

Honest to God: Tough Questions from the Psalms (Part 5 of 8)

Why Should I Fear In Times of Trouble?

Psalm 49

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To the Choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.

- [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. Selah
- [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. Selah

- [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.

Introduction

The psalms are a wonderful and beautiful collection of Hebrew poetry, inspired by God Himself, that speaks to many of the situations of life. The Psalter has some very encouraging and optimistic songs that lift our hearts in joy. It does not, however, spare us from the pain of the tough and horrible realities in this world. Some psalms seem quite depressing, as the description of the human state is not “sugar coated” but is expressed in graphic clarity. The psalms we are covering this summer are of that nature. This week we will study Psalm 49, which is not one of the better known psalms, and which deals with death, unjust behavior, fear, and other uncomfortable issues. Before diving into the psalm, here are a few items that set the background for Psalm 49:

It is a Wisdom Psalm. There are many types of psalms in the Psalter. This one is not unlike the book of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. It is set up to deal with the tough questions of life and to give some wise direction for life.

Theme: We will pursue the theme from verses 5 and 16, centered in the reality of fear. The psalmist presents aspects of life that cause fear and some real-time ways to deal with that fear. It is not the most linear of psalms, so we will need to follow the thought of the psalmist to get to the heart of his message. Obviously, there are many sources of fear today, just as there were in the time of the psalmist. We fear a lack of money, health failure, relationship problems, growing old, lack of education or knowledge, never getting married or never getting out of a bad marriage, aliens, terrorists, and many other things. The theme of fear has been a constant reality since The Fall.

Heading: The headings in the psalms are at times a bit helpful in reading the poem. Many scholars today think the headings were part of the original (hence inspired) collection of the Psalms. Psalm 49 is addressed to the choirmaster (Eric Anderson of Israel) and was done by the Sons of Korah. Whenever I see Korah’s name in the Bible, it makes me think of the incident in Numbers 16. You may remember that text. Korah and some of his associates were skeptical of Moses and Aaron and of their leadership. The story is intriguing and some of the details sketchy, but in the end, there is a “show down” between the LORD and Korah’s people. To show the error of Korah, notice Numbers 16:31ff:

"And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them and they perished from the midst of the assembly."

The text sounds like all of the line of Korah were destroyed, but later, in Num. 26:11 we find further explanation that the sons of Korah did not die. God, in His mercy, saved them, and you would think that their name was marked by their ancestor (Korah lived over 400 years before this psalm) and that they knew some of the causes of fear and what to do with their fear.

Outline: In reviewing this psalm, I have divided it into three sections.

Psalm 49 speaks of three actions that will help a person in time of fear.

- a. Overcome fear by listening to the Word (Ps. 49:1-4)
- b. Overcome fear by exposing the façade of fear (Ps. 49:5-14)
- c. Overcome fear by understanding "but God" (Ps. 49:15-20)

I. Overcome Fear by Listening to the Word (Ps. 49:1-4)

The first four verses of this Psalm sound a lot like sections of the book of Proverbs. Wisdom literature in the ancient world was more common than today. We get a very limited flavor of it when we get the paper out of a fortune cookie. Wisdom literature presents truths of wisdom to the reader that relate to life's situations. These four verses encourage the reader (or singer) to listen to what follows. Verse 1 begins with the word "hear" which is a form of *shema* in Hebrew. That word begins the most important clause in Judaism, from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear O Israel, the LORD our God the LORD is one." That was the basis of Jewish faith. It was not a statement of what they think of life and the world, but of what God thinks. We are to begin our journey of life by hearing — not by talking.

The Psalmist calls the people to hear. It is not just for the people of Israel, but for all the peoples of the world. Verse 2 says that it is not just for the high or rich people but for all the people. What will follow will be words of wisdom and understanding (v. 3) from the source of wisdom. The action needed is to "incline our ears" (v. 4) and hear what God has for us.

When we find ourselves with the temptation to fear, our first step should not be to talk, but to listen. That does not mean that there are not times to tell others what you are feeling and struggling with. The psalmist describes a person who is talking about fear, but the first biblical admonition in this text is to HEAR. Let God speak. I have a very good friend that struggles with panic attacks. There are times when this person will be walking down the street and will be overcome with fear. I know many people who have those extreme examples of fear and others who have them to a lesser degree. I referred this person to Mary Beth (Oblinger) Lundgren (who used to be on staff here at CPC), and she spoke the Word to this person. Be in the Word, and you may be surprised how that spirit of listening will help to deal with fear issues.

II. Overcome Fear by Exposing the Façade of Fear (Ps. 49:5-14)

The Psalm now gets into the meat of the discussion. Verse 5 asks the question of the Psalm: “Why should I fear in times of trouble?” The question goes on, but the implication is that if you want to know why he should fear, he will tell you. There were plenty of reasons to fear in his day, just as there are today. As he expresses some reasons for fear, he does so in a method consistent with the style of the psalm. He writes using the rich people in a non-literal way. They represent, or are the personification of, those who handle fear in a way that the world would handle it.

The idea that money can solve all our problems is a belief that goes back very far in human existence. The psalmist sees the solutions the rich have to life and senses that the rich are against him and are cheating him. In reality, the solutions that appear to be experienced by the rich, but not the poor, are not real solutions at all. It reminds me of our trips to Nicaragua, leading groups of College Parkers. I know the Nicaraguans think we are very rich (and comparatively we are). They think we can solve most, if not all, the problems they have because we have the resources to do so. We become the personification of the answers to all that could cause fear. Let’s look at this picture and see some of the solutions to fear that the rich seem to have.

Abundant riches can give confidence and remove fear — v. 6-9. The psalmist sees people who “trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches.” I know that even in my life, I fear that I will not have enough money. I remember that when my dad officially retired, he became much tighter with his money. He wanted to be sure to have enough, even though he lived less than two years after retirement. Verses 7-9 quickly give the story of riches that may not be evident in our current life. Verse seven says that no man can give God anything to pay for life. It is not for sale. Even the wealthiest will die, and there is not a ransom price that can extend life. Everyone looks for the “fountain of youth” and finds that there is not enough money to make that façade real. Mohammed Ali was probably the most recognized athlete in the 1960s and ’70s. He had fame and fortune but was found to also have Parkinson’s. He seemed invincible in the ring and had huge sums of money. He is now being slowly killed by a brutal disease that is no respecter of persons. The rich can legitimately be afraid that money will not give them one more day of life.

Being really smart and having a good education can remove fear — v. 10. The next verse briefly says that both the wise and the not-so-wise can fear death. Being smart and educated does not free one from fear. When they are dead (which they will be), all their wisdom will not be able to shield them from fear. It is all temporary. Think of Steve Jobs, the mastermind behind the Apple products. He was a relatively young man who was both brilliant and rich, but who could not beat death. It got him, and all his intelligence could not avoid it. Knowledge cannot, in itself, stop fear.

Having possessions and security can remove fear. Verse 11 says that the permanent home of the rich is in the grave. You may build up from a starter house, but your ending house is the same as for all of us — the grave. Regardless of how much you get, you will still end up in the grave. When I first came to Indianapolis, one of the biggest companies I knew of was Conesco. The head of Conesco was Steve Hilbert. We used to drive by his huge house on 116th Street. When the company went bankrupt (that is an item to fear), his house took years to sell. The asking price

started at \$30 million dollars and went down drastically. If you think that having a home will cause you not to fear, think again.

Fame and glamour can remove fear — v. 12. This phrase in verse 12 is repeated with an addition at the end of the psalm. The word for “pomp” in the ESV can be translated “honor.” It appears that the rich are famous, and it seems that their fame should eliminate fear. Every famous person who ever lived has died or will die (apart from God’s intervention). Fear to all you who are famous. But be aware—you will end up like the beasts that perish.

Having friends and the approval of men will remove fear — v. 13. Some people seem to have a bunch of friends and are confident because people stroke them and tell them what they want to hear. Just this week I heard of a football player “Pacman Jones” who spent \$1 million in a weekend to buy friends, but he eventually lost his money and his friends. Having friends is wonderful, but it will not remove the reality of fears.

This section ends with the fact that the rich are destined to death like everyone else, and their wealth, health, houses, fame, and friends will not allow them to avoid the inevitable end. They are like sheep being led to the grave. Death (the grim reaper) is their shepherd. They will end up in the grave, with no place to dwell. Their solution to fear was not helpful. I am glad the psalm did not end with verse 14. I am glad there is a third point to this sermon.

III. Overcome Fear by Understanding “But God”! (Ps. 49:15-20)

Verse 15 of this psalm is one of the great verses of the Old Testament and is well supported in the New Testament. It begins with one of the greatest two-word phrases in the entire Bible — the words “**but God.**” Look at three great truths from this verse:

Theology of “but” and the story of the Bible: The whole theme of this psalm now will change. It is true that there is much in this world to fear. The best we can do apart from God will never mean we can avoid the inevitable: we all die. The beauty of the Bible is “but God”! You need to do a study of the “But God” statements in the Bible. Here are a few:

- But as for you, you meant evil against me; **but God** meant it for good . . . to save many people alive (Genesis 50:20)
- . . . laid Him in a tomb. **But God** raised Him from the dead (Acts 13:29-30)
- **But God** shows His love toward us, in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:7-8).
- . . . not many noble, are called: **But God** chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:26-27)
- . . . were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. **But God** being rich in mercy . . . (Ephesians 2:3-4a)

The big picture of the Bible is a glorious picture of “but God”. God created the universe and the commentary from the infinite creator is that it was “good.” That lasted two chapters, and then sin

came into the world. With sin and the fall of man came death, which is the ultimate source of fear. This is the second chapter of the story of the Bible. Sin infiltrates the pages of Scripture, and it is the plight of mankind. The third reality of the Biblical story is the big “but God” of the Bible: God is redeeming his world. Redemption is the beauty of deliverance of creation from its greatest foe — death. That happens ultimately in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Apart from “but God,” we would not have hope. He radically changes the picture of the story. The final chapter is yet to be written, but it is the conclusion of the “but God” reality. He finishes his word, restores the new heaven and earth, and puts death to death. That is the day of great hope for all the redeemed. Fear will be conquered as the source of fear (death) is finally defeated. A life of fear focuses on the reality of the fall, while a life free from fear focuses on the glory of redemption.

The words of Psalm 49:15 are fantastic. Look at the way the psalmist describes redemption. He says two things: 1.) “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol” and “He will receive me.” This sounds wonderfully like what Jesus did on the cross and in His resurrection, ascension, and return. He paid the price for our sins and defeated death. 2.) But that is not all; He also receives us to Himself — we are His children. The greatest fear factor in the world is death. There is only one who could pay the ransom for death and that is God Himself. Even hundreds of years before Jesus came, the psalmist saw the only way to conquer fear is in the atoning work of God, who will defeat the greatest foe — death. He did that in Jesus.

Sheol is a strange Hebrew word. It has been translated “grave” or “death” or “hell,” and if you cannot determine how to translate it, just bring it over from Hebrew and say “Sheol.” Sheol is probably a place, but the main point of Sheol is not location. The main point is being alone and separated from anyone (as in death) and particularly being separated from the life source, which is God Himself. As bad as it may be today or as bad as a person may be in this life, we are all connected to God to some extent (He brings rain on both the just and the unjust). The thing to really fear is the death and separation that is complete and eternal. That is the negative of Sheol. That is worth fearing. That makes God’s redemption even more glorious. We do not need to fear, because He has ransomed our souls if we are His.

Preach the gospel to yourself daily and more. This verse is the antidote to fear. You may be in a place where you are afraid to go to work or afraid to go to the doctor, or afraid to go home, or afraid of the unknown, and so on and so on. You must believe that Jesus died, was buried, rose again, and is coming for you. That reality will put all your fears into their proper place. That is not to say that I cannot understand your fear. I have fear too. The way to deal with fear is to tell yourself the truth. God is my redeemer and He has ransomed my soul. I do not need to fear. Preach that gospel frequently.

The Lord’s Supper is wonderful. We partook of the Lord’s Supper today. Before Christ, I was destined to hell — “but God.” This is the meal of “but God.” Life is not simple, but neither was Jesus’ death and resurrection. It allows us to say—“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” When you are at the table, realize that Jesus paid it all. You do not need to fear what man can do to you.

Conclusion

The chapter ends with an imperative affirmation. Verse 16 says “Be not afraid.” The reason for that is because “but God.” The psalmist reinforces the destiny of those who try to overcome fear apart from God. He carries nothing away — no trailers behind the hearse (v. 17). All are destined to go the way of all generations, straight into the grave (v. 18-19). The last verse repeats verse 12, with one notable exception. “Man in his pomp . . . is like the beast that perishes.” The addition is “without understanding.” The psalmist is calling the people to heed wisdom and to find the resolution to fear outside of ourselves and in the beauty of a God who redeems souls.

Application

1. Get help with fear. “Hear all you peoples.” Be quick to hear and slow to speak. If you struggle with fear, and we all do to some extent, get into the Word, and if necessary, get help from other believers. Memorize Psalm 49:15-16. You need to stop talking to yourself about all the reasons why your fear is legitimate, and you need to hear the Word of the Lord. That does not mean it will be easy, but it will be worth it.
2. Look at the hollowness of the solutions to fear in this chapter. Do not buy the line that fear can be overcome merely by a change in environment (more money, new people, new jobs, new experiences, etc.). It may be helpful to change things in life, but the ways of the world do not answer the real gut issues of life. Look at the supposedly rich and successful people and the reality that their buffers to fear will not endure.
3. Start today preaching the gospel to yourself. Make the ransom and atoning work of Jesus a daily lesson in life. When you are tempted to be afraid, repeat “but God”! If He did not spare his own Son but delivered Him up for us, how will He not freely give us all? He will give us all we need to be fear-free.

In conclusion (again) I want to show you the end of the Korah story in Numbers 16. Korah and 250 people were swallowed up by the earth into Sheol. What a scary story. In verse 41 of that chapter, the congregation complained to Moses on the very next day. They may have had some fear, but it lasted less than 24 hours. God was angry and threatened to kill them all (v. 45). Moses told Aaron to get between God and the people and to make atonement for them. Numbers 16: 47-48 says that “He put on the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stopped.” Fourteen thousand seven hundred died in this incident, but a ransom was paid. Jesus is the one who stands between the wrath of God and our souls, and we can stand in Him, safe and secure. That is the antidote to fear. SOLI DEO GLORIA (to God alone be the glory).

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