

THE WORSHIP GOD REQUIRES

PSALM 50

INTRODUCTION:

We in America seem to have some sort of obsession with courtrooms and judges. Judge Wapner, Judge Judy, Judge Joe Brown, Judge Mathis, Judge Milian, etc. have all had or have successful court television shows. We like to see cases brought before these judges; we listen to the evidence presented and testimonies given; we enjoy how these judges ask questions and berate the defendants or plaintiffs; we wait in anticipation for the judge's verdict and sentence.

We like to watch this from a distant, safe place at home. But nobody wants to be the one in court, accused of a crime, with evidence piled up against them, and a judge who can see right through us. But Psalm 50 does just that. It is a courtroom drama psalm where God is the Judge and we, His people, are the accused. There is nowhere to hide, and we can't shift the blame over to the pagan unbelieving peoples of the world. For, as Peter said, *"it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Pet.4:17a)*. God cares too much about His people, His church, to leave us as we are. He is constantly refining, pruning, and purifying His people so that we bring honor and glory to His name and the opportunity to grow to our own souls.

In this courtroom psalm, we see the Judge enter in, witnesses called, the defendants accused, and judgment threatened. The purpose of the case is to call God's people to account for faulty worship and then to instruct us how to worship Him rightly.

The drama is laid out before us in three sections:

- A. Court is in session (vv.1-6)
- B. God's charge of empty formalism (vv.7-15)
- C. God's charge of hypocrisy (vv.16-21)
- D. God's concluding exhortation (vv.22-23)

EXPOSITION:

A. Court is in session (vv.1-6)

In the opening six verses, the courtroom scene is set; the case is about to be brought.

1. The Judge enters. (vv.1-3)

- The Mighty One, God, the LORD, has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. ² Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth. ³ May our God come and not keep silence; fire devours before Him, and it is very tempestuous around Him.

Today, all in attendance in court are called to rise for the Honorable Judge so-and-so when they enter the court. Why do we do that? It is to show respect for the Judge and the Law that he/she upholds. That, in essence, is what is going on here. God is the Judge, and the whole earth, *"from the rising of the sun to its setting,"* is summoned/called to respect and honor the Judge of the whole earth (v.1b).

And why should we respect this Judge? Because He is "*the Mighty One, God the LORD*" (v.1). The psalmist combines the names of God (El, Elohim, and Yahweh) to establish the complete authority of the Judge. All the earth is summoned, called to be silent, and listen, for the "*Mighty One, God, the LORD has spoken.*"

And because this judge is the "*Mighty One, God, the LORD,*" glorious and frightening things accompany His appearing.

- ² Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth.

God, from His holy and perfectly beautiful habitation in Zion, shines forth; His glory radiates.

- ³ May our God come and not keep silence; fire devours before Him, and it is very tempestuous around Him.

When God descended upon Mt. Sinai to give Israel His Law, His presence was accompanied by a cloud, lightning, thunder, and fire. And the people's response was fear and trembling. Here, God is described in similar terms. He is not someone we can play around with. He is not someone we can manipulate nor someone we can ignore.

Our God is a consuming fire. But He is also a refining fire. His desire is to burn away the dross in our lives; to refine us as gold; to purify us for His glory and our own good. As we will see, that's exactly what He wants to do in this psalm—show us where we have gone wrong in our worship and teach us to do right.

2. The witnesses are called. (v.4)

- ⁴ He summons the heavens above, and the earth, to judge His people

The psalmist now speaks like one of the prophets, as all of creation—heaven and earth—are called as witnesses in this case. Why? Back when God entered into a covenant with Israel, He said this:

- **Deuteronomy 30:19**—I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants.

Heaven and earth were witnesses to the formation of the covenant when God said He would be their God, and they agreed that they would keep His commands and worship Him as He directed. Now, in this court case in Psalm 50, heaven and earth are called back as eyewitnesses. They know the agreements of the covenant and therefore can bear witness of how God's people have broken that covenant through disobedience and faulty worship.

3. The defendants are identified. (v.5)

- ⁵ Gather My godly ones to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice.

So, the defendants, in this case, are the people of God—the people that have entered into a covenant with God. These are those to whom God has revealed Himself and to whom He has given His Law. These are professing believers, worshipers of God, in-church-every-Sunday people. People like you and me. God is bringing a case against His own people.

4. The Judge's credentials are given. (v.6)

- ⁶ And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge.

Although our earthly human judges are usually quite capable and honest people, there is always the worry that they might miss something in the evidence, misinterpret what someone says, or be biased for some reason. They are fallible, and in rare cases, perhaps even corrupt and subject to bribery and manipulation. This was true in the ancient world and is true today.

So, we are told right away that we don't need to worry about this Judge making any mistakes or judging unfairly or unjustly because this Judge is righteous. How can we be so sure? Because "*God Himself is judge*" (v.50:6b). God, by His very nature, is righteous. He is always right; therefore, He will try this case righteously—rightly. He examines our actions and our hearts, and He will judge you and me rightly. We must let His Word judge us rightly today.

B. God's charge of empty formalism (vv.7-15)

Now that court is in session and all the participants are in place, the charges are brought. But first, we are given a surprise testimony.

1. The surprise testimony (v.7)

- ⁷ Hear, O My people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you; I am God, your God.

Who is that who accuses them of a crime? It is God, their God, our God! How is it possible that the Judge of the case is also their accuser? Because the Judge is the one whom they have offended. Their crime was committed against God. That's what sin is. As much as our sinful actions may offend or hurt other people, in the end, God is always the party most offended (*Ps.51:4*).

And as God brings the accusation against His people's worship, we are to look directly at ourselves, our own worship. Are we guilty of the same crimes? In what ways? How have we offended God in our worship?

2. God exposes their empty formalism (vv.8-13)

Notice first what God is not accusing them of

- ⁸ I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before Me.

God wants them to know that He is not accusing them of messing up steps in the rituals and sacrifices. The problem is not that they aren't following directions in their worship or offering enough sacrifices. Their problem is something deeper, more fundamental to worship.

The accusation is empty formalism in worship. They thought God would be pleased with them if they simply went through the motions and offered the right sacrifices. They thought that if they merely did what God said, they would satisfy whatever need God had of them, and then they would be in a right relationship with Him. But their thinking and their attitude were all wrong.

Consider their wrong thinking. It likely stemmed from the surrounding cultures where offerings were made to the gods to nourish and sustain and satisfy them. They depended on people to feed them with sacrifices, including human sacrifice. Therefore, the gods could be manipulated. "I will feed this god, and in return, he will bless my crops, or allow me to have a child, or reward me with good fortune." It was a very "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" relationship.

God had to remind them and us that He does not depend on anything from anyone; rather, we depend entirely on Him.

- ⁹ I shall take no young bull out of your house nor male goats out of your folds. ¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. ¹² "If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains.

The key word in these verses is "Mine." God does not need anything from us because God already has everything! Everything in creation belongs to Him because He created all of it. God even gets a bit sarcastic.

- ¹² If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains. ¹³ Shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of male goats?

God, of course, does not get hungry. God is Spirit. We need food constantly to sustain the physical lives we've been given, but God has life in Himself—He is eternally self-sustaining. He does not need food because He does not hunger; He does not need water because He does not thirst; He does not need sleep because He does not grow tired. This is the doctrine of the aseity of God. He is independent of anyone or anything else. He is self-existent and self-sufficient. He is God, perfect, complete, and content in Himself. He is not lonely without us. We do not fill some kind of void in His heart.

Ok—so why is this important? It's important because it's impossible to truly worship God if we think He needs us, rather than the other way around. We have to understand that we depend completely on Him. *"In Him we live and move and exist"* (Acts 17:87). When we don't recognize our total dependence on God, we reveal something about ourselves: an ungrateful or unthankful heart. How can we be truly thankful to God for anything if we think that He is the one dependent on us? If we think that He needs us and our sacrifices (our works, our ministries), then what we are really saying is that God should be thankful to us! This is why formalism in worship is a sin of incredible pride.

Application: How do we do this in the church today? We do this when we think and act as if He somehow needs us and our "sacrifices;" and so, we try to use those things to manipulate Him.

- I'll go to church every Sunday, and in return, I expect God better give me a better job.
- I'll pray 30 minutes every morning, and in return, God better fix my kid's bad attitude.
- I'll serve in this or that ministry, and in return, God better make my life easier.

We do not have a tit-for-tat relationship with God. We don't do something for Him so that He will owe us something in return. It is formalism in worship. It is thinking and acting as if God wants and needs our performance, but not our hearts.

3. God's commands and promise to His people (vv.14-15)

Though we can be guilty of formalism and manipulation in worship yet, He is merciful and patient and tells us how to correct our thinking and worship.

- ¹⁴ Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to the Most High; ¹⁵ Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.

a) The first command—"*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving.*"

The offerings or sacrifices of thanksgiving are described in Leviticus 7:11-12 and 22:29. Generally, these were voluntary public offerings—they were not things someone had to do but wanted to do to publicly express their extreme gratitude toward God for the great things He had done for them.

The one making the offering would go to the sanctuary, bringing with them an animal as a sacrifice for a peace offering. When that animal was on the altar, the person would publicly state why they were thankful to God. Then, all would eat of the sacrifice together. It was like an extreme version of our Thanksgiving. It was an admission that they depended on God—that God met their needs.

b) The second command—"*pay your vows to the Most High.*"

The proof that you have a truly thankful heart towards God is in your actions. To pay your vows was to follow through on a commitment to God through loyal obedience to His commands. A heart of thanksgiving produces a life of obedience and service to God and others.

c) The third command—"*Call upon Me in the day of trouble.*"

An obedient life that flows from a truly thankful heart reveals a life of faith and dependence upon God. And the one who depends upon God is invited to call upon Him in the day of trouble. We are invited to call upon Him.

d) The promise of God—"*I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.*"

This is how God has designed our relationship with Him to be. He is our God, our Savior, our Provider, our Protector. We are His people, in need of His salvation, provision, and protection. Therefore, we are to recognize our need for Him and pray to Him with a heart of thankfulness, and He rescues us through Christ Jesus, His Son. And as we depend on Him in this way through Christ, God is honored.

Many of us are guilty of formalism, or mere outward religion, in worship. And we need to take God's correction, or it will result in a dead, dry faith. But there is another major problem in our worship in the church that often flows out of formalism.

C. God's charge of hypocrisy (vv.16-21)

The charge is brought against "*the wicked*." Normally, we think of the "**wicked**" as those who are utterly pagan, who don't identify with God's people, who don't profess Him as their God, who even openly mock God and His Word. But in this context, we see that the wicked are actually people within the covenant community. They are people who profess faith. In our terms, they are people within the church. They may be baptized. They may be on the membership role. They may be in the pews every Sunday. They may be you. But God calls them "**wicked**" because they are hypocrites. They profess to follow God, but their lives show the opposite.

1. God exposes their hypocrisy. (vv.16-17)

- ¹⁶ But to the wicked God says, "What right have you to tell of My statutes and to take My covenant in your mouth?
¹⁷ "For you hate discipline, and you cast My words behind you.

God is understandably angry at those who take His Word in their mouth—who repeat His statutes and commands, who say, "This is the Word of God, obey it"—but they, themselves, actually hate His discipline/instruction. They talk the talk but do not walk the walk. They cast His words behind them in how they live their lives. Jesus accused the Pharisees of this kind of hypocrisy.

2. God describes their hypocrisy. (vv.18-20)

- ¹⁸ When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you associate with adulterers. ¹⁹ "You let your mouth loose in evil and your tongue frames deceit. ²⁰ "You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son."

God lists some of the ways in which their lives completely contradict the faith they profess and the worship they offer. They profess faith and tout obedience to God, but outside of the pulpit or the pew, they indulge in every kind of sin. They take pleasure in theft (v.18), though they know that God said plainly, "*You shall not steal*" (Ex.20:15). They associate with adulterers (v.19), though God commanded, "*You shall not commit adultery*" (Ex.20:14). And though God commanded that we shall not bear false witness against our neighbor (Ex.20:16), they speak evil and spread lies and even slander their own brothers (v.20)!

And we could add to this list of hypocritical behavior. You could be sitting here in church this morning, nodding in agreement to God's Word, while you're living in any kind of sin the rest of the day and week. Do you go from here and knowingly, regularly, and unrepentantly break God's commands as you relate to your family, your co-workers or employers, your boyfriend or girlfriend, or your spouse? Is your life consistent with your profession of faith? Do you even care if it's not? This hypocrisy is one of the most destructive things to the work of God through His church.

Illustration: I remember riding back from the Philippines on an airplane. I was sitting next to a man that I got into a good conversation with. We got into the Gospel, and at some point, he said, "That sounds good and everything, but I see all these preachers on TV, and all they are doing is trying to steal your money." And no matter where I went from there, we couldn't get past that. He saw hypocrisy in the church. And yes, he used it as an excuse, but still, he saw hypocrisy in the church, and it was a barrier to witnessing toward him.

Beware of hypocrisy, for it will kill your witness, harm the church's witness, and bring dishonor to God. We need to make sure the life we are living is consistent with the faith we are professing. God will not tolerate a hypocritical life.

3. God reproves their hypocrisy. (v.21)

- ²¹ These things you have done and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.

Often, the hypocrite continues in their wicked ways, knowing full well what they are doing because they've gotten away with it so far. They take God's silence, His lack of immediate action against them, as proof that He either doesn't know what they're doing, or simply isn't really that angry with them, or worse, that He even approves of what they are doing. Perhaps He is just like them, they think.

But God is a righteous Judge. He emphatically and bluntly states that He knows exactly what they are doing, and He will expose them publicly for their sin—*"I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes" (v.21b).*

Often, their hypocrisy and sin are exposed in the near-term. How many preachers and Christian leaders have been caught in a hypocritical, sinful life and been publicly shamed? But others will be publicly reprovved on that future day of God's judgment when every sin is laid bare. In the end, no one gets away with anything. You cannot fool God. He is a righteous Judge.

D. God's concluding exhortation (vv.22-23)

- ²² Now consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you in pieces, and there will be none to deliver. ²³ "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; and to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God.

Just as God provided the correction needed for those guilty of empty formalism, so He provides a correction to the wicked and the hypocrite. And really, these closing two verses apply to those guilty of either, or both, indictments. He gives a warning and a promise.

1. The command

- ²² Now consider this, you who forget God.

Right now, we must consider the instructions given by God. We must give it our undivided attention because the consequences of failing to heed God's warning are so great. What are the consequences?—*"I will tear you in pieces, and there will be none to deliver" (v.22b).*

God does not mess around with sin, especially when it comes to His worship. Judgment begins with the household of God. And those who profess faith and loyalty to Him must understand that He takes His worship utterly seriously. He will be honored in worship. But if we forget Him—if we are guilty of these sins and do not repent and correct ourselves according to His instructions—then He will judge us without mercy. But thank God that He gives us a promise.

2. The promise

- ²³ He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; and to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God.

To any and all of those who repent by changing their heart attitude to one of thanksgiving to God and by changing their hypocritical behavior, God promises to "*show the salvation of God.*" He will receive us as a loving Father and continue to mold us ever more into the image of His Son, Jesus.

How do we cultivate a heart of thanksgiving? By meditating on the great things God has done for us. And that is what the Lord's Supper, which we will be celebrating in a few minutes, is about. It is about meditating on the greatest thing God has done for us. He gave His Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice for our sins so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life (*John 3:16*). Do not just go through the motions. Think upon His love, mercy, and grace in Christ every day; admit your need of Him; accept His love for you; and your thankfulness will increase, and hypocrisy will begin to disintegrate in your life as you submit more and more to Him.

- **Hebrews 13:15-16**—Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. ¹⁶ And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Amen.

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