

PSALM 53

MAN FOOLISH AND FALLEN

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, January 30, 2011

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good (Ps. 53:1).

In English, we use exclamation points to give emphasis to a thought or feeling. Not having the grammatical tools of later languages, the Hebrew language calls special attention to an idea by means of repetition. A good example is the seraphim who worshiped in God's presence in Isaiah 6:3, singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts." This rare threefold repetition indicates that God is not only holy but preeminently holy. It says that above all else that we know about God we need to realize how holy he is.

Psalm 53 presents a similar emphasis by repeating Psalm 14 almost word for word. The two psalms vary only in minor details, along with a change in verse 5 of Psalm 53. A portion of the psalm is repeated again by the apostle Paul in Romans 3:10-12. This repetition highlights the importance of the topic, the foolish and fallen condition of man. David laments, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good" (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). With these words, Psalm 53, along with Psalm 14 and Romans 3, teaches truths about mankind that the Bible considers essential for us to know. This very negative doctrine of man in sin has the positive purpose that is seen in the longing of verse 6: "Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!" (v. 6).

THE FOLLY OF ATHEISM

Psalm 53 addresses the folly of atheism, beginning: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 53:1). To live in this world, to observe its order and splendor, and then conclude that God does

not exist is simply to declare oneself a fool. This is not to say that the atheist is stupid, in the sense of lacking proper mental facilities. Experience shows that many vocal atheists are intellectuals. Instead, according to Marvin Tate, “Fools are persons who deliberately choose stubborn and pernicious behavior.”¹ This is why the psalm says that the fool “says in his heart,” since folly involves more than bare intellect but also involves the affections and the will.

“In its absolute sense,” says Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, “as a denial of an absolute power, atheism is well-nigh unthinkable.” This is why the atheist who denies God invariably worships something else in the place of what he denies. Bavinck wrote, “Denying the true God, [man] at the same time fashions a false God.”² Richard Dawkins, one of today’s most vocal atheists, illustrates this tendency. Denying the possibility of God, Dawkins instead affirms his belief in space aliens who are “god-like in ways that exceed anything a theologian could imagine.”³ Supposed atheists like Dawkins show that our experience demands some deity, so that the only question is who and what we will worship as God.

The Bible most clearly addresses man’s denial of God in the apostle Paul’s important teaching in Romans chapter 1. Paul’s purpose was to show how the entire human race is condemned for sin, including those who claim to have no knowledge of God. At the same time, Paul shows why Psalm 53 is correct in describing the one who says there is no God as a fool. According to Paul, the atheist is not merely a mistaken person but is a fool because “he knows there is a God and yet chooses to believe and act as if there is none.”⁴

We might summarize Paul’s teaching on the denial of God with three questions. The first question is *how* do all people know that God exists? Paul’s answer is that God has so devised creation as to give an unavoidable testimony to the being and power of God. According to Paul, God’s “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20) are infallibly and unavoidably revealed to everyone. Far from creation presenting an obscure or hidden testimony to God, nature plainly points to its Creator. Paul writes: “For what can be known about God

¹ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 42.

² Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1951, reprint 1977), 43.

³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner, 2008), 98.

⁴ James M. Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1:115.

is plain to them,” Paul says, “because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19). God’s being and power “have been clearly perceived,” Paul insists, “ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). James M. Boice comments: “the revelation of God in nature is not hidden so that only a highly skilled scientist may find it. It is open and manifest to everyone. A child can see it. There is enough evidence of God in a snowflake, a fingerprint, a flower, a drop of water to lead any honest member of the human race to believe in God and worship him. Every single object in the world shouts ‘God’ to humanity.”⁵

The second question asks *why* there are atheists if everyone by necessity knows about God. Paul’s answer shows the condemnation of all who do not believe. People deny God, he says, because “by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Atheists rebel against the truth they know, bending their minds and wills to deny the truth that is ever before them. They do this because they hate God and the idea of yielding to him. They hate God’s sovereignty because they wish to be little kings and queens. They hate God’s holiness because they are not holy. They even hate God’s love and grace because they are hateful and ungracious.

Third, *what* do atheists worship if not God? Paul’s answer is that unbelieving man inevitably worships idols in the place of God:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him... Claiming to be wise, they became fools ... They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! (Rom. 1:21-25).

To know God, as we all do, and worship something else as God – especially something that is man-made or otherwise limited in its being and power – is the very heart of folly.

In the ancient world, there were very few formal atheists – those who attempted to deny the existence of God. But David’s statement about the fool who denies God more broadly entails what we might call *practical atheists*. These are people who would never think to deny the existence of God, but at the same time allow no place for God in their personal lives. The practical atheist, says Michael Wilcock,

⁵ Ibid.

“willfully organizes his life without reference to God.”⁶ According to J. J. Stewart Perowne, “The fool is not the philosophic atheist with his arguments... but the man who by the *practice of wickedness* so stifles and corrupts within him that he *virtually* acknowledges no God.”⁷ The effects of this practical atheism are so serious that David says it has ruined the entire human race. This is why David links the folly of unbelief to man’s fall into depravity, saying of practical atheists: “They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity” (Ps. 53:1).

GOD’S VIEW OF MANKIND

In answer to one so foolish as to dismiss God, David pictures God stooping to observe the conduct of his creatures. “God looks down from heaven on the children of man,” he says, “to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God” (Ps. 53:2). We are reminded of God coming down to observe the folly of man in building the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:5), as well as God looking down on the wickedness of our race prior to his judgment in the great flood (Gen. 6:5).

What does God see when he looks down on mankind from heaven? The Bible says that God sees a humanity that is utterly corrupt and rebellious. David first says that mankind has “fallen away.” This verb (Hebrew, *sag*) means to deviate or be disloyal. God finds that his creatures have not obeyed him but have turned to their own ways. The second verb (Hebrew, *elachu*) refers to milk that has spoiled or some other food that has become rotten so as to smell.

David’s statement about man’s rottenness, echoed throughout the Bible, is rejected by most people today. The view of secular humanists is that man is not depraved but good. To the extent that we may speak of sin we refer only to surface imperfections that might be improved. Psalm 53, along with Psalm 14 and Romans 3:12, refutes this view, saying, “together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” Liberals seek to uphold their doctrine of human goodness by turning the tables on the Bible, deeming it wayward and corrupt and denying the authority of God’s Word.

⁶ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 194.

⁷ J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms, 2 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1878, reprint, 1976), 1:184. Italics original.

Among Bible believers, there is also an important difference in our doctrine of man and of sin. According to Arminian theology, man in sin is only *partially depraved*. To be sure, fallen mankind is morally weak and sick. Sinners are guilty and subject to God's judgment. But their condition is not so bad that they do not possess the ability to reform and believe the gospel so as to be saved.

A third view of mankind, taught by Psalm 53 and Reformed theology, is the doctrine of *total depravity*. This teaching does not say deny that man was created good, bearing the image of God. Total depravity does not mean that people are "worthless;" indeed, it is the value of every human soul that defines the tragedy expressed by total depravity. The point of total depravity is to teach that man's corruption is so pervasive that there is no part or function of man that is not fatally corrupted by sin. Lorraine Bettner explains that total depravity means "that since the fall man rests under the curse of sin, that he is actuated by wrong principles, and that he is wholly unable to love God or to do anything meriting salvation."⁸

MAN FALLEN: TOTAL DEPRAVITY

By considering David's description of what God sees when he looks down on man, echoed by Paul's teaching in Romans 3:10-18, we can see just how the Bible views the total depravity of mankind.

David unfolds our fallen condition in three important statements, beginning with *man's unrighteousness before God*. He speaks to this problem by saying, "They have all fallen away" (Ps. 53:3). Paul states this directly: "None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10).

Righteousness is a legal term, noting our standing before God's justice. According to the Bible, righteousness is attained by obeying God's law perfectly. Paul taught: "It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Rom. 2:13). The problem is that every one of us has done exactly the opposite, breaking God's law daily in thought, word, and deed as any sober consideration of the Ten Commandments will show. When Paul says that "none is righteous," he speaks of man's

⁸ Lorraine Bettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1963), 61

condemnation before God's law so that the curse of God's wrath lies upon us.

Man's problem in sin does not end with our legal guilt but extends to *man's morally corrupt nature*. David adds, "together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Ps. 53:3).

A cursory inventory of man's nature confirms this description. Paul starts with our speech: "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.' 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness'" (Rom. 3:13-14). Citing from the Old Testament, Paul points out the filth and venom that spew from human mouths. We are such masters of falsity and malice that Christians who have learned to speak the truth in love have entered a high realm of sanctification.

Paul proceeds to our habits: "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known" (Rom. 3:15-16). Man's violent is registered in the newspaper every day. Unable to live in harmony, we easily become angry and hateful towards others. If we can get away with it, we employ violence. A couple in my former church reported their experience at a marriage seminar. A thousand Christian couples sat tensely at their tables as the conference leader asked each of them to look across the table into the eyes of the man or woman they had fallen in love with and married. They were then to each say these words: "You are not my enemy." My friends later reported, "You could have cut the air with a knife," as husbands and wives faced the tendency of hostility and hatred even within the most intimate of all human relationships.

Paul sums our corruption, saying, "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). Here again is man the fool telling his heart that God can be ignored and despised. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes: "Men will read trash rather than the Word of God, and adhere to a system of priorities that leaves God out of their lives. Multitudes of men spend more time shaving than on their souls; and multitudes of women give more minutes to their makeup than to the life of the eternal spirit."⁹

⁹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis*, 2:46

We admit that men and women are morally corrupt, but just how depraved are we? The Bible answers that our depravity is so total, so comprehensive, that apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit fallen man is not merely sick or weak but spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). This is David's point in showing what God sees in looking on man: in Paul's words, "no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11). Man's total depravity results in a radical spiritual inability. Imagine owning a broken radio that lacks the ability to receive signals on certain frequencies. The signals are being sent, but you are unable to receive them. Paul states this inability clearly, saying, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Jesus echoed this teaching, clarifying that mankind's inability is spiritual and moral rather than cognitive. It is not that the gospel is too hard to understand but, Jesus said, "you cannot bear to hear my word" (Jn. 8:43). It is because of fallen man's spiritual inability that we require sovereign grace for salvation; as Jesus taught, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3).

David makes a final important point about depravity: man's folly and fallen state is not only *total* but it is *universal*. "They have all fallen away," he laments (Ps. 53:3). In Psalm 51:5, David traced his own depravity to the moment of his conception within his mother's womb. The reason for this universal depravity is the fall of our race in the first sin of Adam, our covenant head before God, so that, as Paul explains, "one trespass led to condemnation for all men" (Rom. 5:18). In David's terms, because of Adam's fall, every human being foolishly lives as a practical atheist, thinking in our hearts as if there is no God. Charles Spurgeon summarizes: "Humanity fallen and debased, is a desert without an oasis, a night without a star, a dunghill without a jewel, a hell without a bottom."¹⁰ How great is our need, then, for the saving grace that can only come from God himself, which is the theme on which David concludes his psalm.

¹⁰ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), I:I:162.

DAVID'S PLEA FOR SALVATION

As David considers man's great need for salvation, he marvels at the destructiveness of the morally corrupt sinner: "Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God?" (Ps. 53:4). David's laments how the ungodly are committed to doing harm to God's people, eating them up, as it were, as they eat their daily bread. David's concern, however, is not just for the victimization of the weak and vulnerable but for the tragic folly of people in such dog-eat-dog rebellion against God. What ignorance is revealed when people prey upon God's people when they might turn to God in prayer for salvation!

It is not as if unbelieving men and women enjoy their rebellion against God! Instead, David adds, "There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror!" (Ps. 53:5), pointing out the existential insecurity of those who refuse to fear God and as a result fear everything else. H. C. Leupold writes: "Driven by a guilty conscience and, perhaps, their own superstitions, they have experienced great and unspeakable terror."¹¹ We see men and women all around us overcome with anxiety at the mere rumor of gas prices rising, the stock market falling, or shortages at the super market. Leviticus 26:36 describes the fear of the ungodly in vivid terms: "The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues" (Lev 26:36).

David says that those who assail God's people are especially prey to uneasiness, and for good reason: "For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them" (Ps. 53:5). It is possible that David wrote these words about his rebellious son Absalom. At first, Absalom was boastful in his successful coup against his father. However, as soon as events started to turn against him, Absalom felt the fiery breath of God's wrath upon his neck and his rebellion fell into folly. Under pressure, Absalom revealed the instability of a prayerless, godless life, with the result that the bones of his defeated soldiers littered the battlefield (see 2 Sam. 17-18). What a tragedy Absalom's life was, when through faith and prayer he might have had God's help. This is the difference

¹¹ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 415.

between God's people and those who reject God. Believers in Christ are sinners like everyone else, but through prayer we are delivered from fear and dismay. Paul says that when we call on him, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7).

Another candidate for David's dismay is Nabal, the embittered husband of Abigail, who was slain by God after his refusal to render David aid. The Hebrew word for *fool* is *nabal*, so that David literally writes, "Nabal says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 53:1). This man showed his practical atheism by refusing to deal generously with David. Godless Nabal lived a life of needless suspicion and violent disruption. He was so opposed to God that the report of his wife's wise and charitable dealings with David caused him to die in frustration with a heart attack (1 Sam.25:1-38).

Absalom and Nabal do not record isolated examples, since all mankind is gripped by the misery of depravity chronicled in Psalm 53. This negative point of view serves David's positive agenda by leading him to long for salvation from God: "Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad" (Ps. 53:6).

Knowing the total depravity of man, David looks only to God for a salvation that is entirely of sovereign grace. Salvation for Israel will have to come out of Zion, that is, out of God's dwelling place. David places all his hopes in the day "when God restores the fortunes of his people," for only then will "Israel be glad" (Ps. 53:6). That glad day arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. The temple on Mount Zion, with its sacrifices for sin, taught God's people to look for a Savior whose substitutionary death would cleanse us from sin. John the Baptist saw the day of Jesus' coming and cried aloud to announce the salvation for which David longed: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29). By trusting in Jesus Christ, totally depraved sinners may be washed clean and be renewed to spiritual life, experiencing the gladness of God's restoring mercy.

David shows the importance of a biblically sober assessment of man's great problem in sin. It is only, he shows, those who have renounced all hope in sinful human flesh who look solely to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is by first agreeing with Paul that "all have sinned and

fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) that we rejoice in the good news that follows: we may be “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). God wounds us that he may heal us; God slays us by his Word that he may raise us to eternal life with Christ. Augustus Toplady was one who understood the implications of his total depravity, and like David he pleaded for God to save him by grace alone. Toplady sang: “Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law’s demands / could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow / all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone.”¹²

Have you called upon God to save you by his mercy alone, receiving salvation as a free gift of grace through Jesus Christ? If you have not, perhaps the reason is that you are too proud to admit the truth about yourself in Psalm 53. What folly this is, when God’s testimony about our sin is so clearly taught. What a tragedy you are, David laments, living foolishly in such darkness and fear, when you might call upon God and find salvation at the cross of Jesus Christ.

SINNERS MADE RIGHTEOUS

Jesus taught a parable that would have made David’s lamenting heart glad. He told of two men went into the temple on Mount Zion to pray. One of them trusted in his outward works, foolishly trying to cover up his depravity with petty religious deeds. Despite his righteousness before men, Jesus said, this Pharisee was condemned by God. The other man was a notorious sinner who took the message of Psalm 53 to heart. Refusing to lift his head in God’s presence, he knelt and beat his breast, crying “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” That sinner, calling on God for grace, was looking to the sacrifices offered in the temple, and through them trusting in Christ’s atoning death for his salvation. If you will do the same, then God will look down on you and declare what Jesus said of that sinner: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified” (Lk. 18:13).

It is out of God’s positive, loving desire to grant that salvation to us that his Word teaches the depressingly negative doctrine of total depravity. The same Bible declares that the Savior for whom David longed has come in the form of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. If you will

¹² Augustus M. Toplady, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” 1776.

look to his cross to be cleansed of your sin, and trust in his righteous obedience in the place of your waywardness and failure, then you will have replaced folly with understanding, receiving through faith alone the righteousness of God that is offered in Jesus Christ.