

Prepared To Live And Die

Psalm 49:1-20

Series: The Psalms [#19]

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Theme: **Only True Trust In God Prepares Us For Life And Death.**

Introduction

The Bible pictures God's people in a number of analogies. Two familiar ones are children and sheep. Children and sheep can be very trusting, and so they can be easily led. They also can be not trusting, and so be stubbornly resistant to being led. All of us trust and also struggle with trust.

In our series on the Psalms we come to Psalm 49 today, which is about trust and its essential role in being prepared to die. Many people are not comfortable thinking, let alone talking about being prepared to die. Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon *Our Last Journey*, said "To be prepared to die is to be ready to live; to be ready for eternity is in the best sense to be ready for time."¹ If you are not prepared to die, you are not really prepared to live.

This Psalm reminds us of a foundational, objective and universal demarcation between people: on the one hand there are those who are truly prepared to live and die; on the other hand there are those who are not. In both groups of people there are varying degrees of being and not being prepared. But this obvious point should not lead us to miss the truth that there is an objective demarcation between being prepared and not being prepared. The point of demarcation is trust. The one group trusts in God while the other does not. The central core truth for us today from this Psalm is that *only true trust in God prepares us for life and death.*

The Foolishness Of Not Being Prepared.

Let's begin with the negative, with not truly being prepared to die and live. This Psalm underscores that not being prepared is sad, tragic and foolish. The Psalm writer tells us that those who trust in wealth are neither prepared to live and die nor wise. Their misplaced trust demonstrates that they are both unprepared and foolish. He describes them in verse 6 as "those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches."

To trust is to place my confidence in, to depend on something or someone. Sometimes our trust is well thought out and explicit, at other times it is an assumption without much or any thought. If you were to trust all your life's savings to an individual, bank or investment firm to manage, you would ask questions, do research, and reach a reasoned decision of trusting based on the knowledge you had gained. On the other hand, I doubt that any of you engaged in a detailed assessment of the trustworthiness of the pew you chose,

of its ability to support you, before you sat down. The Psalm does not address how people reach the place of trusting in their wealth. It includes everyone who trusts in wealth, regardless of how they reached that position of trust.

Trusting in wealth is foolish because wealth cannot save you or anyone from, cannot redeem or buy you out of the clutches of death. Verse 7.

“No man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him. For the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease trying forever—that he should live on eternally, that he should not undergo decay. For he sees that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.” (7-10)

Even if you had the wealth of the ten richest people in the world which is somewhere in the area of \$342 B.,² or if you could somehow siphon off all the annual revenue from the ten highest revenue producing companies in the world which is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$735 B.,³ or if you could transform the \$542 Billion national debt of Canada⁴ and the \$13.4 Trillion national debt of the U.S.⁵ into cash in your bank account, there is no way you could pay the cost of saving yourself or anyone else from death.

Or even if you use all the money and possessions you have for noble, altruistic purposes, that cannot rescue you or anyone else from death. That cannot prepare you to die, to face God and His righteous judgment, and certainly not prepare you to live with Him forever. Jesus made this point as He asked, “... what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”⁶

As well, trusting in wealth is foolish because you can't take it with you when you die. Go on to verse 10. “For he [the one trusting in his wealth] sees that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.” Drop down to verse 17. “For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not descend after him.” The apostle Paul wrote, “For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.”⁷

Earlier we read Jesus' parable of the rich man whose lands produced perennial bumper crops and decided to tear down and build bigger and better barns so he could enjoy his wealth for years to come. God called him a fool because his trust was in his wealth which could not buy him even one more day, and all he had was left to others.⁸

As I said at the onset, if you are not prepared to die you are not prepared to live. Trusting in wealth does not, cannot prepare you to die. Trusting in wealth does not, cannot prepare you to live because it distorts your view of reality and never truly can satisfy you. Ecclesiastes 5:10 instructs us, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity.” It is an empty, vain trust.

Some could be tempted to say, “Yes, the wealthy need to be careful. I guess there is some benefit in not being wealthy!” The truth is that *trusting* in wealth cannot prepare you to die

or to live. And this truth applies no matter how little or much you have. Recall that Jesus prefaced His parable about the wealthy farmer by saying

“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”⁹

It is not wrong to plan and work hard and to be wealthy. It is sinful and foolish to place our hopes and dreams on wealth, or even the hope of having more than we have today.

In a similar way, trusting in our accomplishments and reputation cannot prepare us to die and to live, and so this too is foolish. Pick it up at verse 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. But man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the way of those who are foolish, and of those after them who approve their words.”

(11-13)

“My grand homes and reputation will live on and be known forever!” Of course this is not true. Verse 17, again, tells us our “glory will not descend after [us].” We can’t take our glory with us and those in the next generations will not hang on to it either. Not only do people think about us less often than we think they do while we are alive, they quickly move on and forget about us after we die. A quick and telling test is to start naming all the people you can in your family—*that is*, starting with your great, great grand parent’s generation and going back from there.

When it comes to magnificent structures, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. But we don’t have absolute certainty that they were actually built by King Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon. Then, while the ancient pyramids of Egypt that have survived stand, they leave us with as many or more questions than answers. Thinking there will be immortality through accomplishments and reputation is foolishness. All who think that way, even though they do not have grand structures and reputations to leave behind them, are foolish and are not prepared for either death or life.

To sum it up, trusting in anything temporary does not prepare us to die or to live, and so is foolish. Go back up to verse 10. “For he sees that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.”

It is often and correctly said that death is the great equalizer. All of us die, the rich and poor, wise and foolish, godly and ungodly. Since this is true, and also that all the things of this world are temporary, it is foolish to trust in anything in this world, anything that is temporary. As the apostle John addressed this in spiritual terms, he put it this way,

“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that

is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” (15-17)

When we lived in Oregon we came to know a retired banker who had done quite well financially. One of his retirement projects was building an apartment complex. He had an entire section of it developed as a home for his wife and himself. His wife loved to travel, and so they went on many trips to various places in the U.S. and Europe. But then he became ill. The trips ended. After several years his wife said she looked forward to all the trips she could take after he died. Right after he died, she had a bad fall, became an invalid, never traveled again, and died within a year. She was counting on, trusting in those trips to bring her happiness and fulfillment. She sadly, like the pompous man in verse 20, did not understand that all the things of this world are temporary and cannot prepare us to live happily, let alone die with certain hope.

Are there things, or even people, that you put your confidence in, depend on to be happy, content, fulfilled or even to be right with God and prepared to die? *Only true trust in God prepares us for life and death.*

Let's turn the page to the positive side, to ...

The Wisdom Of Being Prepared.

The wisdom of being prepared begins and continues with being on the right path, the path of God's wisdom. Just as you can't get to Jasper by heading east, you cannot get to the wisdom of being prepared to live and die by heading in a wrong direction.

Psalm 49 opens with the writer telling us his instruction consists of understanding and wisdom. Wisdom is seeing, interpreting things the way they really are, the way God knows them to be. The book of Proverbs tells us that the fear or reverence of God is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.¹⁰ Psalm 119 tells us that the unfolding of God's word gives light to our path and gives understanding even to the simple, or those without understanding and wisdom.¹¹ This understanding and wisdom is available to everyone, as verse 2 expresses it, "both the low and high, rich and poor together." So we too must incline our ears, or stretch out and turn to God's word, open ourselves to it, meditate on it at the deepest level of our being and then follow and obey it to have true wisdom.

At this point we get back to the bedrock issue of trust. Every child of God by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ each day faces specific opportunities and tests of trusting, putting our confidence in, depending on God. Our eternal destiny is not in the balance, but being prepared to live and actually living the full and abundant life Christ gives is in the balance. It comes down to: God has spoken in His word and His plans for me are good; am I going to step out and trust Him by obeying Him or not?

Sometimes we may not recognize these opportunities and tests in what we think are small, insignificant things, things such as...

- how we relate to someone who is annoying,
- getting to where we are going on time by pushing the pedal to the metal,
- trying to make a good impression with a little bit of spin that doesn't give an accurate picture,
- smiling inwardly when someone we don't get along with makes a mistake or fails.

Then we face more obvious opportunities and tests—

- God's word says "you shall be my witnesses" and "do the work of an evangelist", but we may find it difficult to trust God in this and to speak the gospel, which is the power of God for salvation;¹²
- then there may be an issue that is important to us, we are convinced our view is the best one, and so we struggle with trusting God or making sure our view prevails;
- or we understand God's word says "No", but we deeply, even desperately want to think, say or do it.

The path of being prepared to die and live is from beginning to end, in each moment and situation, the path of God's wisdom that comes from looking to and trusting Him.

This path of the wisdom of trusting God may be difficult at times, but the rewards are great. At the most basic level it is being prepared to die with certain, confident hope that, as Paul expressed it, to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord.¹³ Being forgiven of all our sin, accepted fully and forever by God is His gift of grace to all who trust, put their confidence in, depend on Him and Him alone. Jesus said,

“... God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”¹⁴

He also told us,

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”¹⁵

And the apostle John wrote,

“And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”¹⁶

It is God's grace through faith plus nothing.

- Not going to church, as good as that is;

- not being baptized and taking communion, even though Scriptures tells us to do this;
- not doing my best, nor trying to treat others as I would have them treat me, as important as these are.

Being prepared to die, and so being prepared to live, does not come through the works I do, but what God does for and in me. If you do not have confidence that you are prepared to die, that when your life on earth is over you will be with God, if you are trusting in anything other than Jesus Christ, or if you are not trusting only in Jesus Christ, come to Him now, open your heart to Him, trust Him. I and others would be glad to talk with you about this after the service.

For those who are prepared, who know Christ as Savior, there are many great rewards from trusting God each day and in every situation. Being blessed with every spiritual blessing and being equipped for every good work, we have the privilege of walking in the path of good works that God has already prepared for us.¹⁷

In this Psalm the writer mentions the reward of freedom from fear. Look at verse 5. “Why should I fear in days of adversity, when the iniquity of my foes surrounds me ... ?” Now verse 16.

“Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not descend after him.” (16-17)

This doesn’t mean that we will never be surprised by or struck with fear from the oppression of the rich and powerful or in our spiritual battles. It means that as we trust God we will not be conquered and dominated by that fear.

This reward is ours not because God removes our adversity and adversaries, but because we, not they, will triumph in the end *and* that God will always lead us in triumph in Christ as we glorify Him by being a fragrance of Christ to all who are around us.¹⁸ Verse 14 says that “*Death* shall be *their* shepherd,” but Psalm 23 says that “*the LORD*”—eternal, sovereign God —“is *my* shepherd.” And, as verse 14 tells us, we do not have to fear because “in the morning,” in the new everlasting dawn, we will reign with Christ.¹⁹

The Psalm writer mentions another reward in verse 15. “But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me.” Yes, God will make His promise of life forever with him a certain and joyful hope as we, like the Psalm writer, trust God.

Conclusion.

Only true trust in God prepares us for life and death. Alexander MacLaren preached a sermon, over a hundred years ago now, titled *Two Shepherds And Two Flocks*, based on Psalm 49:14 and Revelation 7:17. Psalm 49:14, again, “Death shall be their shepherd.” Revelation 7:17, “for the Lamb [Christ] in the center of the throne will be their shepherd.”

In that sermon he contrasted the grim picture of those who have Death as their shepherd with the sunny landscape of those who have God as their shepherd. He closed the message by saying,

“Those two possibilities are before each of us. Either of them may be yours. One of them must be. Look on this picture and on this; and choose—God help you to choose aright—which of the two will describe your experience. Will you have Christ for your Shepherd, or will you have Death for your shepherd? The answer to that question lies in the answer to the other—have you washed your robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; and are you following Him? You can settle the question which lot is to be yours, and only you can settle it. See that you settle it aright, and that you settle it soon.”²⁰

This admonition, this plea is for you today if you have not yet chosen Jesus Christ, the good, great and eternal shepherd to be your shepherd. See that you settle this *aright* and soon, even now in the next quiet moments.

And each one of us who know Jesus as Savior and Shepherd, let us reflect on the state of our day to day trust in Him. First, thank Him that He is the good Shepherd, that His plans for you are always and only for your good. Praise Him that by His grace your hope and life is in Him, that you are prepared for death and life. Examine your heart for times and ways in which you carelessly trust yourself, others or the temporary things of this world rather than God. Examine your heart for things in which you are afraid to trust God, or where you are not trusting because there are things that you really want and you want to make sure you get them even if His Word or the Holy Spirit’s leading is saying “No.”

¹ C.H. Spurgeon. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol. XXIII*. London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1878, page 512.

² Matthew Miller and Luisa Kroll. “World’s Billionaires 2010.” *Yahoo Finance*. 10 March 2010. Accessed 26 August, 2010. <<http://finance.yahoo.com/career-work/article/109029/worlds-billionaires-2010>>.

³ “Rankings.” *YCHARTS*. 27 August 2010. Accessed 27 August 2010. <<http://ycharts.com/calculations/rankings/revenues?gclid=CJePzfri3KMcFZQz5woduiiLbA>>.

⁴ “Canadian public debt.” *Wikipedia.org*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_public_debt>. 18 August 2010. Accessed 27 August 2010.

- ⁵ “U.S. National Debt Clock.” *brillig.com*. <http://www.brillig.com/debt_clock/>. 27 August 2010. Accessed 29 August 2010.
- ⁶ Matthew 16:26.
- ⁷ 1 Timothy 6:7.
- ⁸ Luke 12:13-21.
- ⁹ Luke 12:15.
- ¹⁰ Proverbs 1:7; 9:10.
- ¹¹ Psalm 119:105, 130.
- ¹² Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16; 2 Timothy 4:5.
- ¹³ cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23.
- ¹⁴ John 3:16.
- ¹⁵ John 14:6.
- ¹⁶ 1 John 5:11-12.
- ¹⁷ cf. Ephesians 1:3; 2:10; 2 Timothy 3:17.
- ¹⁸ cf. 2 Corinthians 2:14-16.
- ¹⁹ cf. 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 5:10; 20:6; 22:5.
- ²⁰ Alexander MacLaren. *Two Shepherds And Two Flocks*. <<http://apibs.org/sermon/am/19038.htm>>. Accessed 26 August 2010.

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