

Psalm 14

For the choir director. Of David.

Introduction

Last week, we considered who the “enemy” is in the Psalms. We know from Psalm 2 that he is the one meditating on a vain thing. He is the one taking counsel against Yahweh and against His Anointed, the one who says, “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” So last week, we heard the king lamenting: “How long will my enemy be exalted over me?” (13:2b). Last week, we heard the king praying: “Look and answer me, O Yahweh my God; Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy says, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my adversaries rejoice that I am shaken” (13:3-4).

In this next Psalm, David—the *king*—meditates further on the “nature” of his enemy. He meditates on this not to be morbid and gloomy, but to strengthen his own faith and the faith of all God’s people. David begins his meditation with these words:

I. Psalm 14:1a — The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

There are four different Hebrew words for the “fool” (or “foolish one”) in the Old Testament.* The most common word is *k^e-sil*, and the Legacy Standard Bible translates this word simply, “fool.” The other three words (*sa-kal*, *e-wil*, and *na-bal*) are translated in the Legacy Standard Bible, “simpleminded fool,” “ignorant fool,” and “wicked fool.” It’s that last word (*na-bal*) that David uses here. We can’t distinguish exactly between these four words since their meanings overlap so much, but one commentator says, “A *nabal* is a species of fool, base and worthless and an object of scorn. He is never merely stupid [though he is that; cf. *k^e-sil*], but... morally deficient” (Fox; quoted by Longman). *Na-bal* is probably the strongest of all the words for “fool.” It’s the word that’s used for that ultimate, unsurpassable, intellectual and moral insanity of saying in one’s heart, “There is no God.”

It’s important to see that the fool says this “*in his heart*.” It’s deep down in the very center of his being that the *na-bal* entertains this conviction. In other words, whether or not he believes philosophically that a supreme being or deity exists is irrelevant. Whether or not he believes that the name of this deity is Yahweh or that this deity is the one who sent His Son into the world in the person of Jesus Christ may also be irrelevant. Deep down, the fool is always working to convince himself that there really is no God — not a holy and just and sovereign God to whom he must one day give an account for his every thought and word and deed; not the true and living God who is who He says He is. One commentator writes: “The fool is one who chooses never to think of a God [specifically a holy and absolutely sovereign God] as being involved with his daily affairs” (Ross). That God, says the fool in his heart, that God doesn’t exist.

And so we see that for David, there are only two categories of people: the atheist (the fool who says in his heart, “There is no God”) and the biblical theist (the one who has “turned to God from

* *K^e-sil* (Prov. 10:23; 13:19; 14:16; 15:20; 18:2; 75x’s; 50x’s in Prov.; 18x’s in Eccl.); *Sa-kal* (1 Chron. 21:8; Eccl. 7:17; 10:3, 13; Jer. 4:22; 5:21; 23x’s; 13x’s in Eccl.); *E-wil* (Ps. 107:17; Prov. 1:7; 7:22; 14:9; 15:5; 20:3; Jer. 4:22; 27x’s; 19x’s in Prov.); *Na-bal* (59x’s; 4x’s in Prov.; 5x’s in Psalms; 22x’s a proper name [1 Sam. 27])

idols to serve [the] living and true God”; 1 Thess. 1:9). To use New Testament language, there are only atheists and Christians. We could call this atheism a “practical” atheism (a *living as if* the holy and sovereign and merciful God of the Bible doesn’t exist), but it’s more than that; it’s also an intellectual atheism. It’s the *thought*, deep down, even if it’s never spoken out loud or consciously articulated, that such a God isn’t “for real”—that such a God doesn’t really exist. And it’s this thought in the heart that is the height—the apex and the pinnacle—of folly.

There are many professing and actively worshipping “Christians” today (together with the adherents of other religions) who do believe that a god of their own imagining exists (a god who is not infinitely holy and absolutely sovereign according to the biblical definitions of those words). There are many professing “Christians” and religious people who believe that this god of their own imagining is, in fact, involved with their daily affairs. We can think, for example, of the “professing Christians” in churches that affirm the sin of homosexuality. But for David, these professing “Christians” (and all other religious people) are no less atheistic than the secular materialist. They, too, are the fools who have said in their heart, “There is no God.” And it’s this thought in the heart that then corrupts and makes abominable all that the fool does.

II. **Psalm 14:1b** — They corrupt—they make abominable—[their] deeds;†

These are two of the strongest possible words that David could have used. To “corrupt,” in the Hebrew Bible, means fundamentally “to destroy,” and so in different contexts, “to lay waste” (Exod. 8:24), “to devastate and ravage” (Judg. 6:5; 1 Sam. 6:5), “to ruin” (2 Chron. 31:11; Isa. 14:20), “to pollute” (Prov. 25:26), “to spoil” (Jer. 18:4); “to make totally worthless” (Jer. 13:7). It’s a strong word. Too strong, according to our human “wisdom.” But if, in his heart, the fool says, “There is no God,” then all the deeds that arise from out of this heart must be, by definition, corrupted — ruined, polluted, and totally worthless. This isn’t to say that the fool never does any good in society. In this purely horizontal sense, he may do many “good” things that are not at all worthless and that we can all be grateful for. But can we finally separate the horizontal from the vertical? What is truly good and worthy in society at a purely horizontal level may be at the same time wholly corrupted and polluted and utterly worthless because it has its source in the heart that says—even if never consciously or out loud, “There is no God.” And so even as this “good” person professes to be wise, he is the ultimate fool (cf. Rom. 1:21). He has made even his good deeds to be corrupt (cf. Isa. 64:6).

When David refers to the fool’s “deeds” (plural), he does refer to specific acts, but he also refers to more than this. The plural “deeds” sums up the whole of a person’s lived life. The Apostle Paul says:

- 1 Corinthians 10:31 — Whether, then, you *eat* or *drink* or *whatever you do*, **do all to the glory of God.**
- Colossians 3:17 — And *whatever you do* in word or deed, **do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks** to God the Father through Him.

† Both verbs are in the *hiphil* (causative) stem and they share the same direct object (“deeds”; see Ross).

But because the fool has said in his heart, “there is no God,” there’s nothing that he has ever done to the glory of God or with thanksgiving to Him. Therefore, all that he does is in God’s sight wholly corrupted and utterly worthless — of no spiritual or saving good.

We can never accurately assess our deeds (all that we say and do) apart from the fundamental orientation of our lives. It’s this reality that David gives expression to when he says, “They corrupt—*they make abominable*—their deeds.” Here’s another strong word. Too strong, according to our human “wisdom.” Something abominable is something grotesque, repulsive, loathsome, and abhorrent (Lev. 20:13; Deut. 7:26; Job 15:16; Ps. 5:6; Ezek. 11:21; 16:36). All the deeds of the fool who says in his heart, “There is *no God*,” are fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the *God who is*, and must therefore be even abhorrent and abominable to Him. They are of no spiritual or saving good. Instead, all that the fool does only condemns him.

But do we still protest? Is David really saying that the atheist can do *nothing* “good”? And is he really saying that the *entirety* of fallen humanity is atheistic? David answers simply:

III. Psalm 14:1c — ...there is no one who does [any] good.

Here in these few words is the whole biblical doctrine of total depravity. “There is *no one* who does [any] good.” All are atheists. All are fools. All have said in their heart, “There is no God” — not the true and living God who is who He says He is.

David is speaking, here, of fallen humanity apart from the sovereign grace of God that raises sinners from death to life and works faith in us so that we are declared righteous in Christ and enabled to live righteously in His sight (cf. v. 5). But to be even more clear: Is David speaking of the whole of fallen humanity only as it exists in the pagan nations outside the covenant people of the Jews? Or is he also speaking of this fallen humanity as it exists even within the covenant people of the Jews? The answer is both. “There is *no one* who does good” — neither Jew nor Gentile (cf. Rom. 3:9-12). Even at the beginning of Israel’s existence as a nation, Moses could write:

➤ Deuteronomy 32:4–6, 15–21 (cf. Isa. 9:17; 32:6; Jer. 29:23) — The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He. They have acted **corruptly** [cf. Ps. 14:1b] toward Him, they are not His children because of their defect; but are a **perverse and crooked generation** [i.e., people; cf. Ps. 14:5]. Do you thus repay Yahweh, O people who are **foolish** [*na-bal*; cf. Ps. 14:1a] and without wisdom? Is not He your Father who has bought you? He has made you and established you? ... Jeshurun grew fat and kicked—you grew fat, thick, and sleek—then he abandoned God who made him, and **treated with foolishness** [*na-bal*] the Rock of his salvation. They made Him jealous with strange gods; with **abominations** [cf. Ps. 14:1b] they provoked Him to anger... **Yahweh saw this** [cf. Ps. 14:2]... Then He said, “I will hide My face from them; I will see what their end shall be; for they are a **perverse generation** [i.e., people], sons in whom is no faithfulness. They have made Me jealous with what is not God; they have provoked Me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a **foolish** [*na-bal*] nation...”

“There is no one who does [any] good” — neither Jew nor Gentile. All are atheists. All have said in their heart, “There is no God.” All have corrupted and made abominable all their deeds. All are fools. Has David come to this conclusion based on his own insight into the hearts of men? He goes on to write in verse two:

IV. Psalm 14:2 — Yahweh looks down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there is anyone who has insight [*sa-kal*], anyone who seeks after God.

We see now that in the eyes of a holy God, there are only two possible categories of people. One is either in the category of the “fool” or he is in the category of the one who has “insight.” One is either in the category of the man who says in his heart, “There is no God,” or he is in the category of the man who is earnestly seeking after the true and living God. One is either corrupting and making abominable all his deeds or he is living righteously by faith. But when Yahweh looks down from heaven upon the sons of men outside of, and apart from, His sovereign, saving grace, He sees that the whole of fallen humanity falls into only one category. This is God’s verdict, who, as Elihu says in Job, “does not need to consider a man further, that he should go before God in judgment” (Job 34:23):

V. Psalm 14:3 — They have all turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

It’s impossible to imagine a verdict more universal in its scope. “All” the sons of men — every single, individual person. The sons of men “[all] together” — a single, undifferentiated mass of humanity. This is the universal scope of the verdict in positive terms, but then the same universal scope is repeated in negative terms: “all... [all] together... *no one... not even one.*”

It’s impossible to imagine a verdict more universal in its scope *or* more devastating and far-reaching in its assessment. They have “turned aside” (pursued their own way in opposition to God); they have “become worthless” (completely ruined and spoiled); they do no good.

We say “they,” but we know (as David did; cf. Ps. 32:1-2 & Rom. 4:4-8) that there was a time when we were all included in this “they.” We had all turned aside, all of us had become worthless, not one of us did any good. We were all fools. Every single one of us said in our heart, “There is no God.” This is God’s own verdict, who looks down from heaven upon the sons of men.

➤ Romans 3:9–12, 19 — What then? [—Paul asks.] Are we [Jews] better [than the pagan Gentiles]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are *all* under sin; **as it is written**, “THERE IS *NONE* RIGHTEOUS, *NOT EVEN ONE*; THERE IS *NONE* WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS *NONE* WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; *ALL* HAVE TURNED ASIDE, *TOGETHER* THEY HAVE BECOME WORTHLESS; THERE IS *NONE* WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS *NOT EVEN ONE.*” ... Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that *every mouth* may be *shut* and *all the world* may become *accountable to God*.

It's against the backdrop of this "hopeless" and "impossible" reality that the power of God is fully revealed in the Gospel (cf. Rom. 1:16). It's against the backdrop of this "hopeless" and "impossible" reality that the sovereign mercy of God is seen in all its splendor (cf. Rom. 9:14-18, 22-24; 11:32-33). It's against the backdrop of this "hopeless" and "impossible" reality that we come to see the miracle of our salvation. And so we confess with all of our hearts that "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him [alone] be the glory forever. Amen."

Paul quotes the first three verses of Psalm 14 to show that we all stand equally in need of the sovereign, saving grace of God. When David wrote these verses, however, he was already assuming the "righteous generation" (cf. v. 5) saved by grace. David was writing these verses as a meditation on the nature of the enemy in order to strengthen the faith of God's people. So he continues in verse 4, recounting, it seems, the words of Yahweh Himself:

VI. Psalm 14:4 — Do all the workers of iniquity [*pa-al a-wen*] not know [*ya-da*], who eat up My people as they eat bread, and do not call upon Yahweh?

The biblical doctrine of total depravity doesn't say that all men are always as bad as they can possibly be, but it does explain how some men can be as bad as they are, and especially how some men can be such hateful and violent enemies of God's people. The one who says in his heart, "There is no God" (and according to the biblical definition that's every person outside of Christ) is capable of every kind of evil, and especially of every kind of evil against God's people. "They eat up God's people as they eat bread." As one commentator puts it, "[They] think... they are not doing anything more sinful, — indeed rather what is justifiable, irreproachable and lawful to them, — than when they are eating bread" (Keil-Delitsch). Aren't we beginning to see this in our own time? But if we've really taken seriously God's verdict on the whole mass of fallen humanity, should this be a surprise to us?

We're not surprised when the fool hates us and even believes he's morally justified in seeking our destruction because we're not surprised when the fool acts according to his folly. And yet there's also a sense in which—because of God's grace in our own lives—we are astonished at just how senseless and stupid and ignorant the fool is. If Yahweh sits in heaven and laughs in chapter two, now, in chapter 14, He looks down from heaven and is in "disbelief" at the folly of all the workers of iniquity. Do they really "not know?" Are they really so completely void of all insight that they dare to touch God's people?

The "senseless" man, in the Old Testament, is described with the adjectival form (*ba-ar*) of a word that refers to "cattle" and "beasts" (*b^e-ir*; Gen. 45:17; Exod. 22:5; Num. 20:4, 8, 11; Ps. 78:48). So we read in Psalm 92:

➤ Psalm 92:6 (cf. Ps. 73:22) — A **senseless** man [the man who is no better than a brute animal] **does not know** [*ya-da*], and a **fool** [*k^e-sil*] does not understand...

What does the senseless man not know? What do the workers of iniquity not know?

VII. Psalm 14:5–6 — There [in the very place where they were devouring God’s people] they are in great dread, for God is with the righteous generation. You would put to shame the counsel of the afflicted [of the righteous whom you oppress], but Yahweh is his refuge.

Here are words full of comfort and assurance! What does the senseless man not know? He doesn’t know this most basic and fundamental of all realities: that there *is* a God. He did know this—and there’s a sense in which he still does know this: but he’s become futile in his thoughts; his foolish heart has been darkened; professing to be wise, he has become the fool (Rom. 1:21-22). What does the senseless man not know? He doesn’t know this most basic and fundamental of all realities: that there is a holy and sovereign God who looks down from heaven and sees, and who will throw into terror and dread all the workers of iniquity who dare to touch His people. So we read in Psalm 92:

➤ Psalm 92:6–9 (cf. Jer. 10:8, 14; 51:17) — A **senseless** man **does not know** [*ya-da*], and a **fool** [*k^e-sil*] does not understand *this*: That when the wicked flourished like grass and all the **workers of iniquity** [*pa-al a-wen*] blossomed, it was only that they might be destroyed forevermore. But You are on high forever, O Yahweh. For, behold, Your enemies, O Yahweh, for, behold, Your enemies will perish; all the **workers of iniquity** [*pa-al a-wen*] will be scattered.

And in Psalm 94:

➤ Psalm 94:8–11 — Discern, you **senseless** among the people; and when will you have **insight** [*sa-kal*], you **fools** [*k^e-sil*]? He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see? He who disciplines the nations, will He not rebuke, even He who teaches man knowledge? Yahweh knows the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.

What does the senseless man not know? He doesn’t know this most basic and fundamental of all realities: that God is *with* the righteous generation; He is the *refuge* of His afflicted ones.

And so it is the senseless man—the fool—who eats up God’s people as he eats bread. *This* is who the “enemy” is. He is the fool.

But what the fool does not know, we do know. By grace we’ve been plucked out of a totally depraved humanity and given insight to understand—to seek after God and call upon His name; to see the ultimate end of all the workers of iniquity and the final salvation of all God’s true people (cf. Ps. 73). By grace we’re no longer the fools who do *not know*, but the righteous who *do know*, and so we pray with complete confidence in and with our King:

VIII. Psalm 14:7 — Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion! When Yahweh restores the fortunes of His people, may Jacob rejoice, may Israel be glad.

We pray these words today in a way that the Old Testament saints never could. We remember that already, Yahweh has installed His King upon the heavenly Zion, His holy mountain (Ps. 2:6). And so we see, even today, the future judgment of the wicked and salvation of the righteous

already accomplished in the victory that Christ has achieved by His death and resurrection and ascension.

We “know” today, in a way that the Old Testament saints could never “know.” Therefore, we have “perseverance and faith in the midst of all [our] persecutions and afflictions which [we still] endure” (2 Thess. 1:4).

- 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10 — This is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. Since it is right for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give rest to you who are afflicted and to us as well at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, executing vengeance on those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, **AWAY FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD AND FROM THE GLORY OF HIS MIGHT**, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.

We “know” today, in a way that the Old Testament saints could never “know.” Therefore, we *rejoice*, already, in the salvation of Israel; we are *glad*, already, in the restoration of the fortunes of Yahweh’s people; and we live in confident expectation of that day when our rejoicing will be complete and our gladness will be full.

- Revelation 19:1–3, 5–6 — After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great crowd in heaven, saying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; **BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS**; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her sexual immorality, and **HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS SLAVES shed BY HER HAND.**” And a second time they said, “Hallelujah! **HER SMOKE RISES UP FOREVER AND EVER.**” ... And a voice came from the throne, saying, “Give praise to our God, all you His slaves, you who fear Him, the small and the great.” Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. **Let us rejoice and be glad** and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come.

We “know” today, in a way that the Old Testament saints could never “know.” Therefore, we who used to be fools ourselves can now boldly speak the truth and live righteous lives “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [we] shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).