

A Lament for the Atheist

Psalm 53

Studies in the Psalms #54

“**T**HE fool says in his heart, ‘**There is no God**’” (v. 1). These are some of the more memorable words of the Psalter. Recognize that Psalm 53 is almost verbatim Psalm 14. One difference is the use of “God” and not LORD, a typical difference in book two of the Psalter. Another difference is verse 5. Its parallel in Psalm 14 focuses on the Lord’s protection of his people; here in Psalm 53 the focus is on God’s judgment of his foes. So why does the Psalter would have two almost identical Psalms? Context is key. The Psalms are not a hodge podge of songs and prayers; they’re intentionally organized this way by the Holy Spirit superintending authors and editors. We’ve just come from David’s prayer about Doeg the Edomite, who reveled in killing 85 priests, women, and children. In Psalm 53 David laments his foolishness. A **fool** doesn’t mean dumb, stupid, or intellectually less than a believer. Far from it. What it does mean is moral foolishness to live like there’s no God when all the while you know deep down that he really exists. Maybe you know someone like this; I do. Let’s allow the Psalm to lead us in lament...

THEIR CORRUPTION (vv. 1, 3)

We lament THE ATHEISTS’ CORRUPTION. **They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good** (v. 1). Skip to verse 3:

They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt—then notice the repeated refrain: **there is none who does good, not even one**. Does this mean we believe every atheist is as corrupt as they possible can be and can never do anything “good?” No. How do we understand this? It’s always helpful to follow the apostles’ interpretation. Paul uses these verses in Romans 3. In the context he’s arguing that Jews and Gentiles are equally under sin and equally in need of salvation apart from themselves. That’s why he asks in verse 9: “What then? Are we Jews any better off [than the Gentiles]? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.” Then he goes on to string together a list of Old Testament passages including ours in Psalm 53. At the end of this list he says, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (v. 20). So we’re lamenting our family members, our friends, our co-workers whose sins are separating them from God, to use the prophet’s language, or to use the apostles, who are dead in trespasses and sins. This is what I lament for my good friend.

THEIR INABILITY (v. 2)

We also lament that the atheists’ corruption leads to THEIR INABILITY.

God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God (v. 2). This, too, is quoted in Romans 3.

One of the great distinctions between biblical religion and all the religions of

the world including man-centered “Christianity” is just this verse. The Psalm and Paul say that humanity in their fallen condition does not search for God. Like Adam and Eve we hide from God and he has to search for us like he did them! Even more, the Psalm and Paul say that humanity in their fallen condition is unable to search for God in and of themselves. This is why God found Adam and Eve; this is why Jesus said the hour was coming in which the Father would search for true worshipers. This is why Paul says God does what we cannot and would not do ourselves. Everything else says mankind is able and in fact God honors your best efforts.

One great illustration is in C.S. Lewis’ autobiography. He reflected on his days as a so-called “agnostic” and said, “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.”¹ Children, how many mice search out for a cat? It’s the same with those outside Jesus’ grace; they do not and cannot search for God in their own wisdom, efforts, and strength. My good friend is unable to help himself; God help him! Who do you know who needs the Lord’s help?

THEIR PERSECUTING (v. 4)

Because the atheist is in this condition as fallen sinner, they act out. Thus we lament THEIR PERSECUTING. Look at verse 4: **Have those who work evil**

no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? (v. 4) Think especially of Doeg in 1 Samuel 22. What an image of what he did: **who eat up my people as they eat bread**. What does that mean? It means the atheist's persecution of the people of God is like eating: it's a fact of life, it's a necessary fact of life. Just like without bread, or food, we would die, in the same way without persecuting the people of God the atheist wouldn't exist. My good friend would never seem to join in on violence, but he does use every scandal, every ridiculous thing a preacher says, and our nations' propensity for merging God and country to mock and ridicule as he's able.

THEIR FEARING (v. 5)

While they may seem to have the upper hand in persecuting, the reality is they are FEARING. And we lament this sad condition. Look at the image in verse 5: **There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror!** One commentator said the image being conveyed here is that the atheist is afraid of shadows.² They might puff their chest out, yell loudly, and resort to violence; but they're afraid of what ethereal to them. In other words, while they say, **"There is no God"** (v. 1), the shadow of what they deny haunts them! I know it does for my friend! He doesn't openly admit it, but it's obvious to me it's in the back of his mind.

THEIR JUDGMENT (v. 5)

This leads to our final lament: THEIR JUDGMENT: **For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them** (v. 5). In the context of David, this is clearly Doeg. But it's also a psalm of the church. I don't joy in my friends' judgment, but it's the reality of the path he's on. Think about believers who suffered under atheistic, tyrannical regimes through history. Think of their perseverance. Think of their faith. When we confess Jesus "shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead," we're lamenting the world's judgment but also celebrating God's righteous acts in setting all things right.

OUR PRAYER (v. 6)

So what's OUR PRAYER besides lament? We pray for the persecuted church these words: **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** (v. 6). We also pray in love until that day of the Lord knowing today is the day of salvation. May the Lord stir us up to loving prayer, witness, and living so that those we lament over may know our love, and through us, Christ's!

Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1955), 220.

² Longman, 226.