

Psalm 49 • How to Preach the Gospel

Introduction

Sometimes it seems like the Old Covenant did not produce active efforts at evangelism. While it is true that most of God's Word, in both Testaments, is designed far more for believers, it nonetheless encouraged all of God's people to share their faith, this Psalm being something of a vehicle to teach what that involves. This is also an interesting lesson in providing an explanation of how 1st century Christians would be able to continue for so many decades with nothing but the Old Testament Scriptures at their disposal, and also shows how in our time someone can pick up a Gideon's Bible in a hotel room and soon find their self embracing Christ as Savior. But when it comes to the Gospel message, it is important to keep it focused on what really matters: salvation not in just how it will work for them, but how it has worked in us.

¹Hear this, all peoples;
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
²Both low and high,
Rich and poor together.
³My mouth will speak wisdom,
And the meditation of my heart will be
understanding.
⁴I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will express my riddle on the harp.

[Read v.1-4]

Q: To whom is this Psalm addressed? Why might that be important?

A: "...all peoples...all inhabitants of the world". (v.1) it indicates that the message is not exclusively for believers alone.

Q: What is a further indication of the audience the psalmist wishes to reach?

A: In v.2 the references to "low and high" and "rich and poor" to indicate he wishes to reach across all social and cultural boundaries.

Q: What is being conveyed by the three body parts listed in v.3-4?

1. "...my mouth will speak wisdom" is speaking God's truth.
2. "...the meditation of my heart will be understanding" is applying God's truth.
3. "...I will incline my ear to a proverb" is listening to God's truth.

These combine to provide a picture of someone who practices what they preach rather than the kind of person who says, "Do what I say, not what I do".

Q: But how is this truth characterized on the part of the hearer?

A: "...my riddle on the harp" is a poetic way of saying he will give an explanation for something normally difficult to understand by an unbeliever.

Application: An authentic public witness and testimony has the best chance of being effective when it comes from a faith putting God's Word into practice. To preach the truth, one must live the truth.

⁵Why should I fear in days of adversity,
When the iniquity of my foes surrounds
me,
⁶Even those who trust in their wealth
And boast in the abundance of their
riches?
⁷No man can by any means redeem his
brother
Or give to God a ransom for him—
⁸For the redemption of his soul is
costly,
And he should cease trying forever—
⁹That he should live on eternally,
That he should not undergo decay.

[Read v.5-9]

Q: How does the psalmist define the "days of adversity" which are being experienced?

1. "...the iniquity of my foes" is a spiritual attack where the things of God which they attempt to use in a twisted way are an actual tool of attack.
2. "...boast in the abundance of their riches" is a parallel attack that one's physical standing reflects their spiritual status.

Point: Unbelievers use the wrong units of measure when it comes to this life, especially as it will follow them into the next.

Q: What is the common list of terms found in these verses? To what do they primarily relate? (Hint: They all begin with “R”.)

A: “Redeem” (v.7), “ransom” (v.7), “redemption” (v.8). They are all aspects of salvation which bear the meaning of paying the price to rescue or deliver someone.

Q: What is the difference between “redeem” and “ransom”?

A: “Redeem” is best understood as, “No man can ransom himself” whereas “ransom” is, “No man can ransom another”. It cannot be achieved on one’s own or on another’s behalf.

Q: How is this theme of a necessary price featured?

A: “For the redemption of his soul is costly.” (v.8) This is an understated way of pointing out that no one has the means to pay the price necessary. It infers that something/someone much greater than many must make the payment.

Q: So what is the psalmist trying to communicate in v.7-9 where salvation is concerned?

A: “No man can by any means redeem his brother” (v.7), but man vainly attempts to do so either by iniquity—trying to alter the truth to suit his own terms, or by “trust in their wealth”—placing their faith in the temporal things of this present life.

Q: How are such attempts characterized?

A: As futile—“he should cease trying forever”. (v.8)

Q: What is the stated outcome for those who are redeemed or ransomed? What does this indicate?

A: “...live on eternally” and “should not undergo decay”. (v.9) This shows that redemption is not being used for someone rescued from benefits pertaining to this life, but for what is to come in the life to follow.

Application: A biblical public witness and testimony is concerned with the false trust of the things of this life and the consequences for the next.

¹⁰For he sees that even wise men die;
The stupid and the senseless alike
perish

And leave their wealth to others.
¹¹Their inner thought is that their
houses are forever

And their dwelling places to all
generations;
They have called their lands after their
own names.

¹²But man in his pomp will not endure;
He is like the beasts that perish.

[Read v.10-12]

Q: What does even a sinner recognize when it comes to this life?

A: That it will come to an end, that everyone does, indeed die.

Q: So how does mortal man attempt to establish something immortal for himself?

A: His possessions become a legacy handed down to others.

- “Their inner thought is that their houses are forever” (v.11)
- “And their dwelling places to all generations” (v.11)
- “They have called their lands after their own names” (v.12)

Q: How does v.12 characterize this as a false hope?

A: “...his pomp will not endure”.

Q: How is a Christian supposed to be different when it comes to this kind of “estate planning”?

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

— Matthew 6:19-21

Application: Non-believers need to be challenged to see that the way they seek to make their name and legacy live on in future earthly generations is exactly what Christ offers, except in how and what it is spent on.

¹³This is the way of those who are foolish,
And of those after them who approve their words.
Selah.
¹⁴As sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
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.
¹⁵But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol,
For He will receive me.
Selah.

[Read v.13-15]

Q: How is v.13 a counterpoint to the opening of this Psalm?

A: The opening refers to the “wisdom” and “understanding” of the “riddle” of life—that is, the biblically wise; here is the contrast of the “foolish” who instead approve and practice the words and ways of the unsaved.

Q: Up to this point, what has been taught about the consequences of pursuing this earthly life?

A: In spite of attempts otherwise, it does not produce anything lasting.

Q: What is meant by, “Death shall be their shepherd”?

A: The first part of v.14 is a poetic way of describing someone who is led away like a sheep to the slaughter. It is a poetic parallel that previous attempts to execute a legacy of “pomp”, which does not last, is followed in a parallel for the next life when that which results is unceremoniously experienced. There is no “pomp” either in this life or the one to come.

Q: But what are the results for the next life?

A: They unredeemed “are appointed for Sheol” (v.14), whereas “God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol”. (v.15)

Q: Is v.15 saying that believers will be saved from an untimely death?

A: No, this is believing in the promise that “He will receive me”—that is, there is another life to come which personally experiences God in eternity.

Q: How is this contrasted to v.14?

A: Whereas “they have no habitation” (v.14), for the redeemed “He will receive me”. (v.15)

Application: A biblical public witness and testimony communicates the fact that those who trusted the most in their earthly homes will find none in eternity, while those who places their trust in God are received eternally into His.

¹⁶ Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;
¹⁷For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
His glory will not descend after him.
¹⁸Though while he lives he congratulates himself—
And though men praise you when you do well for yourself—
¹⁹He shall go to the generation of his fathers;
They will never see the light.
²⁰Man in his pomp, yet without understanding,
Is like the beasts that perish.

[Read v.16-20]

Q: How does v.16 encapsulate what is most valued from an earthly point of view?

A: Riches and glory.

Q: But what actually happens to those things upon his death?

A: When it comes to riches, “...when he dies he will carry nothing away” and “his glory will not descend after him”. (v.17) In other words, you can’t take it with you.

Q: What does such a one get out of those things?

A: Only what he receives in the course of this life either by self-adulation or the praise of others.

Q: What are the actual results of the vain attempt to both receive and then pass on an earthly legacy?

A: It results in the same thing for each generation, as expressed in v.19. They all wind up in the darkness of Sheol.

Q: What renders anything and everything in this life futile and useless from God’s point of view?

A: When it is pursued “without understanding”—that is, the wisdom and insight which comes from believing in and following God’s Word and ways. Without such, no one can bring into proper balance the worldly things in life.

Application: *A biblical public witness and testimony is not a call to physical poverty, but to spiritual submission. It is a call to devote all to the Lord so as to both attain a lasting legacy and leave behind something which genuinely matters to others.*