

The Heart of Atheism

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[0 : 00] To the choir master, the text says, of David, the fool says in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt. They do abominable deeds. There is none who does good.

The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside. Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one.

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the Lord? There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous. You would shame the plans of the poor, but the Lord is his refuge. Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion. When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice. Let Israel be glad.

This is God's holy word. Let's pray. Lord, as we turn now to your word, we ask that you would silence all the voices in our hearts and deep down in our souls that are blocking our ability to see, to hear, to receive your word tonight.

[1 : 11] And we ask, Lord, that you would do the work you love to do, the work of the Spirit, to open our minds, open our hearts to receive Christ and to receive your word tonight.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. This is a wisdom psalm, and it's a wisdom psalm because it's in the category of wisdom because it talks about the nature of the fool.

So the work that it's doing for us is trying to say what a fool is so that we can know, so that we don't become fools or stop being fools. And, you know, foolishness, the nature of foolishness, that's something we all want to know about.

We don't want to be fools in our lives. But when you look at the concept of foolishness, it has been defined in lots of different ways across world history and in cultures and genres and literature and music and lots of different ways people think about the fool.

So in Shakespeare, the fool is the commoner who critiques the king, the person of power, and plays the role of the cynical jokester, you know, the court jester image of the fool.

[2 : 17] But that is not at all like what Tina Turner says about the fool, right? And when you read, listen, to Tina Turner about the fool, she says that when I fall in love, I become a fool for you.

And so a person in love, we say, that person has become a fool in love with somebody. That's not at all like what Alexander Pope said about foolishness.

And Alexander Pope, the English poet, he coined that very famous phrase that people use, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. And he meant by that that the fool rushes headfirst into a situation that they have no experience in, they know nothing about, or even an angel wouldn't do that.

You know, they're reckless, they're dumb, they're foolish. So that's probably the most common way we think about the fool. And in Psalm 14, really none of those definitions are in view.

The fool in Psalm 14 is a technical term. The fool. And David comes and gives us a real definition for it, a very clear definition for it.

[3 : 21] What does the Bible say about the fool? What makes a person a fool? So let's look at that. I just want to point out two things to you about the definition of the fool.

First, David says the fool is someone who believes that God is not real. And so in verse 1, he says it really explicitly.

The fool says in his heart there is no God. And that means that to be a fool is not an issue of intelligence. It's not about being smart or not smart. So you can be a genius.

You can have had so much education and so little education. You can be very successful in life and be very wise with money and not succumb to what Alexander Pope was talking about,

recklessness, that type of foolishness.

And yet the Bible comes and says in the biblical sense of the technical term, be a fool. Because a fool is simply a person who says that God is not real. And you can see what David says about that. [4 : 19] He says the fool says in his heart there is no God. Where? And he puts that very, very important little phrase in his heart, in her heart. And in the Old Testament, in the Bible, the heart is the epicenter of the self.

And it's different than the way we think about the heart. So for modern people, even when we're talking about the heart metaphorically, we think about the heart as the place of emotion. But in the Old Testament, the heart is far more than that.

The heart is that from which we reason. That from which we think. It's really the very center of the soul. And so it includes the emotions. It includes the will.

But it's the place of desire out of which we make decisions, out of which we reason. And so David comes here and effectively tells us this. Here's the point. Here's the point. The fool, the Bible teaches, is a person whose heart is willfully proud and therefore refuses to believe in the real God. So the fool is the person whose heart is blocking them from believing in the real God because of pride. And the pride of the heart reasons that there is no God.

[5 : 29] There is no creator. There is no master of the universe. And that the real God, the God of the Bible, is not the master of the universe. Now, there is a temptation tonight to come into, if you're a Christian, if you're a person who believes in the spiritual realm, to come and say, David, I'm with you 100%.

The atheists. The atheists are the fools. The fool says in his heart there is no God. And it's the atheist who David is talking about here, the intellectual, the theoretical atheist.

They are the fools. And is David talking here about the Dawkins and the Hitchens of the past decade or the Alex O'Connors of today?

Is that who he's talking about? And the answer is yes, but wait. Because he says, hold on a second. Because there's a temptation to say, you get them, David. The atheists.

Then there's a progression here and you've got to keep going in the text. And you just look down to the next line. He says, they are corrupt. They do abominable deeds. Who is this they that's being talked about here?

[6 : 36] And when you read the rest of the passage, the they shows up, verse 3, verse 4, verse 5. They have all turned aside. They eat up my people like they eat bread.

They eat the flesh of my people as they eat bread. Who is the they that's being talked about? And the commentators will say that David has all this language here that's referencing all these other moments in the Old Testament.

And he's pulling into his mind the history of Israel right here. And he's thinking about all the evildoers, the corrupt, the abominable deeds of the nations that have eaten up the flesh of God's covenant people, Israel.

And so who's he thinking about? He's thinking about Egypt. He's thinking here about, in his own time, the Philistines. He's thinking, well, he's not thinking, but later the same thing we'll see in Babylon and Persia and Rome.

And you see the history of Israel as so many different pagan nations that come and say, the Lord is not God, and come and eat up the flesh, metaphorically, of the people.

[7 : 35] They crush them. They kill them. They take their land. David's thinking about that here. Now, who's the they? Egypt, Babylon. The they are polytheists, not atheists.

And there is nobody in the ancient Near East hardly at all who was an atheist in the way we think about it. There's nobody in the ancient Near East who was a theoretical, intellectual atheist like Richard Dawkins.

Nobody at all. But David says they, the pagan nations, the polytheists, the world religions, they also say in their heart there is no God, and they are the fools.

And so what is the fool? What does that extend our definition to? He's teaching us here that the fool is the person not only who says there is no God, but who says the Lord of the Bible, the God of the Bible, is not the real God.

Including the spiritualists, the pagans, the polytheists, the world religions, the atheists, the intellectual atheists, the theoretical atheists. Boy, there's a temptation here to stop and say, David, I'm with you.

[8 : 39] If you're a Christian tonight, if you come here as a confessing, professing believer, and you say, agreed, it's the atheists that are the fools in the technical sense of the world, and it's polytheists and the world religions.

But the text, again, says, hold on for a sec and keep working your way down. And in the third line here, verse 1, David, it's almost as if I think David realizes something.

He goes from saying, the fool says in his heart there is no God. They, the nations, are corrupt. They do abominable deeds. But then he says, there is none who does good. And it's as if David looked at himself and realized, when I said the fool says in their heart there is no God, I forgot for a moment. But I've got to include who. And just go down to verse 2 with me. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand.

And that's language. Where's that language? If you've read the Old Testament or the first few books of the Bible, you may recognize that language. That is language being drawn from the moments before the flood and the moments before the Tower of Babel where God looks down and he says, is there anybody who understands?

[9 : 53] Is there anybody who says in their heart the real God is God? And the answer that God comes to in Genesis was no. There's nobody. And then David gives us, we don't need any more proof than this in verse 3.

He says, they have all turned aside. Together they've become corrupt. There is none who does good, not one. And we saw tonight already in the call to worship that that is the famous text that Paul quotes in Romans 3 to say, Jew and Gentile, covenant people or not, there is none who does good.

You see, David realized what he started to come to as he asked the question, who is the fool who says in his heart there is no God? And the only right answer that David realized he has to come to is it's the person sitting in this pulpit or this chair.

It's me. It's everybody. He said, it's not just the pagan nations. It's not just a theoretical atheist. It is everybody. The fool says in his heart there is no God and that is me.

That's who the fool is. And tonight you can come and say, you know, your head may say the Lord is the real God, but you still know that when you pull back the layers of the heart, even as a Christian, that the heart still struggles so much with practical atheism.

[11 : 09] And saying all the time in our day-to-day lives, well, I believe with my head that there is a God, but my heart all the time is overwhelming that and saying there is no God. And David realizes it's him.

It's us. Now, if you are an intellectually committed atheist tonight or agnostic and you come to a passage like this that does talk about atheism and you think, I'm not convinced that the evidence is there.

I'm not convinced yet that God has revealed himself and that there is enough there. I don't want to try to do an apologetic argument or anything like that right now, but I do want to say that this text says, I want you to face something and it's at least to understand what the Bible teaches.

And the Bible says that it is the pride of your heart that is blocking your ability to reason that there is a real God. In other words, it's not ultimately a problem of the intellect.

It's a problem of the heart. That's what David teaches here. But, and the Bible is in no way picking on an atheist in this room or anywhere else because David turns around and says, it's the same problem that I have.

[12 : 19] It's the same problem that all of us has, that the pride of my heart is blocking me in my day-to-day life from saying the real God is God in every way. He's saying it's universal.

It's not an intellectual issue. It's not a theoretical issue. It's a heart issue and it's a pride issue at the bottom of our souls. You could go down a layer. I think you can read this in the light of the whole Bible and uncover a layer, a layer of the heart with the New Testament calls epi desire or the deepest domain of desire.

And if we were to pull that back, that curtain on all our hearts, I think what this text is teaching is this. The real issue is that the heart, all of our hearts set up rival gods that stand against the real God.

The issue is not an issue really of atheism or theism. The issue is that in every single one of our hearts, we've got rival gods that we are chasing after and worshiping that have replaced the real God.

And the rival, the little gods in our hearts are going to war against the fact that the true God really has revealed himself. That's the issue. That's the issue how Paul teaches it in the New Testament. That's what the Bible says.

[13 : 29] You see, the heart of atheism, both theoretical atheism or practical atheism, is actually a religious heart. And it's that every single one of us are religious people.

And we're worshipping something, we're chasing something, we're pursuing something. And it's actually blocking or getting in the way of seeing the truth about the real God as he's revealed himself. Now, I know that earlier this week, I decided to quote David Foster Wallace long before David Quirt decided to quote David Foster Wallace this morning.

But he was up first today, and it just so happened, without us talking at all, that David quoted the exact quote that is written in my sermon notes from David Foster Wallace.

And so what I decided to do this afternoon was to quote around David's quote to fill in the context. Because David Foster Wallace, the late agnostic novelist, gave this very famous address at Kenyon College, a commencement speech.

And I'll just give you a bit of what David quoted from him this morning. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, he says, this is coming from an agnostic. He says, in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism.

[14 : 45] There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you choose will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. You'll never feel like you have enough. On one level, we all know this stuff, he writes. It's been codified as myths and proverbs and cliches and epigrams and parables. It's the skeleton of every great story. Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid.

And you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. And here's what I really want you to hear tonight. This is exactly what Psalm 14 is teaching. But, he writes, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is that they are unconscious.

He says they are our default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into day by day. Getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

[15 : 58] Now, Wallace is picking up on exactly what Psalm 14 is saying. He gets it. Psalm 14 is saying it is the default setting of the human heart to slip into putting a rival God in the heart set against the real God who is revealing himself.

And Wallace points out the insidious thing is most of the time we don't realize it. We're not aware of it. We're always slipping into worshipping something and we don't know it.

And it's pride that's pushing away the truth of the real God as he has revealed himself. And so the heart, the real heart of theoretical atheism, the real heart of practical atheism is that our hearts say with Friedrich Nietzsche, what did Nietzsche say?

He said, if God exists, then I am not God. Therefore, God does not exist. And that's really what's going on in the bottom of all our hearts according to the biblical diagnosis.

And Dostoevsky, the Russian author, also, he talks about this. He talks about the motives that are in play underneath this. He said, the heart presupposes this. What's really going on in the bottom of my soul?

[17 : 05] It's this. If God doesn't exist, all is permitted. If God doesn't exist, all is permitted. If God doesn't exist, my heart says I can do whatever I want. I can be with whoever I want.

And Thomas Nagel, the NYU philosopher, put it so well in his book, *The Last Word*. He said, I want atheism to be true, and I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally hope that I'm right in my belief. He said, it is that I hope there is no God. I don't want there to be a God.

I don't want the universe to be like that. And you see, he's expressing the truth of the heart. He's saying, at the bottom of every one of our souls is the desire. It's to say, if there is a God, then I would not be.

Therefore, there is no God. And that's the real issue. That's at the heart of all atheism. Practical atheism, theoretical atheism. And Leo Tolstoy, also in the 19th century, he thought about this so

much, and it led him into this existential crisis when he was 50 years old.

[18:13] You may have heard of this, the famous Russian author. And he wrote very famously, if this is true, if there is no God, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me will not destroy?

If there is no God, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitability of death will not destroy? And you see, what he's pointing to there is the greatest problem of atheism.

The atheism we all struggle with. And the greatest problem is this. The little rival gods will not save us. The little rival gods will die just like we will.

The little rival gods that we put and we worship and we chase after cannot bear the weight of intellectual and existential needs of truth. They can't save us. They can't do it for us. They can't bring us satisfaction.

And so the Bible says here that we know the true God, but our pride says, I am the master of my own life. And therefore, God does not exist.

[19:11] Secondly, finally, to the rest of us, to all of us in this room, I wonder if anybody feels like this tonight. Most of us in this room will come tonight and say, I am not a theoretical atheist.

I'm a believer. I believe in the spiritual realm. I'm a Christian believer. In fact, I'm a Christian theist. But I struggle with not wanting God on a day-to-day basis.

I struggle with not thinking of God on a day-to-day basis. I struggle with prayerlessness on a day-to-day basis. I believe, but I don't. And I know, if you know yourself, I know we can say I really do struggle with what this text is talking about, practical atheism on a day-to-day basis.

And the text is coming to say to you, David is saying to you, God is saying to you, that is the default setting of the human heart. You see, in other words, you can come and be justified by faith and yet struggle with returning to the default setting of the heart, the flesh.

Coming back every single day and forgetting and not really believing and not applying the gospel to every aspect of life. And in verse 5 here, there's this moment where the text tells us, David says, When a person realizes that their heart has denied the real God and not worshipped and not followed him, it says in verse 5, There they are in great terror.

[20:37] There's a psychological dread that comes upon us. And then it says, For God is with the generation of the righteous. And if you have a Bible in front of you, you might see that there's probably a cross-reference, if your Bible does cross-references.

And it picks up with Psalm 24 in the cross-reference in almost every version of English translations of the Bible. And it's almost as if you could just continue reading in Psalm 24. Because you say, I don't want to stand in great terror.

I don't want to be in the psychological terror of the pride of my heart. Standing before God, having said, There is no God. What can I do? But the text says, God is with the generation of the righteous. And you say, What does that mean? What does that look like to be the generation of the righteous? And in Psalm 24, 6, it says, Such is the generation of the righteous.

It is those who seek him. Those who seek the face of the God of Jacob. And you say, Tonight, This is a wisdom psalm. You say, I don't want to be a fool. I want to be wise.

[21:37] What does it mean to have the Lord as my refuge? What does it mean to have, To be counted amongst the generation of the righteous? And Psalm 24 picks up and says, Here it is, The generation of the righteous.

The one who seeks the face of the God of Jacob. The real God. Now, It is our natural default To foolishness. To set for our heart to say there is no God.

But wisdom. What is wisdom? Wisdom is when you are seeking the face of God. In other words, Maybe this is the most important point tonight. Right? The fool is the person, In other words, Who wakes up every day And refuses to believe that they are a fool.

And the wise is the person Who wakes up every day and says, I am a fool. You see, The foolish person thinks they are wise While remaining foolish. But the wise person knows they are a fool And thus becomes wise.

And what does that search for wisdom really look like? The fool becoming wise. It says that you wake up every day And seek the face of the God of Jacob By saying, Lord, I am a fool.

[22:41] I know it. But by the grace of God. Only by your gift Could I ever become a person of wisdom. And that leads us to say, Where is our help?

Where can it be found? And what power could we do such a thing? Seek the face of the God of Jacob. And so the last thing is in verse 7. And in verse 7, David prays this.

You see this prayer. He says, Oh, That salvation for Israel Would come out of Zion. And then notice in the next clause, The certainty. He says, When the Lord restores the fortunes of the people.

So first he prays, Oh, That salvation would come from Zion. Oh, That it would. But then he turns and says, When it does. When it does. And so he's got this real certainty When, When salvation comes.

Where will it come from? He says it will come from Zion. Zion is the hill. It gets used, That language gets used all across the Bible. A lot of times we read it and we think, I don't really know what Zion is.

[23 : 44] Zion is the hill Upon which the temple was built In the city of Jerusalem. But Zion really became Another way of just talking about the temple. And in David's time, The temple had yet to be built, Right?

So the tabernacle was there on Zion. Solomon would come and build the temple. So David looks up and he's, He's probably in Jerusalem. He's probably looking and he says, And he says, When I see the tabernacle, When I see the temple, When I see the tabernacle, I know salvation will come from there.

Now we could spend a long, long time, And I won't, Talking about all that the rest of the Old Testament says About Zion and the tabernacle. But when you flip to the Gospel of John, On page one of John's Gospel, John says something incredibly important.

And he comes and says, It says about the Son of God, The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But in the Greek text, It doesn't say dwelt. It says the Word became flesh And he tabernacled among us.

And we beheld his glory. And you see, David didn't know all that he was talking about here In Psalm 14 verse 7, But he knew that salvation was going to come from Zion.

[24 : 59] And when he says Zion, He means from the tabernacle. And John's Gospel comes and says, When the incarnation happens, When the Son of God takes on human flesh And becomes human, John said, We looked at him and we saw the tabernacle.

God come to us. In other words, John's saying, There is Zion. It's Jesus. He is Zion. David was talking about the Zion himself, The tabernacle, The temple, Jesus Christ himself, In verse 7.

And when you ask, Look, tonight you come and say, I don't want to be, I don't want to be found in great terror Before the Lord, In psychological, In real dread of judgment, As a fool, I want to be found in wisdom.

What does it look like to seek the face of the God of Jacob? What does it look like to be found in the generation of the righteous? It's not, It doesn't just stop with the fact that there he is, The incarnation, The temple, The Zion himself has come.

And no, It's more than that. It's something more like this. It's to say, With Paul, My foolish heart says, There is no God, But Jesus Christ became the fool for me.

[26 : 12] It's to look up, According to the language of 1 Corinthians 1, And say, The foolishness of the cross is wiser than the wisdom of all men. And it's to look and say, He, the wisdom of God, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, He was treated like the court jester.

He was mocked. He was spit upon. He was laughed at. And that was me. That was my heart. You see, He was treated like the fool because of my foolishness. And in other words, David here is pointing to something.

To truly become wise is to day by day, Wake up every day and say, He, you, Son of God, Were treated like a fool for me. What a paradox, That the wisdom of God would be treated like the ultimate fool.

It's to say, He who knew no foolishness became my foolishness. So that I might become his wisdom. I might receive his wisdom. And so it could be the case that tonight, As I finish, Because it is the human heart's default setting To let pride block the revelation of the real God in our lives And to chase after so many little gods, It could be the case that it has been for some of us The default setting of our lives to stay right there And to never really deal with the fact that If we uncover the layers of our heart, There are little gods that we are chasing And allowing to be God for us right now That will never do it, That will never satisfy, That will never give us what we really need.

And what does Paul say? Look, here's how you know that that's where you are. If you're still sitting in the default setting, Here's how you know, And this is what the Bible says. In 1 Corinthians 1, It

says, The wisdom of the world says, That is foolishness.

[28 : 03] Cosmic child abuse. What a weak Messiah. It's another myth. But here's how you know that God is transforming your life. Maybe tonight God is changing you. And here's how you might know.

It's that when you can look back and say, I used to say, What a foolish gospel. The cross. But now I say, What I once thought was foolish Has become wisdom to me.

That the wisdom of God And the foolishness of the cross Is wiser than all the wisdom of human beings. And that means that you really experience change. Let's give the last word to David here. At the very end, The last sentence, The last clause, He said, If that's you, If you get that, If you transition from foolishness to wisdom, Only because you say, I'm the fool.

Apart from Christ. David says, Therefore, Let Jacob rejoice. Let Israel be glad. That's another way of saying, Let God's people Who have realized their foolishness And sought wisdom outside of themselves Rejoice.

And another, Let me put that in more modern language. Another way to say it is this. Atheism, Atheism, If you're really honest, Atheism produces existential, Crisis of meaninglessness.

[29 : 14] It has to. You have to come with Sartre and Camus tonight And say, If I say there is no God, There is no blueprint for reality. It's meaningless.

I'm just making my own way. And with Tolstoy, You have to say, Death will take everything from me. But when you realize the truth of Christian theism And the truth of Christian theism Through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ, You can really hear what Jacob says here.

He says, Let the people of God be glad, Rejoice. In other words, Christian theism is a happy thing. Boys, It's a happy thing. Tonight, If you believe that, You can come tonight And be happy, Even in the midst of sorrow, Because you can say something like, It's not just that I want to be valued, I actually am.

You know, If you're with Sartre and Camus and Nietzsche, You have to say, I want to be valued, But I know that there is no value. But in Christian theism, You can come and say, I'm made to be valued and loved, And God does, Because He is love.

He is infinite value. You can come tonight and say, Love is more than a feeling. Not just the song, But really, Love is more than a feeling. It's more than just brain synapses firing, Because God is love.

[30 : 27] Justice is just, Because God is just. Goodness is good, Because God is good. Christian theism is a happy reality, Because love and mercy, And justice and peace are real.

And if you choose atheism, You don't have purpose and meaning in love. You have valuelessness. But it's not true. Because God is, You're loved, You're valued, You have purpose, You have meaning.

Because of the God of the gospel, Let us pray. Father, We thank You For The fact that You overwhelmed Our foolish hearts, And we come tonight and ask That You would help us once again To recognize The foolishness That is so deep within us, What's at the bottom, The core of our souls, And we recognize our need.

We remember once more Tolstoy's question, If there is no, God, Then what do we have That death is not going to take away, And when we think of that, We come and say, Let us be glad, Let us rejoice That it's not true, That because there is a God, And because there is a God Who saves, We know that there is so much meaning, So much purpose, So much value, That will never be taken away from us.

And so we thank You for that, I pray for those tonight That may be struggling With theoretical atheism, Intellectual atheism, And agnosticism, And I pray for all of us Who are struggling With practical atheism, And we ask, Lord, That You would break through, And we ask, God, That You would help us Tomorrow morning To wake up and say, Lord, I'm a fool Apart from You, And so, Help our foolish hearts, Give us wisdom That only Christ can give, We pray that in Jesus' name, Amen.