

"The Fool" (Revisited)

Psalm 53

The Fool and the Final Word: When God Answers the Wicked

This psalm is very similar to the 14th Psalm, although not word-for-word identical. With that in mind, we are going to use the same basic outline from our study of Psalm 14 and highlight the differences between the two and show why they're significant.

The difference in title is one indicator that this psalm, as some assert, isn't just an update by the editors of the Psalter but is a separate inspired work by the psalmist (David), quite probably later in his life. If that's the case, then David found God to be the same throughout his life, and he found that the "fool" was still the same in his response to the Lord.

As we noted in our study of Psalm 14, the word for "fool" here (נָבִיל) is translated "vile" in Isaiah 32:5-6.

Isaiah 32:5-6

⁵ The vile person shall be no more called liberal, nor the churl said to be bountiful. ⁶ For the vile person will speak villany, and his heart will work iniquity, to practise hypocrisy, and to utter error against the LORD, to make empty the soul of the hungry, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail.

The word for "fool" in both of these psalms (נָבִיל) carries the most severe moral condemnation of all the Hebrew words translated "fool" in the Old Testament. This isn't merely an intellectual disregard or poor decision-making – it's a willful moral corruption that expresses itself in what we would consider atheism today. This is someone who has lost the ability to recognize basic spiritual and ethical principles. One of the best examples of this in the Old Testament is in the man named "Nabal" (1 Sam. 25) whose

very name means “fool” and whose behavior demonstrates complete insensitivity to both divine authority and social norms.

The other two primary Hebrew words translated as “fool” (סָכַל, כְּסִיל) offer an interesting progression in the terms.

“Sakal” (סָכַל) is a verb and means to act foolishly or to be foolish. This word emphasizes the behavioral aspect of foolishness, acting in ways that demonstrate disregard for God’s revealed wisdom and His Word.

1 Samuel 13:13

¹³ And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever.

“Kesil” (כְּסִיל), the more common word for fool, found primarily in the book of Proverbs (and only found in Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) describes someone who lacks the proper view toward wisdom that begins with “the fear of the Lord.”

Proverbs 1:7

⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: *but* fools despise wisdom and instruction.

So, the progression represents different stages or aspects of rebellion against God rather than simply different words for the same concept.

- “Nabal” (נָבָל) – the word in our text – represents the end result of persistent rebellion, or complete moral corruption.
- “Sakal” (סָכַל) describes the process of repeatedly choosing to ignore the word and will of God.
- “Kesil” (כְּסִיל) describes the starting point of lacking the foundational fear of the Lord that makes true wisdom possible.

The use of the term “fool” or “foolish” (and its varied terms) in the New Testament holds the same basic meaning: both testaments present foolishness as a moral and spiritual category rather than merely an intellectual one.

When we encounter people who seem intellectually capable but dismiss spiritual truth, they are acting as “the fool” in our text. They haven’t arrived at this atheistic view through any careful philosophical reasoning but through conscious moral choices that gradually hardened their hearts against God and His word.

I. HIS HEART IS WITHOUT GOD – VS. 1A

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

A. Exactly the same wording in both psalms.

B. Summary of what we saw in our study of Psalm 14

We spent quite a bit of time on the phrase, “in his heart,” showing that even we, as believers, should not lose sight of the biblical principal found in Prov. 23:7: “as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”

II. HIS ACTIONS ARE WITHOUT GOOD – VS. 1B-3

A. The difference in this psalm

1. Psalm 14 – “They are corrupt”; Psalm 53:1 – “Corrupt are they.” Exact same verb form used but the translators chose what grammarians call “fronted predicate” construction (placing the adjective before the subject for emphasis) in Psalm 53:1. This word order in English draws attention to the quality being described (corruption) rather than to the actors (they).

Every person without Christ is corrupt. This is the term used for mankind in Noah’s day that

precipitated God destroying the world with a flood (Gen. 6:11-12).

2. Psalm 14 – “they have done abominable works”; Psalm 53 – “and have done abominable iniquity”

- a) “Abominable iniquity” is a stronger phrase than “abominable works.”
- b) They both share the same Hebrew word for “abominable” (הַתְּעִיבוּ). The English word is defined in the OED as, “that which excites moral or physical revulsion or disgust; offensive, reprehensible; loathsome, odious, detestable.”
- c) “Abominable works” (Ps. 14:1) – refers to deeds, acts, or works; specific behaviors and actions that can be observed and evaluated. This word emphasizes the external, visible manifestations of moral corruption.
- d) “Abominable iniquity” (Ps. 53:1) – The Hebrew word for “iniquity” (עָוֹל) represents a significantly different concept. This term describes moral perversity, injustice, or fundamental wrongness that operates at the level of character and principle rather than merely behavior. This word (עָוֹל) points to the underlying moral corruption that generates sinful actions rather than the actions themselves.

B. “There is none that doeth good” (this is repeated in verse 3) – vs. 1c

- 1. This is a Divine standard, not a human one. The phrase “none that doeth good” is not saying no one ever performs a morally commendable action by human standards. Rather, it means: No one does good in a way that meets God’s

perfect standard of righteousness.

2. The Apostle Paul's use in Romans 3 gives this interpretive context.

All of mankind, both Jew and Gentile are under sin and incapable of righteousness that leads to justification.

Romans 3:10-12

¹⁰ As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: ¹¹ There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. ¹² They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Romans 3:20

²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Romans 3:23

²³ For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

3. God's Word acknowledges that some people do morally commendable things, but these actions don't justify the person with God and cannot overcome the guilt and penalty of sin or the need for the gospel.

C. Differences in this psalm in verses 2 and 3

1. One of the main differences between the two psalms is in the use of the Divine Names. In Psalm 14, "LORD" (Yahweh) is used 4 times while "God" (Elohim) is found twice. In Psalm 53, "God" (Elohim) is used in every instance where the divine name appears (6 times).

- a) Psalm 14 uses "LORD" (Yahweh) is considered the covenant name of God, emphasizing His personal relationship with His people. There are exceptions to that rule, but that is the rule, and the rule stands in this text.
- b) Psalm 53 used "God" (Elohim) exclusively, which is the more general name for God emphasizing His universal authority over all creation and all nations.

Why the difference?

Though the psalms are nearly identical, the change in Divine name signals a difference in emphasis:

- c) Psalm 14 highlights God's nearness to the righteous – *"the LORD is his refuge"* – a covenantal comfort.
 - d) Psalm 53 emphasizes God's authority over all people, especially in judgment – *"God hath scattered the bones..."*
 - e) The same God is both personally near to His people (Yahweh) and sovereignly ruling over all nations (Elohim).
 - In a world that seems to ignore God, Psalm 53 reminds us that He still rules.
 - And when we feel opposed or outnumbered, Psalm 14 reminds us that He's still with us.
2. Verse 2: *"and seek God"* (Ps. 14); *"that did seek God"* (Ps. 53). The Hebrew phrase is identical in these psalms (דַּרְשׁ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים). The difference in English is simply how the translators chose to fit the flow of the passage. Psalm 14 reads like an

open moral survey: "Is anyone seeking God?" Psalm 53 reads like the final verdict: "No one did seek Him."

Either way, the point is clear, both here and in Romans 3 where this text is referenced: on his own, man doesn't seek God – God must first seek him.

Luke 19:10

¹⁰ For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

3. "They are all gone aside" (Ps. 14:3); "Every one of them is gone back" (Ps. 53:3)
 - a) "They are all" (הֵלֵל) – this is seen as collectively or general.
 - b) "Every one of them" (כֻּלּוֹ) – more individual or distributive in force.
 - c) "Gone aside" (סָר) – means to turn aside or to deviate from. It's used of leaving a path or departing from right conduct.
 - d) "Gone back" (סָג) – means to turn back, to retreat, to withdraw, often with a deliberate or rebellious connotation.

Both psalms teach the same basic truth of universal sin, but:

- Psalm 14 might be understood as saying: "They have wandered off the path."
- Psalm 53 might be understood to say: "They have turned their backs and walked away." Man doesn't just stray (14:3), he actively rebels against God (53:3).

III. HIS SPEECH IS WITHOUT GAIN – VS. 4

A. Looking back (briefly) at our study of Psalm 14:4, we saw:

1. "Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge?" – the workers of iniquity are not simply ignorant; they are willfully opposed to God's ways and devoted to sin.
2. "Who eat up my people as they eat bread..." – Their daily opposition to God's people is as habitual as eating bread – that is, they seek to silence the righteous.
3. "And call not upon the LORD" – and because they do not call upon the LORD, they rely on everything opposite of God to accomplish their destructive purposes.

B. Differences between the psalms in this verse.

1. In Psalm 53:4, the omission of "all" (כָּל) narrows the focus slightly from the more universal language of Psalm 14.
2. The same Hebrew phrase (לֹא קָרְאוּ) is used in both psalms but translated slightly different.
 - a) "And call not upon the LORD" (Ps. 14) – present tense translation, stressing an ongoing pattern of rebellion.
 - b) "They have not called upon God" (Ps. 53) – past/perfect translation, highlighting a completed refusal now resulting in judgment.

Both are valid renderings of the same Hebrew perfect tense, with the difference reflecting

each psalm's emphasis—Psalm 14 showing a moral condition, Psalm 53 showing a judicial conclusion.

IV. HIS END IS WITHOUT GLORY (IN VICTORY) – VS. 5

Psalm 14:5–6

⁵ There were they in great fear: for God *is* in the generation of the righteous. ⁶ Ye have shamed the counsel of the poor, because the LORD *is* his refuge.

Psalm 53:5

⁵ There were they in great fear, *where* no fear was: for God hath scattered the bones of him that encampeth *against* thee: thou hast put *them* to shame, because God hath despised them.

This is where the two psalms diverge most clearly, both in language and emphasis.

A. Fear in the presence of God (Ps. 14) contrasted with fear from the judgment of God (Ps. 53).

1. In Psalm 14:5, the wicked fear because God is near to the righteous ("God is in the generation of the righteous"). This is conviction and holy terror.
2. In Psalm 53:5, the fear of the wicked is irrational, and quite possibly comes from the Lord Himself ("where no fear was" – not mentioned in Ps. 14). This suggests a panic or dread that is disproportionate to the circumstances surrounding them.

B. Refuge (Ps. 14) contrasted with rejection (Ps. 53)

1. Psalm 14 presents a tender image of the poor being mocked ("shamed the counsel of the poor") for trusting God, but "the LORD *is* his

refuge.”

2. Psalm 53 flips the theme, so to speak. The wicked are now the ones put to shame, because God has despised them (“thou [the poor] hast put *them* to shame, because God hath despised them”).

C. There is a judicial imagery found in Psalm 53 not found in Psalm 14 – “scattered the bones...”

This image is military and graphic. The enemy is encamped against God’s people, but God utterly destroys them. It speaks of total defeat and dishonor in death.

Conclusion: The last verse of the psalm serves as a fitting conclusion. While Psalm 53 hits harder in its judgment imagery – God scattering bones and despising the enemy – it ends on the same hopeful note as Psalm 14: a longing for salvation, a return from captivity, and the rejoicing of God’s people.

The only change is in the Divine name: in Psalm 14, “the LORD” (Yahweh) brings salvation; in Psalm 53, it is “God” (Elohim).

The message, however, is unchanged: our hope is still in Zion, and our joy is still in God’s redemption.”