

PSALM 50

A CALL TO TRUE WORSHIP

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
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The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God! (Ps. 50:23).

One of the chief errors in theology and Bible study is the belief that when God acts differently it is because God himself has changed. Psalm 50 reminds us of this because of the way it relates the two mountains of the Old Testament, Sinai and Zion.

The Bible usually contrasts these two mountains, understanding Sinai to represent the law and Zion the gospel. Paul wrote this way in his allegory of Galatians 4, associating Mount Sinai with Abraham's slave girl Hagar and Zion with Abraham's true wife Sarah. The children of Hagar/Sinai are slaves under the law, Paul said, but the children of Sarah/Zion enjoy gospel freedom (Gal. 4:26). The writer of Hebrews made a similar contrast between the burdens of the law and the privileges believers now have in Christ. As Christians, he wrote, "you have not come" to the blazing, fearful Mount Sinai that Israel encountered in the exodus, with the threatenings of God's law. "But you have come to Mount Zion," he continues, with its warmer reception of joyful angels, a justified church, and "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant," granting forgiveness and eternal life.

Having seen the contrast between Sinai and Zion, the danger is for us to think that these mountains represent two different Gods. The people of Old Testament Jerusalem fell prey to this error, thinking that since God had settled them on Mount Zion, with the temple in their midst, God's smiling face must always be upon them. Psalm 50 confronts them with their error, since the God of Zion is *not* a different God than the raging deity of Mount Sinai. Zion was so privileged and blessed that the psalmist describes it as "the perfection

of beauty” (Ps. 50:2). Yet “Out of Zion..., God shines forth. Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest” (Ps. 50:2-3).

If Old Testament Jews were tempted by the glories of Zion to forget God’s unchanging demands, Christians who enjoy the blessings of the gospel are no less prone to such folly. Psalm 50 counters such thinking with what J. J. Stewart Perowne calls “a magnificent exposition of the true nature of that service and worship which God requires of man. It rebukes the folly which thinks that religion is a matter of sacrifices and gifts, and declares that obedience and thanksgiving are the true fulfilling of the Law.”¹

A SUMMONS FOR JUDGMENT

Psalm 50 begins with the heralding of God in his greatness. He is “the Mighty One,” thundering on high, “God” the Creator, and “Yahweh” the covenant Lord of Israel. His trumpets blast out to the entire world. “Our God comes; he does not keep silence,” the psalmist says; “before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest” (Ps. 50:3).

The opening verses of this psalm present a notable description of God’s relationship to the world and the church. The Lord speaks “out of Zion,” that is, from the midst of his church and its city. Yet he “speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting” (Ps. 50:1). God will reveal himself to the entire earth, but he will do so by means of his judgment of the church. For while the entire earth is summoned, it is gathered to witness the Lord’s dealings with his covenant people. “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!” (Ps. 50:4-5). This summons reminds us of the paramount importance of the church in every generation: there is no more vital civic institution than the Christian church, since the well-being of the entire society depends on God’s blessing on and through his church.

Psalm 50 not only tells us that God relates to the world through his church, but also shows how God relates to the church as its Lord.

¹ J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms, 2 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1878, reprint, 1976), I:403.

Verse 5 refers to God's people as "my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" God has bound his people in a covenant that is sealed in the blood of an atoning sacrifice. He said, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12), with the obligation of faith on the part of the church. Psalm 50 shows this to be a living relationship: God is not an absentee landlord but a sovereign who rules his people. He therefore calls for his church to be gathered so that he may inquire as to their obedience. This is the idea of God coming to "judge his people" (Ps. 50:4): "He comes now... to see whether they have kept His Law, whether they have been faithful to His Covenant."²

God's purpose in summoning his people for judgment can be seen by his call "to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people" (Ps. 50:4). Heaven and earth had been the witnesses arraigned by God when he first brought his people into covenant. Deuteronomy chapters 26-30 record the great covenant-making ceremony the Lord had ordained to take place once Israel was established in the Promised Land. It was a covenant that ordained life for those who walked in his commandments and death for those who turned away (Dt. 30:15-18). The Lord declared on that occasion: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse" (Dt. 30:19).

Throughout Israel's history, when the prophets summoned heaven and earth to witness they were recalling Israel to her covenant with the Lord. Verse 6 thus concludes God's summons by saying, "The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!"

New Testament readers are reminded here of Peter's warning that "it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). God does not forget his requirements upon his people any more than his promises for their salvation. When he comes in a judgment of warning, as Psalm 50 records, God is showing grace to his people – the grace of reproof and the call to repentance – so that God's name may be honored throughout the earth because of his church.

² Ibid., I:406.

A REBUKE TO FORMALISM

Psalm 50 is attributed to Asaph, who was appointed by David to be chief of the Levites who maintained worship before the Lord (1 Chron. 16:4-5). If the original Asaph was the author, then Psalm 50 was penned during David's reign, at the very beginning of Israel's worship on Mount Zion. As we might expect, however, there were a succession of Levites named Asaph, so Psalm 50 could have been written by a later bearer of that name. Whichever Asaph was the author, Psalm 50 is a rebuke from God through one called to lead Israel in worship. The psalmist delivers two chief complaints from God, the first of which is directed against *empty formalism* in worship.

The Lord's complaint against ritual formalism is given in verses 8-15. First, the Lord states that he is not angry because the Levites had grown slack in offering sacrifices, for they had not: "Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me" (Ps. 50:8). The problem was their attitude in making sacrifices. They had come to believe that God was pleased by the sheer mechanics of ritual worship, which in their case required the slaying of animals in sacrifice. Charles Spurgeon comments: "They thought the daily sacrifices and the abounding burnt offerings to be everything: he counted them nothing if the inner sacrifice of heart devotion had been neglected."³

God's complaint against dead formalism is found throughout the Old Testament. The Lord said, through Isaiah, for instance: "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; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats" (Isa. 1:11). One might object, noting that it was God who instituted these very sacrifices. Yet the sacrifices were never intended to represent what God's people offered to him in worship; instead, they depicted what God had given to his people for the forgiveness of their sins, namely, the atoning blood of Jesus on the cross. Offering the sacrifices point to what God had given them, but the Israelites offered nothing of themselves back to God. Jesus gave the same emphasis in his teaching on worship, saying that "to love [the Lord] with all the heart

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), I:2:386.

and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk. 12:33). When Christians ask what to give the God who already has everything, his answer is that he desires us to give ourselves from the heart. When these are withheld, the Lord is uninterested in receiving mere outward sacrifices in worship: "I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds" (Ps. 50:9).

There seems to have developed among the Israelites a theological error that justified their ritualism. God rebukes them for acting as if he actually needed to be fed the meats of their sacrifices: "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. 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?" (Ps. 50:9-13). The idea that God needed their sacrifices denied the essential spirituality of God and blasphemously made the Lord into a man-dependent idol.

Empty formalism in worship imperils our souls precisely because it promotes a false relationship with the Lord. Anyone who thinks themselves to be right with God simply because they received a sacrament – whether baptism or the Lord's Supper – or because they are physically present for worship is dangerously deluded. The classic example of a fully-developed formalism was given by the Pharisees on the morning of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. John's Gospel provides the hideous scene of Jesus' accusers priding themselves in ritual observance at the very moment they were handing over the Messiah to be put to death. John states that Jesus' accusers refused to set foot in Pilate's headquarters so as to avoid ritual defilement during the Passover, not realizing that their "hands were stained with the greatest crime which the world has seen."⁴

The corrective to empty formalism is worship that is filled with thanksgiving, sincere obedience, and trusting prayer: "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" (Ps. 50:14-15). The psalmist indicates that gratitude for God's saving grace is at the heart of all true religion. From

⁴ Perowne, I:404.

thanksgiving comes a whole offering of the self to God in praise. The thankful worshiper is eager to fulfill all his or her obligations to the Lord, including faith, self-denial, holiness, and patient enduring in trials. Thanksgiving is joined to prayer because the grateful believer looks to the Lord in reliance and hope for salvation. Such true faith in seeking the Lord, especially “in the day of trouble,” will gain salvation: “I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps. 50:15).

As a matter of practice, Psalm 50 suggests that we do well always to thank God for his blessings before we turn to our lists of requests in prayer. Even this can become a ritual formalism, however, so that the heart of true worship is a sincere, loving gratitude to God for all his blessings, and especially for his gift of salvation through his Son, Jesus.

The empty formalism described in Psalm 50 is as grave a problem today as it was in Old Testament times. How mistaken we are to think we are doing something special for God by showing up at church. It does not represent an offering to the Lord merely to attend worship: the ordinances of divine worship are not given by us to God but by God to us for our blessing. We only truly worship God when we offer him genuine thanksgiving and love in response to his grace. This problem is especially severe in a time like ours when there is so much controversy over the forms of worship. It is good to have biblical forms of worship, with a theologically sound liturgy and God-honoring music. Yet the most proper forms are never adequate before God. The forms certainly matter and we need to do our best in presenting biblically sound worship. But it would be better to have less sound forms with truly thankful hearts than to offer formally sound worship with dead or disinterested hearts. Whether we are worshiping privately, as a family, or together as a church, we should do our best to be biblical in our worship, but it is equally important for us to offer grateful, loving, sincere, and heartfelt praise.

A CONDEMNATION OF HYPOCRISY

Joined to the problem of formalism in worship is the even more dreadful condition of *hypocrisy*. If formalism involves the going through the motions without a real offering of self to God, hypocrisy is the giving over of oneself to evil under the cloak of religion. Hypocrisy is a more advanced state of depravity than formalism and

as such it receives not merely God's warning but the Lord's most severe condemnation.

Verse 16 shows that God's ire is especially stoked by hypocrites in his church: "But to the wicked God says, 'What right have you to receive my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?'" (Ps. 50:16). Whereas God rejects the worship of his formalistic people, he rejects the people themselves who claim to bear his name while actually practicing evil.

There is no one who cannot be accused for failing to practice what he preaches and for sinning against the very God he or she has claimed to praise while at church. However, what the psalmist condemns as hypocrisy is something more serious than mere failure to live up to our high calling as believers. The Lord condemns those who flagrantly and openly make a mockery of God's moral commands.

Verses 18-20 chart the mocking of God's law in terms of the seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments. The hypocrites not only fail to honor the property of others, but "if you see a thief, you are pleased with him" (Ps. 50:18). They not only fail to uphold sexual purity, but "keep company with adulterers." Instead of bearing a true witness, "You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son" (Ps. 50:19-20). In each case, the false worshiper is found reveling in the things that God despises. This is not a true believer struggling with sinful desires and habits but a false professor of religion who delights in sin and the company of the wicked.

The theological term for the situation Psalm 50 describes is *antinomianism*, which means "against the law." James Boice describes it as "the religion of those who think they can belong to God and nevertheless sin freely."⁵ Not only is there a problem in the church with people living as antinomians, but there is actually a strain of evangelical theology today that defends lawless Christian living. It is possible, people insist, to have Jesus as Savior without surrendering to him as Lord, and to be saved by Christ without following him in obedient discipleship. Such people deride any emphasis on obeying the Bible as legalism, mistakenly thinking that one may be justified through faith alone without being born again to a new and godly life.

⁵ James M. Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:419.

Boice responds to this false teaching in terms of Psalm 50: “It is possible for Christians to sin; they do sin. But it is not possible for them to be hypocrites. If they are not intending to do the right thing and wanting to do the right thing, as defined by the moral law of God, they are not Christians, any more than the ‘wicked’ people of this psalm were truly God’s people.”⁶

The Lord condemns in the strongest terms those who speak his praise while reveling in sin: “Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!” (Ps. 50:22). Hypocrites are fools for thinking God blind to their actions. His patience in withholding judgment leads them not to thankful repentance but to ever more boastfulness in sin: “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” (Ps. 50:21).

Since virtually no one considers himself a hypocrite, we should know the signs of hypocrisy. The best test is found at the beginning of God’s rebuke: “For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you” (Ps. 50:17). God proves their contempt by showing their reaction against his Word: by refusing to submit to clear Bible teaching they show their arrogance towards God. Each of us should therefore observe how we respond to the Bible’s commands and how we react when the Scriptures show us to be in error or in sin. The true believer submits to God’s Word, however haltingly or inconsistently, whereas the hypocrite finds excuses and arguments for evading the Bible’s plain teaching. John Calvin notes: “The Psalmist points to this as the mainspring of their ungodliness, that they had cast the Word of God behind their back, while he insinuates that the principle from which all true worship flows is the obedience of faith.”⁷

The hypocrisy of antinomianism created a major controversy during Calvin’s ministry in Geneva. One of the factions in St. Peter’s Church, where Calvin was pastor, was known as the Libertines. These worldly people boasted in their sinful license, especially celebrating adultery and sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. At the same time, the Libertines demanded the right to receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. In 1553, a wealthy

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 23 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1848, reprint 2009), 5:276.

Libertine named Berthelier was barred from the table by the church elders, but succeeded in having the church's authority overturned by the city council. Believing that the glory of Christ was at stake, Calvin refused to comply. On the appointed morning, after preaching God's Word, Calvin descended to stand before the table with the communion elements. After consecrating the elements in prayer, he saw the Libertines coming forward to partake. Calvin responded by flinging his arms around the vessels, crying aloud: "These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God." "After this," wrote Calvin's biographer Theodore Beza, "the sacred ordinance was celebrated with profound silence, and under solemn awe in all present, as if the Deity Himself had been visible among them."⁸ Calvin understood the message of Psalm 50, where "to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?'"

WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

For all the ferocity of its threats, Psalm 50 is in fact a summons from God to come in worship. We have a tendency to formalism which must be corrected, and we must never descend to a God-mocking hypocrisy. Yet God desires not judgment, but the worship of those who gratefully love him and seek to honor him for his saving grace. It is with this invitation that the psalm concludes: "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!" (Ps. 50:23). How inspiring it is to see that God really is glorified by our grateful hearts, and how exciting to know that sincere faith will receive nothing less than God's salvation.

Questions about worship are common, and Psalm 50 provides a guide that offers many answers. Jesus also dealt with questions about worship, and his classic statement to the Samaritan woman agrees with and amplifies the message of this psalm. When the woman asked Jesus about worship, he responded with an amazing invitation

⁸ Henry Stebbing, *The Life and Times of John Calvin, the Great Reformer*, trans. Paul Henry (New York: R. Carter & Bros., 1852), 309.

and instruction. First, Jesus said that the Lord is seeking worshipers: “the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” Second, the worship that God desires is worship “in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23).

Jesus’ teaching provides a grid for worship that agrees with Psalm 50. The psalmist reprovved empty formalism, and Jesus calls for worship of his Father to be “in spirit.” This means that our worship must not be external but spiritual and inward; true worship is a matter of the heart and not merely of ritual actions. James Boice explains: “True worship occurs only when that part of man, his spirit, which is akin to the divine nature (for God is spirit), actually meets with God and finds itself praising him for his love, wisdom, beauty, truth, holiness, compassion, mercy, grace, power and all his other attributes.”⁹

In addition, Jesus said that worship must be “in truth.” The psalmist rejected worship based on false ideas of God. The Israelites thought that God actually needed to be fed sacrifices (Ps.50:10-13), and the hypocrites thought God was more or less like themselves in moral indifference (Ps. 50:21). Worship in truth requires a right conception of *who* we worship, along with obedience to his teaching regarding *how* we must worship. Just as important, worship in truth requires thinking. Kent Hughes argues, “Worship is not a mindless activity. It includes mental interaction with the truth about God.”¹⁰ This does not make worship a merely intellectual experience, with no effect on the emotions, will, and affections. Far from it! But the trajectory of biblical worship is light shining through the mind to warm the heart. Paul thus urged us to offer God “spiritual worship,” explaining, “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

Jesus taught the good news that the Father is seeking worshipers, and he invited us to come “in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23). But Jesus had one more vital thing to say about worship. The Samaritan woman had asked *where* she should worship, whether on the mount of her fathers or down in Jerusalem at Mount Zion. She then offered, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things” (Jn. 4:25). Jesus responded with words that changed her life and that thunder at the heart of all true worship: “Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he’” (Jn. 4:26).

⁹ Ibid., 297.

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You My Believe* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999), 117.

This completes the Bible's teaching in Psalm 50, telling us that worship must be *in spirit*, it must be *in truth*, and it must be *in Christ*. "To one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!" concludes the psalmist (Ps. 50:23). To his faithful people, God showed salvation by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. The same God who gave the law on Mount Sinai, a God of holy righteousness, who then gathered his people for worship on Mount Zion, a God of covenant faithfulness, has now revealed himself in the fullness of his saving grace on Mount Calvary. There, God gave his Son that we might see his salvation and worship in spirit and truth. Psalm 50 said that "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (v. 2). The New Testament tells us that through the gospel, God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

God is seeking worshipers, through Jesus Christ, who come in spirit and in truth. When we do he will be our chief delight. The Lord says, "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people... I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:10, 12).