

Worship pastors will have no trouble keeping worship real if they use the whole psalter as their resource for worship. We may struggle as to where to place Psalm 14 in the liturgy, but we can be certain that it is necessary for our gathered worship. Salvation is always better understood in the revealing light of evil's darkness. The psalm breaks down the abstraction of evil and focuses on the individual fool whose atheistic thoughts and vile deeds are exposed. The psalm defends the victims of corrupt men and women and sides with the poor whose plans are frustrated and whose lives are consumed by self-serving evildoers. Psalm 14 is a reminder that righteousness impacts people personally and evil wears a human face.

Psalm 14 echoes the thesis of Proverbs, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Prov 1:7). It is a wisdom psalm that reminds us of Psalm 1's description of the wicked who are like chaff that the wind blows away. In book two of the psalms, Psalm 53 repeats Psalm 14. The only major difference is that Psalm 14 uses *Yahweh* for God and Psalm 53 uses *Elohim*. Ross sees the focus of Psalm 14 "on comfort for the faithful" and Psalm 53 as "a warning to the wicked."¹ In any case the repetition of the theme underscores the importance of the wisdom tradition.

This Spirit-inspired wisdom tradition was designed to show the people of God, then and now, how to stay in the gospel story *today*. Wisdom establishes a bond between the meta-narrative of God's salvation history and our personal life stories. From the beginning salvation was intended to encompass everything in our daily lives and our eternal destiny. There is an inseparable relationship between the Cross of Jesus Christ at the center of human history and the call of Jesus to take up our cross daily and follow him. Worship and ethics, like the two tablets of Decalogue converge into a meaningful whole—life, and this liturgy of life is baptized in the Gospel of Jesus. We were meant to be reminded everyday in a thousand little ways that we are children of the covenant-keeping Lord God. Reverence for Yahweh is to be evident in the totality of our life, including our family life, our work ethic, our leisure activities, and our ambitions. The same wisdom that set the stars in place and the planets in orbit calls for honest accounting practices and gossip-free conversation. Wisdom ranges from the mystery of the Big Bang to the mundane task of working for a living.

The Hebrew word for fool is *nābāl* a word "which implies an aggressive perversity, epitomized in the Nabal of 1 Samuel 25:25."² If there is a back story to Psalm 14, Nabal may be it. He personifies the fool. The storyteller in Samuel slows the narrative down to play out the drama between Nabal and David. The tension in the tale builds as Nabal, a wealthy cattle owner, is respectfully approached by a delegation of ten men from David. They reported the ways they had offered protection for Nabal's shepherds and herds and when they finished they made a simple request for hospitality. "Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them" (1 Sam 25:8). But instead of responding graciously to their request, Nabal made the delegation wait and then after deliberation, Nabal intentionally and inexcusably ignored their

¹ Ross, Psalms, 373.

² Kidner, Psalms, 79.

good will, scorned their request and mocked their leader. David's men turned around and went back to David and when they arrived "they reported every word" (1 Sam 25:12). David's response was immediate, "Put on your swords!" Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants ran to tell Abigail, Nabal's wife. In desperation, he concluded, "Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk with him" (1 Sam 25:17). We will leave the story there and pick up the themes of Psalm 14.

Practical Atheism

*The fool says in his heart,
"There is no God."
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
there is no one who does good.
The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.
All have turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good, not even one.*

Psalm 14:1-3

The psalmist defines fools as those who say in their hearts, "There is no God." Fools live their everyday lives as if there is no God. "The fool's lack of understanding is such that his priorities in life are entirely wrong."³ Outwardly they may confess the creed and honor religion but inwardly they are practical atheists, living according to their own selfish desires. They may commend their version of moralistic therapeutic deism – the theory that there is a good god who is remote yet nice, who wants you to have your best life now. But in reality all their religious theory and talk of spirituality is only a cover for living for themselves. "They may not plainly deny the existence of God," wrote Calvin,

"but they imagine him to be shut up in heaven, and divested of his righteousness and power; and this is just to fashion an idol in the room of God. As if the time would never come when they will have to appear before him in judgment, they endeavor, in all the transactions and concerns of their life, to remove him to the greatest distance, and to efface from their minds all apprehension of his majesty."⁴

Calvin argued that it was necessary for us to understand that the "fool" described in Psalm 14 was not the distant enemy but the close at hand "enemy" of the faithful. Calvin saw the fool as an immediate threat to the people of God because they were embedded in the church. He wrote, "We know that it is a temptation which pains us exceedingly, to see wickedness breaking forth and prevailing in the midst of the Church, the good and simple unrighteously afflicted, which the wicked cruelly domineer according to their pleasure."⁵ The fool can sit on the church board or chair the finance committee. Subtle forms of self-righteousness can be more damaging than overt

³ Craigie, Psalms, 148.

⁴ Calvin, Psalms, 191.

⁵ Calvin, Psalms, 189.

acts of corruption. The beautiful side of evil exists right alongside the horrors of the ugly side of evil. The devil's influence is felt not only in violent acts of terrorism but in sky-rocketing sales of pharmaceuticals and warheads. The oppressive world system legitimizes abortions-on-demand and turns children into immortality symbols. Evil is in the dark alley mugging and evil is in the corporate windfall. There is a bull market on Wall Street and poverty runs rampant. The street-wise pimp and the corporate CEO have something in common. The pervasiveness of evil and the universal sweep of idolatry fit the psalmist's description of the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God." C. S. Lewis reminds us, "A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world — and even might be more difficult to save."⁶

People don't have to be famous atheists like Friedrich Nietzsche or Richard Dawkins to qualify as fools. All they have to do is live as if there is no God, and in our late modern secular age that is not difficult to do. Nietzsche followed-up his famous "God is dead" declaration with a question, "How shall we comfort ourselves What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?"⁷ Professing Christians may not agree with top tier philosophers and intellectuals. They may affirm biblical revelation, at least theory, but they have joined forces with the world in a quest for transcendence that is false and idolatrous. The habit of religion persists, but as Søren Kierkegaard quipped, "Everything goes on as usual, and yet there is no longer anyone who believes in it."⁸

If we're honest we would have to admit that many Christians along with many non-Christians find their sense of meaning and transcendence in sports. Philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly contend that a new sense of transcendence can be found most readily in sports. "Sports may be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily."⁹ It is beyond dispute, they claim, that sport now plays a kind of religious role in America. "There is no essential difference, really, in how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass. . ."¹⁰ That is not to say that sport is sacred in "any absolute sense. But there are moments in sport. . .during which something so overpowering happens that it wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along as on a powerful wave. . .That is the moment when the sacred shines."¹¹ As Dreyfus and Kelly say, "The impersonal gods of baseball encourage no questions about the afterlife or the nature of the soul."¹² The sacred is stripped to its "essential core." It is the sacred presence in the absence of God that is taken with utmost seriousness, but not in an absolute sense. We would be foolish not to acknowledge that this form of false transcendence has had a huge impact on the Church. In the modern pantheon of American deities sports rank alongside money, sex, and power.

⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, section 125, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated and Edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

⁸ Kierkegaard, "Either/Or: A Fragment of Life," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, editor Robert Bretall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 81-82.

⁹ Dreyfus & Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 192.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 192-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹² *Ibid.*, 194.

Perhaps nowhere is practical atheism experienced more religiously than at a Christian memorial service. Family and friends, colleagues and neighbors, attend a worship service that has very little relationship to what the audience actually believes about God and Christ, life and death. This cultural rite of passage unexpectedly provokes a quiet clash of cultures. The unsuspecting nominal Christian may not even consciously diagnosis this confrontation or she may simply write the funeral service off as old-fashioned. The prayers, hymns, and testimonies are respected for their aesthetic and therapeutic value. In the moment they contribute to a feeling of inspiration. These sentiments hold existential meaning. The value of the service lies in offering a *feeling* of resolution for those who grieve. People come not to worship the God of creation and redemption but to show respect to the family of the deceased. It is their way of saying, “I’m sorry for your loss.” The signed memorial book in the foyer lets the family know, “I’m here for you.”

For many in the audience, Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” are indistinguishable in meaning from, “It is the hope in our hearts and the faith in our souls that comfort us.” Meaning is customized according to personal tastes and preferences. Significance is creatively self-engineered. Spirituality is left to the individual and their personal quest for self-identity. So when the gospel is preached and the preacher lays out the truth clearly the mood of the audience shifts. There is a restlessness among Christians and secularists alike, visible in shifting bodies, invisible in wandering minds. In a Christ-haunted culture, the audience anticipates religion but does not necessarily believe in Resurrection faith. Skeptics stiffen. Nominal Christians daydream. Teenagers roll their eyes. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

We can paint the picture of a fool as a nasty evil outlier, a bad person who is vile and corrupt. But the truth of the matter is that the person I see in the mirror is the fool I know best. The apostle Paul used Psalm 14 to make his case that Jews and Gentiles alike are corrupted by the power of sin. He quoted from the first three verses of Psalm 14 in Romans 3: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” (Rom 3:10-12). The shocking truth is that we are all guilty of playing the fool. In countless ways we live our lives as if there is no God and we live according to our own selfish desires. “Paul thus encourages us to be realistically hopeless about humanity and then grateful for what God has done in Christ.”¹³

Evildoers

*Do all these evildoers know nothing?
They devour my people as though eating bread;
they never call on the Lord.
But there they are, overwhelmed with dread,
for God is present in the company of the righteous.
You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor,
but the Lord is their refuge.*

Psalm 14:4-6

¹³ Goldingay, Psalms, 217.

No one is more surprised at practical atheism than the Lord God. The psalmist attributes the rhetorical question to God himself, “not because any thing can happen which is strange or unexpected to him, but in order the more forcibly to express his indignation.”¹⁴ Those who live as if God does not exist devour his people as naturally as they eat a sandwich. They are consumers not only of commodities but of people. The apostle John described the great city in the Revelation, where the Lord was crucified and where people refuse to call on God, as the ultimate consumer society. The city trades in precious metals, fine fashions, luxury products, and every conceivable commodity, including the “bodies and souls of human beings” (Rev 18:13).¹⁵

Calvin insists that the fool in view is not the “foreign tyrant” or the “avowed enemy of the church” but the shepherd “whose office it is to feed and to take care of the flock, who cruelly devour it, and who spare not even the people and heritage of God” (see Micah 3:1-3; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Undoubtedly Calvin’s perspective was shaped by his situation, but do we not face a similar challenge today? Whenever the church models itself after the world it begins to see itself in a competitive marketplace with a consumer product to sell. The worldly church feels the pressure to change the gospel to fit the expectations and dreams of “spiritual” consumers. They identify their market niche and target audience, and strive to meet felt needs, pursue corporate excellence, and promote a creative, positive, upbeat, and exciting atmosphere. The worldly church has no need to call on God because it runs itself like any other secular organization.

The psalmist describes evildoers (fools) in three ways: They devour people, they never call on the Lord, and they are filled with fear. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then the bottom line for turning away from the Lord is overwhelming dread. The psalmist breaks down the complexities of life into two ways, wisdom and foolishness. We can either reverence the Lord in a spirit of humility and submission or we can live for ourselves in selfishness and ignorance. Those who live as if there is no God will eventually come to realize that “God is present in the company of the righteous.” And those who have “frustrated the plans of the poor” will have to acknowledge that “the Lord is their refuge.” When it finally dawns on the foolish that they have mistreated the people of God “they will be terrified with a great terror.”¹⁶

The world lives by the principle, “your life for mine.” Christians are called to live by the principle of the cross, “my life for yours.” The subject of the psalm is the fool, the Nabal-like fool, who thinks only of himself. But the positive counter-point to the description of the evildoer is the company of the righteous and the wisdom of the poor. For Yahweh “will never leave them nor forsake them” (Matt 28:20). Therefore there is no resolution better advised “than the resolution to depend upon God, and to rest in his salvation.” Even when we are surrounded with all sorts of “calamities,” this is “the highest wisdom.”¹⁷

Salvation

*Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the Lord restores his people,*

¹⁴ Calvin, Psalms, 195.

¹⁵ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 339. See Revelation 17:1-19; 21:9-22:9.

¹⁶ Ross, Psalms, 381.

¹⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 200.

let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!
Psalm 14:7

Psalm 14 ends on a high note and draws our attention to two words: Salvation and Zion. David prays for the deliverance of the people of God. All hope and expectation can be summed up in the word *salvation*. This single word comprehends a very large meaning. In fact it should be impossible for the people of God to think small when it comes to salvation. In a word, salvation, comprehends all that we have been given in Christ. We are saved from “sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.”¹⁸ We are saved for a purpose, to love God, others, and ourselves. We are saved for freedom, mission, and community.

Salvation changes our relationship with God giving us acceptance with God, forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship, reception of the Spirit, and everlasting life. Salvation changes us emotionally giving us confidence, peace, courage, hopefulness, and joy. Salvation changes us spiritually giving us prayer, guidance, discipline, dedication and service. Salvation changes us personally giving us new thoughts, convictions, horizons, motives, satisfactions, self-fulfillment. Salvation changes us socially giving us a new community in Christ, a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”¹⁹

Zion, the City of David, is the *place* from which salvation comes. Zion as a *place* “formed the nucleus for a rich gathering of images, symbols, promises, and visions that express God’s sovereign purposes worked out on the hard, inhospitable ground of our lives.”²⁰ Until Jesus Christ came, *place* rather than *person* summed up the meaning of God’s presence. But when the Incarnate One came he fulfilled and embodied everything about salvation. For “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament. The land as a holy place has ceased to have relevance. . . . Furthermore, the geographical land of Israel has no place in New Testament teaching regarding the ultimate future of God’s people.”²¹ Instead of the holiness of *place*, “Christianity has fundamentally. . . substituted the holiness of the *Person*: it has Christified holy space.”²²

¹⁸ White, “Salvation,” 968. (This entire section on “salvation” is dependent on R. E. O. White’s article).

¹⁹ White, *Ibid.*, 968.

²⁰ Peterson, *Leap Over the Wall*, 133.

²¹ Chris Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, IVP, 1983, 93.

²² W. D. Davis, *The Gospel and the Land*, 368. Quoted in Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.