

Psalm 53

Introduction – We have a terrible problem with the opioid overdose crisis in America. It is estimated that 71,000 died from fentanyl overdose in the US in 2021 and possibly over 100,000 in 2022. Did you know that the estimated lethal dose of fentanyl is about 2 milligrams (the weight of a common mosquito). But there is something far worse in this nation and in the whole world. It has the heart of every man, woman and child and without the only antidote is absolutely fatal – for eternity. It is called Original Sin or in the Doctrines of Grace, Total Depravity.

This Psalm is an almost complete repeat of Psalm 14, its message important enough to be repeated (and again by Paul in the middle of Romans 3). “Total Depravity” might better be called “Total Inability” or “Radical Corruption” (Sproul). The point of total depravity is to teach that man’s corruption is so pervasive that there is no part or function that is not fatally corrupted by sin. Lorraine Boettner explains that total depravity teaches “*that since the fall man rests under the curse of sin, that he is actuated by wrong principles, and that he is wholly unable to love God or to do anything meriting salvation.*” Augustine fought Pelagius on this, and the Reformers fought the Roman Catholic Church and later the Arminians over the teaching of semi-Pelagianism (sin has corrupted us but not so much that we are enslaved by a sinful nature that cannot freely choose to repent and turn to God). That is where this Psalm begins.

“No, Not One” (vv1-3) – The fool says “*in his heart,*” that is, this is what he believes and lives his life by: “*There is no God.*” From that position, the lives of fools produce all kinds of grosser and grosser sins and corruptions. While they think they are enlightened and progressing towards perfection, “*God looks down*” as He did upon the self-righteous at Babel, and He can clearly see that there are none who understand their plight or seek after Him. Of course, many “seek” a god of sorts, but ultimately their seeking is the kind of seeking that Adam and Eve did, sewing fig leaves to cover their nakedness and going off away from God seeking something else, anything else but God. The Psalmist says this is true for “*everyone of them*” – they have “*turned aside.*” They are all filthy and rancid like milk or food that has become so rotten as to stink horribly. Not a single one in that state can do good and not a single one wants to.

No one does good? What about all the good works I see all kinds of unbelievers do? But God does not grade on a curve; rather He judges each heart. And every son and daughter of Adam is corrupt in their inmost motivations; they do not love God with their hearts and all their works are tainted by this. They cannot earn the favor of God in them, and they do not want to anyway. For there to be “no God” means there is no law, no order, no restraint of lusts or passions. “*The fallen race of man, left to its own energy, has not produced a single lover of God or doer of holiness, nor will it ever do so*” – Spurgeon.

Paul’s Application (Rom 3:10-12) – In his magnum opus, Paul declares the free grace and salvation that only comes by faith in Jesus Christ. In chapter one he shows that all the Gentiles are under condemnation for they have rejected the clear revelation of God and His moral law written on their hearts. In chapter two he rebukes the Jews for their “*we are better*” attitude by showing them that, while having the law, it only revealed their own rebellion and sinfulness too. In chapter three he charges all men to have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23) and he gets there by quoting many passages from the Old Testament including Psalm 53 (and 14). Every mouth is stopped and all the world is to know that we are all guilty before God (Rom 3:19-20).

Hating God Means Hating God’s Image and God’s People (vv4-5) – Back in Psalm 53, we should notice that there are some who do good (like this Psalm-singer writing this inspired text). This is not a contradiction, for there is an antidote for our problem – it just cannot be found in ourselves. For those who hate God, it must follow that they will hate those who are His people and who bear His image. This is why there is such discord among all people and particularly why unbelievers hate Christians (Rom 3:15-17). Adam and Eve fell into sin and then we have Cain murdering his brother Abel in envy. In this state, the workers of iniquity have no knowledge, that is, they lose all conscience, and they will eventually kill and destroy any that get in their way. In our day, the abortion mills are one terrible example of those who have no conscience left. And our cultures growing intolerance of Christian faith and virtues is another. Thomas Watson said this is a Christ-hating and saint-eating world.

And yet, we live in a spiritual world, a world overseen by a Great Judge, and so they cannot get rid of a sense of dread and fear (v5), especially as they see death all around them and know that they too will one day be nothing but scattered bones themselves. Follow Atheism (or as today’s “nones” are known as) to its logical conclusion and there is nothing but dread and despair. “*You have put them to shame because God has despised them*” (5b).

The Antidote (v6) – There is no way out for any sinner on his own. Salvation cannot come by our decision or choice, it cannot be merited by any good works, penance, or indulgence. The salvation of God's people can only come "*out of Zion*" – from the LORD Himself. And the testimony of this Psalm, the whole prophecy of the Old Testament is that He would and has (Luke 24:44-47, Heb 1:1-3). That is Paul's point as he concludes Romans 3 (vv21-26). Psalm 53:6 is looking forward to just such an answer to our sin problem. The joy of our salvation and the promised victory of Christ to subdue all His enemies and bring salvation to nations gives us the ability and obligation to rejoice and be glad today.

The State of Man and the Victory of Christ – "*...this is the secret desire of every unconverted bosom. If the breast of God were within the reach of men, it would be stabbed a million times in one moment...you have a heart that would kill God if you could*" – McChesney. Do you doubt this? Does that sound a bit over the top? Well, consider what happened when it became possible to kill God, when God took on human flesh and became Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus Christ was not crucified by cannibals or pirates or orcs. He was crucified by the upstanding members of society, the leading theologians and moral teachers of the day. But that crucifixion was Christ's victory and our deliverance. And each one of us must see this, our eyes must be opened. We must be delivered from ourselves. "*The only deliverance from this settled disposition is when God in His mercy strikes the blow that slays the dragon in every heart. That is what we call being crucified with Christ, and when that happens, we are born again*" – Wilson. Jesus taught a parable of two men who went to the temple on Mount Zion to pray. One trusted in himself, his own good works, and was condemned by God. The other man was a notorious tax collector who humbly knelt, beat his breast, crying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:9-14). That man understood Psalm 53 and that man went down to his house justified.

We are saved by grace and by grace alone, through faith in the One who, while we were yet sinners, died for us (Rom 5:8).

Dave Hatcher – Reformation Day, October 29, 2023