

PSALMS

Chapter 49

Hear this, all peoples! Give ear, all inhabitants of the world, 2 both low and high, rich and poor together! 3 My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. 4 I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre. 5 Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me, 6 those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches? 7 Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, 8 for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, 9 that he should live on forever and never see the pit. 10 For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others. 11 Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names. 12 Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish. 13 This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts. *Selah* 14 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. 15 But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. *Selah* 16 Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. 17 For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him. 18 For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed—and though you get praise when you do well for yourself— 19 his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light. 20 Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.

Ps 49 A word of instruction from the temple following upon Ps 46–48. It concerns rich fools who proudly rely on their great wealth and on themselves to assure their security in the world (see Ps 52). The Levitical author knows what it is to be without wealth (see Nu 18:21–24; Dt 14:27–29) and has observed the attitudes of many of the rich (see vv. 5–6). He has seen through their folly, however, and offers his wisdom for all to hear (vv. 1–2), so that those who are awed by the rich may be freed from their spell. Inescapable death is their undoing and their destiny, and in the end the “upright will rule over them” (v. 14). The date of this psalm may well be postexilic. (CSB)

Wisdom psalm that instructs on the futility of wealth and worldliness, which stand in contrast to God’s power to redeem from death. The refrain “Man in his pomp ... is like the beasts that perish” (vv 12, 20) points to the certainty of death (v 9, “pit”; v 15, “Sheol”). The psalm teaches God’s power to ransom the soul out of death (v 15). Wisdom (cf Pr 8:22–31) is ultimately fulfilled in and personified by Jesus Christ (cf Mt 11:19; Lk 11:49; also 1Co 1:24, 30). *Sons of Korah*. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–4, appeal to hear wisdom; vv 5–9, insights about preciousness of human life; vv 10–12, everyone dies; vv 13–15, God rescues me from Sheol; vv 16–20, the proud are like beasts. (TLSB)

The psalmist addresses this lesson on wealth to all people. The psalm is a sermon. It deals with the inevitability of death, and it warns people about the foolishness of trusting in riches. Psalm 49 differs from most other psalms in that it does not address God. – (LL)

It is different from the psalms which precede it. It seems to be more closely related to the psalms that follow it, which all deal with human weakness in some way. (PBC)

49:1–4 Introduction. (CSB)

49:1–2 More like the address of the prophets (see 1Ki 22:28; Isa 34:1; Mic 1:2) than that of the wisdom teachers (see 34:11; Pr 1:8, 10; 2:1). (CSB)

49:1 *hear this* – This was a way of saying that the words about to be spoken were of vast importance. (Leupold)

Not only Israel, but “all inhabitants of the world,” who exist for a brief lifetime do well to hear this message. (TLSB)

49: 2 *both low and high* – This is peculiar device, which the Hebrew frequently resorts to, mentioning two extremes and automatically including all that lies between. (PBC)

rich and poor – The rich are warned not to place too much confidence in their riches. The poor are warned against being envious of the rich and against discouragement because of the prosperity of the wicked. (PBC)

49:3 *wisdom* – The word wisdom refers to the disciplined and meaningful way of life that pleases God and proves successful and lasting in the community. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

49:4 *incline my ear* – The wisdom he is about to speak first had to be “heard” by him—all true wisdom is from God (see Job 28). (CSB)

proverb...riddle – The psalmist’s teaching is called a proverb and a riddle because it deals with on the central problems of life, which fascinates people but nevertheless remains a mystery to them, namely, the riddle of the meaning of life and the relationship of life and death. This riddle can be answered with wisdom and understanding only when it is considered in light of mankind’s relationship to God and eternity. (PBC)

This wisdom saying from God promises also to answer the vexing question that only God can reveal. (TLSB)

of the lyre – Another hint of the author’s sense of inspiration (see 1Sa 10:5–6; 2Ki 3:15). (CSB)

49:5–11 Those of little means or power need not be unsettled when surrounded by rich fools who threaten and strut; death is their destiny. (CSB)

49:5 People trust in wealth as though it could bring happiness and immunity from death (cf vv 6–7). (TLSB)

why should I fear – The question is intended to say that there is no reason to fear in such times. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

cheat – They use their wealth to make this life miserable. (TLSB)

49:6 *those who trust in their wealth* – Like it or not, money and our attitude toward it has a powerful effect on our life and our happiness. Wealth can give people a great advantage in

earthly matters. The wealthy can hire better lawyers. The wealthy have more influence where it counts – with the power brokers and the world. (LL)

49:7–9 Wealth cannot buy escape from death—not even one’s “redeemer” can accomplish it (cf. Ex 21:30; Lev 25:47–49). Only God himself *those who trust* can redeem a life from the grave. (CSB)

Wisdom sees that death is the great leveler of rich and poor. (TLSB)

49:7 *Truly no man* – Only the God-man Jesus, “who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1Tm 2:6; cf Mt 20:28), can fully pay the debt so that they “live on forever.” These verses reveal the flaw of every false religion that seeks salvation through human effort. (TLSB)

another. Lit, “brother.” (TLSB)

49:8 *ransom...can never suffice* – Even though riches can buy the best medical care, money cannot buy an extra day of life on earth. They cannot bribe their way into heaven or escape hell by making advance payment for their sins while they are still on earth. Only one man could pay a ransom for sin. Only one could redeem life. And the ransom he paid is beyond price. It is a gift of God, given freely to all who believe in Jesus, the man God sent to pay for sin. (PBC)

49:10 Anyone with “eyes in his head” (Ecc 2:14) can see that even the wise die (see Ecc 7:2; 9:5) and leave their wealth to others (see Ecc 2:18, 21). How much more the fool (see 73:18–20; 92:6–7)! See also 89:48; Job 30:23; Ecc 2:14–16. (CSB)

he – Everyone can observe that no one escapes death. (TLSB)

wise die the fool and stupid – Essentially the “righteous” and the “wicked” of Ps 37. (CSB)

wealth – Often gotten by devious means that their foolish “wisdom” had contrived (v. 5). (CSB)

Status does not follow people into death. (TLSB)

to other – But not to their children. (CSB)

49:11 Though they lavish wealth on their tombs and try at least to perpetuate their memory by putting their names to their large landholdings (see Nu 32:41) as an enduring memorial, they only suffer the bitter irony of having their graves as their “eternal home” (Ecc 12:5). (CSB)

homes forever – Narrow grave site is permanent. (TLSB)

49:12 Their epitaph – and the psalm’s refrain (CSB)

like the beasts – People, created in God’s image but pompously strutting in sin and wealth, die like brutish animals. Cf v 20. Iren: “Having been created a rational being, he lost the true rationality, and living irrationally, opposed the righteousness of God” (ANF 1:466). (TLSB)

When the psalmist compares the death of the rich to that of an animal and when he speaks of the permanency of death, he is not denying the doctrine of the resurrection or the doctrine of hell. He is stressing the finality of death. (PBC)

49:13–15 Their fate and mine—so “why should I fear?” (v. 5). (CSB)

49:13 *people approve of their boasts* – The foolish who admire and follow their confidence in riches will eventually join in death also. (TLSB)

selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

49:14 *Like sheep* – They are like sheep herded away by death as their shepherd. (TLSB)

appointed for Sheol – Destination of all. (TLSB)

death will be their shepherd – † For the imagery of death (or the grave) as an insatiable monster feeding on its victims see 69:15; 141:7; Pr 1:12; 27:20; 30:15–16; Isa 5:14; Jnh 2:2 (“depths”; lit. “belly”); Hab 2:5. The imagery appears in Canaanite mythology, which so depicts the god Mot (death). As one Canaanite document reads, “Do not approach divine Mot, lest he put you like a lamb into his mouth.” (CSB)

rule over – Formerly oppressed, now they prevail. (TLSB)

consumed – Death eats up flesh as it rots away. (TLSB)

49:15 *ransom my soul from the power of Sheol* – While this may refer to saving (for a while) from the universal prospect of death (as in Job 5:20; see 116:8), the context strongly suggests that the author, as one of the upright, speaks of his final destiny. Perhaps the thought is of being conveyed into the presence of God in his heavenly temple, analogous to the later Jewish thought of being conveyed to “Abraham’s side.” (CSB)

God’s solution for the universal human problem of vv 7–9. God can pay the ransom no person can raise to redeem his or her soul. Christ’s victory swallowed death and paid the ransom in full (1Co 15:54; Is 25:7–8). (TLSB)

This verse is one of the high points of the OT in its clear confession of the resurrection and eternal life. (PBC)

will receive *me* – † “Take” translates the word also used of Enoch and Elijah (Ge 5:24; 2Ki 2:3, 5). (CSB)

Same verb used of God’s action when He took Enoch and Elijah (Gn 5:24; 2Ki 2:3, 5). (TLSB)

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49:16–19 So do not let the present state of the wealthy captivate you. (CSB)

49:16 *his house* – His whole estate (see Ex 20:17). (CSB)

The rich and powerful people described here are not believers – they trust in their own power. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

49:17 *when he dies* – In death they will be no more wealthy or powerful than anybody else; their glory was of this world, and therefore temporary. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

49:18 Switches from “he” to “you.” Psalmist rhetorically reminds everyone—even you, dear reader—about the ultimate folly of trusting in wealth. St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “One man praises the Lord because He is mighty; another because He is good unto him; and again, another simply because He is good. The first is a slave, and fears for himself; the second mercenary, and desires somewhat for himself; but the third is a son, and gives praises to his Father” (*SLSB*, p 196). (TLSB)

49:19 *go to the generation* – All people will die as their ancestors did before. (TLSB)

never again – Both the artificial “light” of wealth and the light of life eternal are gone. (TLSB)

light – Often symbolizes well-being (see 97:11; Job 18:5–6; 22:28; 29:3; Pr 13:9; La 3:2) or life and salvation.); Isa 53:11. (CSB)

49:20 *without understanding* – These rich fools who do not trust God perish like cattle and are laid in the grave with nothing. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

Ps 49 Wealth and earthly goods cannot buy off death. Those who foolishly rely on them find a very different end than those whose fortune and trust is in the Lord. In a culture saturated with great personal and national prosperity, our own relative wealth and advantage easily become false “gods” to which we look for all good things. Neither the god of money nor any person can pay the ransom price for sin or overcome death. Christ alone has done this for us by His death and resurrection. • Thanks be to God, who has ransomed my soul from the power of the grave and made me rich in blessings. Amen. (TLSB)