

Prayers

To God

Pray in silence and give your time to God unreservedly, for as long or as short as you feel appropriate.

For myself

Weekly theme: Feelings about 'church'

Pray for your church leaders and for those who are involved in its administration. Offer the Lord your own feelings about your leaders and how the church is run, and submit any concerns you have to Him. You know when you have truly submitted these things to Him, because they cease to be a burden to you.

For others

Thank You Lord God for the privilege of having friends. May I be a true friend to those who value me, and may I also be a true friend to those in need, who do not deserve any friendship, but who need my love and support, whether in practical or financial ways. May I have the courage to give selflessly to others in friendship and love so that Your 'Good News' may be made known through my words and deeds. AMEN

Meditation

Deep inside the soul is 'need'
a trigger sparking feelings
a driver of emotions

But though each need is met in time
another comes with no delay
to make its presence felt
to colour life with insatiable demands
to bleed the soul of ease and joy

One need rankles, however, until its met –
the need to know the Saviour
the need to know the soul is loved eternally

The creature seeks its Creator
perception seeks fulfilment
practice seeks perfection

and consciousness looks beyond the grave
for love requires forgiveness

Nothing in the world will satisfy, but
beyond all sight
we take God's promises disclosed in Christ
and the human spirit finds peace in Him
who shows Himself as Spirit

When He and We have found each other
life will surely make its way
towards the eternal recreated earth and heaven
He will make for us
to be together

Bible Passage

Psalm 14

To the worship leader. Of David.

- 1 The fool says in his heart,
 'There is no God.'
They are corrupt, they do appalling things
 and no good is done by anyone.
- 2 The Lord looks down from heaven on everyone
 to see if there are any who are wise,
 who seek after God.
- 3 They have all gone astray,
 and all alike are perverse;
there is no one who does what is good,
 not even one.
- 4 Will they not learn, those evil doers
 who devour my people like they eat food
 and who do not call upon the Lord?
- 5 They have good reason to be afraid,
 for God stays with those who remain righteous;
- 6 You who would mock the plans of the poor
 When the Lord is their safe haven.
- 7 O that salvation for God's people would come from Zion!
 Jacob will rejoice and Israel will be glad
 When the Lord restores His people.

Review

Psalm 14 reads rather like a sermon! Some of the psalms prior to this have reflected a range of real life situations (Psalm 13), others have declared God's Word with power (Psalm 2), and a number of others have expressed personal concerns (Psalm 9). Psalm 14 however comes across with the craft and vigour of a preacher who wants to make a point and challenge everyone who is listening!

Before we go further into this Psalm, we should look at a couple of its significant features. Firstly, Psalm 14 is the same as Psalm 53! This is not unique in Scripture, because there are a number of other examples of where passages are repeated (e.g. 2 Chronicles 36:22,23 and Ezra 1:1,2), but in this case, a whole psalm is repeated and renumbered, it is not just the case of a few verses! It is almost impossible to know why this came to be, but a careful look at the whole of the book of Psalms yields a possible, but only partial explanation. Psalms consists of five smaller 'books', numbered, in order, 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-150; each of these five Psalm collations has a distinct character, and each may reflect a different and ancient collection of the various Psalms. On the face of it, it seems that Psalms 14 and 53 were in the first and second collection before they were brought together into one book, but they were left in their respective places. Perhaps scholars were unwilling to remove one of them because they regarded each collection as too holy to be changed. Imagine the outcry today if a publisher were to change just one number from a well known collection of songs or hymns!

Secondly, the first few verses of Psalm 14 are used powerfully by Paul in his letter to the Romans. He uses it as part of his argument defining the unique saving work of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:11). He explains the work of salvation as arising from the universal need of salvation from sin, and quotes Psalm 14 as Scriptural evidence of sin's endemic nature. The 'theology' here in Romans 3 is similar to other letters of Paul which explain the Gospel, and the idea that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God is now regarded as a central plank in the Gospel as preached by those who hold to the Protestant and Evangelical faith. This small Psalm is therefore very important, and has huge theological implications.

Psalm 14 begins with the famous words, *'the fool says in his heart, "there is no God"'* (14:1). It is a dramatic beginning, accusing those who do not believe in God of ignorance. But the Psalm goes further. Reflecting on the folly of humanity, the writer then makes the astonishingly bold assertion that all people are *'corrupt'*, concluding *'no good is done by anyone'* (14:1). Verses 2 and 3 then continue this theme, offering us a picture of God gazing down from His throne in His attempt to spot the faithful remnant of those who are earnestly seeking him (14:2). The conclusion then comes in verse three, where the Psalm says in exasperation *'they have all gone astray ... there is no one whop is good, no, not one!'* and by this, the author really does mean everyone. Psalm 14 is not just attacking fools who do not believe on God, it exposes everyone! None even of God's people are *'good enough'*!

Yet we need to be even clearer about those who are addressed by this Psalm. When we read it now, from a Christian perspective, we reckon it refers to everyone and as such provides a good argument for the proclamation of the Gospel. However, when people of ancient times read it, they would have assumed that it was speaking about them as God's people, indeed, all of them. So this is first and foremost a poem about God's people failing! Now, the majority of the history of Israel and Judah in the Old Testament is one of rebellion against God, and it is a tragic story. Their rejection began after the giving of the Law, where we read that Israel rejected her God as soon as Moses disappeared up into the mountain for 40 days (Exodus 32:1f.). In the following centuries, God was able to do wonderful works through great leaders such as the Judges, and also David and the prophets such as Elijah. But the people of Israel always turned away from obedience to God to their own religious practices, frequently ending up worship gods called 'Ba'als' (see Judges, Isaiah 7:1-14 and 2 Kings 17). They eventually paid the penalty when their kingdoms were destroyed first by the

Assyrians (in 721BC, see 2 Kings 17) and then the Babylonians (in 587BC, see 2 Kings 24:1f.).

If the writer of this Psalm was David, then in the course of his life he had every reason to doubt the goodness of humanity, even the goodness of his own people. His life was punctuated by the most awful tragedies, as the book 2 Samuel relates. For us, however, the Bible has been written so that we might understand more than just the history of Israel and Judah. Ultimately, the relationship between God and His people in Olds Testament times now reflects the relationship between God and all the people of the world. Paul himself made the jump of perceiving this, and in Romans chapter 3, as we have already seen, he applies this understanding to all people everywhere. For him, it was Scriptural proof from the evidence of Israel's history, that the basic human condition was one of 'fallen-ness', and the only answer to this was the sacrificial work of Christ .

Psalm 14 concludes by offering an answer to the devouring evils of those who 'do not call upon the Lord' (14:4). Despite the persistent failures of God's people, the Psalm ends with an optimistic feel, giving what amounts to a prophecy, '*O that salvation for God's people would come from Zion*' (14:7)! It seems that David anticipated something of the saving power of God that was eventually found in Jesus Christ, and he also anticipates the joy of God's people when they are finally restored and given hope in the Saviour. Because of this prophecy, countless generations of Christians have found the love of God in Christ, been saved from their ignorance of God and their sin, and rejoiced! Psalm 14 points the way to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

As a whole, Psalm 14 reads rather like a theological statement rather than a simple song of praise. But it can easily be read as a poem that speaks of the saving power of God, who is righteous in all things and still wants to save people. It is a very important passage because it makes us aware of God's greater scheme of salvation, written about within the whole Bible.

Discipleship

Application

Telling people that they have sinned

Psalm 14 is basic to Evangelical Christian faith. However, we should ask ourselves very carefully whether these words are appropriate for preaching. If you tell someone that he or she has sinned, they will most likely walk away unless they already feel within them some concern about their own moral strength and ability. This may be the case for some, but not for everyone. We have all come across those who are fed up with listening to preaching which tells them they have sinned, when they need to hear about love of God.

In truth, the best place for explaining the Gospel, about the sin of humanity and Christ's salvation, is surely in a setting where one person can explain to another what it means to be saved, in relative private. In this way, a Christian can explore with someone else what it means for the Bible to say '*the fool says in his heart that is no God*'. Each preacher must decide for himself or herself whether it is right for him or her to appear to attack a group of people by telling them they have sinned, perhaps using Psalm 14. If they do, then those who hear are surely owed the opportunity to discuss further what these means.

Ideas for what to do

- Write down a list of those things you might consider foolish, and subject to the judgement of God. Consider carefully whether you are prone to any of these sins, and pray for Jesus Christ to deal with your sins. It is difficult to face dealing with sin directly, but we each of these there are times when you need to do it.
- Pray that the Gospel will be preached well and properly to all people who need to hear about the saving love of Jesus Christ.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is it true that no one is perfect for God? How can this be true?
2. What kind of foolishness distracts the church from its mission these days? How does this psalm help us deal with this?
3. Why do people not learn the lessons of the past? What is the difference between God's people today and God's people of Israel?

Final Prayer

May the peace of Christ inspire my soul this day; may His peace be my guide through the all its pitfalls; may His peace be my strength when trouble is at hand; may His peace be my help when I feel downcast; and may His peace be my joy as the day concludes. AMEN