

Only God ransoms souls

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[0 : 00] I read a really sad article not that long ago concerning Elvis Presley and his mother. When Elvis had achieved much of his fame and wealth, he had moved his mother into a huge luxury home where she wanted for absolutely nothing. But as she didn't drive, she became increasingly cut off from contact with the outside world, from any friends she had, and she became very isolated and lonely, turning instead to alcohol for comfort. And she died of liver failure at a relatively young age. Now, money couldn't buy her contentment. Are you ever tempted to think, like I am, that the wealthy and the prosperous of this world are the winners?

That those who are successful and powerful, who boast in their riches, somehow seem to be ahead of the rest of us? Do the Trumps or the Rupert Murdochs seem to have it all their own way? Or is that just reality? Or closer to home, how about the rich that we see around us day by day? There's always someone on a larger salary, someone with more disposable income, someone with a new kitchen, someone with a new car, a bigger house, someone who has had that luxury holiday and we find ourselves envying them. Or perhaps we seek after the certainty that we think that money can buy for our children. We pay for expensive schools or perhaps tutors to get them the best exam results, which we think in turn might give them contentment. But of course, whatever it is we're striving after, those exam results to get a well-paid job, to get the next promotion at work, or that next bonus to pay for that next holiday, these material things never fully satisfy. We're stuck in a treadmill or in a trap. What is it about wealth that we envy? Is it the security? Is it that we seek joy and comfort in this earthly life for ourselves or our children? I'm certainly someone who has chased after wealth and the status that wealth brings, and I can find myself thinking this way.

Now you might think that sounds a little strange coming from me as we sit in our second home here in Kent, but I think it's something that we all struggle with and it is an ongoing battle for everyone. So we're looking at contentment this weekend, true contentment and where to find it. And so we're turning to the Psalms and we're going to look at two Psalms. The first is, just in a moment, we're going to look at Psalm 49. And this is a wisdom Psalm. This Psalm helps us to understand some of the disjoint between what we see in this world and what God tells us is the true spiritual reality. It's a Psalm that shows us that only God can ransom us. No other person can, no other thing can. It encourages us to put our trust only in him. And then in the second session after coffee, we'll have a look at Psalm 1 and how we can put that truth into practice.

So Psalm 49 as an introduction is a song of the songs of Korah, we're told, in the little bit of writing at the top of the Psalm, we are not certain of its date. The writer speaks wisdom mostly to his peer group. And so it's called a wisdom Psalm. It's termed as a piece of wisdom literature.

[4 : 26] And interesting, he doesn't speak just to Israel, to the Jewish people, but to the whole world. So including the Gentiles. So I'm going to read it for us. Hear this, all peoples. Give ear all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together. My mouth shall speak wisdom. The meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb. I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre. Why should I fear in times of trouble when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches?

Truly, no man can ransom another or give to God the price of his life. For the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice. That he should live on forever and never see the pit. For he sees that even the wise die. The fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.

Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names. Man in his pomp will not remain. He is like the beasts that perish.

This is the path of those who have foolish confidence. Yet after them, people approve their boasts. Like sheep, they are appointed for Sheol. Death shall be their shepherd and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol with no place to dwell. But God

will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. For when he dies, he can carry nothing away. His glory will not go down after him.

For though while he lives, he counts himself blessed. And though you get praise when you do well for yourself, his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light.

[6 : 59] Man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish. Okay, you'll see we have a handout. So on the program today, we have a handout. And we've put some headings there to sum up the parts of the song as we go along. We've given it a heading, God ransom souls, so don't envy the rich. So follow along the subheadings as I go through them one by one. And please do take notes. It might be useful. So section one, we're going to look at its verses one to four.

So on the handout, we've called that a message for all. The writer here speaks to all types of people. He begins verse one, hear this, all peoples. And then he really emphasizes his plea in the second half of that verse. Give ear all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together.

The psalmist is talking to everyone. He draws in his listener still further verse three, my mouth shall speak wisdom, and then goes on to a slightly deeper level, the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. And he's going to unpack his message to the music of the psalm, he tells us there in verse four. So that's the introduction. It's for everyone.

Section two, we've called Don't Envy the Rich. The psalmist kicks off this section with a thought provoking question. Verse five. Why should I fear in times of trouble? I think it's a bit like a songwriter today might ask a question. Bob Dylan was one of my favorites, and certainly from my age group. How many roads must a man walk down? I don't know if you remember that. But he's asking a question there. Welcome. Grab a program with some headings there. Yes, so don't envy the rich, he says.

Why should I fear them? Okay, so verse six. They trust in their wealth and boast in their abundant riches, but it does them no good in the long run. Don't we all find ourselves envying those who seem to have it all? Perhaps at the school gate or in the office. We rub shoulders with many people who seem prosperous. We have friends, acquaintances, neighbours, family members, and we do envy them. Perhaps those with enough money to buy the house just next to the right school where they want their children to go. And in what ways, we need to ask ourselves, are we also trusting in wealth or envying those with wealth? But the psalmist here has wisdom. Come with me, have a look at verse seven.

[10 : 24] He lands it here. Truly, no man can ransom another, he says, or give to God the price of his life. He has true understanding, understanding that comes only from God. This wisdom is really worth knowing, isn't it? No one can ransom me. But just suppose there was a way for my life to be ransomed. Suppose there were a person who could give the price for my life, who could ransom me. Well, that would be amazing news.

And something really worth treasuring. And sharing with others, for that matter. Everyone who trusts in themselves or their riches will come unstuck eventually. We've all heard this before. Two things in life are certain, death and taxes. Man cannot save his own life or that of another.

Let's look at verse eight. For the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit. Man cannot avoid the pit. That, of course, is the grave. He can't live forever or give that gift to someone else. It is completely beyond his ability. But there is someone who can. Let's go to the third section. So we're looking at verses 10 to 12. Man in his pomp will perish. We call this. So all people must die and leave their wealth to others. It's almost comical here if it wasn't so tragic. How much money do they or indeed we leave behind? Well, all of it, of course. Let's look at verse 11. Their graves are their homes forever.

That is where they will stay. They will lose everything. Though they called lands by their own names. Now, I happen to be born in Virginia in the USA. So I've always been aware that that particular land was called after Queen Elizabeth I, the famous Virgin Queen. Now, someone like her might name lands after herself. But most of us simply have a gravestone to mark our land after we've died.

This psalm here sums it up in verse 12. Man in his pomp will not remain. He is like the beasts that perish.

[13 : 29] It's amazingly strong imagery. Note how bleak the picture is for those who boast in the abundance of their riches. The man in his pomp is like a beast who dies and lies in the ground.

The rubber really hits the road when we ask, well, do we really believe this? Or do we see the people around us in Dulwich or Herne Hill or Sydenham and want to be like them? With their homes, with their well-educated children, with their successful careers? And do we want to join in?

Man in his pomp will perish. Perhaps we feel like we're someone who is joining in with our peers but would like to be different. Well, recognising that our conforming to the world is a start to changing our thinking.

Let's go on to the next section, verses 13 to 15. God will ransom me. We now start to get a split between those who are worldly and those who follow God.

[14:45] So verse 13 and the first half of 14 say that those who put their confidence in foolish things will be like sheep following their shepherd, death, to the grave.

There's a stark contrast immediately next with the phrase, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. The upright will come through the night and see the daylight, with all the connotations that that brings.

In some sense, they will rule over those who have foolish confidence. So the foolish man's body will languish in the grave.

And again, in stark contrast, we have possibly the highlight of the song. Take a look with me at verse 15. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol.

He will receive me. Now, Sheol is like hell. God ransoms the souls of those with understanding. And this is such a personal picture.

[15:52] And we come back again to this question of a ransom, which we've already had in verse 7. But here, God himself will pay the ransom.

Let's just dwell on that thought for a moment. God will pay for my soul. He will give me life, defeating the power of death for my spirit.

He will receive me. You might have noticed that note, Selah, in the side there. This just means pause and think about this.

So this is not a remote God, but a personal rescuer. Now, for the people of the psalm writer's day, this showed them that God was a personal God, that he cares for his people, for he receives them or takes them to be with him.

Of course, for us now, living after Jesus' death and resurrection, we're familiar with the idea that God himself can ransom his people.

[17:01] The apostle Peter writes about this in his letter to the early church in 1 Peter. He is encouraging them to remember what Jesus has done for them.

And so we're going to turn to that now. And I think it's on page 1219 in these Bibles. 1 Peter 1. 1 Peter 1.

Okay, so Peter is writing. He's talking about Jesus in the little bit I'm going to read. So once we've all got it, it's page 1219.

1 Peter 1.

So Jesus has bought his people salvation.

[18:44] And now just cast your eyes down to the bottom of that page and land on verse 17 there. I'm just going to read verses 17 to 19.

And if you call on him as father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Jesus has ransomed his people's souls. Peter is reminding them that they are saved by Jesus. It was true back in Peter's day in the first century.

And it's the same for us today. God the father has ransomed souls with the precious blood of Jesus. Verse 19. Jesus had predicted that he would die for the sins of his people.

He pays the ransom that their sins deserve. But unlike in verse 7 in our psalm, here in verse 15, back in our psalm, you might want to turn back actually to our psalm, and we're back in verse 15.

[20:12] Here in verse 15, Jesus can give to God the price of his people's lives, because he is God.

He does it on the cross, and it's wonderful to have celebrated that just recently over the Easter break. Okay, now to the last section, section 5, the concluding section, and it's verses 16 to 20.

So don't fear the rich. They lack understanding. Let's look at verse 16. Be not afraid. That's key here, I think.

It's something like don't envy. There's lots of imagery here to heap on what we've already seen. A rich man seems glorious for a time, but when he dies, he will take absolutely nothing with him. His glory will not go down after him, we're told. All the foolish man's reward is summed up in verse 18. Have a look.

[21 : 21] He gets some praise here on earth from others, but his soul will never again see light. The death glory imagery, the going down imagery, the never seeing light imagery, all adds weight to this picture.

It is very bleak. Now, my father is not at all well. He has Parkinson's.

His body, which was once very, very athletic, is declining. His glory, such as it was, is completely gone. He was moderately successful in his work, but death is just around the corner for him.

Will he be descending to the generations of his fathers, or will he yet have understanding, which comes from God? Well, I don't know the answer to that.

Only the Lord knows. But I do know that it's God who ransoms his people. God's people, the psalmist urges, do not be afraid when a man becomes rich.

[22 : 43] So we don't need to fear the rich, the powerful, the boss or the colleague who's doing better than us financially or in any other way.

We don't need to envy the couple on two very large salaries, the friends or the neighbours who go abroad every holiday, the family whose children go on every school trip just because they can afford it.

No, we can have true understanding from God, which is much more precious. Lastly, let's look at verse 20. Man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish.

It is, of course, a repetition of verse 12, you might have noticed, but there is a subtle addition here. Yet without understanding, he adds.

And it's here that the writer hits his target. He takes us full circle back to the beginning. In verse one, he pleaded, hear this, all peoples. And in verse three, he wants to speak wisdom and understanding.

[23 : 58] Well, here it is. The people of his day needed wisdom, which gives understanding. They needed not to fear the rich. For God will ransom the wise soul and all others will perish like beasts.

We too, like them, can have understanding from God. We just need to know where to look. To understand the world as it really is.

What a great thing. What a great privilege. Often we don't appreciate what we do have. Instead, we regret what we don't have.

God has revealed to his people true wisdom. So this psalm gives us confidence to God's people that he alone ransoms their souls.

It's a reminder that the foolish confidence of the rich is worthless. That the spiritual reality is not what the world thinks. Those trusting in God can have real confidence.

[25 : 09] Now our circumstances will be all slightly different. We'll be struggling with all sorts of cares. We might be struggling with work, with rearing children.

We might be struggling in our singleness or in our marriages. We might be feeling stretched in all sorts of directions. We might feel lonely.

We might be trying to juggle looking after elderly parents or battling with health issues ourselves. Well, the good news we can take from Psalm 49 is that however we're feeling, whatever our circumstances, God knows them.

Jesus has ransomed us if we are believing and trusting in him. Verse 15. God will ransom my soul. Well, he already has, if you're trusting in him.

Praise him. The price has been paid. So be confident in what Jesus has done for you if you're trusting in him. Thank him for his rescue of you from the pit, from the grave.

[26 : 23] So coming full circle, back to Elvis Presley's mum, money couldn't buy her contentment. She was without understanding of God. Let's be those who look to the Lord Jesus to ransom our souls instead.

God ransoms souls, so don't envy the rich.