

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Psalms</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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### The Arrogance of Fallen Man

**Introduction:** Psalm 53 is almost identical to Psalm 14. Many lines are word-for-word the same, such as, “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” The question this naturally raises is this: why include both these psalms in the psalter, and why are they so far apart? A skeptic might ask whether this is simply a lazy copying error. The best evidence for an answer, however, lies in carefully examining the subtle differences between the two psalms and in their respective placement within the five books of the psalter. We will see that these psalms apply the same basic theological truth to two very different situations in Israel’s history.

#### 1. Psalm 53:1-3 - The natural state of humanity

- a. The first thing we should note about Psalm 53:1 and 14:1 is that it is not a prophecy about modern-day atheists, i.e. those who explicitly say God does not exist. This verse certainly does apply to them, but it is much broader than that, since in ancient times no one would have directly declared that no gods exist. This verse applies to anyone who claims to believe in God but lives hypocritically as though God’s existence really does not make any difference.<sup>1</sup> The late R.C. Sproul called such people “practical atheists.”
  - i. It is appropriate for David to call such a person a fool because one of the chief characteristics of foolishness in the Bible is blindness to the future consequences of your actions.<sup>2</sup> To live as if there is no God who will call you to account is the height of all foolishness because it is to ignore the ultimate and longest-lasting consequences of all your actions!
- b. The following verses make it clear that this psalm is not just criticizing a small group of especially foolish and wicked people. Every single person shows this wicked foolishness pouring forth from our hearts.
  - i. For example, when a little boy looks over his shoulder before doing something he knows he should not do, he acts as if there is no higher authority than his parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider Deuteronomy 29:18-20, “Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven.”

<sup>2</sup> Consider Proverbs 7, where the young man “lacking sense” is seduced by what is right in front of him and gives no thought to the lasting wounds this will leave him with. Throughout Proverbs there is a constant contrast between short-sighted foolishness and wisdom, which lives with the big picture in mind. Consider also Ecclesiastes 12, which exhorts young people to live in light of the fact that they will all die and face their Creator one day.

His actions reveal that his heart is willing to ignore the reality of God's justice to get what he wants.

- c. The assessment of "the children of man" in verses 1-3 could not be more absolute: all are lost and dead in sin. There is *not even one* who really does good. There are some who are relatively-speaking better than others,<sup>3</sup> but all people habitually live in various ways like God does not see their actions and there will be no punishment. Even at their best apart from God's grace, no one truly loves God (the greatest commandment), and therefore no one truly does good according to his Law.
  - i. This sorry state we all find ourselves is a result of Adam's sin, as our representative in his original covenant with God. He violated the very simple terms he was given, and we bear the curse of his sin. This is the only biblical explanation for the sorry state of our world.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Psalm 53:4-5 - The Knowledge of God

- a. In verse 4 David asks a pointed question: don't these fools see what they will bring down on themselves? Don't they know they will face the wrath of God for their sins?
- b. Verse 5 answers that they *do* know this, at least in part. They demonstrate their knowledge of God's Law when they act fearful with no clear and present danger about them. How can this be? Verse 1 had said they deny his existence in their hearts!
  - i. Part of the effects of the Fall on our minds is that we often live with wildly contradictory beliefs. What is more, those beliefs are often at war with criss-crossing desires and feelings that pull us in every direction. So it actually comes fairly easily for a man to suppress the thought that God exists and will judge his actions for a time, in favor of fulfilling some pressing desire. Later, however, that same man may become paranoid and jump at his own shadow when his conscience condemns his wickedness.
  - ii. This is essentially the same idea that Paul teaches in Romans 1:19-25, that God has made his attributes known through his creation, but sinners still sin as if it does not matter.
- c. We ought to note that, especially when comparing verse 5 with Psalm 14:6, this does say something very important about why social sins exist. There are unjust systems in the world, undoubtedly, but the ultimate reason for social sins such as mistreatment of the poor and wars of conquest is the corruption of the human heart.
  - i. If all people constantly had it clear and present in front of their minds that there would be severe and everlasting consequences for their wicked deeds, they would not do them. But because of the Fall, it is all too easy for us to suppress our knowledge of God when we want something we shouldn't have.
  - ii. The sins of the wealthy and powerful are especially prominent in Scripture not because they are inherently worse people than the poor. Their sins are more prominent because they are able to give free rein to their proud hearts, taking

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<sup>3</sup> Consider Genesis 20, when Abimelech showed that he did have some amount of "fear of God." This does not mean that he was a believer, but merely that he was painfully aware, at least in this case, that his actions resulted in divinely-enforced consequences.

<sup>4</sup> See Ecclesiastes 7:29, "See, this alone I found, that God made man [Adam] upright, but they have sought out many schemes." In this chapter, the Preacher was looking for an explanation for why the world is so confusing, chaotic, and contradictory. His simple answer is the Fall.

whatever they wish and trampling on whoever is beneath their notice.<sup>5</sup> Killing the rich, as in the French Revolution, only leaves a vacuum for more sinners to fill, who will then use their power for similar acts of violent oppression.

### 3. Psalm 53:6 - Salvation from this World

- a. God's people long for relief from the oppression that sin causes all over the world. We must note two important things about this salvation:
  - i. It will be from God alone. There are undoubtedly ways we could improve the political, social, and economic systems we have in our day and age to be relatively more just and achieve somewhat better prosperity for all. Ultimately, however, we will always have significant levels of poverty, cruelty, corruption, and injustice with us until Christ returns. We should therefore be wary of politicians who promise to give us the world on a platter.
  - ii. It will be according to God's promises. David focuses on Zion in verse 6 because God had promised to dwell with his people there to watch over and preserve them. For New Testament Christians, Christ is our great high priest who brings us into God's presence on the heavenly Mount Zion.<sup>6</sup> Therefore we look to Christ alone for our ultimate salvation from all the evils that press down upon us in this world. He is coming and he will finish the job, as the whole book of Revelation testifies.

### 4. Contrasting Psalm 53 and 14

- a. The significant differences:
  - i. Psalm 14 uses both Elohim and YHWH, the personal name of the God of Israel. Psalm 53 only uses Elohim. This gives Psalm 53 a more general feel; it does not use the personal name of YHWH because it is contemplating Israel's relationships with all of her pagan neighbors who worship many gods (elohim), and which hate her and wish to devour her wealth.<sup>7</sup> Psalm 14, on the other hand, is more focused on addressing this wickedness *within* Israel. Those who speak the name of YHWH in worship but inwardly hate his covenant and commands.<sup>8</sup>
  - ii. Psalm 14:6 warns those who shame the poor, where 53:5 warns those who lay siege to Israel. This further supports the idea that Psalm 14 is more about Israel's internal affairs, showing that there is great wickedness within the hearts of God's chosen people revealed in their treatment of the poor,<sup>9</sup> whereas Psalm 53 is as broad as can be, emphasizing the wickedness of every other nation.
  - iii. Psalm 14 is in Book 1 of the psalter, which focuses a great deal on the distress of the king and his people, and yet shows forth confidence that the Lord will deliver them from this distress. This fits with the focus of Psalm 14, which is exactly that. Psalm 53 could also fit there, except it focuses more particularly on Israel's

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<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:8 teaches this when it uses "high" as a euphemism for pride and says we should not be shocked when we hear about the oppression of the poor because you typically find more and more arrogant men the higher up the chain of command you go.

<sup>6</sup> Consider Hebrews 12:22-29, which says the heavenly throne room of God, where Christ has entered on our behalf, is "the heavenly Mount Zion" which we enter through him.

<sup>7</sup> You can see this pattern very strongly in sections of the Old Testament that deal with the Exile, for example. Note how in Daniel, there are many times Nebuchadnezzar, or others, talk about the God of Israel but they do not use YHWH. They call him the Most High, but never YHWH, even in prayer, until Daniel 9 where the book starts to look more clearly beyond the Exile.

<sup>8</sup> Compare with Psalm 50:16-18, "But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit.'"

<sup>9</sup> Consider also Psalms 12 and 15, which likewise speak of arrogant men taking advantage of the poor.

international enemies, which is appropriate because Book 2 presents the king more triumphantly as a warrior against God's foes.<sup>10</sup>

- b. These psalms are two sides of the same coin. Psalm 53 reprises the main idea and themes of Psalm 14, but with its emphasis shifted further toward the whole mass of fallen man across the globe. Together they prove beyond all shadow of a doubt Paul's point in Romans 3:29, that both Jews and Gentiles are enslaved to sin. They strip us of every reason we would have to stand on our own two legs and leave us naked, without excuse before the judgment seat of God.
- c. Only once we see how desperately sick we are, can we see our need for a cure. If you take this description of fallen human nature seriously, you will not find the Reformed doctrine of salvation difficult to accept.
  - i. If you really believe that no one naturally seeks after God, as verses 2-3 of this psalm say, then the need for God to forcefully intervene is obvious. I have heard many Christians say God is a gentleman, and so he will not enter your heart unless you let him in. Would you praise a firefighter for his gentlemanly manners if he knocks and waits before entering a burning building? If the people inside are passed out and incapable of answering the door, it is not good or merciful to wait at the door!
  - ii. If God did not choose us unconditionally, we would never have chosen him. If he did not call us irresistibly, we would have resisted. If we could blow it and ruin our salvation in any way, we would find that way and follow it. Praise God that he knows the depths and the pervasiveness of our sins, and has saved us accordingly: by his free grace alone, so that no one can boast!

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<sup>10</sup> See *Learning to Love the Psalms* (2017), by W. Robert Godfrey, page 41.