

Remember Death

Psalm 49

I'm not sure why, but the words of Psalm 49, as found in the old blue Psalter Hymnal, struck me as a child and I haven't forgotten them:

"Dust to dust the mortal dies, both the foolish and the wise.
None forever can remain; each must leave his hoarded gain."

Death is the unavoidable reality of life. Over 150,000 people die every day. That's about 6,300 per hour, 105 per minute, and almost 2 per second. Over 110,000 people have already died today. Many of them had no idea that this morning would be their last morning on earth. Most of them were unprepared. All of them left every relationship, plan, and possession behind. They took nothing with them into eternity except their deeds. And so it will be for all of us.

Matthew McCullough has recently written a fascinating little book called *Remember Death*. In it, he notes that every death is a reminder of our own. He invites us to imagine the following scene:

"You're one of a line of prisoners condemned to die by firing squad, one at a time. You hear the captains call: Ready. Aim. Fire. You hear the sound of the shots. You hear a body fall to the ground. Then you hear it all over again, only this time a little closer. One by one the others before you in line are killed. And you know in every one of their deaths your own is foreshadowed. Each death implies your own." (32)

Our text this evening calls us to consider a topic our society strenuously avoids. In a culture that worships youth, strength, and health, serious conversations about death and dying seem out of place and inconvenient. For most people, death is something unfortunate that happens to other people, particularly old people. And it usually happens in secret, hidden away in hospitals and nursing homes. Professionals oversee the process and take care of the body. It touches our life from time to time, but has little practical relevance for how we live day to day. How many people do you know who actually allow the reality of death to affect how they spend their time, money, and gifts? How often do you actually think about the unavoidable reality of your own mortality?

McCullough notes that this avoidance of the topic of death is a new, modern wrinkle in human history. For most of the history of the world, death was an up-close, inescapable presence. He gives the example of New England minister Cotton Mather (1663-1728):

"Mather was the father of fourteen children. Seven of his children died as infants soon after they were born. Another child died at two years old. Of the six children who survived to adulthood, five died in their twenties. Only one child outlived his father.

Mather enjoyed all the medical advantages available to anyone at this time. And he buried thirteen of his children.” (35)

John Owen, Puritan pastor, had 11 children. Only one of them survived to adulthood. Young mothers routinely died in childbirth. Disease and accidents took the lives of people in their prime. And these deaths would happen at home, in the bedroom or the living room. There was simply no way to avoid the brutal reality and utter certainty of death.

Not that they tried to avoid it. To the contrary, our spiritual forefathers believed that wisdom required facing the reality of death. For instance, *The New England Primer* was widely used to teach children their alphabet, along with basic theological truth.

A – In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.

The primer didn’t shy away from the doctrine of death.

T – Time cuts down all, both great and small.

X – Xerxes the great did die, and so must you and I.

At school, at home, at church, “The message to prepare to die came from so many sides that it was inescapable.” (45)

How different it is today. We’ve managed to push death to the margins of daily life. And in the process, we are increasingly unprepared to live or die. McCullough’s primary point is that *remembering death* is essential to living in wisdom.

Ps. 90:12 *Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*

In that same vein, Psalm 49, a psalm about death, is a “wisdom psalm.”

49:3 *My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.*

“Wisdom” is Biblical shorthand for understanding fundamental facts about life in God’s world and living in light of those truths.

Consequently, the psalm is not written specifically to God’s people, but is addressed to all mankind.

49:1 *Hear this, all peoples. Give ear all inhabitants of the world.*

The message of Psalm 49 contains wisdom for every man, woman, and child.

The Psalm is divided into 5 strophes. But there are two prominent themes running through the psalm, two themes regarding death that I would like to use as our two main points tonight. First, the psalmist highlights a fundamental human solidarity in death. Everyone

must die. Secondly, he presents a fundamental separation at death. Everyone must die – but at death there will be a visible, eternal separating – some to everlasting life and others to everlasting death.

I. A Fundamental Solidarity

A. The Problem of Oppressors

The second strophe begins with a question:

49:5-6 *Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?*

The writer addresses a reality that people have faced ever since Cain and Abel. It appears that the world is divided between the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich, the oppressed and the oppressor. God does not distribute his material gifts equally – some are physically stronger, more gifted, richer, and born into positions that allow them access to positions of influence. Those in positions of power, being sinners, often use their power in wicked, oppressive, unjust ways. This is a fact of life in this fallen world.

Marx and Engles, the founders of socialism, codified this reality into a philosophy. They determined that humanity is defined by these two groups – the oppressors and the oppressed – and that the only way to rectify the unequal distribution of material wealth is through revolution, where the weak join forces to overthrow the strong and enforce social equality. The world's solution to those “who cheat me” is to remove them.

But that is not how Scripture proceeds. Notice the psalmist *acknowledges* the difference between men. He *recognizes* that there are oppressors in the world, there are people who cheat and then boast of the abundance of their riches. But he does not advocate social revolution but sober reflection. He resolves the appearance of great difference by reminding the reader of a greater and more basic solidarity.

The biblical fact is that, while there seems to be great differences among men in relation to position and power, it is only a superficial difference. Underneath, down where reality lives, all men share a fundamental, irreversible solidarity. We are all made in the image of God, thus all have equal value. And we are all fallen in Adam, thus equally under the reign of death. This is the wisdom of Scripture.

B. Solidarity in Futility

49:7-9 *Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit.*

Notice – all men live their life before God. All men have forfeited their life in sin. And all men are powerless to buy it back.

“...no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life...”

No matter how powerful men might seem, they are, like all men, destined to die, and there is nothing they can do about it. All the money and power in the world cannot buy for us a minute more of life.

It is said that when Queen Elizabeth I was dying, she grabbed her physician by the sleeve, pulled him down over her bed, and said: “Half of the British Empire for six months of life.” He could not even give her six minutes, and she died.

God has determined the day of our death. And no amount of wealth, power, or medical intervention will prevent it. People with access to the best care in the world are not an iota less mortal.

“People do not die because of a failure of medicine. They die because they are human.”

How does this help resolve the problem of wealthy, powerful oppressors? Well, it shows that their wealth and power are illusions. Their wealth and power are a fantasy in the face of mortality. Every man of position and power is just as hopeless and helpless before death as the poorest widow and smallest child. This truth fundamentally levels the playing field. We are all powerless to avoid death. And we must all die.

C. A Solidarity in Mortality

49: 10 *For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.*

Dust to dusts, the mortal dies. Both the foolish and the wise.

Heb. 9:27 *It is appointed unto EVERY man once to die and then to face judgement.*

Death makes the boasting man and the cheating man look like a fool. Have you ever had something stolen from you or been cheated out of something valuable? Our response should be sorrow for the cheater. In light of eternity, in light of the rushing approach of death, what a foolish thing to do. What did it gain you? And in light of eternity, what will it cost?

The fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.

No matter how wealthy you might become in this world, you will leave it all behind when you die. Our lives are fleeting – but death is forever.

49:11 *Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations,*

though they called lands by their own names.

The irony of death is that those who called lands by their own name, in the end have only their graves to their name, like all the rest of mankind.

It is wisdom for us to remember this. The human solidarity in death means that not only will the foolish and wicked man die – but so will we. In other words, the reason we should not fret when people cheat us is not only that they will die, but so shall we.

The biblical answer to the unequal distribution of wealth and power is not social activism but sober reflection. It doesn't give us a vision for how to fix this world – it reminds us that we will soon leave this world. You see, being cheated doesn't matter that much when death is drawing near. You can insist on justice and gaining your rights, but what will any of that do for you when you die?

Have you ever heard of someone getting the news that they only have a few more months to live? Or when someone has gone into hospice, have you thought to yourself, *I wonder what it must be like to face death that way, to know that you are going to die*. But we don't realize that we are all in hospice. Death is facing you – whether you are facing it or not. Maybe the reason we live in a hyper-sensitive, angry society is because we live in a society that has forgotten about death.

Everyone you know is dying. Every person you meet is rushing toward eternity. The only question that remains is this: What will be their experience when they get there?

II. A Fundamental Divide

A. The Fate of the Foolish

The 4th strophe begins with these words:

49:13 *This is the path of those who have foolish confidence...*

There is a path worn by those who foolishly failed to consider their death. In life these foolish people boasted, and other foolish people approved of their boasts! People admired them and wanted to be like them. And then they died – the boasters and the applauders alike.

49:14 *Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd...*

Death is personified as a shepherd who leads people to their eternal loss and consumes them there.

49:14 ...*Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.*

Sheol is the realm of the dead, a place of darkness, decay, and utter loss. Whatever glory men might have in life, they lose it all at death. No matter how gifted and athletic, no matter how bright, no matter how successful, or how beautiful – it all gets left behind. Jeff Bezos is the wealthiest man in the world. He has \$112 billion. In a few short years he will be parted, forever, from all his possessions.

49:17-20 *For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him. For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed—and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light. Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.*

He will not take any of his fame and wealth with him when he enters the grave. And what is true for Jeff Bezos, is true for you.

McCullough: Even if you're life plays out precisely the way you imagine for yourself in your wildest dreams, death will steal away everything you have and destroy everything you accomplish.

What an unspeakable tragedy when men and women, made in the image of God, live their short lives in this fleeting world with no thought of eternity. What a horror when they realize that they must die and are utterly unprepared.

Sir Walter Scott the skeptic said, "Until this moment I thought there was neither a God nor a hell. Now I know that there are both, and I am doomed to perdition by the just judgment of the Almighty."

Voltaire, one of history's best-known atheists, often stated that "by the time I'm buried, the Bible will be non-existent." But his last words were, "I am abandoned by God and man; I shall die and go to hell alone." His despair was so terrible that his associates were afraid to approach his bedside, and as he passed away, his nurse said that for all of the wealth in Europe, she would never watch another infidel die.

How incredibly different it is for those who have come to know the Lord. While death is the lot of all men, there is a great and fundamental difference in the experience of death! The language of the psalmist speaking of those who live and die foolishly is "they" and "them."

Like sheep **they** are appointed for Sheol;

Death shall be **their** shepherd...

Their form shall be consumed in Sheol...

But verse 15 introduces a radical difference. In direct contrast to the fate of the foolish is the promised blessedness of the child of God.

B. The Reward of the Ransomed

49:15 *But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.*

Here we have one of the great "But God" statements! "But God" is the great antithesis to the universal, irrefutable claims of death. The reality of death has been invaded by the reality of God. "God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol."

The psalmist had declared,

49:7 *No man can ransom another, or himself, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice that he should live forever.*

But what is impossible with men is possible with God! God CAN ransom men from death – and he will. The writer is confident that God **will** do this for him: "God WILL ransom my soul."

What is the basis for his confidence? He tells us: "for He will **receive** me." It is a word of acceptance and welcome and peace. This is the incredible confidence of those who hope in God – that death will not be an experience of Sheol, but an entrance into the glory of God.

Ps. 17:15 *As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.*

Ps. 73:24 *You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.*

The experience of the child of God in the presence of death is diametrically different than the experience of the lost.

- Instead of Death being their Shepherd, the **Lord** is their Shepherd.
- Instead of eternal loss of all possessions, we gain vastly superior and lasting ones.
- Instead of loss of glory, we are crowned with glory.
- Instead of eternal despair, we enter into eternal joy.
- Instead of eternal separation from God, we are welcomed into eternal sweet communion with him.

And so the testimony of those who die in faith sound completely different.

Michelangelo, famous painter and sculptor: "I die in the faith of Jesus Christ, and in the firm hope of a better life."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, beloved preacher and author, on his deathbed: "I can hear them coming!" He sat straight up in bed and asked, "Don't you hear them? This is my coronation day. I can see the chariots, I'm ready to board."

Dwight L. Moody, famous preacher and founder of the Moody Bible Institute, while on his deathbed said: "Can this be death? Why it is better than living! Earth is receding, heaven is opening. This is my coronation day."

Every person will die. Some will experience death as unmitigated horror and loss. Others will experience it as unimaginable glory and gain. What makes the difference? JESUS makes the difference.

John 14:6 *I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*

1 Cor. 15:20-22 *Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*

The pages of the New Testament ring with the glorious good news that Jesus Christ has conquered death. He became the ransom that is sufficient to buy back our forfeited life.

1 Tim. 2:5-6 *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.*

Rev. 5:9 *And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."*

You are going to die. That experience will either be absolute despair or utter delight. Which will it be for you?

The core message of the gospel is that God has made a way for sinners to be rescued from death. Jesus is the Redeemer, sent from heaven, to buy back with his own body and blood, the lives of those who were destined to die. The ransom has been paid.

All those who have died in the Lord are right now with the Lord.

All those who belong to Christ by faith can have the absolute assurance that he has already ransomed their soul from Sheol and will joyfully receive them in his presence.

Do you have that assurance tonight? I pray that you will.