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Like the Beasts that Perish

Time, Talent, Treasure 2021

Psalm 49

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So let's imagine that you think you're really somebody—and then you die. And you stand before God, and He informs you that what you accomplished in your life on earth is the equivalent to a cow eating grass in a pasture. I'm assuming no one hearing my voice would want a moment like that. Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 49. Last week Jeff reminded us that every year we take the first two weeks in January to talk about money and giving and generosity. But all of those conversations always come down to the same thing, and that is an assessment of what we value, and what we're actually living for.

One of the things that is unique about Psalm 49 is it has the most comprehensive, all-inclusive introduction of any passage of Scripture in the Bible. It's a way of saying, “This message is so important, it applies to all people, in all times.” Verse 1:

**Hear this, all peoples;
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
Both low and high,
Rich and poor together.
My mouth will speak wisdom,
And the meditation of my heart *will be* understanding.
I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will express my riddle on the harp. (*NASB, Psalm 49:1-4)**

So this psalm was written roughly 3000 years ago. So think about that whether you lived in an ancient culture 3000 years ago, or a modern 21st century America—*all peoples of all times*. In verse one, when it says **all inhabitants of the world**, that Hebrew word translated **world** is actually a very rare term. The common term means *the world in space*, like we would refer to the cosmos or something like that. But this is a very rare Hebrew word that actually means the *world in time*.

So think of it this way: Imagine a line that travels as far north and south as you can imagine. And then you take your pencil and you put a slash on that line. That is the duration of your life in relationship to eternity. Whether you live 20 years, 50 years, 80 years, or 100 years, it's just a tiny slash. What he's referring to is every person that is living in the slash—the world in time—you only have a few days. It's a short time, so you better live for the things that really matter.

Verse 2: **high, low, rich, poor**. Verse 3: He's going to **speak wisdom**, which is the truth, and with **understanding**, which is, “How do you take the truth and apply it to life?” Verse 4: He's going to distill this message. In many ways you might say, “This is the meaning of life.” For this short period of time, he's going to distill it down to one simple **proverb**. When he talks about **a riddle**, we would probably use the word “lyric”. He's going to write this simple lyric in a song to get his message across. Verse 5:

**Why should I fear in days of adversity,
When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me,
Even those who trust in their wealth
And boast in the abundance of their riches? (Vs. 5-6)**

The word **fear** in verse five could be translated *afraid*, but the word literally means *overly awed*. We would probably say *overly impressed*. “Don't be overly impressed with (whom?) *those who trust in their riches, with those who boast in their wealth.*”

Now, again, to understand this psalm correctly, it's very important to understand this is not an indictment on the rich. There is no verse in the Bible that says there's any problem with being wealthy. Many of the heroes of the faith in the Old Testament were wealthy people. We learned in Proverbs that we should celebrate when the righteous prosper, because then everyone wins. But the psalmist isn't talking about the righteous. The psalmist is talking about those who *trust* their wealth, those who *boast* in their riches. The best way to understand this is those who live for the things of this world. Those who think what matters most in these few years we get on planet Earth, live for money, for their house, for their car, for their bank account, for status, for fame—all the things that define life on this earth. Essentially, he's saying there are those that have it, and there are those that wish they had it. That describes most people, and how they will invest their lives on planet Earth. The warning is not to live that way, because, ultimately, none of that matters.

To understand verses 7, 8, and 9, the best way to read it, is to understand verses 7 and 9 are the message and verse 8 is the parentheses. So, I'm going to read it that way:

**No man can by any means redeem *his* brother
Or give to God a ransom for him— (Vs. 7)**

**That he should live on eternally,
That he should not undergo decay. (Vs. 9)**

It doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter what your title is. It doesn't matter how much status you have. You cannot redeem a human soul with something as worthless as money and stuff. Specifically, verse 9: “No matter how much you have, you still are going to die.” Verse 8, then, is the parentheses: Why?

**For the redemption of his soul is costly,
And he should cease *trying* forever—**

If all of that stuff doesn't ultimately matter, why would we live for that stuff? Verse 10:

**For he sees *that even* wise men die;
The stupid and the senseless alike perish
And leave their wealth to others.**

Here's the newsflash: Everyone dies! It doesn't really matter if you're rich or poor, if you're famous or unknown. It doesn't matter if you're **wise**, or **stupid**, or **senseless**. At the end of the story, everybody dies.

In 1973, Ernest Becker wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning book called *The Denial of Death*, and he identified how we as Americans are terrified at the thought of death. And the result of that is that it causes all these problems in our lives that prevent us from truly living life. At the end of the day, nobody...nobody is getting out of this story alive. When what you value most are the things of this world, you're terrified at the thought of death. But when you understand what matters forever, death is not to be feared; it's simply to be understood. And understanding it reminds us that our time on this earth is brief. So, we better live for the things that matter.

You can wear a mask for the next thirty years. You can lock yourself in your basement and never come out again. You can take a bath every night in anti-bacterial gel. But the reality is everyone is going to die. So we better be thoughtful about what we do with the days we've been given. He says they die and **leave their wealth to others**. Perhaps you've heard the story: The rich man died, and someone said, "How much did he leave?" To which the other one said, "All of it!"

So let's imagine you and your family or your friends, go on a 30-day vacation to Jamaica. And all of your friends or family members are spending their days at the beach and discovering all these wonderful things to do in Jamaica. It's wonderful! But for some reason, you are obsessed with rocks. You find this unusual rock, and so you start to look for more rocks. And you're putting them all in a pile, and you get a bigger and bigger and bigger pile of rocks. In the meantime, your family is out having a great time and every day they're saying, "What are you doing? Why don't you come swimming? Why don't you come to the beach? Why don't you come with us and have some fun?" But for some reason, you're obsessed with creating a rock pile. Eventually the 30 days are up, and it's time to get on the plane and go home, and leave behind the rock pile. What were you doing? Why would you spend your entire vacation piling up rocks that you knew you had to leave behind?

I heard this week that Elon Musk has surpassed Jeff Bezos as the richest man in the world. I heard that on the radio while I was driving, and I literally, out loud, all by myself in the vehicle, said to my radio, "Who cares!" (*laughter*) That is the stupidest value system ever! How much is he going to leave behind? All of it! Why would you live to make rockpile that you know you have to leave behind? Verse 11 almost gets a bit sarcastic. He's trying to figure out why would anyone do that?

Their inner thought is (maybe saying their inner thought *must be*) **that their houses are forever**
And their dwelling places to all generations;
They have called their lands after their own names.

The only thing he can figure out is they must believe, even after they die, they'll live in their fancy house forever. Why else would you spend a lifetime with bigger houses, nicer cars, all this stuff that we accumulate? He says, "*They must think they're going to live there forever.*" In the ancient world, in order to achieve a level of immortality, you named a piece of ground after yourself. That's what he's talking about.

So, after the services today, everyone is invited to BC Acres. It's piece of ground I've named after myself. (*laughter*) How do you get there? You take a left turn on Clark Avenue. Now we laugh at that. But that is what we do, isn't it? People live to have buildings and places and streets and things named after them. It's an attempt to achieve some level of immortality. Verse 12 then is the first statement of the proverb he's going to state twice:

But man in his pomp, (pomp is all this stuff that we do, to try to make ourselves something in this life) **will not endure.**

(That Hebrew word translated **endure** literally means make it through the night. It's the imagery of death, as sleep. So, I'm somebody with all my stuff, and I go to bed, and I wake up in the morning, and I have nothing.) So...

...man in his pomp will not endure. (What is he like?)

He is like the beasts that perish.

(He's accomplished no more than a cow eating grass in a field.) Verse 13:

**This is the way of those who are foolish,
And of those after them who approve their words.**

Again, it boils down to this: there are those who have large rock piles, and there are those who wish they did. Most people will be defined by one of those two categories. Verse 14:

**As sheep they are appointed for Sheol; (or the grave)
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.**

That word **habitation** means *mansion*. So the imagery here is people are like sheep. And there's a whole flock of sheep, and they're all headed the same direction to the grave. And the shepherd that is leading them to the grave, is death himself. Because this is so normal in our culture, it's just common for everyone to live this way. We're like sheep, and *death is our shepherd*, leading us to destruction.

The **upright** would be the righteous **shall rule over them in the morning**. This is, again, in keeping with this imagery, that someone goes to bed at night thinking he or she is someone and wakes up in the morning, and what do you know? They have nothing, and the righteous are ruling over them. Verse 15:

**But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol,
For He will receive me.**

Rather than living for the things of this world, we understand what ultimately matters are the things of God. This is our study in the Gospel of John: God will redeem me. God will save me. God will receive me, and what matters will matter forever. Rather than living for the things of this world for a short time, we live for the things that will matter forever.

Imagine if Jesus' disciples had as their highest goal, "How long can I live on earth?" They never would have obeyed their calling. They all understood it is most likely they will ultimately die for the cause of Christ. The mission was not how long can I live on Earth; the mission was to be obedient to their calling. Verse 16:

Do not be afraid (This is our word again; do not be overly impressed) **when a man becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;
For when he dies, he will carry nothing away;
His glory will not descend after him.** (Vs. 16-17)

Verses 18 and 19 are the big problem.

**Though while he lives, he congratulates himself—
And though *men* praise you when you do well for yourself—
He shall go to the generation of his fathers;
They will never see the light.**

This is the problem: The value system of the culture is intoxicating to people. While we live in this world, it is true that your self-worth is defined by your net worth. It does matter to people what your house looks like. It does matter what kind of a car you drive. It does matter what your title is. It does matter if you're somebody. This is our value system. This is how we assess people. So we get caught up in it, and we're so busy congratulating ourselves, "Look at my rock pile!" And others look at my rock pile and they applaud, and they convince me I really do have value; I really do matter. And the applause becomes so loud it drowns out the voice of God that keeps saying, "The rockpile doesn't matter." What he says is the result of getting caught up in the value system of the culture is you **never see the light**.

To me, that is a terrifying verse. I only get a few days on planet Earth, and to get caught up in the value system of this world, and to waste my life building a rock pile that I have to leave behind, is an utter waste of a life. One more time the proverb: Verse 20:

**Man in *his* pomp, yet without understanding,
(meaning not understanding what we've talked about today. What is he like?)
Is like the beasts that perish.**

He accomplishes...she accomplishes nothing more with the days we've been given than a cow eating grass in a pasture.

One of the things I love about this psalm is it is so filled with hope. If, at the end of the day, what really mattered forever is how big is your rock pile, most of us will just be losers. There's only a few that ultimately get a really big rock pile—and the rest of us are just losers. But if the psalm is true, if what God is saying is true, every single one of us, no matter who you are, has an equal opportunity—not just an opportunity, an *equal* opportunity—to live for the things that will matter forever. It doesn't matter if you're old or young. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. It doesn't

matter if you're male or female. It doesn't matter if you're black or white. It doesn't matter! Every single one of us has an equal opportunity to live our lives for the things that ultimately matter.

When you understand this, and when you choose to live this way, you become very sensitive to the still small voice of God when He calls you to take steps of faith to be part of something that will matter forever. Listen to how that happened in Andy and Katie's story:

(Video)

Interviewer to Andy: Would you describe yourself as a planner?

Andy and Katie: (Laughter) Yes.

Andy: A perfect Saturday morning for me is waking up early and having the house to myself, getting the coffee turned on, and then I can just go and sit at the computer, review our Quicken budget, and see how our spending has gone for the past week.

So, we're planning on obviously immediate expenses, and then I've got some intermediate plans. I've looked; we wanted to buy a house and so we need to start saving for that down-payment. And then longer-term plans, whether it's my 401k, and, really, we think it all makes sense. And giving has been a part of what we've been doing, and it's something that we always did. I don't know if we always put a ton of thought into it, but it was always part of the equation in my budget.

Katie: One of the ways that we started giving back in our community was through supporting one of the local agencies who works with foster care kids, and as we were doing that, Andy thought it would be a good idea to go to this information meeting that they had offered, just so that we could be educated on how we were giving and who we were giving our money to, which is a great idea.

Andy: So, after the meeting, we're driving home. I was feeling pretty good about what we had learned, and I turned to Katie, and said, "Katie, what do you think about that?" And then Katie looks at me and she says, "What if God is asking us to be foster parents?" And that was not what I expected her to ask me (laughter). Two kids was what I had planned for. She is pregnant with our third kid and, in my mind, I'm going back to my planning, the long-range and short-range, and this was not on any range of being a foster parent. And it was a big surprise to me!

Katie: It was neat to see how God put different conversations and things that we were studying here at church on Sundays, and it was all kind of piecing together the fact that maybe it doesn't make sense, but that God was indeed asking us to do it. It got to a point for me where, if we didn't take that next step in the foster care journey and that opportunity, that it would be somewhat disobedient to what God was asking us to do. And so it turned into a heart issue, I think, for me fairly quickly. And it may not have been as quickly a heart issue for Andy, but he came around. God began to work in his heart in a way that Andy would be able to respond to, and so I think that's probably what's really neat is that God comes to us where we're at.

Andy: For a while, I honestly prayed that God would change Katie's heart, because I could not understand. It didn't make sense to me on a whole multitude of levels. For me, to be obedient, it involved letting go of a lot of the control that I wanted. I had to let that go and say, "God, you're asking us to do this, and I'm ready to go along. I'm scared, but I trust you."

Katie: So, Noel is eight years old now. We met her when she was three months old. She moved in when she was five months old, and then we were able to adopt her when she was just over a year. So, our story involves foster care, and that's just a specific piece of it. But I think the broader part of the journey, I think, is just living a genuine faith-walk. I think that's probably what it is, for me—the ability to give up my time, or my resources or anything, really. It comes from a place where I just long to have a genuine relationship with God, and having Noel as that reminder of God providing for us, and stepping into something that you don't know the end result of. It's neat to just have her be in our family, and just be that visual reminder for us that God provides.

Andy: If eight years ago, we said no to following God's direction for us, I guarantee you, my Saturday morning coffees would make a little more sense, and I know that there would be a little more free time in our day, and I know that our savings plan may have some more dollars in it. But...emotion...I just can't imagine what life would be like!

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