

**CHOOSE A SHEPHERD**  
**Psalm 49**  
**(based on sermon by Haddon Robinson, “Life and Death Advice,”**  
**Preaching Today, Tape 200)**

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Sometimes obituaries get out of hand. Families, often of the ostentatious sort, print mini-biographies for obituaries. Somewhere between the first paragraph and the end of the diatribe, I begin to ponder: “Why are they making such a fuss over Fred?” Or, should I say in this case, “Frederick von Schnitzelsnortz III”! Ha!

On the other end of the spectrum, I found the shortest obituary I’ve ever read. *The Forum* of Fargo-Moorhead in North Dakota printed the following obituary, “Doug died.”

While I appreciate Doug’s humility and humor, as he planned the obituary himself, Doug’s death really will have an impact on those around him. The lives he touched will be changed forever – for good or for bad. The simple sentence, “Doug died,” has a much fuller meaning.

Put your name in the sentence. What does it mean when, one day, people read, “Howie died”? Only we can write the silent story behind the printed words.

In verses 1-4 of Psalm 49, we have the call from the proverbial sage to come and listen to his words of wisdom. “Everybody listen,” he says in the first verse. “Everybody in the whole world, listen. I don’t care if you are low or high or rich or poor.” Notice the last word of verse 2: together. Low and high is best translated, “I don’t care if you’re a royal person or a weak person.” We’re going to do this together.

Everyone is summoned to listen – rich and poor, weak and strong. They are taught together, because to teach them separately would somehow imply that they were different when, in fact, they are not different at all. It’s a proposal for an egalitarian education.

“I’m going to utter words of wisdom,” he says in verse 3. “I’m going to express a riddle on my harp” (v. 4).

We are given the riddle twice in the psalm. Verse 12 is the first time. “But a man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts that perish.” Again, he repeats the same riddle in verse 20. “Man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish.”

Haddon Robinson has translated this ancient riddle into a modern form. He said it would go something like this: How is a king like a lion? How is a dowager like the dog she has in her lap? How is the Mafia boss like a pit bull? How is a farmer like a cow?

Those who are unimaginative see everything the same. They get into a rut. They live in a routine. But unlike those in the rut and routine, the proverbial prophet says he has observed patterns in life. If we draw close, he will pick up his harp and play us a song of wisdom.

A proverb has been called a small statement that contains a large truth. It's a small box that contains something precious. Listen as the sage plays a song and opens up the box of the precious jewel.

At what price can you buy your way out of death?

Verses 5-6

The psalmist is surrounded by those who are evil. The psalmist is surrounded by those who are wicked. In the end, says the writer of the psalm, the wicked wealthy will have to pay their dues.

There is a commercial for a well-known credit card company. It goes something like this: Skateboard – \$89, skateboard helmet – \$59, a day in the park with your son – priceless. The creditor is trying to say there are some things in life that have no price, but for everything that does, they'd be happy to loan you the money – as long as you will pay, of course, the 21% interest.

It's true that there are some things in life that do not have a price. And death as well, says the psalmist, has no price tag.

Notice what he says.

Verses 7-9

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.

Really, the word in verse 9 is “see the pit.” The corruption of the pit – death. There is no way to purchase your way out of the pit.

What size check would you have to write to keep from having to die? How much of your stock portfolio would you have to sign over to cheat the Grim Reaper? There is no amount of money great enough to pay the ontological ransom – to buy one's way out of the pit. Put another way, money means nothing when it comes to the grave.

Death is the great leveler, the great creator of equality. Death makes trivial the balance in your bank account. Death laughs at our human resources. The lines drawn by society between wealth

and power and weakness and poverty are artificial lines, says the psalmist. In the end, death comes calling on them all.

He is really telling us that eventually (v. 12) man and all his pomp, all of his honor – it makes no difference, because we die like animals.

How is a king like a lion? How is a dowager like the dog that she has in her lap? How is the Mafia boss like the pit bull? How is the farmer like a cow? Well, they all – in the end – face death.

No one (v. 7) can give God a ransom. The idea of the ransom comes from the Old Testament. You remember the ordinances of the law that had to do with an ox. The ox had gored a neighbor. If the ox killed the neighbor, the owner of the ox had to pay a fine. If he brought the ox back home and didn't put it in a pen, just let it roam around the field, and the ox broke out and killed another neighbor, then it was a capital punishment crime. The farmer would pay with his life. But there was loophole in the law. In Exodus 21:30 it says the farmer could pay a ransom and thus not have to die.

Unlike other Old Testament situations, the psalmist says when death himself comes calling, no one can give a ransom to buy himself back from death. No one can pay out enough money to escape the consequence.

In 2001, I presided over the funeral of a man who was 102 years of age. He was born in 1898. His name was Frank Stephens. I suppose that things had gone as well for Frank Stephens in regard to death as they could possibly go for anyone. He lived in three different centuries – the 1800's, the 1900's, and the 2000's. Can you believe that?

**He'd gone from riding in a covered wagon to an age in which space shuttles and web surfing command the day. When Stephens was born, the Civil War had only been over for 33 years. The Wright brothers wouldn't make their first flight for another five years. Henry Ford had not yet founded his motor company. And the radio was 22 years away. When Stephens was small, milk was 12 cents a quart. Five pounds of sugar was a quarter. His first car, a one-seater Model T, was about \$800. (Dave Henry, "Henry: What An Amazing Century It Has Been," *Amarillo Globe News*, 12/31/98)**

His first marriage lasted more than 60 years before his wife died, and when Winfred Moore conducted the second wedding, I'm told that Frank Stephens told Dr. Moore to tie the knot tight because he wanted his second marriage to last as long as his first.

You see, Frank Stephens never intended to die. He almost pulled it off. Almost. At the age of 99, when he got his driver's license renewed, he told the clerk he'd see her again in 2004 – at which time he would have been 105 years of age – indicating he'd be back to drive again.

Stephens lived during the tenure of 19 of the then 43 presidents of the United States. And even though he almost pulled it off, Frank Stephens (who was still working well into his 80's) finally died at the age of 102.

He never really intended to die. But death came calling for even Frank Stephens.

I can't imagine having it better. Frank living during three centuries, having a sharp mind until the day of his death. He was intellectually inquisitive to the very end. But even Frank Stephens, one of our oldest members, eventually had to embrace, to face, to experience death.

In literature, there is an old story, told a number of different ways. It's the story of a man who opens a newspaper and discovers the date on the newspaper is six months in advance of the time he lives. Can you imagine? You turn to the sports page and you have the scores of games that have yet to be played. But of course, immediately you realize you need to turn to the financial pages and see the value of the various stocks, market and bonds six months in advance.

He's no dummy. He realizes his foreknowledge is going to make him a very wealthy man. He will place large bets on the underdog team whose win, he knows, will make him wealthy. He will invest in stocks that are now low but will soon be high. He's going to fatten his portfolio with this printed, prophetic insight. He's delighted.

Then finally, just as an afterthought, he turns to the obituary column and sees his picture and a story. Everything changes. All of a sudden, the sports bets mean nothing, and the portfolio pales in view of the pit before him.

The funeral of H. L. Hunt, who when he died was the third richest man in the world, took place at the First Baptist Church of Dallas. About 2,000 people were there. What was interesting was that there was not a single person in the audience who wanted to be the guest of honor at the funeral. While people envied H. L. Hunt in his life, nobody envied him in his death. Nobody wanted to be H. L. Hunt when it came time to die. He was gone.

We try to remove ourselves so far from death.

There is a story of an order of Trappist monks. The monks always keep an open grave. Each day the monks go out and stand and look at the grave. When one of their number dies, he's put in that grave, and then a new grave is dug. And they go look at the new grave every day, knowing that it may very well be theirs.

An artist asked the gallery owner if there had been any interest in his paintings on display at that time. "I have good and bad news," the owner replied. "The good news is that a gentleman inquired about your work and wondered if it would appreciate in value after your death. When I told him it would, he bought all 15 of your paintings."

"That's wonderful," the artist exclaimed. "What's the bad news?"

"The guy was your doctor. ([homileticsonline.com](http://homileticsonline.com))

As one preacher used to say, "Who is to say but that your or my coffin isn't already sitting here in town."

Human beings are like beasts. There is not much comfort in his riddle. The dowager and the dog, the farmer and the cow – none of us endure. In that sense the riddle is true. We are like beasts.

But we can also be even more like beasts if we go to the grave with a lack of understanding. Notice the first time the riddle is told, in verse 12, it is said that man will not endure. But notice in verse 20, when the riddle is told again, it is said that man in his pomp is without understanding. We're even more like the beasts if we die without knowledge.

He says it another way. Look at verses 13-14.  
This is the way of those who are foolish,  
And of those after them who approve their words.  
As sheep they are appointed for Sheol;  
Death shall be their shepherd;  
And the upright shall rule over them in the morning;  
And their form shall be for Sheol to consume,  
So that they have no habitation.

I was struck by the words that death shall be their shepherd. They are like sheep being prodded along, destined for the grave. And death – it's an awful verse – death feeds on them. Notice, "Their form shall be for Sheol, for death, to consume."

Immediately in my mind, I'm snapped quickly to a more pleasant psalm, the 23rd Psalm(our previous psalm sermon in this series), where I am told,  
The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul;  
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness –  
not to the path of the grave  
For His name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of  
the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me;  
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

It's a different psalm. Death is not the shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. It is the Lord who is the shepherd. Death is not feared because even in the valley of death the Lord, as the Shepherd, with His rod and His staff protects His people. The path is not the path to the pit. Rather, it is the path of righteousness.

The call for you this morning, and the call for me this morning, is to pick a psalm. Psalm 49 – in your ignorance, you go to the grave and die like a beast. Psalm 23 – you trust in the Lord through Christ Jesus, and the Lord becomes your shepherd and you don't have to fear death.

You take your pick. You pick a shepherd to prod you. Death or the Lord?

Verses 17-19

The rich man, when he dies, will carry nothing away;  
His glory will not descend after him.

Death is going to make generous givers of us all. Everything we have will pass on to others eventually. (John Claypool, *In Other Words*, Vol 11, No. 1, Spring 2001)

Oh, you received the praise of men and got a lot of pats on the backs (v. 18), lots of congratulations. But then you go to the abode of the dead, where you never see the light.

Death. Darkness. No light.

Then the final word again in verse 20.  
Man in his pomp, yet without understanding,  
Is like the beasts that perish.

There is another way, though. Look back at verse 14. They are appointed to Sheol, but notice. “The upright shall rule over them in the morning.” Look at verse 15. For the upright, “God will redeem my soul from the power of death.” There are positive words in the midst of the song of the harp. “God will redeem my soul from the power of death, for He will receive me.” He will take me to Himself.

In verse 17, the same verb is used. Notice again the end of verse 15. “God will take me,” is the best translation, better than “receive.” God will redeem my soul from the power of death, for God will take me. In verse 17, when the rich man dies, “he will carry (take) nothing away; his glory will not descend after him.” It’s the same word – take. God will take me. The rich man will take nothing away. God takes me to save me. The rich cannot take, for they have no power after life.

When you put your faith in Christ Jesus, you put your faith and trust in God – the God of life, the God of hope, the God of the resurrection. Paul said it in Romans, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is God and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Two thousand years ago, Jesus finally was the one man, through the power of God, to beat death. Death could not contain Him. Death could not consume Him. He avoided the pit by the power of the resurrection. The promise from the Apostle Paul is that what has happened to Jesus will happen to us – if we choose not death, not money, not materialism as our shepherd. Rather, if we choose the Lord.

But unlike those who shall never see light again, we shall see (v. 14) the morning, the resurrection morning. In fact, while no man can pay the ransom, the blood of Christ Jesus has already paid the ransom to death that we can be free. To know that after death there is life, after darkness there is day – it changes your perspective. It gives you wisdom and understanding.

How is a king like a lion? How is a dowager like a lap dog? How is a Mafia chief like a pit bull? How is a farmer like a cow? None of them endures. They all die.

Some of you here this morning need to choose a new shepherd. Some of you have been trusting wealth and riches. Some of you have been trusting yourself. But you need to trust in the God of the resurrection.

I never do a funeral – and I do one nearly every week, often many more – that I don't look at the casket and say, "One day it will be my casket. One day it will be my funeral. One day I'll trade places and someone will speak words over me. Someone will summarize my life in twenty minutes."

That day is just as certain as the day I was born. No way to avoid it. I must embrace it through the death and the resurrection of Christ.

**As a young man, D. L. Moody was called upon suddenly to preach a funeral sermon. He hunted all throughout the four Gospels, trying to find one of Christ's funeral sermon, but searched in vain.**

**He found that Christ broke up every funeral He ever attended. Death could not exist where He was. When the dead heard His voice, they sprang to life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." (Ennis Marquardt, "I am the resurrection and life," November 8, 1998, Northern New England District of the Assemblies of God website, [nnewdaog.org](http://nnewdaog.org))**