God Looks Down

Psalm 53

Psalm 53 is a variation of Psalm 14, modified slightly and applied again. The Lord testifies once more that He looks down to see if anyone seeks Him and finds no one. We need to hear it repeatedly: apart from His grace, we can no good, and God sees it this way when He looks down. This humbles and at same time fills us with hope. To hear and understand means is at work.

Structure & Summary of the Text

Psalms 14 and 53 both mention God seven times, but in the former, four of those times say Yahweh and three Elohim, and in the latter all seven are Elohim. This is the God of creation, God over all the nations. Whereas in 14:2 "Yahweh looks down", it's "God looks down" in 53:2. Psalm 53 divides into three parts: verses 1-3 consider the foolishness of mankind that does not seek God; verses 4-5 describe the fear and consequences for those who persist in not calling on God; verse 6 concludes with longing for salvation to come from Zion, for joy and gladness by the return from captivity. The fool says in his heart "There is no God", and this is not mere intellectual conviction but belief that drives corruption and abominable iniquity (v. 1). He looks down from heaven and doesn't find philosopher kings meditating on the good, true, and beautiful, but instead sees that all have turned aside, corrupted themselves together, and finds not one who does good (v. 3). He asks if the workers of iniquity lack knowledge who eat up His people like bread (v. 4). They won't call upon God and therefore dwell in great fear where there's nothing to be afraid of (v. 5). God scatters the bones of those who camp against His people; the godly man puts them to shame because God despises them (v. 5). Verse 6 is prayer for salvation and longing for the celebration that will flow from it.

Inside the Fool's Heart

Scripture is sharp and pointed. David doesn't refer to man as ignorant or misunderstanding or uneducated or deprived of opportunity or any other flattering description that could just be remedied with a little help. The fool says in his heart "There is no God." This psalm follows Psalm 52 which recounts Saul sending Doeg, his Edomite henchman, to slaughter 85 priests at the tabernacle and the men, women, children, infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep at the city of Nob (cf. 1 Sam. 21:18-19). Saul is not outward atheist, nor is Doeg for that matter. These are men who live as if there is no God, thinking they will not face consequences for what they do here or ever. This is a position they have considered and arrived at, interpretating data, running cost benefit analysis, weighing the evidence of this world we live in and deciding it is a godless place. God looks down from heaven upon this insanity (v. 2). This is like the scene at the Tower of Babel where men try to make a name for themselves and build a tower with a top in the heavens, but the Lord has to come down to see it (Gen. 11:5). Like Moses, David knows God is omniscient and omnipresent. He doesn't come down and He doesn't learn. He is and He knows. He knows what's in the fool's heart and He condescends to see if there's any who understands, any who seeks after God, any who does good. It's a bleak answer: "No, not one." The apostle Paul quotes verse 3: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one" (Rom. 3:9-10). The "we" who are not better are Jews, those who love the law, meditate on psalms, and call upon the Lord, but only because He called on them first. God has a people, but it's a people who have received mercy and had they not, they would not have turned to Him. To forget this foundational truth is to set yourself up to be Saul, Doeg, and Paul before conversion. You can be a Christian outwardly and a foolish atheist in your heart.

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Great Fear

The same person who says "There is no God" is also terrified. They lack knowledge and rather than call upon God who helps everyone who turns to Him, they eat up the Lord's people like bread (v. 4). They believe that this is how they will triumph, and David is pointing out how dumb it is. Because of it, they have great fear where there is no fear (v. 5). Fear is inescapable. It's not a question of whether you will be afraid, but only of what you will fear: "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe" (Prov. 29:25). Perfect love casts out fear of punishment from God because He has taken our punishment upon Himself on the cross (1 Jn. 4:18). But the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). Those who fear God don't want to displease Him, but instead glory in His fearful majesty. So ungodly fear is irrational. People fear running out of money when there is no shortage. They fear having bad health such that their anxiety has negative physical consequences. They think people are out to get them and damage themselves while worrying and complaining about it. Those who don't trust God will find another savior (who cannot save) and they will necessarily attack the true God and His people. There can only be one God. If you think are that God, then you will brook no rivals. David lays this out so you can walk away false fear, whether it's complete atheism or the habit of thinking and acting like one. Ask yourself, would an atheist think like this? Then don't think that way. If your mind turns to great fear, "What if this goes wrong? What if I get sick? What if this fails? What if I lose my job? What if whatever-other-worrisome thing-I-might-torture-myself-with?", first, ask yourself, "What if it doesn't? What if none of those negative things come true? What will mean for that time I spent thinking that way?" And second, "If the bad thing happened or something much worse, then is God is still God?" He is, and He is still good. He raised Jesus from the dead and will raise you, too. Tomorrow is still tomorrow and you're not permitted to worry about it; it will take care of itself. God's grace for today is sufficient.

The Coming Restoration

After Doeg murdered everyone in Nob, David sees God scattering the bones of him who camped against His chosen one (v. 5). He banks on deliverance because God hates evil and therefore will certainly judge it. Israel is not back in Egypt or off to Babylonian exile yet, but David sees the corruption as captivity. He would love to see Israel saved from it and sings it to the Lord (v. 6). But whether he will see it or not, it will happen. David longs for the future King who will bring salvation out of Zion, for the Lord Jesus Christ who came and saved us. We have seen Him and believed on Him and should pray with the same and yet more confidence than David to reform and revive His church.