

“Life is Costly” Psalm 49 (4Aug19)

Why do good things happen to people?

That’s not our usual question, is it? We like to wonder why bad things happen to good people. Of course, we could just as well wonder why bad things happen to people period, to anybody. We don’t really need to label people either good or bad, since that’s mostly our own biased judgment anyway. And we could also ask why good things happen to people—not to bad people, as if they should be precluded, or to good people, as if some folks should be extra deserving. No, let’s just ask why good things happen to people.

But then we’d also better pause to ask what the good things really are. Lisa got us started on a question that I wanted to ask not just the kids but all of you: what do we typically count as the good things?

That’s a good list – clean water, career achievements, family, friends, a house, health. As we think, we can get pretty esoteric, an enlightened perspective. I was going to add: Life long enough to enjoy grandkids. Traveling and exploring. Freedom. Praise or acclamation. Laughter.

But if boil it down, if we’re honest and a bit crass, we know our culture has one predominant answer. What’s the most important thing? Money. The big bucks. Moola.

We might say money enables you to buy most of the other stuff. It buys security and much of your identity. It funds wellbeing, at very least in terms of health care or food to sustain your body. Education, even if followed by student loans. It pays for vacations and leisure and relief from bad things. Though the Beatles sang Can’t Buy Me Love, tell that to Chalmer’s jewelers. Heck, you can even purchase legal assistance to spring you if you’ve gotten yourself into most sticky situations. That might make us observe that money is a good thing that happens much too often to bad people.

So this may raise questions of Why, of allotment. Why isn’t distribution equal, or at least responsive to a cause? Some may have earned

their millions or billions with extreme skill at sports or as amazing innovators who came up with ideas helpful to humankind or they were really good managers or simply that they gamed the system and knew how to make it work.

For fairness and economics, we don’t much directly say that it is divinely influenced, that God apportioned wealth, deciding somebody should be rich while leaving others in poverty.

Well...we don’t directly say that, but I mention it exactly in order to remove that subtext from our brains. If we think wealth is a good thing and that God chose to give it to some and preclude others, by and large that is not the message of the Bible, and is frequently opposed by the God known in Jesus who sides with the poor and seeks to overturn the rich.

When we believe people with big retirement accounts are successful and lived fruitfully, and churches with big budgets are doing something right, and claim God blesses America as the lucrative financial place to be, then that misses the light of Christ and is idolatrous in identifying God with wealth, when we can’t clearly say where God is in it.

But that godly uncertainty doesn’t bother us much, since we are mostly like the Psalm in getting focused on a life of bank accounts and stock markets and our own fiscal possibilities and impossibilities without much of any mention about God. The Psalm doesn’t indicate that God gives wealth or directly say that God sides with the poor, even though it seems addressed to alleviate some of the fear or resentment. It doesn’t really include God in the perspective much at all. There’s no hint whether God has anything to do with good or bad people winding up with too much money. Psalm 49 seems uninterested in the why questions of fair distribution. The original assigned excerpt for today ended after 12 verses, with only one mention of God which was for the sake of negating relationship with God. That doesn’t say much.

And yet I suspect that’s largely true of not only our cash flow but the flow of our lives. Mostly we carry on without much attention to

God. We assess our own sense of what is good and right, our own judgment on what is bad. It may be something is beautiful or pleasant. It may be because it is painful or sad. We may just trust our conscience or rely on society's perception. We think we know how things should go, or what we want to have. Maybe we pause in prayer about that, to ask God to give us the good, or to lament and argue with God when we feel we unfairly receive the bad. But by and large we continue on without God. Though that may seem especially true in an age when fewer people are attending church or even professing belief in God, evidently it's been mainly true for well over two thousand years, if we can relate so clearly to the Psalm's perspective.

This Psalm is a genre in the Bible known as Wisdom literature, which is why we had Martha's voice as teacher. The book of Proverbs is probably the main association of it. With odd false assurances like "No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble" (12:21), it's some of my least favorite stuff in the Bible, because it's mainly about how we live and fails to have much about God. It can end up saying awful things from a place of smug satisfaction, that my prosperity is evidence God rewarded me for what I did, which means your problems must be because you didn't behave properly. The book of Job is some anti-wisdom literature, because Job says he tried to do all the right things but *didn't* receive good and so that system wasn't true.

At any rate, this Psalm is of a different sort. If wisdom literature is about how we live, and this piece is about money, then we'd probably expect it to tell us how to get more money, or instruct what we should properly spend our money on. Even if it didn't say much about God but gave some financial insight, we would count that as wisdom worth learning. After all, NPR mentions the Dow Jones average in every single news update. Even the president doesn't get that much coverage, much less any issue more relevant to our faith.

But this wisdom tells us that that focus on money isn't worthwhile. It doesn't pay. In the end, in the biggest picture, it doesn't matter. That's what this wisdom claims.

I know you can argue that wealth will extend life and somehow make you live longer, all the way to Google Director of Engineering and transhumanist Ray Kurzweil, who figures he can upload his brain and therefore never die. But the wisdom of the Psalm, with its economic message, declares: no, no matter how rich you are, it won't save you.

I know there's lots of life in the meantime, with need for economic justice and your very personal financial worries. I complained that the sermon I heard last week on vacation warped Jesus' very real concern for those in debt into something delayed and otherworldly. But that also might mean I'm guilty of putting money before God or the economy in the place of God, even if I want to claim I do it for good and godly reasons.

The Psalm will have none of that. It won't let money get in the way of our primary relationship with God. It doesn't care and completely disregards whether we have lots or too little. (Though there's probably less risk of too little displacing God.) The wisdom of this Psalm may at first seem to be mainly a caution or a reminder simply about finances.

But we had to add extra verses to get the theological import and the real good thing that is our ultimate reliance. Its heart is in the words you spoke for yourself: "God will ransom my soul from death. God will receive me."

Yes. In the biggest picture, for any of your successes or what you lack, for the short sweep with a very final ending, that is exactly what matters. God may teach us to love what is worth loving, as our Prayer of the Day said. But this isn't only about what we treasure. That's still about us. This is that nothing can overpower God's relationship with you. Not money. Not death. Nothing. God gives you life. God sustains your life and your whole self. God cares for all of you. And God will never let go, not for the ease or the hardness of these days, not even releasing you

into death, but paying with God's own self that you will live.