

The Difference God Makes

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[0:00] Morning. Good to see you. So Psalm 14. Flory, my eldest daughter, said this morning, Dad, what are you speaking on at church today?

! So I told her and off she went and she read it and then she went, whoa, that's trifical, which I think means tricky and difficult. And I think she's got a point. But anyway, we'll give it a good shot. Let's start with a question for you.

Maybe this is the kind of question to best answer in your head. What would you do today if you knew there was no consequences to your actions?

If no one would find out? No embarrassment, no shame, no punishment, no accountability. Well, I think that is a very hard question to answer. And it's actually a kind of stupid question to ask, really, I think.

Because in so many ways, we're tuned in to a higher authority. So our thinking and our actions are always governed by that.

[1:24] So it could be the law. That applies to all of us. It could be your parents and your upbringing. It could be your school values and rules. So sometimes we understandably find it really hard to think outside those structures.

So when we look at Psalm 14, which we're going to do this morning, at first reading, it seems to paint a picture of a world where there's no authority or higher power.

And to be honest, it just looks a bit grim. But I think sort of if you go beyond that bleak start to the psalm, I think that it ultimately shows us the difference God makes if we believe and trust in him.

And I think that's because of three things that we can learn from this psalm. I think we can learn that God sees. That's been a theme, hasn't it, throughout the summer, if you've been around in the psalms.

God sees what goes on. God saves and God surrounds us. So he sees, he saves and he surrounds.

[2:37] And I suppose as we come to the end of this summer break and for many of us, normal life, whatever that is, resumes, I think my prayer, as I've been looking at this week, is that the difference God makes to our lives will kind of give us a renewed confidence as we tell others about him as opportunities might arise this week in the circumstances that we're in.

So first of all, let's have a look at the first section, God sees, verses 1 to 3. Now I don't know if you have ever been to a model village or one of those model railways.

I'm a big fan of model railways. I had a Hornby set when I was younger, remember them? But I was never going to have the patience to kind of create a big sort of set design.

But I love seeing the results and all the attention to detail that those retired men, because they normally are, put into all those kind of landscapes and villages around the railway.

But maybe part of the reason why I like them is because you have this ability to look down on the scene from a superior position.

[3:57] You can scan the whole landscape rather than just seeing it from the perspective of one of the cows in the field or something. And this psalm is a bit like this. It kind of switches perspective as it develops.

So in verse 1, we're on earth and the fool is speaking, whoever he is. But then in verse 2, David kind of changes the perspective and we're looking down on earth from God's viewpoint.

It says, the Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind. And what does God see when he looks down on the world that he's created?

Well, it's not great. David says he sees fools who say there is no God. And then he links that to corruption and to vile deeds, he says.

He sees people turned away from God and he even sees, it says, no one doing good. It seems perhaps at first glance to be God's assessment of the worst of humankind.

[5:06] And I guess although this psalm was written, what, 3,000 years ago or so, it seems to be a kind of timeless glimpse into human nature. Much of what is described here in this first part of the psalm is often reflected on our news apps as we scroll through.

But it does seem to be broader than that. You see, we might not recognize ourselves in these statements, but it does seem to be a description of us all. Look at the language if you've got it open. There is no one that does good. All have turned away. Is that really what God sees? Is that really a description of me?

So firstly, this term, fool. It's not really a word we use often these days. And if we do, it's kind of connected more with fooling around, practical jokes, playing the fool.

It's kind of got comic associations. But I think less so here. I understand the Hebrew word is nabal. N-A-B-A-L. Nabal.

[6:14] And interestingly, there's someone in the Bible called Nabal who David actually met. He came across him in the book of 1 Samuel. He was a wealthy guy. And so on one level, very successful. But he was mean-spirited.

He was proud. He was harsh. His wife, Abigail, actually called him a fool. So the word is not connected to levels of success or levels of intelligence.

You can be an intelligent fool. And it's not connected to status or class. You can be an aristocratic fool. Biblically, what it means is someone who suppresses or just completely disregards the reality of God.

Someone who suppresses or just disregards the reality of God. And we can come to that conclusion, I think, in different ways. We might just say, well, I can't see him.

Therefore, he doesn't exist. We might think, well, he doesn't seem to act in modern day life. He's ineffective. Therefore, of course, he doesn't exist. We might think, if he's there, he seems to have no impact or bearing on my life.

[7:25] So, therefore, he doesn't exist. Or maybe, I don't actually value what he apparently values. So, he's not worthy of being God anyway.

And I think, by nature, our thought processes can fit into one or more of those categories very easily.

But just notice the wording. If you look at verse 1, it says, The fool says, In his heart there is no God. So, I don't think this is about academic debates about the evidence for God or the existence of God.

It almost certainly wouldn't have meant that in the time David was writing. This is more about what lies beneath that. Because for many, it's actually our heart's rejection of God that can influence our head.

Because what we love or what we don't love can sometimes affect what we're willing to believe. You see, our hearts, and the Bible means by that, our kind of core, our inward desires, our passions, our motivations.

[8:39] They are not naturally drawn to wanting God to exist. And less so to him being in a position of authority. I don't know if you've heard of this chap, Aldous Huxley.

He was a philosopher and writer. He wrote a book called Brave New World. I think he was quite local to this area, actually, as well. He was very honest about this. This is what he said.

It's on the screen if you want to read it through. I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning. And consequently, assumed that it had none.

And was able, without any difficulty, to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. For myself, as no doubt for many of my friends, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation from a certain system of morality.

We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom. That's very honest. Can you see the link? Sometimes a denial of God's existence is actually our heart saying, we don't want a God.

[9:51] Because if there's a God, there's an implication for how I go about living my life. Without God, no one tells me how to do it. Without God, I don't need to depend on anyone else.

Without God, therefore, I'm free. You can kind of see the thought process. And this psalm suggests that this thought process exists in every human heart.

It kind of runs like a vein through us. And it's there from the start. There was a very interesting TV program on a few years ago. It was on Channel 4.

And it was called The Secret Lives of Four-Year-Olds. Remember that? Then it became five-year-olds. And then six-year-olds. And it was this hidden camera exercise filming young children.

And they had different moral dilemmas to navigate. And one of the tests was called the marshmallow test. And children were told that they would have a greater treat if they did not eat the marshmallows displayed attractively in the middle of the room.

[10:55] You know that one, Hamish? And it was just a really good watch. Because some of the children, you know, they looked away from the temptation. Some of them physically moved away. Some began to question the rules, interestingly, amongst themselves.

And several just kind of gave in and ate the marshmallows. You see, it would be strange, wouldn't it? What's that? What's the greater treat?

I don't know. It's something better than marshmallows. Chocolate bar? In my view, chocolate bar is better. You see, it would be strange, wouldn't it? If you picked up your friend's newborn baby and you looked into his eyes and you said, Wow, what a beautiful, beautiful fool.

I don't recommend it. But can you see what I mean? Our fool-like tendencies are built in from a young age. We do know what kind of God's holiness expects from us.

But we're not naturally inclined to go that way. You see, as Christians, of course, we trace that back to the Garden of Eden. The secret lives of Adam and Eve that turned out not to be quite so secret.

[12:08] And ever since the fall, humankind has not naturally looked to God. We have this deeply rooted streak of foolishness in all of us.

But just in case you're wondering whether this is some sort of bold conclusion to emerge from a short little poem in the middle of the Bible, the Apostle Paul, he uses this psalm as he explains God's relationship with his people throughout history in the book of Romans.

If you've got a Bible, just turn over to Romans chapter 3, starting at verse 9. Romans chapter 3, verse 9. If you've got a Bible, that is page 1130, I think.

It's in a section entitled, No One is Righteous. We could change that and we could put, We're All Fools. Let me read it.

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all. He's talking about whether Jews have any advantage before God. For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

[13:22] As it's written, there is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. And then if you jump through to verse 23 as a summary, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And I think if you flip back now, with this context in mind, in Psalm 14, it's a little bit easier to understand this line that's repeated in verses 1 and 3.

There is no one that does good. Because that's a tough one to swallow, right? There's no one that does good. Surely that's just a dodgy translation. There are undeniably good things happening all over this town and country today.

Praise God for that. People are giving to charity. People are chatting to their neighbours. They're giving someone a lift into town. DIY SOS. That is all about the good, right?

It can't mean that. But the theme of this psalm is the heart. So I think the question is this. Is there anybody out there who at the deepest heart level is consistently in tune with God's holiness and desires and motivations and therefore ultimately good in all that they do?

[14:43] And I think the answer is what God sees. No. The children in the TV shows, they all tried different strategies and some of them were good things.

But their hearts were on what they shouldn't eat rather than the brief that they had. And this is what God sees as he looks down. Does that seem a bit too bleak to you?

If that does, please have a chat with myself or a friend afterwards. I'd love to know your thoughts on this. But I think it's really important to grasp this. Because as Christians, we know Jesus as our saviour.

And if that's who we say he is, the more we know of the depths of what we've been saved from, the more likely we are to live lives of gratitude out of what he saved us from.

Okay. At this point, we're going to jump ahead in the psalm and look at the short prayer in verse 7. So if you just head to the end of the psalm, verse 7. Because we see that as much as God sees into our hearts, he has this passionate desire to save us.

[15:58] Let's read verse 7. David prays, Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion. When the Lord restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad.

You see, it's a short prayer, but it's packed with intention. It's a prayer for protection over God's people. It's a prayer for the restoration of God's people who are being oppressed. But most importantly, I think, it's a prayer of salvation.

Because David, having described the condition of the human heart, shows a heartfelt cry for the cure, a longing for a Messiah, a saviour.

He's looking forward with this prayerful optimism. And he mentions this word Zion. It's a word that's used about 40 times, I think, in the Psalms. And the word Zion originally referred to one of the hills in Jerusalem, but it's usually used as a term to refer to Jerusalem as a whole.

And now Jerusalem became the place of God's presence among his people. And this was shown in the temple that was built under Solomon's reign, who was David's son. And it was here that God was present.

[17:08] But because of the foolishness described in these first verses, the only approach was through this sacrificial system carried out by the priests. People just couldn't stand before a holy God without this.

It would have been just too exposing. The guilt would have been overwhelming. But they could be accepted, forgiven, if something or someone paid.

And the sacrificial system at the temple just foreshadowed God's greater plan. If you flick back to verse 2, sorry, Psalm 2, a bit of flicking around this morning, Psalm 2.

We looked at this psalm last summer. And you'll see in verse 6 of Psalm 2, the Lord saying, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.

And it becomes clear later in this psalm that he's God's son. You see, Jesus entered Jerusalem, Zion, the location of the temple.

[18:14] And even to the point of death, he was surrounded by foolishness. So the foolishness of Judas' betrayal for cash. The foolishness of the disciples who couldn't stay awake to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The foolishness of Peter choosing to deny knowing Jesus. The foolishness of the sham trial. The foolishness of the people who chose Barabbas, who was guilty, to go free.

And Jesus, who was innocent, to go to the cross. And at the root of all of this, at the root of that foolishness, was a heart in each of those cases that said, there is no God.

And in the midst of that foolishness, Jesus would have just seen it all for what it was. You're not believing in me. But out of love for his father, compassion for his people, he goes to the cross and he exchanges our foolishness for his goodness.

Our foolishness for his wisdom. But most importantly, our foolishness for his righteousness. That great exchange that took place at the cross. Where did you stand this morning?

[19:34] Is your head saying, there's no God? If so, I'll just encourage you just to take a little bit of time to think, is it actually your heart saying that?

And the good news is that God can change our hearts. He can change our status. He can change our motivations through his son, Jesus, as we move from unbelief and put our trust in him.

If you've never read one of the biographies, the Gospels of Jesus, I'd really encourage you to do that. But lastly, let's jump back to the verses that I left out in the middle.

Because David, whilst he's longing for this future salvation to come, he's really keen, I think, to explain that there were many of God's people at this time who were victims of those who rejected God.

And I think this part of the psalm is written to bring great comfort to those who, by God's grace, have had their hearts changed, who've moved from unbelief to belief, and are no longer seen by God as the fools described in verses 1 to 3.

[20:50] And I think it brings great comfort because God's presence surrounds those who believe in him. Let's read verse 4.

Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread. They never call on the Lord. You see, the heart of a fool, by nature, is more likely to live for self.

It is more likely to be inward-looking. And David makes this kind of clear connection here between those that know nothing of God and deny him and their treatment of others.

You see, a heart that has no sense of God, that denies God, obviously has no relationship with him, and is not interested in God's good desires for people, and is therefore more prone to using others to achieve their own means.

Because that is our heart's default position. You see, in this psalm, we're not told who David has in mind. It could be the godless within Israel, or it could be foreign invaders who worshipped idols.

[22:02] And maybe for us it's a bit different. It might be a colleague who only seems to think of self, who's hurt you along the way. Or maybe a close relationship you have with someone who doesn't consider God, where there might have been betrayal.

Or maybe plans to share the gospel that you have have been stopped by organisations that don't want there to be any platform for the gospel. But I think if we're believing and trusting in the God of the Bible, this psalm says that we can be assured of two promises.

Verse 5, God is present in the company of the righteous. And then verse 6, the Lord is our refuge. And I think these are precious truths to hold on to. Particularly right now, if you're under pressure from anybody or those who deny God. And of course we can take this to a more extreme but very real level.

If you were a believer in northern Nigeria right now, or if you were in an underground church in Iran, verses 4 to 6 would be words that sustain you.

[23:19] God's promise to surround us with his presence and provide a refuge for us has been an incredible comfort to Christians throughout the generations.

But there's just one last line in this psalm that I want to leave you with. For those that deny God and might well look down on you as you believe and trust in him, there's something quite astonishing, I think, going on in verse 5.

If you look at it. End of verse 4, first of all. They never call on the Lord, but there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.

As we live out our lives for Christ, a life that's been changed from unbelief to belief through his saving grace, it has a powerful impact on others.

And I don't think we're going to really fully know the impact of that until eternity. Because when people know that you follow Jesus, that you believe and trust in God, everything you say and do is noted by those that don't share your faith.

[24:34] And it causes a reaction in your friends or your neighbours or your colleagues, some of which you'll see and maybe pick up on, I suspect, but most of which, I think, will remain unseen to you.

Because in this country, where people tend to be more kind of reserved and polite, the reaction often, I think, remains in the heart. As verse 5 implies, people sense God's presence working in and through you.

And it really affects them. So keep on living for Jesus. And as you do, you become this active agent in helping someone move from a heart that says, there is no God, to someone who believes.

So as you offer that word of encouragement to that isolated mum at the school gate, as you invite your neighbour around for coffee for the first time, as you resist piling in with criticism during that office whinge, as you interact with your adult children who don't yet follow Jesus, as you invite a neighbour's child to HBC, it's noticed and it's seen and it has deep impact.

And sometimes I think we hesitate because we worry about the reaction and sometimes the reaction isn't positive. But usually I think we never see the reaction. But it's there, deep in the heart.

[26:07] God is present in the company of the righteous and he's present in you by his spirit. As we come to the end of this little series of psalms that we've been looking at over the summer, I think we've definitely seen the extent to which the human heart can stray from God.

But I think we've also seen something of God's loving and faithful character and his desire, his utmost desire to rescue and save the people that he's created.

God really does make a difference. You see, the fool says in his heart, there is no God. And the Christian says, there is.

And he's good. Let's pray. Father, we confess that even if we're trusting in Jesus this morning, we still live at times as if you don't exist.

In fact, each time we sin, we effectively deny your existence and your goodness. Father, thank you for your grace and mercy to us. Lord, we're staggered that despite what you see when you look down on the earth that you created, you're still drawn to us, you're so patient with us, and your main desire is for us to be restored into relationship with you.

[27 : 39] Father, thank you this morning for the Lord Jesus who makes this possible as he took our foolishness on himself and gave us his righteousness. Father, help us this week, I pray, that we can live in the light of these truths.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.