

Introduction

The psalms make up one of the largest books in the Bible. In terms of Hebrew words, Psalms is the third largest book after Jeremiah and Genesis. However, Psalms consists in the most units since there are 150 of them. I don't see me doing a series of sermons that covers all of the psalms one-by-one, but the psalms are rich and powerful, and they must not be neglected. So I have determined to be intentional about preaching the psalms now and then. As we take breaks between the study of smaller books, and occasional breaks in the midst of the study of longer books, I will come to the psalms. Next week I plan to return to Matthew, but today we will direct our attention to the psalms, in particular Psalm 49. It is a psalm that speaks of peace in the midst of trouble, peace in the midst of trial, peace when it seems that others are flourishing while you are not, peace when the power and glory of the wicked is on the increase.

From time to time, we all need the reminder the psalmist sets before us here in Psalm 49.

[Read Text; Pray]

You may have noticed a few variations in the translations this morning as I read. Linguistically there are places in which this psalm is tough to translate. Rather than slowing to deal with these several challenges, I am just going to stick with the ESV translation because the overall message is not called into question by any of the variations. The central message that emerges from this psalm is to trust God. And it starts with a call to hear this message.

I. The Necessity of Hearing. (1-4)

A. The psalmist calls all people from everywhere and every social and economic level to come and attend. All inhabitants of the world are summoned to pay attention. The rich and poor together should incline their ears to what the psalmist has to say. In fact the psalmist himself says he will incline his own ear to what he says.

B. The matter about which he will speak is a matter of wisdom and understanding. He will not simply be shooting the breeze. He is not doing standup comedy. These will not be idle words. The claims will have far reaching implications. So everyone should give careful attention.

C. We encounter this kind of call all over the Bible.. Moses summoned Israel to come listen to the statutes and the rules of God's covenant, and he began with these words, "Hear, O Israel." He repeated this exhortation that they would absorb the commandments of the Lord and be careful to do what he said. During his time on earth, Jesus would urge those with ears to hear. He again did so in the revelation. In Ecclesiastes we are warned to guard our steps when we go to the house of God. We are told that "to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools." Fools draw near simply to have a word with God. The wise draw near to have a word from God. Back in the New Testament, James exhorts us to be quick to hear and slow to speak.

Each of these exhortations calls us to give careful attention when God speaks and when those speak who proclaim his word. That is what the psalmist is doing here. He is preaching a sermon. And everyone should give ear and heart to the words of truth. You and I are accountable for how we listen, how we hear. We are accountable to God to give ear to him and to his messenger. Isaiah tells us that the one to whom the Lord will look is he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at his word. We are accountable to hear even God's words of truth we ourselves speak. We are accountable to take the time and put forth the effort to hear.

Do you read the Bible? It is no excuse that you do not know what God has said if you will not pick up his word. It is a sad and guilty state when a person wanders about in defeat, bemoaning their defeat, wishing they had more victory in their life and more joy in their soul, but never looks to God's word for what they need.

Do you listen when the bible is read or preached? If you are like me, you will agree that listening is work. It takes effort, attention, and diligence. The call of the psalmist is to engage those very actions to digest and be

nourished by wisdom. Watch it when you are reading God's word that you engage to understand it and interact with it.

And think about how you attend to the word when it is preached. It is sad and distracting when the word of God is opened and the time has come for preaching that word and that is the time persons check-out. Some check-out mentally. Some check-out physically and leave the room. It is suddenly the time they have to go to the bathroom or stretch their legs. I know unexpected things happen. That is not what I am talking about. I am talking about what some seem to almost every single week. When people get up in the middle of preaching it not only keeps them from hearing the word, it interferes with others as well. The flesh is going to fight us for sure. We need to fight back. Spiritual life and death hang in the balance. We must fight to be still and we must fight to listen. But we are talking about the fight to hear the word of God.

James in the NT says that we need to be doers of the word and not hearers only. But I feel I need to say this morning that being a doer of the word starts with being a hearer. You will never be a doer if you are not first a hearer. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" does not just mean a lot of the word dwelling in you but also a depth of that word which is there. So hear the word. Hear it regularly and certainly hear it right now.

II. The Experience of Peace. (5-6)

A. Once the psalmist has seized our attention, he points us to the riddle he is going to address. And here it is in verses 5-6, "Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me?"

Though it comes across as a question, this riddle is no doubt rhetorical. The psalmist leaves unspoken but implied the answer which the rest of the psalm unfolds. That unspoken but implied answer is this, "I should NOT fear!"

The way the psalmist comes across reminds me of a treasured hymn. "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" starts like this . . .

Why should I feel discouraged/Why should the shadows come

Why should my heart feel lonely/And long for heaven and home
When Jesus is my portion/A constant friend is he
His eye is on the sparrow/And I know he watches over me

The point the Civilla Martin was making is that when Jesus is my portion, and when his eye is on the sparrow, and when I know he watches me, I should NOT feel discouraged; the shadows should NOT come and my heart should NOT feel lonely.

Similarly, the psalmist asks, why should I fear in times of trouble when everywhere I look I am surrounded by sinners and their wickedness? And the point is this, "I should not fear; I should not be troubled; I should be at peace." Here is an experience of rest known by the psalmist in the midst of trouble. And in that he calls everyone to come and hear the wisdom he is preaching, he is holding out hope that we too can experience that same peace, that same fearlessness.

These are troubled times. They are troubled by trials bodily pain and disease. The times are troubled by relational dysfunction and sin in families. The times are troubled because our society is growing increasingly vocal in going about calling good evil and evil good.

How can people experience peace in times like these? How can we be at rest within? How can it be that the troubles all around us can be kept on the outside but not be allowed to invade and disquiet our minds and our hearts on the inside? The rest of this psalm answers that question.

III. The Path of Foolishness.

A. The psalmist begins his answer to the riddle by declaring that there is a path that is foolish because it does not lead to the peace he knows. He shows us several false hopes in verses 6-12 and then he declares in verse 13, this is the path of those who have foolish confidence. There is a peace and confidence that some people possess, but it is worthless; it is foolish; it is even deceiving. There are those who walk about in a kind of peace, but it is grounded in an illusion that cannot ultimately deliver.

1. One of these false hopes is riches or wealth—financial security. Possessing significant wealth is not the issue but placing one's faith in their wealth and boasting of their riches, finding their joy in their wealth and possessions. It is their identity and their pursuit. It is their security. It is the thing after which they strive. The peace they experience depends upon their goods. Their happiness depends upon their monetary accomplishments.

One problem with trusting in riches is that they will never be enough. True they will never be enough to satisfy one's own desires, but here they will never be enough to pay the bill everybody owes. No amount of money will enable a person to avoid death. No amount of money will endear a person to God. It does not matter how much money a person has they can never render to God what is necessary for eternal life.

2. The second false hope is intelligence. Intelligence is a gift of God, and by using it, problems can be solved, diseases can be treated, and strategies devised. But it does not matter how smart you are. You can do some great things with your brain, but your mind will never give you an escape from death. The smart die just as surely as the stupid and foolish. Just ask Steven Hawking and Christopher Hitchens.

3. The third false hope is human honor. The world may love you. It may applaud you because it takes some delight in you. It may put a star in the sidewalk in Hollywood with your name on it. Having lands and buildings named after you for your great accomplishment or whatever might make a man feel important, but it will never exempt him from death.

4. And finally there is pomp. Pomp is an impressive outward showing. It can be how you look or how athletic you are or even how religious you are. But here again the idea is not simply the possession of qualities that are admired by the world but trusting and boasting in them, gaining your sense of value and worth from them. But verse 12 says that man in his pomp is like the beasts that perish. Human beings arrayed in the brightest human glory are yet reduced to the level of an animal by death. Popularity, fame, and attraction cannot spare you from death. And when you die you are no better than a dead dog. One moment a bear is formidable. It can kill you

in an instant. But the moment he is dead, you can skin him and make a rug. Man in his pomp thinks he is something. He pursues it, finds it, puts it on for all to see. But when he dies, it is over. The pomp disappears.

B. Now no matter which of these false hopes one trusts and boasts in, he is on the path of foolish confidence. And the evidence is where it leads. The rich cannot purchase a ransom for their life but go to the pit of death. The wise, just like the foolish and the stupid dies. Those who had lands called by their names nevertheless find themselves in a grave. Look at verse 14; it sums things up for those who walk the foolish path. Just like sheep appointed to the slaughter, these are appointed for Sheol—the place of death. Death is their shepherd. What a sad opposite to having the Lord as one's shepherd! Rather than passing through the valley of the shadow of death, these find themselves in the clutches of death itself. The righteous rule over them. They are consumed. They have no place to dwell.

In Romans 6:23, Paul the apostle sums it up, the wages of sin is death. The wages of trusting not in God but in accumulation, smarts, human achievement, and human pomp is death. These things may result in man's applause. You may get your name on a building, an airport, or a street. You may buy your way into entertainment arenas. People may applaud your discovery of a disease-killing vaccine. But none of these will bring escape from being thrown into the outer darkness. If these are your heart's passion, your end is death—eternal death.

C. So the implication from the psalmist is do not fear trouble and do not fear those who make trouble because they cannot withstand death. Once they die, they are no more powerful than a dead animal. Their ways are not the ways of life but death. Even if they can kill you that is all they can do. There is a bigger threat to us all than the wealthy powerful who cheat us or would use us or persecute us. Even to them that threat is death.

So do not put your hope in these things. They cannot keep you from death. This is the foolish way. And do not fear what those who trust in them can do to you.

IV. The Path of Wisdom.

A. The path of wisdom is to reject the path of foolishness. Reject putting your faith in the false hopes and distractions of wealth, intelligence, man's honor, and man's applause. Reject finding your satisfaction in them. Instead trust in God. Rest yourself and your hopes in him.

B. The path of wisdom does not lead to death. It leads to ransom from the power of death. It leads to being received by God. When we arrive at verse 15, we have come to an incredibly wonderful Old Testament verse.

It is the way of the world to trust in the things that the psalmist has mentioned. It is the natural way of man to find his passion and satisfaction in the things of this world. It is the way of the world to make a good showing in the flesh. It is natural. This is what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins and to walk in them following the course of this world. And the only way out of the death spiral is the gracious work of God. This is so beautifully presented in Psalm 49.

Notice the first two words of verse 15. But God. Hopefully these words are familiar to us from the NT. We were dead in our sins and without hope BUT GOD (Ephesians 2) These are not just NT words. Right here they are in the OT as well. This psalmist knows he deserves death just as the rest. He does not anticipate escaping death because he is better than the rest. The difference between himself and the rest is God. The statement itself makes plain that he trust God. He does not trust wealth, intelligence, making a showing in the flesh, pomp. He trusts God. While all the things in which the men of the world trust cannot keep them from death, it is not so with God.

And let me show you something else. The other time God's name appears in this psalm is back in verse 7. "Truly no man can ransom another or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly."

Listen, the psalmist understands that the price required for a human/a sinner to be redeemed from the death he deserves because of his sin, is completely beyond the capability of another human to pay. Any faith in any

merely human provision will never be enough. But that is not where his faith is.

No man can render a sufficient payment to God to bring about redemption. But God can render to God what is due and ransom my soul from the depths. Thereby I will be received by God himself!

This is the work of Jesus! The wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. The ransom has been paid by Christ, and redemption from death is purchased for those whose trust is in God, whose faith is in the work of Christ.

Matthew 20:28 – The Son of Man came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

Acts 20:28 says the church was obtained with [the ransom of] his own blood.

Romans 3:23-25 declares that while all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, there is justification by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

1 Cor 6:19 tells Christ-followers "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price."

Galatians 4:4 declares that God sent forth his son to redeem those under the law.

The Israelites were redeemed out of Egypt from the bondage and death of their existence and their first born sons were spared because of the blood of a substitute lamb, the Passover lamb. But when God redeemed humans from the bondage of sin and death, by the payment of the ransom, it was the blood of his son that satisfied. If your faith is in him, your worst nightmare is over. Whatever trouble you may know in this life is nothing in comparison to what he has for you. Whatever threat you may experience, do not fear. The worst any of them can do to you is kill you.

Put things in perspective. This is the wise perspective and it is the perspective of peace.

V. The Implication of the Truth

Verses 1-4 are a call to all peoples to come and hear. Verses 5-15 are the testimony the psalmist bears about his experience of peace. In verses 16-20, he directly addresses those who have drawn near to listen, those who trust God. And he says, "be not afraid." Be not afraid when others become rich. Be not disquieted when human glory increases. Do not fear that your faith is in the wrong thing. Do not fear that you have missed out. Do not fear that others are getting ahead of you, becoming more powerful than you, getting more applause than you.

Remember worldly measurements of success and meaning are vain. They are short-sighted measurements about the short-run. And measured against death, they all are an utter failure. When a man dies, he takes nothing with him, not his money and not his glory. Man's praise will not keep him out of the grave. It is wisdom to recognize "But God." God alone will ransom one's soul from the power of death. It is wisdom and true understanding to trust him. The failure to do so renders a man in his death no better than an animal.

Conclusion

Matthew Henry rightly understood the purpose of this psalm to convince the men of this world of their sin and folly in setting their hearts upon the things of this world and so to persuade them to seek the things of a better world; as also to comfort the people of God in reference to their own troubles and the grief that arises from the prosperity of the wicked.

That comfort is expressed gloriously by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians (4:16-18). Do not lose heart ... for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Keep your faith fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ and your eyes fixed on the things above where he is. And let His peace rule in our hearts!