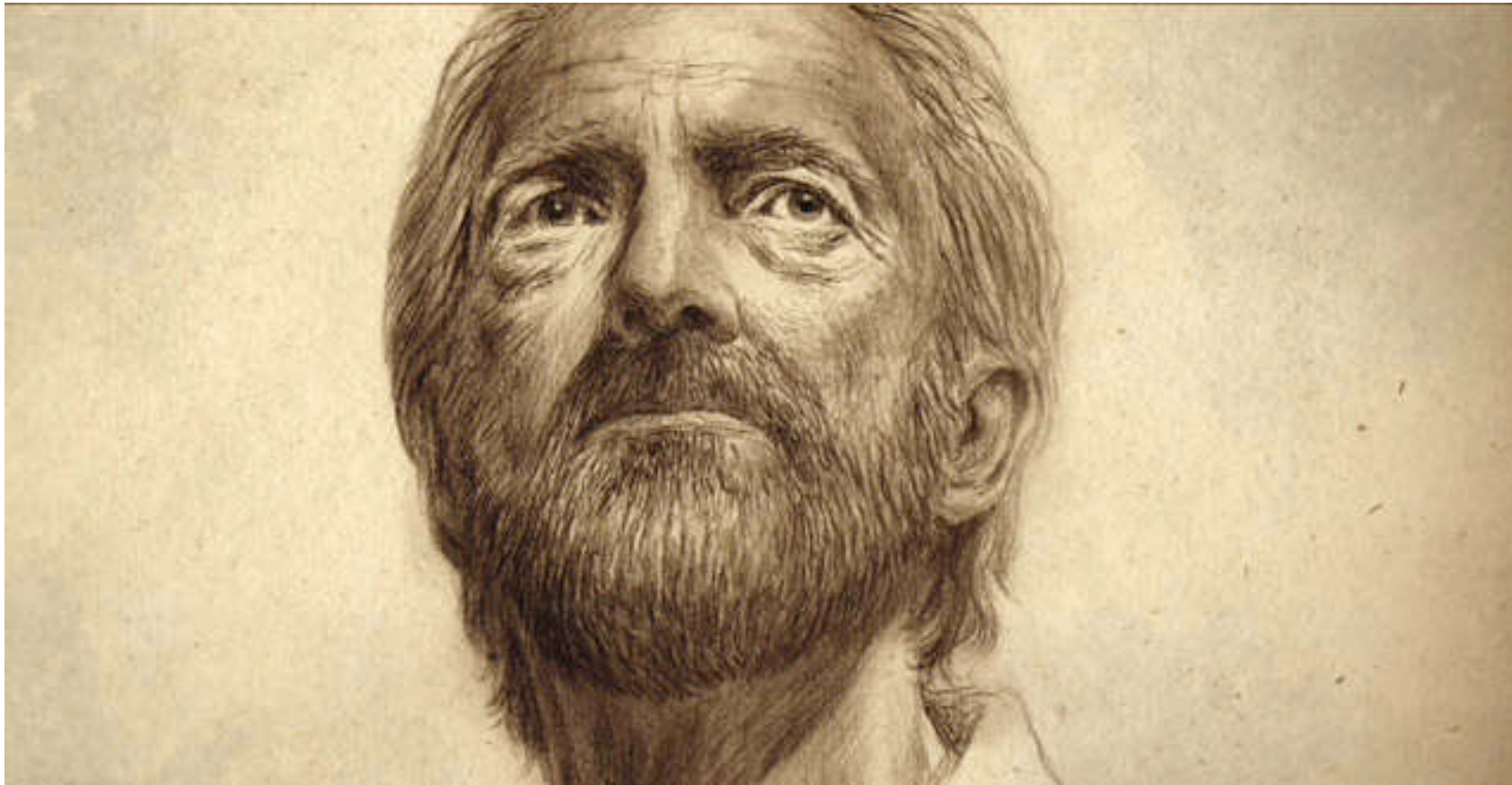


# Psalm 49: Human mortality



Psalm 49 (48) (Mode 2. 5....31 / 4.....32)

Death is an unavoidable dimension of the human condition. The rich and powerful cannot buy their way out of it. They are foolish, therefore, to be too impressed by the power they wield. We should not be too impressed either, but rather place our hope in God, who alone gives and sustains life.

Hear this, all you peoples!

Listen, inhabitants of the world,  
people both high and low,  
rich and poor alike.

I have wisdom you need to hear.

My heart is full of insight.

I turn my mind to an enigma.

To the sound of the harp I will present my challenge.

No one can pay a ransom to God to secure life (v. 7);  
yet the psalmist has been snatched from the power of  
Death, not by his own power but by the power of God  
(v. 15).

Why should I fear times of trouble,  
when criminals track me down to destroy me,  
people who trust in their wealth  
and boast of the abundance of their riches?

‘I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of  
a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades  
like grass?’(Isaiah 51:12).

‘Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere  
mortal human beings and make mere flesh their  
strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord ...  
Blessed are those who trust in the Lord’(Jeremiah 17:5,7).

Yes, none of us can buy our own freedom,  
or pay a ransom to God for our lives.  
For the ransom is too high,  
well beyond our means.

There is no escaping death,  
no avoiding the grave.

‘All is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the  
righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,  
to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice  
and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so  
are the sinners’(Ecclesiastes 9:2).

Look, even the wisest die.

They perish just like the foolish and the stupid.

They have to leave their wealth to others.

‘Then I said to myself, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?”

And I said to myself, “This also is vanity”’(Ecclesiastes 2:15).

‘Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them’(Psalm 62:10).

‘Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves’(Proverbs 11:28).

The grave is their home forever.

The Hebrew text has qirbam ('inner thoughts').

The Greek has taphoi ('graves') = Hebrew qibram.

their final dwelling,

even if their names spread wide through the land.

*Human beings [ʾadam אָדָם] in their opulence cannot endure;  
like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

Such is the lot of those  
who find their security in themselves:  
just like sheep  
they are being driven to the grave.

Death shepherds them.  
Straight to the grave they descend,  
and their form wastes away.  
The earth is their home.

But I know God will rescue me,  
snatching me from the grip of death.



Our hope that we might stay alive has nothing to do with our supposed wealth or power. It is God alone, as the psalmist knows from his own experience, who grants and sustains life.

The idea of being ransomed from death takes on a new meaning in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection and the consequent Christian belief in life after death.

‘The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ... and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies’(Romans 8:21,23).

Do not be concerned when a person becomes rich,  
when the wealth of his house increases.

When we die we will take nothing with us.

There is no place for wealth in the grave.

Though in their life they consider themselves blessed –  
for you are praised when you do well for yourself –  
they will go down to join their ancestors,  
and will never again see the light.

*Human beings in their opulence cannot comprehend;  
like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

## Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Then he told them a parable: The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’

## Luke 12:13-21

And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.’