

Psalm 50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 50, a Psalm of Asaph. The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God comes, he does not keep silence. Before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people.

Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice. The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. Hear, O my people, and I will speak.

O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you. Your burnt offerings are continually before me.

I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your foals. For every beast of the forest is mine. The cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine.

[1 : 0 1] If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High.

And call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. But to the wicked God says, What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?

For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free reign for evil, and your tongue frames deceit.

You sit and speak against your brother. You slander your own mother's son. These things you have done, and I have been silent. You thought that I was one like yourself.

But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you. Mark this then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver. The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me.

[2 : 0 9] To one who orders his way rightly, I will show the salvation of God. Psalm 50 is a prophetic rebuke of Israel. As Conrad Schaeffer observes, it is a sort of cosmic court scene, with the great judge coming, summoning the witnesses and the accused, before presenting an indictment of the people on the grounds of their liturgical and moral practices, concluded with a solemn warning.

The covenant people are called to give an account of themselves, for their failure to worship and to live faithfully. God is the judge, but he is also the prosecutor and the wronged party.

After God has been introduced in three titles or names of ascending importance, the Mighty One, God and the Lord, the whole earth is summoned before him. We might think the earth is being summoned to its own judgment, but that initial impression is soon wrong-footed.

Asaph describes the Lord shining forth from Zion, the place where he has put his name, in a way that recalls the theophany of Sinai. There is a devouring fire before him, and a mighty tempest all around him.

Having sent out a horizontal summons, as it were, to the whole earth, the Lord sends out a vertical summons, calling the heavens to join the earth in witness, to the end that he might judge his people.

[3 : 25] Heaven and earth were presented as witnesses to the covenant, in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 19 to 20, so it is appropriate that they should appear here. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

After all of the witnesses are assembled, Israel are called to the dock, my faithful ones, the ones who made a covenant with me by sacrifice. The heavenly assembly declare and confirm the Lord's righteousness.

God himself will be the judge. The Lord now presents his testimony against Israel. According to the covenant promise, in charging them to attend to his words, he reminds Israel that he is their God and they are his people.

They have been treating the Lord as if he was somehow in need of their sacrifices, which they could perform mindlessly, as if God merely had to be pacified with mechanistic ritual.

[4 : 35] But God doesn't need sacrifices. He is the creator of all and all is his. Any sacrifice is merely giving back to God what he has already given to the person making the sacrifice.

Nor is God hungry. He doesn't need food as a creature does, nor does he eat bulls and goats. What God desires from his people is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a sort of peace offering testifying to the goodness of what God had done for them.

He wants them to perform their vows to him. He wants them to call upon him in the day of trouble. The purpose of all of these things is so that they might know joy, communion and deliverance in relationship with him.

They have treated God with careless indifference, but God is most glorified when his people look to and take delight in him. Such a challenge to bear ritual, to treating religion as if it were just a matter of going through the motions, detached from hearts that look to the Lord, is something that we find in many occasions in scripture.

One important example can be seen in Isaiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 17. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.

[5 : 44] I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who is required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings.

Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression.

Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. From the ritualist whose heart is far from him, the Lord turns to wicked hypocrites, to those who pay lip service to the covenant, while thoroughly rejecting and despising it in their actions.

[6 : 47] They speak the words of the covenant ceremony and declare the Amen to its judgments. Yet they then go out and pursue and approve all kinds of evil. If the first half of this psalm presented an indictment upon their sinful posture towards God and their worship, the second half focuses upon their sinful behavior towards their neighbors.

Like the fools described in the book of Proverbs, they hate discipline and reproof. They reject instruction and the fear of the Lord. They disregard the second table of the commandments.

They despise the discipline of parents. They approve those who steal. They keep company with adulterers. They slander their brothers. The Lord has been long suffering with them, not judging them.

The Lord's silence, however, had merely emboldened these people in their sinful presumption. The gracious delay of his judgment led them to become more assured in their wickedness. They suffered from a severe idolatry in their imaginations, fancying that God was like them, unmindful of sin, not holy, susceptible to hollow flattery, and easily persuaded to wink at wrongdoing.

However, now they must face the Lord's judgment. The psalm ends with a distinction drawn between two parties. The wicked who forget God are charged to come to their senses and to repent while they still have time.

[8 : 03] The Lord's judgment might seem to tarry, but there will be no escape from it when it falls upon them. The righteous person, by contrast, who offers a pure sacrifice of thanksgiving and acts uprightly, will receive the deliverance of God when the time for judgment comes.

A question to consider. This psalm especially foregrounds the importance of the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

In Hebrews chapter 13 verse 15, the same language is taken up. Through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

How might this psalm help us to understand the character of true worship and how it is fulfilled in the life of the church?