

St Marks Northbridge Sermon, 9th January 2022, Andre Kyme

Psalm 49: A Song of Wisdom

Songs to remember

When my wife Steph was at Bible college, she developed her own special method to remember the declensions for ancient Greek. If you know Steph, you'll know she's very musical. So her method was a rhyme she could sing to recall the rules. If you'd been able to watch her in a Greek exam, you'd see her bopping away to her little jingle until she reached the relevant part – and then carry on writing. Apart from looking a bit odd – and also the drawback of having to start from the beginning of the song each time she wanted to use it – it actually proved to be a very effective way of remembering important information.

And the psalm we're looking at today – Psalm 49 – is similar in many ways. Usually Psalms are prayers to God – prayers of praise or petition or lament. But this one intends something different: it intends to *teach wisdom*, v3: *"My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the meditation of my heart will give you understanding."* The psalmist – who's a son of Korah, put in charge of the music in the house of the Lord under King David (1 Ch 6:31-33) – wants to illuminate something that's hard for us to perceive on our own. Notice how he uses the term 'riddle' in v4. And he hoped that explaining this 'riddle' via the harp (v4) would help the message be remembered.

Now, I'm not going to sing the psalm, or play an instrument as I speak – thankfully for you – instead, I'm just going to explain what the son of Korah taught on his harp. This might be less engaging than the harp – but I promise it won't be less relevant. And that's underlined in the opening verses. Usually when reading the Bible we need to take some care applying the word from the original context to our own. For example, it mightn't be as simple as: Jesus said X to Peter, so Jesus says X to us; or Gideon did Y, so we should do Y. But this Psalm makes the connection very simple and direct. V1-2 leave no doubt about who the psalm is targeting: *"Hear this, all you peoples... all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike..."* So Psalm 49 is for you and me. It's a timeless song of wisdom relevant to *everyone*; a song that needed to be heard and remembered then, and a song we need to hear and remember now.

A song about wealth

Ok, so what's this song that's so important for the world to hear? Well, in the first instance it's a song about wealth – but not at all academic or at arms-length. Because notice the platform from which the whole song springs in v5: *fear*. *"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?"* You see, this is a word to those *troubled* by the wealth of the wicked, probably from one who's been deeply troubled *himself* by the wealth of the wicked. So yes – it's a song about money and wealth – but a song that's personal and pastoral.

We don't have to try very hard do we to think of ways in which wealth in the hands of the wicked is troubling. The Bible describes money as a root of all kinds of evil, and we could think of many troubling examples:

- Greedy corruption that leaves the poor poorer and prevents aid from going where it's needed;
- Sex trafficking of women and children that combines theft, abuse and greed into one awful package;
- Arms deals that simultaneously fuel greed and violence;
- The perversion of justice as the guilty buy their freedom and the poor receive no representation;
- Monopolies starving the livelihoods of the small;
- Drug smuggling which makes a few wealthy but which wrecks whole families, communities and cities;
- Gambling and betting agencies preying on the vulnerabilities of addicts;

Sadly that's just the start of a very long list we could compile. Wealth + wickedness is troubling.

But feeling troubled by wealth can also be more subtle than these blatant evils. In v16 the psalmist expresses the fear a little differently – he says, “*Do not be overawed when others grow rich, when the splendour of their houses increases...*”

See although we mightn't be consciously afraid at the prosperity of another, it's possible for overawe to manifest in our hearts in subtle ways. For example:

- If we think the wealthy prosper at our expense
- If we have a niggling concern that maybe material things do matter more
- If we worry that maybe God won't look after my material needs as I believe
- If we think maybe there won't be any ultimate justice for wrong done with wealth

These too can be troubling. Perhaps you can relate to some or all of these to varying degree.

Feeling troubled by the wealth that surrounds us and the ways in which such wealth can be wielded – that's the occasion and motivation for this song. And the psalmist's goal is to illuminating these fears and equip us to think about them wisely. And just like when you turn a camera lens and the image progressively transforms from a blurry mess to that pleasing point where all the colours, shapes and lines are sharp and the scene is clear, what brings wealth and the use of wealth into sharp focus is *death*. So this is, in fact, a song about death.

A song about death

Many of you would've heard the saying “*death is the great leveller*” – because it seems to put people on an even playing field despite their differences in life. But that isn't what the Psalmist is saying here. He's saying something much more profound: that death is in fact the great *sifter* – sifting the redeemed from the unredeemed.

You see, for the psalmist, redemption is the key to thinking about his fears. V7: “*No one can redeem the life of another, or give to God a ransom for them – the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough – so that they should live on forever and not see decay.*”

What's going to happen to your life when you die? Will you live on forever and not see decay? Only if you're redeemed. Only if a ransom has been paid to God for your life. And therein lies the problem for those trusting in wealth. Because the ransom for a life is costly! No payment is enough!

Worldly wealth – no matter how much you have – has any spiritual currency with God. Not in this life. And certainly not when you die, since no matter who you are, v10, – wise, foolish, senseless – nobody takes anything with them when they die. The idea that we can transact with God to redeem ourselves sounds so silly when we put it like this doesn't it? And yet, how often do we try to transact with God – or think we'll be able to when we meet Him? Lord I'm a reasonable person. Lord, there are and have been many people a lot worse than me. Lord, yes, I've chiefly looked out for me – but I've done plenty of good things along the way. Lord, remember those donations I gave to the Salvos and the Blind Dog Society? Lord, I haven't exactly had the easiest life; I feel like I deserve a break.

Trading in prayers; trading in beads; trading in church-attendance; trading in good works; trading in reputation; trading in the lot you've been dealt; trading in money; trading in whatever. Those currencies are meaningless. It doesn't matter how much we offer of any of them, they're worthless to redeem our life from the pit of death. God is simply not some store owner selling redemption, who we can barter with. We've got no currency. None of us do.

You might've seen the Cadbury chocolate ad on TV where the little girl comes into the store to buy her mother a chocolate bar using her buttons and toys as currency. The currency is obviously worthless to the shop owner. And when we try to transact with God, it's like us handing over our worthless buttons to Him. No amount of buttons can convince or coerce God.

And if you've seen the ad you'll know the shop owner does give the girl a chocolate bar. The reason is not because the buttons had value for him, but because he's gracious to her. And it's the same for God and our redemption. The only reason our life can be redeemed is because God is gracious. Redemption's always been about humbly trusting the God who pays the ransom for us. That ransom was the life of His Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross, as a payment. Christ's ransoming death paid backwards for all in the OT – like the psalmist – who put their trust in God. And the same ransoming death of Christ pays forward for you and me – who put our trust in Jesus.

There are, therefore, just two groups of people on view in this psalm. Not the wealthy and the poor as you might've guessed at first – but the redeemed and the unredeemed. Or, as v13 puts it, those who trust in God and those who trust in themselves.

Most of the psalm is devoted to the outlook for the unredeemed - and it's a bleak picture. Scan along with me from v11:

- Though in life they named lands after themselves for posterity (v11), they don't endure (v12).
- Though in life they had mansions (v14), now a tomb will be their permanent home (v11).
- Though in life they fed themselves richly, now death will feed on them (v14).
- Though in life they ruled those who trust God, now the redeemed will rule over them (v14).
- Though in life they had splendour, that splendour does not descend with them (v17)
- And though in life they had reputation and approval, now they'll never again see the light of life (v19).

This psalm is one of the clearest, yet darkest, portraits of the theology of the death of the unredeemed in the whole OT. For those who choose to reject, disregard, ridicule or just plain ignore the ransom payment for their redemption – death is a doorway to a dark reality.

By contrast, though, the outlook for the redeemed is entirely different. It's marked by the complete assurance of v15: *"God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself."* As surely as Christ died as the ransom and rose again from the grave, never to see decay, so too all who trust in Him will not see decay. For them, death is merely a doorway to a wonderful and hopeful new reality and experience the psalmist calls the 'light of life'.

For those who trust in themselves it means that this side of death is, sadly, the best they will ever have it. On the flip-side, the song assures all who trust in Christ that this side of death is the worst they will ever have it.

A song about eternity

Well, I hope you can see that by arrowing in on *redemption*, the son of Korah is – after all is considered – not singing a song about wealth, or a song about death, but a song about *eternity*. And this's the last point on your outline.

The doctrine of coming judgement and eternal life is the rightful backdrop for how we think and feel about wealth on earth – and so he rightly sets worldly wealth and present prosperity against that backdrop. Thinking eternally like this doesn't come naturally to us, which is why we need this riddle teased out – why this wisdom psalm is so timelessly valuable.

We can summarise the psalmist's main point this way: as someone redeemed by God for all eternity, you have no need in this life to fear (v5) or be overawed (v16) by the wealth you see around you and how it's used. This is a word of pastoral encouragement in an area we're all tempted.

I think the key take-away from this song for us is simply letting its truths impact how we think about and steward the wealth the Lord's given us in this life. It means conscientiously thinking of wealth in light of eternity, not compartmentalising it to *this* side of death; it means letting our redemption in Christ actually inform and control our choices with wealth; it means apprehending the fact that our fears about wealth – whether the result of others seeking to make our life difficult, or more subtle fears driven by doubt, envy

and worry – that these can be dispelled by knowing our safe spiritual condition as redeemed and the consequent freedom this gives to use wealth in this life for the Lord.

Not surprisingly, the NT reiterates and develops the ideas in this psalm in many ways, in light of the redeeming work of Jesus. We don't have time in this sermon to explore these in detail, but I want to leave you very briefly with three avenues for further application, all from Jesus Himself in Luke 12:32-34. His words are printed on your sheet – so if you have that handy, I'll read them for us:

³² *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Three things. First is a word of strong caution in v34

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Just like a nasty but charming overlord, money and wealth easily becomes a dangerous master leading us into all kinds of selfishness. So we must be on guard about this. Let's not underestimate the draw, the lure, the appeal and the charm of wealth to shift our trust from our redeemer Christ to what is, ultimately, ourselves. Instead, let's be realistic about the temptation, and real with God and others.

Second is a call to radical generosity in v33

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. Although our material wealth has no value beyond death, our shrewd use of it in this life can 'pay forward' into eternity – so be radically generous with what the Lord has given you and aim to do the most good you possibly can while the currency has meaning. Christ's redeeming us for all eternity has freed us from fear, to be generous with all we have.

And third a word of fear-dissolving assurance in v32

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

The psalmist was spot on when he counselled those hearing his song not to be fearful and not to be overawed. The basis for this was not pie in the sky, but their redemption by God. Nothing has changed. The ultimate reason there's no need to fear, or be overawed, by wealth is because we're safe in Christ forever. If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember these wonderful words from Jesus to His sheep, echoing the words of the psalmist a thousand years earlier: *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”*