

Wisdom calls for a worship song on the riddle of life and death and the Sons of Korah oblige. The psalmist challenges all those who use their wealth and self-reliance to live in denial of death. With a bent toward natural reason he approaches the subject philosophically. Without referencing God's special revelation or specific events in salvation history, he makes his case for all people everywhere to hear and agree that wealth is no defense against death. Death is no respecter of persons and in the end no matter what their net worth or worldly status may be "they are like sheep destined to die" (Ps 49:14).

Ernest Becker described the human dilemma this way: "As soon as a man lifts his nose from the ground and starts sniffing at eternal problems like life and death. . .he is in trouble. Most men spare themselves this trouble by keeping their minds on the small problems of their lives. . .They 'tranquilize themselves with the trivial' . . ." ¹ Psalm 49 challenges the denial of death by encouraging the poor and exposing the wealthy.

A Song to be Heard

*Hear this, all you peoples;
listen, all who live in this world,
both low and high,
rich and poor alike:
My mouth will speak words of wisdom;
the meditation of my heart will give you understanding.
I will turn my ear to a proverb;
with the harp I will expound my riddle:*
Psalm 49:1-4

Imagine Irish singer-songwriter Bono, lead vocalist and primary lyricist for U2, belting out this psalm. The first word, "Hear!" invoked in the mind of the Israelite, the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4). The truth that follows is rooted in "the unity and universal rule of Yahweh," and the Israelite knows that for certain, but the song the poet sings is meant for all peoples, all who live in this world.²

The pedagogical strategy of the psalmist is to craft a message that will gain a hearing among those who do not necessarily acknowledge Yahweh's universal rule. For this unique psalm the worship leader does not assume a view of the world that is shaped by salvation history. The psalmist is like the apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17) striving to find a way to communicate the truth of God to the world at large – a world unfamiliar with Abraham and Moses and the Covenant promises.³ To do this, the psalmist assumes the shared experience of the human condition. People everywhere are looking for insight into the riddle of life and death. They feel

¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973, 178.

² Wilson, *Psalms*, 747.

³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 96.

vulnerable and powerless before the “high and mighty” who boast of their riches and power. Then on the basis of this shared experience the psalmist makes a claim about himself. He professes to speak words of wisdom from his heart. We can choose to believe him and listen or we can refuse, but either way we have to deal with his explicit claim and stated intention. What the poet has to say comes from his “heart seasoned understanding of life” (Ps 49:3 MSG). Finally, the psalmist chooses a medium that has universal appeal – a song set to music. His communication strategy consists of a universally recognized subject, a clear profession of soul-searching integrity, and his artistic commitment to “solve life’s riddle with the help of a harp” [or a Gibson J-200] (Ps 49:4, MSG).

Destined to Die

*Why should I fear when evil days come,
when wicked deceivers surround me –
those who trust in their wealth
and boast of their great riches?
No one can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for many –
the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough –
so that they should live on forever
and not see decay.
For all can see that the wise die,
that the foolish and the senseless also perish,
leaving their wealth to others.
Their tombs will remain their houses forever,
their dwellings for endless generations,
though they had named lands after themselves.
People, despite their wealth, do not endure;
they are like the beasts that perish.*

Psalm 49:5-12

Implicit in the singer’s question, “Why should I fear?” is an allusion to the fear that grounds the life of faith, namely, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7). Given his aim to reach an inclusive audience he explores two pressing fears that everyone can identify with. First, the fear of evil days, when “wicked deceivers” are nipping at his heels, like snakes along the path ready to strike.⁴ Second, the fear of the rich and powerful who seem insulated from the ills common to man and who use their wealth, not to serve others, but to disadvantage others and oppress the weak. The psalmist seeks to eliminate the fear induced by these two expressions of evil by taking in the big picture. Wisdom calls for a new perspective. Our destiny is not in the hands of our foes “that seek to work us woe” nor is it in hands of the wealthy who pride themselves on their possessions and seek to dominate others. The psalmist reflects on a simple

⁴ Ross, Psalms, 134. Ross translates Ps 49:5, “Why should I fear in the days of adversity, when the iniquity at my heels surrounds me.”

gospel truth to make his case: “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them.” He states this truth as a simple fact of life without apology or embellishment. The psalmist reminds his audience that wealth cannot control human destiny. No one has the purchasing power to redeem a human life. Death is humanly inescapable. The wealthy may think that they can buy their way to happiness and a long life but they are “terribly mistaken.”⁵ Only God can redeem a human life, but the psalmist waits to make that point until verse 15. First, he lets the powerlessness of the wealthy and the leveling effect of death sink in. Jesus echoes this truth when he asks, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

The psalmist states the obvious: everyone is going to die, whether they be rich or poor, wise or foolish. Death is the great leveler. You and I are going to die, and how much money we have is not going to make a difference. The psalmist implies that the denial of death is especially pronounced among the wealthy. The poet’s lyrics identify two specific ways their arrogant quest for immortality is expressed: (1) They inwardly compensate for their frailty by building elaborate and enviable homes. Their physical dwelling-places give them a sense of permanence. (2) They name things after themselves. Like the people who built the Tower of Babel they strive to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4).

But who is fooling who? Despite the big mansion, a heart attack can render the wealthiest person “homeless” in an instance. We are as defenseless against death as the animals are. Ernest Becker reasoned that we conger up “immortality symbols” to overcome our fears and feelings of vulnerability. Wealth is one of the prime immortality symbols, but it is not the only one. We can focus on sports or sex or success or style or anything that catches our imagination to avoid thinking about our “tragic destiny.”⁶ David Goetz writes, “An immortality symbol is not really about the thing (bank balance, home, car, child, job, etc). It’s about the glory that the thing bestows on me.”⁷ The poet songwriter exposes the myth of these “immortality symbols” and let’s it be known that redemption is possible, but only in God.

The Myth of Self-Sufficiency

*This is the fate of those who trust in themselves,
and of their followers, who approve their sayings.
They are like sheep and destined to die;
death will be their shepherd
(but the upright will prevail over them in the morning).
Their forms will decay in the grave,
far from their princely mansions.
But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead;
he will surely take me to himself.
Do not be overawed when others grow rich,*

⁵ Goldingay, Psalms, 101.

⁶ Becker, The Denial of Death, 3.

⁷ David Goetz, Death by Suburb, 42.

*when the splendor of their houses increases;
for they will take nothing with them when they die,
their splendor will descend with them.
Though while they live they count themselves blessed –
and people praise you when you prosper –
they will join those who have gone before them,
who will never again see the light of life.
People who have wealth but lack understanding
are like the beasts that perish.*

Psalm 49:13-20

There is an implicit contrast between Israel's wisdom tradition, concisely stated in Proverbs 3:5-6, and the fate of those who trust in themselves. The me-centered world of our own making is the alternative reality to the God-centered world of creation and eternity. To concentrate day and night on our feelings, potentials, needs, wants and desires, is to live in denial of the soulful truth that we have been made in God's image and depend upon his mercy.⁸ The psalmist likens those who trust in themselves to a herd of dumb sheep shepherded for slaughter. The vivid image is a sharp reversal of the twenty-third Psalm, where the shepherd leads, guides, provides and protects the sheep. Instead of being led besides quiet streams and green meadows, these sheep are being led to their deaths.

Like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes the psalmist briefly interjects the faith of the "upright" in God's redemptive deliverance. He reassures those who trust in the Lord that they "will prevail" over the wealthy "in the morning." Unexpectedly, the poet's song turns personal: "But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself" (Ps 49:15). The redemptive climax of the psalm is linked to the earlier reference to redemption (Ps 49:7) and it is embedded in the negative description of those who trust in themselves. This is the only time God is the subject of the psalm, "in the realm where the rich thought they were in control, but are not."⁹ The psalmist is confident that God will redeem his life from Sheol and "take" him. The same expression is used in Psalm 73:24: "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory." "How much the psalmist actually understood is unclear," writes Ross, "but the words convey the idea of a hope that contrasts with the death and descent of the wicked to an unseen world."¹⁰ Those who fear the Lord and depend upon his mercy should "not be overawed when others grow rich and the splendor of their houses increases" (Ps 49:16). Mansion-building fools may be the envy of many, but their wealth will be given to others and their bodies will see decay.

The psalm concludes with a sober warning: without the fear of the Lord and the redemption that

⁸ Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules*, 8.

⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 105.

¹⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, 151. See, Craigie, *Psalms*, 360, who takes an opposing perspective: "Against this bleak picture of the destiny of the wealthy, the poet quotes their (imaginary) words of self-confidence: 'Surely God will redeem me. . .'" See, Goldingay, *Psalms*, 105. Goldingay writes, "The language of 15a especially parallels Hosea 13:14. Like other psalms, this one expresses a strong conviction that God is involved in the this-worldly lives of people, bringing healing and rescue from persecution."

only God can provide the wealthy are senseless. They are, “like the beasts that perish.” We need to keep the psalmist’s universal message to all people in mind when we seek the wealth of the wealthy for our good causes. It is ironic that Christian mission organizations play down the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need for redemption when they request funds from philanthropic foundations for humanitarian causes. In the name of social justice and medical care they soft pedal the gospel with the hope that the foundation will overlook their “spiritual” initiatives so that they will fund their humanitarian causes. “It is good to seek the common good,” writes Scot McKnight, “but not at the expense of personally surrendering to King Jesus. If the kingdom story is the true story, there is no good for the common good until humans surrender to King Jesus.”¹¹

It is not difficult to imagine Psalm 49 inspiring and informing Jesus’ parable of the rich fool in Luke 12. The correspondence between the psalm and Jesus’ teaching is striking.

“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

Then he said, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.”

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

Jesus concluded, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

Whenever we pray the psalms we are reminded that they anticipate the gospel of Jesus Christ. We seek to understand the psalms as they were first prayed and used in worship, but we also seek to understand their meaning in the light of Jesus Christ. When the psalmist says, “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them – the ransom for life is costly, no payment is ever enough” (Ps 49:7-8), we gladly affirm that the Son of Man came “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

When the psalmist says, “God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself” (Ps 49:15), we look to Jesus who said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you, I will come back and *take you to be with me* that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1-3).

We pray Psalm 49 in agreement with the author of Hebrews who confessed: “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb 9:27-28).

¹¹ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014. 37.

