

# **"Hear This"**

## **Psalm 49**

This psalm is a bit unusual in its composition, relating details more inline with the book of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, and because of this style, it is considered a "Wisdom Psalm." Wisdom Psalms are characterized by the features of Hebrew wisdom literature, which is what makes them similar to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Their purpose is not primarily lament, or praise, or thanksgiving, but instruction, urging the reader (or listener) to live rightly based upon God's principles and the fear of the Lord.

There's no occasion given for this psalm but some of the indicators put it toward the end of the kingdom of Judah or even post-exilic. The author is unknown and all we know is that it was written to be orchestrated and led by "the sons of Korah" in a formal worship setting.

The uniqueness of the psalm is found in its structure, beginning with a call to attention and "understanding," and ending with what happens if you don't listen and understand ("like the beasts that perish").

### **I. "LISTEN UP! – vs. 1-4**

#### **A. It's a universal message – vs. 1-2**

1. "Hear this" = "give ear" – this is a call to pay careful attention to what's about to be said.
2. "All ye inhabitants of the world" – this call is for everyone, whether a king or a servant ("high and low"), "rich and poor" – it's for everyone.

There is something unique in God's choice for the word translated "world" (תֵּלֶד) here.

- a) It's a rare word, used only 5 times in the Old Testament (all in the Poetical Books): twice it's translated "age," twice as "world," and once as "short." It's a word that speaks to duration or lifespan.

Job 11:17 [speaking of the span of Job's life]

<sup>17</sup> And *thine* age shall be clearer than the noonday; thou shalt shine forth, thou shalt be as the morning.

Psalms 39:5

<sup>5</sup> Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

Psalms 17:14

<sup>14</sup> From men *which are* thy hand, O LORD, from men of the world, *which have* their portion in *this* life, and whose belly thou fillest with thy hid *treasure*: they are full of children, and leave the rest of their *substance* to their babes.

Psalms 49:1

<sup>1</sup> Hear this, all ye people; give ear, all ye inhabitants of the world:

Psalms 89:47

<sup>47</sup> Remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?

- b) There are two other common words translated "world" (עֲרֶץ, תֵּבֵל) that deal with spatial or geographical concepts. These words answer to the question, "Where," while the one in our text answers the question "when" or how long.
- c) It's used here to set the stage for what comes later in the psalm that speaks of life and death. It speaks to the transient nature of the world

relative to the lifespan of time for mankind. In other words, the psalmist is about to give a message on a subject that even we today grapple with: whether justice will ultimately prevail and whether our faithfulness really matters when unfaithfulness seems to be rewarded.

## **B. It's a message that's meant to instruct – vs. 3**

NOTE: There is a hint here, looking forward to the New Testament and the primary ministry of the pastor in “feeding the flock of God.” The aspect of feeding means there is something that is fed or provided for, and it speaks of teaching the Word of God. These first few verses of this psalm give a glimpse into how that works and the function of preaching.

1. The Hebrew parallelism used here is a type of synonymous parallelism that we've seen so often but it's what might be called “intensifying parallelism” where the second element doesn't just repeat the first but deepens our understanding of it by revealing its foundation.
  - a) “My mouth shall speak...” has its foundation in “the meditation of my heart.”
  - b) The idea of the Hebrew word for “meditation” (הַגּוּת) is not emptying the mind (as in Eastern mysticism), but on filling it with the Word of God. It suggests ongoing, repetitive contemplation, like a cow chewing the cud, which is linked to this Hebrew word.

Joshua 1:8

<sup>8</sup> This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then

thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

Psalm 1:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Blessed *is* the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. <sup>2</sup> But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

- c) From that meditation on the Word of God comes the “mouth” speaking. We aren’t likely to talk about the things of the Lord if we’re not meditating on them.
- 2. The second parallelism in this verse is in the words “wisdom” and “understanding,” words that are seen together often in the wisdom literature of the Bible.
  - a) Wisdom is knowing how to live well according to God’s Word and according to His will.
  - b) Understanding is the foundational insight that makes wisdom possible.

### C. It’s a message from the Lord – vs. 4

- 1. This is found in the first line: *“I will incline mine ear...”* This points back to the previous line – *“the meditation of my heart.”*

Psalm 78:1

<sup>1</sup> Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

- 2. “To a parable” – in Hebrew, this isn’t just a clever saying but a form of revelation that requires spiritual insight to understand properly. By “inclining his ear,” the psalmist is

saying that what he is about to give is from careful “meditation” (study) on the Word of God. He’s not just hearing words but receiving spiritual understanding that he can then share with others.

3. Once received, the parable is given – that’s what follows. It’s called a “*dark saying upon the harp.*”

- a) “I will open” – he is about to express a truth.

- b) “Dark saying” (חידה) – it’s translated “riddle” and “hard questions” (as well as a few other words) but these give the idea of its meaning. It connects different elements in ways that aren’t immediately obvious, requiring the reader (or listener) to have to work mentally and spiritually to make the connections. “It’s like a puzzle that rewards careful thought with genuine insight.”

#### Psalm 78:2-3

<sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: <sup>3</sup> Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

#### Matthew 13:34-35

<sup>34</sup> All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: <sup>35</sup> That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.

- c) “Upon the harp” – in ancient Israel, music wasn’t just entertainment; it was a primary mode of instruction and worship. Music engages the mind, heart, and memory, helping the truth being taught to penetrate more deeply.

The harp accompaniment creates what cognitive scientists today would recognize as a "dual-processing environment." While one part of the mind engages with the analytical challenge of understanding the riddle, another part responds to the musical patterns, rhythm, and melodic structure. This dual engagement actually makes the brain more receptive to complex, multilayered information.

## **II. "HERE'S THE RIDDLE" – VS. 5**

### **A. "Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil..."**

There may be compelling reasons to be afraid, but the psalmist is going to demonstrate why such fear is ultimately unfounded.

### **B. "When the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about"**

There are two primary explanations of this line and both have merit. The phrase "of my heels" is the challenge. The word "heel" is used symbolically in the Bible and can imply vulnerability (Gen. 3:15), pursuit or following (Gen. 49:19 – "at the last"), or deceit (Jacob's name is from the same root as this and is defined for us as "supplanter" in Gen. 27:36).

1. One way this is understood by capable scholars is that it is speaking of the psalmist's own sinful footsteps or conduct. It's understood in that light as: "Even when my own past sins or failings surround me like a trap, I won't fear."
2. Another way, and the way that fits most closely with the context of the next verse and following is to view the phrase "of my heels" as the wicked pursuing him and not fearing those wicked, powerful oppressors mentioned in the

psalm. This is similar to what's seen in Psalm 41:9 and 56:6.

The Hebrew structure of this phrase, which uses prepositions in a slightly different way than English, can be seen as "the iniquity that clings to my heels" or "the wickedness that pursues my steps."

Psalm 41:9

<sup>9</sup> Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up *his* heel against me.

Psalm 56:6

<sup>6</sup> They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul.

### III. "WHAT'S THE RESPONSE?" – vs. 6-20

#### A. What might cause fear? – vs. 6-12, 20

Answer: the apparent power and security of the wealthy.

1. Verse 6 introduces those who trust in their wealth and boast of their riches.
2. Verses 7-9 reveal the fundamental limitation to wealth: it cannot purchase redemption from death.
  - a) Vs. 7 – "None...can redeem his brother" – no one has the power or price to save another from death.

"Nor give to God a ransom for him" – the issue is not dying, but being made right before God. In other words, atonement is the issue.

Christ alone is able to redeem mankind.

#### 1 Timothy 2:5-6

<sup>5</sup> For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

<sup>6</sup> Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

- b) Vs. 8 – “The redemption...is precious” – it’s incalculable. The word (יָקָר) means rare, costly, or beyond reach). Redemption was beyond our reach without Christ.

#### 1 Peter 1:18-19

<sup>18</sup> Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation *received by tradition from your fathers;* <sup>19</sup> But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

“It ceaseth for ever” – it fails; it’s beyond human reach. No human solution exists.

- c) Vs. 9 – “That he should live for ever” – this is the universal aspect of the psalm. All want to live forever. That’s what this is speaking to: eternal life.

“And not see corruption” – but without redemption, corruption (death and decay) is inevitable.

The only way one can have eternal life is through faith in Christ.

#### John 11:25-26

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said unto her, *I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:*

<sup>26</sup> *And whosoever liveth and believeth in me*



| shall never die. Believeest thou this?

3. Verses 10-12 show that this limitation applies universally, regardless of how wise, foolish, or brutish people (the senseless, spiritually dull person who lives without understanding) might be.

## **B. Why such fear is misplaced? – vs. 13-15**

Answer: death equalizes all and God redeems the righteous.

1. Verse 13 shows the wealthy person's confidence is actually folly, even though their followers ("posterity" – literally, those that are behind") approve of their approach.
2. Verse 14 uses striking imagery of death as a shepherd leading the sheep to the grave to show how completely their situation will be reversed. *"And the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning"* is saying that those who lived uprightly, who trusted in God rather than wealth, who seemed at a disadvantage during the "night season" of earthly existence, now find themselves in positions of authority and honor
3. Verse 15 begins with the word "but," providing a crucial contrast. While death will dominate the wealthy who trusted in their riches, God will redeem the psalmist's soul from the power of the grave.

The psalmist moves from the impossibility statements of verses 7-9 to the confident declaration here: *"But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave..."* The same God

who makes redemption impossible for human effort makes it certain through divine provision. The psalmist's confidence anticipates the gospel solution even while clearly establishing why such a solution requires divine intervention.

### C. "The fearless response" – vs. 16-20

1. Vs. 16 – the practical conclusion: "Be not thou afraid when one is made rich."

#### Psalm 37:1

<sup>1</sup> Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity.

#### Psalm 37:7

<sup>7</sup> Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

2. Verses 17 and 18 explain why wealth provides no advantage: none of it transfers beyond death, and divine approval doesn't follow human acclaim.
3. Verse 19 traces the wealthy person's journey to join previous generations who "shall never see light" again.
4. Verse 20 repeats the refrain from verse 12 but in a context that now makes its meaning dramatically clearer.

The summation of the "riddle" of this psalm relating to the wealthy and their position while on this earth is found in this verse: *"When a man lives in honor but has no spiritual insight, he shares the same fate as animals: death without*

*meaning."*

Conclusion: All people everywhere are passing through this world and no one will be able to take anything with them into the grave. As "The Preacher" said in Ecclesiastes 2:16, *"And how dieth the wise man? as the fool."* The great and the small, the rich and the poor, the wise and the fool – all return to dust.

But this psalm reminds us that while no man can redeem another, God will redeem the soul of the one who trusts in Him.

Don't be deceived by appearances. Don't fear the success of the wicked. And don't put your hope in what fades. Instead, live with understanding, not as the one who is in position of power and prestige ("honor") yet knows nothing, but as one who know the true Shepherd, who laid down His life for the sheep and conquered the grave.

Because of Him, we can say with confidence: "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me."