



Psalm 53 - Denunciation of Godlessness

To the leader: according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David.

Introduction

This psalm is almost identical to Psalm 14, and the two psalms were probably alternate versions of the same hymn before they were included in the Psalter. The two hymns serve the same function, namely, to mourn the fact that mankind does not seek after God and thus treats God's people cruelly.

The main difference between the two psalms is that 53:5 is as long as 14:5-6 together and thus 53:6 = 14:7. In 53:5 the psalmist describes in greater detail the terror that will befall the wicked instead of emphasising God's care for the poor (14:5-6). Also, Psalm 53 uses *Elohim* for God throughout to refer to the deity, while Psalm 14 uses Yahweh 'the Lord' in several of these places.

- ¹ Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'
They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts;
there is no one who does good.

Psalm 53:1

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' David looked at those who denied the existence of God and came to the conclusion that they are fools. The idea behind this ancient Hebrew word translated fool is more moral than intellectual. David did not have in mind those not smart enough to figure God out, for no one is that smart: <<*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord*>> (Isaiah 55:8); he had in mind those who simply reject God.

David says this because of the plain evidence that there is a God; evidence in both creation and human conscience that Paul described in Romans Chapter 1. The fact that some men insist on denying the existence of God does not erase

God from the universe; it instead speaks to their own standing as fools. As Paul wrote: *<<Claiming to be wise, they became fools>>* (Romans 1:22). The Hebrew word for fool in this psalm is *nabal*, a word which implies an aggressive perversity, epitomised in the Nabal of: *<<My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent>>* (1 Samuel 25:25).

The God-denying man is a fool because:

- He denies what is plainly evident.
- He believes in tremendous effect with no cause.
- He denies a moral authority in the universe.
- He believes only what can be proven by the scientific method.
- He takes a dramatic, losing chance on his supposition that there is no God: *<<So they are without excuse>>* (Romans 1:20b).
- He refuses to be persuaded by the many powerful arguments for the existence of God.

There are many powerful arguments for the existence of God; among them are these:

- The Cosmological Argument: The existence of the universe means there must be a creator God.
- The Teleological Argument: The existence of design in the universe means there must be a designer God.
- The Anthropological Argument: The unique nature and character of humanity means there must be a relational God.
- The Moral Argument: The existence of morality means there must be a governing God.

David not only found what the fools said to be significant; where they said it is also important, in their hearts. The God-denying man David has in mind is not merely troubled by intellectual objections to the existence of God; in his heart he wishes God away, typically for fundamentally moral reasons. The apostle explains it this way: *<<For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed>>* (John 3:20).

The phrasing of *<<say in their hearts>>* is also a reminder that it is possible for one to say in his mind that there is a God, yet deny it in his heart and life. One may believe in God in theory, yet be a practical atheist in their chosen way of life. First Samuel 27:1 states that: *<<David said in his heart, 'I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul; there is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines; then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer*

within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand’>>. Was this not David, in some sense, also denying God and speaking as a fool?

They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts. David here considers the result of denying God. It leads men into corruption and abominable acts. This is not to say that every atheist lives a dissolute life and every God-believer lives a good life; yet there is a marked difference in moral behaviour between those who take God seriously and those who do not.

As David considered the sin of the God-denier, he looked out over the landscape of humanity and concluded that there is no one who does good. He did not mean that there is no human good in this world; but that fallen man is so fallen that he does not by instinct do good, and even the good he may do is tinged with evil: <<*The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually*>> (Genesis 6:5), and: <<*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*>> (Romans 3:23).

² God looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise,
who seek after God.

³ They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good,
no, not one.

Psalm 53:2-3

While man may wish to forget about God, God never forgets about man: <<*what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*>> (Psalm 8:4). He is always observing man, looking down from heaven on humankind. In man’s rejection of God, there is often the wish that God would just leave him alone. This is an unwise wish, because all human life depends upon God: <<*so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*>> (Matthew 5:45), and: <<*For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring”*>> (Acts 17:28). This is an impossible wish, because God has rights of a creator over his creation.

To see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. When God does look down from heaven, one thing he looks for is if there is any understanding or seeking among humanity. God looks for this not primarily as an intellectual judgement; he does not wonder if there are any smart enough to figure him out.

He looks for this more as a moral and spiritual judgement; if there are men who understand his heart and plan, and who seek him for righteousness sake. People may deceive themselves into thinking that man, on his own, really does seek God. Do not all the religion and rituals and practices from the beginning of time demonstrate that man does indeed seek God? Not at all. If man initiates the search then he does not seek the true God, the God of the Bible. Instead he seeks an idol that he makes himself. As the apostle puts it: **<<We love because he first loved us>>** (1 John 4:19).

They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse. When God looks, this is what he finds. He finds that man has turned away from God, and has therefore become corrupt and perverse: **<<Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord; they did not follow their example>>** (Judges 2:17).

There is no one who does good, no, not one. When God finds no one who does good, it is because there are none including David himself. It is not as if there were some and God could not see them. David here observes and remembers that man is truly, profoundly, deeply fallen.

⁴ Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,
who eat up my people as they eat bread,
and do not call upon God?

⁵ There they shall be in great terror,
in terror such as has not been.
For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly;
they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.

Psalm 53:4-5

Have they no knowledge, those evildoers. David first considered the profound fallenness of man; now he deals with the fate of God's people in such a fallen world. God's people might seem like the weak fools, but David understood that it is the workers of iniquity who have no knowledge of God and his ways.

Who eat up my people as they eat bread. It looks like the evildoers are strong and have the upper hand. David wondered if the people of God are abandoned to the fools and the corrupt of this world; to those who **do not call upon God.**

There they shall be in great terror, in terror such as has not been. Here, this psalm briefly but significantly departs from the words of Psalm 14. The idea seems

to be that David took Psalm 14, slightly modified it to meet their present crisis, and used it to encourage Israel.

David prayed for something that God had promised an obedient Israel. God promised to send such fear in passages like: <<*And as for those of you who survive, I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies; 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 though no one pursues*>> (Leviticus 26:36), and: <<*Among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting-place for the sole of your foot. There the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit*>> (Deuteronomy 28:65).

David prayed for something that God had done on other occasions. There were many times when God sent fear into the hearts of Israel's enemies. Examples include Joshua against the Canaanites (Joshua 10:10), Gideon against the Midianites (Judges Chapter 7), when Jonathan and his armour-bearer defeated the Philistines (1 Samuel Chapter 14), and in the days of Hezekiah against the Assyrians (2 Kings Chapters 18-19).

They will be put to shame, for God has rejected them. Here God answers the fool who despises him with despising the fool in return. However, it seems that it was not only the fool's denial of God that provoked the Almighty; it was more pointedly the fool's attack against the people of God. It might be said that attacking the people of God is just as foolish as denying God's existence.

⁶ O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When God restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

Psalm 53:6

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! David knew that God was a refuge for his people and that the workers of iniquity would never win. Yet that was hard to see at the present time, so David expressed his great longing that God would bring the victory and deliverance he had promised to his people.

When God restores the fortunes of his people. This does not refer to the Babylonian captivity, many generations after David's time. Here captivity is used in a general sense, speaking of any time or situation where God's people are oppressed and bound, spiritually as well as physically.

Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad. David anticipates the coming deliverance, and calls the people of God to be joyful in consideration of it.