



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Maintaining Our Focus on God

Psalms 49, 77

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Introduction

To establish a context for this study, consider two passages in the Pentateuch.

The first is Exodus 34.1–9, the context of which is Israel’s sin with the golden bull while Moses was receiving the law on the mountain. Upon discovering their sin, Moses destroyed the original tablets, but then interceded for the people when the LORD announced he would destroy them and begin anew with Moses (Exod 32 – 33).

Exodus 34.1–9 concerns the replacement of the tablets. Three things are noteworthy.

- The LORD was specific in setting stipulations for how Moses was to approach him—and Moses was very careful to honor those expectations (vv. 1–4).
- The LORD revealed himself in a well-rounded statement of his character, each trait of which was rooted in the fundamental declaration of the LORD’S name (v. 5; cf. 6–7).
- Overwhelmed with the LORD’S glory, Moses spontaneously bowed in worship and again pleaded on behalf of the people (vv. 8–9).

The second text is Deuteronomy 4.15–19, 25–28. Notice first that a characteristic of idolatry is an attempt to present (or “package”) God in a way that makes him tangible and therefore manageable, what we might call “substitute theology” (vv. 15–19; cf. Exod 32.4–5). Then pay attention to how seriously God takes the substitution of a lesser object of worship for the Lord GOD: he will allow it to occur, but there will be serious consequences, one of which is allowing us to exercise our free will if we seek to serve the lesser god (vv. 25–28; cf. Rom 1.22–24, 26, 28).

From the juxtaposition of these two texts, we learn that the greatest challenge to serving God is to keep a clear vision of him in our minds so that we do not settle for lesser substitutes. One of the features of the psalms shows us how to do that: by making sure our religious reflections center on God in all his majesty; this should characterize both corporate worship and individual

devotional times.¹ The two psalms we'll review here, representative of others we could study, help us reflect on both aspects of this challenge.

Reminder 1: Lesser gods fail to deliver (Psalm 49)

Before analyzing Psalm 49 in detail, we should notice that the writer who, according to the heading, was among the Sons of Korah, says he is engaged in "meditation," that is, in theological reflection (v. 3). He intended apply the conclusions of his reflection to the lives of all the people (v. 2). Notice also that his meditation is especially concerned with real world concerns, e.g., times of trouble, the iniquity of cheaters, and the temptation to trust in wealth (vv. 5–6). In light of this background, he develops two ideas.

First, the things we are most likely to try to trust as substitutes for complete reliance on God cannot produce what they promise. His point is especially pertinent for our day since we are prone to dismiss the temptation to idolatry because we do not literally bow down to carved images, statues, and the like. But modern idolatry is more subtle, and is, as it was then, often engaged in *alongside* our overt devotion to God.

Therefore, we need the psalmist's reminders that all the accumulated wealth in the world will not buy eternal life (vv. 7–9). Ultimately, dedicating our efforts to the accumulation of this world's goods is futile: we really cannot take it with us (vv. 16–17). Nor should we take inordinate pride in whatever status we might achieve: all of us will end up the same (vv. 10–11, 18–19).

Accordingly, the psalmist reinforces an idea we find often in Scripture: with respect to our ability to last and make use of this world's goods, we're really no better off than the animals. Notice the refrain, repeated in verses 12 and 20, and its elaboration in verses 13–14:

Man in his pomp will not remain;
 he is like the beasts that perish.
 This is the path of those who have foolish confidence;
 yet after them people approve of their boasts.
 Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
 death shall be their shepherd,
 and the upright shall rule over them in the morning.
 Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell...
 Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish (Ps 49:12–14, 20).

Having emphasized these things, the psalmist is not hopeless about life, but is confident that if we will stay focused on God, he will do what the lesser gods cannot. Verse 15 states the point:

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,
 for he will receive me.

Reminder 2: Only the LORD lasts and provides (Psalm 77)

If Psalm 49 represents the psalms that remind us of God's glory by comparing it with lesser substitutes, Psalm 77, attributed to Asaph, represents the texts that look directly at the LORD. He

¹ One application of this principle is ensuring that the songs we sing are mutually instructional (cf. Col 3:16), not merely moving (or entertaining).

wrote a lament expressing his struggle through a dry spiritual period (vv. 1–6). He cries out in his affliction, wondering whether God had “forgotten to be gracious” (vv.7–9).

The psalm is an example of the problem expressed in Deuteronomy 4.15–19 where Moses warned Israel not to allow an inability to experience the LORD lead them to turn to other gods. The warning and example remind us that it is precisely because God is not tangible that it is such a challenge to remain focused on him. But notice how the psalmist counters the problem and thus shows us how to remain centered on God.

First, he reviews God’s incomparable nature, appealing to “the years when the Mos High stretched out his right hand” (v. 10 NIV) and to the fact that God is holy and great as no other god is (v. 13). The psalmist’s emphasis serves to remind us that the point of revelation is to help us know God, the definition Jesus gave to eternal life (John 17.3). If we want to stay focused on God, we need to make it a point to stop reading Scripture mainly to discern answers and rules—as important as those matters are—and simply look at God, regardless of how incomprehensible he is.

Second, Asaph’s lament reminds us that as beings who rely on our physical senses, it is helpful to have access to something tangible to help us maintain our focus. Replacement gods are not acceptable (Deut 4.15–19), but reviewing God’s work in history is, as Asaph models for us.

You are the God who works wonders;
 you have made known your might among the peoples.
 You with your arm redeemed your people,
 the children of Jacob and Joseph. ...
 Your way was through the sea,
 your path through the great waters;
 yet your footprints were unseen.
 You led your people like a flock
 by the hand of Moses and Aaron (Ps 77.14–15, 19–20).

Third, Asaph reminds us that sometimes we need to “stop the world and get off”—that is, we need to pause and [quietly] reflect on the glory of God in nature.

When the waters saw you, O God,
 when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
 indeed, the deep trembled.
 The clouds poured out water;
 the skies gave forth thunder;
 your arrows flashed on every side.
 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
 your lightnings lighted up the world;
 the earth trembled and shook (vv. 16–18).

Concluding Reflections

I’ll make four observations in light of our study of Psalms 49 and 77. *First*, I am struck by the fact that the people of the Old Testament were able to be diverted from focusing on God long before the things that distract us were invented. To say that is not to minimize the problem we face in a world filled with so much sensory stimuli, but it does serve to remind us that people have always faced the problem and Scripture has something to say to help address it.

Second, it follows that there is a need for us to be intentional in exercising the discipline called for in the psalms to purposefully focus on God, what he has done and does, and what that means.

Third, the psalms are not the only passages that can help with this (see e.g., Isa 40 – 44), but they are good places to begin. In the nature of their composition, they draw in our whole beings (mind and emotions) and are easily adaptable for both communal and individual times of focus. Thus, we are wise to consult other psalms that develop the same themes as Psalms 49 (e.g., 37, 73, 127, 133) and 77 (e.g., 95 – 100, 103, 105 –106).

Fourth, a case can be made that Exodus 34.6–7 concisely points to what we ought to be about as we live for God.

The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

John 17.3 is even more succinct: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

So, as we continue to live for God, let us reflect, meditate, and study—not just about religious questions and rules—but especially about the one who has called us into fellowship with him. Let us seek to know the Lord.

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