

# Psalm 49

**Introduction** – This psalm is a wisdom song. It is not composed explicitly to bring praise to God but to instruct us. This is not a psalm for the faint of heart, for this Psalm-singer, upon his harp (v4), sings with dark sayings of ever-present death, meaninglessness, and hopelessness. But, for those who have ears to hear, it will lead us out of the stark truth about our situation as a race of men in dark despair and into the glorious light of the Morning Star (2 Pet 1:19).

**Dark Wisdom for All Peoples** (vv1-4) – Psalm 47 told *all peoples* to “*clap their hands*” and “*shout to God*” in triumph. This psalm begins by calling all peoples to “*listen up*,” for it invites us to meditate on a specific but universal problem. There will be much talk about the idol of mammon, but “*low and high, rich and poor together*” need to hear this (v2). Power and money are not problems only for the powerful and rich; cemeteries are very egalitarian and democratic places.

He is going to sing a great proverb, a dark saying (v4). “*Proverb*” can also be translated “*parable*” as it is in Psalm 78:2, a verse Jesus quotes when He tells His dark parables (Matt 13:34-35). Jesus spoke in such a way so that His teaching was not accessible to the self-secure, those who trusted in their education, status, wealth, or reputation (Matt 13:10-13). Psalm 78 is a chastisement for Israel’s failure to understand their history and a failure to pass the truth on to the next generation. Psalm 49 addresses one of the principal reasons men forget God.

**The Futility of Mammon and the Inevitability of Death** (vv5-13) – We think money solves all problems and we’d rather not talk about death, but here it is. Death rates are all around us today with the COVID arguments, but here is the truth: There is a 100% death rate for all humanity. Money (or health, or power, or prestige) is unable to preserve us from the great problem of death. Grasping this, we have no reason to be distressed when riches are amassed by others (vv5-6). They may trust in their riches, but even the top five billionaires cannot pool their money together and stop the death of any one of them (vv6-7). The price of immortality is way more than they have (vv8-9). Jesus gives us the classic example of this folly (Luke 12:19-21). There is no profit in gaining the world if you sell your soul to get it (Matt 16:26).

Death really is the great and haunting problem for the human race. Both the wise and the foolish will die, leaving their wealth to others who will then die as well (v10). The rich seek immortal glory, naming monuments, counties, and buildings after themselves, but, quoting the textual variant of v11, “*their graves shall be their houses forever*.” If you measure the worth of a man by his achievements, wealth, or power and that’s all, then because of the looming reality of death, you are no more significant than the road-kill you passed by this morning (vv12-13). And you should stop and think about this (Selah).

In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were the rich fools like the psalmist describes; they had no idea which characters they actually were in the story God was writing. They loved their covenant status, which they twisted, and they loved their money, and this was their great blinder to the truth (Luke 16:13-14). When you are blinded by your idols, you think you are looking for a Messiah but you will in fact betray and crucify Him to your own destruction and judgment. This is the cruel irony for those who trust in mammon.

**The Death-Shepherd...** (v14) – This dark parable darkens: “*This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts. Selah. Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd...*” (vv13-14a, ESV). The imagery is of stupidly unaware sheep lined up for the slaughter – and that is God’s picture of the human race (Rom 3:23, 6:23). We are all lined up before the grave and the only question is which one of us will be fed to it next? “*The upright shall have dominion over them in the morning*” (v14c) is our first hint of gospel and reminds us of a beatitude, “*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*” (Matt 5:5). Oh, by the way, are you trusting in your beauty, your good figure, your ability to turn eyes? “*And their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling*” (v14d). The psalmist pulls no punches.

**...and the Great Divide** (vv15-20) – There is no way for anyone to ransom himself out of the grave. But it does not follow that God is unable to ransom us (v15, Matt 20:28). “*But God...*”, what a powerful pair of words (Eph 2:4-5). And so now meditate on this. Selah.

And so, those who are trusting in His ransom-payment need not concern themselves with the mammon of others (v16). We will have all things in Christ and they will not be able to take any of it with them (v17). It looks like they live in the limelight, but that light is going away for them soon and forever (vv18-19, Jude 13). The man who refuses to understand this will simply die like the unknown, unnamed, unimportant beasts in the wilderness that no one ever finds out about (v20).

**The Gospel, a Charge, and Living Hope** – As the book of Ecclesiastes teaches us, life “*under the sun*” cannot be understood. It is like trying to grasp the wind. And worse, as this Psalm makes clear, our constant attempt to make idols of our stuff, to define God as we prefer, or to live as though death could never touch us, let alone the final judgment, is foolishness, rebellion, and unbelief all mixed together in one toxic cocktail.

Death is coming to your door. I don’t know how far off he is, but he is coming. Do not try to live without first understanding this. And then hear the words of Jesus, “*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live*” (John 11:25). And then the important question: “*Do you believe this?*” (John 11:26). If you do, redemption and forgiveness are yours (Eph 1:7) and you have been ransomed from the futile ways of your forefathers (1 Pet 1:18-19). If you do, then you may sing with the psalmist, “*But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me*” (v15).

The charge comes out of verse 5: “*Why should I fear the days of evil...*” Paul has something similar to say in Eph 5:16 that we should be “*redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*” For every moment of evil, or the results of the Fall, or the consequences of specific sin that you find in this life, you have been given words of life to speak into it. Redeem the time. Make the most of every evil as an opportunity to bring light upon the darkness.

And this can only be done by faith – a living hope that your soul will always be with the Lord Who loves you, that your body will one day experience the glory of the resurrection unto eternal life, and that right now all things are working together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28). Walk by faith in that hope and there will be nothing to fear.

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