

The World's Empty Glory

Windows of My Soul

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Heavenly Father, as we turn now to the scriptures which holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, we pray that you would speak to us, help us to listen, help us to heed, help us by the power of the Holy Spirit not just to be hearers this morning but also to be doers. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now turn with me to Psalm 49 as we work our way through the second book of Psalms. As you're doing that, I rode home late last night from Ligonier as did some of you who were there, and 4,000 people or so, it was like COVID never happened. But sadly, Dr. Ferguson wasn't able to fly because of restrictions in Britain, and I know that some of you need a Dr. Ferguson fix every now and then, so there was a wonderful interview Chris Larson did with, a live interview with Sinclair from his office in his home surrounded by books and lasted about 20 minutes or so, and would recommend search online, YouTube, somewhere, ligonier.org, somewhere, you'll find it.

Psalm 49.

1 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. 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. 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.

Well, so far God's holy and inerrant word.

In a place called Valladolid in Spain where Christopher Columbus died in 1505, the great discoverer, there is a monument to the memory of Columbus and it's in the form of a lion that's destroying one of the Latin words that is on the monument and the Latin word on the monument which had been Spain's motto for centuries reads "Ne plus ultra, No more beyond." Spain had long believed that Spain was the extent of the world and there was nothing beyond to the west of Spain and, of course, Columbus proved that to be untrue, and so the lion is eating that Latin word "Ne" so that the motto now reads "plus ultra, more beyond," and that's what this Psalm is about. There is more beyond this life and you need to be ready, you need to be wise, you need to have understanding.

This Psalm is very different, isn't it? We've been looking at book 2 of the Psalms beginning at Psalm 42 and all of the Psalms that we've looked at and the majority of Psalms are the same, they're Psalms of praise, they're Psalms of worship, but this one, as a Puritan once said, this one preaches. This is a different genre. It sounds a bit like the book of Ecclesiastes, "What is the meaning of life? Is there nothing new under the sun?" It's a warning about falling in love with this world. It's a warning about acquiring a taste for materialism, for this world, and making that the be-all and end-all of life.

So, first of all, and you see it there in verses 1 to 4, there's kind of an introduction and it's a call to listen to God's word. He's calling upon everyone, the whole world, whoever is within the sound of his voice, he wants them to listen to a word of wisdom, to a word of understanding. This is God's revealed truth that's about to occur. He's going to solve a riddle, the riddle of life. Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the righteous suffer? What is the meaning of life? Why am I here? What is my purpose? How do I know what is right and what is wrong? What is the basis for life and living? Is there anything beyond death that I should prepare for?

Bob Godfrey was reminding me, I can't remember, I think it was yesterday at the Ligonier conference, of a book that I once glanced at and then decided I would read the last two pages in the bookstore in the airport and then not buy the book, and it's by Yuval Noah Harari. I picked up the book because he had written a New York bestseller by the Latin word "Sapiens," which I didn't read either, but this book was called "Homo Deus, A History of Tomorrow." That's a great title. "Homo Deus, A History of Tomorrow." Well,

Godfrey wondered if it was a riff on Anselm's great book, Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo," twist it round, homo Deus, but there's no reference to Anselm in the book. It's a book about the meaning of life and he has a conclusion and I read the last two pages or so and this was his conclusion. Are you ready? There is no meaning. It is meaningless. You don't need to buy the book. You don't need to read it. Life has no purpose. There is no meaning, so eat, drink, have fun as much as you can. Enjoy yourself because there is no meaning to life.

What a philosophy but it's the philosophy of millions today all around us. We hear it in Washington, we hear it on the news, we hear it in Hollywood loud, extravagant voices on the meaninglessness of life. Life is what you make it to be. It's all about me and my comfort. You know, Harari wasn't saying anything new, Epicurus had said exactly the same thing and Paul talks about him in 1 Corinthians 15, "Let us eat and drink and be merry because tomorrow we die." Psalm 49 has a better answer and he wants us to heed it.

Life is a riddle. My favorite story, of course, is Douglas Adams' "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." A wonderful book. Read it when I was young and funny, amusing and serious at the same time. A supercomputer in an age when they didn't really know what supercomputers were but the supercomputer is asked to find the meaning of life and the universe and everything. And so it begins, chirps away, lights are flashing, days go by, months go by, years go by, 7 ½ million years go by and then suddenly it stops and chirps and says, "The answer is 42." And somebody yells at the computer, "Is that all you've got?" "Yes," the computer said, "I've checked and double checked. The answer is 42." But probably you are never quite sure what the problem was and that's the issue, isn't it? People don't really know what the problem is. You can't dictate a solution until you actually know what the problem is.

Life is a riddle. Take off your rose-tinted glasses for a minute and rub your eyes and look at it long and hard and what do you see? Well, from one point of view you see endless recurring cycles in nature: spring and summer and fall and winter, and spring a little later this year but it's coming, and then summer and round and round and round it goes. People come and people go. People die. Everyone dies. And so we don't look at that and we look at life itself and rotters seem to excel and those who are righteous seem to be downtrodden and beaten to the ground, and the ordering of events, if there is an ordering of the events, is inscrutable, unfathomable. What profit is there, then, in this life? And the psalmist is saying, "I want you to listen. Wherever you are, whoever you are, I want you to listen because I've got a solution to the riddle, I've got a solution to this life that we have." So the psalmist then turns in verses 5 to 11 to focus on the one great reality that we all can agree on and it speaks of it there in verses 10 and 11, "he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names." The unavoidability and the inevitability of death. Now we have guests and visitors here today and you chose the wrong Sunday to come and hear me preach because the subject matter here is death.

The righteous, and this is so typical of the Psalms, the righteous are always conscious that they're surrounded by a raucous mob of people that are mocking them, and this raucous mob of people are materialists, they are people who live for wealth, they live for money, they live for things, they live for this world, things they can touch and handle and feel. It's the way of life for them. We're surrounded by them today, that this world is all that you have. You're familiar, of course, with the story of Voltaire who did so much to destroy and mock Christianity, and on his dying bed, he said to his physician that he would give half of what he had if he could extend his life by six months, which he couldn't do. He wanted to cling onto this life with money or anything that could buy him some extension to his life, and he couldn't. The wise, even the wise, verse 10, "he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others." You can't take it with you, even the wise.

Haddon Robinson who taught homiletics, wrote a book on preaching that preachers read, one of many, a fine book about preaching, Haddon Robinson tells a story of being at a grave-site of a man who spoke 35 languages fluently. Imagine. Some of you are struggling with English. Imagine speaking 35 languages and here he was, he was dead. He was wise, wise beyond comparison, but he was now dead. Death is no respecter of persons. It's the great leveler. In the book of Job, death is spoken of as the great intruder, it comes when you don't want it, least expect it.

Many, of course, go through life attempting to deny their mortality. Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher who did so much to advance the narrative that this is all you have, today is all you have, the now is all that you have, that's the only meaning and purpose is the now, and he wrote, "Life has no meaning. The moment you lose the illusion that you may be eternal, life has no meaning." And he's right, of course. If you lose the perspective that you're eternal, that you're going to live forever whether in heaven or hell, life has no meaning and no purpose.

There's a book by Gregg Easterbrook, it's called "The Progress Paradox." It's a sociological analysis, one of thousands of modern America and life in modern America and worldviews in modern America, and he draws attention, his opening thesis is the fact that Americans and Westerners in particular, are constantly, their lives are constantly improving. I grew up in a house with no indoor plumbing. Life is better, for sure. Imagine 2020 with no cellphone. Imagine 2020 without internet. When the pandemic hit 100 years ago in 1918, the Spanish Flu and this church closed down twice in one year. It was almost impossible to contact the members of the church. Imagine. Things have improved. So he asked the question why is it, then, that Americans are not happier? Because evidently they are not. This will surprise you. If you follow the social media, which I don't, but if you follow the social media, evidently people are spitting at each other every second of the day. Everyone is snippy. Everyone is offended by everyone else, what they do, what they say, what they think. The House in Washington is full of it. There's no happiness. Why is it? And he has a lot of conjectures about reasons and then he comes to the conclusion, he says he wonders if the real reason why Americans are not happier is death. Maybe people grow steadily better off, yet seemingly no happier because there's a baseline anxiety in all our hearts and that anxiety is the fear of death.

Well, Mr. Easterbrook, maybe he's Dr. Easterbrook, is right except he has no real solution to it. Death. The reality of it. Leo Tolstoy, a great 19th century Russian author, writer, perhaps the greatest, you know, "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina" and so on, he writes, "My question that which at the age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide was the simplest of questions lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder. It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live. As I had found by experience, it was what will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?" Here he is 50, the greatest writer of the 19th century, one of the very best writers perhaps, and at 50 he's at the point of suicide because he can't see the meaning of life. What's to become of it all? What happens when we die?

So the psalmist says in verse 12 and again in verse 20, men are like beasts. Now he's not denying Genesis 1:26 and 27 that we are made in the image of God and that actually distinguishes us from the beasts. He's not denying that. What he's saying is that we die like beasts. Now some of you do this thing when you have children, when you go on a road trip, keep them from killing each other in the back, you make them count roadkill. Don't deny it. You've told me about it. And on a long trip, the number can be quite embarrassingly large. Roadkill.

Men die like beasts. Animals are living creatures, they are soulful in Hebrew. They have life, in other words, but it doesn't last. You remember those words and one day they will be spoken over you perhaps and me from Cranmer's liturgy, that Book of Common Prayer, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It's the one great certainty. I may not know who you are this morning, at least I can see your face which I couldn't at 8:30 but I may not know who you are, you may be a complete stranger to me, I may not know your name, I may know absolutely nothing about you, not a thing, but I know one thing about you: you're going to die. There is a day, it is appointed, and you will die. You will exit from the existence of this world. It's true of every single one of you.

I learned this, this week, I think I may have known it before but I had completely forgotten, but Trappist Monks dig a grave by hand, and then when one of the monks dies, they bury him in that grave and then they dig another one, and when they're digging another grave, they're all thinking, "Is this mine?" And it's a way of reminding them of their mortality. It's a way of reminding them that a day is coming when one of them will be put in that grave. Some laugh it off, like Woody Allen in his imitable way. "I'm not afraid of death," he said, "I just don't want to be there when it happens." Well, yes, it's funny and then it isn't. Materialists, people who just live for the now because that's all there is.

William Provine has a book on Darwinism often cited, taught and maybe still does at Cornell University and this is what he said, "When you die, you're not going to be surprised because you're dead. Now if I find myself awake and aware after death, I'm going to be really surprised, but at least," and listen to this, "but at least I'm going to go to

hell where I won't have all those grinning preachers from Sunday morning." And then he gives his worldview, "There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end of me. There is no ultimate function for ethics, no ultimate meaning of life. Since we are not going to live after we die, there is no reward for suffering in this life. You live and you die."

He's being honest. That's his worldview. It's the worldview of millions of people around us today. Sadly, it's the worldview of those in power in Washington too. It accounts for where we are. It accounts for cancel culture. It accounts for the entire base. Why is it wrong that elderly people die of COVID? After all, it's the survival of the fittest. It's Darwinism. The fittest survive, that's the ethic. Why is it wrong to abort millions of babies? How is it possible to argue for late-term abortion unless you believe that there is no ultimate basis for ethics, it's the survival of the fittest? Makes absolutely perfect sense at what drove the Nazis to remove 5-6 million Jews.

Enter Svetlana Alliluyeva, and she's commenting about witnessing the death of a man who killed millions of people. "At what seemed like the very last moment, he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance. Insane, or perhaps angry and full of fear of death and the unfamiliar faces of the doctors bent over him. The glance swept everyone in a second. Then something incomprehensible and awesome happened that to this day I can't forget and don't understand. He suddenly lifted his left hand as though bringing down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace, and no one could say to whom or what it might be directed. The next moment after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of his flesh." That was Stalin and the person writing it was his daughter.

There is one thing that is true of every single person in the world this morning, we are all going to die. So then, thirdly, what happens when you die, and I want you to look at verse 15, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." Now Sheol, this is the Old Testament and there is advancement and progress and revelation. Doctrines are given in the scriptures in embryonic form and they grow and develop and they come into fruition and flower in the New Testament, and only the seeds of them sometimes can be seen in the Old Testament, and that's true about the Old Testament understanding of what happens after death. Sheol is the realm of the dead and it's not stating one way or another whether the folk who have died are in heaven or in hell. That's not the point here, it's the fact that they still have being, they still have existence, there's life after death, they're in the realm of the dead, and the psalmist says, "Here's the solution to the riddle of life: I'm going to live forever. Here's the solution to the riddle of life that can often seem, at least from one perspective, to be so unfair: this life is not all there is. There is another life, an eternal life. There is a heaven to be anticipated and there is a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell."

And how will I get there? God will ransom my soul. Ransom, technical word in the Old Testament for the atonement. A ransom price has to be paid. The Passover lamb was a ransom price. You remember the words of Jesus, it's almost like his Mission Statement, "I

came not to be served but to serve and to give my life a ransom for many." That sums up the entire reason for the coming of Jesus into the world, "I came to serve and to give my life a ransom for many." Of course, he's quoting from the 4th servant song in Isaiah. A ransom. To whom is the ransom paid? C. S. Lewis, of course, in the "Narnia Chronicles" answers it by saying it's paid to the devil, the white witch, and that was a belief in the early church to some degree. But it's not to the devil that the ransom is paid, the ransom is paid to God himself. He cannot just forgive, you see, because he's holy and righteous. The law has to be satisfied and it leads in our own tradition in the Westminster Confession when it speaks in chapter 8 about the atonement, it summarizes it in this way, that Christ satisfied the demands of divine justice. He satisfied the demands of divine justice. He provided satisfaction. He provided a ransom. Jesus has to die as our substitute and sin-bearer.

The psalmist, of course, is anticipating that, "God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." This is the Old Testament equivalent of a statement in the New Testament that says to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Believers can say that. Life has meaning. Life has purpose. The worldview of the scriptures that God is and that this world is not all there is, there is another world and another dimension, that at our death what happens five seconds after you die? Your soul is immediately taken into the presence of Christ and if you're a believer, that is, you're immediately taken into the presence of Christ.

And now if you're not a believer this morning, if you're not a Christian this morning, I urge you what is your worldview? What's going to happen to you when you die because you are going to die. And you may say, "Well, I'll think about it tomorrow." My dear friend, you may not have a tomorrow. You may be dead before the end of this day. You must think about it now, this very moment. You must ask yourself while you still have breath, while your brain still functions, while your heart still beats, "What's going to happen to me when I die?" And unless your life is being built on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, my friend, the Bible is very clear and Jesus was very clear, he will say to you, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." That's not me saying that, that's not me tired after a week's conference in Florida. That's scripture. That's Jesus. So I urge you, I want you to be able to say, "Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven," as the hymn says. Can you say that about yourself? "God will ransom my soul because Jesus has died in my place and he will receive me." Oh, may it be so.

Father, we ask now in the solemnity of this topic that the psalmist raises, but there's joy in it, there's true and lasting joy in it that we need not fear death at all because death is just the beginning of eternal life in the presence of the Lord Jesus. Oh, may it be so, Lord, for those here who are uncertain, those who are still rebels in the far country, and bring them home, we pray, and save them by the power of the Holy Spirit. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.