

## PSALM FORTY-EIGHT AND FORTY-NINE

2. If we do not consider Mount Zion as the church, how shall we apply verses 1 through 3? Discuss possibilities, but forget not: when there is no application of the scripture text to the heart of the reader there is no eternal value in it!
3. How shall we represent "the kings of the earth" who came to inspect the city? Please be specific—an idle thoughtless answer is a refusal to take the interest in God's Word it deserves!
4. Will this idealized picture of the triumph of the city of our God ever become a reality? Has it already occurred?
5. If we were to consider Mount Zion as the church, verses 12 through 14 might suggest a very careful walk through the pages of the New Testament. How do you apply these verses?

## P S A L M 49

### DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

Death and Redemption: Oppressed Saints Comforted  
and Oppressors Rebuked.

### ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-6, An Introduction, consisting of the Proem and the Problem. Stanza II., vers. 7-12, Answer first, Personality more Precious than Possessions. Stanza III., vers. 13-20, Answer second: The Unrelieved future of the Oppressor in Contrast with the Redeemed Future of the Psalmist. The *Refrain* Charges Home the Byword.

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(Lm.) Psalm.

- 1 Hear ye this all ye peoples,  
give ear all ye dwellers in this passing world;<sup>1</sup>
- 2 Both sons of the low and sons of the high,  
together both rich and needy.
- 3 My mouth shall speak forth wisdom,  
and the soft utterance of my heart be understanding:
- 4 I will bend to a by-word<sup>2</sup> my ear,  
I will open on the lyre mine enigma:—<sup>3</sup>

1. Or: "age"—"aion not kosmos"—O.G.

2. See vers. 12 and 20. "An aphorism"—Del.

3. Or: "hard question," "riddle": Sep. "problem."

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- 5 Why should I fear in the days of evil,  
 when the iniquity of my circumventors encloseth me,  
 6 who are trusting in their wealth,  
 and in the abundance of their riches do boast themselves?  
 7 But<sup>1</sup> no man can really effect a ransom  
 and give unto God his ransom-price—  
 8 of such worth is the ransom of men's self<sup>2</sup>  
 it has failed to the ages—  
 9 That one should live on continually,  
 should not see the pit.  
 10 For one must see that wise men die,  
 together with foolish and brutish they perish;  
 they leave to successors their wealth:  
 11 Graves<sup>3</sup> are their houses to the ages,  
 their habitations to generation after generation,—  
 Though their names had been given to landed-estates!  
 12 A man who will not understand his own worth  
 Bringeth on him the by-word—No better than brutes!<sup>4</sup>  
 13 This is their way—in their folly!  
 and this their future—<sup>5</sup> who with their present portion<sup>6</sup> are  
 so pleased.  
 14 Like a flock to Hades are they assigned—  
 Death will tend them!  
 So let them descend smoothly to the grave,<sup>7</sup>  
 and their image<sup>8</sup> be for Hades to consume out of his dwelling.  
 15 But God will ransom my soul,  
 out of the hand of Hades will he surely<sup>9</sup> take me.  
 16 Do not fear when a man groweth rich,  
 when the splendour of his house increaseth;  
 17 For when he dieth he can take nothing,  
 his splendour cannot descend after him:—

1. So—'ak, "but," instead of 'ah "brother"—in some cod.—Gn. Better here, since the problem is whether a man can really redeem at all—even himself. Not at the hands of God, though from man he may (Exo. 21:29, 30).

2. Ml.: "their soul."

3. So *Gt.* (k-b-r-m or k-r-b-m)—Gn.

4. Ml.: "Brutes they resemble."

5. With Br. substituting *th* ( ) for *h* ( ): thus bringing this psalm into verbal relation w. 37:37, 38 and 73:17.

6. Ml.: "their mouth." Cp. O.G. 805, 5b.

7. So *Gt.*—Gn.

8. Or.: "form."

9. Cp. O.G. 472, 1, e; 474, "note."

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- 18 Though his own self<sup>1</sup> while he lived he used to bless,  
and thank it because it was doing well for itself.  
19 He will enter<sup>2</sup> as far as the circle of his fathers,—  
never more can they see daylight!  
20 A man who will not understand his own worth  
Bringeth on him the by-word—"No better than brutes!"<sup>3</sup>

## PARAPHRASE

### PSALM 49

Listen, everyone! High and low, rich and poor, all around the world—listen to my words,

3 For they are wise and filled with insight.

4 I will tell in song accompanied by harps the answer to one of life's most perplexing problems:

5 There is no need to fear when times of trouble come, even though surrounded by enemies!

6 For they trust in their wealth and boast about how rich they are!

7 Yet not one of them, though rich as kings, can ransom his own brother from the penalty of sin! For God's forgiveness does not come that way!<sup>4</sup>

8, 9 For a soul is far too precious to be ransomed by mere earthly wealth. There is not enough of it in all the earth to buy eternal life for just one soul, to keep it out of hell.<sup>5</sup>

10 Rich man! Proud man! Wise man! You must die like all the rest! You have no greater lease on life than foolish, stupid men. You must leave your wealth to others!

11 You name your estates after yourselves as though your lands could be forever yours, and you could live on them eternally!

12 But man with all his pomp must die like any animal!

13 Such is the folly of these men, though after they die they will be quoted as having great wisdom!

14 Death is the shepherd of all mankind. And "in the morning" those who are evil will be the slaves of those who are good. For the power of their wealth<sup>6</sup> is gone when they die; they cannot take it with them.

1. U.: "his sould." Cp. Intro., Chap. III., "Soul."

2. So it shd. be (w. Sep. and Vul.)—Gn.

3. MI.: "Brutes they resemble."

4. Implied from text.

5. Literally, "so that he should not see the Pit."

6. Literally, "their beauty shall be for Sheol to consume."

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15 But as for me, God will redeem my soul from the power of death, for He will receive me.

16 So do not be dismayed when evil men grow rich and build their lovely homes.

17 For when they die they carry nothing with them! Their honors will not follow them.

18 Though a man calls himself happy all through his life—and the world loudly applauds success—

19 Yet in the end he died like everyone else, and enters eternal darkness.

20 For man with all his pomp<sup>1</sup> must die like any animal!

### EXPOSITION

This psalm is one of great beauty and power. Its *breadth* is at once evidence; since it appeals to men everywhere, of all sorts and conditions; *peoples—low, high, rich, needy*. Its *elevation* is clear; inasmuch as it implies that the present order of things is temporary—a mere *passing world*, during which *the days* may be *evil*, and the wealthy *iniquitous, overbearing and boastful*; but beyond which *God* may interpose in *redemption*. Its *insight* is penetrating; for it pierces through to man's *true worth*, which *money* cannot measure. Its *structure* is simple: one stanza, containing proem and problem, and two stanzas of argument, crowned each by an identical refrain. Its *unity* is complete; rendering the psalm, to a large extent, self-interpretive. But, withal, its chief characteristic is, that it is *parabolic, enigmatic and ironical*: its sarcasm is as biting as it is benevolent. It has its surface meanings, and its deeper intentions. It plays upon words. Its *wise men* are only *clever*: they *perish*, or at least they pass into the *land of shadows*. They are *brutes* in behaviour; yet, if they were really only brutes, they would not thus be blamed. They think much of themselves; and yet how little! if they would only think more of themselves, they would not think so little of their poor neighbours. Such is the style; and it is this which makes successful translation and exegesis difficult. The more difficult these are, however, the more need is there that the unity of the psalm should be held fast, and the interpretation be made as self-consistent as possible.

1. Literally, "but without insight." It is uncertain whether this phrase was part of the original text.

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The *proem* or exordium, so far from being an afterthought of a later date, strikes the key-note of the psalm. It is the utterance of a man who is conscious of having something weighty to say, and is inwardly compelled to give it expression. He has glimpses of a coming better time, or he would not speak of the present as a *passing age*; esteems his solution radical, or he would not propound it for the consideration of all classes. He bespeaks attention to a *by-word*, and warrants our expectation of finding one in the sequel. He promises to *open* his *enigma*, by the help of his harp; and therefore justifies us in looking for a real solution of his problem—his music should at least do something to calm the troubled breast.

The *problem* itself is stated in terms sufficiently explicit to reveal its bearings. It is not the brevity of life which perplexes the psalmist, for of that he makes no mention. Nor are the inequalities of life what chiefly trouble him; but mainly the iniquitous scheming and vainglorious boasting of those who have the larger share of this world's goods. They plot and they plunder; they do as they please, and boast that so they will continue to do. Such neighbors are as formidable as they are unscrupulous. They may well be feared. And if the writer nevertheless asks *why he should fear*,—it can only be because he has good reasons for not being afraid of the injuriousness which he is powerless to arrest. It cannot be merely that these boasters will *soon* be in the graves; for the same, in the ordinary course of things, may be said of those who are suffering such wrongs.

The *solution* strikes home, though it takes the form of a paradox. The injurious boasters do not really think enough of themselves: it is for their adventitious wealth that they have such an inordinate affection. If they more highly esteemed their essential *selves*, they would more highly esteem their poor neighbours. If they would but think of it, they themselves are *so precious*, that not all their wealth can bribe God to add to their life a single day—how much less to extend their life indefinitely? And is not every other man essentially *as precious* as they? They deem themselves *wise*, and they *are* very *clever*; but—as any one can see—*clever* people *die* as well as the *foolish* and *brutish*. And the clever rich afford contrasts, when they die, which their poor neighbours do not occasion: the large mansion, and the

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little grave—how different they appear! and the tenants of these “long homes” have left their *names on broad acres!* Ah! if these, whose helpless relics are thus *housed*, had only risen to the high level of esteeming themselves aright, they would have esteemed all others as essentially their equals; and would have scorned to brow-beat them with the *brute-force* of wealth. But now the scorners are scorned. These men lowered themselves to do as the brutes; they intimidated and trampled on the weak. They forgot that they themselves were men!

The poet returns to the charge. His sarcasm bites more bitterly. Look on their late *way* of self-gloriousness—as the folly of it; and look on the *end* of the way—the *future* at which they have arrived. They are My Lord Hades’ *small cattle*, under the care of his *shepherd—Death!* Begrudge them not ease, comfort, plenty, on the road to such an inglorious end. Let them down *gently*. Let them take with them their *good looks*—which will soon enough fade!

“But who art thou, O scornful poet? What of thyself? Shalt not thou, too, soon become weak as we?” might not these shades of the rich reply? The poet’s answer is ready:—“God,” saith he, “will do for me, what your money could not do for you,”—and the words are suited to the time of waiting for Messiah’s first advent,—*God will ransom my soul—my person—my essential self.—from the hand of Hades will he surely take me.* The words have just that measure of ambiguity which fits them to their time; but they have all the point and force needed to adjust them to their context. They are ambiguous so far as this: That they may denote either the fore-stalling of the grasp of Hades by TRANSFORMATION; or the rescuing out of the hand of Hades by RESURRECTION. But they have all the point and force which the context requires. “God” will place me in such a position of realised immortality, that I shall *live on continually, and not see the pit*,—which is what riches have never yet accomplished. And, looking forward, as I do, for such Divine redemption,—*I will not fear* the worst that *iniquitous circumventors* can do unto me during the *days of evil*.

But this final stanza is not yet complete. Having given conclusive reason why *he* should not fear, the poet counsels others to be equally bold: *Do not fear!* But as, in his first reply, he descended from argument to irony, so does he, in this his second

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answer: only, as the argument is stronger now than then, so is the irony keener and more prolonged. *Then* the argument was drawn from *the inherent worth of man*: now it is derived from *the redeeming purpose of God*. And, accordingly, we are here treated to an exquisite picture of the rich man's pampering and flattering of his superficial self, which is terminated only by the fall of a curtain of thick darkness—suited to those pre-messianic times, when the future of the wicked was as yet unrevealed. The "shade" of the once great man may penetrate as far into the dark vault of Hades as to bring him into *the circle of his fathers*; but—no more at present can be said: silence reigns—and the familiar *by-word* is once more heard. The clever but foolish tyrant has brought it on himself—*no better than brutes!*

In finally reviewing the psalm, one is struck with its numerous points of contact with other scriptures. Kirkpatrick well says: "The theme of the psalm is akin to that of Psalms 37 and 73." It "reminds us of the parables of Rich Fool (Luke 12:16ff) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19ff)." Moreover, this psalm "contains numerous parallels of thought and language to the Books of Job and Proverbs." "There seems to be an allusion in ver. 11 to the vast estates which are condemned by Isaiah and Micah." See Isa. 2:9, 11, 17, 3:14, 15, 5:8, 15, 59:9-15; Mi. 2:1, 2, 3:1-3. But perhaps the most significant reference should be to Mat. 6:26.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This should be a very vital and interesting psalm to every American because it discusses money and its influence. With this theme in mind read back through the psalm.
2. There are two answers to the problem of the use and abuse of money: one in verses 7-12, and the other in 13-20. State these answers in your own words.
3. Why is there a tendency to bow down before the worldly rich? Let a man be known as a millionaire and the attitude of people changes toward him—why?
4. Does verse eleven suggest that there is a vast difference between the two homes of the rich man? What are they?
5. There is here described a strange and awful flock and shepherd—who are they?