

Sermon Given by

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Psalm 14 - "The Foolish Atheist"

Psalms – an introduction

Thank you for welcoming me here this evening, and I would like to welcome you to the sermon series on the Psalms. This is an intermittent series that started last summer and made a brief reappearance a few weeks ago in the morning services. Now the Psalms have made the jump to the evening services and dragged me with them!

So before I get stuck into Psalm 14 (and I will be asking you to turn to it in a moment and praying for God's help in understanding it), it may be worth reminding ourselves what is distinctive about the Psalms so that we can study them and use them in the most fruitful way. To start with the obvious, they are poetry, songs even, lending themselves to recital and to memorisation. And if I were to simply say "The Lord's my Shepherd" or "Your word is a lamp unto my feet" or "As the deer pants for the water", I suspect for many of us that would trigger familiar songs in our heads. So, the Psalms involve our emotions as well as our intellects, and they use heightened imagery, colourful language, repetition and contrasts. They put phrases at our fingertips that we can use to describe ourselves or the world or God, or to express to God how we feel. I think that means that they won't always give definitive answers on matters such as theology or ethics, but we have the rest of the Bible to help with those. Having said all that, Psalm 14 makes some pretty stark and unambiguous statements about human nature.

To give you some guide for the next twenty minutes or so, I am going to focus mainly on sin and how it corrupts us. Then I'll take a bit of a detour to talk about addressing modern day atheism. Finally, I'll say a few words about God's response to sin. So let's pick up Psalm 14 and see how it helps us build a picture of ourselves and our relationship with God. And let's pray as we do that...

Denying God

The first verse of this Psalm immediately makes my point about memorable phrases. That simple opening statement "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" has lodged itself in my brain since I started preparing for today and over the weeks has sometimes been my lens for seeing the world: witnessing denial of God and linking that to moral failure, or witnessing moral failure and inferring a denial of God. Less than two months ago, Derrick Bird shot dead 12 people in one morning in a random, sickening tour around Cumbrian villages. This certainly fits the description in verse 1, "**They are corrupt, their deeds are vile**", and from what we can guess of his state of mind which eventually led him to kill himself, he took on himself the authority to decide who lives and who dies, the right to set the boundaries of right and wrong, defying God's authority and God's right alone to determine these. He acted as someone who has told himself that there is no God. It is right for us to feel revulsion, as the Psalmist does too, at such evil deeds. But that only makes it all the more shocking with the punch at the end of verse 1, "**there is no-one who does good.**" And to reinforce the point, verses 2 and 3 have this striking image of God surveying the whole world looking for one person who does the opposite of denying God, who actually

seeks God and wants to understand his will. If you've ever used Google Maps, you might know how absorbing it can be to swoop over the world on your computer, zooming in here, zooming out there. We picture God doing something similar, searching for just one person who is not corrupted. Read verses 2-3. **"Not even one"** – and if we've not got the point, the final verse from our earlier Romans reading said: **"You... have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else, for whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."** (Romans 2:1). All of us deny God – we forget that he is the judge not us. Now, some might argue that this is simply dramatic over-statement, a poetic image to emphasise how widespread sin is, and they might point out that later the Psalm talks about the righteous, so surely some people are good. I'll discuss that in due course, but Paul quotes these opening verses of Psalm 14 in making his argument later in Romans and explains carefully that no-one is righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law – the moral code that we all should live by – we become conscious of sin (that's Romans 3:20). So let's stop looking at extremes like Derrick Bird, and look at ourselves, recognising how each of us and the decent people we call friends, family, colleagues or read about in the newspaper or who entertain us on TV are all corrupted by sin flowing from our denial of God. In our society, of course, there are many people who don't just say in their heart "there is no God", they say it out loud consistently, as a more or less reasoned world-view – atheism. I'll come back to that a little later. But let's concentrate for now on what would be more familiar to the Psalmist, people like us who probably assent to a belief in God, but (it would seem) choose to think and act as if there is no God.

Recognising our sin

Our reading from Romans gave us a vivid catalogue of sins. It started with corruption of our sight: the denial of God is to ignore his invisible qualities that we can deduce from the universe visible around us and instead worship the things we can see, making material things become what we live for. Then it only gets worse with our eyes lighting up with "shameful lusts" as Romans calls them, seeking to satisfy ourselves with the wrong things. Then Romans moves on to corruption of our minds. It lists murder and deceit – "not us!" we respond, but what about envy, insolence, disobeying parents, gossip, or being boastful or arrogant? They are on the list. What's your sin? I'd like to skip this part of the sermon and not think too hard about how it applies to me – or anyone else. But that's a cop out. If there is a God, he wants me to turn from sin, my acts of rebellion that harm others and ultimately will destroy me, so I must examine myself. I will ask some questions of each of you, but be assured I ask them of myself too. Do you dream of having something you haven't got, or fantasise about being with someone? And so you deny God's authority in deciding what is best for you and whether you need that thing or person. Do you make a habit of small deceits – maybe not being entirely honest about how you spend your evenings, or concealing your internet use at work? And so you deny that there is a God able to see all things and judge them. Do you ignore the needs of others – caring little, if you're honest, about many of the people you interact with, or not thinking too hard about the desperate contrast between our comfortable lives and the world's poorest? Or perhaps, it's just that most of your decisions are based on what promotes you or your family's interests or makes you happy rather than others? And so you pretend and comfort yourself that your time and money belong to you (denying that they are a gift from God), so you can use them as you see fit. If I've missed the mark, then just imagine I had a DVD recording everything you've said and done over the past month, with subtitles revealing everything you were thinking. If I started to rewind from today, how soon would I find something to make you squirm – even if you were watching it by yourself? Would it show a weakness for pleasure? anger? money? hypocrisy? malicious talk? making your faith fit round your lifestyle? Where was God then?

The fool, the morally deficient, has said in their heart “There is no God”. That diagnosis of denying God’s existence can help us understand all kinds of defiance of God’s law. For example, there’s Adam and Eve calling into question God’s word, accepting the serpent’s falsehood that we can all be like God, so denying a unique God with unique authority and power. Or there’s Jonah, who thought he could run away from the Lord, limiting God’s existence to somewhere else – not here! Reading this Psalm, we realise that such ways of thinking are indeed folly. Verse 2 reminds us that God is in heaven with a clear view of everything we do, and verse 5 describes God being fully present to the point that he fills evil-doers with dread. I am aware that just meditating even briefly on those two images as I prepared this sermon tempered my desire to sin. I pray that you will take the time to contemplate God’s power and presence long after this service and it will help you too to resist temptation.

Addressing atheists

As I promised, I would like to say a few words about atheism. How do we approach those who openly believe there is no God and live by it, quite possibly having no less moral standards than many who profess a belief in God? Well, I encourage you to pray for atheists you know – I’d say logic dictates that they can’t mind if you do that! – and have hope that they can change their mind. And to do that, we need to reason with them, which is where this sermon turns into a brief book review. I wonder how many people here have read “The Reason for God” by Timothy Keller? I’d strongly recommend it as a book that fully engages with contemporary culture and addresses the difficult questions that non-believers raise. In the second part of the book, he looks at the evidence for God and shows how the Christian faith explains the world and answers our needs. Now, he honestly accepts that he cannot prove God but he argues for some strong evidence. Time does not permit me to even give a summary of all his arguments. To give you a taste, he starts with physics and the natural world – for example, why is there a universe at all (rather than nothing), a universe capable of supporting minds that can ask the question why is there a universe at all? He tackles those who argue religious belief is just a by-product of evolution: but if our minds are just biological adaptations how can we even trust our reasoning that they are just biological adaptations? We can’t prove that there is a God, but our belief that our reasoning to reach that logical conclusion is valid is just that – a belief, that itself cannot be proved. In this way, the foundation of truth disappears completely from beneath the feet of the atheist. Finally, Keller goes on to look at our sense of morality. If, for example, we feel sure as liberal-minded westerners that it is wrong to treat any section of society as second-class citizens but a different culture has no problem with it, who says which view is right? What is the source of that burning feeling that one view is good and should prevail?

Try a thought experiment. Think of a time and place where moral standards are or were different from your own. Maybe, the early southern United States which had no problem treating black people as property. Or if you are really imaginative, 100 years from now, when perhaps we’ve abandoned that old-fashioned 21st century view that medicine should only prolong life, so instead routinely kill those over a certain age to ease the burden on society. Are you right or are they right? Why do we feel so clearly that some moral viewpoints are wrong however strongly they are held? But who decides? In the thought experiment, imagine just over half of society stands on one side – should the majority view prevail? If the majority swings the other way, are right and wrong reversed? The problem is we keep having this nagging feeling that there are universal rights and wrongs. If we observe only nature, we would conclude that the strong must prevail. Arguing for things like human dignity to justify treating everyone equally is difficult if we are just animals evolved randomly from indifferent atoms. Without God, there is no authority we can appeal to, no consistent moral foundation for establishing what is right and what is wrong. No wonder

denying God opens the door for moral corruption. In an echo of our Romans passage, Keller argues that our sense that there is some meaning to the world shows that every human being already knows that God exists. That's maybe a provocative statement and there is a great deal more in the book, so you'll have to read it yourself and definitely pass it on to a non-believer to read. And if you are someone here tonight who feels unable to accept these arguments or is sceptical of the validity of Christianity, I would warmly recommend this book. It is written by someone who has heard the intelligent objections raised by people like you and he has some compelling things to say.

The destructive power of sin

But I need to return to the psalm, and take a step back to look again at what it says about sin. By the way, this is something that is discussed at length in "The Reason for God". Sin is putting our trust in something other than God, building our life on something that will not last – and that will be our downfall and society's downfall. We don't just ruin ourselves with sin; we ruin families, friendships, communities, nations. We get hints of that in the psalm. Let's read verse 4. *Read v4.* Evildoers "**never learn**" – we sense the Psalmist's frustration – will you never learn that pursuing X will not solve your problems? that it won't make you happy? And see the havoc it causes – they "**devour my people as men eat bread**" says verse 4. At every point where God is at work building a new world, sin corrodes. Our selfishness, our self-importance, our quest for pleasure push aside the needs of others, distorting relationships, causing suffering. Verse 6 expresses this as frustrating the plans of the poor – those who have the least are not helped, but are trodden down by each person trying to meet their own interests. The world is suffering because of sin: people are hurting, people are dying. Is God just watching all this, as we saw in verse 2, appalled by our corruption? Well, no, as we can glean from verses 4 onwards. So let's look at God's response to sin.

God's response to sin

The despair at evil – devouring, godless evil – that the Psalmist expresses in verse 4 is interrupted with the image of evildoers stopped in their tracks in verse 5. *Read v5a.* When God meets his enemies, they are terrified. If you have said in your heart that there is no God, it is a shock to realise that there is a God and that he will not tolerate disobedience. God is frequently described as a judge – the Judge – in the Bible, and one who, according to verse 2, just by looking can tell if we understand – he knows what's in our hearts and he will punish all sin. "**The Lord your God is a consuming fire**" says Deuteronomy 4 verse 24. Romans explains how sin inescapably leads to death – when? "**on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ**" says Romans 2 verse 16. Naturally, it is right for us to fear the God who holds this power, but it is also an enormous comfort to know that sin will not stand, that God will not compromise on removing every trace of this dreadful corruption and establishing justice completely. But God also has a rescue plan for those who cry out to escape from sin. And we get three hints of this from the Psalm. First, verse 5 goes on to mention a group of people – the righteous – and God is actually present among them. *Read v5b.* If according to verse 1 no-one does good, who are the righteous? They are those put right by God, and this is where we need Romans to help us again. After quoting from Psalm 14, Romans 3 goes on to say this:

no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This

righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Of course, for Christians this should be familiar ground, the heart of the gospel message, that Jesus died in our place so that we could be justified – treated as innocent. If you have faith in Jesus Christ then you become one of the righteous – rejoice! If you don't have that faith, receive it – it's a free gift. And this is the way God rescues people from the penalty of sin.

Secondly, in verse 6, we have a common image from the Psalms of God being a refuge. *Read v6.* For me, at times of struggle, when life feels grim, I cling on to the knowledge that God is my hiding place, that he will not let go of me. As the darkness descends, I am safe: I might still feel pain and one day I will have to face death, but sin cannot keep a grip on me, evil cannot win – I am destined to be with God in eternity. So as well as rescuing us from the penalty of sin, God rescues us from the power of sin. Let's not give up struggling against sin, sharing God's view that it is vile and wanting to resist it wherever we meet it.

Finally, verse 7 looks ahead to God's salvation, a time of restoration and joy. *Read v7.* God is going to build a whole new nation, a whole new world where there is no more sin. The vision of Revelation 21 at the end of the Bible puts it like this:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

So God rescues us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and one day he promises to rescue us from the presence of sin. God will be with us then, so that we can't make the mistake of thinking there is no God, and we will give up being fools forever. Like the Psalmist, I can hardly wait: Oh! – ***"Oh, that salvation would come out of Zion!"***

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)