

Psalm 49

Introduction

1. This psalm is attributed to the sons (e.g. descendants) of Korah:
 - a) There are a total of 11 psalms attributed to them
 - b) In the time of David, they were leaders in choral and orchestral music in the tabernacle
 - c) We even know some of their names: Heman (a singer) and Juduthun (1 Chronicles 16:41) and Asaph (who is listed as the author of 14 psalms)
2. It's one of the wisdom psalms which are designed to teach spiritual truths, generally about God, His ways or life in general
3. They often focus on the contrast between the Lord's ways and the world's ways, or between the wicked and righteous, or foolish and wise
4. We see that reflected here as this psalm addresses how God's people are to respond when we face adversity, distress, persecution brought upon us by those more powerful than us
5. The main question is should we fear when this happens

A. Structure and Poetic Elements

1. Structure:
 - a. 1-4: Introduction and Call to Listen
 - b. 5-12: Addresses the COMMON ENDING of all men
 - c. 13-20: Addresses the UNCOMMON ETERNITY of all men
2. Poetic Elements:
 - a. Typical parallelism
 - b. Contrast: wisdom/foolishness, low/high, rich/poor, eternal/decay, man/beast, life/death
 - c. Simile and metaphor: "like the beasts that perish" (12) & "as sheep...death shall be their shepherd" (14)
 - d. Repetition of a similar, though slightly different, summary statement in vs. 12 and 20
 - e. Even some chiasmic ABBA structure in v. 2 (low-high, rich-poor)

B. Teaching

1. The Psalmist appeals to all the inhabitants of the Earth (READ 1-4):
 - a. His appeal begins with two commands: "**Hear this...Give ear**"—or as the NET renders it, "**Listen to this!...Pay attention!**"
 - b. His words apply to everyone no matter who they are:
 - 1) Race or nationality doesn't matter (1): "**Hear this, all peoples; Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,**"
 - 2) Social standing or position doesn't matter (2a): "**Both low and high**":
 - a) The Hebrew here is literally "**both son of Adam (adam) and son of man (ish)**" which is highly poetic
 - b) Most English translations treat these as terms related to social standing so they render the phrase "both low and high" (a possible allusion to royalty and commoners)

- c) The NET, however, treats this more literally as simply a poetic way of stressing all mankind, **“all you people”**
 - 3) Economic status doesn't matter (2b): **“rich and poor together”**
 - c. The psalmist states that his words will provide **“wisdom”** and **“understanding”** (3): **“My mouth will speak wisdom, and the meditation of my heart will be understanding”**
 - d. He likens his words to a **“proverb”** and **“riddle”** (4): **“I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will express my riddle on the harp.”**
 - 1) A proverb is a wise statement
 - 2) A riddle is a cleverly devised statement or question which serves as a puzzle to be solved through wisdom and intellect
 - 3) In this case, the psalmist is going to propose a riddle in the form of a question, and then answer it himself as a teaching tool
 - e. His riddle (5-6): **“Why should I fear in days of adversity, When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me, ⁶ Even those who trust in their wealth And boast in the abundance of their riches?”**
 - 1) The question he poses is rhetorical: Why should he be afraid when facing trouble brought upon him by his enemies
 - 2) He specifically describes these enemies as those who **“trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches”**—he's not referring to all those who are wealthy or powerful, but only those who use that wealth and power to oppress others
 - 3) Later refers to such men as **“fools”**
 - 4) He uses himself as an example here, but in the context of the psalm he represents all of God's people who are oppressed (based upon his call in v. 16)
 - 5) In essence, what he is asking is this: should we be afraid when this happens?
2. The Psalmist addresses the COMMON END of all mankind—they all die (7-12):
- a. No man, no matter how powerful or wealthy, can prevent death (7-9): **“No man can by any means redeem his brother Or give to God a ransom for him-- 8 For the redemption of his soul is costly, And he should cease trying forever-- 9 That he should live on eternally, That he should not undergo decay.”**
 - 1) The psalmist refers to a man attempting to buy back his brother's soul by paying God a ransom so that he can escape death and live forever
 - 2) The fact that **“live on eternal”** is juxtaposed with **“not undergo decay”** (a form of antithetical parallelism) suggests that the author was referring to avoiding physical death, not addressing eternal life as we think of it
 - 3) However, the psalmist says avoiding death is impossible because of the cost is too high-- the different English translations render the second half of v. 8 in one of three different ways:
 - a) The cost is so high that man should simply stop trying to purchase redemption (NAU, HCSB)
 - b) The cost is so high that no earthly ransom would be sufficient (ESV, NIV)
 - c) The cost is so high and therefore the soul either ceases or goes to its final destiny (NET, KJV, NKJV)
 - d) The first two are more likely than the third

- b. The author's main point is that EVERYONE IS GOING TO DIE and the proof is found in what we witness every day (10-11):
 - 1) All men die and leave their wealth to others—we can actually look around and see it (10): **“For he sees that even wise men die; The stupid and the senseless alike perish And leave their wealth to others.”**
 - 2) All men end up in the grave (11):
 - a) There's a difference of opinion on how to translate verse 11 because there are some differences in the Hebrew manuscripts:
 - b) NASB, KJV and NKJV follow one set of Hebrew texts and translated it this way: **“Their inner thought is that their houses are forever And their dwelling places to all generations; They have called their lands after their own names.”**
 - c) All other major English translations follow the Majority Text and read similar to the NIV: **“Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they had named lands after themselves.”**
 - d) I prefer the later because it seems to better support the context—in other words, all men ultimately die and end up in the grave, even the wealthy and powerful who have entire lands named after themselves

- c. The psalmist sums up his answer with a simple truth (12): **“But man in his pomp will not endure; He is like the beasts that perish.”**
 - 1) Pomp in this instance refers to wealth
 - 2) NIV: **“People, despite their wealth, do not endure; He is like the beasts that perish”** (did you notice the use of simile there?)
 - 3) Again, the emphasis so far has been on physical death, not spiritual, so all men are like animals in this regard—they all die
 - 4) Make a mental note of this verse because the author is going to use the same basic phrase at the end of the psalm but with a slight twist

- d. So, every man shares a COMMON ENDING IN THIS LIFE—we die

3. However, the psalmist NOW addresses the UNCOMMON ETERNITY of all of mankind (13-20):
 - a. The psalmist began with a question: In essence, should we fret when oppressed or persecuted as God's people?
 - 1) You might be asking how his answer that all men face the same end—death—answers that question
 - 2) Well, that's only the first part of the answer
 - 3) The second part of the answer comes in vs. 13-20

 - b. While all men face a common end, they do not all face a common eternity (13-15):
 - 1) Fools (e.g. in this passage the wealthy and power who oppress God's people) will face eternal judgment in Hell (13-14):
 - a) V. 13 serves as an introduction to the next verse: **“This is the way of (e.g. this is what happens to) those who are foolish, and of those after them who approve their words.”**
 - b) What happens to the fool? (14): **“As sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; And the upright shall rule over them in the morning, And their form shall be for Sheol to consume So that they have no habitation.”**

- Sheol was where everyone in the OT went after death, and it was made up of two compartments: one for the righteous called Abraham's Bosom where they would wait for the resurrection, and one for the unrighteous where they would wait for eternal judgment
 - The psalmist's use of the perfect tense (appointed) implies a permanence to the fool's place in Sheol meaning they will face eternal judgment rather than experience resurrection
- 2) But, the opposite is true of God's people because we will be redeemed and resurrected by the LORD after death (15): **"But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me."**--There are so many theological truths packed into this one short sentence:
- a) First, notice the subject of this sentence: God:
- Earlier the author said that man cannot redeem a man's life because the cost is too high
 - Here, he reminds us that only God can do that and He does that for His people
- b) Second, notice the word "redeem":
- This is the Hebrew word for ransom which means to buy back
 - This is important because it states that there is a price that must be paid to free someone from death (e.g. the power of Sheol)
 - We know the price God paid to ransom us from death was the substitutionary death of His Son, Jesus Christ—He died to pay the penalty for our sins
- c) The last thing to notice is the past phrase: "He will receive me."
- The word "receive" is the Hebrew word meaning to take, lay hold of, fetch
 - So not only did God pay the ransom for His people, but He did so that He could take us to be His own for all eternity—we are now His possession!
- c. And with that, the psalmist finally provides the answer to his question (READ 16-20):
- 1) No, we do not need to fear the rich and powerful of this world
 - 2) When they die—and they will--they can't take their wealth, power or earthly glory with them
 - 3) Though they did well for themselves (in a worldly sense) and were praised by men, they will still die and face eternal judgment and **"never see the light"** (e.g. resurrection)
 - 4) Remember when I told you to make a mental note of v. 12 because the author was going to use it again, but with a slight twist:
 - V. 12 read, **"But man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beast that perish"**
 - However, he now replaced **"will not endure"** with **"yet without understanding"**
 - Why is that?
 - In v. 12 the emphasis was on the fact that all men share something in common with animals—they all die
 - In v. 20, however, the emphasis is on the fact that only fools (those who do not know the LORD and oppress His people) share something else in common with animals—they will not be resurrected (the LORD's people don't share this with animals because they will be resurrected)

Conclusion

1. So, how might we summarize what we've learned today?
2. God's people have always and will always face adversity, oppression, persecution at the hands of those who are more powerful
3. So, if we look only to the here and now and focus on the adversity we face it leads to fear, anxiety, etc.
4. Instead, the psalmist looks beyond the here and now to eternity and sees that God's goodness and justice for His people ultimately comes after this life, when He judges and punishes the guilty and redeems and resurrects His people to eternal life