

Judgment Day

Psalm 50

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In recent years, we have seen several people who had used and abused others have a day of reckoning. People like Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, and others who had been serial abusers finally had their sins brought into the open. These people (and others like them) persisted in their actions for years, believing they would never get caught or face repercussions for them.

While there is a great deal of controversy around these cases, especially about who else may have been involved in these actions, each of these abusers discovered that there would ultimately be a day of reckoning. No amount of money or power can forestall judgment forever.

That is the same message we find in Psalm 50. Hopefully, you have not engaged in the same kinds of behaviors as these men, but this passage does call us to examine ourselves to see our own areas of compromise and hypocrisy. The surprising part of this psalm is that its accusations are leveled squarely at the people of God. It condemns those who claim to follow the Lord but are missing the point.

The Lord

The first section of this psalm serves as an introduction. If you picture the psalm kind of like a courtroom, verses 1-6 are like when the judge enters the room. Everyone rises and the judge is introduced.

¹ The Lord, the Mighty One, is God, and he has spoken; he has summoned all humanity from where the sun rises to where it sets. ² From Mount Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines in glorious radiance. ³ Our God approaches, and he is not silent. Fire devours everything in his way, and a great storm rages around him. ⁴ He calls on the heavens above and earth below to witness the judgment of his people. ⁵ “Bring my faithful people to me—those who made a covenant with me by giving sacrifices.” ⁶ Then let the heavens proclaim his justice, for God himself will be the judge. (Psalm 50:1-6, NLT)

The psalmist wastes no time in making us aware of who the judge of these proceedings is. In the opening line, he uses three different names of God to describe Him. He calls Him: Yahweh El Elohim. All three describe the Lord, but each carries a slightly different connotation. Here’s how one commentator described these.

El speaks of God as mighty; Elohim, as the object of religious fear; Jehovah [Yahweh], as the self-existent and covenant God...¹

¹ Alexander Maclaren, quoted in Boice, James Montgomery. *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005.

It's not necessary to know these three Hebrew names, but it's valuable to understand that the psalmist is going to great lengths to ensure we see the greatness of the Lord. He introduces Him in this way to remind us that He is all powerful, the One who is over all things and all people.

The second thing to note in this introduction is that the psalmist points to the Lord as the judge over not only Israel, but the whole world. Many imagine that they will not answer to the Lord because they don't believe in Him. You will hear them argue that Christian morality doesn't apply to them because they don't believe in the Christian God.

While I understand the logic (I don't believe in Allah, so I don't feel subject to Shariah law), the reality is quite different. God exists whether you believe in Him or not. The analogy I like to use is that disbelieving in God is kind of like disbelieving in gravity. I may not believe in gravity, but its laws are active in my life whether I want them to be or not. I'm subject to gravity's power whether I like it or not. If I jump off a building because I claim that gravity doesn't exist, I'm still going to fall. My disbelief does not make it stop existing.

It is the same with the Lord. You can convince yourself all day long that God doesn't exist, but your disbelief does not erase His existence. And your refusal to acknowledge His power does not negate it. The psalmist reminds us that everyone on the face of the earth is subject to the Lord's judgment.

The final element we see in these opening verses is that God is holy and will bring judgment. The language used here is designed to draw us into a place of worship and submission.

Listen to the descriptions Asaph gives of the Lord. He describes Him as perfect in beauty. He says God shines in glorious radiance. Elsewhere in scripture the Lord is described as dwelling in unapproachable light—a light so bright and so pure that you cannot even come near it. He describes God as being preceded by fire that clears the path for Him and surrounded by a great storm. All these depictions remind us of the greatness and power of the Lord.

We often imagine God in a watered-down, weak way. Some of that, I think, has to do with the way we think of Jesus. Jesus talked about the importance of loving your enemies, and He did not immediately destroy those who were seeking to kill Him. Because of this, I think many people have the idea that Jesus was weak and passive. That simply isn't true. Some have argued that the God revealed in the Old Testament is very different than the God revealed in the New Testament. That isn't the case either.

Jesus spoke more about Hell than He did about Heaven! Jesus never backed down from calling people to repentance. He did not indulge people in their sin. He was on the earth to perform a specific task—to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin. The New Testament also describes a future second coming of Jesus to the earth. Those

descriptions match what we see here. Jesus will come in power and judgment. Our God should not be underestimated; He will punish sin once and for all.

Not only is God powerful, but He is also just. Notice that Asaph says that after God acts, the Heavens declare His justice! No one in all of creation will question God's judgments. Many do today, but that is only because we do not see clearly. When we stand before the Lord in judgment, we will be able to see that He is perfectly just, and no one will second-guess or undermine His decisions or actions. As He punishes sin, all creation will praise Him, because they see He is just.

As we've gone through the psalms, we've mostly ignored the interludes listed in them, but I think it's worth drawing attention to this one in Psalm 50. Depending on your translation, it may say something like interlude, or it may just put the Hebrew word, *Selah* in the margin. Most people think this marking was intended as a pause—a time to reflect on what was just said. There is value in quiet stillness before the Lord to allow the truths we have just seen to wash over us. Probably nowhere is that more necessary than when reminding us of His character. The psalmist wants God's holiness and justice to sink in before we move into the rest of the psalm.

The First Accusation

After introducing us to the judge in the opening verses, we see the charges being read in verses 7-15.

⁷ "O my people, listen as I speak. Here are my charges against you, O Israel: I am God, your God! ⁸ I have no complaint about your sacrifices or the burnt offerings you constantly offer. ⁹ But I do not need the bulls from your barns or the goats from your pens. ¹⁰ For all the animals of the forest are mine, and I own the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know every bird on the mountains, and all the animals of the field are mine. ¹² If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for all the world is mine and everything in it. ¹³ Do I eat the meat of bulls? Do I drink the blood of goats? ¹⁴ Make thankfulness your sacrifice to God, and keep the vows you made to the Most High. ¹⁵ Then call on me when you are in trouble, and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory." (Psalm 50:7-15, NLT)

We should note who is being brought before the Lord, because it is not the people we would expect. Back in verse 5, we see God call his faithful people to Him, those who keep His covenant by making sacrifices. So, the charges we read about in this psalm are not directed at the heathens who do not believe in God, but at those who describe themselves as followers of the Lord.

And this first section of charges makes it clear that the Lord is speaking to those trying to carry out His ritual commands. The Lord declares that He has no complaints about their burnt offerings or sacrifices. They were doing the things the law said to do in that regard, but God says these things do not please Him.

He walks us through a short thought experiment—does the Lord need our sacrifices or offerings? Of course not! He created the world. He doesn't need anything from us. So, simply offering sacrifices isn't pleasing to the Lord.

This raises a fair question: why did God command these things? God did not command sacrifices and offerings because He needed things from people (as people imagined the false gods did). These commands were for our benefit, not His! The sacrifices were intended to remind us that our sin is deadly and we would need a redeemer. And the command to give tithes and offerings was not to provide for the Lord, but to remind us that everything we have is from His hand. They are intended to help us see our need for Him and to learn to look to Him for provision, as opposed to our own methods.

So, what accusation is God really making? He was condemning outward obedience but hearts that are far from Him. God doesn't merely desire that we follow His rules (though they are for our benefit). He desires hearts that are thankful, trusting, and devoted to Him.

Many people imagine that the religious actions we do today: baptism, communion, offerings, and even church attendance, are somehow intended to make us acceptable to God. But the goal of these actions is not to appease God, but to refocus us, to remind us of our need for Him, and to lead us to a place of worship and submission. If we lose sight of this, we miss the point entirely. That was the message the Lord was giving to the people in Israel who thought their adherence to the rituals would please the Lord. And we need to hear and take heed of the same message today.

The Second Accusation

The second accusation seems a bit harsher, but it is still being leveled against those who would call themselves God's followers. Listen to what the Lord says.

¹⁶ But God says to the wicked: "Why bother reciting my decrees and pretending to obey my covenant? ¹⁷ For you refuse my discipline and treat my words like trash. ¹⁸ When you see thieves, you approve of them, and you spend your time with adulterers. ¹⁹ Your mouth is filled with wickedness, and your tongue is full of lies. ²⁰ You sit around and slander your brother— your own mother's son. ²¹ While you did all this, I remained silent, and you thought I didn't care. But now I will rebuke you, listing all my charges against you. ²² Repent, all of you who forget me, or I will tear you apart, and no one will help you. ²³ But giving thanks is a sacrifice that truly honors me. If you keep to my path, I will reveal to you the salvation of God." (Psalm 50:16-23, NLT)

These verses speak of hypocrisy among the people of Israel. They condemn those who recite the Lord's decrees and pretend to obey His covenant but are living lives of utter rebellion against Him. They claim to love God's laws, but they refuse to abide by them.

This is a huge problem for Christianity in America. Many Americans would identify themselves as Christians, but surveys repeatedly show a disconnect between what people call themselves and how they live. Many who identify as Christians do not

regularly attend church or give a tithe. Many who claim to follow God do not see the Bible as authoritative. And many who claim to be followers of Jesus do not actually abide by His instructions. Many claim Christ, but He has no impact on how they live. The Lord reminds us that this is the height of hypocrisy.

The people described in this section make the opposite mistake of those in the first section. The people of the first section focused on following a list of rules to make themselves acceptable to God, but missed the real point, which was for their hearts to be aligned with Him. Those in this group claim to be God's people, but their lives reveal they are only paying lip-service to Him.

The charges the Lord levels here are about the way they behave. He says they approve of thievery and adultery. They may not participate in those activities themselves, but they enjoy hanging around those who do. They will not take a stand for the Lord for fear of what it might cost them. Similarly, He condemns their speech, saying their mouths are full of wickedness, slander, and lies.

While it's tempting for us to make a list of all the people we think fit into this category, it's far better for us to ask whether we fit here. Are we consistent in our faith? Are we working to submit to the Lord in every area of our lives? Or are we trying to hold back in some areas because we don't want to change?

There are many today who want to claim the title of Christian—who imagine that they are forgiven by God and therefore acceptable to Him—but have no intention of following God's commands in their lives. Do not miss what the Lord says to these people: "Repent, all of you who forget me, or I will tear you apart, and no one will help you."

God is not to be trifled with. The Lord is not saying that we must be good enough to earn His favor. There is forgiveness available in Christ that sets us free from the penalty of our sin. But He is saying that there are many who will claim to be His followers but aren't. They call themselves Christians, but they aren't trying to follow Jesus. There are many who claim Him as Savior, but do not submit to Him as Lord. These people, He says, will be in for a rude awakening on the day of judgment. They will stand before Him and discover that they have made a serious mistake. This psalm calls to us and tells us to ensure we don't make the same one.

Conclusion

In many ways, this is not a particularly uplifting psalm. It isn't meant to be. This psalm is meant to grab our attention and call us to take stock of our own lives, so we can ensure we stand with the Lord rather than against Him. It reminds us that God's judgment is real, and we choose to underestimate Him at our peril. So, let's come up with an action plan we can draw from this passage.

First, examine what you do. Ask yourself, does my life reflect my faith? Do the things I do and say match up with the faith I claim to have? Or am I simply claiming the title of Christian while living in rebellion to Christ? Look at the things you say, the way you treat

others, the people you hang out with, the things you do with your free time, the way you spend your money, the way you do business, and the things you prioritize. Do these things point to a life that has Jesus at the center? Or do they point to someone who's merely "reciting His decrees and pretending to obey His covenant?" You can sit in church every week and still be far from the Lord. Be honest with yourself, because there's much at stake.

Second, examine why you do it. We can do lots of good things, but we can also do them for the wrong reasons. We can be at church every time the doors are open, we can give everything we have to the Lord, we can serve on a dozen boards and committees, and we can do all the things that "good Christians" do but still be far from the Lord. God does not merely desire that we do these things. He is not looking for us to check the boxes we think we must check to make Him happy. He desires a heart that wants to be close to Him. These things are good and important, but they only have value when they are done to align our hearts with God's.

There are Sunday mornings where I wake up and would rather stay in bed. I know there are mornings where that's true for you. There are times when I consider holding onto my tithe instead of giving it to the Lord. There are times when I would rather not invest more time in people because I would rather have time for myself. But when those times come, I face a choice: do I do them because it's my job and it's what's expected, or do I do them because I know it's the right thing to do and will ultimately draw me closer to the Lord? This is the question we must ask ourselves often: *why* am I doing what I'm doing? The Lord doesn't need or even desire our rituals, what He wants is our hearts. Rituals have value, but only if they are leading us to submit to Him. Be honest with yourself about the *why* behind the things you do, and make sure you're doing good things for the right reasons.

Finally, make changes where necessary. It's not enough to sit through a sermon and realize your heart isn't where it should be or you are being hypocritical with regards to your faith. That's a good first step, but if we don't do something about it, it's completely worthless! Let me challenge you to take action today. If you see areas where you are compromising in your faith or merely paying lip service to God, take steps to go in a different direction. Tell someone about the changes you're trying to make. Ask them to help you stay on track. And ask the Lord for help. That's what the Lord desires, and it's the right response to a passage like this. Don't make changes to try to be acceptable to God, but do so because you know it's what's best and what He desires for you.

Many people imagine the Lord as a kindly old grandfather. They do not believe that He will punish sin. So many claim to believe in God but ignore the God who is revealed in scripture. He has made it very clear that we should not take Him lightly because a day of judgment is coming. Do not confuse God's patience with you with Him not caring about your rebellion. A day of judgment is coming, and He calls on each of us to make sure we're prepared for when that day comes.

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