

Psalm 50

Introduction – Psalm 50 is a Call-to-Worship psalm (like Psalm 122), but it is not an immediately pleasant CTW psalm, for Psalm 50 is a psalm of judgment. As we study the psalms, we learn about worship, about what God requires of worshippers, of what He detests, and of what He is doing as He gathers us together. This psalm smells of the stench of burning formalists and hypocrites, as well as the aroma of a well pleasing Sacrifice and sacrifices. The church would do well to ask “what is God smelling” as we offer up our worship.

Summary of the Psalm – Almighty God and Lord of the covenant people summons the entire earth to come before Him as He singles out His gathered people for judgment (vv1-5). His judgment begins with a declaration of the sort of worship that is acceptable to Him, and that which is not (vv6-15). He then exposes the immoralities of the religious hypocrites and promises coming judgment (vv16-21). He closes with a savage warning of vengeance (v22) and a glorious offer of grace (v23). Buckle up. This is describing what God is doing now, in this service of worship. “*If anyone has ears to hear...*” (Mark 4:9).

Fire and Tempest (vv1-5) - These opening words evoke the setting of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-19). In fact the whole psalm gives the impression of a ceremony of covenant remembrance or renewal – including the allusions to the Ten Commandments (vv7, 18-20) and the reference to reciting these and professing allegiance to the covenant (v16) (Kidner).

El (Mighty One), *Elohim* (Creator) and *Yahweh* (Covenant Lord) summons all the earth (v1). He does so “*out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,*” which is a place where God dwells with His people (Psalm 48:2) “*God will shine forth.*” This is a majestic call from the LORD, through the church, to the world – a summons to gather. He comes and “*shall not keep silent,*” but He comes like a devouring fire, a rushing hurricane (vv2-3). His saints in heaven and on earth are called together, “*that He may judge His people*” (vv4-6). It is no different now, in the New Covenant. We also, are summoned with the saints in heaven, to Mount Zion, to show forth our praise and to be judged by Almighty God (Heb 12:22-29). It is vital that we come as “*those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice*” (v5), that is, that we come only in the name of Jesus Christ Who is our atoning sacrifice.

The judgment will come upon the gathered saints, but the whole earth is summoned. That is because this service of worship affects the whole world. “*There is no more vital civic institution than the Christian church, since the well-being of the entire society depends on God’s blessing in and through the church*” (Phillips). What happens here changes the world out there. But judgment begins in the household of God and so these next sections explain why we do not see a worldwide transformation. It is not their sin first – it is ours.

Forms and Formalists (vv6-15) – God is not against forms of worship. He is not against rituals. He establishes rituals (v8). He has done so in the New Covenant, the rituals of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, worship on the Lord’s Day, a covenant renewal order (established out of the old covenant sacrificial order), the singing of psalms He wrote, and so forth. What He will not receive is any of these things as some kind of bribe, as though He was hungry and needed an animal cooked up for Him (vv9-12), or as though He wanted to hear some good music (Amos 5:23) and did not care about the hearts that were making the offerings. He is not an idol that needs to be fed or appeased. Formalism is that sin that makes sure one has the appearance of holiness while harboring a treasonous heart towards God. The Pharisees are the classic example. In John’s Gospel we are told that they prided themselves in remaining ritually clean for the Passover while handing over the Messiah to Pilate (John 18:28).

Formalism is an idolatrous sin, but forms and liturgies, biblically and humbly used as tools to approach God with thankfulness, are like learning the steps to a beautiful dance so that you can dance with your Beloved. You learn those steps in order to “*offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High*” (v14). But if there is not thankfulness, if there is no obedience of faith, then the steps, the dance, the liturgies, become a farce. According to faith in our covenant God and with thankfulness, He invites us – “*Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me*” (v15, Phil 4:6-7). Proper worship, offered rightly by faith in the name of Jesus, is a tool of deliverance and warfare for the church and by the church for the life of the world.

Whitewashed Tombs of Hypocrisy (vv16-21) – Worse than formalism, but often connected, is the dreadful condition of hypocrisy, which Jesus hates (i.e. Matt 23:25-28). These are the wicked the Lord now addresses through His psalmist, those who declare His Word, claim their covenantal status and safety and yet hate those same statutes and refuse to be instructed by them (vv16-17). They keep company with thieves, adulterers, foul-mouths, and slanderers (vv18-20). They might not actually commit those sins *technically*, but they love watching, hearing, thinking such things (again, Jesus, Matt 5:27-30). Theft by employees is rampant, the porn industry booms, foul language is considered “cool” and juicy tidbits of gossip masquerade as prayer requests. Think about this? What do you entertain yourself with, what strokes your ego, your lusts, your jealousies? How cool do you try to be? Or, on the flip side, how righteous and holy do you try to present yourself as? Are you good at looking down your nose at those who are far under you spiritually? Do you lack forgiveness and grace, do you harbor bitterness in your soul, because of your righteous judgments upon another (Matt 6:14-15).

The God Who Rips Apart (v22) – Next Lord’s Day is Reformation Sunday. The reformation was not a judgment upon the world; it was a judgment upon the church. The world was a dark and wicked place because the church was a dark and wicked place. Our culture is impotent to stand against vice and violence and some of the stupidest worldviews in which to build civilization because the church is impotent to stand against vice and refuses to listen and obey the Word of God. The world is “woke” because the church is “woke.” The world openly fornicates because the church openly approves of many forms of fornication. We are a fatherless nation because the church has forsaken the Father. We have forgotten God and there is none to deliver.

Potent Praise (v23) – *“Praise is the best sacrifice: true, hearty, gracious thanksgiving from a renewed mind. Not the lowing of bullocks bound to the altar, but the songs of redeemed men are the music which the ear of Jehovah delights in...Holy living is a choice evidence of salvation. He who submits his whole way to divine guidance and is careful to honor God in his life, brings an offering which the Lord accepts through his dear Son; and such a one shall be more and more instructed, and made experimentally to know the Lord’s salvation...”* – Spurgeon.

This is why we worship the way we do. We hear His summons and so we come. We hear His law and are reminded that we must obey, and we must confess our sins. We offer up our praise and open our ears and hearts to the work of His Spirit-wrought Word to be transformed, remade, renewed. Our communion is sealed with a meal, and then we are sent out to be in the world but not of the world, a city set on a hill, filled with light, because 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).

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