

Psalm 49

Evening Prayer Tuesday Week 2

Death is an unavoidable dimension of the human condition. The rich and powerful cannot buy their way out of it. They are foolish, therefore, to be too impressed by the power they wield. We should not be too impressed either, but rather place our hope in God, who alone gives and sustains life. The title of the psalm reads: 'To the leader. Of the Korahites*. A Psalm*'.

The psalmist is confident that what he has to say transcends all frontiers. It is for everyone.

The 'riddle' is that wealth and power seem important but are ultimately useless. No one can pay a ransom to God to secure life (verse 7); yet the psalmist has been snatched from the power of Death, not by his own power but by the power of God (verse 15).

The psalmist knows what it is like to be persecuted. But he makes the point that we should not be afraid – persecutors die like everyone else.

I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere human being who must die, a mortal human being who fades like grass?

– Isaiah 51:12

Thus says YHWH: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortal human beings and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from YHWH ... Blessed are those who trust in YHWH.

– Jeremiah 17:5,7

We cannot buy our way out of dying.

All is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners.

– Ecclesiastes 9:2

¹Hear this, all you peoples; listen, inhabitants of the world,

²ordinary people and those in power, rich and poor alike.

³My lips shall speak wisely; my heart is filled with insight.

⁴I will attend to a proverb. To the sound of the harp I will propose my riddle.

⁵Why fear times of trouble, when criminals track me down to destroy me,

⁶people who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?

⁷Yes, none of us can liberate ourselves, or pay a ransom to God for our lives.

**⁸For the ransom of life is so costly, that one can never have enough
⁹to buy unending life and not have to see the grave.**

All must die

¹⁰We look at the wise. They die. They perish just like the foolish and the stupid, and leave their wealth to others.

Then I said to myself, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said to myself. ‘This also is vanity’.

– Ecclesiastes 2:15 (see Sirach 38:22; 40:3-4)

Put no trust in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

– Psalm 62:10

Those who trust in their riches will wither, but
the righteous will flourish like green leaves.

– Proverbs 11:28

¹¹The grave is their home forever, their dwelling place to all generations, even if they have given their name to their lands.

Their only permanent home is the grave!

This text is an interesting example of the Greek Septuagint providing a better text than the standard Hebrew Masoretic text. ‘graves’ translates the Septuagint τὰφοί. The Hebrew text has qirbām [קִרְבָּם] (‘inner thoughts’). The Greek fits the context better, which leads scholars to judge that the received Hebrew text contains a scribal error, and that the original Hebrew was not qirbām, but qibrām [קִיבְרָם] (‘their graves’).

¹²Human beings in their opulence do not endure; like the animals they succumb to silence.

This refrain is repeated at the end of the psalm. ‘Human beings’ translates the Hebrew ’ādām [אָדָם].

¹³Such is the way of those who find their security in themselves, the lot of the self-satisfied:

[Selah*]

¹⁴like sheep they are destined for Sheol. Death shepherds them. Straight to the grave they descend, and their form wastes away. Sheol is their home.

Our hope that we might stay alive has nothing to do with our supposed wealth or power. It is God alone, as the psalmist knows from his own experience, who grants and sustains life.

¹⁵But it is God who ransoms me*, snatching me from the hand of Sheol.

[Selah*]

See the article 'Resurrection' in the Introduction. Compare the following:

As YHWH lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity.

– 2Samuel 4:9

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

– Hosea 13:14

The dead do not live; shades do not rise – because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them ... Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:14,19

My heart is glad. I experience a profound joy in the depths of my being.
Even my flesh rests secure for I rest my trust in you.

You do not give me up to Sheol. You do not let your faithful one see the Pit.

– Psalm 16:9-10

The idea of being ransomed from death takes on a new meaning in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection and the consequent Christian belief in life after death:

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

– Matthew 20:28

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity.

– Titus 2:14

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors ... with the precious blood of Christ.

– 1Peter 1:18-19

The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ... and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

– Romans 8:21,23

He entered once for all into the Holy Place ... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

– Hebrews 9:12

The rich and powerful cannot avoid death

¹⁶Do not be afraid when a person become rich, when the wealth of his house increases.

¹⁷For when we die we will take nothing with us; wealth does not go down into the grave with us.

¹⁸Though in their life they consider themselves* blessed* – for you are praised when you do well for yourself –

¹⁹they will go down to join their ancestors, and will never again see the light.

The psalmist has already stated that he is not afraid (49:5). Here he is encouraging others to join him.

‘Themselves’ translates the Hebrew *nepeš*.

²⁰*Human beings in their opulence do not comprehend; like the animals they succumb to silence.*

This is a repetition of the refrain already heard in verse twelve.

We can become desensitised by the luxury in which we have chosen to live. No one is more deaf than the person who does not want to hear.

We might reflect on this parable of Jesus:

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’

Then he told them a parable: The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

– Luke 12:13-21