

# PSALM READING FOR JULY 26, 2015

**START WITH SCRIPTURE:** Psalm 14

## **OBSERVE:**

Psalm 14 might be called a “Lament” because it addresses one of the darkest of themes: atheism, corruption, and evildoing.

The Psalmist pulls no punches in his denunciation of unbelief: *The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, their deeds are vile.* The footnote provided in the text offers further explanation of the term *fool* in Hebrew. It does not mean one who is stupid or ignorant, but one who is morally deficient.

This helps clarify the premise of the Psalm — that unbelief derives from and leads to moral corruption and sin.

What is most disturbing is the general scope of evil: *there is no one who does good. . . All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.*

While this is a pretty pessimistic assessment of human nature, the Psalmist does make an exception: those who are being oppressed by the godless evildoers are the people of God. *They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the Lord.* This vivid figure of speech compares the godless to carnivorous beasts, or even cannibals!

This gives the Psalmist the occasion to draw the contrast between the godless and the Godly. On the one hand, the godless live in constant anxiety: *there they are, overwhelmed with dread.* On the other hand, *God is present in the company of the righteous.*

On the one hand, the *evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor.* On the other hand, *the Lord is their refuge.* To use a figure of speech from the game of chess, the Psalmist is declaring “check and mate!” If God is the refuge of the poor, the evildoers’ efforts to oppress them are thwarted. The game is essentially over, because God has won!

The Psalmist ends with a great exclamation of victory which is also a plea for God’s intervention: *Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the Lord restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!*

## **APPLY:**

It seems to me that our culture thinks that morality is no longer black and white, good and evil — that moral judgments are simply multiple shades of gray (please pardon the allusion to a morally reprehensible book!).

The Psalmist sees the moral universe in far more stark and clear terms. Evil derives from godless disbelief, and results not only in moral corruption but in oppression of the innocent and the righteous.

When the Psalmist tells us that *All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one,* he is describing the destiny of all who have turned their backs on God.

In contrast, the people of God depend on the righteousness of God for their salvation. Paul quotes this Psalm in Romans 3, pointing out that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Sin and its consequences are universal. However, he also declares that *all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came*

*by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith (Romans 3:24-25).*

Without God, we are all morally corrupt fools. And we have no righteousness of our own that can make us “wise” in God’s sight. But our faith in Christ’s righteousness imputes his righteousness to us, and we become God’s people.

## **RESPOND:**

Atheism seems to be making strides in our era. According to the Pew Research Center, Christians in the United States declined from 78.4% in 2007, to 70.6% in 2014, whereas the “Unaffiliated,” which includes atheists and agnostics, has increased from 16.1% in 2007 to 22.7%.

It seems to me that there are several factors in this: some “Cultural Christians” who are Christian only because of family origin or background are probably being more honest about their state of faith and no longer claim to be Christian. On a more positive note, this may indicate a clarification among some folks that Christianity isn’t merely a matter of culture, but of conviction and commitment.

I think there are some fairly general causes of “atheism”:

- arrogance – those who seem to believe that they have thoroughly investigated all of the world religions and have concluded that they are intellectually superior to people of faith; or have persuaded themselves that there is no Creator necessary in this vast, complex universe.
- anger – those who have been hurt by Christians, or perhaps have been disappointed that their faith in God failed to deliver what they hoped for.
- apathy – those who are simply too lazy to conduct a systematic search for God, and simply don’t care enough to find faith.
- accountability – those who honestly hope that there is no God; for if there is a God, and this is a moral universe, there are consequences for their actions and our lifestyles. That is certainly the case for the godless referred to in Psalm 14.

From my perspective, the Psalmist’s blunt words apply to each of these factors, though most of us are too polite to say it out loud: *The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”*

But we are also reminded that *at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6).*

*Our Lord, the Psalmist’s words are blunt. Only fools declare unequivocally that you don’t even exist. And yet, I’m reminded that you love even those who don’t love you! That love is at the heart of the Gospel! Help me to do what another Psalm declares, which is to “teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.” Amen.*

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