

Psalm 49

Life in the Valley of Death

It's a common story: Person works hard, lives honestly, seeks to honor and obey Christ in all his or her affairs, and struggles. Person who lives for self, hoards resources, helps no one, prospers.

Why does there often seem to be such a disparity between people who follow Christ and those who don't? And for those of us who believe that God is sovereign and has "foreordained whatsoever comes to pass," as the Westminster Confession teaches, it's even more confusing. "Why has God given health to that guy and not to me?" Or, "Why has God given a stable marriage to that guy and not to me?" Or, "Why has God given healthy, industrious children to that guy and not to me?" Or, (and this is really the "biggie"), "Why has God given financial success to that guy and not to me?" This is particularly true when the financially "successful" person that we're envying has come by his or her wealth dishonestly. We wonder why God sometimes allows (indeed, ordains!) that people who lie and cheat and steal their way to the so-called "top," often even at the *expense* of God's people? And so, we look at their lives and then we look at our lives and we think: "Why can't my life look more like that?"

God's people have been asking that question for thousands of years. This is the exact issue that the Psalmist in Psalm 49 addresses. Psalm 49 is a wisdom Psalm. It is written to help us develop the skill of living in a world that seems out of balance. The Psalmist will come to us and, in some sense, say: "I know how things appear, but here is how things actually are. So this is how you ought to feel about these unbelieving, unethical wealthy people, and this is what you ought to do, or how you ought to respond." Let's see what the Psalmist here has to say.

Psalm 49 begins with the following superscription (insert superscription here)

In other words, the Psalmist here writes this wisdom psalm and then has it recorded in the hymnal of Israel, that all of the generations of God's people might not just read it, but sing it! There is a wisdom in this Psalm that should cause us to worship.

Psalm 49:1-2 (NASB)

¹Hear this, all peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of the world,

²Both low and high, rich and poor together.

1) Who is this message of wisdom addressed to?

The word "world" in verse 1 is a very rare word in the original Hebrew language and it means literally, "this transient world," or "this world that is passing away."

2) Given out topic, what significance, if any, do you attribute at this point to the Psalmist's use of this particular word for world? What do you think that he's trying to tell us (and all of the other inhabitants of this transient world) from the very beginning of his message of biblical wisdom?

Psalm 49:3-4

³My mouth will speak wisdom, and the meditation of my heart will be understanding.

⁴I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will express my riddle on the harp.

The Psalmist is going to give us insight into the riddle of life through a riddle of his own. He will give to us a proverb (a simple illustration or analogy that shares a basic truth about life that, in this case, should change the way we feel toward the unbelieving unethical wealthy and, thus, what we ought to do, and how we ought to respond.)

The Psalmist then divides his riddle into 2 equal parts, which both end with essentially the very same proverb.

Part 1 (Psalm 49:5-12)

Psalm 49:5-9

⁵*Why should I fear in days of adversity, When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me,*

⁶*Even those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches?*

⁷*No man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him--*

⁸*For the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease trying forever--*

⁹*That he should live on eternally, that he should not undergo decay.*

3) The word "foes" in verse 5 means literally, "those who are seeking to supplant or take advantage of me," in this case, for money! Have you ever had someone take advantage of you for money? What was the end result? How did that make you feel toward that person?

4) What is the Psalmist here telling all of the inhabited (transient) world about the god of money?

Psalm 49:10-11

¹⁰*For he sees that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.*

¹¹*Their inner thought is that their houses are forever and their dwelling places to all generations;*

They have called their lands after their own names. The word "wise" in verse 10 refers to the educated and the refined. Those who know and understand good literature, good wine, and fine dining. It refers to the wealthy and sophisticated class.

5) What is the Psalmist here telling all of the inhabited (transient) world about the god of education, or sophistication?

6) Do you know anyone like the people described in verse 11? Have you ever tried to manufacture your own mortality via visible, tangible things in this transient world? Why?

Psalm 49:

¹²*But man in his pomp will not endure; He is like the beasts that perish.*

This is the end of the first part of the body of this Psalm and it ends with this "proverb" about the beasts that perishes (the same proverb that he concludes section 2 with). In other words, the Psalmist compares the unbelieving, unethical rich who lie, cheat and steal their way to the so-called "top" and whose lives make us envious and angry, to a farm animal. That is to say, the Psalmist is comparing them to a cow! If you think about it, this is a very powerful image. What does a cow do? It spends its days feasting upon the grasses of the fields of this world, satisfying its appetites to the full, all the while oblivious to the fact that its headed for the butcher shop. You don't envy the cow, because you know how his story ends: on your plate!

So it is for everyone who trusts in wealth or education or anything short of the blood of Jesus for the redemption of their souls, for the redemption of our souls is "costly" (v. 8).

7) If we're not to envy or resent (or worse) these folks who take advantage of us and others for money, or power, or pleasure, or whatever, what feelings do you suppose that we are to have toward them? Why?

8) How does that differ from the feelings that you have toward those kinds of people? What difference do you suppose that should make in the way that you behave toward them?

Part 2 (Psalm 49:13-20)

Psalm 49:13-14

¹³*This is the way of those who are foolish, and of those after them who approve their words. Selah.*

¹⁴*As sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd; and the upright shall rule over them in the morning, and their form shall be for Sheol to consume so that they have no habitation.*

Notice that the Psalmist here now uses the image of the sheep in order to augment his proverb. Like the cow, the sheep spends his life grazing, oblivious to the fact that his fur and skins will be used for clothes and his meat for food. His use of the sheep then opens up his rather frightening statement about death being the shepherd of those whom he is describing here; those that he describes as the "foolish," meaning those who lack the very wisdom and insight that he is providing via this Psalm.

9) If Psalm 23 is a representation of what the Good Shepherd who is Jesus does for his "sheep," what kind of eternal existence might the "foolish" that the Psalmist describes here expect from the shepherd who is death?

Do you see the irony here? He's saying that those who satisfy themselves with anything less than Jesus in this transient life and world, will find themselves eternally dissatisfied in the eternal life and world to come. This life is all the heaven that they will ever know.

Psalm 49:14-

¹⁴As sheep they are appointed for Sheol;

Death shall be their shepherd;

And the upright shall rule over them in the morning,

And their form shall be for Sheol to consume

So that they have no habitation.

¹⁵But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol,

For He will receive me. Selah.

¹⁶Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich,

When the glory of his house is increased;

¹⁷For when he dies he will carry nothing away;

His glory will not descend after him.

¹⁸Though while he lives he congratulates himself--

And though men praise you when you do well for yourself--

¹⁹He shall go to the generation of his fathers;

They will never see the light.

²⁰Man in his pomp, yet without understanding,

Is like the beasts that perish.

10) What are the disparities that the Psalmist gives between those who belong to God and those who don't in the next life?

The Psalmist ends Part 2 of the body of his Psalm the same way that he ended Part 1 (e.g., with the proverb about the beasts that perish - the image of the cow, who grows fat satisfying himself today, but is heading for the butcher and thus for your plate!) With that said, the cow serves a purpose in your life. He feeds or nourishes you.

11) In what way might these unbelieving, unethical people who lie, cheat and steal their way to the top, often at your expense or at the expense of God's people, be designed by our sovereign God for your nourishment? (Hint: What was

the heart of Jesus toward those who took advantage of him? How did he feel toward them? What did he then do, or how did he respond to their actions?)

The Psalmist also clearly assumes something that may not necessarily be true of all of us. He assumes that our lives are different from these folks whom he compares to the cows of the field. That is to say, he assumes that we don't value, trust in, chase after, and pursue the same things they do. He assumes that we're not out in the fields right next to them, eating the same grass and attempting to satisfy the same appetites.

12) Do you think that the Psalmist is right in this assumption? Why or why not?

13) Can you give any examples in your life in which you are noticeably different from those who don't satisfy themselves in Christ in this transient world?

14) If we're no different from the rest of the cows in the field, what effect will this have on our mission to help save them?

The message of Psalm 49: We need to develop in ourselves the heart of Jesus, even for those who oppose us, and we need to start living like people who actually do trust in Jesus. Not until we stop “chewing the same grass,” satisfying the same appetites and pursuing the same dream as everyone else, will we be able to credibly and effectively lead others out of the barren fields of the Shepherd of Death and to the green pasture of the Shepherd of Life—to the feet of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

May God bless and guide you this week in your journey through this broken world of disparity. The New City is coming!