

Psalm 49

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Would you turn with me in a Bible to Psalm 49? This summer we're looking at the Psalms. And the Psalms are a very diverse collection of prayers and songs written by at least 12 different people over a period of probably a thousand years from the time of Moses to the time of the exile in Babylon.

And they express a wide variety of emotions and experiences, everything from praise and thanksgiving to confession and repentance, a desperate cry for help, or a meditative reflection on God's wisdom.

Though the Psalms are diverse and different in many ways, there's also a unity to the book. Gradually the Psalms are collected and they became the hymn book or the song book or the prayer book for the people of Israel.

And within the book of Psalms, there are actually five books. If you look, Psalm 1 through 41 is book 1, Psalm 42 through 72 is book 2, etc., etc. That's what we're looking at, book 2 this summer.

And it's five books, just as there were five books of Moses. So there's a sense of completeness in how the Psalms have been collected. So this summer, book 2, it begins with a song of a downcast person.

[1 : 14] We looked at it two weeks ago, a depressed person even, crying out, thirsting for God. And then the Psalms in this section build on each other. I've been reading through this section of Psalms, and it struck me how many of the themes go through this whole section of Psalms.

And so as we go through it this summer, you might consider reading not only the Psalms that we'll cover in our preaching and our worship services, but this whole section, and see how they build on each other. But the place where they're going, the section ends with the words, praise the Lord.

And actually, each of the five books within the book of Psalms ends with an exclamation of praise to the Lord. The whole book of Psalms ends with seven Psalms at the end. It's sort of like a grand finale to fireworks or something, with seven Psalms of praise and thanksgiving.

So the direction of the Psalms as a whole, we might say, is from lament, from crying out for God to praise. And each Psalm doesn't give the whole picture of that.

But consider each Psalm a step along the way to praising God. And so as we read this Psalm, Psalm 49, a Psalm of wisdom, consider it one step along the way to praising God.

[2 : 29] Psalm 49, let's read together. 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 of 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.

[3 : 27] 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 of 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 will 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.

[4 : 33] Man in his pomp, yet without understanding. The day is like the beasts that perish. A couple of weeks ago, my wife and I went to Mississippi.

To visit her extended family for our vacation. And traveling on an airplane with two young children is always an adventure. But thankfully it wasn't too much of an adventure this time.

It went pretty smoothly. Now if you've ever traveled on a plane. One of the things that you get used to every time you go on a plane. Is hearing the safety briefing. At the beginning of every flight.

The flight attendant stands in the middle of the aisle. Says please give us your full attention. As we demonstrate the safety features of this aircraft. Or on some planes they do it on the TV screens.

But either way they go on to explain how the seatbelts work. Where the emergency exits are. How to open them. What to do in case the cabin loses pressure. Where the oxygen masks are. Where the life vests can be found in the event of a water landing.

[5 : 30] And all sorts of other information that could potentially save your life. In the event of an emergency. But on every airplane that I have ever traveled on.

Almost nobody listens to the safety briefing. Right? Some people are looking out the window. Some people are reading a book or a magazine. Some people have already fallen asleep. Now why don't people listen to this message that could potentially mean the difference between your life and death?

Well maybe we think it's obvious. Right? If you've been on a plane before. Maybe you could recite the whole speech yourself. Maybe we're momentarily distracted by something else.

But most of all. I think we don't really expect to have to use this knowledge. Right? We expect that we'll arrive safely. Or worst case if the plane crashes.

Probably won't be of any use anyway. Right? So it's not worth it. Because we're not actually going to use this knowledge. So it's a slim possibility that will ever be relevant to us.

[6 : 36] Well this morning's psalm begins a little bit like the flight attendant saying, listen up. Hear this. All peoples give ear. All inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor, together.

The psalmist is saying this is a message for everyone. With no exceptions. And the psalmist says, I have a message of wisdom. Wisdom. Verse 3 and 4, the psalmist uses four words.

Wisdom, understanding, proverb, and riddle. And the same words are used in the introduction to the book of Proverbs. Proverbs chapter 1, verse 5 and 6. Let the wise hear.

Let the one who understands obtain guidance. To understand a proverb and a saying. The words of the wise and their riddles. So all of these are words that talk about wisdom. And when the Bible talks about wisdom, it's not just talking about some scholarly theory that may or may not be true and may or may not have anything to do with you.

It's not just some interesting information that you might find in an old library or a museum.

Interesting, but if you miss out, no great consequence. No, the Bible says that God made the world by his wisdom.

[7 : 49] Proverbs 3 talks about this. And he says God continues to govern the world by his wisdom. And so learning to live in line with God's wisdom is the way to life and joy and peace and justice.

And it's the only way to these things. Because that's how God made the world to work. And so if we ignore or reject God's message of wisdom, we do so at our own peril.

So this psalm is not just something that we can take it or leave it, and if we didn't listen to it, no big deal. It's not just talking to one particular culture, to people way back then, or one particular age group.

It's talking to all of us and giving us some of God's wisdom through which we can find true life. Now the psalmist begins with the structure of the psalm is the psalmist begins with a question in verses 5 and 6, and then he gives an answer verses 7 through 15, and finally a conclusion in 16 through 20.

So we're going to take that as our framework this morning, starting with the question, and then the answer, and then the conclusion. So first, the question, which is verse 5 and 6. He says, Why should I fear in times of trouble, or literally in days of evil, when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?

[9 : 21] Now the psalmist is apparently describing his own situation. He's in a difficult spot. He's surrounded by people who are trying to undermine him. Literally that word, to cheat him, means to grab at his heels, or to trip him up.

And yet these people who are trying to trip him up are actually very successful. In fact, they boast of how successful they are.

Now in the Old Testament, and in the ancient world in general, the common assumption was, if you're rich, if you're doing well, that means that God is blessing you, and he's pleased with you. And if you're poor, that means that God is not pleased with you. And maybe he's cursed you. That was the assumption in people's minds back then.

And so the psalmist's situation was rough, because he's looking at these successful people around him who are trying to keep him down, and wondering what's going on.

[10 : 25] It was a little bit like the situation of the Israelites in Egypt, right? They were slaves. They were powerless, barely surviving from one day to the next. And they were surrounded by their Egyptian masters, ruthless men, powerful and wealthy men who would do just about anything to keep them down.

Now throughout the world, this is many people's daily experience. whether it's migrant workers forced to work 14 hours a day in the fields, or children growing up in the garbage villages of the developing world, or young girls sold into sex slavery in brothels.

Many people in our world are powerless and surrounded by people who are taking advantage of them and struggling just to survive.

Now simply because we're here in the U.S., most of us have it somewhat better off. But even so, maybe you can identify with some, or at least part, of this feeling, of this experience.

Being in trouble, surrounded by people who are far more successful than you, maybe even people who are trying to keep you down and seem to have it out for you.

[11 : 44] So maybe you live in a neighborhood where there aren't many good jobs, or the only jobs you qualify for pay about minimum wage or a dollar more than that.

But every day in your neighborhood you see guys revving up their BMWs and blasting their expensive stereo systems and flashing their gold jewelry. And if you connect with one of them and join in their illegal and destructive business, you could probably earn your monthly paycheck in one day if you just sell drugs.

Or more generally, for better or for worse, we're in New Haven and the city of New Haven is dominated by Yale. Right? And if you're not part of Yale, you might feel intimidated by people who are.

Right? They seem so much smarter, so much more privileged. They use five-syllable words in ordinary conversations. Right? They talk about traveling to places in the world that you've never even heard of.

And so whenever you're around them, you feel like you don't belong and you don't have anything to offer. Maybe you feel intimidated being in this church because you look around and you see there's a lot of people connected with Yale here.

[13 : 05] Right? And even if they have every good intention, even if they're not trying to harm you at all, you still feel intimidated and excluded. Or maybe, maybe you're a parent of young children.

And whether you stay at home full-time or work part-time or limit your full-time hours for the sake of caring for your family, you feel surrounded by people who are far more successful and advancing in their career far more quickly than you.

And even if they're not trying to rub it in, you constantly feel inferior. And you wonder, will I ever be able to make it back in?

Am I a total failure in my career? Or maybe, maybe you're a grad student and you're laboring away at your research.

12 hours a day, six days a week. Right? It's not that unusual. And maybe even in your own lab, there are people who have no qualms about stealing other people's research.

[14 : 10] Or recreating a very, very similar experiment and finding a way to publish before you do. Or to get their names on a paper that they really didn't do all the work to justify their name being an author.

And if one of these things happens, you're going to be left in the dust. And your last year of diligent work will be worthless. Now, if you're in trouble, if you're in a situation like one of these, if you're

surrounded by successful people who may even want to keep you down, fear is a natural response. Fear of powerful people and fear of shifting circumstances. And you know, in one sense, fear is not always a bad thing. Right? If you're walking down a deserted street in New Haven late at night, it's good to be alert to potential dangers and not blind or naive.

But fear is not just being alert to potential dangers and then responding appropriately. Fear drives and determines our response. It's a controlling emotion.

fear of people and fear of circumstances can drive us to make foolish, impulsive decisions or it can paralyze us so that we do nothing.

[15 : 36] Maybe our fear of other people turns into resignation and cynicism. we think this is the way things are, this is the way things will always be, they'll never change so it's not worth trying, put your head down, don't be the nail that sticks out, otherwise you're just going to get pounded.

Or maybe our fear turns into envy and ruthless ambition and we think we plan and scheme to find a way into that position of power and we think I'm going to get on top somehow or other so that nobody can keep me down.

Now fear is a very natural response whether it's expressed in cynical resignation or envious ambition. But the psalmist doesn't simply accept his fear.

He questions his fear. He says why should I fear in these times? What reason do I have to fear?

Now the answer to his question is in verses 7 through 15. And the answer to his question is that for those who trust in the true and living God there is no good reason to fear.

[16 : 59] You don't need to fear powerful people or shifting circumstances. Yes, you should be alert to potential dangers and respond appropriately but your life does not need to be determined and driven by fear.

And the psalmist gives us two reasons why this is the case. In verse 7 through 12 and then in verse 13 through 15. But notice first notice what the psalmist does not say.

He does not say if you trust in God nothing really bad will happen to you because he knows that's not true. He also does not say if you trust in God God will bring down these ungodly cheaters around you and so you can rise to the top and so you can be the head and not the tail because in this life that doesn't always happen either.

The psalmist is not teaching prosperity gospel or liberation theology. What he does say is two things. In verses 7 through 12 he says everyone will die rich and poor wise and foolish death is no respecter of persons and in the face of death all the success in the world will make not a bit of difference.

Your money can buy a lot of things. You can buy a beautiful home. In a quiet neighborhood. A good education for you and your children.

[18 : 38] All kinds of interesting toys and gadgets to keep you busy and amused. Expensive medical treatments that will keep you alive for days or months or years longer than you would otherwise.

In today's world all kinds of insurance to protect you from all kinds of potential harm. But no amount of money can insure you against death.

In the one moment when it matters most all the money and all the success in the world is like the currency of Zimbabwe. Absolutely worthless. They don't even use it anymore.

They use foreign currencies because their currency was so devalued it's completely worthless. You see death is a great level. Death pays no regard to human distinctions.

It doesn't discriminate on the basis of race or class or gender or nationality or educational achievement or religious affiliation or cultural influence or anything else.

[19 : 40] When death comes it takes away everything that we own. We take zero with us. Our body decomposes our influence gradually fades and the memory of us is gradually lost.

Earlier this week I walked through the Grove Street Cemetery and there are a lot of people buried there who were famous and influential in their time. Yale professors Yale presidents New Haven mayors and city officials prominent families who have a plot of land specifically reserved for them. Some of the graves are marked by very impressive monuments. Some of the monuments you can't really quite see it from the outside but they're 25 feet tall. Marble gravestones words etched in stone but none of those people will ever move back to the houses that they lived in in this world.

None of them will ever assume the positions of authority that they had. Verse 11 says their graves are their homes forever. And over time even the tombstones get worn down.

Some of the older tombstones you can't even read them anymore so they've been worn down by time and weather. And I thought how many of these people famous and influential at one time have been completely forgotten.

[21 : 16] The only record of them is in some cemetery files that some obscure archivist will occasionally look at and write a book about it that nobody else will even read.

Psalms concludes in verse 12, man in his pomp will not remain. He's like the beasts that perish. Now on the face of it, this isn't a pleasant message.

It's not what most people would consider positive and encouraging. So this psalm might not make the cut on certain Christian radio stations. But it's if you're from the south you know what I'm talking about.

But it is true. And the psalmist says this is part of what it means to be wise. To face hard truths. Not to run away from them or deny them.

But to live in light of them. So the first part of the psalmist answer is that everyone will die. And no amount of wealth or worldly success will change that.

[22 : 23] But in verse 13 through 15 there's a second part to his answer. He says only God can deliver from death.

Verses 7 through 12 emphasize that death comes to everyone. God doesn't make any distinctions. But verse 13 through 15 point to the only distinction that matters.

It says those who trust in their worldly success will be devoured and dispossessed. But those who trust in the true and living God will be ransomed and received.

You know throughout the Bible there's a principle that we become like the things that we worship. What we fear, what we love, what we stand in awe of, what we delight in, gradually we become like that thing or that person.

You can see this pattern in a child's relationship to their parents when they repeat what you say and even react like you do. It's like a great big mirror of all the things that you maybe didn't see about yourself beforehand.

[23 : 38] You can see this in a friendship or a marriage when two close friends or a husband and wife spend a lot of time together and they start to talk like each other and think like each other and some people say even look like each other.

And the Bible says that the same pattern holds with the objects of our ultimate trust. The things that we're ultimately driven by and loyal to.

The psalmist says if we trust and boast in our worldly success, in our stuff, we'll eventually become just like stuff, inanimate, depersonalized, destined to eventually be consumed and fall apart.

And that's the picture that the psalmist paints in verse 13 and 14. He says like sheep they're appointed for sheol. Sheol is just a Hebrew word that means the grave. He says death shall be their shepherd.

Their form shall be consumed in the grave. They'll be eaten up. They'll fall apart. And everything that they've loved and trusted in will fall to pieces too.

[24 : 52] And it's a scary picture to be dispossessed and everything that you own taken away and to be homeless and on the outside forever. He says that's the destiny of those who trust in their success.

But he says for those who place their trust in God and the true and living God, there's a totally different future that awaits. He says their form shall be consumed in the grave with no place to dwell, but God.

God will ransom my soul from the power of the grave, for he will receive me. Instead of being consumed in the grave, God will deliver him from the grave's power.

Instead of having no place to dwell, God will receive him into his house. Instead of death being his shepherd and ultimately eating him up, God will be his shepherd and call him his own, his beloved. Instead of being stripped of his humanity, he'll be renewed in his humanity to reflect the very image of God himself. This is the hope that the psalmist has.

[26 : 11] He says this is the hope and the promise to everyone who trusts in the true and living God. Now you might ask, well how does the psalmist know this? Why isn't this just wishful thinking or even poetic exaggeration?

Just projecting his own desires onto the world or onto God? Well the psalmist could look back and he could see how God had already ransomed and received his people, Israel.

They were slaves in Egypt, surrounded by the Pharaoh and their Egyptian masters who just wanted to keep them down. And God stepped in. And God executed judgment on Pharaoh and the land of Egypt.

Through the ten plagues he gradually uncreated the whole world of Egypt. And finally one night the angel of death came knocking at every family's door.

And yet on that very night God ransomed his people. God provided for them through the blood of a lamb that was put on their door posts so that when the angel of death came through the angel of death passed over that house.

[27 : 35] And not only did God ransom them and deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh who wanted to kill them he received them into his presence and he made a home for them in the promised land.

And so the psalmist could look back at this and say look God has already ransomed and received us as his people. And because I trust in God I will I can have confidence that he will not abandon me but he will ransom and receive me.

You know throughout the Bible it often uses this kind of logic it says look at what God's already done in the past. Can't you trust that he'll be faithful to you in the future?

Look at what he's already done. How he's ransomed and received you. How he ransomed and received the people back then. Surely he will not abandon you but he will ransom and receive you. But the psalmist's words were not only a reflection of what God had already done in the past they were also looking forward anticipating what God would do in the future. God is mentioned in this psalm by name in only two verses.

[28 : 50] Verse 7 and verse 15. Verse 7 says no one no man can ransom another or give to God the price of his life because the price is just too high.

We can't pay it. But then verse 15 says God will ransom me from the grave. In other words God will accomplish what we cannot.

And that's exactly what God did in sending his son Jesus Christ. Jesus said the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus lived as the true servant of God faithful loyal and obedient every moment of his life. Unlike the rest of us he did not deserve to die.

And yet on the cross when Jesus died he offered himself as the perfect ransom the true Passover lamb his life in place of ours.

[29 : 58] Jesus submitted himself to death so that through his resurrection he would defeat death and free us from its power so that we might be ransomed and received that we might belong to him and be part of his family forever.

This is the good news. This is the good news that gathers us together every week what God has done to ransom and receive us in Jesus Christ.

And this is also the psalmist answer to his fears. He says don't live in the bondage of fear anymore because God will ransom and receive me.

So we've seen the psalmist question we've seen his answer and now we come to the conclusion how do we live in light of this? The psalm concludes with a word of comfort for those who are troubled and a word of warning to those who are comfortable.

So first a word of comfort for those who are troubled. Verse 16 he says be not afraid when a man grows rich when the glory of his house increases.

[31 : 12] Remember the psalmist is surrounded by successful people who aren't trustworthy and don't care about him and the temptation for him is to be driven by fear either fearful envy and ambition or fearful cynicism and resignation.

If you're in that kind of situation God has a word for you be not afraid. Don't envy people just because they're more successful than you.

Because if they continue trusting in their success in their wealth they are headed for a terrible end. losing all that they love and trust in.

Having nothing left to hold on to and nothing that will hold on to them. He says don't become cynical and resigned and joyless.

He says if you trust in Christ God has already ransomed and received you and one day he has a glorious future in store for you. He will one day ransom you from death and receive you with joy into his presence forever.

[32 : 29] You have a glorious hope. So stand firm. Be who God's made you to be. Don't try to be someone else. Don't be driven by fear.

Because God has a hold of you. And he will not let go. As Jesus said in Luke 12, fear not little flock for it's your father's good pleasure to give you his kingdom.

Why even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not. You're of more value than many birds. Now second, he gives a word of comfort to the troubled but he also gives a word of warning to those of us who are comfortable.

Now many of us here are successful by our culture's standards and probably almost all of us, maybe even all of us, compared to the people in biblical times, at least economically, would be considered wealthy.

Simply because of what our standard is. Now wealth in itself and success is not the problem.

Wealth, success, power, status, all these things can be used wisely for the glory of God and for the good of many people.

[33 : 47] They're not bad in themselves. But there is a danger, a spiritual danger in comfort and success. And God in his love gives us a warning here in this psalm so that we do not fall into this danger.

The danger of a comfortable life is that it can draw our attention and our affections away from the things that will last forever and toward things that will certainly perish.

And as a result we can become spiritually dull and complacent without even realizing it. We lack passion for God. We lack compassion and sacrificial love for other people.

And so Jesus warned his hearers, he said, take care, be on your guard against greed, all forms of greed, for our life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

But instead he says, seek God's kingdom first and these other things will be added to you as well.

And then he says, sell your possessions, give to the needy, provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail.

[35 : 02] For where your treasure is there your heart will be also. You know, one of the best ways to see that your heart is not drawn toward wealth and success is to use the resources God has given you and give them away.

for the sake of others, for the sake of his kingdom. Jesus Christ poured out his life on the cross as a ransom for us. He paid the price that we could never pay and that we can never pay him back for.

And he has given us all that we have that we might generously invest in for his kingdom purposes and share in his joy. Because it says, for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross.

And so, giving generously, God calls us to it, not simply as a matter of duty, but as an invitation to joy and to find delight in him as our true treasure and our true satisfaction and our true and eternal security.

So there's comfort if you're troubled. There's a warning for those of us who are comfortable. And finally, the psalm ends in the same way it began, by pointing to God's wisdom.

[36 : 18] It ends in verse 20 by saying, man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish. You see, the key to true life is receiving the wisdom that God has revealed to us and ultimately receiving Jesus Christ, God's wisdom incarnate.

So as we hear these words, let's listen to them. And live in light of them and live confidently, trusting in the God who will ransom and receive us.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the words of this psalm, for this message of wisdom.

God's wisdom. We thank you for how you are honest with us. Lord, that you do not ignore hard truths, but that you bring them to our attention for our good, so that we would not live a life that ends up empty, but that we would live a life in you that is full of your presence and full of your joy and full of confidence in you.

Lord, we pray that you would set us free from the fears that enslave us and that drive us, fears of other people or fears of shifting circumstances, that we would come before you and stand in awe of you, and that we would stand in confident trust.

[37 : 59] Lord, you have ransomed and received us in the past, and surely you will not abandon us in the future. So give us confidence, Lord, with whatever we may face.

Give us humility, Lord, for those of us that you've blessed with many resources. Help us to use them generously and joyfully for your kingdom's sake and to share in your joy in that way.

Thank you, Lord, for your word to us today. We pray that you would be at the center of our vision in all that we do.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.