

Psalm 14

Prayer during the Day Tuesday Week 1

This is an impassioned reflection on the folly and corruption of those who do not acknowledge God, and a statement of faith that YHWH is on the side of the oppressed. If we fail to acknowledge the true God we will create our own. In this case it is untrammelled power exercised by those who show no concern for the poor. Verse seven is a plea that YHWH will restore his people, composed, it would seem, by someone writing from exile. Perhaps he was a refugee from the north after the destruction of Samaria (721BC), or an exile in Babylon from Judah. Psalm 14 is almost identical with Psalm 53. Verses 5-6 are somewhat different, and where Psalm 14 has 'YHWH', Psalm 53 has 'God'. Perhaps Psalm 53 came from the Northern Kingdom and Psalm 14 is an adaptation made for the temple in Jerusalem. The title reads: 'To the leader. Of David'.

¹Fools say in their hearts*, 'There is no God.'

The psalmist is not concerned with theoretical atheism, but with the folly of an attitude that denies the relevance of God to human affairs. Compare the following:

The irreligious despise YHWH: 'There is no God to whom I must give an account.'

– Psalm 10:4

They say, 'YHWH does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.'

– Psalm 94:7

You say, 'What does God know? Can he judge through the deep darkness? Thick clouds enwrap him, so that he does not see, and he walks on the dome of heaven.'

– Job 22:13-14

His anger does not punish, and he does not greatly heed transgression.

– Job 35:15

They are corrupt, they perpetrate dreadful deeds; there is no one who does good.

This seems to represent the judgment of the psalmist. It is their ignoring God that leads to their evil behaviour.

The worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil.

– Wisdom 14:27

²YHWH looks down from heaven on Adam's descendants to see if there is a wise person anywhere, one who seeks after God.

YHWH is imagined as looking out over the heavenly balcony to observe the world (compare Genesis 11:5 and Psalm 33:13-14).

Wisdom is identified with believing in YHWH, and seeking ever closer communion with God.

Verse three is God's judgment. It echoes the judgment that brought on the Flood:

YHWH saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And YHWH was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

– Genesis 6:5-6

The earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.

– Genesis 6:11-12

Compare also the following from Job:

God puts no trust even in his holy ones and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, one who drinks iniquity like water!

– Job 15:15-16

Paul quotes this psalm in chapter 3 of Romans:

There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.

– Romans 3:10-12

Paul goes on:

Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.

– Romans 3:13a = Psalm 5:9

The venom of vipers is under their lips.

– Romans 3:13b = Psalm 140:3

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

– Romans 3:14 = Psalm 10:7

Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery are in their paths,
and the way of peace they have not known.

– Romans 3:15-17 = Isaiah 59:7-8

There is no fear of God before their eyes.

– Romans 3:18 = Psalm 36:1

³They have all gone astray, they are all depraved; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

Why such evil?

⁴Those evildoers, do they know nothing?

Compare the following:

They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
they grope in the dark.

– Psalm 82:5

They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand.

– Isaiah 44:18

They devour my people as if they were eating bread

This awful image of what rampant greed is doing to the poor is repeated in other texts:

Wickedness burned like a fire ... and the people became like fuel for the fire; no one spared another.

– Isaiah 9:18-19

Do not let them say in their hearts,
'Aha, we have what we have always been wanting'.
Do not let them say, 'We have devoured you.'

– Psalm 35:25

Israel was holy to YHWH, the first fruits of his harvest. All who ate of it were held guilty; disaster came upon them, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 2:3

You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.

– Micah 3:2-3

^{4c}and do not call upon YHWH.

YHWH is the source of life and the grace to live justly. Failure to call upon YHWH is failure to welcome God's grace. Without this grace we are left to our own corrupt ways:

Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you, and on the peoples that do not call on your name; for they have devoured Jacob; they have devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation.

– Jeremiah 10:25

It is here that we find a difference from Psalm 53 which reads:

They shall be in great terror,
 in terror such as has not been.
 For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly;
 they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.

– Psalm 53:5

There are a number of terms here which are discussed in the Introduction (indicated by the * after the word). See the articles ‘Fear of YHWH’, ‘Just’, and ‘Poor’.

For the meaning of ‘deliverance’ see the article ‘Saving Help’ in the Introduction. Compare the following:

Thus says YHWH God: ‘Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name.’

– Ezekiel 39:25

⁵Well, then, they will have to tremble*, for God stands with the just*.

⁶You may thwart the plans of the poor*, but YHWH is their refuge.

⁷O that deliverance* for Israel would come from Zion!

When YHWH restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.