

## Meditation on Mortality

When people get together they talk about all kinds of things – the weather, their family, their job, etc. What is the one topic that rarely comes up spontaneously and one that makes people feel uncomfortable and nervous? This is the theme of Psalm 49 which we'll be looking at today. The psalmist mentions **death** and **grave** 12 times in this brief meditation: Almost sounds morbid, but Solomon said “a wise person thinks a lot about death.” (Ecclesiastes 7:3, NLT) Think a moment: can you remember the first time you were confronted by the reality of death?

Did you have a heart attack? Were you in a serious car accident? Or perhaps a loved one passed away? This is what happened to me. I was 8 years old when my father died of cancer and my 3 brothers and 3 sisters were all younger. Our family felt a deep sense of shock and loss, more so than if my Dad had died at a ripe old age. The emotional anguish and heartache lingered for many years, though, thankfully, my mother's close walk with the Lord, made it that much easier for us to know God hadn't abandoned us. He was, in fact, father to the fatherless.

One aspect of my father's home-going that I found particularly hard to get my head around involved him dying at such a young age, 34. This did not make sense considering how other bad people lived to a ripe old age. Why didn't they get cancer and die rather than my father? This is quite similar to the dilemma Solomon raised in Ecclesiastes 9:2-3; “The same destiny ultimately awaits everyone, whether righteous or wicked, good or bad, ... Good people receive the same treatment as sinners ... It seems so wrong that everyone under the sun suffers the same fate. Already twisted by evil, people choose their own mad course, for they have no hope. There is nothing ahead but death anyway.” (NLT)

Another godly man who thought deeply on these matters was a musician descended from Korah. He composed Psalm 49 as a song to be sung by the temple choir. (NLT)

- 1 Listen to this, all you people!  
Pay attention, everyone in the world!
- 2 High and low, rich and poor—listen!
- 3 For my words are wise,  
and my thoughts are filled with insight.

- 4 I listen carefully to many proverbs  
and solve riddles with inspiration from a harp.
- 5 Why should I fear when trouble comes,  
when enemies surround me?
- 6 They trust in their wealth  
and boast of great riches.
- 7 Yet they cannot redeem themselves from death  
by paying a ransom to God.
- 8 Redemption does not come so easily,  
for no one can ever pay enough
- 9 to live forever  
and never see the grave.
- 10 Those who are wise must finally die,  
just like the foolish and senseless,  
leaving all their wealth behind.
- 11 The grave is their eternal home,  
where they will stay forever.  
They may name their estates after themselves,
- 12 but their fame will not last.  
They will die, just like animals.
- 13 This is the fate of fools,  
though they are remembered as being wise. Interlude
- 14 Like sheep, they are led to the grave,  
where death will be their shepherd.  
In the morning the godly will rule over them.  
Their bodies will rot in the grave,  
far from their grand estates.
- 15 But as for me, God will redeem my life.  
He will snatch me from the power of the grave. Interlude
- 16 So don't be dismayed when the wicked grow rich  
and their homes become ever more splendid.
- 17 For when they die, they take nothing with them.  
Their wealth will not follow them into the grave.
- 18 In this life they consider themselves fortunate  
and are applauded for their success.
- 19 But they will die like all before them

and never again see the light of day.

20 People who boast of their wealth don't understand;  
they will die, just like animals.

Let's take a closer look to see how this Psalm grapples with similar questions to the ones Solomon raised in Ecclesiastes. The Psalmist says in verse 10 everyone can see that our earthly lives come to an end. All people die whether, wise or foolish, powerful or weak, rich or poor. It doesn't matter that some people drive around in posh cars, live in mansions and act proudly as though they'll never die. We will all end up in the grave, just like animals. The author repeats this "crude" comparison to animals at the very end. (v. 20) You may wonder why the psalmist ends on such a negative note. Wouldn't it be nice if he concluded with a "happy-ever-after" ending? Or at least hinted at a glimpse of hope?

But this is the point: he already declared that his hope is in God his Redeemer. Now he wants to deliberately warn readers by prodding and "**goad**ing" us to wake up from our spiritual lethargy. It is urgent for us to acknowledge that today could be my last. This was true yesterday right in the road where we live. A 63 year old man died after being hit by a car. How shocking it was for all of us who lived in the same building. He didn't expect yesterday would be his last. Was he ready? Can anyone be prepared for this?

Like Solomon who posed a number of startling proverbs on death in Ecclesiastes, the psalmist is also challenges us to live in such a way that we are prepared to die. Notice how the Preacher concludes Ecclesiastes, "The words of the wise are like **goads**, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; They are given by one Shepherd. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments." (Ecclesiastes 12:11-13, ESV) Is it coincidental that a **goad** is an instrument for steering animals in the proper direction?

Notice how the author introduces Psalm 49 by explaining that he is presenting a **proverb** and solving a **riddle**. If we bear this in mind, the startling note at the end begins to make sense. He wants to shake us out of our spiritual lethargy so we won't be "without understanding." The Christian Standard Bible translation of verse 20 clarifies this

nicely, "A man with valuable possessions but **without understanding** is like the animals that perish." It is, of course, possible to be rich and yet have true wisdom, like Abraham and Job. The psalmist wants his readers not to die like beasts, "**without understanding.**"

The psalmist is encouraged, when he realizes that wealthy people, who so often mistreat and oppress others, will not escape death. Such godless people when they get old or perhaps are diagnosed with terminal illness, may try to offer a doctor a huge sum of money, hoping somehow to live forever, but no ransom is ever enough to prevent one from going into the grave. There's no escape.

When we realize this, it frees us to live with true peace and contentment. This works in two ways: First we live without envy, and secondly, we can make sense of our brief span of life on earth knowing that we have a powerful redeemer who pays the price necessary to rescue us from the grave. The psalmist says in verse 15 (NLT), "But as for me, God will redeem my life. He will snatch me from the power of the grave. Interlude"

In the years after my father died I gradually came to understand that where he went, really was a better place and it comforted me. As the Psalmist said, "afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth I desire besides you. ... for me it is good to be near God." (Psalm 73:24-25,28, NLT)

Can you think of another Old Testament prophet who, while enduring terrible suffering, testified of his deep confidence in God as his **Redeemer**? Job 19:23-27 (NLT);

23 "Oh, that my words could be recorded.

Oh, that they could be inscribed on a monument,  
24 carved with an iron chisel and filled with lead,  
engraved forever in the rock.

25 "But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and he will stand upon the earth at last.

26 And after my body has decayed,  
yet in my body I will see God!

27 I will see him for myself.

Yes, I will see him with my own eyes.  
I am overwhelmed at the thought!"

It is so easy when we experience trials and troubles of various kinds to compare our circumstances with other people, particularly bad people who seem to be blessed with a trouble-free life. Such comparisons make it easy for us to be envious. Instead of being discontented with our lot we ought to “do everything without complaining”, as Scripture says, so that you may “shine like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.” (Philippians 2:14-15, NLT) We can only do this with God's help.

Earlier we saw how the authors of Psalm 49 and Ecclesiastes compiled thought provoking sayings about death. But there's another interesting similarity. Both writers provide a glimpse of mankind's deepest heart desire – we long to live forever with our heavenly Father. The psalmist says humans “cannot redeem themselves from death by paying a ransom to God. Redemption does not come so easily, for no one can ever pay enough to **live forever** and never see the grave.”

Interestingly, Solomon also mentions this heart longing, saying, “God has planted eternity in the human heart, yet even so people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

So how can humans fulfill this yearning? How can we quench this thirst? The Psalmist testified his hope was in God his Redeemer. As for the Preacher, he concluded the book of Ecclesiastes by saying, “keep God's commandments.” This calls to mind how a devote Jew asked Jesus what he should do in order to inherit eternal life and Jesus answered, “Only God is truly good. ... you know the commandments. You must not murder, etc” (Mark 10:17-18, NLT) If you read the rest of the story, you'll see this man actually failed to keep the law, even though he thought he had.

Solomon emphatically declared in Ecclesiastes 7:20 that everyone has sinned. Nowhere did he suggest that we can compensate for our moral flaws by trying to accumulate merit from doing good deeds. As a matter of fact, the long-awaited Messiah was the only perfect human. Furthermore, he came as the spotless Lamb of God to take away our sin. (John 1:29) Jesus declared in no uncertain terms: eternal life means to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. (John 17:3) It has proved impossible for humans to keep God's commandments perfectly. We need a Saviour to rescue us.

On one occasion Jesus was asked an important question by the Jewish religious leaders, “What must we do, to be doing the **works** of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the **work** of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:28-29, ESV) What did Jesus mean by this puzzling statement? We don't need to exert more and more effort to do good deeds as if works will help us gain forgiveness and approval from God. Forgiveness cannot be earned. Salvation and eternal life are to be received as a gift from God. Have you humbly acknowledged that you've broken God's laws? Let me encourage you to ask the Lord to forgive your sins through Christ dying in your place on the cross?

Earlier we read how the psalmist talked about a payment that God will provide as our Redeemer. As we conclude this message it is important to see that Jesus fulfilled this hope of redemption by laying down his life as a sacrificial ransom and rising victoriously from the grave.

There is, however, another heart-warming truth in Psalm 49 that I want to encourage you to pray about. God says in Psalm 107:2, “Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out. Tell others he has redeemed you from your enemies.” (NLT) Think about it. What does it mean that the psalmist speaks proverbially and sets out to unwrap a riddle? Also, consider how these insights correlate with the longing for eternity as planted in our heart by God. I have found these insights very helpful as a way to engage unbelieving friends in conversation that is stimulating and “seasoned with salt” like the apostle Paul instructed in Colossians 4:2-6. Will you ask the Lord to open doors for these kinds of meaningful conversations?

Let me share a recent conversation with my friend Khalid. Several months ago we had a meaningful discussion prompted by reading Psalm 49 together. The recurring mention of death fascinated him. His curiosity was further aroused by seeing death depicted as a dilemma, a riddle which the Psalmist proposed to solve with the help of a harp. The key to unravelling this riddle involves understanding God as REDEEMER. (Psalm 49:15)

More recently I asked Khalid if he would like to hear an interesting song, titled, “There goes sundown.” This contemporary song echoes Psalm 49 and Psalm 90. It begins on a startling, shocking note: “Doomsday ... Some day, But not today so far.” As a Muslim Khalid is

quite familiar with this kind of imagery which some might view as inappropriate shock therapy. The song continues, “Only God in his wisdom, Surely not me in mine, Knows the number of the days of a man, Every day he shows me a sign.” (compare Psalm 90:11-12)

Khalid and his father listened with rapt attention as the sombre image of sundown is repeated again and again in the chorus. Wayne Watson, who composed this song, undoubtedly noticed Psalm 49 and 90 portray “morning” metaphorically, so it is fitting to speak metaphorically of “sundown.” Let us take a few moments to listen to this song.

Doomsday... Some day, but not today so far  
Said this world wouldn't be here much longer  
But look around, here we are.  
Only God in his wisdom, surely not me in mine,  
Knows the number of the days of a man  
Every day he shows me a sign.

(Chorus) There Goes Sundown  
There Goes Sundown  
There Goes Sundown again.

Some days I pray this prayer more than others  
For My Lord to come. When I'm weary of fighting  
When I'm tired of running.  
Other days I wanna stay around  
Grow old with that girl of mine  
Most of the Future is out of my hands  
He reminds me every day about this time.

(Chorus: 2x) There Goes Sundown  
There Goes Sundown  
There Goes Sundown again.

(Bridge:) I don't believe we've been forgotten  
God's too faithful, he's too good at keeping  
All his promises  
He's gonna come for me, just like he said he would.

(Chorus: 2x) There Goes Sundown  
There Goes Sundown  
There Goes Sundown again.

Now let us think about the imagery of “sundown” and its counterpart, “morning.” Let's take a careful look at the terms “light” and “morning” against the gloomy backdrop of darkness and death. I trust you will be enlightened. The lines from Psalm 49 and Psalm 90 that mention these words read as follows:

“Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the **morning**. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol [grave], with no place to dwell. ... his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see **light**.” (Psalm 49:14,19, ESV)

“from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, “Return, O children of man!” For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the **morning**: in the **morning** it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. ... Satisfy us in the **morning** with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”  
( Psalm 90:3-6,14, NLT)

The author of Psalm 49 makes many challenging observations about death and the grave. But he also mentions a couple words with positive, hopeful connotations: **light and morning**. Why do you think these words convey a hope of life beyond the grave (sheol)? And how?

You may be interested to hear that my discussion with Khalid took an interesting turn as I showed him a booklet titled, “Let there be **light**” displaying a splendid **sunrise** on the cover. This beautiful scene invites the reader to meditate on **light** as a Divine attribute. This booklet quotes V. Jayaram, a student of comparative religion, who is a devote Hindu. He acknowledges that **light** is “universally associated with divinity or godliness in almost every culture or civilization.” (Symbolism of Light in Hinduism) This tract continues unwrapping the message of hope by showing how God revealed **light** through his Messiah. (Isaiah 49:6) Jesus Christ brings the **sunrise** (Luke 1:77), the **dawn** (2 Peter 1:19), and indeed, the true **light of life** (John 8:12; cf. Psalm 49:19). And this **light** is for each one of us, if only we open our eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4)

## Appendix

We live in an age when many Muslims have come to the “west” and are now living in closer proximity to Christians. Canada is a typical example of so-called Christian nations welcoming unprecedented numbers of Muslim neighbors as refugees and foreign students, etc. Indeed, some of you reading this article, may have Muslim friends and you are curious, “Do Muslims struggle with accepting death emotionally and intellectually, like the psalmist said?”

Interestingly, the riddle posed by the psalmist poses resonates with Muslims for two reasons: 1) Broadly speaking, Muslims are supposed to think much about death. Wrestling with such questions helps humans to face the fact: death may come unexpectedly any time. Sooner or later everyone dies. Being mindful of this, hopefully, helps deter us from the wrong path, which hopefully, means we will be more prepared to face the Day of final reckoning – judgement Day. Moreover, from a Muslim viewpoint, there's no ransom payment one can try to offer Allah which will be sufficient to avert his verdict. (Surah 6:70) This raises a key question; “Could this possibly imply that God/Allah himself pays the ransom, as the Psalmist (and Ayoub and Ibrahim) so confidently testified?”

Two recommended articles to help you explore this further are available here: [http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/eid\\_passover.html](http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/eid_passover.html) and <http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/homeward.html>