

Psalm 49- "Dying with God" How can I endure? Only by the grace of God.

Intro- How do you measure your value?

Good morning, let me kick off by simply asking the big question of this Psalm- how do you measure your value? What is it that matters to you, that you depend on, that makes you confident or rich?

If you are a Christian it's a tricky question in a sense because you probably know what the "right" answer is- it's classic Sunday school syndrome... we know we *ought* to say God, Jesus, or the Bible, or something along those lines. But in truth for most of us there's a variety of other answers which crowd in round the edges, and when it comes to day-to-day life, outside of the confines of church or a home group bible study, there's a thousand other things that vie for first place on our internal wish list... so what do you value? What would enrich your life if you had more of it?

Is it something trivial like an iPhone? Or fashionable clothes (not in my case obviously)? Is it more substantial- a higher salary, a better car, or a nice house, or good family time... time spent with your children or even grandchildren? What would bring you more satisfaction? What are the things which at least to some extent you depend on? And what's the nature of your relationship to them?

Context of Psalm

I think that's one of the big questions which this Psalm should prompt us to ask. By way of context- obviously this is the last Psalm in our series, and it's the last of this little set of Psalms from the "Sons of Korah". We don't really know for sure who they were, or when these were written, and aside from Psalm 45 which is clearly a wedding song, we don't really know the purpose of them. One suggestion which seems to fit moderately well is that these are a set of pilgrimage Psalms, to be sung or used on a journey towards Jerusalem. They certainly range through a spectrum of the believer's experience, starting back with Psalm 42-43, and the Israelite's individual experience of distance from God, longing for him, feeling wounded and hurt and in turmoil because of his absence, and yet looking forward through the bleakness with a certainty that relationship will be restored... there's a sense of yearning to reach that destination.

Then Psalm 44 picks up the corporate aspect of that feeling as the nation of Israel longs for their God, and then they follow Israel closer to home... Psalm 45 is the wedding ceremony, it celebrates a transition, as the Lord takes his throne, and elevates his bride to a lasting, blessed position, bringing them into the city. Then in 46-48 the Israelites are appreciating this kingdom that's been established- saying "look how fantastic it is to have God as our fortress, as our ruler, as our guide... see what it means to dwell here, in Jerusalem, in God's kingdom. Aren't we blessed?" They end with that claim in Psalm 48 "God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end"... they have found and they know their security in Him, and that it will last.

And then finally here in Psalm 49, perhaps we're at the end of the pilgrimage: the Psalmist has arrived in Jerusalem, he has security and sanctuary in his God, and from this position of privilege, this unique vantage point, he gets to look outwards from the very threshold of God's temple, towards the rest of the world, and address them... and there's a sense of heartbreak to it, and desperate reaching out, because he knows his security full well- look at v15 "God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself."- but everyone else is getting it so badly wrong... and he sees their path leading further and further away from what he's got.

That gives this quite an unusual feel- it's got to be one of the most outward looking of the Psalms, it's not a song of praise to God, or an appeal for help, or even an exhortation for others to worship him. It's more like a sermon, something from Proverbs or Ecclesiastes- a message that the author's longing to get across: "Hear this all you peoples, listen, all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike"

He's got words of wisdom for them, a meditation. In case they don't like that he's prepared to dress it up as a proverb, or a riddle, or even use his harp to set it to music... anything that'll get this message across!

Futility of life measured by the wrong criteria

- **Encouragement for persecuted and warning to unbelievers**
- **But the point of the Psalm is to highlight the value of living by the right criteria.**

Verses 5-12 outline the problem as he sees it, and then in verses 13-20 he compares other people's lot to his own. So first off in verse 5 we see the riddle, the confusion- "Why *should* I fear when evil days come, when wicked deceivers surround me?"

I suppose it's not clear here whether he's addressing confusion in his own heart or other people's, I suspect it's a bit of both. Certainly the world around him would consider that he has a great deal to fear- those who trust in their wealth, those who have great riches are in a position to do him great harm if they so choose- they'll certainly be the people with political clout, and extensive resources... enemies that you wouldn't take lightly. Or there's the expectation that he should fear to miss out on what they have... they are

wealthy, they are prosperous, and successful, they have much to boast about, whereas who knows, perhaps he is a humble man with relatively little to his name.

That kind of comparative thinking certainly affects us doesn't it? Who can say that they're not swayed by the occasional advertising campaign showing happiness and riches? I've got more than one gadget in my house which testifies against me! Does anyone else here ever find themselves comparing their lives with others around them... totting up the blessings and thinking "Where's mine?". It can be particularly galling for us as Christians can't it? When we're looking at non-believers, people who don't seem to accept God, or who even seem to deliberately reject and oppose Him... and yet we see that he's mercifully granted them blessings which we long for- the happy marriage, with many offspring, the success and prosperity, the health. What's going on God?

So he's certainly partly speaking then to comfort down-trodden believers, *why should I fear? Why should I be taken in by this deception?* Consider the big picture, and remember what matters.

But I think as well he's speaking further outwards to those who are completely taken in by their own deception, who think they've got it made, or would have it made if only they could get a bit more... and he's saying "don't you see how little this leads to?". "With all your wealth," he asks, "who among you can buy back the life of even your dearest friend? Can you meet that cost? What will you offer the universe, or God, to stop a body from seeing decline, and decay?"

Medical science has undoubtedly done fantastic things, and contributed in lifting the lives of countless hundreds of millions from a wretched state to a reasonable one or even beyond, but as we've managed to push back more and more causes of early death we've seen a corresponding rise in cancers and degenerative disorders of age... so that the naive science fiction hopes of eternal life by technology are simply vanquished. Some scientists make perplexed comments that death almost seems to be hard wired into our biology, while others will point out that from an evolutionary point of view that would make sense.

And so even with the best medical care, even for the world's super rich, who can really hold death at bay?

"Man despite his riches does not endure, he is like the beasts that perish" That word endure implies having an abode, a home, somewhere to lay one's head for the night and rest... and Man despite his riches cannot achieve that longed for permanency and rest... we die! I think that's the bitter pill in verses 10 and 11... wise or foolish (it's very democratic, a level playing field), whatever we do we'll leave our wealth to others, it won't help us or change our fate. And as a result, verse 11- All their much vaunted achievements, lands they name after themselves... the things that we find ourselves envious of, or even boasting in and depending on... all they come down to are tombs.

Whatever great work, or success, or act of philanthropy I might hope to define myself by, I can't pretend it'll be any more than a mausoleum for me when I'm gone, imperfectly housing my memory for a few years. Is that a concept I can place my hope in and trust on?

The Psalmist looks out from the temple courtyards, and he sees a world whose trusts and hopes are inevitably futile- "man despite his riches does not endure".

I should pause at this point and apologise, I'm aware that I'm a young man speaking about the certainty of death- what do I know? I'm aware as well that to a visitor, or to someone who doesn't consider themselves a believer the claims of this Psalm can seem arrogant, a religion's pious and self-righteous attempt to console it's followers, by condemning those who haven't rejected the good things in life. If that rings a bell, then look back at the tone of verses 1-4, or 16-19, see his desperation to reach out... I think his message is born of concern and love, not self satisfaction. If you're not sure, then study the Christians around you. They're an imperfect bunch of sinners, just like anyone else, and the popular characterisation of them is as fools, or arrogant or naive. But study them and I believe that before too long you'll find it hard to miss that they've got a hope which weirdly does not depend on the wealth of this world.

Or perhaps like many of my friends, or family, or colleagues, you'd say "Well of course this is right isn't it? It's trivial, obvious. Sure we will one day pass on, and in a few hundred years no one will know our names... but that's always been the case for everyone. Grow up... we should just get on with living, and enjoy the now." I think that's what the next section of the Psalm's there for- the author wants to *claim* at least that there's a better alternative... and if there's even the chance that he's right, then let me suggest that it's worth some serious consideration. Ask a Christian friend about the evidence for their position, read about it, go on an exploring Christianity course, don't just rest on assumptions, because the potential gain and loss are immense.

Look at verse 13- "This is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings. Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them." How sinister is that? Other translations go for "Death will be their shepherd", who will benefit from them? Who will reap the rewards of their lives and sell their wool and profit from their flesh? Only their ultimate enemy, death, while they will decay in the grave, far from the mansions they imagine for themselves. Surely he had Psalm 23 in mind for contrast when he wrote this- "The Lord's my shepherd, I shall not be in want". Look at the comparison he wants to make, he knows we're all in the same boat, that's clear in verses 5-12, wise and foolish both perish, mankind generally, Christians included, face death, there's no magic pill to avoid that. No one can redeem another, or give God a ransom, to turn things round, but look at verse 15- "God will redeem me from the grave; he will surely take me to himself"

Despite death, this man has a constant and certain hope in his God, *that's* what he'll rely on, *that's* where he'll find his value. And what he saw dimly in the character of his God, through his people's history, was clarified hundreds of years later, when Jesus, who calls himself the Good Shepherd, died on the cross- as God's Ransom, to Redeem, and buy back from our inherent death in rejection of Him, anyone of us who is prepared to turn from *false* wealth, and depend on Christ instead.

Verse 15 is the whole point of this Psalm- it's not arrogant, it's not condemning or mocking, it's just an open invitation isn't it? ... a man who has riches without this understanding, a human who chooses to derive their value or security from their wealth, or success, or reputation, or anything except this redeeming God is missing one heck of a trick... they're no better off than an animal which dies.

So, where do I derive my value? What confidence do you have, and what is it based on? If you are a Christian brother or sister here today then it is God, it's Jesus who has redeemed us, and will surely gather us in. Isn't that our source of confidence and meaning? Good isn't it?

Application... warning not to let priorities stray, keep dependent on Jesus.

So how do we apply this? What's it mean for us today? The obvious application is the one given to us in verse 16- Do not be overawed at other people's prosperity. It's so easy to be taken in by the deception isn't it? To want something that other people have, and feel aggrieved that we don't seem to get it, but I know my judgement is immensely unreliable... my track record for choosing things that will bring me long term satisfaction is abysmal.

The Matthew Henry commentary on this Psalm gives this observation-

God often gives abundance of the good things of this world to bad men who live in contempt of him and rebellion against him, by which it appears that they are not the best things in themselves (for then God would give most of them to his best friends), and that they are not the best things for us, for then those would not have so much of them who, being marked for ruin, are to be ripened for it by their prosperity.

Essentially, you think you're missing out on something good, but if the Good and Loving God prefers you not to have it then he's probably got better plans. Not that there's anything wrong with prosperity and wealth, a believer could have those things and be made better or more able to serve through them... Matthew Henry goes on to say "it is not men's having riches that denominates them worldly, but their setting their hearts upon them as the best things" their trusting in them!

That's the claim of the Psalm- All your wealth and success are nice, but they won't keep you safe if you're not depending on God. So don't get taken in, don't imagine that other people have it better, how could they, what could give them that? And verse 18- don't be taken in if people praise you when *you* prosper... don't succumb to the illusion that you're doing pretty well on your own... without the Lord my efforts amount to nothing... nothing more than a tomb.

So let me ask you the same old question- what treasures and ambitions distract you from God? What things do you long for? What fleeting pleasures, or apparently lasting riches and blessings keep drawing you back? Whether they're inherently sinful or not, can they really be your source of confidence? Will you depend on them?

What do you long for, as I know I sometimes do, imagining that in *that* lies happiness or fulfilment? In honesty we know at some level that if we achieve it it'll still be found lacking... and yet we still get taken in again and again!

Or like verse 18, do you already have blessings which sometimes grow out of proportion in your mind so that they become your source of comfort and confidence, life without them would be unacceptable? And yet again we know at one level or another that those things too shall pass, God may remove them from us, they'll fade, and in time we'll be able to depend on them no longer.

So the Psalm says come back to this, this Pearl of Great price, this incredible treasure, depend on the Lord, and make that your defining, enduring, sense of value- God has redeemed my life from the grave, he will surely take me to himself.

That's the Psalmist's application, but I also find myself asking that question: "What would my life look like if I actually believed this?" It's always a good question, and maybe it's something for us to ponder and mull over during this week. A couple of thoughts for you-

If I actually believed this, how would my relationships with non-believers look? Lacklustre is a good word for my evangelism... but the Psalmist here he knows his blessing and security, he's sat in the temple of his God looking out, and seeing the contrast... and so he's desperate to be heard by everyone, making every effort to speak out to them, and somehow I don't think he's worried that they might think he's a weirdo. How would *my* evangelism look if I really thought through the security and wonder of my salvation, the fact that it's freely available for all who seek it, and the desperate need of the people around me?

More prayerful maybe, more active certainly, more determined, less timid. I'm not in a position to guilt trip anyone, but maybe if we dwelt more on this treasure that we have we'd begin to have more of a passion for those around us, who don't.

Or if I actually believed this how would my use of money look? Would it be such a source of confidence to me, so that when my bank balance is healthy I feel relaxed, but if I consider the mortgage I feel anxious? Would it make a difference to my level of giving to charities, to support friends, or to church? Possibly, and maybe that's something for me to sit down and assess over the next few weeks, maybe for you too... because it will be no long term treasure for me, it cannot define my success and safety, whereas God has redeemed me, he will surely take me to himself- there is my value and security, if I would only cling to it!

What about you, how would your life look different if you held to this truth and let it define you?

Encouragement- what does this look like today in the context of Christ's grace?

I realise that this kind of message can seem very negative- stop doing this, stop trusting in that, give up this, give up that... and often it feels like that's what Christians are called to- a hard life now, so that we can have blessing later. Put like that it doesn't always make much sense- why would God want us to go without good things now?

Let me finish then with some encouragement. Do you like me sometimes feel the lack in your life of what appear to be key, necessities almost, for happiness? I suspect for most of us there are one or two things which fall into that category.

Why hasn't God granted me that discipline to resist that sin so that I could finally live cleanly for him? Why hasn't he given me a spouse? Why do I continue in ill-health? Why do my family not yet know Jesus? Questions that sometimes when they register deeply with us make us wonder if God truly loves us, or exists at all. Good things that we want, but don't have, despite prayer and longing. If that's not entered into your Christian experience yet, then watch out- it probably will sooner or later.

I am certain that the main reason I don't much appreciate the promise of verse 15 is that I am so easily taken in by the deception in verse 5 and 6- the idea that some good thing would be enduring blessing, but that's false. Only in God himself can I have something which lasts and does not decay. The encouragement's back in verse 15, if you're a Christian, then God will take you to himself. That doesn't just mean we get a disappointing life and then He picks us up and dusts us off, it means He won't be satisfied until He's brought us fully to Him, fully into alignment with Him, until He's made us properly able to cling only to Him, and not to other minor blessings.

It is Christ that will build understanding in his people; he won't let us just cling onto the world. Sometimes that'll mean that he shows us the hollowness of what the world has to offer in advance, and we'll realise we don't want it after all. Sometimes he'll bring it into our grasp, and we'll enjoy it or be disappointed, but either way we'll come to understand that we need something more. But sometimes he will consistently keep that thing we desire outside of our reach, he'll deny it to us, but continue to sustain us, in his grace, even without it, so that we can begin to learn that our hope is founded on Him, not merely on his blessings.

That's undoubtedly a hard discipline, it's painful, and I freely confess I have struggled with it... but it indicates that Christ is at work in us now. He is growing us in understanding, taking us to himself, and fitting us for heaven. Let's not struggle against his discipline, because in that difficulty and pain is a greater blessing... being made more like him- being counted worthy to suffer with him, being conformed to his likeness, following his example as we learn to see the futility of the world's riches, releasing and dying to that world, as we live with him.

Let's cling to a treasure in understanding that will not perish or spoil or fade.

Remember as well that this is not speculative, it is spoken from certainty... and since the cross that certainty is greater still. No one can ransom themselves or a friend, it is too costly, but God has not let his holy one see decay, he has vindicated Jesus in his suffering, and raised him from the grave. If we rely on that, if we remain as branches of Christ who called himself the true vine, then we'll draw our sustenance from Him, not from the world's fading promises, so that although it may be after much pruning and growth we *will* bear glorious fruit.

If Christ is my treasure, and the root of my confidence, then he has redeemed me from the grave, and he will surely take me to himself.