

The differences between Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 are slight but significant. They offer a new slant on the basic message of the psalm. I entitled Psalm 14 *Nabal's Psalm*, because the Hebrew word for fool is *nābāl* and because his story embodies the message of both psalms (1 Samuel 25:25). The superscription for Psalm 52 refers to Doeg the Edomite (1 Sam 21-22) and the superscription for Psalm 54 refers to the Ziphites (1 Sam 26).<sup>1</sup> In between these two accounts of hostility against David, we have the story of Nabal. Only this time, instead of focusing on individual Israelites who foolishly ignore God (Ps 14), Psalm 53 shifts “to foreigners who are foolish enough to think they can attack and destroy the people of God.”<sup>2</sup> This concern for the nations is consistent with the use of *Elohim* for God in Psalm 53 (Book II) instead of the more personal name for the Lord, *Yahweh*, used in Psalm 14 (Book I). In the sequence of Zion Psalms, Psalm 53 addresses the nations.<sup>3</sup> Ross concludes, “Psalm 14 seems to focus on comfort for the faithful; Psalm 53 stresses a warning for the wicked.”<sup>4</sup> The key textual difference is in verses five and six:

*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 14:5-6

*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.*

Psalm 53:5

The psalmist has chosen to nuance Psalm 53 for a reason. In the world, the faithful, those who reverence God and depend upon his mercy, appear vulnerable to the foolish who deny God and despise his ways. Salvation awaits the righteous because the Lord is their refuge, but judgment comes down hard on the corrupt because they are despised by God. They may ignore God, but God does not ignore them. God terrifies them. He scatters their bones and puts them to shame. The psalmist is convinced that the line between practical atheism and outright atheism is very thin. Both states of denial are highly unstable and corrupt at the core. But the difference between the faithful and the foolish is the difference between life and death, salvation and judgment. Both psalms look for the salvation that comes from Zion, when the people of God will be restored and will rejoice. Psalm 14 gives hope to the faithful who are vulnerable to the foolish and who use their power to oppress. Psalm 53 is a warning to the fool. The consequences for denial are shame, guilt, and fear.

### *The Shame of Fools*

*The fool says in his heart,  
“There is no God.”*

Psalm 53:1

The fool’s denial is articulated either in the secret recesses of his heart, that inner hidden sphere

<sup>1</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 196.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 215.

<sup>3</sup> Ps 44:2, 5, 13; 45:5, 17; 46:6, 10; 47:1, 8, 9; 48:4; 49:1; 50:1.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 215.

of intentional full disclosure, or in the passionate core of his heart-felt conviction. Either way, whether the denial is covert or overt the fool is a fool. Whether the fool is religious or secular, the fool has said in his heart “There is no God.” Whether rich or poor, smart or stupid, the verdict is the same. The fool’s confession receives no credit for honesty only the shame of knowingly living in denial.

Fools have to work to defend their conviction. They learn to live within an overarching sphere of meaninglessness. Physicist Steven Weinberg claims that it is a scientific fact that the universe is meaningless. Scientists may think they are doing meaningful work — they “build telescopes and satellites and accelerators, and sit at their desks for endless hours working on the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.”<sup>5</sup> From Weinberg’s perspective all scientists are confused—borderline psychotic, in their search of meaning, when there is no meaning to be found. Purpose is only a figment of our imagination. Whatever appearance of meaning there may be, the universe is ultimately meaningless.<sup>6</sup>

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins contends that belief in God is a by-product of a quest for survival. The perceived need for religion is related to Darwinian survival. Children are dependent upon the advice of their parents for protection and well-being. From one generation to another need-to-know knowledge, necessary for survival, is mixed up with useless superstitious perspectives. Sense and nonsense are passed down from one generation to another.<sup>7</sup>

Dawkins argues that religion is the by-product of a deeply ingrained psychological disposition to trust others and the inability to distinguish what is real and unreal. The “useful programmability” and “gullibility” of a child’s brain accounts for religion being passed down from one generation to the next. The reason moths fly directly into the candle flame is because they are genetically hardwired to use moonlight to fly a straight line. Artificial light is a relatively recent phenomenon and the number of moths killed by flying directly into the flame is rare compared to the number of moths guided by moon-light. For Dawkins, religion is a by-product of genetic hardwiring that predisposes us to believe in the authority of an older generation. He also believes that religion makes about as much sense as a moth flying directly into the flames.

Dawkins finds it more probable to believe that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the cosmos than to believe in the God who created the universe. He argues that “luck” and the development of life by natural selection are better explanations for life than God. Albert Einstein said, “The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.” That would be true, but only if you attributed the origin of life to luck and the development of nature to a purposeless process of natural selection. If on the other hand, life is infused with meaning in every sphere and from every angle, then the intelligibility of the universe from top to bottom is understandable and really not very surprising at all.

---

<sup>5</sup> Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes*, 154-155.

<sup>6</sup> Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 172.

“Luck” is a major concept pulled in by brilliant fools to make sense of life. “Luck” never shows up in their indexes, but it is offered as a major explanation for the origin of life and hope for the future. Richard Dawkins attributes both the origin of life and the origin of human consciousness to luck. “Once that initial stroke of luck has been granted,” argues Dawkins, we’re off and running with evolution.<sup>8</sup> Bill Bryson concludes his masterful work on the science of life by saying how “awfully lucky” we are to be here—“doubly lucky” in fact, because we have the singular ability to appreciate the privilege of existence. He credits our survival to “a nearly endless string of good fortune.” We are only at the beginning of this “one planet, one experiment” experience, but we will “require a good deal more than lucky breaks” to “make sure we never find the end.”<sup>9</sup>

If luck is the best explanation for the origin of life and hope for the future; if love is little more than a biological drive to pass along our genes; if meaning is entirely self-created; then wonder is best described as a strange mood that comes over us at odd times. Meaning and wisdom are only illusions. In an uncreated world of nature alone, joy is an individual stroke of good luck. Present moment happiness is the key. Nobel laureate Francis Crick summed us up this way: “*You*, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”<sup>10</sup>

Nietzsche drove the denial of God to a fatal and nihilistic conclusion. He contended that the human animal is naked. There is nothing to life but the will to power and the survival of the fittest. What others whispered to themselves in their heart, Nietzsche embraced as a core conviction and shouted it from the housetops. He had the courage of his convictions, even if it drove him mad. Nietzsche sought to reverse the notion of shame and fear. Instead of running and hiding, the way Adam and Eve did when they realized they were naked, Nietzsche wanted true men to believe in the hard fact of exploitation and self-mastery. “In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.”<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche gave narcissism its marching orders. “Egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul.”<sup>12</sup> “The noble soul has reverence for itself.”<sup>13</sup> For Nietzsche there were only two kinds of people, the exalted and the exploited, the proud and the humble, the powerful and the petty, the hardened and “the doglike people who allow themselves to be maltreated.”<sup>14</sup> Humility was unbecoming the noble soul. To exploit and dominate was a worthy goal for the man of superior rank and self-made self-worth.

Nietzsche claimed Christianity was “this most ingenious, unscrupulous, and dangerous systematization of all the means for producing orgies of feeling under the cover of holy

---

<sup>8</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 140-141.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, 478.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 23, 221.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 265, 405.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 287, 418.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 260, 395.

intentions. . .” He called for “unconditional honest atheism” not as an antithesis to an ideal, but as an “inner consequence” to “the awe-inspiring catastrophe of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God.*”<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche’s maddening efforts to overcome the shame of our wilful rebellion against God is worked out in countless ways across the spectrum of ordinary life. We grab for fig leaves to cover our nakedness. We make immortality symbols out of our children. We look for transcendence in sex. We try to fill the void with adventure. We keep fear in check with alcohol. We prop up our egos with a new car or a new house. We worry far more about what our friends think of us than what God thinks of us, because if we’re honest we are practical atheists. We may not take it as far as Dawkins and Nietzsche do, but we take it far enough.

### *The Guilt of Fools*

*They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;  
there is no one who does good.  
God looks down from heaven  
on all mankind  
to see if there are any who understand,  
any who seek God.  
Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt;  
there is no one who does good, not even one.  
Do all these evildoers know nothing?*

*They devour my people as though eating bread;  
they never call on God.*

Psalm 53:2-4

Corruption is the inescapable byproduct of saying “There is no God,” whether one whispers it in his heart or posts it on *facebook*. Belief and behavior are inseparable. The way we think is the way we act (Prov 23:7). We know that the apostle Paul had Psalm 14 and 53 in mind when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Romans 1 elaborates on the psalmist’s opening theme of the fool. The apostle wrote, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools . . .” (Rom 1:21-22). He then elaborated on the psalmist’s description of “corrupt” and “vile.” When the truth of God is exchanged for a lie, God gives people up to their shameful lusts and to a depraved mind. They “become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity” (Rom 1:26, 28-29).

The apostle takes his message further and deeper than the psalmist’s did. It is not just foolish Israelites living like practical atheists or foolish pagans denying the living God, the verdict of “fool” belongs to all of us. We are all guilty. As I said in the meditation on Psalm 14, we can paint the picture of a fool as a nasty evil outlier, a bad person who is vile and corrupt. But the

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., sec. 27, 596.

truth of the matter is that the person I see in the mirror is the fool I know best. The apostle Paul used these psalms to make his case that Jews and Gentiles alike are corrupted by the power of sin. He quoted from the first three verses shared by both psalms 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.”<sup>16</sup>

The psalmist uses anthropomorphic language to describe God’s shock and dismay at man’s mind-boggling inhumanity to man. It is as if the universal scourge of evil knows no limits. The depth of depravity never hits bottom. These evildoers, these “practitioners of iniquity,” are so “spiritually blind that they do not know what they do.” They devour God’s people “as if it were as natural as eating bread.”<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the beautiful and seductive side of evil consumes people just as much as the ugly and raunchy side of evil does.

One of the benefits of consistently praying and meditating on the psalms is a deepening understanding of evil. Evil, both in ourselves and in others, will always be shocking. But if we ignore the Bible’s analysis of evil and skip over its dark and disturbing descriptions of evil, we invite a naivete and ignorance that increases our vulnerability and confusion.

In the Book of Revelation, the apostle John places the beautiful side of evil 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.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Fear of Fools*

*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.*

Psalm 53:5

The person who says in their heart, “There is no God,” experiences all three deep emotions: shame, guilt and fear. These feelings are tangible and real and cannot be explained away as a figment of the imagination. They are the first consequences of the judgment of God. The fragile

---

<sup>16</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, Psalms, 221.

<sup>18</sup> Webster, Follow the Lamb, 238.

psyche of the fool may be readily apparent or deeply hidden by either a hardened exterior or a flippant persona. But whether the dread is concealed or acknowledged it is a sign that we are made in God's image and that evil is a violation of our core identity. In the blink of an eye, the psalmist goes from dread where there should be no dread, to a battlefield disaster where God scatters the bones of the fool. The consequences for denial are devastating. The fool's disdain is matched by God's judgment. On this side of judgment, shame, guilt, and fear, are meant as an early warning signal, a gift of God, calling the fool to change his ways and turn to God for mercy. Their acknowledgment is often the first step toward repentance and reconciliation.

### *The Absence of Fools*

*Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!  
When God restores his people,  
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!*  
Psalm 53:6

When Jesus prayed Psalm 53 he alone understood how the "salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!" He was aware that to rescue fools in the eyes of God he had to become a fool in the eyes of the world. He humbled himself "by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:8). After describing Mount Zion and the Most Holy Place, the author of Hebrews describes Jesus suffering "outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood" (Heb 13:12). Until Jesus came and died for us no one knew exactly how God's salvation would come out of Zion, but now we do! Jesus experienced ultimate denial and abandonment in order to rescue and redeem all those who have said in their hearts, "There is no God."

By God's grace, the invitation stands open to all "fools," because we have all turned away and we have all become worthless (Rom 3:12). The tragic mistake we must not make is to persist in denial. In the spirit of Psalm 53, the apostle warns against deception and witnesses to the power of justification by faith in Christ:

"Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:9-11).