



Daily Devotional
Reflections on the Psalms

Psalm 49:1-9: You Can't Take It with You

Hear this, all you peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together. My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp. Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches? Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on for ever and never see the grave.

When my son graduated from college a decade and a half ago, the commencement speaker began his address with three important rules for a successful and happy life. "Remember," he said, "money cannot buy happiness, but," he added, "it can finance the illusion." "Live beyond your means, even if you have to borrow heavily to finance it." And, finally, the third rule was: "Always check the bag before you leave the drive-through window." All three were tongue-in-cheek, but in the end one thing is for sure—no matter how much or how little wealth you may have, you can't take it with you. We die as we came into the world—empty handed. One person's funeral may be much more expensive than another—an ornate casket rather than a simple pine box—but whatever becomes of our mortal remains when we breathe our last, in the end we are all dust. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the funeral liturgy reminds us, and you can't buy your way out of that.

In addition to that sobering news, the psalmist also reminds us that even the greatest wealth cannot shield us from all trouble. As money cannot buy happiness, neither can it buy security. I, for one, always feel a bit more secure when I have some resources to fall back on in the event of unexpected hardship. Setting those funds aside, I think, is only a matter of prudent planning or good stewardship. Yet, in the end, there are some things for which there is no price tag. A late parishioner of mine, a brilliant and very successful businessman, who was generous with the church, various educational institutions, and other worthy causes close to his heart, had just begun his descent into the darkness of Alzheimer's disease when I met him. While he could afford the best medical treatment available, in the end the one thing that he would have purchased if he could—a cure—simply was not possible, no matter how much money he possessed. What impressed me about him, though, was the dignity with which he continued to carry himself and the faith that sustained him and his wife as together they dealt with his "losing his mind," as he referred to his illness. In the end, they knew that their hope and comfort, their peace and their strength were to be had in *whose they were* and not in what they *had*.

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