

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

**Bereans Sunday School
Placerita Baptist Church
2005**

by
William D. Barrick, Th.D.
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary



Psalm 49 — The High Cost of Redemption

1.0 Introducing Psalm 49

- Some common themes show up in Psalms 47–49:

Preceding Psalms	Psalm 49
48:14 God, Our God . . . will guide us until death	v. 14 Death shall be their shepherd
47:1 O clap your hands, all peoples; 48:10 So is Your praise to the ends of the earth;	v. 1 Hear this, all peoples; Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,

- Psalms 49 and 73 share many similarities. Both are wisdom psalms.
- The wisdom characteristics of Psalm 49 are also common to Ecclesiastes and Proverbs:

Psalm 49	Ecclesiastes & Proverbs
v. 3 My mouth will speak wisdom	Proverbs 10:31
v. 4 I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will express my riddle on the harp.	Proverbs 1:6
v. 10 <i>even</i> wise men die;	Ecclesiastes 2:16
v. 10 leave their wealth to others	Ecclesiastes 2:18; 6:2
vv. 12, 20 like the beasts that perish	Ecclesiastes 3:19
v. 14 the upright shall rule over them	Proverbs 12:24; 17:2
v. 17 when he dies he will carry nothing away	Ecclesiastes 5:15

Reading Psalm 49 (NAU)

49:1 A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

Hear this, all peoples;
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,

49:2 Both low and high,
Rich and poor together.

49:3 My mouth will speak wisdom,
And the meditation of my heart *will be* understanding.

49:4 I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will express my riddle on the harp.

49:5 Why should I fear in days of adversity,
When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me,

49:6 Even those who trust in their wealth
And boast in the abundance of their riches?

49:7 No man can by any means redeem *his* brother
Or give to God a ransom for him —

49:8 For the redemption of his soul is costly,
And he should cease *trying* forever —

49:9 That he should live on eternally,
That he should not undergo decay.

49:10 For he sees *that even* wise men die;
The stupid and the senseless alike perish
And leave their wealth to others.

49:11 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.

49:12 But **man in his pomp** will not endure;
He is like the beasts that perish.

49:13 This is the way of those who are foolish,
And of those after them who approve their words.

Selah.

49:14 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.

49:15 But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol,
For He will receive me.

Selah.

49:16 Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;

49:17 For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
His glory will not descend after him.

49:18 Though while he lives he congratulates himself —
And though *men* praise you when you do well for yourself —

49:19 He shall go to the generation of his fathers;



They will never see the light.

49:20 Man in *his* pomp, yet without understanding,
Is like the beasts that perish.

2.0 Understanding Psalm 49

2.1 Outline

- I. The Psalmist's Call (vv. 1-4)
- II. The Psalmist's Query (vv. 5-12)
- III. The Psalmist's Consolation (vv. 13-20)



2.2 Notes

- v. 1 “the world”
 - The Hebrew word *heled* indicates the temporary world of time.
 - People exist in a transitory world.
- v. 2 “low and high . . . Rich and poor”
 - These two merisms refer to all people by means of two extreme categories of people.
 - Compare “young and old” and “ladies and gentlemen.”
- vv. 3, 20 “understanding . . . without understanding”
 - References to “understanding” form an inclusio highlighting the condition of fallen man in contrast to the wisdom God offers by revelation.
- v. 4 “a proverb . . . my riddle”
 - **Proverb:** “Man in *his* pomp is like the beasts that perish” (the refrain in vv. 12 and 20).
 - **Riddle #1:** What can a man give in exchange for his own soul?
 - **Answer:** Verses 6-9.
 - See Matthew 16:26.
 - **Riddle #2:** What is the great equalizer between rich and poor?
 - **Answer:** Verse 10.
 - The riddle might be “the contradiction encountered when those who are wicked enjoy ease and prosperity while the righteous suffer oppression and want.”—Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 748.
- vv. 5, 16 “Why should I fear . . . Do not be afraid”
 - Another inclusio providing a rhetorical question and the understood answer.
- v. 8 “the redemption of his soul is costly”
 - Compare 1 Peter 1:18-19.
- v. 9 “That he should not undergo decay”
 - Literally, “That he should not see the pit.”

- Note the parallelism. The second line speaks of death.
- Compare Psalms 16:10; 30:3, 9.
- **vv. 9, 14** Eternal Life?
 - “That he should live on eternally” (v. 9) and “And the upright shall rule over them in the morning” (v. 14).
 - “It is doubtful that the poet believes in an afterlife with God. The psalm is too early in the development of Israel’s thought to formulate such a belief.”—Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), 124.
 - “Most moderns, even A. B. Davidson and Salmond, minimise the Eschatology of the ancient Hebrews, so as to reduce it much below the level of that of the ancient neighbouring nations.”—Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (reprint; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 1:411.
- **vv. 12, 20** Refrain
 - The differing portions (“will not endure” and “yet without understanding”) involve assonance (similarity of sound: *bal yālîn* and *w^{elō}’ yābîn*).
 - The first refrain refers to the transitory nature of man and his wealth or power. Literally, “does not spend the night.”
 - “It suggests that in view of death a person’s position in life is not as secure even as a traveler who turns into an inn for the evening. In our case, life is so short that we do not even make it to the morning.”—James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 2:412.
 - The second refrain refers to the ultimate distinction not erased by death: spiritual understanding (= fear of the LORD).
- **vv. 13, 15** “Selah.”
 - *What are the concepts upon which the reader is to meditate?*
- **v. 14** “Death shall be their shepherd”
 - NIV’s “death will feed on them” is based upon the verb’s ambiguity. It can mean “shepherd” or “graze.”
 - In either phraseology, the picture is sinister and a stark contrast to Psalm 23’s shepherd motif.
 - “Those who thought they needed no divine guide end up with a shepherd whose name is Death, who herds them into Sheol to dwell forever”—Schaefer, *Psalms*, 126.
- **v. 15** “But God”
 - This is the hope of the psalmist.
 - Not only will God “redeem” him, God will “receive” him.
 - Compare Genesis 5:24 and 2 Kings 2:11 (both use the same Hebrew verb).



3.0 Singing Psalm 49



Tune: “Rock of Ages” (repeat last two lines of refrain)

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| <p>1 Dust to dust, the mortal dies,
Both the foolish and the wise;
None forever can remain,
Each must leave his hoarded gain.
Yet within their heart they say
That their houses are for aye,
That their dwelling places grand
Shall for generations stand.</p> <p>3 O’er them soon shall rule the just,
All their beauty turn to dust;
God my waiting soul shall save,
He will raise me from the grave.
Let no fear disturb your peace
Though one’s house and wealth increase;
Death shall end his fleeting day,
He shall carry naught away.</p> | <p>2 To their lands they give their name
In the hope of lasting fame,
But man’s honor quickly flies,
Like the lowly beast he dies.
Though such folly mark their way,
Men approve of what they say;
Death their shepherd, they the sheep,
He within his fold will keep.</p> <p>4 Though in life he wealth attained,
Though the praise of men he gained,
He shall join those gone before,
Where the light shall shine no more.
Crowned with honor though he be,
Highly gifted, strong and free,
If he be not truly wise,
Man is like the beast that dies.</p> |
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— Author unknown

4.0 Praying Psalm 49

- Lord, help me to meditate on Your Word with understanding. [v. 3]
- Teach me not to fear the “days of adversity.” [v. 5]
- Father, thank You for the priceless ransom Christ paid for my soul. [vv. 8, 9]
- Do not let me focus more on my house than on You, O God. [v. 11]
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5.0 Applying Psalm 49

- No man can save himself from death and hell.
- Wealth is not the answer to life’s greatest riddles.