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## Psalm 14: To the Leader. Of David.

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**Psalm 14**  
**To the Leader. Of David.**  
(NRSV)

Curiously, Psalms 14 and 53 are almost identical. The layout below will show you where they are the same, and where they differ. There are several inconsequential wording differences, but two main differences of thoughts. First, in verse 2, where Psalm 14 has the LORD searching for a wise person, Psalm 53 has God looking. Thus Psalm 14 thinks of the covenant God of Israel, while Psalm 53 thinks of God generically. Second, Psalm 14:5-6 are reworked in Psalm 53:5. More on this difference below.

**Vv. 1-3** (Ps. 53:1-3)

- 1a Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.”**
- 1b They are corrupt,**
- 1c they do (Ps. 53: **commit**) abominable deeds (Ps. 53: **acts**);**
- 1d there is no one who does good.**
- 2a The LORD (Ps. 53: **God**) looks down from heaven on humankind**
- 2b to see if there are any who are wise,**
- 2c who seek after God.**
- 3a They have all gone astray (Ps. 53: **fallen away**),**
- 3b they are all alike perverse;**
- 3c there is no one who does good,**
- 3d no, not one.**

There is here a stark contrast between the foolish person and the wise person (verses 1a and 2c). But it is not a contrast of equals. Everyone, universally, is a fool. And the LORD searches to see whether there is a wise person, but finds that all have gone astray. Indeed, the Psalmist laments that there is no one who does good (verse 1d), but after the LORD searches to see whether anyone is seeking for God, He comes to the intensified conclusion, “there is no one who does good, no, not one” (verses 3c-3d).

The hallmark of the fool is that s/he says, “There is no God.” When we hear this slogan, we might immediately think of our modern philosophical atheism, which challenges the existence of any God. And to take up the debate as to whether God exists or does not exist may be useful in another context. But that is not the complaint of the Psalmist; he is not thinking of that problem. Something else is on his mind. The Psalmist lives in a day and in a culture where everybody, Jews and surrounding Gentile nations alike, believed in a god. Every nation had its own god; life without a national god was utterly unthinkable. Israel’s problem was not whether there was a god or not; their problem was whether Yahweh or another god was the stronger god, or even the true god. The Psalmist is concerned rather with those who say in their hearts that there is no God. These people may indeed say with their lips that there is a God, and may even in the public worship call Him Yahweh. But inwardly they do not draw the consequences of such a confession. They are guilty, not of unorthodox beliefs, but of a massive and ultimately foolish inconsistency. They say that there is a God with their lips, but in their heart they deny that He has any claim upon them. They are guilty of practical atheism.

God is God, whether we call Him so or not. He has created us and we are accountable to Him for our lives and in our lives. Practical atheism occurs when people live and act in such a way as to deny that there is a God to whom we are accountable for our behavior. They say, "There may or may not be a God, but He has given no Ten Commandments. He may or He may not have given the Ten Commandments, but I choose not to take his Ten Suggestions. God may or may not have claim to be Lord of my life, but I will do as I please, because it's my life, and I will live it as I will." That is the folly of which the Psalmist speaks. He is not accusing them of being idiots; they are fools because, in the image Jesus uses, they are building their houses on sand.

That the Psalmist is speaking of their practical atheism can be seen from the fact that the Psalmist indicts them, not for their foolish thinking, but for their bad behavior and bad character. Notice how verse 1b,c,d and verse 3a,b,c,d heap up descriptions of bad behavior and bad character. The people about whom the Psalmist is speaking may not *appear* bad, but their badness is the necessary judgment and the inevitable concomitant of their practical denial of the relevance of God. Such a denial is a fundamental denial of their humanity and of the image of God in which they were created, for we were all created by God and for God.

St. Paul uses these verses as they appear in the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek from about 200 B.C.) in his epistle to the Romans. In Romans 3:10b-12 he cites this Psalm as he finds it in the Septuagint, and then in verses 13-18 refers to further verses from other Psalms and other portions of the Old Testament. He does so in order to confirm the indictment he had made of the whole human race, namely, that under the Law of God, and before God, we are all damn-worthy human beings (Romans 3:19-20).

Verse 2 contains a gentle irony: God has to seek for those who are supposed to be seeking for Him. The contrast to being a fool is to be a wise person. The hallmark of the wise person is that s/he seeks after God. Psalm 53 pictures God searching for those who seek God. Psalm 14 is more pointed: Yahweh is seeking for those who are looking for Him as God. The phrase, "to seek for the LORD," is frequently used in the Old Testament. Read, for example, in Isaiah 45:18-19 Yahweh, who alone is God, is the one who creates order out of chaos. So do not seek after the LORD as He wants to be known by His People in the chaos, but rather in the word He has spoken. Then we shall not seek the LORD in vain. Amos (8:11-12) can think of no more horrible plight than for the People of God to seek for the Word of God and not be able to find it, because God has withdrawn it. And Isaiah (55:6-7) pleads with Israel to seek the LORD while He may be found, for He will pardon. In Jeremiah 29:13 Yahweh promises that if you seek him with all your heart, He will let himself be found. For the transformed heart no longer secretly thinks that there is no God, but now urgently wants to be what God intended us to be. So also Jesus preached: "Seek first the Kingdom (the Rule) of God" (Matthew 6:33).

**Vv. 4-6** (Ps. 53:4)

**<sup>4</sup> Have they no knowledge, all the (Ps. 53: those) evildoers  
who eat up my people as they eat bread,  
and do not call upon the LORD (Ps. 53: God)?**

In the first section of these Psalms (verses 1-3), the indictment of folly is universal; no one does good. In this section (verses 4-6), there does seem to be a distinction. On the one hand, some of the people are evildoers, who prey upon God's People, and who do not call on the name of the LORD. Furthermore, they are therefore bereft of some necessary knowledge of the LORD. On the other hand, there are some others who are in the company of the afflicted righteous

(verse 4b), who are the poor whose refuge is the LORD. Here we may think of a society whose dominant character is one of contempt for the commandments of God. Yet within the broader society there are those who make it a point to be found in the company of the righteous. These are not those who imagine themselves to be holier than the other "thous," but those who take refuge in their affliction in the LORD. It may not have been so different in Israel when the Psalmist wrote than it now is in our day. We sometimes lament that we live in such a secular society, where God seems to be irrelevant to the day to day concerns that we have. Yet within that society, there are those who, while confessing that they too fall into the prevailing practical atheism, nonetheless also look for their righteousness to God and find refuge in the LORD, the God of the Covenant. What the evildoers do not seem to know is that in the long run God will vindicate the righteous poor, and that the predations of the evildoers will eventually be curtailed by the LORD Himself.

After verse 4, the thought of these two otherwise so similar Psalms here diverges somewhat.

**(Ps. 14:5,6)**

**<sup>5</sup> There they shall be in great terror,  
for God is with the company  
of the righteous.  
<sup>6</sup> You would confound the plans  
of the poor  
but the LORD is their refuge.**

**(Ps. 53:5):**

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

In Psalm 14, the evil doers shall experience great terror. That terror is not specified, but the Psalmist is confident that they shall experience it, because God is with the righteous, and he will not forever tolerate the abuse of His own. The evil doers intend to confound God's poor; that is, they intend to humiliate them and frustrate the righteous poor in their plans to call on the name of the LORD and to gather in the company of the righteous and to make the LORD their refuge.

In Psalm 53, the terror that the evil doers shall experience is called unparalleled terror. They shall experience terror because in ungodly manner they have attacked God's righteous poor. Their terror is more graphically spelled out. They will die, but their bones, instead of receiving honorable burial, will be scattered abroad in dishonor. Thus they will be put to shame and contempt. And what is the reason for such indignity? The verdict is brutal in its directness: God has rejected them.

The evil doers of whom the Psalmist speaks are guilty of a double sin. First, they are practical atheists, who by their behavior deny the claim that the LORD has upon them. In that respect, of course, we all fit the definition of the fool. It would compound our folly if we were to deny our own guilt of that sin. But the Psalmist also notes how these evil doers are not content with their own practical atheism; they also try, perhaps forcibly or perhaps simply in terms of numbers and influence, to alter the behavior of others, the righteous poor, so that they follow in their foot steps.

Verse 5 begins with a rather mysterious "there." I should like to end the discussion of this section with a quote from James L. Mayes:

The evildoers will be gripped with the dread of the divine, the experience that comes from overwhelming confrontation with the presence and power of the LORD. The

somewhat mysterious “there” suggests that this will happen precisely in the oppression of “my People.” Somehow it will be disclosed that the LORD is with the company of the righteous, who in the poverty of their powerlessness make the LORD their refuge. Their weakness and trust, such a perfect contradiction, of the power and autonomy of the evildoers will be the means of revealing the true reality which their oppressors do not know and cannot understand. Just how this will happen is not said, but the notion points to the power of the witness of martyrs and especially to the cross of Jesus.

## **V. 7**

(Ps. 53:6)

**<sup>7</sup> O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!**

**When the LORD (Ps. 53: God) restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.**

If in the present the People of God are divided into oppressors and oppressed, into evildoers and the righteous poor, into the attacking ungodly and those who take refuge in the LORD, then the Psalm ends with a prayer for a future day when the whole People of God, all of Israel, would be delivered and restored to a day of rejoicing in the LORD.

### **Prayer to accompany Psalm 14:**

God of wisdom and truth, without you neither truth nor holiness can survive. Show your mighty presence among us, and make us glad in proclaiming your deliverance in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **Nugget**

I call upon Him in prayer. Often He might reply – I think He does reply – “But you have been evading me for hours.” For He comes not only to raise up but to cast down: to deny, to rebuke, to interrupt. The prayer “prevent (=go before) us in all our doings” is often answered as if the word prevent had its modern meaning. The presence which we voluntarily evade is often, and we know it, His presence in wrath.

And out of this evil comes a good. If I never fled from His presence, then I should suspect those moments when I seemed to delight in it of being wish-fulfillment dreams. That, by the way, explains the feebleness of all those watered versions of Christianity which leave out all the darkest elements and try to establish a religion of pure consolation. No real belief in the

watered versions can last. Bemused and besotted as we are, we still dimly know at heart that nothing which is at all times and in every way agreeable to us can have objective reality. It is of the very nature of the Real that it should have sharp corners and rough edges, that it should be resistant, should be itself. Dream furniture is the only kind on which you never stub your toe or bang your knee. You and I have both known happy marriage. But how different our wives were from the imaginary mistresses of our adolescent dreams! So much less exquisitely adapted to all our wishes; and for that very reason (among others) so incomparably better.

Servile fear is, to be sure, the lowest form of religion. But a god such that there could never be occasion for even servile fear, a safe god, a tame god, soon proclaims himself to any sound mind as a fantasy. I have met no people who fully disbelieved in Hell and also had a living and life-giving belief in Heaven.

C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

*Walter E. Keller*

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