

Living for What Lasts

Psalm 49

© September 20th, 2026 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Psalms

If you ever look around at an outdoor youth sporting event like a baseball game, you'll see a familiar sight—those folding camp chairs that everyone brings with them to a game. They're far more comfortable than sitting on bleachers, and they are part of the official uniform for many sports parents.

I have owned many such chairs through the years. For many years, I was constantly disappointed by the fact that these chairs didn't seem to last a full season. By the end of the season, I had usually resorted to some sort of redneck engineering to get my chair to stay together. One day I actually read the label on my chair and discovered it had a weight limit! I'm a big guy, and realized I was well above that weight limit, which probably explained why my chairs kept falling apart. I have since purchased a chair designed to carry my weight, and that one has served me well for over a decade and shows no signs of wear.

My point in sharing this story is to remind you that when we put more weight on something than it is meant to carry, the result is usually destruction. Just as that principle is true with camp chairs, it's also true in life. That's the point of Psalm 49. Many look to the things of this world to satisfy them and provide meaning and comfort. But the psalmist reminds us that those things cannot possibly bear such weight. They cannot do what we are asking them to. And only a fool continues to rely on something they know cannot hold them.

The Futility of Man

Psalm 49 is ascribed to the Sons of Korah. This is the first time we have seen this attribution, so it is fair to ask who they were. Korah is mentioned in the book of Numbers as a Levite who challenged the authority of Moses and Aaron. God ended up killing Korah and the others who joined him in his conspiracy. But his family line was permitted to continue. By the time of David's reign, some of Korah's descendants had become part of the group that led music in the worship at the temple. Most scholars believe the Sons of Korah refers to these descendants who were active around the time of David. Beyond that, we really don't know much about who these people were.

This psalm has a very different feel from the outset. It reads less like a psalm and more like a section of Proverbs. Its intent is to challenge those who read or sing it to think carefully about their lives.

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. (Psalm 49:1-9, NLT)

The psalm begins by calling its hearers to listen carefully to the wise words that follow. The point is to grab your attention from the outset. In the second stanza, vv. 5-9, the psalmist gets to his point—death comes to all, and all the riches in the world cannot save you from this fact.

This is a readily accessible truth, but it is one no one particularly wants to acknowledge. And that is exactly the reason he calls us to listen. This truth has profound implications for every aspect of life.

Americans spend a massive amount of money each year on trying to help people live longer and to be healthy for as long as possible. Most people today take several prescriptions in hopes of helping to prolong their lives. Many spend thousands of dollars each year on medical care designed to help them live longer. This is not inherently bad, as it is prudent to make use of the wisdom and tools available to us. But what is really at the core of this attitude is a simple truth—most fear death and see it as the ultimate enemy to be defeated.

Here's the problem—we cannot defeat death! It comes to us all! It is interesting to see how a non-Christian person approaches death compared to one who trusts Jesus and is sure of their eternal destiny. One fights to hang on for as long as possible, sometimes grasping for any treatment that might promise a few more months, while the other is able to gently let go of the things of this world and surrender to death, knowing Christ has them secure. I have heard many hospice workers talk about how you can see a difference between how a Christian dies and how a non-Christian does.

The point of this psalm is to show us that no amount of wealth or power or any other earthly thing can provide that which we desire most. We desire redemption. We desire to know that we will be secure no matter what, even if death comes to us. This psalm reminds us that looking to the things of this world to meet that need is foolish, because these things can never provide what we're asking them to.

What Really Lasts?

The next section of this psalm really doubles down on this notion.

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. (Psalm 49:10-13, NLT)

Everyone, wise and foolish alike, will ultimately die. And what happens to the wealth, the things that we treasure so much? It gets left behind. People try all sorts of things to live forever, even though they know they will die. They think that if they name estates or hospital wings after themselves, then people will remember them. They think that if they

accomplish something great, then they'll have their name recorded somewhere and they will have a form of immortality, even if it's just among a small group of people. But none of these provide immortality. They can't.

I'm reminded of an old joke of a man who died and was told he was allowed to bring one bag with him to heaven. The man searched frantically and filled his bag with as much gold as he could get his hands on. When he arrived in heaven, the man who greeted him seemed surprised. He said, you were allowed to bring one bag, and you chose to bring pavement?

In Revelation, the street of Heaven is described as paved in gold. I am inclined to think that this description is intended to give us a glimpse of the majesty of heaven rather than describing a literal condition. The point is that the grandeur of Heaven is so great that what we value most in this life is only good enough to serve as pavement.

Our writer points us to the fact that wearing ourselves out trying to amass the most stuff in this life is a fool's errand. After all, you can't take it with you. As my Dad was fond of saying, the more stuff you amass in this life, the more your kids will have to throw out when you die. Those who do not grasp this fact are rightly described as fools.

Two Shepherds

Now the psalmist contrasts two different masters, or shepherds.

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. (Psalm 49:14-15, NLT)

The famous Scottish pastor, Alexander Maclaren, observed that this psalm may intend for us to see a contrast here because it says that death is *their* shepherd, but we know from Psalm 23 that the Lord is *our* Shepherd. Where we place our trust determines who (or what) will shepherd us. Death is the great equalizer. All the grand estates, the great plans, and the power, fame, and fortune a person has amassed will disappear as soon as they die. None of those things have any value for them anymore.

The psalmist gives us a significant contrast. For the believer, there is life beyond the grave! This is a significant declaration in the Old Testament. The Old Testament writers did not fully understand God's plan to send Jesus into the world as the redeemer of mankind, as the One who would provide confidence of eternal life even in the face of death. But they clearly understood a couple of things we should note here.

First, death is not the end of the story. This passage speaks of eternal life, of being snatched from the grave. Sometimes people comfort themselves in their rejection of God by saying you live, you die, and that's it. Your body goes into the ground and decomposes, and that is the fate of all. It's a pretty depressing belief, and it certainly does not give any hope or meaning to this world.

But the psalmist recognizes that God will deliver us from the power of the grave. When we combine this statement with what the New Testament teaches us about this, we know that not only will we spiritually be with Christ forever, but believers will also experience a physical resurrection (1 Cor. 15). We will live forever with God. Therefore, death is not the end of the story.

Second, God is our redeemer. Again, this psalmist would not have fully understood the truth about Jesus coming into the world to serve as the perfect sacrificial lamb for us. That truth would be revealed later. But even at this stage, he knew two things. First, he would be redeemed. Second, he could not redeem himself. So, he arrived at the only logical conclusion: God would be the One who would redeem us!

This is the message of the gospel. We all deserve condemnation. Nothing we can do can make us acceptable in God's sight. But thankfully, that burden does not fall to us. Instead, Christ has become the perfect sacrifice and has made it possible for us to be forgiven, because He has paid our ransom. This is great news, and it is surprising to see a glimpse of the gospel message nearly a thousand years before Jesus would walk on the earth!

The psalmist contrasts for us the difference between a person who trusts in their wealth and their abilities and one who trusts in the Lord. The Lord provides confidence and assurance that nothing in this world can even approach.

The Take-Home

The last section of this psalm gives us the take-home point we should gain from this.

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. (Psalm 49:16-20, NLT)

He says don't be dismayed when the wicked grow rich and their homes become ever more splendid. I feel like this is describing today's American pastime—looking at those who think are rich and becoming frustrated or even disenfranchised with the fact that those who are amassing the most wealth also seem to be the most evil. The ultra-rich have huge amounts of money while many of us are struggling to afford groceries, despite working hard and trying to spend wisely.

The result, sometimes, is that people begin to question God. They ask, why would God allow the evil to prosper like this? Why are the wicked able to have a life of ease, while godly men and women are left to struggle in relative poverty and obscurity?

The psalmist reminds us that these things shouldn't dismay us because they will not ultimately last. In fact, many times, extreme wealth actually leads people much further from the Lord, because they don't feel like they need Him. Many of the richest people in

the world today are also the farthest from the Lord. Rather than lamenting that we don't have things that will not last, we should rejoice in the fact that we have what will!

The overarching point of this passage is to remind us to live with perspective. To remember that most of what we seek in this world will not last. As such, it is foolish to devote our minds and our hearts to such things. Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount.

¹⁹ “Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be. (Matthew 6:19-21, NLT)

His point is that while everyone else is wearing themselves out chasing the trinkets of this world, we should be focused on investing in the things that really matter. We should invest in the things that will last far beyond the grave and far after everything and everyone in this world have been destroyed. We should live our lives for the things that last.

Conclusion

So, the big question is how do we do that? What does it look like? I've got some suggestions. **First, dedicate your resources to things that last.** One of the big metrics in investing (I'm told) is ROI, or return on investment. When you invest in something, you expect that it will ultimately pay you back more than what you put in. We can grasp that with our money in the stock market, but what if we took that same mentality into all our resources?

Whether you realize it or not, you have resources you can choose to invest as you see fit. You can choose how to invest your money, your time, your abilities, your attention, your energy, etc. What if we started asking, will this investment last beyond this life? Will it matter in eternity? These are the kinds of questions we should be asking and using to make decisions.

Most people dedicate a huge amount of their resources into their children (and this is a good investment!) but I would challenge you to ask, what is your investment going to purchase for you? Are you ensuring your children will grow up knowing Christ and having a strong basis that will make them confident of their eternal destination? Or are you merely teaching them to throw a ball well, or to get a good job, or to be popular? We should dedicate our resources to things that will yield an eternal return.

We can wear ourselves out trying to gain fame and fortune, to get a bigger house, a fancier car, or a more valuable name. But remember, none of those things will satisfy, and each will fade away when our lives are over. We would be wise to devote our time and energy to things that will ultimately last. Strive for holiness. Strive to serve God fully. Strive to use your resources to bring others to Christ. These are investments that will always pay rich dividends—sometimes in this life, but certainly in the life to come.

Second, we shouldn't allow temporary things to rob us of joy. I cannot tell you how many relationships I have seen destroyed because of people fighting over money, land, power, influence, or control. We get frustrated when we feel like others aren't treating us fairly, or worse, when we're being used. And that's reasonable! Sometimes people behave in ways that are evil and hurtful. But we should live with the perspective that these things will not ultimately matter. No matter what, at the end of our lives, we will lose it all. It cannot go with us and it will not offer us security or meaning.

So, instead of becoming angry, instead of stewing, instead of fighting to the death over the things of this world, maybe we should simply choose to let them go. Refuse to let those things rob you of joy. Is it frustrating when evil people seem to get things that we'd like to have? Absolutely. Are any of those things really going to matter in eternity? No. If we live with the right perspective, we will not be dismayed when the evil seem to prosper, because we know they are investing in things that will not last. With each evil action, they are distancing themselves further from God. Putting Christ first in all things will yield a return that no one can take from us. Sometimes putting Christ first means choosing not to fight over things that really don't matter.

Finally, choose to embrace the wisdom of God. The psalmist begins by calling people to listen. The things contained in Psalm 49 are not especially deep or lofty. They are not difficult to understand. But just because they are readily understood does not mean they are readily embraced. These truths run contrary to everything our world holds dear today, so it requires us to go a different direction. James Montgomery Boice made a helpful observation.

...not all who are foolish are rich; there are also foolish people who follow them, aspire to be like them, and approve their sayings or philosophy of life. You do not have to have wealth to perish because of wealth. You can perish equally well merely by making money your goal and forgetting spiritual things.¹

Who are you choosing to listen to? Whose pattern will you follow? The world calls loudly to us and demands that we align our lives with its priorities. This passage reminds us that the truth is not flashy or exciting or difficult to grasp. And that's exactly why many miss it. They are too busy running after other things to listen to the wisdom of God. It doesn't fit with what we want, it calls us to a different set of priorities, and since we don't like it, we abandon it in search of something more fun. This is a fool's errand.

The things of this world cannot satisfy. When we lean on them for satisfaction and meaning, we will quickly discover they will collapse under a weight they were not meant to bear. If you know this to be true, you should change course. Take it from me, only a fool continues to sit in a chair they know cannot hold them.

© September 20th, 2026 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Psalms

¹ Boice, James Montgomery. *Psalms 42–106: An Expositional Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005.