

3. How do you see renewal happening amongst God's people today? What needs to happen in the church for this to happen?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It is easy for any of us to say that certain attitudes are 'foolish' when they do not accord with our own, but we have to apply more spiritual logic to this then merely express our opinions. The Bible defines foolishness as the refusal to accept that we are all made by God our Creator, and therefore acknowledge Him as Lord; the rest of our Christian understanding of life and salvation follows from this. The worst foolishness however is to nominally accept God as Creator, but to allow yourself to become so distant from Him that contact is minimal and He is left out of our everyday lives. This, I believe is what the psalmist was concerned about in his own day, and we should be today. Psalms such as this remind me of the great importance of keeping close to God through Jesus, so that we are not overcome by our own foolishness.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Pray for any you know who are troubled by faith, because they find it hard to make sense of what to you is plain and easy to understand. Be ready to see things from the point of view of others, so that you can do your best to be a blessing to them.*
- *Ask yourself whether you have been foolish in your own attitudes and presumptions about God or about other people. This is hard to do, but it is important that we show ourselves gracious enough to accept our faults and vulnerabilities. Certainly, others will talk about them behind our backs, if we are not willing to be open and handle our failings in a positive manner.*

Final Prayer

Bless, O Lord, everything I do in the course of my day. May what I do be worthy of Your Kingdom, and may all who come across my path know that I work for You. May all I do bear fruit worthy of Your Name, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer. AMEN

Prayer

Open the rich stores of Your blessings O Lord, not for us but for our sisters and brothers throughout the world. Then, whether literally or spiritually, the blind will see, the lame will walk, the captives will be set free and those who do not know You will have the Good News announced to them. This is Your blessing for all people; thank You Lord Jesus for the glory of Your blessings! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray for those who will be on watch over the Christmas, protecting others from the dangers of fire. Pray for any you know who will be away at Christmas because of their duties.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for all those whose prospects are bleak this Christmas*
- *Thank God for the joys of preparing for Christmas*
- *Pray for the safety of young children in schools and institutions*

Meditation

This is the life you have given me, Lord God. I have none other.
I know you are my Saviour, and have redeemed me from sin; so

*Help me to grasp the present and claim it for all that is good;
Save me from the evil of wishing things could be different;
Grant me the power of Your Holy Spirit to be victorious over evil;
Shape me into one who is generous of spirit in every situation;
Give me the courage to face all circumstances with honest intent;
Enable me to treat everyone I meet with humanity and equality;
Mould my words to make them worthy of one who serves You.*

This is the life you have given me, Lord God. I have none other.
For I know You love me as I am, and will do so for ever: Alleluia!

Bible Study - Psalm 53

For the director of music. According to mahalath. A maskil of David.

¹ *Fools say in their hearts, '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 consume my people as they eat food;*

those who do not call upon the Lord?

⁵ *They were overwhelmed there with great fear,
where there was nothing to fear.
For it was God who scattered*

*the bodies of those who attacked
you;
You were put to shame,
for it was God who rejected them.*

*would come from Zion!
Jacob will rejoice and Israel will be
glad
when the Lord restores his people.*

⁶ *O that salvation for God's people*

Review

Psalm 53 is a fascinating psalm. It is the same as psalm 14 in all aspects except for verse 5, which is completely different from the corresponding verses 5 and 6 of psalm 14. The structure of the psalm is simple, beginning with something of a sermon of complaint against the ungodly (53:1-4, 14:1-4), and ending with a forthright statement that God will act to bring salvation to His people; 'Jacob will rejoice and Israel will be glad when the Lord restores His people!' (53:6, 14:7).

The verses which are different between psalms 14 and 53 may well indicate two different settings in which the basic psalm was used. Verses 5 and 6 of psalm 14 (which correspond to verse 5 in Psalm 53) speak about God's protection of the righteous and the poor from those who 'mock' them, and this makes psalm 14 feel like a condemnation of social injustice within Israel. Verse 5 in our psalm 53 reads like the criticism of foolish people who have not trusted God at a time of war or siege, and therefore reads like a condemnation of foolish kings who have not acted with godly insight in the leadership of the people of Israel.

Comparing psalm 14 and 53 is fascinating because it helps us see how the psalms could have been used by God's people in ancient times, and indicates that we, too, could do the same thing. We could use the external structure of verses 1-4 and the last verse, and include in the middle our particular concerns about governments, leaders or people that have not acted in a godly way and been 'foolish'. We will all have opinions about such things, but the psalm invites us to place our concerns into a scriptural pattern of prayer which accepts the foolishness of humanity and looks forward to the saving and delivering acts of God.

Fools, unbelief and corruption A clear picture is painted from the start; those who deny the existence of God and His creation are fools, moreover they are the source of wickedness and corruption in the world. In particular, those who have enjoyed the benefits of the Lord's saving and protecting work and then proceed to reject God have completely lost their way. We may not be able to know who falls into this category, but God 'looks down from heaven' (53:2) to see who trusts Him and believes in Him, and who does not! Clearly the psalm expresses amazement that some of those who have known the benefits of God's covenant faithfulness to His people chose to ignore this; they have 'gone astray ... there is no-one who does what is good, not even one' (53:3).

We need to be clear; the evil being described is not simply atheism, but unbelief amongst God's people; and the church today is as much prone to the tragedy of this waywardness as were the people of Israel in ancient times. There is a specific example of this in the Bible. King Jeroboam 1 of Israel decided that although the people he ruled in the northern Israel had worshipped the Lord for centuries, he set up a golden calf for them to worship at Bethel (1 Kings 12:30), the very place where Jacob had his vision of angels ascending and descending (Genesis 28:10 ff). This foolishness set in motion internal strife and bribery within the kingdom that marred Israel's history for two hundred years until the nation was invaded by Assyria in 721BC (1Kings 13 to 2 Kings 17). It is possible that this psalm was either influenced by or came from such times, as its themes closely match what some would have thought at the time.

Today, the psalm sounds a clear warning about the foolishness of unbelief amongst God's people because it leads to the corruption that happens when people are valued more than God. This distracts from the Church's task of bringing the Lord's salvation to all, particularly at times of crisis (53:5). Unfortunately, in recent times, it is not difficult to find those within the Christian Church who profess no belief in God. They have been taught to use academic methods to 'critically assess' the evidence for God, and in their own eyes, they find that belief lacks credibility. I have heard bishops, clergy and other church leaders who profess such beliefs, and they claim to reflect both good academic standards and the spiritual values of today. This is highly debatable and in my opinion quite wrong. They do not reflect good academia or the truth about the living God who made them.

Does anyone do good? Psalm 14 speaks unequivocally, 'there is no one who does what is good, not even one' (53:3). It would be possible to argue that this is just colourful language used by public speakers, but it is so much more than this. Psalm 14 is urgently calling people back to their God who promises them salvation (53:7) from evil; wickedness and sin. Some believe that Psalm 14's talk of 'fools' (53:1) and the 'wise' (53:2) is a type of Old Testament speech called 'Wisdom', and regard all this as teaching material for young people (which often contrasted the actions of 'the fool' and 'the wise' e.g. Proverbs 10:14). However, this does not explain the serious tone of the psalm, and the absolute conviction that no-one is able to live up to the standards of God.

Perhaps, even in ancient times, it was recognized that however good our intentions, it was impossible for people to live up to the exacting requirements of God's Law all of the time. Yes, foolish people lack belief in God and rebel against the one who made them, but when God looks from heaven to see who he can use amongst his people, he is looking for those who will do his bidding absolutely, without question and whatever the price. The psalm tells us the unhappy news that He does not find anyone who fits the bill!

This, of course, is exactly what Paul picks up in his famous letter to the Romans (Romans 3:10,11,12). He mixes up the message of this psalm with that of psalm 1, 5:9, 140:3, 10:9, 36:1 and also Isaiah 59:7, but this only adds force to his argument. Paul argues that because no-one is good enough to do God's work of renewal and redemption, Jesus has done this work once and for all on the Cross. Jesus was pure and did not compromise His relationship with God by sinning, and was therefore able to answer the call for a 'righteous' person to do God's will. He alone is the reason why we can be restored to God's presence from our mortal, fallen state, and is the power source behind any renewal or revival God brings to His people.

Renewal today Psalm 53 ultimately points to the salvation (the word also means 'renewal' and 'deliverance', as well as 'salvation') which is God's answer to human sin and wickedness. Today we know that Jesus has fulfilled the psalm, and salvation has 'come out of Zion' (53:6), and this news is as important today as it has ever been. The defenceless poor, whether they are oppressed Muslim women or starving Africans, confused and controlled North Koreans or oppressed in Western society; all can find their true hope for redemption and salvation from the one who stands above human folly and wickedness, Jesus himself.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How do you feel about God's knowledge of every detail of your life? Why would He want to know us this closely?
2. What kind of foolishness distracts the church from its mission these days? How does this psalm help us address or identify this?