

Psalm 53: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 53. To the choir master, according to Mehalath, a mascal of David. The fool says in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity.

There is none who does good. God looks down from heaven on the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away.

Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one. Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up My people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God.

There they are in great terror, where there is no terror, for God scatters the bones of Him who encamps against you. You put them to shame, for God has rejected them.

O that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion, when God restores the fortunes of His people.

Let Jacob rejoice. Let Israel be glad. Psalm 53 is a surprising psalm in the fact that it is virtually identical to Psalm 14.

[1 : 04] The most notable differences are found in changing four instances of the divine name, Yahweh, to God. And in Psalm 53, verse 5, There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror.

For God scatters the bones of Him who encamps against you. You put them to shame, for God has rejected them. Which contrasts with Psalm 14, verses 5-6, which read as follows.

There they are, in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous. You would shame the plans of the poor, but the Lord is His refuge. One further difference is seen in the superscription of this version of the psalm, which gives the music to which it was to be put.

This psalm belongs in the second book of the Psalter, while Psalm 14 belongs in the first. This would seem to give some weight to the idea that both of these books circulated independently before being made part of this single book.

Marvin Tate suggests that there is a slight shift of the emphasis from Psalm 14, which focuses upon Israelites who devour the righteous, to Psalm 53, which might have foreigners more in view.

[2 : 08] Alan Ross adds that Psalm 14 might provide slightly more comfort for the faithful, and Psalm 53 more of a warning for the wicked. He cautions against the presumption that Psalms 14 and 53 simply have exactly the same message, and that the differences between them can merely be attributed to some editorial hand.

Rather, he suggests that Psalm 14 may have been amended at some later point for a specific situation, with some proposing events during the reign of Hezekiah or Jehoshaphat as possible contenders.

The psalm is a sort of prophetic denunciation of the sinfulness of mankind, its claims taken up in Paul's famous catena of scriptures on the subject of universal sinfulness in Romans 3, verses 10-19.

The psalm opens with a description of the mindset of the fool. The fool declares to himself that there is no God. This claim is less one of theoretical than of practical atheism.

The fool believes that he can live and act as if God didn't see or know, as if God were indifferent to or incognizant of his deeds. Such practical atheists act as if there were no divine judgment that might come upon their actions.

[3 : 18] This fool might be a particularly pronounced case, but broadening the frame to include humanity more generally. The same general faults can be found in all. All have corrupted their way.

None is committed to what is good. They don't seek after God. Each has, in his own manner, fallen away, together becoming unfitted for God's presence. The judgment that there is none who does good in verse 1 is intensified in verse 3.

Not even one. However, the fool has fallen into a catastrophic misjudgment. He is complacent as he prays upon the people of God and does not seek God. In verse 5, he experiences his

comeuppance.

In the very place where the man who does not consider God thought that he was secure, sudden and great terror comes upon him. Those who encamped against the people of God are swallowed up, and their bones littered across the earth, as God's fearful judgment comes upon them.

One could imagine this psalm fitting in the context of the Lord's defeat of the invading Assyrians during the reign of Hezekiah, for instance. God puts those who disregard him to shame, but Israel looks to the Lord for its deliverance, its eyes fixed upon his house.

[4 : 29] Israel's fortunes and the fortunes of the Lord's people will be restored, and they will be given reason to rejoice in God's goodness.

