



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 49

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- The title of this Psalm is *To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of the sons of Korah*
- These sons of Korah were Levites, from the family of Kohath
- By David's time, they served in the musical aspect of the temple worship (2 Chronicles 20:19)
- The occasion is not known neither when it was written
- The previous Psalms included a call to all peoples to recognize God the Ruler of the world through His mighty deeds for Israel
- This Psalm addresses all people with a subject of common interest to all humanity



Introduction

- It is a reflective or meditative Psalm
- It is full of lessons of wisdom related to the vanity of trusting in riches and on earthly goods which will not to save or prolong life
- It is so much in the style of the Book of Job
- It is also a meditation on the usual pride of those who possess riches
- The psalmist's solution of the problem is to point out the limits to the power of wealth
- All the wealth in the world cannot purchase exemption from death



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- A Fervent Invitation to Listen 49:1-4
- Unreliable Wealth, Limited Honor 49:5-12
- Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- This Psalm begins more like a proverb than a song
- All peoples, all the inhabitants of the world, are called to listen, for the subject is of common interest; it concerns all humanity
- What he is about to say is worthy of everyone's attention and it pertains equally to all mankind
- He says, *Give ear*, do not listen just for curiosity
- The first line recalls the opening words of Micah's prophecy (Micah 1:2), and the words of Micaiah (1 Kings 22:28)
- The psalmist spoke to everyone, especially including *rich and poor together*

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- He hoped to guide those who were troubled about the wealth of the wicked
- It carries warning to the great and *rich*; a consolation to the *poor* and lowly
- According to Onesimus, bishop of Jerusalem, who quotes many fathers, and in particular the scholar Origen, and St. Basil the Great, the psalmist here mentions three categories of people: All peoples, all inhabitants of the world, rich and poor men
- All people, the non-believers; as the Lord Jesus Christ came as a divine Physician to heal the ill

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- All the inhabitants of the world, the righteous; for they too, are in need of the divine counsel and wisdom
- The earthly men, lovers of the earth, rich and poor
- *rich and poor* together, they are called upon to pay attention and heed to what is said so the one may not be delighted with and trust in their riches, and the other may not be unhappy or sad because of their poverty
- It is time for all to receive the Word of the Lord, for the nonbelievers to receive faith, for the fallen to receive repentance; and for those who strive in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, to continue in their struggle and spiritual work

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- Inspired and therefore lifted, the psalmist is not praising his own wisdom, but praising the divine Spirit which spoke in him
- He knew that the Spirit of truth and wisdom spoke through him
- They need to listen to this Psalm to obtain wisdom which is better than the wealth of the world which they desire
- These words of wisdom are for *all inhabitants of the world*
- This teaching is the result of thought and reflection
- The mouth speaks what the heart meditates
- If the heart meditates on understanding, the mouth will speak of wisdom

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- St. Augustine says, “And this repetition is perhaps made, lest perchance if he had said only ‘my mouth, you should suppose that one spoke to you who had understanding but in his lips. For many have understanding in their lips, but have not in their heart, of whom the Scripture saith, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.’ ... when he has said, ‘My mouth shall speak of wisdom,’ in order that you might know that what is poured forth from the mouth flows from the bottom of the heart, he has added, ‘And the meditation of my heart of understanding.’”

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- St. John Chrysostom is wondering what is the connection of *I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will disclose my dark saying on the harp* with the previous verse? The teacher is now a listener *I will incline my ear*
- He answers and says that the psalmist did not want those who listen to his words think that this wisdom is his
- He continues, “he shows through the following remarks that the words are divine and that, far from uttering anything personal, what he says is what he heard.”
- The psalmist receives by revelation what he desires to teach

A Fervent Invitation to Listen

49:1-4



- He *will incline* his *ear* to the voice of God before he attempts to speak to men
- He also shall join with them in attending to it, that whilst he may seem to be teaching them, he himself may will learn the same lesson
- *I will disclose my dark saying on the harp*, What they are about to hear is difficult and hard to be understood
- As St. Paul said, “*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.*” (1 Corinthians 13:12)
- He hoped that doing it *on the harp* might help the message to be better remembered

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- *Why should I fear*, The man of God looks calmly forward to dark times when those evils wanted to trip up his heels and gain a temporary advantage over him
- When wicked men flourish, and good men are oppressed and persecuted
- The Psalmist uses a language to describe his enemies that is similar to Psalm 41:9, *“Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”*
- According to Origen, “The iniquity of heel” is the disobedience of Adam that caused the serpent to have authority to crush his heel

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- He might be talking about his fears of sin, when iniquities of all sorts abound that turns the good day into a day of evil
- Sin is, in many respects, grievous and distressing to good men, as we read in Romans 2:5, *“But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”*
- This is the wisdom and understanding the Psalmist had been meditating upon, and was about to utter; this is the parable he inclined his ear to, and the dark saying he would open; that the righteous has nothing to fear in the worst of times

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- The psalmist, having said that good men had no sufficient reason to fear on account of what they might suffer from ungodly men, now in verse 6 proceeds to show that the ungodly had no reason to be secure because of their riches
- It is not merely the possession of material things that makes one rich in the sense that verse 6 means it
- It is to *trust* in that wealth and to *boast* in their riches
- The Holy Bible presents several godly rich men to us, such as Abraham and King David, who trusted in the LORD and made their boast in Him

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- What if the good man's enemies be among the proud boastful rich people and the great ones of the earth?
- He must not fear them
- But why? And how?
- They sometimes have power in this life to destroy others
- Yes, they do – *in this life*, there is a small value of riches, and the helplessness of their owners in the hour of death
- The psalmist wants to give us a more eternal perspective of the situation
- Richness is powerless

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- It cannot deliver anyone from death
- If the rich man has so little to hope, his victims have little to fear
- Death is the debt which all owe, and which each must pay for himself
- No wealth can buy a man off; however great his wealth, *Nor give to God a ransom for him*
- Money itself cannot rescue a soul because *the redemption of their souls is costly*, beyond the ability of material things to purchase
- St. John Chrysostom says, “he added this to show that he was right in mentioning one fear to be entertained, the fear of sin and no other.”

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- The psalmist questioning the value of wealth in preserving life, *souls*, which is of more worth than the whole world, or in saving man from the grave
- The only price of redemption of the soul is the precious blood of Jesus Christ
- His life is the ransom price; He himself, 1 Peter 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:6
- The redemption of the soul is not possible upon any other ground
- *And it shall cease forever*, Wealth forever comes short of the power necessary to accomplish this

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- There is no hope that wealth ever will be sufficient
- The whole matter is perfectly hopeless when it comes to the power of wealth in saving one human being from the grave
- The soul has no power to object or oppose when it hears the divine command, *“This might your soul will be required of you.”* (Luke 12:20)
- Verse 9 is to be closely connected with verse 7
- Verse 8 is parenthetical to describe the effect which the payment of a ransom by the rich
- Therefore, the meaning is that those who have the *redemption of their souls* will *live eternally* and not *see the Pit*

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- Here we see the concept of *the Pit* as more than just the grave, but the ultimate destiny of those who reject God
- Then in verse 10 he explains that all men die, the wise and good, as well as the foolish and wicked, much in the pattern of Ecclesiastes (6:1-2)
- Every man sees and knows it; the experience show it
- The rich man must see that any hope of ransoming himself by means of his wealth, and so escaping death and the grave, is vain, since the law of death, which is seen to all, is common
- The reference here is especially to the rich whether they are *wise or fool and the senseless person*

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- The simple fact, as stated, is that no matter what may be the character of the man of wealth, whether wise or foolish, he must certainly die, his wealth cannot save him from the grave
- The wealthy person himself *sees* this
- It cannot be concealed from him
- No one can carry it with them, it will be of no service to them after death
- However, our material wealth can do us good in the world to come as Jesus explained about storing up treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21)

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- And yet, even though the inevitability of death is so obvious, the psalmist wants to give us insight into the mindset of the wealthy wicked of this world
- Still, though they know that all will perish, the rich and worldly have an idea - an *inner thought* that they can escape death
- If they do reflect that they must die, they comfort themselves with the illusion that their houses will last for ever
- They convince themselves that their names will be remained in the names of their palaces, which like builders of cities or conquerors (2 Samuel 12:28), they have named after themselves

Unreliable Wealth, Limited

Honor 49:5-12



- In spite of these *inner thought* and outward actions, the psalmist simply maintains the ground already taken v 10, all will *perish*
- Though a man may have some measure of *honor* through properties or descendants or memorials, *does not remain* just like an animal dies
- He who assumes to abide in this world, and keep on enjoying its pleasures, is foolish and without understanding, and would be counted like the beasts
- The psalmist used *like the beasts* to compare the wicked to wolves, lions, dogs, oxen, serpents, etc. for being irrational

Unreliable Wealth, Limited Honor 49:5-12



- They perish like the beasts; as they are like them in life, fool and ignorant
- And in death; as the beast dies, so do they, as the one dies without any thought of or preparation for death (Ecclesiastes 3:19)
- Therefore, the truly wise person does not trust in riches or boast in wealth
- He prepares for eternity by trusting God and making their boast in the LORD



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- The psalmist noted that the *way* that values the material over the spiritual and that does not prepare for the world to come is *foolish*
- They are self-confident
- There is a second *foolish* way: to be a follower or a descendant of the one who trusted and boasted in riches and to *approve* of his world view
- *Selah*, It as a pause; a note of attention to mediate on the vanity of the world
- The psalmist started at verse 14 to contrast the eternity of the ungodly with the godly



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- He mentioned in verse 12 that a man is buried like an animal and death consumes his material body
- The first death shall consume their bodies in the grave, and the second death shall devour their souls
- And because these men have rejected the Good Shepherd their whole lives, they will have their own shepherd; and that shepherd is death
- The righteous are led by the Good Shepherd, but the ungodly have death for their shepherd
- *The upright*, Those who did not trust or boast in riches



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- They will *have dominion* over those who lived and died with a focus on the material and with no urgency to prepare for eternity
- According to St. Basil, “Man, though in honor, that he did not recognize; has been likened to the irrational beasts. Hence, the crafty devil took over the entire human race; gathered all men in Sheol, like sheep, helpless and irrational, pushed them down to death. and kept shepherding them since Adam up to the coming of the Lord Christ, Glory be to Him; who said in the gospel: “I am the Good Shepherd”, and the Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep, which were shepherded by death.”



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- When that *morning* finally comes, those who did not trust or boast in wealth, *the upright*, will be justified
- Sinners may rule till night fall but in the morning, they will find their position totally reversed
- However, for *the upright* that the *morning* will bring an eternal day
- *And their beauty*, All their glory and pleasure that they in this life was rather imaginary than real, and indeed but a shadow, as it is called, Ecclesiastes 6:12,8:13
- They shall be hurried from their large and pleasant mansions into a close and dark grave



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- St. Augustine says, “For the non-believers, death is the shepherd; Whereas for the believers “Life” is the Shepherd. ... If, in Sheol, there are the sheep whose shepherd is “death”; In heaven, on the other hand, there will be the sheep whose shepherd is “Life”. ... In flesh, we walk on earth, but with the heart we dwell in heaven, if we send there ahead of us everything that touch us. The fruit of our labor will appear in the morning; Those who labor now will reign; whereas the proud and the haughty here, will go down below.”



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- The one who trusted and boasted in riches had no power to ransom or redeem a soul, verses, 7-8
- The psalmist understood that *God* and God alone had the power to *redeem my soul from the power of the grave*
- While wealth is powerless to prevent death, God can and will deliver His servant
- The psalmist expresses his faith, that though he should die, and for a while be under the power of the grave, yet he will not be hurt by the second death
- He should be redeemed from it in the resurrection



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- *the power of the grave*, The psalmist spoke of the grave in which the wicked are left and here he says that the grave shall not have power to retain him, but shall be forced to give him up into my Father's hands; and hell shall have no power to get hold of him
- St. Augustine says, "He is speaking of this redemption, which Christ now shows in Himself. For He hath descended into hell, and hath ascended into heaven."
- How great is such a hope to anything which the ungodly can boast!
- *Selah*, Here is something worthy of meditation



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- The conclusion repeats and confirms the general lessons of the psalm
- After expressing his own hopes of escaping from death, or being rescued from corruption, the psalmist repeating the question of verse 5 and completes the answer to it
- There is no ground for fear, nor even for perplexity, when the wicked grow rich and prosper
- They will die, and, dying, can take none of their possessions with them and will have no advantage from it there
- On the contrary, their misery in eternity will be such as to far outweigh any enjoyment which they may have had on earth



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- The psalmist assures us that reasons for fear are unfounded
- The fool who trusted and boasted in riches can take *nothing* with him to the world beyond
- Temporal prosperity is a matter too small to be worthy of worry
- *His glory shall not descend after him*; Whatever glory his wealth has secured to him in this life shall be left behind
- For the upright, the opposite is true; their glory shall ascend after them, and they will in some sense be brought to glory (Hebrews 2:10) and even obtain God's glory in the world to come (2 Thessalonians 2:14)



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- Yes, those who trust and boast in their riches are often pleased with themselves and others are pleased with them
- Yet that is short-lived
- Each will die and *go to the generations of his fathers*
- *he blesses himself*, He may proclaim himself a happy man, because of his wealth and riches and perhaps foolishly praises himself with peace, prosperity, and length of days, and even with honor and glory after death
- However much the wicked man delights in his life, nevertheless he has to die, to join the *generations of his fathers*, to go where they have gone before him



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- St. Augustine comments on verse 18 and says, “Because he ate and drank, because he did what he chose, because he feasted lavishly, therefore he did well with himself. I say, he did ill for himself. Not I say, but Christ. He did ill for himself. For that rich man, when he feasted lavishly every day, was supposed to do well with himself: but when he began to burn in hell, then that which was supposed to be well was found to be ill.”
- The psalmist may have had a dim understanding of punishment in the world to come, but he knew it to be in some sense a place of darkness



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- God will redeem the soul of the righteous from the power of death but the rich ungodly man shall for evermore not *see light*
- The Psalm ends by repeating the warning first given in verse 12
- It is the crucial warning to those who may have *honor* in this world but no understanding
- Their honor in this world will not preserve them in the next
- All men die; but only those who are without understanding die without hope
- If men do not understand the differences between men and animals and do not follow the highest wisdom, and like beasts find their all in this life, then their end shall be as that of beasts



Contrast the Ungodly and the Righteous 49:13-20

- St. Augustine says, “But ye, brethren, consider that ye be men made after the image and likeness of God. The image of God is within ... is made wherein is the intellect, wherein is the mind, wherein the power of discovering truth, wherein is faith, wherein is your hope, wherein your charity, there God hath His Image: there at least ye perceive and see that these things pass away ... Be not disquieted, for of whatsoever kind these things be, they are transitory, if ye are men who being in honor understand. For if being men in honor ye understand not, ye are compared to the beasts without sense, and are made like to them.”



Discussion

- What are some of the temptations associated with wealth?
- Why should we not be jealous of the rich?
- What is futile about seeking wealth?
- If we should not seek wealth, where should we focus our attention and effort?

Discussion



- What are the benefits of seeking righteousness instead of wealth?
- What are the disadvantages of seeking righteousness over wealth?
- How do the benefits of seeking righteousness outweigh the disadvantages?
- What attitude does this Psalm encourage us to have toward money?



Discussion

- How does contemplating the grave help the rich and the poor, the weak and strong, live according to wisdom? How might contemplating the grave help the oppressed to live courageously?
- What are some ways God's people might feel pressure to conform or fear in or current culture and time?
- How do we keep a "hope focus" in the midst of our age?