

Overcoming the Herd Mentality

A Study of Psalm 49
(Easter Service)

Characteristic of Completeness: Salvation by Grace

Big Idea: We are redeemed by faith alone in Christ alone.

Related Scriptures: Job 19:25; Psalm 16:10; 130:7-8; Isaiah 59:20;

Daniel 12:2; Mark 10:45; Luke 24:13-35; John 6:47; 14:1-3;

Acts 2:24-28; 13:30-35; Galatians 3:13; 4:4-5; 1 Timothy 2:5-6a;

1 Peter 1:18-19

Introduction:

- A. Good morning. He is risen! This morning I want to begin by testing your powers of observation. Watch this very short video clip. Then I'm going to ask you a question.

(Show ► video, "Cattle" here.)

Here's the question: What do these cattle have in common? What can we say is true for all of them? What do they share?

Here's one thing they all have in common: They all have the same destiny. What is their destiny? Let me give you a hint: ► "Beef. It's what's for dinner." Ultimately, these cattle are all headed for the grill.

Oh, we can certainly make some distinctions among the cattle.

1. Some stampede. They're on the fast track. Some are faster than others, more ambitious. A few lead the pack.
2. Others are more laid back. They just graze. They like to stop and smell the flowers. Before they eat them.
3. Some are old; others are young. Some are fat; others are lean. Some never leave the herd; others are mavericks. Some are nice; others are ornery.

But in the end, these distinctions don't really matter. These cattle are all headed for the same place. They all share the same destiny. "Beef: It's what's for dinner."

- B. Today we're going to study a part of the Bible that says something about cattle. And about us. Strangely, it says that we are like cattle. Our text for the day is ► Psalm 49. The concluding verse—► Verse 20—says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:20**

Man in *his* pomp, yet without understanding,

Is like the beasts that perish.

Now, at first blush, this may seem pretty impolite. And when we study it a bit further, I'm afraid you might be downright offended. But the intent is not to bring insult, but insight.

The phrase ► “man in his pomp” describes the best of us—the prime cuts. The original Hebrew word translated ► “pomp” describes people who are highly valued or esteemed,¹ people who carry weight or influence or power.² This is saying the very best of us are no better off than the ► “beasts” that perish, *if* we are without understanding. *We* are “what’s for dinner,” just like the cattle, *if* we are without understanding. The cold, hard reality presented by the psalmist is that, *if* we are without understanding, we ultimately have nothing to look forward to but being a party platter for maggots.

- C. I know that sounds harsh, but thankfully, the psalmist points us to the ► “understanding” we need for a brighter future. The psalmist directs us to the “understanding” needed to break away from the herd mentality.

The Hebrew word, “understanding” describes the “power of judgment and perceptive insight.”³ A person of understanding connects the dots; he sees the patterns; he goes beyond the superficial and gets to the heart of a matter.

Well, what specifically is this understanding that can separate us from the herd?

- I. From the ► first part of Psalm 49, we can see that, whatever this understanding is, it is intended for everyone. It is *not* an understanding reserved for the powerful or the privileged or the pretty. In Verses 1-3, the psalmist offers this understanding to the broadest possible audience. He says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:**

¹ Hear this, all peoples;

Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,

² Both low and high,

Rich and poor together.

³ My mouth will speak wisdom,

And the meditation of my heart *will be* understanding.

¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “רָקַץ,” (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), hereinafter referred to as BDB.

² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. “רָקַץ,” (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1994-2000), hereinafter referred to as HALOT.

³ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “בִּיָּן,” (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), hereinafter referred to as TWOT.

- A. ▶ “All peoples” means all ethnic groups,⁴ including Latinos and African Americans and Native Americans and Eastern Indians and Asians and Iraqis and Iranians and North Vietnamese and every other group that exists. The “understanding” knows no racial boundaries. We all need to “hear this.”
- B. ▶ “All inhabitants of the world” includes everybody who can fog a mirror. We all need to “give ear” to it.
- C. The ▶ “low” common folk are included, as well as the “high” mucky-mucks.
- D. The ▶ “rich” with deep pockets are included, along with the “poor” with no pockets at all.
- E. The psalmist is about to present ▶ “wisdom” that applies to every human being. He is about to offer ▶ “understanding” intended for each one of us in this room today—understanding that can change our destiny.
- II. And this understanding is going to come in a special package. It’s not going to be in the language we speak at the dining room table or at *Costco*. It’s going to be different. In ▶ Verse 4, the psalmist explains,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:4**

I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will express my riddle on the harp.

- A. A ▶ “proverb” is normally a short, pithy saying that is intended to convey truth. It reads more like a fortune cookie than a newspaper.
- B. And notice that this proverb does not originate with the psalmist. He says that he himself inclines his ear to it. It is God who gave him the lyrics. God himself inspired these words; the psalmist is just passing them along to the rest of us.
- C. A ▶ “riddle” is “something put indirectly and needing interpretation.”⁵ Riddles are normally a little ambiguous. They make you think. The psalmist is giving us a “heads up.” This is going to make us think. We’re going to have to connect the dots. There’s going to be some things left unsaid. This is a riddle.

⁴ William Lee Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*, s.v. “אָזְנוֹ,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972).

⁵ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “רִמְזֵי,” (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), hereinafter referred to as BDB.

- D. The mention of ► “the harp” is a good reminder to us that the words we are studying are actually lyrics to a song. So this is poetic. It’s not going to read like a one-two-three instruction pamphlet for the assembly of your new gas barbeque grill.
- III. In this song, the closest thing to a repeated chorus comes in ► Verses 12 and 20. The choruses of songs are usually telling, so let’s take a look. Verse 12 says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:12**

But man in *his* pomp will not endure;
He is like the beasts that perish.

Verse 20 sounds very similar:

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:20**

Man in *his* pomp, yet without understanding,
Is like the beasts that perish.

Certainly, one of the points of the chorus is that our “pomp” doesn’t distinguish us from the beasts that perish. Pomp without understanding won’t help us at all in the end.

Throughout the psalm, we see the complete inability of all different kinds of human pomp to save us. That’s part of understanding that the psalmist is offering.

- A. For example, wealth cannot save us. In ► Verses 5 and 6, the psalmist tells us that he is perhaps painfully, but not fearfully aware of the people who trust in their wealth and abundance:

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:**

⁵ Why should I fear in days of adversity,
When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me,
⁶ Even those who trust in their wealth
And boast in the abundance of their riches?

Then he tells us that we shouldn’t get all worked up about the rich because wealth cannot save. If we’re trusting in wealth without understanding we’re “what’s for dinner.” In ► Verses 16 and 17, he says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:**

¹⁶ Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;
¹⁷ For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
His glory will not descend after him.

- B. Education and intelligence cannot save us either. Verse ► 10 says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:10**

For he sees *that even* wise men die;
The stupid and the senseless alike perish
And leave their wealth to others.

It doesn't matter whether we have a Ph.D. or a G.E.D. It doesn't matter whether we're brilliant or slow. Without understanding, we're all "what's for dinner."

- C. Fame and reputation cannot save us either. Verse ► 11 describes some famous, reputable people who will perish, just like cattle:

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:11**

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.

This speaks of people so famous, so reputable that they have buildings or states or schools named after them. Some of these think they'll live on forever through their fame. But it doesn't matter in the end. Without understanding, we're all "what's for dinner."

- D. Positive self-talk and popularity cannot save us either. In ► Verses 18 and 19, it says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:**

¹⁸ Though while he lives he congratulates himself—
And though *men* praise you when you do well for yourself—
¹⁹ He shall go to the generation of his fathers;
They will never see the light.

We can pump ourselves up with every self-affirming, self-congratulatory, self-glorifying, self-important, self-centered, self-promoting strategy on earth. Without understanding, it won't matter. In the grave, we will "never see the light." Without understanding, we're all "what's for dinner."

- E. In fact, ► no human effort of any kind can save us. We are like cattle at auction. Cattle may become wallets, but they have no wallets. We have no means to pay for our own freedom or anybody else's. It is too costly. That's what the psalmist is saying in ► Verses 7-9:

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:**

⁷ No man can by any means redeem *his* brother
Or give to God a ransom for him—
⁸ For the redemption of his soul is costly,
And he should cease *trying* forever—
⁹ That he should live on eternally,

That he should not undergo decay.

The psalmist says that ► we have a price on our heads that we simply cannot pay. There is a debt or ransom owed to God. But we cannot redeem ourselves; it's too costly. So we should "cease trying." To "redeem" means "to achieve the transfer of ownership from one to another through payment of a price."⁶

What is this price on our heads? What debt is owed to God? The psalmist doesn't say. This is a riddle.

- F. Those who try to redeem themselves or others through their own pomp and efforts are described in ► Verse 13:

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:13**

This is the way of those who are foolish,
And of those after them who approve their words. Selah.

We're not quite sure what the word, ► "selah" means. It appears to be a musical term that somehow indicates how the song is to be sung at that point. There is some evidence to suggest that *selah* signals a pause.⁷ Perhaps it's a pause designed to let the immediately preceding verse soak in.

If that's the case, then it appears that the psalmist wants us to linger over the idea that trusting in our own various forms of pomp is ► "foolish." The term, "foolish" describes a false self-confidence.⁸

- G. The psalmist continues to characterize such foolishness in ► Verse 14, saying,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:14**

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.

1. Here we see that I've been wrong. Apparently, the beasts that the psalmist has in mind are ► sheep, not cattle. The point is largely the same, but maybe a little more negative. If we could somehow grade in terms of brainpower all the animals commonly found on the ranch, I'm afraid sheep would rank even

⁶ TWOT, s.v. "פִּדְיוֹן."

⁷ HALOT, s.v. "סֵלָה."

⁸ HALOT, s.v. "כֹּסֵל."

lower than cattle. When it comes to cattle and sheep, I'm afraid it's "dumb and dumber."

2. "Sheol," ► here, is simply the Old Testament name given to the grave, where everyone goes who dies.⁹ The grave is dark.
3. It says death will be the ► shepherd of those without understanding. Death is a bad shepherd. It raises a question: Who or what will be the Good Shepherd—the Good Shepherd of those with understanding? The psalmist doesn't say. This is a riddle.
4. And the phrase ► "in the morning" is a little cryptic. In the Bible, it is the evening and the morning that form the day. Out of the night there comes the day. Out of the darkness there comes the light.¹⁰ So it seems that the morning represents something that comes after the grave. It's something beyond the grave in which those who have acquired the understanding have a big advantage over those who haven't. For those with understanding, "good morning" is far more than a salutation.

What exactly is the morning? When will the sun rise? The psalmist doesn't say. This is a riddle.

- IV. We ► have touched on every verse in Psalm 49, except one. If we were to stop here, the picture would be a rather hopeless one. To be sure, a big part of the understanding that the psalmist offers us is that our pomp counts for nothing in the end. If pomp is all we have, we're not much different than cattle, or sheep.

But one verse—► Verse 15—changes all that. The psalmist doesn't want us to miss it because it has a *selah* at the end of it. He wants this truth to soak in. Verse 15 says,

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:15**

But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol,
For He will receive me. Selah.

What we need to understand is that, while *we* are helpless to redeem ourselves, *God* can redeem us. Somehow *God* can redeem us from the power of death or Sheol. And then, somehow, *God* will receive us.

How? The psalmist doesn't say. This is a riddle. But there are clues.

⁹ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, s.v. "Sheol," by W.A. Van Gemeren, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 101.

¹⁰ Haddon Robinson, "Life and Death Advice," *Preaching Today*, tape 200 transcript, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 2000).

- A. Long before this psalm was written, God's people had their hope fixed on a coming Redeemer.
1. Perhaps Job was the first to give voice to the hope of a Redeemer who would come to earth. In ► Job 19:25, he says,

^{NAU} **Job 19:25** "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth."
 2. In addition, God Himself, through the prophet Isaiah, said that a Redeemer would come to Zion, the mountain on which Jerusalem is situated, the mountain on which Golgotha stands, the place where criminals were crucified. Isaiah ► 59:20 says,

^{NAU} **Isaiah 59:20** "A Redeemer will come to Zion, And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob" . . .
- B. In the days of the Old Testament, not much was known about who this Redeemer would be or exactly how He would redeem His people. But this much seems reasonably clear: This Redeemer was to somehow pay a ransom for sin. Psalm ► 130:8 says,
- ^{NIV} **Psalm 130:8** He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.
- C. For many hundreds of years, the Jews looked ahead to this Redeemer of Israel who was to come. And then, a man named Jesus came on the scene. He spoke with authority and performed miracles. Referring to Himself as the "Son of Man" He ► said, as recorded in Mark 10:45,
- ^{NAU} **Mark 10:45** ". . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."
- Redeemers pay a ransom; it's what they do. And so, many believed this Jesus was the promised Redeemer, the Messiah. But they still didn't quite know *how* He was going to redeem them. The clues had been given all along. But they hadn't yet connected the dots. To them, it was a riddle.
- D. Many, ► perhaps most, filled in the blank with the kind of redeemer they wanted. They wanted a Messiah who would somehow redeem them politically from the oppression of the Roman government. A lot of us would like a redeemer who would make this life easier.

But the hopes of those who believed that Jesus was that kind of a Redeemer were dashed when Jesus was crucified like a common criminal at the hands of the very Roman government they wanted Him to overthrow. How could this be redemption?

Two ► Jewish men were typical. We meet them in Luke 24. They're leaving Jerusalem on the third day after the crucifixion of Jesus. They are most likely devout Jews who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. They're walking back to their homes in Emmaus. They're talking about the events surrounding the crucifixion, when some ► clueless guy starts walking with them, asking questions.

Luke 24:17 . . . “What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?”

The two men stop dead in their tracks, dumbfounded that this guy doesn't seem have a clue about the crucifixion. One of them answers the guy, ► saying,

Luke 24:18 . . . “Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?”

Then the clueless guy ► says,

Luke 24:19 . . . “What things?” . . .

And they ► say,

Luke 24:19 . . . “The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, ►²⁰ and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. ►²¹ But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. . . .”

Those words say a lot: “we were hoping.” “We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel.” The unspoken, but unmistakable conclusion is, “But He didn't; He didn't redeem us after all—not in the way we expected.”

They go on to tell the clueless guy about some unbelievable rumors being ► circulated:

Luke 24:21 “. . . Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. ►²² But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, ►²³ and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. ►²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see.”

Then the clueless guy says something startling. He comes off like maybe He's not so clueless after all. He ► says,

Luke 24:25 . . . “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!”

The guy thought to be clueless is saying, “*You* are foolish. You need to connect the dots. You need to see the patterns. You need to go beyond the superficial. You need some insight. You are without understanding. You need understanding. A man without understanding is like the beasts that perish.”

Then ► he says,

Luke 24:26 Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?”

The clueless guy is challenging their view of redemption. Then the text ► tells us that . . .

Luke 24:27 . . . beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

You see, the clueless guy was ► Himself Christ Jesus, raised from the dead. But the resurrection of Christ was so far outside the little box of the two other men that they didn’t recognize Him. Jesus “explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”

How did He explain it? What did He say? We’re not told. But we know He explained from ► “all the Scriptures” the need for Christ to suffer. I take this to mean that Jesus drew from every Old Testament category of books, including the psalms. Which ones? It doesn’t say. But we can imagine.

Of course, we need to be careful. We can’t just make up stuff we like and call it truth. But our imagination can be helpful to the extent that it is based squarely on biblical truth.

I imagine Jesus saying to the ► two guys, “Do you remember Psalm 49?”

And I imagine one of them ► saying, “I think so. Isn’t that the dark and depressing song about sheep and Sheol? I never liked it much.”

And Jesus ► says, “Yes, but remember the one line? . . .

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:15**

But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol,
For He will receive me.”

And they ► say, “Yeah. The one bright spot. Sounds good, but we don’t quite get it. It’s a riddle, you know.”

And Jesus ► says, “Yeah, I know. ► Jesus the Christ is the promised Redeemer who came to pay the price for sin by dying on a cross. Remember when He was with you, He ► said . . .”

^{NAU} **Mark 10:45** ‘ . . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’

► “His death was the ransom. His death redeems from the power of Sheol. The power of death to condemn is broken.”

After a moment of reflection, the two guys ► respond, “Psalm 49 also says God will receive us. What does that mean and what must we do to make sure that God will receive us?”

Then I imagine Jesus ► saying, “Remember what the Christ said when He was with you. He gave you a command so simple a child could understand it. You need to understand this:

► ^{NAU} **John 14:1** “. . . believe in God, believe also in Me. ► ² In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ► ³ If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you [Get it? *Receive* you . . .] to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.” [emphasis mine]

► “So what you need to understand is this: Simply believe in Jesus for eternal life and, after you die, He will receive you to Himself in heaven. ► You are redeemed through faith alone in Christ alone.”

► ^{NAU} **John 6:47** “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”

- VI. The ► answer to the prophetic riddle in Psalm 49 has unfolded in history, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, our Redeemer, who offers eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. This is all about ► salvation by grace. We can’t earn our salvation and we should “cease trying.” It’s too “costly.” We simply receive it as a gift. We are redeemed by faith alone in Christ alone. That’s the understanding. That’s ► the big idea. We are redeemed by faith alone in Christ alone. That’s the understanding that liberates us from the destiny of the herd.

I can almost hear someone thinking what I myself have thought many times before. Why does God speak in riddles? Why isn’t He more direct? Why must we put the pieces together? Why didn’t Jesus reveal Himself right away to the two men on the road to Emmaus? Why didn’t He just say right off, “Hey look, I’m Jesus! I rose from the dead.” Instead the two men went all the

way back to Emmaus and had dinner with Jesus before they finally recognized who He was. Why is the Lord's communication often so cryptic?

As I've thought about this, it occurs to me that maybe it's not the most relevant question. Instead of asking, "Why is the Lord's communication so cryptic?" maybe I ought to be asking, "Why is my understanding so cow-like?" Maybe God's transmission is just fine; maybe it's my reception that's garbled. Maybe I get so wrapped up in my own pomp that I can't hear what God is trying to say. Maybe sometimes I don't want to hear Him because I like my pomp better.

Through the corridors of time, the psalmist calls out to me and to ► you:

^{NAU} **Psalm 49:**

¹ Hear this, all peoples;
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
² Both low and high,
Rich and poor together.
³ My mouth will speak wisdom,
And the meditation of my heart *will be* understanding.

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