



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 53

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm has the title *To the Chief Musician. Set to "Mahalath." A Contemplation of David*
- The title describes for us the author, audience, and tune or instrument of the song
- This Psalm is almost a repetition of Psalm 14 with a few variations which hardly affect the meaning
- Both Psalms contemplate on the foolishness and wickedness of non-believers
- They both show that not believing in the existence of God is a destructive idea and it has substantial consequences, and is connected with a wicked life



Introduction

- Both Psalms are attributed to David, and both are dedicated to the *Chief Musician*
- But in the title of Psalm 53, there is the addition of, to *Mahalath*
- The name of God came seven times in both Psalms
- Yet in Psalm 14, it came four times (in Hebrew) as “Jehovah”, and three times as “Elohim”
- Whereas in Psalm 53, it came as “Elohim” the seven times
- The name “Jehovah” concerns God in His relationship with His people, “The Being” (He who is among His people)
- Whereas “Elohim” concerns God the (Creator)



Introduction

- Some may wonder why what came in Psalm 14 would be repeated in Psalm 53 with minor differences?
- Could there be a repetition in the inspiration?
- All repetitions are not vain repetitions
- We are slow to learn
- This repetition confirms the authenticity of the Scripture
- It would have been omitted if it is not inspired by the Holy Spirit
- David after a long life, found men no better than they were in his youth



Introduction

- Psalm 14 is in the first group of the Psalms (Psalms 1 to 41), where the focus is on the salvation of man (the individual)
- While Psalm 53 is in the second group of the Psalms (Psalms 42 to 72), where the focus is on the salvation of the church, all people not the individual
- The word *Mahalath* occurs only here and in the title to Psalm 88
- Some say it denotes a stringed instrument
- Others believe it to refer to the tune of the song
- While still others translate it as “Chief” or a “Band leader”
- Some translate it as (our maladies or disease)



Introduction

- Disease because a form of the word almost identical occurs in Exodus 15:26; Proverbs 18:14; 2 Chronicles 21:15
- And it points here to the spiritual malady with which all mankind are infected
- They believe that it refers to the malady of sin, and the weakness it causes
- According to St. Augustine it means pain
- He says, “For Maeleth,’ as we find in interpretations of Hebrew names, seems to say, For one travailing, or in pain.”



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1
- Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3
- God's Defense of His Righteous People 53:4-5
- A Pray for the Restoration of Israel 53:6

The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1



- David looked at those who denied the existence of God and came to the conclusion that they are *fools*
- He means a group of men, not a particular individual
- Foolishness is the opposite of wisdom in its highest sense
- *The fool*, Denotes moral willfulness and determination, not mere ignorance or weakness of reason
- It may imply rejection of God, imprudence, or opposition to His will (Deuteronomy 32:6,21; Job 2:10,42:8; Psalm 74:18,22)

The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1



- For a description of the ‘fool’ in his ‘folly’, we read in Isaiah, *“The foolish person will no longer be called generous, Nor the miser said to be bountiful; For the foolish person will speak foolishness, And his heart will work iniquity: To practice ungodliness, To utter error against the LORD, To keep the hungry unsatisfied, And he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail.”* (Isaiah 32:5-6)
- This is not to be understood of a hypothetical denial of the existence of God; but of a practical denial of His moral authority and His Divinity
- The God-denying man David has in mind is not merely troubled by intellectual objections to the existence of God; but *in his heart*

The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1



- David had in mind is not an atheist for primarily intellectual reasons
- That means when we speak with those who deny God, we should not only speak to their mind, but also to their *heart*
- By not believing in God, they ruined and degraded their nature, and gave themselves up to practices which God hates (Psalm 5:6)
- David here considers the result of denying God
- It leads men into *corruption* and *abominable iniquity*
- *Corrupt* describes the self-degradation of their better nature

The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1



- *Abominable* The vile character of their conduct in the sight of God
- Such was the condition of the world before the Flood
- Here, the Psalmist talks about the collective corruption that dwelt upon humanity since the fall of Adam and Eve, “*And God saw that the earth was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth*” (Genesis 6:2)
- David says this because of the plain evidence that there is a God
- Evidence in both *creation* and *human conscience* that Paul described in Romans 1

The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1



- The fact that some men insist on denying the existence of God does not erase God from the universe; it instead speaks to their own standing as *fools*
- As Paul wrote in Romans 1:22, *Professing to be wise, they became fools*
- *There is none who does good*, Without a single exception men have forgotten the right way
- God, from the place of His Holiness, looks on the children of men, and sees how little good there is among them
- This verse is written twice in this Psalm and repeated a third time by Apostle Paul (Romans 3:12)

The Sad Condition of the Man Who Deny Divine Providence 53:1



- When we are choosing to ignore the obvious evidences of the universe, ignore the revelation of the scriptures about God, and ignore our own conscience which seeks out a higher power, then we are being ignorant and fool
- David says that the reason people ignore these evidences and declare within their hearts and by their actions that there is no God is because their ways are vile and corrupt
- They want to do things that are right in their own eyes and not right in the eyes of God
- By ignoring God, we do not become a better person but a corrupt and vile person

Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3



- David now switches to God's point of view of the situation on earth
- While man may wish to forget about God, God never forgets about man
- He is always observing man, looking *down from heaven upon the children of men*
- It is of mankind in general, not of Israel, that the psalmist is speaking
- According to St. Augustine, this may lead one to wonder: Is God not aware of everything, to have to look down from heaven to see?!

Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3



- The Holy Book often refers to the works of God in human way for our sake
- Saying, *“The Spirit searches all things, yes, even the deep things of God”* (1 Corinthians 2:10), does not mean that the Spirit needs to search to know the deep things of God; but this is written to exhort us to search the divine mysteries by the Holy Spirit
- The same thing when it is said, *God looks down from heaven upon the children of men, To see if there are any who understand, who seek God*
- It does not mean that God was not aware of that

Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3



- But the goal of using this expression is to proclaim to men their actual status, that they may seek salvation from corruption that has dwelt upon them
- God made Himself known through the voice of conscience and in the works of creation, but men would not follow the light of conscience or learn from nature
- *“He did not leave Himself without witness.”* (Acts 14:17)
- *“God, who made the world and everything in it,...He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being.”* (Acts 17:24,27)

Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3



- *“because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.”* (Romans 1:19)
- God looks for men who *understand* His heart and plan, and who *seek* Him for righteousness' sake
- Is there any person who has understanding? Does anyone comprehend that we exist by the power and might of the Lord?
- The Lord did look only for sincerity and right desire, but He did not find any
- We do not understand the seriousness of sin; we do not understand the hatred of God for sin; we do not understand the power of God to judge sin

Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3



- When God looked, He found that man has *turned* away from God, and has therefore *become corrupt*
- In God's eyes, wickedness and sin, indeed a form of atheism, is universal
- All of us, at one time or another or on a continual basis, are fools because we ignore God in our lives
- We choose to live how we want to live and do not place God as the primary importance in our decisions
- When God finds *none who does good*, it is because there *are* none

Heaven's Analysis of Fallen Humanity 53:2-3



- It is not as if there were some and God could not see them
- David's use of *there is none who does good* unexpectedly broadens the scope beyond the atheist to include *everyone*
- We may deny God, but our denial does not cause Him to go away
- He *looks down* and sees us in our sin, and holds us accountable for it

God's Defense of His Righteous People 53:4-5



- God is the speaker here
- In these two verses, the corruption of mankind exemplified in their treatment of God's people; and His Providence demonstrated in the deliverance of them
- David first considered the profound fallen state of man; now he deals with the fate of God's people in such a fallen world
- *the workers of iniquity* do not learn, despite evidence of God's existence in the world around them, despite evidence of God's presence in the lives of His people
- How about the good men who are devoured by the wicked?

God's Defense of His Righteous People 53:4-5



- According to St. Augustine, “Those people who are devoured, who suffer from the wicked, who moan among them; they, instead of being men, they will come to be the children of God! For they have been devoured as men!”
- And how about the wicked?
- St. Augustine often say the human wolves, while devouring the human lambs, and drinking their blood; will, themselves, sometimes be transformed into meek lambs; as it happened with Saul of Tarsus
- *And do not call upon God*, they call upon their idols and they do not pray

God's Defense of His Righteous People 53:4-5



- David sees the end of the ungodly, and the ultimate triumph of God's people
- *There*, points to some occasion in which panic terror and overwhelming adversity overtook *the workers of iniquity* who came to devour the people of God
- During a time of attack or siege from an enemy David trusted that God would put the enemy *in great fear*, even though their strategic position gave them no real reason to fear *Where no fear was*
- There were many times when God sent fear into the hearts of Israel's enemies

God's Defense of His Righteous People 53:4-5



- Examples include Joshua against the Canaanites (Joshua 10:10), Gideon against the Midianites (Judges 7), Jonathan and his armor-bearer against the Philistines, *“And there was trembling in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and the raiders also trembled; and the earth quaked, so that it was a very great trembling.”* (1 Samuel 14:15), and Hezekiah against the Assyrians (2 Kings 18 and 19)
- And in 2 Kings 7:6, 19:7, 35
- *You have put them to shame*, God answers the fool who despises Him by rejected them

God's Defense of His Righteous People 53:4-5



- They were unsuccessful in their attempt
- God has shown that they were not to be feared
- Therefore, it is no wonder if they could not stand before Him
- However, it seems that it was not only the fool's denial of God that provoked the Almighty; it was more pointedly the fool's attack against the people of God
- We might say that attacking the people of God is just as foolish as denying God's existence
- God's people may well look with despise upon their enemies since they are the objects of divine disapproval

A Pray for the Restoration of Israel 53:6



- David concludes with a prayer for the full restoration of Israel
- He is expressing a great desire for salvation, rejoicing and gladness when God restores His people to their land
- David *knew* that God was a refuge for His people and that *the workers of iniquity* would never win
- Yet that was hard to see at the present time, so David expressed his great longing that God would bring the victory and deliverance He had promised to His people
- Zion is the place of God's presence
- *Captivity*, here is used in a general sense, speaking of any time or situation where God's people are oppressed and bound

A Pray for the Restoration of Israel 53:6



- Our captivity to sin is the core spiritual element of our enslavement
- But through true repentance, God deliver us from the slavery of sin and the world
- David anticipated the coming deliverance, and called the people of God to be joyful in consideration of it
- In faith, we know that God exists, and God will act for His people in His time
- Though we may go through long periods of oppression and persecution, we will still take strong hope and confidence in God



Discussion

- What is David mourning in this Psalm?
- How did the psalmist describe the wicked?
- What is the outcome of pursuing corruption in a person's soul?
- How does David describe the condition of mankind?
- What will happen to those who do not believe in God or respect Him?

Discussion



- Who put the evildoers to shame? What does this tell you about the way God often works in our world?
- What main idea unifies this Psalm?
- Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 are nearly identical. Why would the Holy Bible include two psalms that are very nearly the same?