

Only Fools Reject the Lord

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[0 : 00] The fool says in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, their deeds are vile. There is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.

All have turned away, all have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one. Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread. They never call on the Lord. But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous. You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge. Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion. When the Lord restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, good evening. For any of those of you who I haven't met, I'm Simon, I'm a member here at St. Silas.

[1 : 10] To start this this evening, I'm going to read three quotes from three quite famous people. First is from the physicist Stephen Hawking. He once said this, Before we understand science, it's natural to believe that God created the universe.

But now science offers us a more convincing explanation. What I meant when I said we would know the mind of God is that we would know everything a God would know if there was a God, which there isn't.

Secondly, one of the nation's favorite people, the author and TV star Stephen Fry, when asked one time if he met God, what would he ask him, said this, He goes on to say, The God who created the universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly an utter maniac, totally selfish.

We have to spend our lives on our knees thanking him. What kind of God would do that? He is monstrous and deserves no respect whatsoever. The moment you banish him, life becomes simpler, purer, cleaner, and more worth living, in my opinion.

Or third, from the comedian Jimmy Carr, when I was a kid, I had an imaginary friend, and I used to think that he went everywhere with me, and that I could talk to him, and that he could hear me, and that he could grant me wishes and stuff, and then I grew up and stopped going to church.

[2 : 52] And in response to the popular opinions of our age, we get the psalm today that says, The fool says in his heart, there is no God. How at odds believing in God seems with the rest of the world, and how convincing and more intellectual does the atheist opinion seem in our age?

Do we ever find ourselves longing for the good old days when Christianity was just a bit easier? Well, as we dig into this psalm today, we might find out that that nostalgia for a better day is not only false, but foolish.

The main focus of this psalm is the work of the Lord. So as we look through it, there will be three parts. They'll be on the service sheets he receives on the way in. First, the Lord is rejected. Second, the Lord's people are oppressed. And third, the Lord provides a true hope. Our first thought then, the Lord is rejected. The first voice we hear in this psalm is not the Lord or David, but the heart of the fool, saying there is no God.

Now, fool in the Bible's language is quite a loaded term. It's not just of childish ignorance, a kind of foolishness, but a willful rebellion. Someone who chooses not to follow God.

[4 : 11] As you look through this psalm, you build up quite a picture of the foolish person, don't you? Corrupt, vile, doesn't do good. Verse 2, they lack understanding, refusing to seek God.

Verse 4, an evildoer, a people devourer. It's not the friendliest portrayal of atheism I've ever read, but is that the tone of this psalm?

Is it a psalm of derision? Are we to take it in our attitudes that we should be as publicly scathing about atheism in the public sphere as some atheists are of Christians?

Should we take to Facebook to publicly mock the foolish, foolish pagans? How ridiculous that someone wouldn't believe in the creator of the universe. Well, if we're not careful, that is what our attitude becomes.

If we don't have a measured reaction to this psalm, we can get aggressive and decide that we are proud of the fact that we figured it out. Aren't we great that we're not like the foolish atheists who don't know God?

[5 : 12] But in our attitude, we would end up mirroring our worst critics. And that's just not who we are. And as we read this psalm, that is not who David is. Who is the fool in Psalm 14?

It turns out we all are. So let's reread our psalm a little more carefully then. Verses 1 to 3 give us a God's eye view of the whole of humanity.

Nobody does good, not even one. Nobody understands. All have turned away. All have become corrupt. The first part of the psalm isn't a scoffing indictment against atheism, but a lament at the state of humanity.

God looks down at the world that he crafted with his own hands, the human beings that he made in his own image, that he breathed life into so personally, and finds that there isn't one who hasn't turned away.

All are corrupt. All are sinful. It's the same language that we would find if we turn back to Genesis chapter 6. If you want to turn there, it's verses 5 and 6 that say this.

[6 : 21] The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

And the Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. And if there is one thing that remains eternally the same, except for God himself, it's humans in their nature.

Our human nature is always sinful. What about those of us here who are Christians? Are we not better? But so surely these verses say absolutely not, as they are quoted by Paul in the book of Romans in the New Testament, to say that there isn't anybody, slave or free.

There is no difference, Jew or Gentile, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, says Paul in chapter 3 of Romans. So as far as sin is concerned, God's verdict on the whole of humanity is guilty.

But we believe in God, don't we? How am I getting counted as a fool in this? I do believe in God. Well, that's where we need to find ourselves in this psalm.

[7 : 35] We have to face up to a somber truth that the fools in Psalm 14 are us because we also have rejected God. Every time we sin, we act as if God isn't there, as if his law doesn't matter.

A Christian whose sinning is functionally, at that moment, an atheist because they do not believe that he is there and that he matters. It's not just the world outside this building that is sinful.

It's the world in here. It's me, everyone who serves in this church, all of the children, the lovely old ladies, right down to the toddlers, all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So we must resist in every way an us and them attitude towards sin. This psalm levels out the playing field for the whole of humanity. Sin is something that we have all chosen in our own hearts. None of us want to live God's way or else we would have done so and not sinned. In fact, sin suits us. If we're totally honest, we don't choose what to believe because it's logically proved to us all the time, but we go for what we want.

[8 : 42] We choose to live as if God isn't there because then there are no consequences. I can do what I want and I can sin freely and I can choose not only to believe what I want, but to believe that sin doesn't exist anyway.

Painful though that is, we must be honest with ourselves. This is who we are. Until we really believe that we are culpable sinners, we cannot go any further in the Christian life, we are all fools.

Before a holy God. There will be no point in your life at which you stop being a sinner, no Christians so good that they are not one, and no day in your life so perfect that sin wasn't there with you.

However, there is good news. David wouldn't be writing this psalm if that was the final conclusion. There is more to this. Though all are sinners without exception, there are distinctions to be made, says David.

Now, I work with the Christian unions at the universities, and the point of these is to give every student in the UK the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 52] Now, in order to meet that goal, we put on a lot of public events, a lot of discussions, inviting people to ask the questions that they have about Jesus and discuss what they think of the Christian worldview.

Now, many are interested and seeking, and it's a joy to work with people who come in asking very genuine questions. But some come and don't really actually want to hear.

Some reject passively, but occasionally you do find people who just turn up for a fight at a Christian union event. It's remarkable how ardent people can be in their anti-God sentiment, and how scornful it can be to any Christian they meet in those discussions.

But if this sounds right, that shouldn't be a surprise. Because if you want a new way to reject God, then actually why not reject his people? Someone who hates Christians at a university lunch bar, though, they're usually inconsequential.

They're not going to cause that much damage. But think when they have power, when they're scaled up to the rulers of nations, then they can cause significant suffering for God's people. And so our second point then, the Lord's people are oppressed.

[11 : 02] And we'll be concentrating on verses 4 to 6 for this part. David moves from his opening lament to a cry of distress. At this point, there is a distinction drawn between God's people and others, between those who seek refuge in God and those who would never call on his name.

All are sinners, but here is a group of people who have the title evildoers. Here are people whose rejection of God has led them to active persecution of the Lord's people.

Now, were you to read the Bible's accounts of David's life, you would find that many oppressive forces came in against the Lord's work and the Lord's people. They made their lives a misery.

In this psalm, there are those who oppress the Lord's people so they've been made poor. They are picking on the weak. Verse 4 intensifies that with a very dark picture.

They devour my people as though eating bread. The oppression of God's people here is as mundane and as routine to these people as their daily work. A page before this, if you're in the Church Bible's page, 547, you find Psalm 10.

[12 : 19] And if you read that starting at verse 2, you get something quite similar. In his arrogance, the wicked man hunts down the weak who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts about the cravings of his heart.

He blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord. In his pride, the wicked man does not seek him. In his thoughts, there is no room for God. We find here that this category of evildoer, it actually benefits these people to be against the Lord's people.

They get what they want. This people's rejection of God leads them to sin in their own lives and the abuse of God's people. Now, the oppressed and poor people of the Lord will need help and we will come to that later.

But what we find David saying here is that these evildoers are a danger to themselves. They are ignorant of God's presence with those they are attacking. It's like the playground bully who thinks they'll never get caught only to find out that they've been picking on the headmaster's own child. If they knew the danger they were in, they would have changed their actions. Do all these evildoers know nothing, says David in verse 4. They oppress the Lord's people.

[13 : 35] And that starts to make sense of verse 5. They are overwhelmed with dread. Or if you ever read this in the English Standard Version, they are in great terror. The Lord is with his people.

The evildoers may think that there are no consequences, but they are in a position of an enemy of the Lord Almighty. And that is a terrifying position to occupy.

And just think what's going to happen to these oppressors in David's own lifetime. David will become king. The Lord will be with him fighting his battles. And David will end up on the throne with his enemies beneath his feet.

God will have won. And those enemies will have been destroyed. Judgment will have come. So when we think today that the church looks weak and oppressed, when society refuses to have a Christian voice anywhere in the public sphere, should we despair?

Well, God's people have always looked like they're on the losing side, always look weak. But every time, the victory goes to God alone when it eventually comes.

[14 : 48] And it's always miraculous, just as David suffered with his people, but was eventually brought to victory over his enemies by the Lord. So the church today, we have Jesus, and Jesus suffers with us in all that we go through.

If people attack the church, they're attacking him. They don't know who they set themselves up against because he has already won in the cross and is coming again. Those who would seek to tear down the church today are setting themselves up against God himself.

Atheism, says David, is blind because it can't see the consequences of its own actions. It misreads today and has no knowledge of the future. And that is foolish.

If you're here today and you're not a Christian, you're unlikely to be an active persecutor of the church or else you probably wouldn't be in one. But that doesn't mean that you're safe with God. Everyone is a sinner. You don't get a choice in that. But you can choose to call on the Lord or not. In the end, you'll ever find yourself a child in God's kingdom or outside of it as an enemy of the king. [16:01] And that thought should spark some fear in all of us. If Jesus is finally coming to reign as king, am I one of his own people or one of his enemies? There is no middle ground to occupy.

And when we see the weakness of the church in the UK or the oppression of the church in the Middle East and North Africa, we must cry out to the Lord for help, but never totally in despair, knowing with great confidence that the situation is temporary, the victory is won, and Jesus will come again.

So we've had the voice of the fool in his rejection, the voice of God in his verdict, but all this time we've been listening to David as the psalmist. We've had his lament over humanity's sin, a cry of distress over the oppression of the Lord's people, but finally, we have joyful news and our third point that the Lord provides true hope.

David is still speaking to sinners. We need not forget that, but in contrast to the evildoers who never call on the Lord, there are those who take refuge in him.

For the poor and oppressed people, the Lord is their hope in two ways. First, that he is present with the righteous, verse 5, and a refuge of the poor in verse 6.

[17:26] This hope isn't exclusively in the future for Lord's people. God is present with them now. Now, we need to put this in its context. For the majority of David's life, the tabernacle is just gone.

The place where the Lord's people go to meet with him has disappeared. The ark is parked and there is no central worship place. But that doesn't mean that God has abandoned his people. He is still present with them. Though the Lord's people are poor and oppressed and homeless, they take refuge in the Lord. And this is a comforting reminder when people would sing or read this psalm that their Lord is with them.

Secondly, though, in verse 7, that cry for a true salvation, the warm glow of that coming day of restoration of the people of God. There will be a day for these people that is free from oppression. And David calls out for it, longing, as were the people, for God to fulfill his promises and restore the fortunes of his people. The wonderful news is that some of that cry out in verse 7, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion, that the Lord would restore his people, came within David's own lifetime.

[18:49] David's offspring, Solomon, straight after him, in the time of David's rule and Solomon's rule, it's about the highest point in Israel's history. And if you turn to Psalm 126, which is on page 623, we get a bit of an idea of what it was like when the Lord had brought victory, when the people had won, when there was a temple and God's presence was expressed and there was prosperity.

It's Psalm 126. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with joy.

Then it was said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy. And what a wonderful picture.

Don't you feel the surprise, the joy, the relief, the magnificent glory being given to the Lord for rescuing his people in that day? David cries out to the Lord and the Lord answers and brings joyful worship from the lips of his people.

Now, as we know, things don't last like this in the Old Testament story. The universal sin problem haunting this psalm affects everybody, David himself and his son Solomon both spectacularly full from grace.

[20:13] The Lord remains a refuge for his people always, but we're left yearning for a hope of restoration not just of Jerusalem but of people everywhere, restored to a place without sin into the perfect presence of God, free from all oppression as God has promised.

When Jesus appeared, he was the culmination of all of the hopes and prophecies of God's people. At last, freedom from the power of sin and the wrath of God has come.

But his first coming wasn't the end. His death and resurrection and ascension have given a sure victory, but if you haven't noticed, we're not home yet.

We're still waiting for him to come again but with the promise of salvation and restoration to come from heaven when finally, Jesus comes to restore and remake and free us completely from the presence of sin and that will be a glad day indeed.

Like the Lord's people in Psalm 14, the church lives in hope but with the comfort of God's presence, with the Spirit as our guide and our refuge now. So when we sing in church, we express truths that we believe to one another and to the Lord and just like David, we should feel able to sing songs with content like this.

[21 : 37] Songs that lament our own sinfulness, songs that cry out for God's mercy in the struggles of living faithfully, songs that express the deepest desire of the Christian heart that is for Christ to come again and come soon.

As we mull over this psalm, it must bring us to humble repentance. Every one of us, whether for the first time or the thousandth time, needs to seek forgiveness from God. And we all need to call on the Lord, ask for forgiveness and depend on him and also ask him to protect the church where it is afflicted.

All those countries that Martin mentioned that are playing in the World Cup that do oppress the Christians there, pray for them. And finally, that we would be praying that God's presence would be with us, that we would be aware of that, and cry out for Jesus to come again and to come soon. And how wonderful then Jesus' very last words in the whole Bible at the end of Revelation, yes, I am coming soon. May we always seek to live in the light of that hope.

Let us pray. Amen. to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.

[23 : 06] To the only God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ, our Lord, before all ages, now, and forevermore. Amen.