

PSALM 49

This psalm is a sermon, and so is the next. In most of the psalms we have the penman praying or praising; in these we have him preaching; and it is our duty, in singing psalms, to teach and admonish ourselves and one another. The scope and design of this discourse is 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.

I. In the preface he proposes to awaken worldly people out of their security (v. 1-3) and to comfort himself and other godly people in a day of distress (v. 4, 5).

II. In the rest of the psalm,

- 1.** He endeavours to convince sinners of their folly in doting upon the wealth of this world, by showing them
 - (1.)** That they cannot, with all their wealth, save their friends from death (v. 6-9).
 - (2.)** They cannot save themselves from death (v. 10).
 - (3.)** They cannot secure to themselves a happiness in this world (v. 11, 12). Much less,
 - (4.)** Can they secure to themselves a happiness in the other world (v. 14).
- 2.** He endeavours to comfort himself and other good people,
 - (1.)** Against the fear of death (v. 15).
 - (2.)** Against the fear of the prospering power of wicked people (v. 16-20). In singing this psalm let us receive these instructions, and be wise.

PSALM 49:1-5

A CALL TO ATTENTION

To the chief musician. A psalm for the sons of Korah.

This is the psalmist's preface to his discourse concerning the vanity of the world and its insufficiency to make us happy; and we seldom meet with an introduction more solemn than this is; for there is no truth of more undoubted certainty, nor of greater weight and importance, and the consideration of which will be of more advantage to us.

I. He demands the attention of others to that which he was about to say (v. 1, 2): *Hear this, all you people; hear it and heed it, hear it and consider it; what is spoken once, hear twice. Hear and give ear,* ~~Psalm~~ Psalm 62:9, 11. Not only, “Hear, all you Israelites, and give ear all the inhabitants of Canaan,” but, *Hear, all you people, and give ear, all you inhabitants of the world;* for this doctrine is not peculiar to those that are blessed with divine revelation, but even the light of nature witnesses to it. All men may know, and therefore let all men consider, that their riches will not profit them in the day of death. *Both low and high, both rich and poor,* must come together, to hear the word of God; let both therefore hear this with application. Let those that are high and rich in the world hear of the vanity of their worldly possessions and not be proud of them, nor secure in the enjoyment of them, but lay them out in doing good, that with them they may make to themselves friends; let those that are poor and low hear this and be content with their little, and not envy those that have abundance. Poor people are as much in danger from an inordinate desire towards the wealth of the world as rich people from an inordinate delight in it. He gives a good reason why his discourse should be regarded (v. 3): *My mouth shall speak of wisdom;* what he had to say,

1. Was true and good. It is wisdom and understanding; it will make those wise and intelligent that receive it and submit to it. It is not doubtful but certain, not trivial but weighty, not a matter of nice speculation but of admirable use to guide us in the right way to our great end.

2. It was what he had himself well digested. What his mouth spoke was the *meditation of his heart* (as ~~Psalm~~ Psalm 19:14; 45:1); it was what God put into his mind, what he had himself seriously considered, and was fully apprized of the meaning of and convinced of the truth of. That which ministers speak from their own hearts is most likely to reach the hearts of their hearers.

II. He engages his own attention (v. 4): *I will incline my ear to a parable.* It is called a *parable*, not because it is figurative and obscure, but because

it is a wise discourse and very instructive. It is the same word that is used concerning Solomon's proverbs. The psalmist will himself incline his ear to it. This intimates,

1. That he was taught it by the Spirit of God and did not speak of himself. Those that undertake to teach others must first learn themselves.
2. That he thought himself nearly concerned in it, and was resolved not to venture his own soul upon that bottom which he dissuaded others from venturing theirs upon.
3. That he would not expect others should attend to that which he himself did not attend to as a matter of the greatest importance. Where God *gives the tongue of the learned* he first *wakens the ear to hear as the learned*, ²⁸⁰Isaiah 50:4.

III. He promises to make the matter as plain and as affecting as he could: *I will open my dark saying upon the harp*. What he learned for himself he would not conceal or confine to himself, but would communicate, for the benefit of others.

1. Some understood it not, it was a riddle to them; tell them of the vanity of the things that are seen, and of the reality and weight of invisible things, and they say, *Ah Lord God! doth he not speak parables?* For the sake of such, he would open this dark saying, and make it so plain that he that runs might read it.
2. Others understood it well enough, but they were not moved by it, it never affected them, and for their sake he would open it upon the harp, and try that expedient to work upon them, to win upon them. *A verse may find him who a sermon flies*. Herbert.

IV. He begins with the application of it to himself, and that is the right method in which to treat of divine things. We must first preach to ourselves before we undertake to admonish or instruct others. Before he comes to set down the folly of carnal security (v. 6), he here lays down, from his own experience, the benefit and comfort of a holy gracious security, which those enjoy who trust in God, and not in their worldly wealth: *Wherefore should I fear?* he means, *Wherefore should I fear their fear* (²⁸²Isaiah 8:12), the fears of worldly people.

1. “Wherefore should I be afraid of them? Wherefore should I fear in the days of trouble and persecution, *when the iniquity of my heels*, or of my supplanters that endeavour to trip up my heels, *shall compass me about*, and they shall surround me with their mischievous attempts? Why should I be afraid of those all whose power lies in their wealth, which will not enable them to redeem their friends? I will not fear their power, for it cannot enable them to ruin me.” The great men of the world will not appear at all formidable when we consider what little stead their wealth will stand them in. We need not fear their casting us down from our excellency who cannot support themselves in their own excellency.

2. “Wherefore should I be afraid like them?” The days of old age and death are the *days of evil*, ^{<211>}Ecclesiastes 12:1. In the day of judgment *the iniquity of our heels* (or of our steps, our past sins) will compass us about, will be set in order before us. *Every work will be brought into judgment, with every secret thing; and every one of us must give account of himself.* In these days worldly wicked people will be afraid; nothing more dreadful to those that have set their hearts upon the world than to think of leaving it; death to them is the king of terrors, because, after death, comes the judgment, when their sins will surround them as so many furies; but wherefore should a good man fear death, who has God with him?

^{<220>}Psalm 23:4. When his iniquities compass him about, he sees them all pardoned, his conscience is purified and pacified, and then even in the judgment-day, when the hearts of others fail them for fear, he can lift up his head with joy, ^{<226>}Luke 21:26, 28. Note, The children of God, though ever so poor, are in this truly happy, above the most prosperous of the children of this world, that they are well guarded against the terrors of death and the judgment to come.

^{<196>}PSALM 49:6-14

THE VANITY OF WORLDLY RICHES

In these verses we have,

I. A description of the spirit and way of worldly people, whose portion is in this life, ^{<174>}Psalm 17:14. It is taken for granted that they have wealth, and a multitude of riches (v. 6), houses and lands of inheritance, which they call their own, v. 11. God often gives abundance of the good things of

this world to bad men who live in contempt of him and rebellion against him, by which it appears that they are not the best things in themselves (for then God would give most of them to his best friends), and that they are not the best things for us, for then those would not have so much of them who, being marked for ruin, are to be ripened for it by their prosperity, ^{<4112>}Proverbs 1:32. A man may have abundance of the wealth of this world and be made better by it, may thereby have his heart enlarged in love, and thankfulness, and obedience, and may do that good with it which will be fruit abounding to his account; and therefore it is not men's having riches that denominates them worldly, but their setting their hearts upon them as the best things; and so these worldly people are here described.

1. They repose a confidence in their riches: *They trust in their wealth* (v. 6); they depend upon it as their portion and happiness, and expect that it will secure them from all evil and supply them with all good, and that they need nothing else, no, not God himself. Their gold is their hope (^{<4312>}Job 31:24), and so it becomes their God. Thus our Saviour explains the difficulty of the salvation of rich people (^{<4112>}Mark 10:24): *How hard is it for those that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!* See ^{<4167>}1 Timothy 6:17.

2. They take a pride in their riches: *They boast themselves in the multitude of them*, as if they were sure tokens of God's favour and certain proofs of their own ingenuity and industry (*my might, and the power of my hand, have gotten me this wealth*), as if they made them truly great and happy, and more really excellent than their neighbours. They boast that they have all they would have (^{<4103>}Psalms 10:3) and can set all the world at defiance (*I sit as a queen, and shall be a lady for ever*); therefore *they call their lands after their own names*, hoping thereby to perpetuate their memory; and, if their lands do retain the names by which they called them, it is but a poor honour; but they often change their names when they change their owners.

3. They flatter themselves with an expectation of the perpetuity of their worldly possessions (v. 11): *Their inward thought is that their houses shall continue for ever*, and with this thought they please themselves. Are not all thoughts inward? Yes; but it intimates,

(1.) That this thought is deeply rooted in their minds, is rolled and revolved there, and carefully lodged in the innermost recesses of their hearts. A godly man has thoughts of the world, but they are his outward thoughts; his inward thought is reserved for God and heavenly things: but

a worldly man has only some floating foreign thoughts of the things of God, while his fixed thought, his inward thought, is about the world; that lies nearest his heart, and is upon the throne there.

(2.) There it is industriously concealed. They cannot, for shame, say that they expect their houses to continue for ever, but inwardly they think so. If they cannot persuade themselves that they shall continue for ever, yet they are so foolish as to think *their houses* shall, and their dwelling-places; and suppose they should, what good will that do them when they shall be no longer theirs? But they will not; for the world passes away, and the fashion of it. All things are devoured by the teeth of time.

II. A demonstration of their folly herein. In general (v. 13), *This their way is their folly*. Note, The way of worldliness is a very foolish way: those that lay up their treasure on earth, and set their affections on things below, act contrary both to right reason and to their true interest. God himself pronounced him *a fool* who thought his goods were laid up for many years, and that they would be a portion for his soul, ~~(17)~~ Luke 12:19, 20. And yet their posterity approve their sayings, agree with them in the same sentiments, say as they say and do as they do, and tread in the steps of their worldliness. Note, The love of the world is a disease that runs in the blood; men have it by kind, till the grace of God cures it. To prove the folly of carnal worldlings he shows,

1. That with all their wealth they cannot save the life of the dearest friend they have in the world, nor purchase a reprieve for him when he is under the arrest of death (v. 7-9): *None of them can by any means redeem his brother*, his brother worldling, who would give counter-security out of his own estate, if he would but be bail for him: and gladly he would, in hopes that he might do the same kindness for him another time. But their words will not be taken one for another, nor will one man's estate be the ransom of another man's life. God does not value it; it is of no account with him; and the true value of things is as they stand in his books. His justice will not accept it by way of commutation or equivalent. The Lord of our brother's life is the Lord of our estate, and may take both if he please, without either difficulty to himself or wrong to us; and therefore one cannot be ransom for another. We cannot bribe death, that our brother should still live, much less that he should live for ever, in this world, nor bribe the grave, that he should not see corruption; for we must needs die, and return to the dust, and there is no discharge from that war. What folly

is it to trust to that, and boast of that, which will not enable us so much as for one hour to respite the execution of the sentence of death upon a parent, a child, or friend that is to us as our own soul! It is certainly true that *the redemption of the soul is precious and ceaseth for ever*; that is, life, when it is going, cannot be arrested, and when it is gone it cannot be recalled, by any human art, or worldly price. But this looks further, to the eternal redemption which was to be wrought out by the Messiah, whom the Old-testament saints had an eye to as the Redeemer. Everlasting life is a jewel of too great a value to be purchased by the wealth of this world. We are *not redeemed with corruptible things, such as silver and gold*, ¹ Peter 1:18, 19. The learned Dr. Hammond applies the 8th and 9th verses expressly to Christ: “*The redemption of the soul shall be precious, shall be high-prized, it shall cost very dear; but, being once wrought, it shall cease for ever, it shall never need to be repeated*, ³⁰⁵ Hebrews 9:25, 26; 10:12. And he (that is, the Redeemer) *shall yet live for ever, and shall not see corruption; he shall rise again before he sees corruption, and then shall live for evermore*,” ⁴¹⁸ Revelation 1:18. Christ did that for us which all the riches of the world could not do; well therefore may he be dearer to us than any worldly things. Christ did that for us which a brother, a friend, could not do for us, no, not one of the best estate or interest; and therefore those that *love father or brother more than him are not worthy of him*. This likewise shows the folly of worldly people, who sell their souls for that which would never buy them.

2. That with all their wealth they cannot secure themselves from the stroke of death. The worldling sees, and it vexes him to see it, that *wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish*, v. 10. Therefore he cannot but expect that it will, at length, come to his own turn; he cannot find any encouragement to hope that he himself shall continue for ever, and therefore foolishly comforts himself with this, that, though he shall not, his house shall. Some rich people are wise, they are politicians, but they cannot out-wit death, nor evade his stroke, with all their art and management; others are fools and brutish (*Fortuna favet fatuis — Fools are Fortune's favourites*); these, though they do no good, yet perhaps do no great hurt in the world: but that shall not excuse them; they shall perish, and be taken away by death, as well as the wise that did mischief with their craft. Or by the wise and the foolish we may understand the godly and the wicked; the godly die, and their death is their deliverance; the

wicked perish, and their death is their destruction; but, however, they leave their wealth to others.

(1.) They cannot continue with it, nor will it serve to procure them a reprieve. That is a frivolous plea, though once it served a turn (~~2418~~ Jeremiah 41:8), *Slay us not, for we have treasures in the field.*

(2.) They cannot carry it away with them, but must leave it behind them.

(3.) They cannot foresee who will enjoy it when they have left it; they must leave it to others, but to whom they know not, perhaps to a fool (~~2419~~ Ecclesiastes 2:19), perhaps to an enemy.

3. That, as their wealth will stand them in no stead in a dying hour, so neither will their honour (v. 12): *Man, being in honour, abides not.* We will suppose a man advanced to the highest pinnacle of preferment, as great and happy as the world can make him, man in splendour, man at his best estate, surrounded and supported with all the advantages he can desire; yet then he abides not. His honour does not continue; that is a fleeting shadow. He himself does not, he tarries not all night; this world is an inn, in which his stay is so short that he can scarcely be said to get a night's lodging in it; so little rest is there in these things; he has but a baiting time. *He is like the beasts that perish;* that is, he must as certainly die as the beasts, and his death will be as final a period to his state in this world as theirs is; his dead body likewise will putrefy as theirs does; and (as Dr. Hammond observes) frequently the greatest honours and wealth, unjustly gotten by the parent, descend not to any one of his posterity (as the beasts, when they die, leave nothing behind them to their young ones, but the wide world to feed in), but fall into other hands immediately, for which he never designed to gather them.

4. That their condition on the other side of death will be very miserable. The world they dote upon will not only not save them from death, but will sink them so much the lower into hell (v. 14): *Like sheep they are laid in the grave.* Their prosperity did but feed them like sheep for the slaughter (~~2420~~ Hosea 4:16), and then death comes, and shuts them up in the grave like fat sheep in a fold, *to be brought forth to the day of wrath,* (~~2421~~ Job 21:30). Multitudes of them, like flocks of sheep dead of some disease, are thrown into the grave, and there death shall feed on them, the second death, *the worm that dies not,* (~~2422~~ Job 24:20). Their own guilty consciences, like so many vultures, shall be continually preying upon them, with, *Son,*

remember, ^{<2165>}Luke 16:25. Death insults and triumphs over them, as it is represented in the fall of the king of Babylon, at which *hell from beneath is moved*, ^{<2349>}Isaiah 14:9, etc. While a saint can ask proud Death, *Where is thy sting?* Death will ask the proud sinner, *Where is thy wealth, thy pomp?* and the more he was fattened with prosperity the more sweetly will death feed on him. And in the morning of the resurrection, when all that sleep in the dust shall awake (^{<2712>}Daniel 12:2), *the upright shall have dominion over them*, shall not only be advanced to the highest dignity and honour when they are filled with everlasting shame and contempt, elevated to the highest heavens when they are sunk to the lowest hell, but they shall be assessors with Christ in passing judgment upon them, and shall applaud the justice of God in their ruin. When the rich man in hell begged that Lazarus might bring him a drop of water to cool his tongue he owned that that upright man had dominion over him, as the foolish virgins also owned the dominion of the wise, and that they lay much at their mercy, when they begged, *Give us of your oil*. Let this comfort us in reference to the oppressions which the upright are now often groaning under, and the dominion which the wicked have over them. The day is coming when the tables will be turned (^{<1791>}Esther 9:1) and the upright will have the dominion. Let us now judge of things as they will appear at that day. But what will become of all the beauty of the wicked? Alas! that shall all be *consumed in the grave from their dwelling*; all that upon which they valued themselves, and for which others caressed and admired them, was adventitious and borrowed; it was paint and varnish, and they will rise in their own native deformity. The beauty of holiness is that which the grave, that consumes all other beauty, cannot touch, or do any damage to. Their beauty shall consume, the grave (or hell) being a habitation to every one of them; and what beauty can be there where there is nothing but the blackness of darkness for ever?

^{<2445>}PSALM 49:15-20

PRIVILEGE OF THE GODLY

Good reason is here given to good people,

I. Why they should not be afraid of death. There is no cause for that fear if they have such a comfortable prospect as David here has of a happy state

on the other side death, v. 15. He had shown (v. 14) how miserable the dead are that die in their sins, where he shows how blessed the dead are that die in the Lord. The distinction of men's outward condition, how great a difference soever it makes in life, makes none at death; rich and poor meet in the grave. But the distinction of men's spiritual state, though, in this life, it makes a small difference, where all things come alike to all, yet, at and after death, it makes a very great one. *Now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.* The righteous has hope in his death, so has David here hope in God concerning his soul. Note, The believing hopes of the soul's redemption from the grave, and reception to glory, are the great support and joy of the children of God in a dying hour. They hope,

I. That God will redeem their souls from the power of the grave, which includes,

(1.) The preserving of the soul from going to the grave with the body. The grave has a power over the body, by virtue of the sentence (^{<1009>}Genesis 3:19), and it is cruel enough in executing that power (^{<2086>}Song of Solomon 8:6); but it has no such power over the soul. It has power to silence, and imprison, and consume the body; but the soul then moves, and acts, and converses, more freely than ever (^{<669>}Revelation 6:9, 10); it is immaterial and immortal. When death breaks the dark lantern, yet it does not extinguish the candle that was pent up in it.

(2.) The reuniting of the soul and body at the resurrection. The soul is often put for the life; that indeed falls under the power of the grave for a time, but is, at length, redeemed from it, when *mortality shall be swallowed up of life*. The God of life, that was its Creator at first, can and will be its Redeemer at last.

(3.) The salvation of the soul from eternal ruin: “*God shall redeem my soul from the sheol of hell* (v. 15), the wrath to come, that pit of destruction into which the wicked shall be cast,” v. 14. It is a great comfort to dying saints that they shall not be hurt of the second death (^{<601>}Revelation 2:11), and therefore the first death has no sting and the grave no victory.

2. That he will receive them to himself. He redeems their souls, that he may receive them. ^{<485>}Psalm 31:5, *Into thy hands I commit my spirit, for thou has redeemed it.* He will receive them into his favour, will admit

them into his kingdom, into the mansions that he prepared for them (⁴⁴John 14:2, 3), those everlasting habitations, (²¹⁹Luke 16:9.

II. Why they should not be afraid of the prosperity and power of wicked people in this world, which, as it is their pride and joy, has often been the envy, and grief, and terror of the righteous, which yet, all things considered, there is no reason for.

1. He supposes the temptation very strong to envy the prosperity of sinners, and to be afraid that they will carry all before them with a high hand, that with their wealth and interest they will run down religion and religious people, and that they will be found the truly happy people; for he supposes,

(1.) That they are made rich, and so are enabled to give law to all about them and have every thing at command. *Pecuniae obediunt omnes et omnia* — *Every person and every thing obey the commanding influence of money.*

(2.) That the glory of their house, from very small beginnings, is increased greatly, which naturally makes men haughty, insolent, and imperious, (⁴⁸¹Psalm 5:16. Thus they seem to be the favourites of heaven, and therefore formidable.

(3.) That they are very easy and secure in themselves and in their own minds (v. 18): *In his life-time he blessed his soul*; that is, he thought himself a very happy man, such a one as he would be, and a very good man, such a one as he should be, because he prospered in the world. He blessed his soul, as that rich fool who said to his soul, “*Soul, take thy ease*, and be not disturbed either with cares and fears about the world or with the rebukes and admonitions of conscience. All is well, and will be well for ever.” Note,

[1.] It is of great consequence to consider what that is in which we bless our souls, upon the score of which we think well of ourselves. Believers *bless themselves in the God of truth* (²⁵⁶Isaiah 65:16) and think themselves happy if he be theirs; carnal people bless themselves in the wealth of the world, and think themselves happy if they have abundance of that.

[2.] There are many whose precious souls lie under God's curse, and yet they do themselves bless them; they applaud that in themselves which God

condemns, and speak peace to themselves when God denounces war against them. Yet this is not all.

(4.) They are in good reputation among their neighbours: “*Men will praise thee, and cry thee up, as having done well for thyself in raising such an estate and family.*” This is the sentiment of all the children of this world, that those do best for themselves that do most for their bodies, by heaping up riches, though, at the same time, nothing is done for the soul, nothing for eternity; and accordingly they *bless the covetous, whom the Lord abhors*, ^{191B} Psalm 10:3. If men were to be our judges, it were our wisdom thus to recommend ourselves to their good opinion: but what will it avail us to be approved of men if God condemn us? Dr. Hammond understands this of the good man here spoken to, for it is the second person, not of the wicked man spoken of: “*He, in his life-time, blessed his soul, but thou shalt be praised for doing well unto thyself.* The worldling magnified himself; but thou that dost not, like him, speak well of thyself, but do well for thyself, in securing thy eternal welfare, thou shalt be praised, if not of men, yet of God, which will be thy everlasting honour.”

2. He suggests that which is sufficient to take off the strength of the temptation, by directing us to look forward to the end of prosperous sinners (^{191B} Psalm 73:17): “Think what they will be in the other world, and you will see no cause to envy them what they are and have in this world.”

(1.) In the other world they will be never the better for all the wealth and prosperity they are now so fond of. It is a miserable portion, which will not last so long as they must (v. 17): *When he dies* it is taken for granted that he goes into another world himself, but *he shall carry nothing away with him* of all that which he has been so long heaping up. The greatest and wealthiest cannot therefore be the happiest, because they are never the better for their living in this world; as they came naked into it, they shall go naked out of it. But those have something to show in the other world for their living in this world who can say, through grace, that though they came corrupt, and sinful, and spiritually naked, into it, they go renewed, and sanctified, and well clothed with the righteousness of Christ, out of it. Those that are rich in the graces and comforts of the Spirit have something which, when they die, they shall carry away with them, something which death cannot strip them of, nay, which death will be the improvement of; but, as for worldly possessions, as we *brought nothing into the world* (what we have we had from others), so it is certain that we shall carry

nothing out, but leave it to others, ~~3007~~1 Timothy 6:7. They shall descend, but *their glory*, that which they called and counted their glory, and gloried in, *shall not descend after them* to lessen the disgrace of death and the grave, to bring them off in the judgment, or abate the torments of hell. Grace is glory that will ascend with us, but no earthly glory will descend after us.

(2.) In the other world they will be infinitely the worse for all their abuses of the wealth and prosperity they enjoyed in this world (v. 19): *The soul shall go to the generation of his fathers*, his worldly wicked fathers, whose sayings he approved and whose steps he trod in, his fathers who would not hearken to the word of God, ~~3008~~Zechariah 1:4. He shall go to be there where they are that shall never see light, shall never have the least glimpse of comfort and joy, being condemned to utter darkness. Be not afraid then of the pomp and power of wicked people; for the end of the man that is in honour, if he be not wise and good, will be miserable; if he understand not, he is to be pitied rather than envied. A fool, a wicked man, in honour, is really as despicable an animal as any under the sun; he is *like the beasts that perish* (v. 20); nay, it is better to be a beast than to be a man that makes himself like a beast. Men in honour that understand, that know and do their duty and make conscience of it, are as gods, and children of the Most High. But men in honour that understand not, that are proud, and sensual, and oppressive, are as beasts, and they shall perish, like the beasts, ingloriously as to this world, though not, like the beasts, indemnified as to another world. Let prosperous sinners therefore be afraid for themselves, but let not even suffering saints be afraid of them.