

Lesson Three: Don't Be Foolish

Focal Text: Psalm 14

Background: Romans 3:9-20

Main Idea: Those who reject God are corrupt and do evil.

Question to Explore: How do I reject God?

Quick Read: The foolish reject God, have become corrupt, and risk being eternally separated from God.

Introduction

“With age comes wisdom, but sometimes age comes alone.”¹ While older individuals often can grow wiser as they age, that is not always the case. There are instances and experiences that show that foolishness can happen as often to the old as well as the young. If only there were a “litmus test” that individuals could use, so they could discover the difference between the wise and the foolish! It would be helpful to have a “checklist” of sorts to decide whether individuals were foolish in their exploits.

The book of Psalms, like the book of Proverbs, provides a few “checklists” to determine proper actions. Psalm 1, for example, is an excellent portrayal of those who are wise: they stay away from the wicked and their ways, and they meditate upon the counsel of God. It also describes that the wicked person lives in the opposite manner. Psalm 1, then, is categorized as a “wisdom psalm,” for it contains a common theme of wisdom material: the determination of the righteous and the wicked.²

Psalm 14 has all the markings of a “wisdom psalm.” It is so categorized because it, like Psalm 1, focuses upon the behavior of people, and it marks the difference between the wise and the foolish. The psalm contains small aphorisms that mark out who these people are in the Lord, or in this case, who they are not.

Commentary

Psalm 14 is nearly a repetition of Psalm 53, as they do have many similarities. However, there are also a few differences. Psalm 14 uses the term *Yahweh* (“The LORD”) to describe God; however, Psalm 53 uses *Elohim* (“God”) exclusively. Psalm 53 has a much larger superscription

attached to the psalm, using the musical terms *mahalet* and *maskil*.³ Psalm 14:5-7 is quite different than Psalm 53:5-6. Whereas 14:7 looks forward to God coming to the rescue of His people, 53:5 appears to say that God was in the process of rescuing them.

While it is not easy to determine who is the narrator of the psalm,⁴ it is certain he has a keen awareness, insight, and outcome of the foolish person. His description of the wicked continues to spiral downward (and crescendos) until the final verses, where the poet concludes that all is not lost. As hostile as the wicked ones were, God was with the righteous. Thus, the psalm can be divided rather simplistically: wisdom's lament (vv. 1-6) and the anticipation of deliverance (v. 7).⁵

Who Are the Foolish? (14:1-6)

Rather than starting the psalm with a word of praise or a plea for God's mercy, the psalmist made a startling declaration: "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God.'" Such an abrupt declaration begins the elements of a foolish person. The first part of the verse notes the identity of the fool. The word "fool" (*nabal*) does not imply a simpleton or an ignoramus; instead, it refers to a person who is morally bankrupt. This is the same definition of the fool noted in many proverbs (ex. Prov. 10:1), and it may also allude to the individual found in 1 Samuel 25. In the passage, Nabal, Abigail's husband, did not care for anyone but himself, and his actions nearly cost him and his family their lives.⁶

The second part of verse one indicates what the fool says in his heart: "there is no God." Rather than a statement that he says outright, it is inferred by his actions. Consequently, his morals reflected a self-centered individual who did not care for anyone else but himself. His statement, "there is no God," is not theological; he is neither an agnostic nor an atheist. Instead, his moral misgivings were of someone who did not believe that *this* God existed, or if this God did exist, the individual did not care. Such an attitude may just be what Malachi had in mind when he spoke against those who wondered where the God of justice was (Mal. 2:17).

The psalmist continued in verse one to describe such an immoral person. "They are corrupt," signifies that they had caused ruin. "Their deeds are vile" indicates that nothing they did was good; it was all abominable. With such traits, the psalmist concluded that "there is no one who does good." Their lives were the antithesis of any good thing that they might be invited to do.

Verse two ends the description of the corrupt individual, and it instead provides a striking illustration of God. While the fool may have declared in his heart that God did not exist, God very much *does* exist, and has been looking down from heaven to see if there were any who understood or sought God. They may not have looked toward God, but God looked toward them, and He was not pleased.

Such an illustration is reminiscent of events found in the Primeval Prologue of Genesis (chapters 1-11). In chapter 6, the Lord saw the evil that humanity had done and were capable of doing. He

was concerned and was grieved by their actions. Consequently, the Lord sent a flood to wipe creation from the face of the earth. Similarly, in chapter 11, the Lord looked down upon the people as they were building a tower that reached into the heavens. With one speech and language, the people decided they could do anything. God, however, saw them as acting independently from Him, and He decided to confuse their language. In both cases, when God looked down from His vantage point, the view was not pretty, and the outcome was heartbreaking.

While the NIV renders v. 2b as “to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God,” the particle *yesh* (“there is”) has an interrogative pronoun attached (“Is there...?”) Thus, it could be translated, “Is there anyone who understands, any who seek God?” Either way it is translated, God created a litmus test to see if there was anyone who might follow the Lord.

Verse three continues the requirements of the fool. “All have turned away” means they have left the right path and have diverted elsewhere. “All have become corrupt” indicates moral failing.⁷ The verse concludes by repeating what was said about the fool in verse one: “there is no one who does good,” then ends the verse with an abrupt conclusion: “not even one.”

In these verses, the fool acted as if there were no God. Everything about the fool indicates that God was not even on their minds and was certainly not in their hearts. They may have said, “There is no God;” God, however, says, “There are none who do good.”⁸

It is hard to know where God’s words end, and where the Psalmist’s words begin. Because it is hard to discern, it seems obvious that the writer is of one accord with God. The words of the previous verses culminate⁹ with an abrupt but certainly understandable question: “Do all those evildoers know nothing?” (v. 4). If they knew anything, they certainly did not act like they did.

The poet continued with his description of their lives. “They devour my people as though eating bread” indicates that they could not care any less about the misfortunate. The text can have two meanings. It could mean that they devour people as they devour bread, indicating that they plowed over these people without giving it another thought. It could also mean that they devoured people while they were eating their bread, as if it were second nature to them. Much of the difference has to do with either the speed of devouring them or the nonchalant way that they did it. In either scenario, these evildoers did not care for the misfortunate they trampled upon.

It is because of their attitude toward the misfortunate, and their mistreatment of them, they clearly did not care for God. “They never call upon the Lord.” Their lifestyle is so diametrically opposed to God and who He is, they are poles apart from God in every way.

For the past four verses, the psalm has spiraled downward. Each verse seems to be worse than the one that preceded it. As readers ponder the psalm, they hope to “find bottom.” Will this evildoing last? Will it continue to travel downward at breakneck speed?

Verse five brings the evildoers to a slow stop. While it may appear that there is no end to the evildoer, things would change. “But there they are, overwhelmed with dread” is literally “there they dread dread” (or “have a great dread”). Fear would take over their lives, because quite simply, “God is present in the company of the righteous” (v. 5b). Amid all that they have done, there is still a light shining in the dark world. While “none are doing good” among those who did not follow God, those who did good were being watched by God—and He was present with them.

Verse six is not easy to translate. The NIV adds the word “evildoers” to help smooth out the passage, but the word is not found in the Hebrew. “You shame (=confound) the plans of the poor (=humble)” is a plausible translation. Although there is no modifier for “you” (plural), most have understood it to be the foolish ones as the subject. The fools who “devour people like they eat bread” would imply individuals who would gladly frustrate the plans of the poor. But, as God was in the company of the righteous, God was also the refuge to the poor.

Rather than seeing the psalm as a downward spiral into the abyss that eventually tilts upward, it might be better to think of the psalm as words about the foolish which crescendo to their unwillingness to call on God. All the evil that they have done would cause them to be overwhelmed with dread, because in the end, God would be with the righteous, and God would be with the poor.

The Anticipation of Deliverance (14:7)

The psalm concludes differently than it began, which has made some wonder if this last verse is an addendum to an older psalm. The writer interjects, “O that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” In the psalmist’s mind, the poor and the righteous were in Jerusalem, and he longed to see a restoration of the people of Israel. Such a cry might imply the Exile, either from Assyria or Babylon, but it need not be. It could also be that, whenever the writer saw injustice in the land, God could restore the righteous people back to a prominence with Him. Such an idea caused him to rejoice at the end, and he called all his people to do the same: “Let Jacob rejoice, and let Israel be glad!”

Conclusion

There is no doubt that this psalm resonates with wisdom. Rather than focusing on who the wise person is (like Psalm 1), this psalm explains what it takes to be a fool in God’s eyes. This person is ruinous from the inside out. With nothing good inside him, there is nothing good outside of him either. Absolutely no one in this situation does good—not even one. It is not that they are ignorant; they at one time knew what to do and how to live, but they walked away from it. They trampled on people as if they did not matter, and they caused frustration to any good thing that the poor (or humble) wanted to do.

The more the psalmist spoke about who the fool was, the more difficult it becomes to identify them. Certainly, society knows who an evil person is—or does it? Oftentimes, “white collar crime” is differentiated from other sins, as if there were a hierarchy of evil among others. But the more one reads through the list, the question should be asked, “who isn’t a fool?”

There are times when doing harsh things against the poor are obvious: prejudice, mistreatment, or an unwillingness to help others in need. Is it possible, however, that anyone, at any time, could be guilty of doing such evil? How are the homeless treated, especially when they are seen in one’s neighborhood? How are the less fortunate treated? Could anyone be considered a “fool?”

The prophet Amos believed that anyone could be so foolish. With razor-sharp precision, he told the people of Israel that they were maligning others. These individuals mistreated the poor, the women, and the prophets (Amos 2:6-12). Those who were among the elite of the country would harass the misfortunate, then they went off to worship God. They may have provided great offerings and gifts, but God did not accept them. They may have had great fellowship, but God did not look at them. They may have sung beautifully, but God stopped up his ears! Their lifestyle did not match their worship, and God was not happy (Amos 5:21-24). Perhaps there really were not any of them that did good.

Toward the end of Psalm 14, the question is asked: “what about the righteous?” The righteous are only mentioned toward the end of the psalm, and while the psalmist noted that God would be with them, perhaps they themselves wondered if this were even possible. Such a reaction would be reminiscent of the days of Malachi. After sharing with his audience as to how corrupt most of the people of Israel were, the righteous minority asked, “What’s the use?” They pondered if there were any reason to remain righteous. Malachi urged this righteous minority to stay the course, for there would come a time when they would be able to rejoice (Malachi 3:13-18).

Psalm 14 states bluntly the kind of person one should not be. At first, it appears that such a person could never be those who are the readers of the psalm, but like most psalms, it causes the reader to look inward and ask, “Could I be like this?” This psalm, coupled with the requirements for entering the sanctuary (Psalm 15), provide an excellent litmus test for the type of person God wants His followers to become when they are worshiping Him.

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1. Although the quote is attributed to Oscar Wilde, no source has been found.
 2. See William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 440.
 3. It is nearly impossible to determine the exact translation of either term. See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, A Continental Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 25, 27.

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4. That David was the author of the psalm is up to debate. Although the phrase *lēdāwid* could mean “of David” (as in authorship), it need not mean this. The preposition before the name could mean “of,” “from,” “to,” “about,” or “for,” to name a few possibilities. However, Kraus, 22–23, was convinced that the phrase meant authorship (*lamed auctoris*).

5. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 147.

6. First Samuel 25 could be an intercalation, a story that sheds light on what precedes and follows it. In this case, chapter 25 would serve to aid in the understanding of the two pursuits of David by Saul, in chapters 24 and 26. When Saul declared to David that he had acted as a “fool” (1 Sam 26:21), it may allude to the Nabal story in chapter 25. Nabal, whose name means “fool,” lived up to his name—as did Saul.

7. This is, at best, an educated guess, as the word is only used three times in the Old Testament: Psalm 53:4 (the mirror of this psalm), Job 15:6, and here.

8. The word for “there is not” (*’ên*) is used four times in these three verses. The emphasis could not be any clearer. There is absolutely nothing good in these individuals, and it stems from their moral livelihood.

9. Craigie, 146, notes that tucked in some versions of the Septuagint, and within a few Hebrew manuscripts, the following text has been added:

“Their throat is an open grave;
(with) their tongue they have used deceit.
Viper’s poison is under their tongue,
whose mouth is replete with oath and deceitfulness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood.
Destruction and misery are in their ways,
and the way of peace they have not known.
There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

This entire passage, Craigie notes, is quoted in Romans 3:10–18. Craigie surmises that this was not an original part of the psalm, but an amalgam of several psalms that came together. Paul could have quoted several psalms that contained lines about corrupt individuals. Later, copyists may have placed them in the margin of the manuscript (as a rabbinic gloss), which then, in some manuscripts, became incorporated. Apart from Craigie, few other commentators note this insertion; however, there is a footnote within *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* about it, as well as some modern editions of the Septuagint.