

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message The Two Ways: Self-Deception and Reality

Scripture Psalm 14

Scripture states that we can journey through life in one of two ways: we can walk by faith or by sight. The question is which method gives us the clearest picture of reality. We can't see God or touch Him, yet for people of faith God is very real. Non-believers have a different idea. They say, "Because God cannot be seen or touched, He must be part of human imaginations." By faith or by sight? Which way should we walk through life?

Psalm 14 is attributed to David. As King of Israel, David was in a position to observe the behavior of the people of his kingdom. He recognized that many of his countrymen had foolish attitudes and were involved in wicked activities. He called these people "fools." The first 6 verses of the Psalm describe the characteristics of a "fool," and the seventh and last verse expresses the hope for change.

Read Psalm 14

The first verse of the Psalm states the problem: "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'" Spiritual problems always begin with a wrong heart attitude. Scripture tells us that faith is essential before God reveals Himself to a person. There is a verse, Hebrews 11:6, which states: "anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." I wish that everyone would take that verse seriously. God will reveal Himself only to individuals who start with the assumption that He exists. God established this principle, and people who ignore it have no hope of salvation. Without the correct starting heart attitude the fool is prevented from knowing God, and therefore becomes convinced that "there is no God." This is self-inflicted delusion.

I suppose more people would be convinced if the existence of God could be proven scientifically, but God cannot be observed or measured like physical matter. Lack of scientific proof is no reason to think that there is no God. Scripture informs us that God has provided more than adequate evidence that He exists — through creation, through miracles, through His Son who came to earth. The person who denies the existence of God has foolishly chosen to ignore the evidence. This is a form of self-deception.

The fool says “There is no God,” but this doesn’t mean the fool is without religion. Fools can be very religious. They can believe in many gods. They can create their own gods. Most people have a belief in some kind of a “higher power,” but very few people acknowledge one personal supreme God. Another group of people acknowledge that there may be a supreme God over all, but they are unwilling to submit themselves to that God. They want to live according to their own rules.

The problem with these people is disobedience. The person who is unwilling to do what he knows God wants him to do is really saying, “No” to God. Verse 1 can, in fact, be translated to mean, “God, I won’t do what You want me to do.” This is not a denial of God, but a refusal to obey Him.

From a practical standpoint, most people do not consider God to be a relevant factor in their lives. Even if there is a God, they think that they don’t need Him. They think that they can ignore God. People who think that they can ignore God are self-deceived.

I know it’s not good to be judgmental, but it seems to me that churches today are filled with individuals who mimic the forms of faith, but who, in day by day living, essentially ignore God and His commandments. Such a person may hold on to a form of belief in God, may believe in God “philosophically,” but does not believe functionally. As I said, these people deceive themselves.

Improper heart attitudes toward God have serious consequences. These attitudes are the cause of behavioral problems in our world. Three phrases in verse 1 describe the behavior of fools. First, “they are corrupt.” This indicates the lack of moral righteousness of these people. Second, “their deeds are vile.” This refers to actions which are incompatible with God’s revealed law. Third, “there is no one who does good.” This is a sweeping all-inclusive summary statement which indicates the lack of godliness in the behavior of fools.

People who resist and deny God have nothing to protect them from moral and ethical corruption. They have no standards other than their own by which to define proper behavior. People who think they can live independently of God are self-deceived.

In verses 2 and 3, the writer describes how things appear from God's standpoint. From His heavenly point of view, the LORD has the ability to not only observe the behavior of people but, more significantly, to also perceive their attitudes. "The LORD looks down from heaven ... to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God." Undoubtedly He is disappointed about what He sees because "There is no one who does good, not even one." Fools are not naturally inclined toward God. Their thinking is wrong, and hence their behavior is ungodly.

Believers, on the other hand, have had to consider three crucial questions: First, is there a God? The believer says, "Yes, there is," and seeks to know more and more about God.

The person who believes that God exists must then answer a second question: If there is a God, has He spoken? What has He said? Obviously any person who knows that God is real would be foolish to ignore what God has said. The third question is a logical extension of the second: If we know what God has said, then what is our response?

Fellowship with God begins with our recognition of the reality of God and this must be followed by our willingness to do what God says. Faith is the essential factor. Non-believers will never experience fellowship with God. None of them will ever understand (verse 2) nor will they ever learn (verse 4). They do not follow the process that leads to fellowship.

Notice that the people who were called "fools" in verse 1 are called "evildoers" in verse 4. Evildoers do not acknowledge the Lord nor do they care that He looks down on them from heaven. They busily pursue their self-interests and, in so doing, mistreat others.

Evildoers have a particular hatred of God's people, perhaps because God's people talk about the reality of God and live as if God were real. Godly people by their lifestyles are witnesses to the reality of God. Hatred of God is the basis of hatred toward God's people. Evildoers "devour" God's people, they act with violence, they completely disregard the rights of others.

In verse 5 David explains why evildoers are overwhelmed with dread. They recognize that God is present among His people. God accomplishes things among His people that cannot be explained rationally, but are nevertheless true: God protects, guides, supplies, heals. God also gives peace, joy, self-control, righteousness, and confidence to His people. Evildoers can sometimes discern these things, but the question is: do they learn from their observations? Apparently they never learn.

Verse 6 is a summary of verses 4 and 5. Evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor. This means that poor people are deprived of their hopes and expectations, possessions, and rights. This has the same general meaning as verse 4: "evildoers devour my people." The phrase "The LORD is their refuge" is linked to verse 5 "God is present in the company of the righteous." The wicked may heap abuse on the poor, but God is "the refuge" of his children, and some day He will come to their rescue.

Now let's think about verse 7. This is the grand conclusion of the Psalm. This verse describes what David wants to happen. Notice his deep desire and longing: "Oh, that salvation would come out of Zion." The word "salvation" can also be translated "deliverance." "Oh, that deliverance would come out of Zion." In view of the attitudes and behavior of foolish evildoers, David knows that there is the need for a change in the fortunes of God's people, and that only God could bring about the change.

In the Old Testament, Zion represented the presence of God. The place where the Old Testament temple stood was called Zion. It was the place where the people of Israel brought their sacrifices and worshipped God. David wanted God to come forth from His place of dwelling to rescue the people.

David affirmed his faith in the reality of God. The last sentence is stated in a very positive way: “When” (not if) “When the LORD restores the fortunes of His people,” then the people of God will rejoice and be glad. At the time of the writing of this Psalm, God’s people were Israelites. Today, we can say, “When the LORD restores the fortunes of believers,” or “the Church.”

As a believer, what would you like to see “restored?” I think we would agree with David. We would like the spiritual circumstances of people around us to change. At the present time, fools and evildoers are everywhere, and they are powerful — they “devour” and “frustrate” God’s people. The fools and evildoers of the world think of us believers as old fashioned, misguided, unscientific, and unintelligent fanatics because we believe in the reality of God. We are often ridiculed and laughed at because we insist that God has provided eternal salvation to us, and that He speaks truth to us through His Word, and that He hears and answers our prayers. Fools say that our beliefs are nonsense, but we know the truth because God has spoken to us and confirmed our faith.

Here in America we haven’t yet experienced these pressures in a severe way, but we know that believers in other countries risk their very lives because of their faith. They certainly are praying “Oh, that deliverance would come out of Zion.”

Verse 7 does not speak of the judgment of evildoers, which we might expect since the Psalm has described them so derogatorily. Instead verse 7 only speaks of the deliverance and restoration of God’s people. This Psalm looks forward to the time when the LORD will restore the fortunes of His people. At the present time, we go on, seeing God by faith. We, as God’s people, know that He is “present in the company of the righteous”; that He is a “refuge” for us. We go on in this life confident that some day He will reveal Himself. That will be a day of shock and fear for those who did not believe in the existence of God, but it will be a time of rejoicing and gladness for God’s people.

Faith or sight? Faith helps us to see reality much more clearly than physical sight. We live in a world which is described in verses 1-6 of this Psalm, and we long for the time of verse 7. By faith we understand that, at the present time, God is “present in the company of the righteous,” and a “refuge” for those who place their confidence in Him, and that some day He will be the “restorer of the fortunes of his people.”