

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 53 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 53:1-6 ESV

1 To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David. The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good. 2 God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. 3 They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. 4 Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? 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. 6 Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

STRUCTURE

- I. **Humanity's Downward Trend: Divine Denial (1-3)**
 - a. The atheist's foolishness (1)
 - i. His denial of God (1a)
 - ii. His violation of God (1bc)
 - b. God's thorough evaluation (2-3)
 - i. His universal search (2)
 - ii. Our universal sinfulness (3)
- II. **CENTER: God's Astonishment (4)**
 - a. Human ignorance (4a)
 - b. Human cruelty (4b)
- III. **Humanity's Upward Turn: Divine Intervention (5-6)**
 - a. God's judgment (5)
 - i. Judgment of terror (5a)
 - ii. Judgment of shame (5b)
 - b. God's salvation (6)
 - i. Plea for salvation (6a)
 - ii. Hope in salvation (6b)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

David wrote this short Psalm, which almost repeats verbatim Psalm 14. The song is about the practical atheist, the one who—despite what spiritual truths he might claim to believe—lives like God does not exist or judge.

Verse 4 provides the center of the song: God's astonishment over the wickedness of man. The Psalmist marks the centrality of this verse by shifting the speaker from himself to God. Furthermore, we observe thematic differences between what comes before and after.

Before verse 4, we find the atheist's foolish denial of God, which ensues in "abominable iniquity" (1a). The extreme example of verse 1 is generalized in verses 2-3, applying to all humanity. We are not all equally corrupt, but apart from God, we all fall short. These verses also resemble the account of the flood (see below), suggesting that mankind did not progress since then. Rather, we presumed on the mercy signified by His bow in the sky (cf. Gen. 9:13-16). Ignorant of spiritual matters (4a), man's foolish denial of God leads not only to sinfulness (1bc, 3), but in its worst form, to cruel persecution of God's people (4b). Without divine intervention, the cycle of sin only trends downward.

After the negative intro of verses 1-3 and divine astonishment of verse 4, verses 5-6 present the necessary intervention. It comes to us in the form of judgment (5) and salvation (6). We can't have one without the other. The universality of sin requires a brick wall to stop it: God. The one who denies God's reality will meet it full force in judgment. Only in vanquishing the wicked can God save the righteous. Only in smiting the oppressor can oppression cease and the oppressed know liberation. To eternally enjoy God and one another, the earth must be rid of those who despise and attack both. Judgment is real. Therefore, so is salvation.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David. The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good.

—"To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David":

- These musical instructions remind us that the Psalms were not just for reading but singing. Yet their songs taught. "Maskil" is typically understood as a musical term related to wisdom or instruction. Worship songs should teach. Corporate worship turns orthodoxy into doxology, doctrine into delightful heart-songs.
- No one knows what "Mahalath" means. Possibly a stringed instrument.
- This song was originally written by David, but many scholars believe Psalm 53 was edited later. It is almost exactly the same as Psalm 14. One difference is the name for God—Psalm 14 says "Yahweh" where Psalm 53 says "God"—a distinction characteristic of Book 1 versus Book 2 of the Psalter. The former (Psalms 1-41) typically use the name "Yahweh"; the latter (Psalms 42-72) typically uses "God" to depict Him. The other difference is verse 5. In Psalm 53, the verse focuses on the judgment of the wicked; in Psalm 14 (where it is separated into two verses, vv. 5-6) it centers on the succor of the righteous.

—"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

- The "fool" in Scripture refers not to an idiot, as though the verse intended to mock atheists. Rather, the "fool" portrays anyone who rejects God and His infinite wisdom. The term speaks not of intellectual deficits—a "fool" can top the IQ charts—but rather moral rebellion. The rest of the Psalm bears this out.
- He says this in his heart—not necessarily out loud. Nobody claimed atheism in ancient times. For that matter, Romans called Christians atheists for rejecting their pantheon! The point of the Psalmist is that the "fool" lives as a practical atheist. He lives as though God does not see, care, or judge. Even if he gathers for worship, he does so for social reasons and then lives as he pleases.
- This is the twenty-first century man. It also depicts many churchgoers. One can sign a doctrinal statement about the Trinity yet live as though the Father, Son, and Spirit never intervene in human affairs.
- Theological Wordbook of the OT: "The noun 'nabal' is widely used in wisdom literature. In Prov, the term 'nabal'... emphasizes being ignoble and disgraceful, a downright boor. Insensibility to God, as well as a moral insensibility, close the mind to reason."
- The Hebrew word for 'fool'—nabal—is the name of Abigail's husband (1 Sam. 25:25). His literal name was fool! And he acted like one. In the words of his wife, "he is such a son of Belial that no one can speak to him" (1 Sam. 25:17). In the end, Nabal died a fool's death for treating David with contempt.
- Romans 1:22 says of practical atheists: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools".

—"They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good."

- "corrupt": same word found in Gen. 6:12, which precipitated the flood: "And God saw the earth, and behold, it was **corrupt**, for all flesh had **corrupted** their way on the earth."
- This verse confirms that "fool" is a moral category, not an intellectual one.
- People who claim to reject God for intellectual reasons subconsciously do so for moral reasons: they don't want God to meddle in their personal affairs.
- If we refuse God's blessed intervention in this life, we will suffer His stern intervention at the end of it.
- Inwardly, their hearts are "corrupt"; outwardly, they actively commit "abominable iniquity"; outwardly, they passively omit "good." In other words, their corrupt, God-denying, hearts commit sins of commission and omission. They do the wrong thing; they don't do the right thing.
- The "They" in this verse speaks not of "my people" (v. 4)—believers—but of the "fools" (v. 1) who reject God (vv. 1-3) and God's people (vv. 4-5).

- The way we relate to God's people says much about how we relate to God. If we love God, we love His people, and vice versa.
- People who claim to be Christians but do not engage in church community (apart from extenuating circumstances) deceive themselves.
- Many of us have met kind atheists; we have also known mean Christians. How does this square with the statement that "there is none (among the atheistic fools) who does good"?
 - "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6); "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Verses such as these show that outside of a friendship with God, even our "good" deeds do not bring Him glory.
 - This verse does not deny that atheists can do "good" in a relative sense. No doubt, they can. Cornelius in Acts 10:1-2 exemplifies the unbeliever who does good, giving alms generously to the poor. Granted, he believed in God. But he did not know Jesus. He remained unsaved until Peter preached. In the same way, atheists can do good relative to others.
 - Before God, however, we all fall short.
 - Apart from Him, even our "good" deeds are filthy rags (Isa. 64:6).
 - Isaiah would have been viewed as an upstanding citizen, yet when He saw Jesus in His divine splendor, Isaiah declared, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (6:5; cf. Jhn. 12:41—where Jesus attributes Isaiah's vision of Yahweh to a vision of His own glory, equating Himself with the LORD).
 - Similarly, Job fancied himself righteous—until He caught a glimpse of glory: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).
 - Even Jesus—God in the flesh!—did not receive in His humanity the label "good" from a supposedly "good" man: the rich young ruler (Lk. 18:18-19). Jesus intended to illustrate the fallacy of claiming human "goodness" by comparing ourselves with others instead of God and His holy law (18:20).
 - Regarding the question of some Christians behaving worse than some atheists—we must consider the environment. A tormented orphan who succumbs to drugs, gets saved, and struggles forward in Christ cannot be adequately compared to a wealthy and well-educated atheist who grew up in a stable, moral, home. God considers every factor—our environment, inherited generational iniquities, our progress, etc. It's possible to imagine that the aforementioned orphan grows steadily in the fruits of the Spirit, yet never attains to the base level morality of the atheist who started his race miles ahead.
 - Ross: "Here we have a hard saying, for surely one could argue that atheists and unbelievers do some things that are good in life. But in God's sight they are not good because they are not done to the glory of God. They do nothing to enhance and promote life in a way that pleases God."

2 God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. 3 They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

—"God looks down from heaven":

- God does not need to "look down" to evaluate a situation because He possesses omniscience already. The action portrays Him in a human-like manner (anthropomorphism) to poetically communicate the thoroughness of His understanding. He is no blind ref. He sees everything clearly.
- The action of looking down from heaven reminds us again of the flood, where "God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt..." (Gen. 6:12). The Psalmist wants us to see that the flood did not cure the earth's wickedness. The continuance of our species owes not to our righteousness but God's mercy, signified by the rainbow (Gen. 9:13-16).
- God's vantage point "from heaven" contrasts with His actions on earth (vv. 5-6).

—"on the children of man":

- The Psalm began by addressing the practical atheist, but here he expands his address to "the children of man". Not everyone is as reckless in wickedness as the "fool" of 14:1, however all fall short of the glory of God (cf. Rom. 3:23).

- Kidner: "The point of these two verses is that the arrogant materialist of verse 1 is but an example, even though an extreme one, of man in general."

—These verses communicate the universality of human corruption. Not only do we fail to understand; we fail to even "seek after God." Every single person has "fallen away." All people have shown their corruption. And as if we miss the point, he emphasizes it by repetition: "there is none who does good, no not one."

—Paul cites these verses in Romans 3. Here is the broader context, vv. 9-20:

- *"For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: **'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'**" "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."*
- Here, Paul quotes a variety of Scriptures (mostly from the Psalms) to display that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin." After the initial general quote of Psalm 53, Paul proceeds to address the "lips... mouth... feet... [and] eyes" of those "under sin." His point is that humans are corrupt from head-to-toe. Not one aspect of our body, will, or personality escaped the depravity of Adam. This does not mean that we are all as wicked as we could be. Instead, it means that sin has infected our total being like a virus.

—Paul cites this in Romans 3, not only to show how far short we fall but also to point toward the solution. See verses 21-26:

- *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."*
- Because we all "sinned and fall short of the glory of God," God presented an alternative way to be declared righteous in His sight—through faith in Jesus. God "put forward" our Savior "as a propitiation (a sacrifice that turns away wrath) by His blood." The penalty of sin was death, so Jesus died in our place. He paid our penalty, turned away God's wrath, and made God favorable toward us. By placing our faith in Him, God imputes the righteousness of Christ to us. The universal sinfulness of man required the sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of man.

—How can it be that no one seeks after God? Do we not observe many "seekers" in the world? Even God says that He determined peoples' times and places in history in order "that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27).

- When Scripture says both that no one seeks after God (Ps. 53:2; Rom. 3:11) and that God intends for people to seek Him (Acts 17:27), He does not contradict Himself. This goes back to the drawing of the Father: "No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him" (Jhn. 6:44). The point of Psalm 53 and Romans 3 is not that nobody ever seeks God but rather that nobody seeks God *on their own*. We must be prompted by grace. We love because He loved first; we seek because He sought us first.
- Grace always takes the initiative.

4 Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God?

—Again, the godless individuals of vv. 1-3 are distinguished from "my people" in verse 4. The first three verses depict the state of humanity without Christ.

—The voice shifts from the Psalmist to God, who refers to believers as "my people". God asks this question as if He's taken aback by the wickedness of humanity. As an omniscient being, we cannot surprise Him. This is another anthropomorphism, where the Psalmist illustrates God's nature by making Him appear human-like. In this case, the Psalmist conveys God's holiness. Those made in His image fall not just short, but miserably so.

—Now these foolish, godless, workers of evil level up their wickedness.

—The first way they level up their wickedness is by devouring God's people like bread. Their basic sustenance is the flesh of the saints. Harming God's people is as casual as a daily meal. Persecution energizes them. Slander fills their appetite.

—The second way they level up their wickedness is by not calling upon God. At first glance, this seems redundant. The Psalmist already said they refuse to seek God (v. 3). How does this verse "level up" their wickedness? We must consider the context. In verse 5, the judgment begins. Even with their world caving in around them, with the hand of God stretched out against them, with His lightning bolts striking them—they refuse to admit error. They have grown recalcitrant. God turns up the heat, but they stay in the oven.

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.

—Translations vary with the tense of the verbs—past, present, or future.

- NKJV: "There they are in great fear where no fear was, for God has scattered the bones of him who encamps against you; You have put them to shame because God has despised them."
- NIV: "But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, where there was nothing to dread. God scattered the bones of those who attacked you; you put them to shame, for God despised them."
- CSB: "Then they will be filled with dread — dread like no other — because God will scatter the bones of those who besiege you. You will put them to shame, for God has rejected them."
- NASB: "They were in great fear there, 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."
- NET: "They are absolutely terrified, even by things that do not normally cause fear. For God annihilates those who attack you. You are able to humiliate them because God has rejected them."

—If the ESV/NET is correct, these enemies are terrified by nothing. Fear itself is the judgment, which in turn leads to crumbling before their opposition. An example of this can be found in Leviticus 26:36-39:

"And as for those of you who are left, I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues. They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues. And you shall have no power to stand before your enemies. And you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity, and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them."

—We have an example of this in western nations. Anxiety levels have increased at rapid and exponential rates because we have rejected our foundation; we have tried to walk on water without faith. In my opinion, the increase in anxiety is a judgment against western nations, as Leviticus 26 portrays. We are terrified by the sound of a driven leaf.

—If the NKJV/NIV is correct, these enemies are now terrified by God's judgment, whereas they once acted with impunity. They said "peace and safety," when wrath loomed. Now they are terrified. They should have feared God while they had the chance. It does no good to fear God as He's casting you into hell.

—The NASB is similar to the NKJV/NIV, however it seems to look back on a past judgment of the wicked as a way of building faith for a future judgment/salvation.

—Regardless of which translation matches the author's original intent, the overall message is the same: God judges the wicked. Their corrupt actions will not persist perennially. God judges people and nations throughout history. And each of these historical judgments portend the final judgment, where unbelievers are cast into hell.

—"For God scatters the bones of those him who encamps against you":

- To have one's bones scattered implies improper burial. The imagery suggests victory in battle God's people against a military force that "encamps" against us.
- In its original setting, this would have related to Israel and her national rivals. However, if we view it through a New Testament lens, it prophesies Armageddon. Leon Morris defines Armageddon as "a symbol for the final overthrow of all the forces of evil by an Almighty God." It is portrayed throughout Revelation as a battle, where the whole world unites in a global persecution against "the camp of the saints and the beloved city"—that is, the church. In the very last days, the world will turn against us. Psalm 53 will come alive in underground churches across the globe. We will lament the corruption of the godless who devour us like bread. But we will not retaliate, for vengeance belongs to God. We will place our faith not in the Beast who makes war on the church (Rev. 13:7),

but rather in the Lamb who “makes war” on the Beast (Rev. 19:11). Judgment for the world means salvation for the church. Maranatha!

6 Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

—Judgment (v. 5) and salvation (v. 6) hold hands. We can’t have one without the other because the wicked devour the righteous like bread. God must judge oppressors to liberate the oppressed. He must destroy the destroyers to save those being destroyed.

—This makes me think of the quote by Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, who wrote during the ethnic cleansing and Yugoslav wars of the 90s. He says this: *“My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone (which is where a paper that underlies this chapter was originally delivered). Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect noncoercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God’s refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.”*

—Without a fulsome view of God’s wrath, we will misunderstand God’s passionate, personal love. Divine wrath is not the same as a bad temper. His fuse is neither short nor His anger disproportionate. God’s wrath is His passionate opposition to evil and His refusal to compromise with it. As such, wrath and love are two sides of the same coin. Those who caricature God as loving but not angry instead have a God who is neither. I cannot love my children without passionately opposing all that harms them. God’s wrath is passionate for the very reason that His love is also. The Psalmist portrays God’s wrath against enemies (v. 5) as salvation for His people (v. 6). It is not wrong to long for justice. Rather, our faith in a God of justice enables us to forgive and let the chips fall.

—In the original context, the Psalmist longed for God to save them in battle from their enemies. He knew God was with them—in Zion, the City of God, and especially in the temple there. But he longed for God’s presence to manifest in the joy of victory.

—Through a New Testament lens, the church is “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16; cf. Rom. 9:8). Salvation has already “come out of Zion” because Joel 2:31-32 has been fulfilled: *“The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.”* Peter quotes these verses in Acts 2, viewing the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy in Jesus. Jesus saves because Jesus reigns from heavenly Zion. When we call upon the name of the Lord—upon Jesus—He provides for us “escape” from eschatological judgment. We join “the survivors... whom the LORD calls.” —“When God restores the fortunes of His people...”:

- In its original context, this spoke of God giving Israel victory over her enemies in battle so that they could flourish in Jerusalem and throughout Israel.
- In its eschatological context, this takes on two meanings—an inaugurated fulfillment at Christ’s first advent, and a consummative fulfillment at His second.
 - In His first advent, Christ began to reign from heavenly Zion, and we who call on Him there are saved (see above). By the Spirit, we experience “times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:20). When we gather for church, we “come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:21-25). In other words, when we gather for church down here, we gather with the church up there—in heaven—with saints and angels and the Triune God. From heavenly Zion, Christ reigns and opens the way for salvation, for meeting with God and His people, and for all the blessings of the new covenant. This is the inaugural fulfillment of God restoring the fortunes of His people, which the original Jewish (B.C.) fulfillment only foreshadowed.

- In His second advent, God will *fully* restore the fortunes of His people. He will judge all wickedness, redeem all who believe, restore the whole creation, resurrect our bodies, and open our eyes to behold the beatific vision—that is, to see God’s face. This is the full restoration prophesied in these verses.

—“let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad”:

- I have applied these verses to ancient Israel (B.C.) and to spiritual Israel (the church—which includes Jews and Gentiles). But will there ever be a renewal for ethnic Israel? Personally, I believe there will be. I think Romans 11 prophesies the salvation of the majority of ethnic Israel.
- But what about the land promises? I believe they will be fulfilled in the new heavens and new earth. This is intimated in Romans 4:13: “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be **heir of the world** did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” All of God’s people, Jews and Gentiles, will inherit the entire resurrected planet.
- “Jacob” and “Israel” are not biological but spiritual referents. Unbelieving Jacob/Israel will never “rejoice” or “be glad.” Only those who believe will experience the joy that accompanies faith. *“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God”* (Rom. 2:28-29). Gentiles who trust in Jesus as their Messiah are spiritual descendants of Abraham, our father in the faith. Jews who reject Jesus as their Messiah are not.
- Therefore, we should read this verse as though it is calling on all the people of God—Jew and Gentile—to rejoice and be glad in God.
- Joy and gladness should typify the life of any believer. Even if we go through hard times, like Paul, we can be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10).
- Ross: “What enables the righteous to endure in this world is the anticipation of a coming day of judgment that will bring them relief and joy.”