

Serpent's Brood

Windows of My Soul

By Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

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Bible Text: Psalm 53
Preached on: Sunday, April 25, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Heavenly Father, as we turn now to the scriptures, we ask for your blessing. Pour out your Spirit, grant a spirit of insight and illumination, and as a result that we might be blessed by focusing our minds, our affections, our wills, upon you and your greatness and holiness. And hear us, Lord, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now our Psalm this morning is Psalm 53. Psalm 53 and as you're turning there, I do want you to know that in the second service it's a different bulletin because we are receiving some 30-35 new members. We received maybe 25 new members last week which was from a year ago and the ones we're receiving today are those that came into membership during the pandemic season, which is an enormous blessing, I think, on God and I want you to be encouraged and you're not going to see it, obviously, at 11:15 but I did want you to be encouraged by the thought that God added significantly to our membership even during this difficult season that we're passing through.

Now let's turn to Psalm 53.

1 The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good. 2 God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. 3 They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. 4 Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? 5 There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror! For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them. 6 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.

Well, those of you who know your Psalms well will know that Psalm 53 is almost, almost identical to Psalm 14, just a few minor changes and one extra verse, but it was repeated and there seems to be a particular incident that lies behind it. We don't know what that

incident is but Psalm 53 was added to the Psalter and perhaps humankind needs the repetition that the fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

This Psalm is an anatomy of atheism and, of course, atheism is far more prevalent in our society than it would have been in the time of David. There wouldn't have been many atheists in David's time. There were certainly polytheists and idolaters in David's time but few, I think, who would have actually said, "There is no God." In our time, there are some significant names, of course, who have made the headlines by writing books and giving speeches and lectures and being on the radio and tv, and they are Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett and others who are significant names, who are open about being atheists and saying, "There is no God." And if you read these men, and I've not read them comprehensively but I've read sufficient of these to draw the conclusion that the argument that they make is usually a moral one and they say if there is a God, how come children suffer? If there is a God, how come there are things like hurricanes which kill innocent people and so on? And so they create a scandal about God's goodness and then they reject him outright and forthright, and these arguments, it seems to me, are not arguments against the existence of God, they are arguments against their conception of if there is a God, what would that God allow and permit and so on.

Well, Martin Heidegger, late 19th early 20th century, said something that everyone now seems to repeat, that the most basic question of all is why is there something and not nothing? Why is there something and not nothing? And this is what is being contemplated here in this Psalm and you'll have heard, of course, as we read the Psalm together, that this Psalm is quoted, verse 3 is quoted in a litany of texts, in Romans 3 when Paul is outlining the sinfulness of humanity, that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and it picks up verse 3, "there is none who does good, not even one," among maybe a dozen other texts that Paul cites in Romans 3. And I want us to look at this Psalm together, first of all, in verses 1 through 4. The Psalm analyzes humanity and analyzes atheism.

"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Now for any human being to deny the existence of God, the Psalm suggests, is absolute folly, it's stupidity, it's crazy that will land you ultimately in outer darkness in the world to come. And the point of the Psalm is to say that atheism leads to immorality, that this intellectual premise that there is no God has moral consequences, it leads to all that is corrupt. The reason for atheism is not insufficient information. It's not that God's self-disclosure is obscure. The problem is not intellectual, the problem is moral, the problem lies in the heart. It's not that human beings can't know God, it's that human beings won't, they don't want to know God.

People say God doesn't exist because you can't prove that God exists, and 19th century atheists following the Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment atheists and especially in modernity and now in post-modernity, that the premise was that religion is the result of inventive imagination, that of human beings who don't have the moral courage to believe the cold meaninglessness of life, right? If you can't accept that life is meaningless and all of these modern-day atheists, Dawkins and Harris and Hitchens and Dennett and so on,

all of them suggest in categorical terms that life is meaningless, there is no purpose, there is no goal, there is no objective. It is the survival of the fittest. It is the philosophical view of Darwinism that the fittest survive and might is therefore right, and it's that philosophy, of course, that makes the argument for abortion so very acceptable in our modern society, that might is right. And if you don't have the moral courage to accept that life is meaningless, you invent, you invent a category of another world, you invent a category of a god, and the primary source, then, of religion, according to modern atheism, is human psychology.

Now why do people deny his existence? God, you see, stands as the single most powerful being that stands in the way of human autonomy and Paul takes this up, and Paul essentially in Romans 1, 2 and 3, he begins in Romans 1 to tell us that God exists and that he reveals himself and he reveals himself in creation, and he reveals himself in providence, you cannot get away from it, and every human being knows, his conscience declares God is clearly seen, Paul says, in the things that are made. You look at creation, you look at the things that are, you look at the sun and the moon and the planets and the stars, and you look at the great vistas of the world, and you cannot but conclude that someone created all of these things, but human beings suppress that truth, they hold it down in unrighteousness. It's clearly seen but they suppress it, they hold it down, katechan is the Greek word, and it could be translated "stifled." They hold it down, they suppress the truth. They know it, they know it in their conscience. Their conscience declares to them that God is but the wickedness of the human heart, the proclivity of the human heart suppresses that knowledge and so it leads to the conclusion that there is none that does good, not even one, and Paul moves from the existence of God, then the suppression of the knowledge of God, into that section in Romans where he declares human depravity and he quotes from a plethora of sources including Psalm 53 and Psalm 14 which is almost identical, that there is none that does good, not even one.

Now what does that text mean? It doesn't mean that human beings are not capable of doing any kind of good at all. There is an ability in the natural man to perform what John Calvin called civic good. The Pharisee who lives next door who takes care of your yard while you're away and makes sure that your house is protected. There is much that is good in the world but you can't do that good that will be rewarded by eternal life, and in that sense there is none that does good, not even one. Every action, every word, every thought, every deed is tainted by sin.

So the natural man, what this Psalm is saying is that the natural man by his denial of God, by his suppression of the truth that surrounds him everywhere and is inside him, not just out there objectively but internally, the very way that we are, the very way that we think, our conscience, the factor within us that says that there is a God, the natural man suppresses that and it leads to immorality. It leads to living for one's self. It leads to idolatry. We make ourselves God. We are the most important beings on the face of the planet. And the rejection of this existence of God begins at suppression, begins at the moment of conception. We are born in sin.

C. S. Lewis famously said that there is no neutral territory in the universe. Atheists, you see, are squatters. They're squatters on God's earth, on God's planet. And notwithstanding, God grants them gifts of common grace so I'm not deterred by marveling at a piece of music, even though the person who wrote it may not subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. So a staggering fact, it's a staggering fact that anthropologists and the study of anthropology from the time of Darwin in the 19th century to this day has grown immensely as a science, but it's a staggering fact that anthropologists have never ever discovered a tribe of people that's atheistic. Never. Every tribe that anthropologists have studied has a form of religion. They've worshiped some deity or a plethora of deities but never once have anthropologists discovered an atheistic tribe. There is a universal bent in the heart and core of man's being that knows that God exists and in the suppression of the existence of the one true God, they make gods for themselves, in Calvin's famous statement in "The Institutes," man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols.

You have to ask yourself Heidegger's question: why is there something and not nothing? What was there before the Big Bang? I'm not here to defend or deny the creation of the world as a form of a big bang when God made the universe, but let's get past that. What was there before the Big Bang? What was there a millisecond before the Big Bang? And you don't have a lot of choices. One answer is to say there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing produces everything. Nothing produces Beethoven. Nothing produces Solzhenitsyn. Nothing produces President Biden. Don't go there. It was just a thought. It's very difficult to believe, isn't it? We have no categories in which to understand that. There's no logic, there's no reason, there's no science that comprehends that nothing produces everything. Well, let's think of another answer. Another answer would be there was something, there was gravity, there was hydrogen or helium or something. Where did the hydrogen come from? Where did gravity come from? And again, we are in a loop here. Or you can simply say before there was the universe, there was God, a greater power, a greater force, a greater intelligence.

Professor Antony Flew, one of the great thinkers and atheists of the 20th century, died in 2010. He was the son of a very distinguished Methodist minister. He led the charge on atheism in the second half of the 20th century. He listened to C. S. Lewis as a student in Oxford but was unimpressed by Lewis's declaration of Christianity when Lewis was dragged famously kicking and screaming to acknowledge that there was a God. When I was in seminary, I was made to read an essay of Antony Flew called "Principles of Falsification." It's a very very difficult thing to understand. "Principles of Falsification," and it was an argument for atheism. And in May, 2004, at a conference of atheists, he came out and said, "I was wrong." He came out and said he had changed his mind. It was at a New York university and he said, "I had to go where the evidence led me." What he had been studying was DNA and the advancement in the science of DNA and the complexity of it, the immense complexity of it, and the fact that DNA, and I'm speaking way beyond my knowledge here, but the fact that DNA has to be precisely the way it is for the world to exist and for human beings and for animals and birds and reptiles and so on, to be the way that they are, the massive massive massive improbabilities that that would come about just by chance. And he said, "I had to go where..." He'd been an atheist

all his life, one of the great atheists of the 20th century, perhaps number 1, Professor Antony Flew, and in 2004, six years before he died, he came out and said, "I was wrong. There has to be, there absolutely... The evidence, the scientific evidence, the logical evidence suggests that there's a pre-existent intelligence," Antony Flew said.

The natural man has a conscience. It's in-built. It's in every human being. It is the voice of God. Approving or not, human words and deeds and actions, everyone has it, internal evidence of a sense of accountability.

"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" It is intellectual craziness, it is intellectual folly that leads to moral folly. Aquinas in the 13th century famously said, "Unchastity is the firstborn daughter of blindness of spirit." Unchastity is the firstborn of blindness of spirit.

"They have all fallen away," verse 3, "together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." Why do we see so much ugliness in our society? Why do we read the headlines that we read every week? You get up in the morning and you pick up your phones, perhaps, and you go to your app just to see what the news is, what's happened in the last few hours when I've been blissfully unconscious and in la-la-land? And you read the headlines and they repeat themselves on a daily basis, on a weekly basis, on a monthly basis. "Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind, to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteousness, God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." My friends, doesn't that speak to our time? Doesn't that speak to where our society is right now? We throw our hands up in horror every day, how can the world be the way that it is? And it's because of atheism. It's because the fool is saying in his heart, "There is no God."

Dr. Joel Nederhood, famous radio preacher back in the middle of the 20th century, '60s, '70s and so on, a member of the Christian Reformed Church, tells of being in Moscow and at a booksellers convention, and during Glasnost, you remember Glasnost when Gorbachev in the waning days of the Soviet Union opened up a little and so on, and there was that famous period of Glasnost and Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister in Britain, I remember, and Joel Nederhood was in Moscow and at a booksellers convention when the American Bible Society was giving away free copies of the Bible and he saw a line several hundred yards long going out of the building and down the street and people were lining up to get a free copy of the American Bible Society's edition of the Bible. And this line went past the 70 year old Madalyn Murray O'Hair, she was the founder in the '60s of the American Atheist Society and there was a magazine that she published, there was a huge tragedy in her life, some of her family, children and so on, were killed and some of them went missing, their bodies were never found and so on. And there was no one at her table. She was there at a booksellers convention with her own book on atheism and there

was no one there. "What fools!" She must have been thinking, "What fools these Russians are to stand in line for Bibles. They should be buying books on atheism from me," Nederhood thought she might be thinking and, of course, she was the fool. She was the fool.

Well, what is God's response to atheism? And there are two responses in verses 5 and 6. In verse 5 great judgment, and in verse 6 great prayer. Great prayer. Great judgment, first of all, and the Psalm suggests that atheists are actually unstable. They are in great terror where there is no terror. They imagine all kinds of fearful things for God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you. You put them to shame for God has rejected them and it's a warning that there's coming a day of accountability, there's coming a day of judgment and atheists will be judged. They will be judged for not using the knowledge that they naturally have within their soul, within their mind, within their conscience. And so the Psalmist ends with a prayer, a longing, a great prayer. "Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people." When atheism increases, as it has in our current society, moral corruption is the inevitable consequence. When intellectual nonsense reigns, it's like being in captivity and God's people resort to prayer. "Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Joseph Addison, he was an 18th century prose writer, and he tells the story of being on a ship and on this ship was a particularly nasty person, and the ship was caught in a storm and this passenger was very frightened and he went to the chaplain and fell on his knees and confessed he'd been an atheist since his teens. And the sailors who had never heard the word "atheist," upon hearing that there's an atheist on the upper deck, thought it was a rare fish they were talking about, but when they discovered what it was, they suggested that this atheist be thrown overboard. But he wasn't and upon reaching land, he recanted and begged the passengers not to speak of his lapse from atheism. Then after a couple of days, he met one of the passengers and reminded him and he denied it, and the argument got so heated that they engaged in a duel, and this atheist was stabbed with a sword and he thought he was going to die, so once again he called upon God for mercy until he discovered that his wound actually was not mortal and then he recanted once again. "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

The most famous atheist in my lifetime apart from Antony Flew, was Malcolm Muggeridge and Malcolm Muggeridge, he died in 1990 and was famous both in Britain and here in the United States, and went to Cambridge University, described it as the most futile and dismal period of his whole life. He had a job in India and then in Egypt teaching and was a political commentator for the left wing Literati newspaper for the elites, The Guardian, still in existence today. But they kept editing what he was writing for the editorials, they kept editing him and so he left them, went to Moscow and was totally disillusioned. He was a socialist and was totally disillusioned by the Stalinesque version of it that he saw and argued, began to argue for capitalism, and then for a short time, he was a spy, espionage in Mozambique, of all places, and in 1953 became editor of Punch and Punch was a satirical magazine commenting on politics and the arts and so on. But what brought his atheism to a head was the rise of the sexual revolution in the 1960s

and early 1970s, and he found himself in a drugstore in Wisconsin and seeing people openly reading pornography in a drugstore in Wisconsin, not in a Byzantine scene of debauchery but in a drugstore in Wisconsin, and he wrote a famous essay that in which he said that sexual promiscuity is fundamentally anti-religious because it reverses the Christian formula that we are to die in the Spirit and be reborn in the flesh rather than the other way around. What brought it all to a head eventually was an interview with Mother Teresa in India and he wrote, "Previous civilizations have been overthrown from without by the incursion of barbarian hordes. Our barbarians are home-produced, indoctrinated at public expense and urged on by the media dismantling Christendom." He could have written that yesterday. That was back in the late '60s, early '70s, and he recanted his atheism and announced that he was, indeed, a Christian.

Well, you sometimes read the Psalms, you know, written 3,000 years ago and you think, "This is lovely but what in the world does it have to do with me?" Well, this Psalm could have been written yesterday. What explains our society right now is the lack of belief in the one true and living God who has revealed himself. What a wonderful thing it is to believe in him and to trust him. What a wonderful thing it is to be a Christian and that we can, as it were, look at our society and see what's wrong with it, but we can also see the solution that it desperately desperately needs.

"Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!" Make that your prayer this week. The answer to the problem that is our society right now is a pouring out of God's Holy Spirit in power and might, that he can turn the world upside down once again.

Father, we thank you, thank you for this word twice repeated in the Psalms. We thank you that we are not atheists this morning, that we believe in you, we believe in your Son, we believe in the Holy Spirit, three-personed God. We worship you. Hear us and bless us and may salvation come out of Zion by your sovereign power and might. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.