Psalm 53-54   "What Do You Sing When Surrounded by Fools?"   May 5, 2013

While I normally cover one Psalm per sermon,
        Psalms 53-54 fit well together.
        The themes of the two Psalms fit very closely together –
                and the title of Psalm 54 connects with 1 Samuel 23,
                and since we just discussed 1 Samuel 21-22 last week,
                        it made sense to put it all together here.
        (Otherwise, I'd wind up preaching practically the same sermon two weeks in a row!)

I've titled the sermon, "What do you sing when surrounded by fools?"
        The fool, according to Psalm 53, is one who says in his heart, "There is no God."
                That does not mean that all fools are atheists.
                The fool may be a professed Christian –
                        but in his *heart* he says, "there is no God."
                He may genuinely and truly believe that God exists,
                        but he does not believe that God is going to do anything.
        The fool is a practical atheist (or at least a practical deist).
        The fool says,
                "God may exist, but his existence is irrelevant to my life."

When you are surrounded by these sorts of fools,
        then you need to cry out to God for mercy –
        because you certainly won't receive mercy from a fool!

Who are the fools?
        Part of the reason why I wanted to connect Psalms 53 and 54
                is because David also interacted with a fool in the context surrounding these Psalms.
        In 1 Samuel 25, David met a man named "Nabal" –
                which is the Hebrew word for "Fool."

So let's take a look at the background to Psalms 53-54 in 1 Samuel 23.

Introduction: 1 Samuel 23
(Psalm 53) *To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath. A Maskil[a] of David.*
(Psalm 54) *To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Maskil[c] of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, "Is not David hiding among us?"*

Last time we heard how Doeg the Edomite used his tongue (as well as his sword)
        to destroy David and the priests.
And so David sang Psalm 52 – "Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?"

Psalm 53-54 turn to the fool (Nabal in 1 Sam 25) and the ruthless strangers (1 Sam 23).

Because while Saul is busy pursuing David and slaughtering the priests of the LORD,

David is defending Judah from the Philistines,
    and protecting the last priest of Yahweh!
Of course, having the priest around is helpful,
    because then you can inquire of the LORD!

So when David hears that the Philistines were attacking Keilah and robbing the threshing floors,
    he inquires of the LORD, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?"
And the LORD answered, *Go and save Keilah…for I will give the Philistines into your hand.*

Of course, the one problem with defeating the Philistines is that everybody hears about it!
    Saul now knows exactly where they are.
The irony between verses 4 and 7 is not accidental:
    the LORD says to David, "I will give the Philistines into your hand,"
    and Saul says to himself, "God has given David into my hand."

Don't count your providences before they're hatched!

David hears that Saul will come after him,
    and so David again inquires of the LORD:
        will Saul come to Keilah?
        and will the men of Keilah surrender me to Saul?
    And God says Yes and Yes!

There is a curious irony in all this.
If Saul had not slaughtered the priests,
    then David would not have had a priest with an ephod through whom to inquire of the LORD.
He might have remained in Keilah,
    trusting in kinship to save him.

But sin always (in the end) destroys itself.

The murder of the priests comes back to haunt Saul.
    (If you think of the end of Saul's life, haunting might be just the right word!)

And so David fled into the Wilderness of Ziph,
    and though Saul sought him, *God did not give him into his hand.*
The Ziphites do not appear to have liked him very much (no reason is given).
    They are part of the tribe of Judah – but they seem to prefer Saul to David.
    So they play the Judas and came to Saul and revealed David's whereabouts.

   Judas is exactly the right comparison.
        The Ziphites come to the ruling power in Israel,
            and offer to hand over the Lord's anointed,
            whose very presence is a threat to the ruling powers.
        Not only that, but the ruling power was itself appointed by God.

The chief priests in Jesus' day were the Lord's anointed.
And they eagerly accepted the offer of treason
by the one who could give the Messiah into their hand.

Because it is only through trial and temptation that the Messiah can be made perfect.
As Hebrews says, he was perfected through what he suffered (Hebrews 2:10).

And so Saul pursues David through the wilderness,
but just as Saul is catching up, he gets a message:
the Philistines are raiding!

Chapter 23 started with David saving Keilah from Philistines raiders.
Chapter 23 ends with the Philistines saving David from Saul.

In the same way that Egypt–the land of death and cursing–
becomes a refuge for the people of God in Joseph's day,
so also the Philistines become an ironic benefactor to David,
both now and later!

God will defeat both his and our enemies.
Until then he will use them to accomplish the salvation of his people.
He will use radical Islam as his instrument of judgment against the apostate west
(just as he used the Philistines against the apostate Saul),
and yet through their attacks, many (both Muslim and apostate Christian)
are yet being brought to repentance.

Brothers and sisters,
if we have paid attention even slightly to what God has revealed in David,
and then, far more clearly in Jesus (!)
we should be fearless.
What can separate us from the love of God in the Messiah?
If God brought Jesus through suffering to glory,
and has now made us partakers with Jesus,
then why should cross or trial grieve me?

And you can see this mentality in both Psalms 53 and 54.
They are both laments –
and laments generally follow a similar pattern:
Help!
I've got a problem!
You're my only answer!
And when you answer, I'll give thanks to you!

I strongly recommend that you get this "lament pattern" fixed in your head –
      because it makes a great pattern for petitionary prayer:
You can pretty much fill in the blanks.

Of course, there are all sorts of ways of starting a lament:
      In some cases, the Psalm starts with a statement of the problem –
            Psalm 53 – "the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"
      In other cases, the Psalm starts by speaking directly to God –
            Psalm 54 – "O God, save me by your name…"

            This is not a request.
            It is a command.
                David may ask "how long?"
                But he does not ask, "will you please save me?"
            He boldly says,
                "Save me, O God!"
                Deliver me from my enemies – be gracious to me – rescue me!
      Many laments start with the imperative.
            Here is what God *must* do!
            Only *then* does Psalm 54 explain the what and the why.

On the other hand, in Psalm 53, David starts with the problem.
Now, Psalm 53 is virtually identical to Psalm 14.
      There are only minor differences.
      But the context of book 1 and the context of book 2 are different.
            Psalm 14 is in the middle of the first collection of Davidic Psalms –
                most of which do not have any specific historical connections.
            Psalm 53 is sandwiched in between Psalms that refer specifically
                to David's wilderness wanderings in 1 Samuel 20-26.
            And Psalm 53 opens with a reference to Nabal – "the fool" –
                who appears in 1 Samuel 25, and exemplifies this Psalm beautifully!
            In 1 Samuel 25, David encounters a woman, Abigail,
                and her foolish husband, Nabal (whose name means "fool").

      People have sometimes wondered why this Psalm is repeated twice.
      I mentioned recently that the five books of the Psalms were remarkably edited
            to have very precise word and line counts.
      Apparently, Psalm 14 fit perfectly here as well –
            and the *nabal* connection fit so well in this series of Davidic Psalms,
            that the editor had to put it here!

  1. **O That Salvation Would Come! (Psalm 53)**
      a. **The Problem: No One Seeks God but They Devour My People (v1-4)**

53 The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
   They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity;
   there is none who does good.
2 God looks down from heaven
   on the children of man
to see if there are any who understand,[b]
   who seek after God.
3 They have all fallen away;
   together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
   not even one.
4 Have those who work evil no knowledge,
   who eat up my people as they eat bread,
   and do not call upon God?

The problem in Psalm 53 is twofold:
        First, the problem is that there is no one who seeks after God – none who does good.
        And second, that those who work evil are ignorant –
                and they devour my people "as they eat bread."

Wait, if all have fallen away –
        if God looks down on the children of men and finds not even one who does good,
        then how can there be anyone left to be called "my people"!

It is possible that "children of man" (ben-Adam) refers to the nations,
        and "my people" refers to Israel;
        after all, verses 5-6 will speak of "salvation for Israel."
Or maybe "the fool" also includes apostate Israel –
        which the prophets will regularly point out.

But David's point is to distinguish between "the mass of humanity" (the ben-Adam)
        and the few, the called, the chosen – "my people."
Nabal (the fool), in 1 Samuel 25, illustrates this well.
        Nabal is a fool and he does evil to David and his men.
        Nabal acts as though there is no God, and David and his men suffer for it.

But we can't stop there.

Because Psalm 53 (or Psalm 14) –
        is quoted in Romans 3,
                where Paul applies these statements to all humanity.
Paul says that Jews, as well as Gentiles, are all corrupt.
        There is none who does good – there is none who seek after God – not even one.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

But even Paul is willing to admit that there is *one* exception!
  Jesus is the one righteous man!
  And when all humanity – Jew and Gentile – united to destroy the Son of God,
    then Jesus became the singer of Psalm 53,
    he alone became the singular "my people" –
    as the wicked sought to devour him.

What Paul is doing in Romans 3 is taking the principle of Psalm 53 (or Psalm 14)
    and saying that ultimately, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile –
      because all have sinned –
    and left to ourselves, we are all fools.

We saw the language of "eating" people last time.
  Like the English word "backbiting" the Hebrew here has the sense of devouring people.
  When you slander someone or gossip about them,
    you are "eating them."
  Your words are consuming them.

If you have ever been on the receiving end of such language,
  then you know how it feels.

Words devour.

Verse 5 brings us to the solution.

b. The Solution: God Rejects the Wicked (v5)
[5] *There they are, in great terror,*
 where there is no terror!
For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you;
 you put them to shame, for God has rejected them.

  Laments usually include both the problem and the solution.
  When you face difficulty, you should appeal to God to *do* something –
    but you may also come to him *declaring* what he should about it!

Most biblical laments are fairly generic in stating *what* God should do about it.
  If Nabal is in view in Psalm 53, as I've suggested,
    then it's appropriate to think about what happened to Nabal.
  After his wife, Abigail, rescued him from his foolishness,
    she told him what she had done,
    and then his heart died within him and he became like a stone,

and ten days later, the LORD struck him and he died.

"There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror!"
　　Nabal had been partying the night before – feasting and getting drunk.
　　But where there was no terror, terror struck when the fool discovered the truth.
　　"For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you…"

　　Now, the "you" is masculine singular.

This is one of the most significant changes from Psalm 14 to Psalm 53.
　　Psalm 14:5-6 says,
　　　　"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."
　　In Psalm 14 the "you" is the wicked – the one who shames the plans of the poor.
　　But in Psalm 53, the "you" is the singular righteous one –
　　　　the "my people" who have been assaulted.

This is why I think that David and Nabal are in view here.
　　Or, since Nabal in 1 Samuel 25 is imitating Saul in persecuting David,
　　　　you can see the "nabal" – the fool – of Psalm 53
　　　　　　as anyone who persecutes the LORD's anointed.

After all, Psalm 53 would then continue to be sung through all Israel's history
　　as a song of warning to fools who oppress "my people."

The early church historian, Theodoret,
　　tells the story of a widow in the church of Antioch, named Publia.
She had founded a convent in the city in the middle of the fourth century.
　　In the year 361, Julian, a nephew of Constantine, became emperor.
　　Upon his coronation, he renounced Christianity
　　　　and sought to return the empire to paganism
　　　　(hence his nickname, "Julian the apostate").

Well, when the emperor Julian passed by Publia's convent during a visit to Antioch,
　　she had her choir of virgins sing Psalm 115. Theodoret comments:

"As the Emperor passed by, they sang together more loudly than usual,
　　since they looked upon this 'destroying angel' as an object of contempt and derision.
They sang especially those songs which satirize the impotence of idols,
　　declaiming in the words of David that:
　　　　'The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.'
　　And after this declaration of the idols' insensibility they added:
　　　　'Let those who make them be like them, and so too all who trust in them.'

When the Emperor heard these things, he was greatly upset
   and commanded them to keep silent at the time of his passing by.
Publia, however, having little respect for his laws, instilled greater enthusiasm in her chorus,
   and when he came by again bade them sing: 'Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered.'
         [Ps 68]" (quoted in James McKinnon, Music in Early Christian Literature, p105)

Julian had her arrested and ordered his guard to box her ears –
   but she took that as an honor and went back to the convent
   to continue her "accustomed assault on the Emperor in spiritual song."

When we sing Psalm 53, we are declaring that God scatters the bones
   of him who encamps against Christ and his church;
   and Christ will put them to shame, for God has rejected them.

And then we plead with God to do this soon:

c. The Plea: O That Salvation Would Come from Zion (v6a)
6 Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!

We recognize that our hope is in the heavenly Jerusalem –
   that our salvation comes out of Zion, the heavenly city.

Our hope for deliverance is not in our own wealth, or wisdom, or power.
Our hope is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

And then we give thanks for that deliverance:
d. The Thanksgiving: When God Restores the Fortunes of His People (v6b)
   When God restores the fortunes of his people,
   let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

We've seen this phrase "restore the fortunes" many times in the OT.
   It means to return the captivity – to restore from exile.
When you are in the middle of a lament,
   you are always looking forward to deliverance –
   you are looking forward to rejoicing and giving thanks for the mighty deeds of God!

2. Save Me, O God! (Psalm 54)
a. My Plea: Save and Hear! (v1-2)
You see the same themes in Psalm 54,
   but in a different order.
Psalm 54 starts with the plea:

54 O God, save me by your name,

and vindicate me by your might.
² O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

What do I want:
        "save me" – "vindicate me"!

But also notice *how*:
        "save me *by your name*" –
                God's name is powerful –
        "vindicate me *by your might*" –
                "might" here is related to the word "gibbor" – "mighty man" from Ps 52.

God is the mighty one – the Divine Warrior – who is able to save and to vindicate.
        The image here is that of a trial by combat.
        If there is a dispute between two parties,
                one way to resolve the dispute is a trial of strength;
                think of Goliath's challenge to Israel:
                        a trial by combat!
        David, the one who defeated Goliath! –
                now asks God to be his champion
                        "vindicate me by your might."
        "Vindicate" is a legal term,
                but "might" is a military term.
        He's not saying, "vindicate me in courtroom by providing evidence,"
                but rather, "vindicate me on the battlefield by defeating my foes."

Indeed, so overwhelming is David's longing for vindication
        that he doesn't even get around to asking God to hear him until verse 2!

Sometimes that's where you are!
        Yes, you could start your prayer,
                "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name…"
                        and work your way through to "and deliver us from evil…"

        Or you could start your prayer,
                "O God, deliver us from evil!..."
                        because you are our Father in heaven!

The laments in the Psalms demonstrate that there is no single pattern that must be followed!
        Psalm 53 started with the problem and moved through to the plea.
        Psalm 54 starts with the plea, and then explains the problem:

b. My Problem: Strangers Seek My Life (v3)

³ For strangers[d] have risen against me;
   ruthless men seek my life;
   they do not set God before themselves. Selah

It's the same basic problem as Psalm53.
   But instead of Nabal – the fool –
      now we are dealing with the Ziphites –
      those who have betrayed David to Saul.
   It may seem strange to call the Ziphites "strangers."
   After all, the Ziphites were David's kinsmen – fellow Judahites!
   But the Ziphites are acting like strangers – and so David calls them such.

And their problem is the same as the Nabal of Psalm 53:
   "they do not set God before themselves."

As one commentator puts it:
   'Not to have God before the eyes, means to speak and act without dread,
      whatever one pleases, nay what is contrary to God and his holy word,
         as if God did not see and hear it;
      nor to be afraid of God's anger, or of his judgment,
         and to have no remembrance of God in the heart.' (Arnd p. 220, Vol. 2).

This attitude is just as common today as it ever was.
   Let me ask you:
      do you set God before yourself?
   When you are at school, do you think about how to love God and neighbor?
   When you hear people say things about others that are cruel,
      do you join them in their hatred?
   Or do you quietly ignore the whole situation?

   How many Ziphites did it take to turn David in?
      (I know that sounds like the opening to a joke:
         how many Ziphites does it take to screw in a lightbulb?!)
   It only took one.
      One Ziphite who said, "let's turn in David,"
         but it also took the whole clan to acquiesce silently.
      I suspect there were more who actively participated –
         but I suspect that there were many who silently sympathized with David.
   However, the scripture condemns the Ziphites as a whole,
      because the Ziphites as a whole concurred by their silence
         in the betrayal of David.

If you are silent in a just cause,
    then you share in the guilt of those who do wrong.

And if you pass on someone else's gossip and slander,
    then you also share in their guilt!

Think about this on Facebook before you share somebody's post!
    Whether it's social networking online or a group of friends chatting in the hall,
        you must set God before you –
        you must always think, "how can I love God and neighbor in this situation?"

But even as David is betrayed by the Ziphites,
    whose words are pursuing David and seeking to destroy him,
    he still has great confidence.

c. My Helper: God Will Save Me (v4-5)

[4] Behold, God is my helper;
  the Lord is the upholder of my life.
[5] He will return the evil to my enemies;
  in your faithfulness put an end to them.

Again, David sees God as the Divine Warrior –
    the one who uphold and defend him –
    the one who will put an end to my foes –

    because God is my helper.

This is the word "ezer" (if you are familiar with the song "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"
    this is the word quoted there: "here I raise my Ebenezer" –
        my "stone of help" from 1 Samuel 7:12 –
    because God has been our helper.

The noun form of this word is used primarily of God – as our "helper" –
    (think of Luther's "our helper he amidst the flood of mortal ills prevailing")
    but is also used of Eve, who was created to be Adam's "helper,"
    and is also used by the prophets to speak of other "helpers" who fall short.

You've probably heard people object to the statement, "God is my co-pilot" –
    because it makes it sound like God is not really in charge.
But David's statement, "God is my helper" faces the same objection!
    It makes it sound like I am the center of the story,
        and God "helps out."

11

But think about what a helper really is.
> A helper enables you to do what you could never do by yourself.
>> Think of Eve.
>> What does Eve do to help?
>> She has babies.
>> Adam is utterly incapable of having babies by himself.
> Left to himself, he *cannot* fulfill what God has called him to do.

> (Plainly, Eve does more than *just* have babies –
>> but in Genesis 2, that *is* the central point of Eve being a "helper."
> And that is *the* thing that distinguishes male and female.
>> Women have this amazing ability to bear children!)

But that may *help* you understand what a *helper* is.
> God is like Eve to David.
> God does for David what David could never do for himself!

> God will uphold David's life and protect him.
> Left to himself?
>> David would die.

And so David gives thanks to the LORD.

d. My Thanksgiving (v6-7)
⁶ With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
  I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.
⁷ For he has delivered me from every trouble,
  and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

Only in verse 6 does David finally use the name of Yahweh.
> We haven't heard the name of Yahweh since Psalm 50.

> This portion of the Psalter tends to emphasize the name Elohim (God).
> But the sparse references to the Divine Name tend to make those references stand out.

The same LORD who delivered Israel from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land
> will also deliver David.
And so David promises that he will bring freewill offerings to the LORD.
> The point of a freewill offering (as the name suggests) is that it is entirely voluntary.
You bring a freewill offering simply because you are thankful to God for what he has done.

Indeed, David is so confident that he puts verse 7 in the past tense!
> The LORD *has delivered me from every trouble*,

and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

How can we look in triumph on our foes?

Calvin says,
> "If any one asks whether it is permitted to the children of God,
> > when God takes vengeance on crimes, to feast himself on such a spectacle,
> the answer is easy – only let his eyes be pure, and he can piously and holily
> > refresh himself with the manifestations of God's justice;
> but when they are infected with any evil desire,
> > all is then drawn to a wrong and perverse end." (Calvin)

If you are gloating over another's misfortune,
> that is wicked.

But if you are celebrating the vindication of God's honor,
> that is glorious!

What do you sing when you are surrounded by fools?
> You sing songs of lament –
> > crying out to God for help!
> > pleading with him to deliver you!
> > bringing him your problems,
> > > and demanding that he do what he has promised!

After all, if there is something in our lives that we aren't praying about –
> that's because we don't think that we need God's *help* in that area!

Let's Pray!