

God Doesn't Believe in Atheists

Psalm 53:1-6

By Joe Holland

Our great God, our majestic God, we are so thankful that You have given us Your word that we might not be adrift in the sea without a rudder, without an anchor. Would You come tonight through this—Your inerrant, holy word—and teach, rebuke, train, correct, that we would be better equipped to serve You as men and women of God? We pray and ask all of these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We continue our series on the Psalms this evening, coming to Psalm 53. Allow me to offer a few words of introduction before I read the text. Psalm 53 reminds me of one of my favorite pastimes in coming to a new congregation, and that's trying to figure out what your favorite hymns are. A congregation has certain hymns that they sing with more passion, and you can tell by listening to a congregation sing which hymns are precious to their hearts. Now Psalm 53, were it in our hymnbook, would not be one of your favorite hymns. We don't usually sing hymns about total depravity. God looking down upon creation; upon unregenerate man. In fact, if you're on a Bible-reading plan that takes you through the Psalms, I dare say this is one of those Psalms that you would read through quickly without much contemplation. And that's because in the end, topics like this that we approach tonight make us uncomfortable. But for some reason, for very *good* reasons which we will see tonight, God saw fit to take this Psalm and this topic and place it in the Psalm book of His people, because He wanted His people to dwell on it, to look it over, and to contemplate it.

And it's thus we look at as we come to this text tonight. If you'll notice in the subtitle that David wrote this text. It's very similar to Psalm 14. It appears that later in David's life he revised Psalm 14, rewrote and changed a few verses, and those two Psalms—very similar, almost identical—became a part of the worship of the people of God. If you would look at it briefly before I read and notice how it's divided. Verse 1 will serve as an introductory verse; verses 2 through 4, the second part that lay before us sin and total depravity; and verses 5 through 6 are the answer. As is common in the Psalm, it often presents a problem and then answers it. So with that introduction, allow me to read this, the word of God.

Psalm 53

For the choir director; according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David.

The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God," They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good. God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there is anyone who understands, Who seeks after God. Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one. Have the workers of wickedness no knowledge, Who eat up My people as though they ate bread, And have not called upon God? There they were in great fear where no fear had been; For God scattered the bones of him who encamped against you; You put them to shame, because God had rejected them. Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores His captive people, Let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

This is the word of our God. May He add His blessing to it tonight as we look to it.

Now, I have to offer one caveat before we jump into this so you don't get confused as we go through, and that's the topic, the subject that we're looking at here. David is talking about unregenerate, unconverted, non-Christian—in this context, non-Israelite—humanity. He leaves the Church out when he's talking about sin, and he's not saying that the Church is without sin, as we heard this morning in 1 John 2 and as we saw in Psalm 51 when David confesses his sin before God. But what he is doing is that he's taking this opportunity to write a Psalm looking at those in amongst the congregation of God who are not believers and those who are in nations around who also are not believers. So this Psalm is *not* saying that we are 'the high Christians on the high hill' and we are without sin looking down on the rest of creation that is with sin.

I. Definition of the practical atheist

So with that being said, look with me at verse 1. It's the introduction to the text. It says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Now as you know, a fool in the Proverbs is an un-intellectual person, someone who lacks wisdom, maybe someone who lacks tact—and that is not what David is talking about here. When David talks about the *fool* in this passage, he's talking about the *atheist*; he's said in his heart, "There is no God." And not just a theoretical atheist or an intellectual atheist; he's talking here, specifically, about the practical atheist.

What I mean to say is that *biblically* there is no such thing as someone who doesn't believe in God. I know there are people who *claim* that they don't believe in God, but biblically speaking...the title of my sermon, "God Doesn't Believe in Atheists"...there is no such thing.

If you would turn in your Bibles to Romans 1:18-20, this is a key verse that I want you to hold in your minds as we move through this Psalm this evening. This is

Paul talking about what I just told you, that there are no such things as intellectual atheists: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

Very clearly, there is no such thing as an intellectual atheist, and so we come tonight to this verse wondering about this fool who says in his heart, “There is no such thing as God.” And you might be prone at first blush, when you look at this passage, to think that the person mentioned here, the fool, is someone who would raise his fist at God and say in his heart, “There is no God.” That’s not the picture we get when we read Romans 1: that everyone knows that there is a God; it’s ingrained in their hearts.

Instead, what I want you to hold in the forefront of your mind when we look at this fool, as we go forward, is rather the image of, let’s say, a broken man, huddled in the corner, maybe with his fingers in his ears, rocking back and forth, saying, “There is no God. There is no God. There is no God.” Someone who is trying to convince himself of the thing that he wants to be not true, *desperately* wants to be not true, desperately wants there to not be a Judge. He wants there to not be a God in heaven, and he can’t escape the fact that there is one, and so he says in his heart, “There is no God. There is no God. There is no God,” as a comfort to himself in all of the actions that you’re about to see that he commits. And so that’s the introduction as we approach this evening with verse 1, that there is no God. And that’s what the fool says in his heart.

II. God's condemnation of the practical atheist.

Now if you’d look at verses 2 through 4, we have God’s condemnation of this fool. One of the things that I have to chuckle about, whether I hear it on the news or in articles or magazines or when someone waxes eloquently about the goodness of humanity and how such-and-such... “If only we could get such-and-such—” “If only people would understand this or that,” then man would unlock his potential and there would be perfect peace and there would be summertime all around, and there would be great music blaring and life would be wonderful. And I just chuckle, not necessarily in humor but more in sadness. And we come to that in this verse.

What I want you to see is this statement, that “God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men,” the very beginning of verse 2. Now it’s a very interesting perspective that David brings. He could’ve said that David the king looks out over unregenerate Israel, looks out over all of the nations and makes a proclamation about sinfulness, but he doesn’t. He said, ‘The very God *Yahweh*

looks down from heaven upon the sons of men, and makes a declaration about their sinfulness.' He is emphasizing the fact that this is *God's doctrine* of total depravity, that it's God's doctrine of sin, that we in a very real way are entering into the classroom of God, that God has made careful study into the heart of man and He is about to instruct us as to what He found. And it's not that humanity is basically good, and "if only we could get to such-and-such"; it's much, much bleaker than that.

And so what I want you to see in this verse is the doctrine of total depravity. And, very quickly, let me briefly tell you what total depravity is—a word we throw around very eagerly here when we are talking about sin. Total depravity basically is that your affections, your thoughts, your will—all of it is tainted in some way by sin so that nothing that you do is absolutely good. That everything is tainted in some way by sin and by corruption and by wickedness. It's the illustration of one bad apple makes the bunch go bad. You have heard the adage, I don't know exactly if you know where that comes from, but what happens is that when an apple ripens it lets off a gas that causes the other good apples to ripen as well; it causes all the rest to go bad as well. And that's a good illustration of what total depravity is: that all of our faculties are tainted with sin, that there is sin in each one, and it corrupts each part. And that's what God's about to instruct us about here in this Psalm.

And the way that I'm going to frame it is under two categories. First of all, that the unbeliever is good-less and that the unbeliever is God-less. So let's examine good-less first, without good. I want you to look at the end of verse 1 and the end of verse 3. "There is no one who does good. There is no one who does good, not even one." David doesn't leave much wiggle-room here when it comes to applying goodness to the world. Would you look at the strong vocabulary that God uses when He describes the non-Christian, these nations that are raging against God? Verse 1, "abominable," "corruption"; then in verse 4, "wickedness." They are without good in every faculty; all of them are depraved and sinful. Now that's pretty easy to see in this passage.

What you might be wondering, or the objection you might have, is how can this be? I mean, there are good actions done by people who don't believe in God, who don't confess Christ. I'll give you an example, a story from my college days. I had a friend who was a confessing Christian who later turned away from the faith because he had joined a service group at the University of Virginia. And what he saw was people who served, non-Christians who served the community, who served the poor and the underprivileged *more* than he saw his Christian friends. And he said, "This can't be right. Christianity can't be the only way because I see more goodness in these non-Christians, more zeal than I do in the church itself." And certainly that was a proclamation against the church, and certainly we have our faults with the way that we serve.

But we cannot apply ultimate goodness—even when we see people serving the

poor, even when we see people saving lives; great, virtuous, zealous acts; honest businessmen who aren't Christians — to these actions. God looks down and says, 'None of it. Not a single action, not a single thought, even the great ones, even the ones that appear great in our eyes—none of them are good.' And that's because they're lacking one fundamental ingredient, the one fundamental ingredient that the law giver—the great law giver, our God—declared, that this is goodness; this is ultimate goodness.

To be able to define something as “good” requires that it to have a pure, unadulterated, uncorrupt, unabominable, unwicked (as it says in this passage), a pure desire after the glory of God. And so we have to look out over all of the good things we can see in the world and the good actions of men and women who are not Christians, and we have to say that each of those actions in some way, whether small or big, are tainted with pride—maybe trying to earn righteousness before God, trying to earn their way into heaven, trying to make themselves feel better. And so each one of those things, though they are good relatively speaking, before God He says, 'corrupt, abominable, and wicked.' He paints a pretty dark picture and, if you would, that's the very verse right here. This very fact, that all things are tainted with sin, is what Paul is getting at at the end of those verses, those precious chapters at the beginning of Romans, Romans 1-3. If you'd turn with me to Romans 3:10 where this very Psalm is quoted. Paul has just gone through three chapters of saying, 'Gentiles: sinful, lacking goodness, lacking righteousness before God,' and then he turns to the Jews and he said, 'Jews, in all of your zealousness, in all of your laws, in all of your rituals: sinfulness, lacking righteousness before God.' And we see here our Psalm uttered, “As it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.’” And we start to see in this Psalm what I talked about in the beginning, that it is uncomfortable for us. It is uncomfortable for us to hear the lips of God pronounce over all humanity, 'sinful, no goodness, not even one.'

But goodless-ness is not the only thing that God declares upon the fool in this verse. He declares them to be godless as well. If you'd look with me at verse 2, “God has looked down to see if there is anyone who understands, who seeks after God.” And then paralleled in verse 4, “Have the workers of wickedness no knowledge,” and at the end, “and have not called upon God?” Those who have not Christ, those who have not been saved by the blood of the Lamb, though they may pursue all kinds of gods, all kinds of outlets, all kinds of things to place their faith in—whether it is their own works or whether it is laws made up by a fake religion, an empty religion—none of them truly seek the Lord. That is important for us to remember as we cling to our doctrines of salvation: that it is only God who can so change a man's heart; it is only God that can so work in a man's heart and so call him that he would even desire to follow after God, that he would even understand the way of salvation; and without that nobody, nobody turns to God. It's very common for Christians to think that all they have to do is somehow take their non-believing friends and just kind of turn them the right way and they will

see Christ. That is completely blown apart in this passage when you consider what God has to say about the fool. No one seeks Him without Him calling them.

And so we come to the end of this passage, the end of godlessness, bleak and dark. How could this be a song of the people of Israel? I'm going to add one more thing before we get to the solution. Would you look at verse 4? It's a description of the persecuted Church. David uses an interesting turn of phrase here. He says that it is as natural for the non-Christian to persecute the Church as it is for him to eat a normal meal. That's a pretty startling statement by the King of Heaven. That it is as natural for the non-Christian to be an enemy of God as it is for him to do a daily activity of life. And I only say this because I want you to see that the bride of Christ will always have an enemy with the world. Never expect the world to be happy, to raise the banner of Christ without salvation. If there is no salvation in the heart of a man or a woman, whether they confess it openly or not—even in our civil, southern hospitality where atheism is looked down upon—they are at enmity with God. It started in Genesis. It started when God pronounced the curse upon the serpent. And He said, 'Satan what's going to happen throughout all eternity is your people, those who are not of My flock, will hate My people. There will be enmity.' And that cord runs all through the Old Testament, whether it be the Israelites at war with the Canaanites or whether it be the Sadducees and Pharisees at war with a remnant, the true Church in the New Testament. That cord of enmity between non-Christians, non-believers and the Church runs here through this Psalm and is muttered here right before Paul turns to the solution to sin, the solution to total depravity. And so I want you to see that before we move on to the solution at the end.

III. God's solution for the practical atheist

And so now we move to verses 5 and 6. I get to give you a little bit of a break from the melancholy, from the morose topic that we've been studying, from total depravity and sin. If the first four verses of this Psalm are the groan, the last two verses of this Psalm are the sigh of relief. And the interesting part about it is that it mirrors the second coming of Christ. It mirrors that Day of Judgment when Christ will come again and save His Church, because two things will happen. First, God's enemies will be judged. They will be given wrath and eternal punishment for all of their sins, for all of the ways that they have waged war against the church and denied Christ. And the second thing that will happen is that the people of God will be saved. They will be brought into eternal joy and bliss. They will see the Lamb and they will rejoice. And we have those two things mirrored here in the solution, so let's dive into that.

First of all, verse 5, we see God's punishment upon the wicked. Here, metaphorically, the enemies of God are pictured as an army outside of the gates of Jerusalem and God does two things to them. First of all, there's fear where there was no fear, unwarranted anxiousness, a lack of peace, always thinking

that the next day is going to bring calamity and destruction. That is God's punishment upon unbelief, even in this world. It is no coincidence that one of the statements that a believer makes as soon as he comes into the kingdom of God and first experiences adoption as a son—and you know it; you may have said it yourself—is, “What peace there is with God.” How comfortable it is to be redeemed and to know that I have a sovereign God looking out for me, because without that there is fear even when there is no fear. There is unwarranted anxiousness. And that's the first punishment of God upon the wicked.

The second is complete destruction. Do you notice that God says...that not only does He bring destruction to bear but He takes the very bones of the enemies of God and scatters them? There will be a day when the cry of our hearts...and you have to know it...the cry of our hearts when we look upon the persecution of the church no matter where it is, and we cry out, “It's not right! The world isn't supposed to work this way. It's supposed to be different. Where is the justice?” That there will come the day when God will look upon the enemies of His kingdom, of His church, and He will make amends and justice will be wrought and wrath will come. So in here we have encapsulated and finalized the life of the unbeliever, which is so sorrowful, is so dark it should make you almost want to weep, a life filled with anxiousness, of unwarranted fear to end in destruction because of sin, because of enmity with God.

Now we move on to the beautiful verse 6, David's crescendo in this Psalm. He comes to the point of crying out to God, “Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores His captive people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.” And if you were a Jew you would immediately link Zion with the presence of God. You would know exactly what David was talking about: that Zion was the place that God dwelt especially, even apart from His omnipresence. And that was where His people worshiped Him and where He was in all of His power and might. And when David says, “Oh, that salvation would come from Zion!” he's saying, ‘Oh, that the Anointed One would come. Oh, that the Messiah of Israel would come. Oh, that God Himself would come and bring salvation for His captive Israel!’ David is calling to Christ.

And please don't let Christmas so depart from your minds to forget that name given to Jesus from the Old Testament, “Immanuel,” “God with us.” That David's cry here echoes throughout the Old Testament, echoes through the destruction of Jerusalem and even the return of the exiles, echoes all the way to the opening pages of the New Testament in Matthew: Matthew 1, an angel coming and saying, ‘There will be a baby born and He will be “God with us.”’ The incarnation of Christ yells back the answer to David's question in this verse, that ‘Yes, salvation from Zion has come. Let His people rejoice.’

And we see here the answer to total depravity, the answer that David was working through all the way through, the answer to the darkness, the answer to the valley of despair that we have walked through: that the light at the end of the

tunnel is Christ Jesus, salvation out of Zion; that He will come and He will bring deliverance to His people—not just from foreign enemies, not just from domestic enemies, but from the enemy of sin. And that's what Paul is getting at in Romans 3 when he takes this Psalm and he quotes it as I read to you, quotes that “all have fallen,” that “none is righteous, not even one,” “no one seeks God.” And then he comes down to verse 23, verse 24, verse 25 of chapter 3 in Romans and he lays out that there is a propitiation, that there is a sacrifice, that there is a Christ, the salvation out of Zion that David calls to from the Psalm, that he prays to, who has come and He has brought salvation. “Let Jacob rejoice, let His people be glad.”

And we start to see why God would want us to walk through the valley of death, the valley of despair, the valley of dealing with this doctrine of total depravity—that we might at the end of the tunnel through seeing the depth of the darkness see the glory of the light in Christ Jesus as He is shown to be in the New Testament, a mighty Savior. That is the beauty of Psalm 53. That's what is meant to David; that's what brought the people of Israel comfort as they sang this over and over again, as Christ Himself sang this Psalm in the congregation of His people: comfort for His people.

So why don't we turn our eyes to ourselves in 2004 and consider some points that we don't want to miss as we consider Psalm 53 and our day to come, our evening tonight, our week, the rest of our lives? First of all, there is sorrow and there is suffering in this life, and we grieve and we hurt and we have to let it be that way; we must. I'll give you an example. Most of you have just gotten done with Christmas and New Year's where you visited family; you were at office parties with friends; and you had opportunities to be in the midst of not just Christians, to be in the midst of those who don't confess Christ. And I dare say that in the midst of those parties, in the midst of maybe conversations with your family, there were times that you looked at someone who doesn't know Christ and you were sorrowful to hear the words that came out of their mouth, that belied sorrow underneath and hopelessness. You looked upon a family member and you knew grief for their souls. Or maybe at an office party, maybe even around the dinner table, you were labeled as “that crazy conservative Christian.” Maybe passive-aggressively, maybe even openly you had arguments with those who maybe leveled calls of “hypocrite” or tried to tear down your faith. This Psalm is for you, because what God is bringing before us here is that the sorrow and the grief that we experience in those situations are good. Because our tendency is to say, “It's not that bad. Cut 'em a break. It's not that bad. It's not *that* bad. Things aren't *that* dark. They aren't *that* bad.” And as soon as you say that, you make the light of Christ not that bright, because as you worked through this Psalm you saw your heart lift as we got to verses five and six when once they had been low talking sin and depravity. We must walk through the valley of sin, and we must be honest at what sin really is and what it looks like to live in a fallen world if we are going to truly proclaim Christ for who He really is in all of His power and in all of His beauty, in all of His majesty, and be able to have

something to offer when we are sorrowful or we are persecuted at family gatherings or at office parties or fill-in-the-blank what event you were at.

Secondly, we must be a prayerful people. Did you notice the main thing that marked a fool in this verse? Not seeking after God, or even more specifically, not calling upon God. I know for myself that prayer happens to be the number one thermometer for my health with the Lord, and I think that it would be the same with you if you truly thought about it. I can do Bible reading plans. I can serve in soup kitchens. I can minister to youth and I can trick myself into thinking that I'm doing it for the right reasons, that somehow I'm earning points before the Lord. But when I pray, or when I look at my lack of prayer, I know how I truly stand before the Lord. I know that if I am not defined by prayerfulness, if I don't have a heart desire to seek after God, then how am I different from the fool in here? Because, you see, the fool is defined...his life is defined by a lack of seeking God.

And so I ask you, "Can we take the gift of prayer that God has given us as a church and work in the weeks to come, maybe in devotions in the morning that you have with your families, and will you just be what you've been created to be?" You're not a fool. You're the people of God, and you've been given the power and the desire and the motive to seek after Him in prayer. We must be a prayerful people. It's what we were made to be.

Lastly, this is my request to you, and this pertains to worship—what we've done this morning, what we've done this evening—similar to our first application. I ask you to open your eyes during the week. Would you look as you drive around town, maybe even as you drive to church? Would you keep your eyes open and honestly admit what you see? Would you look at a fallen world, would you look at yourself and your own shortcomings? Would you let verses 2 through 4 in this song be the walk that you walk during the week, even if it means that you're uncomfortable, even if it means that you're sorrowful and you grieve at the state of our world, of our society, of our country? Would you allow the depth of fallen humanity to hit you, that when you come into this place on Sunday, Sunday morning and Sunday evening when the church gathers as we're gathered now...what we're about to do as soon as I am finished: sing the praises of God...that you would be..."Let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad"...that you would confess verses 2 through 4 that you might come into the glory of the church and see the glory of God and rejoice and be glad? The more that the world looks like the church, the more that what we do in here will look like the world. So let us be honest. Let us look to our God who had a purpose of placing a Psalm like this in His inerrant word, a hard Psalm, a Psalm filled with darkness and talking about sin, that we might at the end see Christ, see the salvation out of Zion. Because, in conclusion, this Psalm really is a Psalm of comfort. It was a comfort for David and his people who were persecuted, and it's a comfort for us today, so we need to read it, we need to sing it and we need to daily dwell on the mercy offered by our great Savior.

So if you would, if you'd let me close with 1 Peter 1:6-9. It's a verse in the New Testament that parallels what we were talking about here in Psalm 53. Peter's talking to a persecuted people, a people who were sorrowful about the world around them, and these were his words to them: "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls."

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).