

I BELIEVE IN GOD

Psalm 14

As we continue our journey through the Apostles' Creed, I invite you to open your Bible to **Psalm 14**. This morning we are reflecting on this phrase in the creed: *"I believe in God."*

"What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us," claims A. W. Tozer.¹ He's right. So let me ask you: What comes into your mind when you think about God? Do you see an image—a kindly grandfather with a broad smile and open arms? Or maybe an angry old man with a Clint Eastwood glare and a 45-Magnum in his hand, growling, *"Go ahead, punk, make my day."* Do you see an image? Or do you think less in terms of image and more in terms of concepts like love, gracious, holy, fire, Father, Friend, Jesus, Judge? Or do you think of nothing? If nothing comes to your mind when you think about God, the psalmist has a name for you. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

The Apostles' Creed states, *"I believe in God."*

I

In v. 1 of our psalm, the fool says in his heart, *"There is no God."* But the psalmist is not talking so much about the atheists with which you and I are familiar. People like Nietzsche, Sagan, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Madelyn Murray O'Hair. These atheists deny God's existence altogether. Some are even militant. Someone described the spirit militant atheism like this: *"There is no God, and I hate him."* Their equation looks something like this: Logic + Science = No God. This is **intellectual atheism**.

There are also **circumstantial atheists** who may have once believed in God but consider him dead. In their minds, *"If God ever existed, he does not anymore."* This week I read Elie Wiesel's holocaust memoir *Night*. Though Wiesel came back to his faith in later years, the holocaust killed God for him, stole his belief and murdered his soul. On one occasion, prisoners were

¹A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 9.

marched by a child dangling dead from a noose. Wiesel said the child had the face of a sad angel. Someone near Wiesel groaned, “*For God’s sake, where is God?*” “*And from within me,*” writes Wiesel, “*I heard a voice answer: ‘Where he is? This is where: hanging here from these gallows.’*”² Dead. All the brutality and undeserved suffering, the crematoria, the starvation, the stench of death all around—such circumstances killed God in the minds of many. Maybe your suffering has killed God for you. Circumstantial atheists.

But the psalmist didn’t have these kinds of atheists in mind. There were no atheists that we know of in the psalmist’s day—a day with so little scientific knowledge that God became the explanation for most everything. Most cultures believed in many gods—gods and goddesses of the sun and the sea and sky and healing and fertility.

II

The psalmist has in mind practical atheists—men and women who may believe that God is but choose to live as if God isn’t, as if he doesn’t exist. Here’s what it sounds like: “*Of course there is a God, but who cares? What difference does it make? God has no claims on me. I live as I please.*” We sometimes call these people agnostics, but let’s call them what they really are: practical atheists.

The psalmist has a stronger word. He calls them **fools**. *Fool* is the Hebrew word *nabal*. It does not mean stupid, inept, silly, clown, buffoon. James Mays says It means a person “*who decides and acts on the basis of the wrong assumption.*”³ In 1 Samuel 25, we meet **a man named Nabal**—filthy rich in land and livestock. David and his men were on the run from King Saul. They came upon some of Nabal’s servants and livestock. David did them no harm, didn’t steal a thing. He sent a few of his men to seek some food from Nabal. Nabal refused them, blew them off: “*Who’s David? Who is this son of Jesse? Just another slave running from his master.*” Nabal made the wrong assumption about David. Nabal’s wife Abigail recognized the

²Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 64.

³James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 81.

danger, snuck David and his men some food, and kept David from murdering Nabal and taking his livestock. When Abigail told Nabal that he came within a fly's eyelash of being struck down by David, Nabal's *"heart died and he became a stone. Ten days later the Lord struck Nabal dead"* (1 Sam 25:37-38). Nabal was a fool. He made the wrong assumption about David, and he paid for it with his life.

In **Luke 12**, Jesus tells a different story about a fool. A farmer had such a bumper crop that he didn't have enough barn to store it all. A dilemma. *"What do I do with the extra?"* It never occurred to him to share with those in need. He decides instead, *"I'll build bigger barns, take early retirement, and live on Easy Street the rest of my life."* Wrong assumption! That night, God said to him, *"You fool! This is the last night of your life."* It's one thing if *you* call me a fool. Maybe you're right, maybe you're wrong. But if *God* calls me a fool, I'm a fool. The fool in Jesus's story made all kinds of wrong assumptions: what's mine is mine, blessings are not to share but to hoard, and I've got plenty of time to live my life. Fool.

"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Said *"in his heart"*—not his lips, but his **heart**—down where he really lives and feels and believes and wills. He may profess a faith with his lips, but he betrays that faith with his life. He is a practical atheist.

Practical atheists make all kinds of wrong assumptions about God:

- God is real but irrelevant to my life
- My life is mine not God's
- I play by my rules not God's
- God put people here for me to exploit to my own ends
- I am not accountable to no one, not even God

Fool! You couldn't make worse assumptions about God. You couldn't be more wrong.

The psalmist describes these fools in v. 1: *“They are corrupt. They do vile deeds. There is no one who does good.”* And then, the psalmist says something in v. 2 that stirs up memories of two judgments God rendered in the Old Testament. The psalmist declares, *“The Lord looks down from heaven on the human race to see if there is one who is wise, one who seeks God.”* This sounds a lot like what God did before he **sent the judgment** of confused language on those arrogant souls in Babel who thought they could build a tower high enough to climb all the way up to God (Gen 11:5). And it sounds like what God did before he hurled fire and brimstone on the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20-21). He looked down on earth to see what he was working with, and he saw a bunch of fools.

And when God looks down on atheistic fools, this is what he sees. Look at **v. 3:** *“All have turned away; all alike have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one.”* The psalmist calls them *“evildoers”* in **v. 4**, and some of their evil is the way they treat God’s people: *“They consume my people as they consume bread; they do not call on the Lord.”* Of course, they don’t call on the Lord. They consider him irrelevant. They don’t care what God thinks. They live by their own rules. Instead of liberating people they oppress them. Instead of saving people, they consume them. Instead of serving people, they use them. Fools!

The psalmist blows a **warning trumpet:** God looks down from heaven. God sees these fools. God sees their vile deeds. God sees the way they frustrate the oppressed. And God sees his righteous ones too. God is with them, on their side. God is a refuge for the oppressed. (**v. 6**).

And as we read in **v. 5**, sooner or later God will judge those evil fools by filling them with **dread**. Have you ever felt dread? I’ve not been in the best mental health for the last several months: too much stress, too much fatigue, too many decisions. In the midst of that, I have had moments when a horrible feeling of dread settled on my heart—and for no rational reason. It never lasted long when it came, and thankfully, God has lifted that from me. But if you’ve felt that, you know that dread is a horrible thing.

The psalmist says, *“These fools who live like there is no God will be filled with dread.”* Don’t you think that’s what **Nabal** felt when Abigail told him how close he was to being skewered by

David's sword? His heart failed him, and he became like a stone. Dread. And what about the **rich fool** in Jesus' story? Here he was rolling in cash, reclining in his Lazy-Boy, looking at travel brochures to places like Fiji and the Cayman Islands. Not a care in the world. Has the world by the tail. And suddenly God whispers, *"You fool! You die tonight."* Can you imagine his dread? These fools are filled with dread before they experience the judgment. Talk about a one-two punch. Sort of like having their foot caught in a railroad track with a roaring freight train barreling down on them from a hundred yards away. Dread. Judgment. That is the destiny for these practical atheist fools who say in their heart, *"There is no God."*

IV

And if you're like me, you're feeling pretty good at this point in the psalm: *"Yeah! You go, God! Don't pity those fools. Drop your dreadful hammer on their heads."* You know why we tend to feel this way? Because we usually identify with the good guys. In the psalm, we identify with the poor and the oppressed and the righteous. We do the same thing when we read novels and watch movies. We do that all the time when we read the Scripture.

- I am righteous Abel, not the murderer Cain.
- I am cunning Jacob, not dopey Esau.
- I am Joseph, not one of the jealous brothers who sold him into slavery.
- I am David, not Goliath.
- I am Job, not one of his annoying friends accusing Job of having done something to deserve his suffering.
- I am John the Baptist, not Herod.
- I am a disciple, not a Pharisee.
- I am the faithful Centurion who says at the cross, *"Surely this man is the Son of God,"* not one of the soldiers driving nails in Jesus' hands or gambling for his clothes.
- I am Peter who left everything to follow Jesus, not the rich young ruler who believed Jesus knew the way to eternal life but didn't believe him enough to cash out his wealth, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Jesus.

- I am a wise man, not a fool
- I am a follower of Christ, not a practical atheist.

Am I right? Do you tend to identify with the heroes in the Bible rather than its villains?

The **psalmist challenges that** today. Instead of assuming you're among the righteous, among God's poor and oppressed people in this psalm, maybe you should consider the fact that you may be the fool the psalmist condemns. You have your moments of foolishness, maybe even a lifestyle of foolishness. You may say you believe in God, but your life doesn't offer enough evidence to convict you in any court of law. You believe God exists, but your heart—that part of you that thinks and feels and believes and wills—whispers, *"God is largely irrelevant to me. I play by my rules not God's. It's all about me not God. There is no God."*

Now before you get defensive: *"Hey, that's not me. I believe in God."* Understand that if it's not you now, you were once like this. In **Romans 3:10-12**, Paul quotes much of verses 1-3 in our psalm and indicts us all. Look at the language: *all, all alike, no one, not even one*. Sin's shadow touches us all. Sin's stain marks us all. Paul applies this universally, driving to this central and familiar verse in Romans 3:23 – *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

All of us have **played the fool** sometime. Some of you are playing the fool now. And you might fool me and the person on the pew behind you. But you don't fool God. He looks down from heaven and sees.

V

But I have good news for you: Jesus can save you from your foolishness. The psalmist begs for it in **v. 7**: *"Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad."* In its context, this is probably a word for Judah's exiles in Babylon: *"Better days are coming. You will not be in exile forever. Deliverance will come from Zion."* God kept his promise and delivered the exiles.

And **God delivers sinners** like you and me. Deliverance has come. It came from heaven by way of Zion on a small hill outside of Jerusalem where, on a cross, God's only Son Jesus took your sins and mine on himself and killed their power and penalty over us. God delivers us from our atheistic foolishness. God can deliver you from your low-rent, wishy-washy walk with him. He can deliver you from your head-knowledge only belief in God: "*I know God exists,*" to heart-experience belief in God, "*God lives in and through me.*" He can move you beyond "I know *what* I believe" to Paul's testimony to Timothy: "I know *whom* I believe" (2 Tim 1:12).

To get to the belief that saves and sanctifies and makes you a reflection of Christ, **own your foolishness**. Be honest with yourself. If Christians were being persecuted, would the police be tracking you down? Do the people in your home, at work, among your friends, know you are a Christian? Would they be surprised to find out? Do they see Christ in your life? Do they smell the scent of his fragrance when you're with them? Don't just take stock of your mental beliefs, take stock of your life. Do you live as if God lives or as if God is nothing more than a mental construct? Be honest with yourself. Own your foolishness. Confess to God, "I am a fool."

Then **turn to Jesus and give your life to him**. The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "*What must I do to be saved?*" Paul answered, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved*" (Acts 16:30-31). Fred Buechner plays around with this preposition *in* to get at the heart of the kind of belief the Bible is talking about. When we say a man is *in* architecture or a woman is *in* teaching, we mean this is what they do to make a living.

But if we say they are *into* these things, that is another story. "Into" means something more like total immersion. They live and breathe what they do. They take it home with them nights. They can't get enough of it. ...

Believing "in" God is an intellectual position. It need have no more effect on your life than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams.

Believing "into" God is something else again. It is less a position than a journey, less a realization than a relationship. It doesn't leave you cold like believing the world is round. It stirs your blood like believing the world is a miracle. It affects who you are

and what you do with your life like believing your house is on fire or somebody loves you.⁴

Do you believe *in* God or believe *into* God? This can make the difference between being a foolish practical atheist and being a faithful follower of the living God. It can make the difference between *thinking* you are saved and *being* saved. Ask the late **Bill Tolar**, longtime professor at Southwestern Baptist Seminary. In a sermon he preached in the seminary chapel in 1977, he shared his testimony. He told of being challenged by a high school teacher to read the Bible all the way through. Tolar took the challenge. He said he read it out of intellectual pride so he could say he had read the Bible through. And as he read it, Tolar explained:

Something began to happen to me. I began to realize that if this book were true, then my life was false; if this book were right, then my life was wrong. I was no atheist ... I was simply living my life without serious regard for God. I was not so much denying God as I was ignoring Him.

The time came when I realized that I would have to stop reading the Bible or I would have to commit my life in faith to the living God revealed in Jesus Christ whose presence and reality was becoming so real to me. I realized that it was not enough simply to acknowledge the existence of God. The book of James says that even the “demons” or “devils” believe there is a God. And you know where they are! It is one thing to acknowledge that there is a God; it is quite another to be rightly related to that God.

Tolar **made a commitment** to Jesus Christ and found salvation and new life. He was saved by grace—Tolar couldn’t make it happen, only Jesus could—through faith—Tolar’s faith that believed Jesus enough to give Jesus his life, his dreams, his time, everything. Tolar had played the fool, but he would never play the fool again. He concluded, *“My attitudes, my outlook, my everything truly changed. In the words of the New Testament, I had a ‘new birth.’ I could only say of Christ as Thomas had said, ‘My Lord and my God.’”*

⁴Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 20-21.

Can you say that? Does your life say that? If it does, you are no fool. And you can say the first phrase of the Apostles' Creed with conviction: "*I believe in God.*"

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First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR

John Scott McCallum II