

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

Psalm 49

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ברית חדשה

The *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter. Brit Chadashah (*New Covenant*) is a Messianic Fellowship in Sydney. Led by Paul Cohen a Jewish believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). We meet together fortnightly for Bible studies from a Messianic Jewish Perspective. We are a unique fellowship made up of Jewish and Gentile people who are believers in Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel.

If you don't know Yeshua as your Messiah, we encourage you to search out the Scriptures for yourself. God promised in the book of Jeremiah, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And we hope you will make contact with us so that we can share more about the Messiah, His life and ministry.

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Pondering Psalm 49 Pondering a riddle.

¹ For the choir director. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

Hear this, all peoples; Give ear, all inhabitants of the world, ² Both low and high, Rich and poor together. ³ My mouth will speak wisdom, And the meditation of my heart *will be* understanding. ⁴ I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will express my riddle on the harp. ⁵ Why should I fear in days of adversity, When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me, ⁶ Even those who trust in their wealth And boast in the abundance of their riches?

⁷ No man can by any means redeem *his* brother Or give to God a ransom for him— ⁸ For the redemption of his soul is costly, And he should cease *trying* forever— ⁹ That he should live on eternally, That he should not undergo decay. ¹⁰ For he sees *that even* wise men die; The stupid and the senseless alike perish And leave their wealth to others. ¹¹ Their inner thought is *that* their houses are forever *And* their dwelling places to all generations; They have called their lands after their own names. ¹² But man in *his* pomp will not endure; He is like the beasts that perish. ¹³ This is the way of those who are foolish, And of those after them who approve their words. Selah.

¹⁴ As 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. ¹⁵ But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, For He will receive me. Selah.

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

Intro

This psalm closes the first cycle of Psalms for the Sons of Korah (42, 44-49), but we will encounter more in book 3 (Psalms 84-85 and 87-88). For comments on Korah and these prophetic singers see previous studies.

This psalm is a *מִזְמוֹר* (*mizmor*), a *musical song or poem*. This indicates that it was sung by the sons of Korah and therefore by the worshipers in the 2nd temple. As we study this psalm we may find it a strange song, yet we must remember that our music and today's lyrics would be strange to them.

The genre of this Psalm is a Wisdom Psalm, that is, it reads like Ecclesiastes or Proverbs, and indeed it contains some parallels in thought and language to these books. It is a didactic (an instructive) poem warning all peoples of the earth, not just Israel, of the dangers of the vanity of temporary / earthly wealth versus the eternal consequences.

As we do not have a clear author, we do not have a set date for the setting of this Psalm. Personally, and this is just my sanctified imagination, I think the psalm fits the period of the eighth century B.C.E., the time of the prophets Amos and Isaiah. It was a time of great wealth; when we read about the reigns of king Uzziah (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 26) or

Jotham (2 Kings 15:32-38; 2 Chronicles 27:1-9), yet the prophets gave strong condemnation for their hoarding and the oppression of the poor (Amos 2:6-7, 3:9-10, 4:1, 5:11, 8:4-6; Micah 2:2; Isaiah 5:8).

In this psalm *the rich* are those who *trust in their wealth*. Having money is not a sin, but the love of money (trusting in wealth or power) is a sin (Job 31:24; Psalm 62:10; Judges 17-18; Matthew 6:24; 1 Timothy 6:10; cf. Hebrews 13:5).

Sitting Shiva

In the Orthodox Jewish community this psalm is recited after every morning and evening service in the house of mourning. Shiva - שִׁבְעָה (pronounced shiv-ah), comes from the word *seven* referring to the week-long mourning period for close relatives, the ritual “*sitting shiva*” refers to sitting for a week on low stools at home and mourning the deceased relative.

Outline

- 1) A Proverb and a Riddle - 49:1-6
- 2) The Certainty of Death - 49:7-13
- 3) The Solution to Death and the Grave - 49:14-15
- 4) Do not be afraid - 49:16-20

The psalmist argues that all unredeemed people are in danger, especially the wealthy, as they tend to trust in their wealth, so they will die just like animals (49:12, 20). No amount of money can save their or our souls (49:7-8). The righteous are rewarded, for they “*will rule over*” the wealthy in the morning, that is after death (49:14). Therefore do not envy the rich (49:16-20).

1) A Proverb and a Riddle - 49:1-6

First comes the call to wisdom for all mankind, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, both believers and unbelievers. The Psalmist wants to reveal something to us, not from his own imaginations, but something he has received, a wise saying. A מִשְׁלָּה (*ma-shal*) is a saying expressing wisdom for life, as such we need to incline our ears in order that we may understand the *riddle* (KJV: *dark saying*). This indicates that it is hard to understand, a mystery, as such we need the Spirit of God to give us wisdom and understanding.

It is set for musical accompaniment; music was considered a help or an aid in inspiration (2 Kings 3:15; 1 Chronicles 25:2-3).

An observation on the Hebrew word “*world*” עוֹלָם (*cheled*): this is a rare word for the *world*. In Psalm 89:47 it is translated as “*span of life*” (KJV: *how short my time is*). Here also it should reflect men in time, compared to the eternal redemption to which the psalmist looks, so it is the fleeting world or this temporary life that is being indicated.

Some believe the riddle to be “*Why do the wicked prosper more than the righteous* (see Psalm 37; 73; Ecclesiastes 7:15-18; cf. Jeremiah 12:1)?”¹ And indeed this has been a question of the ages. Or a related question along the lines of *Why does God allow the rich to oppress*

¹ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 15–16:214.

the poor? With that comes the question *is therefore success, wealth and power a sign of God's blessing?* It is these questions that the rabbinic sages sought to answer, and even today believers struggle with this as the false 'prosperity gospel' is still being taught.

There are related questions in this psalm "*Why should I fear in days of adversity?*" for worrying does not help (Luke 12:22-34; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:6-9), or *who can redeem from sheol?*

2) The Certainty of Death - 49:7-13

It is not the physical redemption that is in mind here (Exodus 21:30), but the redemption from decay (the pit), the grave or sheol (verses 9, 11, 14). The psalmist tells us that whether we are rich or poor we are unable to redeem or buy back our lives. None of us are righteous (Ecclesiastes 7:20), but because we all belong to the Lord (Ezekiel 18:4) we need an atonement acceptable to Him (Isaiah 53:10). The Lord has accepted the death of the Righteous one, God's Servant (Isaiah 53:11-12), and therefore those that reject His offering will, in the judgement to come, rise to everlasting shame and contempt; while those that accept Messiah's offering will rise to everlasting life (Daniel 12:2). And since none of us are righteous, for we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), we need the advocate who can make the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:1-2). This redemption was costly, for the Messiah Yeshua had to die on my (our) behalf. We should cease pretending that we can save our lives from the LORD by good works (Isaiah 64:6), though we ought to show our faith by good works (James 2:18-24).

The wise here are those that trust in the LORD, rather than in their wealth, fame or power. For nothing endures, even when they call entire lands or cities after themselves; building a name for ourselves is futile (Genesis 11:4). In the ancient context, think of Egypt which was called Mizraim, Ethiopia was called Cush, and the Promised Land was called Canaan. All of these were named after the founder (Genesis 10:6), or in a modern context, think of cities like Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) in the former Soviet Union, or Léopoldville (Kinshasa) in the Congo, which were named after infamous rulers. No matter how we may remember them, as either villains, conquerors or heroes, they have all perished. The lesson is that we need to be careful who we see as significant leaders from the past, Selah.

3) The Solution to Death and the Grave - 49:14-15

King Solomon said animals and men have the same fate (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21); although here we read about a distinction. For there are two shepherds, the Lord who is the shepherd for believers (Psalm 23), and Death who is the shepherd for all who are not upright, who are not redeemed from the power of sheol. Messiah Yeshua, the good shepherd, provided redemption from sheol by rising from the grave as the *firstfruits of the resurrection* (1 Corinthians 15:20). We may even say He taunted the other shepherd by saying, "*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*" (1 Corinthians 15:55). And while the psalmist could not have known all the details past the grave, he knew there was a resurrection to come (Job 19:25-27), and in the Psalms we do see further glimpses (Psalm 16:10, 71:20). More was revealed in time through Isaiah, who talks about the resurrection of the righteous (Isaiah 26:29), and the prophet Daniel as mentioned above, to whom was revealed that there would be two resurrections: one for blessing and one for everlasting disgrace (Daniel 12:2), Selah.

4) 49:16-20 Do not be afraid

We are encouraged to trust in the LORD and not be afraid of men, for while the rich may grow powerful, they take nothing to the grave. It is the same for us, we too take nothing with us, however we will have the glory of Yeshua bestowed upon us (2 Thessalonians 2:24); because He tasted death for us and brings many sons and daughters to His glory, for He is *the author of their salvation through His sufferings* (Hebrews 2:10).

Selah

This is a selah moment for us to contemplate the brevity of life and the simple question: who do we trust for our redemption? Are we fools and trust in our money, power, wealth or our glory? As Solomon wrote “*Riches do not profit on the day of fury, but righteousness will extricate from death*” (Proverbs 11:4).

By trusting Yeshua, who gave His life as a ransom (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6) and who conquered the grave (Colossians 2:15), we are redeemed from the power of death. For no-one, neither the rich nor the poor, neither the wise nor the foolish, can redeem himself or pay a ransom to God for his life. Only God can pay that ransom, “*God will redeem me*” and is able to set us free from the pit. This is what Yeshua has provided for us and the choice is ours, in who or what do we trust?

Selah

Blessings in Messiah

Sue and Paul