

Wisemen and Fools

Psalm 53

What does Psalm 53 have to do with Christmas?¹ I do know it's Christmas, and typically sermons at this time of year take up Christmas themes.

Is there Christmas hope in Psalm 53? I think so. While the Psalm² does not directly foretell the birth of Christ, it does show the messianic longing of the people of God (6).³ Perhaps they did not understand all the implications of their Messianic hope, or how it would play out on the stage of history, but they did know their only hope was that salvation would come from *Zion*.

Christmas hope is a longing for the messiah who will deliver us and make us eternally glad. As believers at Christmas, we look back to his first advent and forward to the second.

A. Christmas in Church History

Christmas has had a bit of a rocky history in the Church. In Scripture, other than the record of the birth narratives, there is no indication that the early church celebrated Christmas as a religious holiday. To be sure, the incarnation of God the Son was huge in the mind of the early church, but not in a way that isolated the incarnation from the total Christ. The life of the early church was centered around a weekly celebration of the resurrection of the Son of God on the first day of the week, which inaugurated the age to come.

In church history, there is no reference to the church celebrating Christmas until the 4th Century (the year 336). Julius I, bishop of Rome, was the first to declare December 25 a Christian holiday to celebrate the incarnation. At that time, the Julian calendar was in use, so December 25 was the equivalent of our first day of winter, the darkest day of the year. It seems that the winter solstice was picked to celebrate the birth of Christ, perhaps, to symbolize the light of the world appearing on the darkest day.⁴

From 1647-1660 Christmas was canceled in England. The Massachusetts Bay Colony banned Christmas in 1659.⁵ The holiday was too pagan for New England Puritans. For various reasons Christmas was not declared a federal holiday until 1870.⁶

In summary, in the early history of the church, Christmas was not a thought. In the 4th century, perhaps it was a replacement of pagan myths. In England and the

Colonies in the 1600s, it was too pagan for the church because it promoted revelry and gift giving. Now, Christmas is too Christian for the culture, so pagans want to cancel it.

B. A Corrective to Christmas Thinking

Perhaps, we have all felt a little Christmas burn-out. We may even worry that in our Christian families we nod to the incarnation in order to get to the good stuff. It's easy to see why Christmas has had such an *on-again-off-again* history among Christians.

Enter Psalm 53. The psalm brings a needed corrective to our Christmas thinking that I want us to consider. My aim is not to curb our celebration but to enhance it. We have not yet celebrated the incarnation until we feel the shock of the shepherds, the joy of the angels, the faith of Mary and Joseph, the wonder of the star and the wisemen, and the fear of Herod and all Jerusalem. We have not celebrated until the mystery of the incarnation and all of its implications have impressed our thoughts, our songs, and our words and made us glad.

Psalms are given to application to various situations throughout history. I think Psalm 53 can find meaningful application in the Christmas season. I want us to see two Christmas reminders in Psalm 53.

1. Why the world needs Christmas hope (1-5)

Psalm 53 will not let us feel the Christmas hope of verse 6 without reminding us of the universal guilt of mankind and the judgment to come.

The psalm divides humanity into two categories: the fool (1) and the people of God (4, *my people*). There is no clearer statement in Scripture of the universal sinfulness of mankind than Psalm 53 and its twin, Psalm 14. To establish the universal guilt of man, both Jew and Gentile, Paul picked up the language of these psalms in Romans 3.

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom 3:9-12; cf. Ps 53:1b-3).

A. The Corruption of Humanity (1-4)

The psalmist begins with *the fool*⁷ who says in his heart, “*there is no God*” (1a). The *fool* of verse 1a is used in a collective sense because it is antecedent to the plural pronoun, *they*, in 1b. The psalm divides humanity into two categories: wisemen and fools.

1) The Fool (1-3)

The language of the psalm is strong. It draws on the conditions surrounding 3 of the great judgments of OT history—the flood, Babel, and Sodom—to show the universal corruption of mankind (1b-3).

The word *corrupt* (1b, 3) draws on the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9 (Gen 6:11-12). The Lord *looking down from heaven* (2) draws on the language of both Babel (Gen. 11:5) and Sodom (Gen 18:21).

These judgments did not remedy the corruption of mankind but point it out and anticipate the final judgment to come. They show man is corrupt (1b, 3a), does not do good (1c, 3b), and God finds none among them who understand (act wisely; same word is *maskil* in the superscription) and seek after him (2).

This is the universal condition of mankind outside of Christ. You may not determine in your heart there is no God and maintain a foundation for morality. When as a society you divorce yourself from God, then to whom will you be married? We may not abandon the God of Scripture and remain a moral people. It may take a minute, but society will descend into moral chaos.

2) His corruption (4)

Fools are antagonistic to wisemen (4). We could not have a better illustration of the actions of wisemen and fools than in the story of the wisemen and King Herod. The wisemen arrived in Jerusalem asking, *Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?* Herod had worked hard to gain the title, *King of the Jews*. He was a brilliant politician, and a man who would stop at nothing to gain and hold power. This is why, *Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him* (Mt. 2:2-3) when the wisemen appeared, asking about one *born King of the Jews*.

Herod is the consummate example of the *fool who says in his heart, “there is no God.”* He could not tolerate any rivals to his throne. The more he pushed God out of his mind, the smaller his heart became. Herod was like the Grinch: He hated Christmas; *his heart was two sizes too small*.⁸

Herod, following the corruption of his own heart, in the furry of his pride had all the male children, 2 years old and younger of Bethlehem, killed (Mt. 2:16). Herod is verse 4: He was a *worker of evil who had no knowledge, who ate up God's people like he ate bread, and did not call upon God.*

That is a terrible story for Christmas, but it shows so well the antagonism fools have for Christ.

You reject the babe of Bethlehem, and the next thing you know you are killing children. You cannot live as if there is no God without descending into moral disorder. Eventually, what you get is the relics of goat demons displayed in statehouses and so-called Christian legislators defending the right of Satanists to put them there, as if there is some kind of moral and legal equivalency between goat demons and nativity scenes.⁹ What you get is city leaders making the argument that if we have *Praise in the Park*, we have to have family friendly drag shows as well.

Unfortunately, examples abound. You can see where this is going. Soon there will be no room for the nativity scene. There is no neutrality. There is no static state where we can be free of the incarnation and all its implications and still maintain a wholesome society.

B. The Judgment of God (4-5)

Verse 4 asks a rhetorical question: *Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God?*

The question shows the outcome of the life of the fool. He loses the ability of sound moral reasoning. He draws moral equivalencies between goat demons and nativity scenes, between praise in the park and porn in the park, between after school Bible study and satanist clubs.

A new morality arises where evil is called good and good is evil. Naturally, Christians are billed as bigots, haters, and terrorists. This reasoning becomes as natural and reasonable to the fool as eating a meal (4). They don't understand why you disagree with the new morality, and they view your disagreement as violence.

There (5), right there, at that point and at that time, *they are in terror where there is no terror* (5a). At the place and time where they feel they are firmly in control, the judgment of God will fall suddenly. *For God scatters the bones of him who*

encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them (5b).
When salvation comes out of Zion, He will put down the enemies of his people.

Verse 5 could be applied to many historical events in the history of Israel, and Herod, again, is one of them. He was so gripped by the fear of losing his throne that he had 3 of his sons executed.¹⁰ Matthew mentions that he died but omits the circumstances of his death because everybody knew what happened (Mt 2:19-20). Not long after he killed the children of Bethlehem, Herod began to rot internally. He had a number of leading Jews rounded up to be executed upon his death for fear there would be no mourning when he died.¹¹

Psalm 53 shows us why the world needs Christmas hope—the universal corruption of man and the coming judgment of God.

2. Christmas is a time of hope (6).

Psalm 53 shows us the longing that the ancient people of God carried set against the background of a world that is totally corrupt and has nothing for God and his people: *Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad (6).* The hope and expectation of the people of God was ultimately for Christ.

The world of Jesus was a world of messianic expectation, in which the Messiah would come, overthrow Israel's enemies, and establish his Kingdom. This is what their longing for *salvation to come out of Zion* meant (6).

A. Messianic Expectation

We can see it in the birth narratives. When **Mary** was told she would give birth to the *Son of the Most High who would reign on the throne of David* and have an *everlasting kingdom* (Lk. 1:30-33), the idea of the Messiah coming into the world was not foreign to her. You can see this in her song she composed when she went to visit Elizabeth:

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty (Lk 1:50-53).

Mary understood well what the advent of the Messiah meant. She understood the implications of salvation *coming from Zion*. Salvation coming from Zion had significance for the world.

To the **shepherds** the angel said, *Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord* (Lk. 2:10). Then a multitude of angels said, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased* (Lk 2:14).

The angel said to **Joseph** in a dream, *Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins* (Mt. 1:20-21).

When Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the temple for their purification, **Simeon**, who was *waiting for the consolation of Israel* (in other word Psalm 53:6), spoke by the Holy Spirit, *Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel* (Lk. 2:29-32). Then Simeon said to Mary, *Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed* (Lk. 2:34-35).

B. The Pattern of Psalm 53

We could go on and on, but you get the point. The pattern of thinking in Psalm 53 is the same pattern the Scripture takes up when we are told of the birth of the Son of God. Scripture will not let us look at baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger without reminding us of the sinfulness of mankind, the looming cross of suffering, the reigning of the resurrected Son, and salvation found in him.

We cannot carry a Christmas tree without feeling the weight of the cross. We cannot look at the cross without seeing the empty grave. We cannot see the empty grave without seeing the reigning Lord who lives forever to make intercession for us.

We cannot have the babe of Bethlehem and not the reigning Lord. We cannot admire Christ as a baby and walk away. We cannot hear the angels' song and be silent. All of history flows to the advent of the Son of God and proceeds from it.

Christmas confronts us with the truth that we must have all of Christ or none of Christ.

The incarnation confronts the world and every person with the whole Christ. The greatest need of everyman is the salvation that comes from Zion. As we think, of the incarnation of the God the Son and all the implications of it, we join the longing of the ancient people of God for salvation to come out of Zion.

This season, perhaps, more than any other in our culture, shows the longing of the human heart. People will try to fill those longings with all sorts of things and, yet the longings only intensify the more we try to fill them. The longing heart is God's gift to us, and the only thing that will fill it is a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. The psalmist is right! Salvation comes out of Zion.

¹ I take some comfort in the resurrected Christ saying to his gathered disciples, *These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled* (Luke 24:44). Since the historical background of most psalms is unknown, the psalms lend themselves to being applicable to every life situation and season. Even psalms with a historical superscription or psalms that obviously focus on a historical situation like the Exodus have wide application.

² The psalm does not fit neatly into the standard classifications of psalms. It has some features of a lament and some features of a wisdom psalm (*maskil* in the superscription is translated *understand* in verse 2) but lacks others. It has some elements of a prophetic liturgical style with its calling out of the fool, its word of judgment, and its future hope. It, like Psalm 14, seems to be a composition that draws on features of different types of psalms. There are times when the conventions of poetry, praise, and prayer do not work to adequately express our experience.

³ Psalm 53 is almost a repeat of Psalm 14. It is Psalm 14 revisited and applied to a different historical situation the people of God faced. The differences between the two Psalms point to adapting it to new circumstances. Where Psalm 14 uses LORD (2,4,7), Psalm 53 uses God (2,4,6), as it is part of the Elohistic (God) collection (Psalms 42-83, Book 2 of the Psalter). Both Psalm 14 and 53 are Davidic. Psalm 14 uses *abominable deeds* (2) where Psalm 53 reads *abominable iniquity* (2). Psalm 14 uses *turned aside* (3) where Psalm 53 uses *fallen away* (3). The heart of the difference in the two psalms is Psalm 14:5-6, which reads, *They are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous. You would shame the plans of the poor, but the LORD is his refuge*, compared with Psalm 53:6, which reads, *There they are in great terror, where there is no terror! For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them*. This alteration seems to point to the emphasis of Psalm 14 being directed toward comfort for the faithful, while Psalm 53 is more of a warning to the wicked. Of interest is the superscription of Psalm 53, not so much for what it says as what it does not say as compared to Psalms 52 and 54. While Psalm 53 lacks such a historical reference, the psalm deals with the *fool*. Between the Doeg and the Ziphite incidents in 1 Samuel is the story of Nabal, who lived up to his name. He was the personification of the *fool*. The possibility exists the inspiration behind the three psalms is the historical flow of 1 Samuel 22-26 (see Kidner, *Psalms, TOTC*, 214).

⁴ See [Why Is Christmas Celebrated on December 25? | HISTORY](#), accessed December 13, 2023. Also, see Scott Hubbard, "The Curious History of Christmas," *desiringGod*, December 6, 2023.

⁵ Hubbard, "The Curious History of Christmas."

⁶ [Why Is Christmas Celebrated on December 25? | HISTORY](#). Following the Revolutionary War, some felt Christmas was too British. Perhaps others felt the holiday promoted revelry and excess.

⁷ The fool is a category of humans in wisdom literature.

⁸ https://www.best-poems.net/poem/how-grinch-stole-christmas-by-dr-seuss.html#google_vignette

⁹ <https://notthebee.com/article/the-satanic-temple-has-placed-a-statue-of-satan-in-the-iowa-state-capitol-and-this-representative-and-pastor-says-its-a-okay>. See also, [A word about the Satanic statue controversy | Not the Bee](#), where apparently the so-called satanic temple is a group of militant atheist who troll public places to threaten lawsuits if they don't get to display the absurd, that even they do not believe in.

¹⁰ He also had his wife Mariamme I killed as well as others. [BBC - Religions - Christianity: King Herod](#)

¹¹ [BBC - Religions - Christianity: King Herod](#)