

God Judges His People

Psalms 50

In Psalm 50, God indicts his people for their legalism, and calls them to repentance and renewed worship. In this psalm, God presents his case against his people. It is not that his people have failed to do *what* God has asked them to do in worship, but that they have failed to worship him in the *manner* in which he calls them to worship him. God's charge against Israel is not that they have worshiped other gods beside him (First Commandment), or that they have made for themselves graven images (Second Commandment), but that they have worshiped him in a light, flippant, insincere manner—that is, that they have taken his name as a vain thing (Third Commandment). This text confronts us each and every time *we* gather for worship, in addition to serving as a preview of the judgment on the last day. *In worship, God judges his people.*

The Lord Calls his People (Ps. 50:1–6)

To address his guilty people, Israel's covenant Lord opens his indictment against his people by three titles/names for himself (v. 1a): “The Mighty One” (lit; “God”; אֱלֹהִים, *‘ēl*), “God” (אֱלֹהִים, *‘ēlōhīm*), and “Yahweh” (יְהוָה; *yhwh*). As Charles Spurgeon observes, this threefold identification carries royal significance: “To render the address the more impressive, these august titles are mentioned, just as in royal decrees the names and dignities of monarchs are placed in the forefront.”¹ This majestic king does two things: he “speaks,” and he “summons the earth” (v. 1b). By this, the author casts this psalm “in the form of a legal accusation in which the LORD comes to judge the worshipping community.”² Moreover, this psalm is “a liturgy, or a part of a liturgy, to be associated with the ceremony of the renewal of the covenant in ancient Israel.”³

While some scholars have tried to identify the precise setting for which the psalm was composed and/or recited,⁴ we should remember that its inclusion in the psalter extends the importance of this psalm beyond its original context. That is, this is a psalm that our covenant Lord has given to *us* to inform our own covenant renewal ceremonies. In the Christian church, this is therefore a psalm that speaks directly to the covenant people of God as they gather for public worship, week by week on

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), 1:384.

² Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 2 (42–89)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2013), 2:158.

³ Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, ed. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, 2nd ed., WBC 19 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 363.

⁴ e.g., Craigie and Tate suggest that this liturgy may have been performed at dawn, during the “first dazzling rays of sunrise on the eastern horizon” to give the “effect” of a “theophany” of God’s shining forth (v. 2; *Psalms 1–50*, 364). For Ross, this is “not a description of an actual coming, and not a prophecy of a coming of the LORD to judge his people. It is a vision of a hypothetical court case” (*A Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:158). These are possibilities; however, it is better to focus on the force of the psalm for God’s covenant people today.

each Lord's Day. Of course, the implications of this psalm clearly address our lives *beyond* what happens when we gather for worship; nevertheless, we should experience this psalm as God's direct word to *us* when we gather as his people to worship him. Indeed, we gather because God *speaks* to us and *summons* us, from all the earth—"from the rising of the sun to its setting" (v. 1c).

Next, the Psalmist informs us that, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (v. 2). Martin Luther's interpretation of this verse may sound over-spiritualized at first: "The church is the loveliness of His, Christ's, beauty, because it is conformed to Him and receives of His fullness. He is Himself comely and most beautiful with every kind of beauty, and from this beauty comes the loveliness (*species*), that is, His form and image, in the church."⁵ Nevertheless, his exegesis of "Zion" as the church is solid, according to the author of the book of Hebrews:

[22] But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23] and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, [24] and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:22–24)

Translating this Old Testament imagery into the fullness of Christian symbolism, then, recognizes: (1) God speaks to summon his covenant people, and (2) he summons them into the gathering of the saints. While we will not enjoy the fullness of the heavenly Zion until glory, these are words by which God addresses his church as we enter into worship.

How does God enter the assembly? "Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest" (v. 3). We should notice that the psalmist says, "*Our* God." The possessive pronouns are important throughout this psalm, and here we see that God is specifically summoning *his* people, who recognize this as "our God."⁶ When he comes, our God does not keep silence—although, as we will see later, he *did* keep silence up until this point (v. 21). Now, though, he comes with a "devouring fire" and a "mighty tempest"—language that echoes the appearance of God on top of Mount Sinai.⁷ Additionally, God calls heaven and earth to witness, so "that he may judge his people" (v. 4). In Deuteronomy, Moses had called heaven and earth as witnesses against the people (Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31:28), but now, "the same silent witnesses are summoned, this time by God: though God was the "judge" in a formal sense (v 6), heaven and earth participated (symbolically) in that judgment as observers of all the actions of the covenant people."⁸ God comes as he did at Sinai in the book of Exodus, and he calls creation itself as his witnesses

⁵ Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms (Psalms 1–75)*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 1 of *Luther's Works* 10 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 230.

⁶ "...he speaks as one of the people, and declares that the God who was coming to avenge the corruptions of his worship was the same God whom all the children of Abraham professed to serve. He who shall come, as if he had said, is our God, the same in whom we glory, who established his covenant with Abraham, and gave us his Law by the hand of Moses." (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 2:261–62.)

⁷ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:162–63.

⁸ Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 365.

in his case against his people.

It is striking, then, that God calls the people whom he summons as his “faithful ones”: “Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!” (v. 5). Notice again the possessive pronoun: “my faithful ones.” While “faithful one” (חָסִיד; *hāsīd*) is a word closely related to God’s loyal, steadfast, covenantal love (חֶסֶד; *hesed*), the context clearly demonstrates that it here means “the covenantal community in general and is not a term for the faithful within the nation of Israel.”⁹ God’s *whole* people are on trial, and the people’s response to God’s indictment will mark the difference of their outcomes. Before laying out the charges, one final statement is offered to assure us the trustworthiness of the trial: “The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge! *Selah*” (v. 6). Calvin offers an insightful comment on the importance of this statement: “Men are disposed to admit that God is judge, but, at the same time, to fabricate excuses for evading his judgment, and it was therefore necessary that the sentence which God was about to pronounce should be vindicated from the vain cavils which might be brought against it.”¹⁰

The Lord Convicts his People (Ps. 50:7–21)

At the beginning of the indictment, we have another allusion back to God’s covenant with his people: “Hear...” (v. 7a). This echoes Deuteronomy 6:4, where Moses had declared, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”¹¹ Now, God declares to his people that they must listen, for he “will speak” and “testify against” them (v. 7a–b). To reinforce the particular claim that Yahweh has upon his people’s attention, we again find a possessive pronoun: “I am God, *your* God” (v. 7c). As Spurgeon writes, “Because Jehovah speaks, and they are avowedly his own people, they are bound to give earnest heed.”¹²

Before turning to the indictment, let us remember the context in which we hear these words as we enter into worship. When God calls us (by his word) to gather in his presence as his people, he speaks these words directly to us as well. This psalm reflects the “dialogical principle” of worship, where we acknowledge that our corporate (i.e., public) worship is something more than just a time for us to get together and talk *about* God. Rather, it is *God* who gathers us, and he does so in order to *speak* to us—and even to *testify* against us. Today, God speaks to us through his word, which God administers through his elders, whom he has ordained to declare to his people, “Thus saith the Lord!” Within our own liturgy, the Bible passage we read in the confession of sin is not included as mere content filler to pass the time better. So much more, this is God speaking to us to testify against us because of our sin. Likewise, *we* are the target of God’s testimony here in Psalm 50 as well.

Charge #1: False Worship (v. 8–13)

What, then, does the Lord hold against us? In particular, God indicts us on two counts: (1) for false worship (especially, *legalistic* worship), and (2) for failing to offer true worship of prayer and

⁹ Willem A. VanGemenen, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms*, rev. ed., 5, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 429.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2:265–66.

¹¹ VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 429.

¹² Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1:386.

praise.¹³ As God begins with the first charge, he clarifies that he holds nothing against his people for their sacrifices: “Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me” (v. 8). So, at one level, God acknowledges that, “[as] far as the ritual and the cultic worship was concerned, they were doing everything to the letter. The priests were in their proper attire, the people were bringing the right animals, the ritual was conducted in perfect accord with the Law—it would have appeared fitting and beautiful.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, their worship was deeply flawed. Spurgeon summarizes the Lord’s concern well: “They [the Israelites] thought the daily sacrifices and abounding burnt offerings to be everything; he counted them nothing if the inner sacrifice of heart devotion had been neglected. What was greatest with them was least with God.”¹⁵

So, God declares that he will no longer tolerate their sacrifices: “I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds” (v. 9). The disconnect between God and his people arose from the fact that the people believed that God commanded them to sacrifice to him for *his* benefit, as though he needed their sacrifices. This perception was common in pagan religion, who believed that the gods had created human beings in order to delegate to humans the tedious work of gathering foods for the gods.¹⁶ For example, a surviving prophecy recorded from the Neo-Assyrian goddess Ištar upbraids the king for failing to feed her, despite her faithfulness to establish his kingdom: “What have [yo]u, in turn, given to me? The [fo]od for the banquet is no[t there], as if there were no temple at all! My food is wi[the]ld from me, my drink is with[he]ld from me! I am longing for them, I have fixed my eyes upon them.”¹⁷

Against this pagan notion, God flatly declares that he personally has no need for 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?” (vv. 10–13). From this false view of God, the people believed that the only purpose for their worship was simply to bring the sacrifices. Just as we may not care too much about the attitude of a waiter at a restaurant unless he fails to bring us our food promptly, so the Israelites didn’t imagine that God cared about anything beyond the sacrifices themselves. As such, God indicts them for bringing false worship.

Reminder: Legalism Looks for Loopholes

Ultimately, God is indicting his people for legalism. As we have mentioned a number of times, the heart of legalism is to look for loopholes. In this case, the people believed that they were fulfilling God’s obligations upon them simply by bringing an offering. God wanted their full selves, and they simply gave him an external sacrifice. They believed to have found a loophole that excused them from worshiping God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, but God was not fooled by their legalism. Still today, God is not fooled by our own legalism, where we think that simply showing up and going through the motions in worship allows us to slip under God’s radar unnoticed. As

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2:257.

¹⁴ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:164.

¹⁵ Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1:386.

¹⁶ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:165.

¹⁷ Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Peter Machinist, 1st ed., WAW 12, ed. Theodore J. Lewis (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 123; §SAA 9 3.5 (l. iii. 25–31).

Augustine writes:

It is up to each one of us, brothers and sisters, to assess how effective God's word is in correcting our life. How far does it incite us to hope for the rewards he promises, and to fear the punishments he threatens? Each one of us must confront our own conscience honestly without any self-flattery, for we stand in great danger. As you see, our Lord God himself flatters no one. Even though he consoles us by promising us good things and thereby strengthening our hope, nonetheless he will not spare any of us who live bad lives and scorn his word.¹⁸

Remember: God is speaking to *us* to indict *us* of these sins.

Charge #2: Failure to Offer True Worship (v. 14–15)

The corresponding indictment, then, is that the people have failed to bring God what he *does* want from us in worship: the fullness of our hearts. Specifically, God wants heartfelt *praise* and *prayers*. Regarding praise, God says, “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High...” (v. 14). This offering of thanksgiving was a public acknowledgement to God in gratitude for his mercies toward them. Allen Ross explains this process well:

When the people received a blessing or an answer to prayer from God, they were to go to the sanctuary with a sacrifice to be offered as a peace offering, celebrating the fact that they were at peace with God. While the animal was on the altar, they were to stand there and declare what God had done for them. Then they would all eat the sacrifice as a communal meal. If this was done correctly, the meaning would be clear to all: they were making a sacrifice to acknowledge that they had needed God and that now they were praising him for meeting that need.¹⁹

God charges his people with ingratitude for failing to thank him for what he has done for them.

Regarding prayer, God says, “...and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (v. 15). God not only wants to be praised for what he has done, but also for his people to turn to him to seek his help through prayer in the future. That is, he wants them to seek after him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Calvin writes:

Praise and prayer are here to be considered as representing the whole of the worship of God, according to the figure synecdoche....Praise and prayer are set in opposition to ceremonies and mere external observances of religion, to teach us, that the worship of God is spiritual....And the first thing deserving our notice is, that the Jews, as well as ourselves, were enjoined to yield a spiritual worship to God....It is true that he subjected the Jews to the

¹⁸ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33–50*, trans. Maria Boulding, vol. 2 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* III/16 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 380.

¹⁹ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:166.

ceremonial yoke, but in this he had a respect to the age of the Church; as afterwards, in the abrogation of it, he had an eye to our advantage. In every essential respect the worship was the same.²⁰

We are called not to the mere performance to duties, and we are especially not to think that we are somehow meeting God's needs. Rather, we are called to bring God our spiritual worship, where we look to him attentively for every blessing in our life, and we give him all the glory for whatever we receive from him. This never-ending cycle of prayer and praise glorifies God in a way that merely meeting external obligations never could.

Charge #3: Legalism Leads to Loose Living (v. 16–20)

At this point, God connects his people's legalism in worship to their evil in the rest of his lives. While God rebuked all of his people for their legalism in worship, he now gives special attention to those who have especially drifted:²¹

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 rein 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." (Ps. 50:16–21)

First, God rebukes "the wicked" for hating discipline, where they "cast my words behind you" (v. 16). It is not that these people are ignorant, but that they callously disregard what they know God has spoken. Second, God charges them with helping others to sin, by their pleasure in thieves and the company they keep with adulterers. Third, God indicts them for taking part in evil speech ("free reign for evil"; v. 19), so that they speak against their brothers and even close family members.

No Longer Silent (v. 21)

The terrifying part of this speech is in v. 21, when God says that all of this happened while God has "been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you" (v. 21). As VanGemenen writes, "Too often, God's silence is taken as his approval (cf. Mal 2:17; 3:14–15). The people became used to God's patience and mistook it for an inability to do anything about the evil on earth....In his own time, God will come to rebuke and then to judge his people openly."²² As the Apostle Paul reminds us, God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4), but these wicked people have presumed upon that kindness. Although God was silent, this did not mean that he was letting them get away with what they were doing. Remember that

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2:269–71.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2:274.

²² VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 432.

earlier in this psalm, we read that God will no longer “keep silence” as he comes with devouring fire and a mighty tempest (v. 3).

The Lord Comforts his People (Ps. 50:22–23)

This is a warning that each of us must hear and heed: “Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!” (v. 22). On the other hand, the Lord closes this psalm with a gospel promise: “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!” (v. 23). What, though, does the Lord mean by this? Does he mean that we will be saved if we sufficiently reform our lives? Is there a threshold of how much we must do in order to find the salvation of God?

Not at all. Instead, what the rest of the Scriptures reveal is that God’s salvation begins in justification through faith alone, in Christ alone. God calls us to order our way rightly, and Jesus declares to us that *he* is the “way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). To order our way rightly is to recognize that we are guilty of God’s indictment—for legalism, for wicked living, and for everything else that God condemns in his Word—and to repent from our sin, looking in faith to Jesus to forgive us of our sin because of his sacrifice for us, in our place. It is to pray to the Lord for our salvation, and to respond with praise and thanksgiving for what God has already done for us through Christ (v. 14–15).

This salvation then continues into holy living as the “choice evidence of salvation.”²³ Toward this end, Christ has poured out upon his church the Holy Spirit, in order “to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation” (WLC #32). We do this by gratitude and from hearts filled with thanksgiving, and not by any servile, legalistic desire to please God.

This is the message that God confronts us with every time we gather for worship. God confronts our loophole-seeking, faithless, and devious hearts. He speaks to us and confronts us, bringing testimony against us from his word. He does this, though, because he invites us to prayer to him and to praise him. God wants us to call out to him in the day of trouble for the salvation that *he* provides through Jesus Christ, in the recognition that all other hope for salvation is lost in the face of the furious vengeance of our God, who is a consuming fire. Brothers and sisters, as God confronts us, let us repent from our sins and believe the gospel, moving from earnest prayer to joy-filled praise.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the introduction of this psalm (vv. 1–6) present God as a mighty King? In what ways does this introduction present God as a righteous Judge? How does this portrayal of God align with common understandings of God in the church and in the wider culture? How does this portrayal of God align with how you typically think about him? What about this is surprising to you, and why?

²³ Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1:390.

2. Whom is God summoning before his royal tribunal? What do all the possessive pronouns suggest about God's relationship to his people? How does this psalm draw you into the role of defendant as God comes to judge? What does God acknowledge that the people are doing well? Why does God nevertheless condemn those efforts? How does legalism look for loopholes in worship? Where do you catch yourself falling short of what God has demanded of you in worship?

3. How does legalism lead to loose living? What sorts of sins have God's covenant people drifted into, after having thoroughly excused their legalistic, formalistic religion? Where do you see these sins in your own life? Do you recognize a connection between legalistic worship and loose living in your own life? In what ways have you thought that God was silent, or just like you (v. 21)? Has God really been silent all this time?

4. What does it mean to "offer thanksgiving as [a] sacrifice" (v. 23a)? How does this glorify God in a way that all the other sacrifices the Israelites were offering did not? What does it mean to "order [your] way rightly" (v. 23b)? How does this drive us to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ? How ought we to seek Christ in prayer, and to honor him with our praises? How is Jesus Christ alone the way to eternal life?