

A Letter to the Church in Israel

Psalm 50

If there was a specific something God wanted to talk to you about, something he noticed that was lacking in your faith and obedience, what do you think he would address? What do you think he would speak to?

Maybe a secret or besetting sin?

Maybe your lack of a devotional life?

Maybe a relationship you are neglecting?

Have you ever considered that God might have a problem with your worship? With the way you do church?

Psalm 50 is a unique psalm in that most of the psalms are prayers – prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of lament, prayers of confession. They are Holy Spirit inspired prayers from men lifted up to God. But Psalm 50 runs the other direction. This entire psalm is a message from the living God to Israel.

It's also unique in that it is nearly identical to the letters to the 7 churches we've been studying in Revelation 2-3. It is a letter from the living God to the Old Testament church. It has the same basic outline of the letters in Revelation:

- There is an introduction of the speaker (1-6)
- Then the heart of the message, addressing specific issues (7-21)
- A warning for those who don't repent (22)
- And a promise for those who do (23)

The same heavenly Judge and King who spoke in the letter of Revelation is speaking here in the letter to the church in Israel. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Just as the letters in Revelation are meant for us, for the church, so too is this letter in Psalm 50.

I. The God Who Speaks

50:1 The Mighty One, God the LORD, speaks...

The psalm begins with a powerful announcing of the speaker – a three-fold naming of God:

"El Elohim Jahweh"

- **El** – God, the One God of heaven and earth
- **Elohim** – the word *God* in the plural (trinity; "Let **us** make man in **our** image.")

- **Jahweh** – God’s covenant name, signifying God's covenant relationship to Israel.

The introduction introduces a key theme of the psalm: Israel has forgotten their God. They still believe in God, of course. They are still worshiping God. But their lives show that they have replaced the bracing reality of the living God with a tamed, humanized version of God.

50:21 *You thought that I was one like yourself...*

50:22 *Mark this then, you who forget God.*

The real God would like to introduce himself!

50:2–3 *Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest.*

God has something to say. And he says it with all the regal glory, moral perfection, and consuming fire of his holy character. This God is the Mighty King and Eternal Judge of heaven and earth.

50:6 *The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!*

Think of how Israel might have heard this introduction. The Mighty God of Israel is summoning the earth and coming to judge. And the Israelites could very well have thought, “Wonderful. God is going to judge this wicked world and their pagan idolatry.” This is what they had prayed for! But they would have been very surprised to hear the following words:

50:4 *He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, **that he may judge his people:***

Us? The godly? The God-worshippers? The children of Abraham? But we worship the true and living God. We have the temple and the appointed sacrifices and feasts. We aren’t like the pagan nations. Why would God be coming to judge us? We’re the good guys!

We can easily make the same assumptions. We’re good reformed people. We observe the Regulative Principle of worship. We worship twice on the Lord’s Day. We aren’t perfect – but what fault could God find in our worship?!

As we will see in the following verses, God doesn’t deny Israel’s external orthodoxy or orthopraxy. His complaint is not that they were bowing down to pagan gods, but that they were treating HIM like one! They practiced their **religion**, but they had forgotten their God. And God – **their** God – was coming to rebuke and correct them.

God's message to Israel is divided into two parts, addressed to two separate groups of people: the Performers (7-15) and the Pretenders, the pure hypocrites (16-23). I would like to reverse the order, beginning with God’s words to the Pretenders in verses 16ff.

II. The Pretenders (16-23)

50:16 *But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?"*

The "wicked" of verse 16 are not the wicked of the world, but the wicked of Israel. They recite the statutes of God, they take the words of the Torah on their lips, they quote Scripture; but God challenges them with a question they had never considered:

"What **right** do you have?"

These are the holy things of God – what right do you have to take my covenant on your lips?

The unspoken but clearly intended answer is that they have no right whatsoever! From God's perspective they are blaspheming: They are pretending at religion. They have no actual care for God at all! The evidence is seen in their life!

50:17-18 *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.*

In verses 19-20, God says, "You give your mouth free rein for evil. You lie, deceive and slander."

The religion of an unrepentant wicked man or woman is deeply offensive to God because they pretend to honor God and yet, in their heart, want nothing to do with him. They use God and his worship to gain for themselves a good reputation and as a cover for their wicked hearts. It's an outrageous blasphemy to use God as a cover for your sin.

Maybe you are here tonight and you are singing the songs and joining in the prayers – but the truth is that you are just pretending. You don't love God – you love your sin. It's not that you don't believe the things you hear, you just refuse to allow God's word to rule your life. You cast his words behind you so that you can do the wicked things you love to do. And you maybe think that, because judgement hasn't fallen, that it never will. But you're making a huge mistake.

50:21 *These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself.*

These men mistook God's patience for permission. They thought God was like them – a hypocrite. They thought that God, like them, says things he doesn't really mean. All his

threats and warnings concerning sin is just posturing. He doesn't really mean it. People do this all the time; they mistake God's patience for lenience. But God has something to say.

50:21-22 *But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. Mark this, then, you who forget
God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!*

Friend if you are living in secret, unrepentant sin, you need to know tonight that God, the living God, knows exactly what you are doing. He knows the game you are playing. In his word tonight he is rebuking you and laying his charge before you (21). And if you don't repent, he will destroy you.

God is not a hypocrite. He means every syllable he speaks. I promise you that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hand of the living God. The worst possible place to enter hell is from the pews of the church. Better never to have known the truths of God than to have known them and used them for your own wicked ends.

III. The Performers (7-15)

50:7 *Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you.*

God comes to testify against his people. They have fallen into a dangerous sin – the sin of a thoughtless religion of external performance rather than true dependence upon God. He introduces himself to them this way: *"I am God, your God."* It's almost as if God is saying, "Remember me...God?"

They haven't forgotten to offer sacrifices.

50:8 *Your burnt offerings are continually before me.*

But they had clearly gotten the whole thing backwards:

50:9-13

*I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.*

*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?

Do you see what God is saying? He's saying, "What are you doing? You offer your sacrifices as though I needed them. You engage in your worship as though you are doing me a favor. You bring your gifts as though I am lacking something. I am God. I created everything and need nothing. I don't eat meat!"

God's charge against his people is that they were worshiping like pagans! Pagans offer gifts to their gods hoping to curry favor with them. Their religion is a bargain they make with their god: "I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine." But God bluntly says, "I don't need your sacrifices!" To which the Israelite might respond, "Well, if you don't need them, why are we doing them? And why did you command them?"

It's a great question. It's a question many church-goers should stop and ask. "Why are we going to church?" Why are you here? Many people go to church because they think that it is a part of doing business with God. It's their way of giving something to God, something that will make him happy, so that God will give them the things they desire.

In their religious formalism, they were fundamentally confused about the nature of God as God. As God, he has no needs. He will not be made a debtor. It is the glory of God, as God, to have no lack, no need that we could supply.

Rom. 11:35 *Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?*

Have you ever visited a church, and everyone seemed to be just going through the motions? The songs were sung, the prayers were offered, the liturgy was faithfully followed – but it was strangely devoid of any real emotion, any real sense of need. You had the sense that the minister and the congregation felt like they were doing God a favor. They were doing this for his sake. It's a fatal misunderstanding of worship – and God abhors it.

This religious formalism not only fundamentally misses the reality of God as God, it also is a devastating misunderstanding of their own need. You see, God did not command Israel to offer sacrifices because he needed them – but because THEY did!

Contrary to what the Israelites assumed, the offering of sacrifices did not prove what good people they were – they proved the exact and precise opposite.

The sacrificing of animals was a constant, daily reminder that there is a great gulf between God and man created by sin. Sacrifices pointed to the awful reality of their sin and the

deadly consequences. The soul that sins shall die. And there was nothing they could do to fix that!

Sacrifices were not about giving something to God, but receiving something from God. They were a reminder over and over again of their great need for help and their great dependence upon God for that help.

Sacrifices were the evidence that they were not basically good people, but sinful, flawed, and failing people – and unless God provided his saving help they would be lost. That’s why the fundamental disposition of true worship is not one of proud service to God, but humble, desperate dependence upon Him. (e.g. the Publican and the Pharisee.)

At the heart of the Psalm is verses 14-15, where God calls Israel back to true religion:

*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.*

True religion is not a matter of doing favors for God, but receiving unmerited grace and goodness from God – and **thanking** him! The sacrifices that are pleasing to him are the sacrifices of thanksgiving. You see the same thing in verse 23:

*“The one who offers **thanksgiving** as his sacrifice **glorifies** me;”*

Why does God delight in thanksgiving as a sacrifice? Because thanksgiving doesn’t offer anything to God as merit, but only praise and thanks as worship. The thankful person correctly understands the nature of God as the giver of all gifts and the nature of men as the underserving recipients. God is always the Giver – never the beneficiary!

The essential relationship of true worship is captured in verse 15:

Call upon me on the day of trouble and I will deliver you – and you will glorify me.

This is how we glorify God – by needing him. By calling on his mighty name!

John Piper: How do you glorify your nurse when you are at the hospital? By depending upon her! By acknowledging your dependence and helplessness and allowing her to show her expertise and ability.

The sacrifices were never for God – they were God's gracious gift to Israel. And all pointing to the greatest gift of all: the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

God's deliverance has come in the form of a person – His son. Christ is able to deliver needy, lost, helpless, wicked people, and he delivers to the uttermost. He washes away all the stain of sin, he breaks the power of sin, he frees us from the sentence of death. He brings us into the very presence of God – without spot and with great joy. The very best way to glorify God is by coming to Christ, believing in Christ, receiving Christ – in a way that leads to thanksgiving.

How is your worship? Is it a lie? A cover up for an unrepentant life of sin? Is it just duty – something you do because you know you should but find little joy in? God calls you to something so much more – a life of genuine adoration, love, thanksgiving, and praise. All you need to do is humble yourself, acknowledge your utter dependence, and call upon his name. He will save every sinner who calls on him for redemption. You get the gift – he gets the glory!