

Psalm 53 Folly and wisdom

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
The Bible talks a lot about Wisdom and Folly. In the book of Proverbs chapter 9 Wisdom and Folly are presented as 2 women, each calling from a prominent place in the city to those who pass by. Lady Wisdom calls out:

*"Come with me, oh come, have dinner with me
Walk up the street to a life with meaning"*

Meanwhile Madam Folly also calls out:

*"Come with me. No one will ever know. I'll
give you the time of your life."*

But all her guests end up in hell.

What is the difference between the wise person and the fool?

Jesus had a lot to say about wise people and fools. They feature in some of his best known stories.

You will remember for example that the wise man built his house upon the rock while the foolish man built his house upon the sand.

When the storm came and hit the 2 houses the

one built on rock stood firm whereas the one built on the sand collapsed. Jesus' point, which he explained himself, was the difference between those who *hear* his words and *obey* him and those who merely hear his words - and then ignore them.

Then there was Jesus' story of the rich farmer, the man whose verdict on his life went like this: I have so many crops, so I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And I will say to myself,

*"You have plenty of good things laid up for
many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be
merry."* But God's verdict went like this:

*"You fool! This very night you will die. Then
who will get what you have prepared for
yourself?"*

The man was a fool. That does not mean that he was stupid. He was a clever farmer and capable of planning years in advance. Who knows, he might even have believed in God, but what made him a fool was that he lived as if there was no God. Whatever his theology, in

practice he lived as if this world was all that there is.

I remember as a child being taught a chorus which went like this:

*Store your treasure in the bank of heaven
Where no thief will steal away
You will find your treasure safely hidden
When you get to heaven – one day*

The rich farmer only stored up treasure on earth.

Psalm 53 takes us back to the root cause of foolishness

The Hebrew text of the psalm begins:

The fool says in his heart “No God”. This is not so much a piece of philosophical reasoning. The fool in all these Bible passages is not some ancient version of Richard Dawkins, or indeed Yuri Gagarin the first man in space who announced that there was no God because he, Yuri Gagarin had been up into space and looked around and didn't see him.

People who live as if there was no God are not necessarily atheists. They may have a vague

belief in the god of granddad and grandma, they may put notices in the In Memoriam section of the local newspaper indicating a vague belief in the afterlife, they may even turn to God fleetingly in moments of crisis, but they live their lives to all intents and purposes as if God was just an old man in the sky, or as if he was, to quote Bob Dylan, “just an errand boy to satisfy their wandering desires.”

Let's look at the text of this psalm which tells us what happens in the lives of those who live as if God did not exist.

When people turn away from God, there is nothing to stop their lives becoming more and more evil. They are liable to become corrupt and their ways vile. This corruption means that they have no desire at all to do good. They may become oppressors of others as in verse 4 *“they devour my people as men eat bread”*. We can see these patterns in the lives of individuals, societies and nations.

Two words of explanation here:

Firstly, the Bible does not teach that people are as bad as they can be. What it does teach is that the whole human race is involved in sin. The verdict of psalm 53 is repeated by Paul in Romans 3:10:

“There is no one who does good, not even one.”

All of us are like a bowling ball with a bias in it. We may bowl the ball straight, but at some point in its journey it starts to go off the straight line to the side. Evil is not just something which happens “out there” in the world of tyrants, paedophiles or abusers; it is something which has an influence on each human heart. Jesus’ verdict on the human heart was this:

“Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” (Matt. 15:19)

And Paul, in a moment of frustration put it like this:

“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the

good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing.” (Romans 7:18, 19)

We need to be quite clear about this. The Bible does not say that there are some bad people out there. It tells us that people everywhere are sinners and come under God’s judgement. Each one of us is guilty of a lack of love which is both vertical and horizontal; vertical because we have a lack of reverence for God, horizontal because we show injustice to other people. Secondly, whatever our sin, if we turn from it and toward God, we will always find him willing to accept us and forgive us.

Jesus said:

“Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” (John 6:37)

In one of his best known stories Jesus drew a picture of a rebellious son returning to his father. He has wasted his life and his inheritance. He thinks that his father will reject him for being such a waster. One song writer imagines the thoughts of the returning son as he approaches his father:

*I realised that it that it just might be too late,
But there stood my father by the gate
He reached for me and I couldn't believe my
eyes,
The realest smile I'd seen in a thousand miles.*
And that of course is a picture of what happens
when self-centred human beings like you and
me return to God. The message Jesus gives us
is that we don't have to live like orphans; we
have a heavenly father who will welcome us
back however much we may have hurt him in
the past.

However, the emphasis in this psalm is on
those who refuse to return to God and continue
to reject him. And for them the message is also
clear; if you continue to reject God, then he
will reject you.

God does not ignore those who reject him and
who live as if there is no God to whom they
will have to give account for their lives. The
picture in psalm 53:2 is that he looks down
from heaven and sees the good and evil of each
person's life. He speaks to challenge the evil of

those who oppress other people who are his
creatures:

*"Will the evil doers never learn –
Those who devour my people as men eat bread
And who do not call on God?"* (Psalm 53:4)
His words are followed by action as he sends
them into terror and panic that they have never
known before. They are defeated on the
battlefield. Those who were so proud of their
own wisdom and strength are put to shame. No
wonder these evil doers are called fools; they
had heard about God's punishment of evil
doers in the past, yet continued to do evil
themselves.

If you are familiar with the psalms, you will
enjoy the vast range of thoughts, feelings and
prayers which we encounter even in the
opening verses:

"The heavens declare the glory of God" (19)

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken
me"* (22)

"The Lord is my shepherd" (23)

"God is our refuge and strength" (46)

In the final verse of psalm 53 we come upon another strain which permeates the psalms, and that is longing:

“Oh that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” (Psalm 53:6)

This was in fact a longing for 2 things; firstly the people longed for salvation or being saved or delivered from their enemies immediately. They were constantly in great danger from the much greater nations which surrounded them, like Egypt and Assyria for example, and at one of the lowest points they were taken off into captivity across the desert in Babylon. They longed for an earthly Son of David who would establish the kingdom of God in an Israelite empire and crush the enemy.

God’s people in the Old Testament lived between the promise of the Messiah and the coming of the Messiah. Right at the very beginning of the story, God made this promise to his people when he spoke to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan, in the form of a snake had tricked Eve into going her own way and

rejecting God’s way, and at this moment God speaks to the snake:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, And you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

And as the years went by, God repeated the promise and made it clearer.

In Genesis 12:3 God made this promise to Abraham:

“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

In Deuteronomy 18:18, God said to Moses:

“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I will command him.” (Deut 18:18)

Much later, through the prophet Isaiah, God spelled out in astonishing detail how his servant would die for the sins of his people. But centuries went by, and many of the prophets and psalm writers cried out “How long?”

How long, Lord, until you make good your promise?

The Good News for us is that salvation has come out of Zion. God has fulfilled his promise by sending his one and only Son, who lived up to the name the angel assigned to him:

“You are to give him the name Jesus (=God is salvation), because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21)

As Peter declared in Acts 4:12, his is the only name by which we must be saved. He is the one who brings rest to the weary, hope to the hopeless, new life to those who are lost in the sort of mess we have been looking at in Psalm 53. He does so because he came and lived a flawless life in our place. As we stand before God as his children he looks upon us with love because we come in Jesus’ name. As he looks at us, he no longer sees us spoiled by the corruption and evil which are the marks of humanity in Psalm 53.

It is of course true that each one of us struggles with what the writer to the Hebrews calls “the

sin that so easily entangles”. However, in Christ these sinful thoughts and actions have been covered by his perfect goodness which enables us to stand before God, accepted in his grace. Christ’s perfect record has been given to us.

Now we no longer need to say:

“Oh that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” (Psalm 53:6)

Instead let us concentrate our thoughts for one moment on the amazing salvation which has been achieved for us by Christ on the cross. I would like us to meditate on these familiar words which we find in the book of Isaiah, chapter 53, words which were written hundreds of years before Jesus came and so wonderfully sum up what happened to Jesus and what he accomplished for us in his death:

3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with
suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was
upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Whoever we are, however we are this morning,
this is where we need to come; to the cross of
Christ, predicted and longed for in the Old
Testament, fulfilled in the New; to the cross of
Christ which is the only place where we can

find forgiveness, acceptance, the chance to
make a fresh start with God; the place where
we can ask God to take away the burdens of the
past and give us a hope and a future.

Prayer:

*Father, whether we have merely wandered
from the path, or have deliberately chosen the
wrong direction, we come to the cross this
morning, thanking you that the death of your
Son opens the way back to you, gives us the
power to change direction and be released
from the guilt and power of sin. Thank you that
in Jesus we find forgiveness and our broken
personhood is restored. Amen.*