

Psalm 49**Matthew Williams**

Good morning, my friends! If you have a Bible, go ahead and open it to Psalm 49. I'm grateful for another opportunity to speak to all of you. Thanks to everyone who tuned in last Sunday and especially for your encouragement to continue with our live stream. Thanks be to God for the unchanging goodness of the Word of God that continues to nourish our souls even while we are physically separated.

It was good to speak with many of you by phone or video chat last week. I told our elders when we met online Wednesday how grateful I am for the way I see the members of our church fighting well to trust God in the midst of all the limitations and fallout from COVID-19. Thank you for pressing into the Lord over the last 2 weeks. You're also finding new ways to contact, pray for, and practically serve one another and the people in your neighborhood.

That's not a small thing, brothers and sisters. It's called holding fast to the truth of the gospel. In many ways, it feels like everything has changed. At the same time, the most important things haven't changed at all. God is sovereign. God is loving. God is wise. Because he hasn't changed, even when life is hard, even when our faith feels weak, we can, as Pastor John Piper says, continue to trust the One who keeps us trusting.

No matter how long this strange season continues, keep doing that. There are always reasons to be afraid and there are always better reasons to trust the Lord. We heard one of them last week in Psalm 93. We trust the Lord because he is the King of all creation. This morning, Psalm 49 adds a second precious reason to the list. We trust the Lord because he ransoms our soul from the power and fear of death.

If you're willing to pay attention, if you're willing to turn off our newsfeed for a few minutes and listen to God's Word, a viral pandemic can accomplish a tremendous amount of good in your soul. This virus is not good. It's a reminder we live in a fallen world. But it can accomplish tremendous good because it forces us to confront truths we prefer to ignore or forget, chief among them – we're not in control. For all our supposed power, all our technological advances, all the blessings and privileges of life in Western society, we are still mortal. We are finite.



We forget that, don't we? We live with this illusion that we're in control, that our plans are reliable, that we have the power to do and be whatever we want to do and be. We fancy ourselves to be god. We think we hold the outcome of our life in our own hands. And then the coronavirus brings the whole mirage crashing to the ground. Things that even two weeks ago seemed very stable suddenly feel anything but certain.

To the degree that's been your experience, Friend, you have a choice to make. Will you try to suppress the gnawing anxiety and fear in your heart through busyness, entertainment, or the perfect practice of social distancing? Or will you slow down, confess the truth of your mortality, and run to Jesus for deliverance from the power and fear of death? It is exceedingly good and profitable to remember our morality. It's part and parcel of genuine faith in the Lord. You can't trust Jesus to deliver you until you despair of delivering yourself.

So how do we respond when the coronavirus dashes our futile attempts at controlling the final outcome of our life? We seize the opportunity to remember our mortality and cast ourselves on the mercy of God. Why? Because God alone ransoms our soul from the power and fear of death. That's what Psalm 49 is all about.

Psalm 49 begins by calling every person on earth to pay attention. Whether you are socially admired or socially disdained, whether you are rich in wealth and power or desperately poor, there's something all of us need to understand.

1) WE CANNOT DELIVER OURSELVES FROM DEATH

There's a lot of talk in the news right now about getting the right medical supplies, passing the right economic stimulus package. It's not a good time to be a public official. Criticism of what people in positions of power are doing or not doing is rampant. We have to act. We have to spend. We have to do something to keep this virus at bay.

It is good and right to do everything we can to protect human life because life is a gift from God. Yet something is strangely absent in all the chatter and blame-shifting, something that was true before the coronavirus hit and will remain true long after it has subsided. There is no amount of money and there is no human power in the world that can keep you from dying.



Look at verses 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." Have you stopped to think about why death exists and why, no matter how much our life expectancy increases, it remains inevitable? The Bible gives us a clear answer. Death is inevitable for every one of us because we all live under the curse of sin.

When the first man and woman disobeyed our Creator, what did he say? Genesis 3:19, "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Why? Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death..." The richest and most powerful person in the world is not immune. We all inherit a sinful nature from our forefather Adam and we all add to our original corruption manifold sins of our own. And there's nothing you can do, and nothing anyone else can do for you, to keep you from dying.

Personal wealth cannot keep you from dying. The healthcare system cannot keep you from dying. Exercising habits, eating habits, and social distancing habits will not suffice. There's nothing you can pay God or do for God that can deliver your soul from the curse of death. Doing your best is not enough. Being a good person is not enough. You cannot escape your mortality, Friend. The sense of vulnerability and finitude we all feel in times like this isn't an unwelcome intruder into our otherwise idyllic life. It confronts us with the true condition of our life.

Even Christians die. Verse 10, "For he sees that even the wise – those who choose the path of obedient trust in the Lord – die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others." Verse 12 is right. "Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish." In normal times, we insulate ourselves from the reality of death. Unless you read the obituaries, you can go through daily life blissfully ignorant of the nearly eight thousand people who die every day in the US alone.

Our life is so fragile, friends. We're like grass – here today, gone tomorrow. In our pride, we forget that, don't we? We think we're in the driver's seat. We think we're calling the shots. In reality, every day you remain alive in this world brings you that much closer to the day of your death. Will a majority of people who get the coronavirus recover? Absolutely. Yet eventually they too will die – if not from COVID-19, then from something else, which raises an age-old question.

If all share the same experience of death, why does it matter what we believe or how we live? If the righteous suffer no less than the wicked is there any reason to

deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus? Eat, drink, and be merry – live it up as long as you can – because tomorrow we die. It's a fearful thought. It would mean there's no reason to choose one action over any other action, no reason to do justice, to love mercy, or to walk humbly. It would mean no vindication for the injustices of this life, no standard of good or evil, and ultimately no reason to live for anyone but yourself.

But that is not at all where the psalmist lands, is it? Look back at verse 5. "Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me...?" It's a rhetorical question, another way of saying in the final analysis, I should NOT be afraid when the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer in this life, when I come face to face once again with the reality of our mortality and remember death eventually chases all of us down.

Which begs the question, why not? Why not be afraid if you or someone you love comes down with the coronavirus and goes into isolation in the ICU? The answer is found in verses 13-20. Those who trust in their wealth and those who trust in the Lord have the same experience of death in this life, but they have a radically different end in the life to come.

2) GOD WILL DELIVER ALL WHO TRUST IN HIM FROM DEATH

Look first at what will happen to all who place their hope for the future in what they can control through their own power, status, or possessions. Verse 13, "This is the path of those who have foolish confidence," the people we admire as those who reached for the stars and made themselves something. Verse 14, "Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd."

It's a terrifying thought. Death will guide them. Death will lead them. Death will restrain and rule over them in keeping with the sovereign judgment of God. Verse 14, "Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell." When their eyes close in death they will awaken to an eternity of pain, sorrow, isolation, and destruction. It's not a joke. It's not a scary story. It's reality. As sure as God is real and the created world is real, so too is the final condemnation of the wicked before the judgment seat of God.

But that need not be the outcome of your life, friend. There is another end. And it's not an end of eternal death. It's an end of eternal life with the Lover of your soul.



Verse 15, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me."

What's that? It's the cry of faith. It's the cry of wholehearted dependence. It's the cry that says, "God, I can't save myself. I can't rescue myself. I'm mortal. One day, I'm going to die and all my plans and illusions of control will perish with me. I choose to trust you. I choose to stop trying to 'ransom' my own soul – frantically fighting with every last fiber of my being to keep my physical death at bay or striving to do enough good works to earn some sort of life after death.

You're my only hope and I choose, right now and every day of my life, to cling to you as the only one who can ransom me from the power of death. You're the only one who can pay the debt I owe on account of my sin. You're the only one who can deliver me from closing my eyes and waking up to the terror of eternal condemnation.

You died the death I deserved to die. You lived the life I'm supposed to live. You did it all to make me righteous as you are righteous so that when I die, I know you will 'receive me.' You will justly and joyfully welcome me into heaven. I'll get to see your face and step into an eternity of unrivaled joy, of life with YOU the way it was meant to be."

The psalmist believed God would do for him what he knew he could not do for himself – ransom his soul from the power of Sheol. He knew he would die and that when he did, the Lord would be faithful to deliver him from death's clutches and raise him to eternal life – not because he deserved it, but because the Lord will not deny his Son the reward of his suffering. A ransom was required and a ransom has been paid. The Lord will not fail to raise up all who trust in him.

In a pandemic, Sheol reaches out to us, grabbing at our ankles, whispering of our mortality, reminding us tonight could be the night. That fear is real, friends. It's the fear of death all who do not know Jesus and are not trusting Jesus rightly feel on account of their sin.

So how do we respond? We do what the psalmist in Psalm 49 did. Don't ignore or forget your mortality. Recognize it. Confess it. But don't be afraid of it. Look it in the eye. And then look to Jesus and confidently declare with the psalmist, "God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol." Therefore (verse 5), "why should I fear in

times of trouble?" Why should I be afraid of getting sick? Why should I be afraid of dying?

Might it be really hard? Absolutely. Might it be really sad? Absolutely. Is there wisdom in being careful to avoid hastening the day of our death? Absolutely. But when you die, Christian – whether today, next month, or 50 years from now, don't be afraid. Because Jesus rose and was received by his Father, you too will rise and be received by your Father with shouts of joy. It's not the only eternal outcome, but it is the outcome of all who trust in him for salvation. Faith unites us with Christ such that his death becomes our death. His life becomes our life. His story becomes our story.

Romans 6:5, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." We cannot deliver ourselves from death, but God will deliver all who trust in him from death. That means Jesus will deliver you from captivity to the curse of sin – verse 15, "God will ransom my soul." That means Jesus will welcome you into his presence in glory – verse 15, "He will receive me." And that means Jesus will grant you the unspeakable privilege of reigning with him in the new heavens and the new earth – verse 14, "The upright shall rule over them in the morning."

CONCLUSION

Do you feel powerless? Are you increasingly aware of your mortality? Has this virus brought the reality and inevitability of your death out of the shadows and into the forefront of your mind? If it has, Friend, thank God. Because that's a good thing. It's good to remember we're not in control.

But unlike the rest of the world, we don't despair. We don't lose heart. We don't give up on following Jesus. We trust the Lord because God and God alone ransoms our soul from the power and fear of death. You can't save yourself, Friend. Only Jesus can save you. And if you choose to cling to him and him alone, he will be faithful to save you. Allen Ross says it well. "Those who cherish the power and the wealth of this world will perish like the beasts, but those who live by faith will triumph over the grave."

So fear not when death comes to the righteous no less than the wicked. Fear not when human power, wealth, social distancing, or personal protective equipment



seem like the key to guarding you from death and preserving your life. In the final analysis, they're not. Jesus is. And none who wait for him will be put to shame.

May the renewed awareness of your morality send you running to Jesus this week for deliverance from the power and fear of death. And no matter what you watch on the news or hear from your doctor, may abiding faith in Christ cause you to shout with the Apostle Paul,

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:55-58).