

TRUE WORSHIP

Psalm 50

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It is a good psalm. It has a substantial message to us to communicate. The title I'm going to give this psalm tonight is "True Worship." It is psalm of Asaph.

"The Mighty One, God, the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages. He summons the heavens above, and the earth, that he may judge his people: 'Gather to me my consecrated ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.' And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for God himself is judge. *Selah*. 'Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am God, your God. I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.' But to the wicked, God says: 'What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips? You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you. When you see a thief, you join with him; you throw in your lot with adulterers. You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son. These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face.

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Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue: he who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God” (Psalm 50:1–23, NIV).

The language of this psalm is pretty economical. It’s terse and to the point. Very moving. It is a psalm that is identified as belonging to Asaph. It is the first psalm we have run across that is associated with Asaph. The last few weeks, we’ve been looking at psalms from the sons of Korah. They’re pretty much done now, except for several in the late seventies of the Psalter.

Who is Asaph? He is one of David’s top three musical leaders. We see him introduced for us in 1 Chronicles 6:31–46, where he appears along with two other musicians in the hierarchy of temple musicians, directly answerable to David. Chronicles gives us a list of David’s fighting men and priests and musicians. These musicians were with David when he brought the ark of the covenant from Philistine control to Jerusalem, and when David danced before the Lord. It was these musicians who arranged for the sounding of trumpets and cymbals and songs. It appears that Asaph, in addition to being a singer, was the lead percussionist. He was in charge of the cymbals. He appears to have lived a very long time, going all the way through David’s reign. David reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. When Solomon dedicates the temple, which is fourteen years or more into his reign, Asaph (according to 2 Chronicles 5:12–14) is still on the scene. It is one of the rare times, when God’s people are worshipping him, that God moves with his presence in a powerful way in the service. God makes an appearance in that moment.

The reason why I read that in relationship with Asaph is that I think it’s vital for understanding the message of Psalm 50. Psalm 50 is saying that God is making a theophany in Zion at his temple every time his people come to worship him. God is making an appearance there. While his people, coming to worship, may not see that he is there, they need to understand that indeed

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his presence is. There are those occasions when the blindness of human sight is removed and people really see God present in the midst of their worship to Him.

One other reference to Asaph should be noted. That is, that two centuries after Asaph is gone from the scene, Hezekiah, who rebuilds Jerusalem and rebuilds the city wall and extends the city and restores temple worship, gives directions in 2 Chronicles 29:30 to the Levites who are in charge of worship in the temple, that they are to use David and Asaph's words in the rededication of the temple. That is, the psalms that they composed that were appropriate for a dedication of the temple were to be brought out. It is not hard to suppose—given the theme of psalms which have to do with the correct attitude when you're worshipping God in the temple—that Psalm 50 would have been one of the great hymns used on that occasion when Hezekiah rededicates the temple of the Lord.

Psalm 50 addresses especially two groups. It addresses those who are unthinkingly religious—just going through the rote motion of ritual, not understanding at all what they're participating in. The second focus of this psalm is that it speaks to those who are hypocritical in regard to their service to God.

Both groups are obviously present in context of temple worship and are present, really, anytime God's people gather. Some naïve folk simply out of force of habit participate without ever letting worship go beyond walls or ceilings; and those who are there because it's part of being in the religious community. Maybe the body is there, but the heart isn't. Those are the two groups addressed in Psalm 50.

One of the other introductory things I want to say is that it is a very daring psalm. It really says to worshippers in 1000 B.C.—during the time of David and Solomon, when animal sacrifices were probably at their heyday in terms of being offered in the temple—it's saying to them, "God

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simply provided this for you.” God could care less about your sacrificing all these animal sacrifices. If your heart’s not right with God, the sacrifice is absolutely meaningless.

Given the fact that the whole religious establishment was behind and had Scripture to support their view that one must bring sacrifices, it was a daring thing for Asaph to say, ‘What does God care about sacrifices?’ Some key passages that are in agreement with the message of Psalm 50 are:

Amos 5:21–24. What does God say in Amos regarding animal sacrifice? “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:21–24, NIV). All the ritual without intent of the heart is worthless.

Hosea picks up this theme in Hosea 6:6 and 8:13. “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” and “They offer sacrifices given to me and they eat the meat, but the LORD is not pleased with them. Now he will remember their wickedness and punish their sins.”

Isaiah 1:11–18. “‘The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?’ says the LORD. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my

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eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. Come now, let us reason together” (NIV).

Micah says the same thing in Micah 6:6–8: “With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (NIV).

Jeremiah 7:21–23 says, “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you” (NIV).

There are some modern-day Jews who pretty much throw ritual out and there are others, on the opposite end of the spectrum, for whom ritual is everything and the meaning is lost. When you look into the New Testament to see this thread picked up, you can see where John the Baptist and Jesus stand. They’re basically through with the temple ritual and are calling for a cleansing of the heart. Jesus builds upon what Asaph is saying in Psalm 50, when he says, “The hour is coming and now is when those that worship the Father will worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). What’s important is the spirit coming out of your heart.

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There is a place for ritual and a place for form and observance. Psalm 50 approves that, but it must always be from a proper heart.

This psalm has four parts to it.

I. The first part of the psalm is what might be called a “divine appearance” or “divine summons” (verses 1–6).

It is the theophany, the God appearance. What the Lord is saying in these six opening verses is that he is coming down to talk with the people who are coming for worship. When we look at the psalm, I think we err if we say, “When exactly did this happen? When, in the Old Testament, was there a moment when everything stopped and God put in a personal appearance?” The point of the psalm is more spiritual and theological than it is historical. It’s not looking for a precise spiritual moment. What the psalmist is saying is, “Every time my people are gathered together, I am putting in an appearance—whether you see me or not. I’m asking these kind of things of you and I am summoning you at worship, to ask you about the motives that are in your heart.

So the psalm begins with three impressive titles. The three most commonly used names for God in the Old Testament. “El”—the name most commonly used for God, the Mighty One. “Elohim,” and “Yahweh”—the name by which God revealed himself to Moses, the covenant name he gave his people. The people used all three titles in calling upon God. We call God “Lord” and “Christ” and “anointed one” “Savior” “Master” - all the individual titles have different connotations to us. He speaks and summons the earth. What’s He doing here? Right in the beginning, Asaph is saying that we serve a mighty God, whom the whole world must obey and who uses the whole world as a background for his actions. Here is no tribal God, no provincial God. Here is no denominational God, a God of just a small sect or group of people. Here is the God of the whole

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earth, who has at his disposal the right and the ability to summon the whole world to an audience from all the earth. All the people of the earth are invited to gather.

The assumption behind this phrase is that when we come to worship and realize that God calls us to worship, we are not coming to a little God or a powerless God or to a God of the few. But we come to the powerful Lord, who calls us in our acts of worship to change our own life and experience.

Verses 2–3 specifically localize where He is going to put in the appearance: in Zion. Obviously a reference to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. What Asaph does in the language of verses 2–3 is use imagery out of the appearance that God made to his people in the wilderness at Sinai. In Exodus 19:16, when God gave the law to Moses at Sinai, he came with thunder and lightning and a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, and everybody trembled.

Deuteronomy 33:2, picking up on God's appearance at Sinai, says, "He came with myriad of holy ones and they were on the mountain slopes." The appearance of God is majestic. What the psalmist does here is change the geography of God's appearance from Sinai—now God is in Zion. Why? Because God doesn't hang out in empty places. His people are no longer in Sinai. They are in Zion. Wherever God's people are, there He's choosing to make an appearance.

That's a wonderful truth, because it says to us, when we're not gathered as a church, God is not hanging around an empty building. God only appeared at Sinai when His people were there.

When His people are gone, he moves with His people.

Why is God coming down? Why is He making an appearance? Not to judge the world, although the world has been summoned. He is making an appearance to judge his people, the ones who had made a covenant with him by sacrifice.

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It's appropriate that this language should be used of a temple worshipper. They're coming back to the temple now to offer sacrifices to God and to remember that the God who stands behind the ritual is a living God and a powerful God.

God summons us and lets us know that, in our act of worship, He's standing to judge us.

II. Then the second part of the psalm begins. We might entitle it, "Plain words to the religious" (verses 7–15).

God has now appeared and He's ready to hold a hearing on all the pious people who have come to the temple.

What this psalmist is doing is really addressing pious and religious people, "I've got my animal with me. I've come to sing God's songs. I've come to have a transaction with God. I want to go away from here having done my duty and feeling good." Asaph is saying, "You can't come to the Lord in that unthinking mode. You have to examine your motives. Why are you here?"

God assumes the role both of judge and witness. It's interesting how God can serve in both roles simultaneously. It's not regarded as contradictory. God can be the judge. He can be the witness. He can be the prosecutor. He can be the defense attorney. What role He is in depends upon the status of the person who comes. God is always judge, but sometimes he'll take the role of prosecutor or defense attorney.

Is that a rigged court? Or is it because God is so filled with integrity he can be counted upon to fulfill all the roles? God comfortably fills the role of a witness here against his people. It becomes apparent, within these verses, that God has not come to pass sentence as a judge upon his people. But he has come instead to bring truth to light and call for repentance. The sentence he is asking is the sentence we bring upon ourselves, as we look at our motives in coming to Him. There is importance upon the spirit of worship rather than the form or ritual.

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The highest form in the temple was animal sacrifice. The point of this psalm is that God doesn't need it. It doesn't satisfy any need within God. The psalm addresses the reality behind the ritual. The psalmist acknowledges that the ritual was given by God. And we know now, looking back through Christ, that the reason why animal sacrifice was given was to help mankind understand that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin" (Hebrews 9:22). A price must be paid for sin. Death must ensue. Therefore, through the teaching example of the Old Testament, that death was continually repeated—death of an innocent, death of a perfect one—it was drilled in the national and individual conscience until one could understand the meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. That is what satisfied God's demands for justice and forgiveness. But the psalmist, reflecting on all the ritual, says "What does God want to do with all of that? What does God really want?" "Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High" (Psalm 50:14). If God has any kind of need at all, it is the desire within himself for a relationship with us. That's what God is looking for—grateful devotion. Not adherence to a prescribed routine.

Therefore, when you come to the Lord, know that He delights in the praises of his people. In the genuine response of his people, in a love relationship to Him. If that's not there, all the ritual won't do.

What possible joy does God get out of our worship when we're together? Praise. What you praise is what you yourself begin to move toward. Relationship is built upon affirmation, not denigration.

Does God need the trappings of our liturgy? Does our good music impress him? Does bad music bore him? He just wants us to think about why we're coming. He says, "Why don't you fulfill your vows to me?" Keep your relationship. Thank offerings was one of the five categories of

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sacrifices offered, a thank offering was an offering given to God after He'd given a special victory. The meat was given back to the worshipper, so they could enjoy it. It came back as a benefit to the worshipper. The Lord is saying, "Just keep coming to me with praise. That's what I really want."

Then he says that when you get in trouble, He'll hear you, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15). Fortunately, we find there is something so special about the grace of God that even when we haven't worshipped Him the way we should, if we get in trouble, He still hears us.

It's a wonderful plain word to the religious people that come.

III. Then verses 16–20 give the third part of the psalm. That is, "Plain words to the hypocrites."

A hypocrite is one who is over-judging, someone carrying judgment beyond a normal level, which means they're role-playing. They're play-acting, sitting in judgment over others, while themselves, they're playing some kind of part.

To the wicked, the hypocrite, God says, "What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips?" Verses 7–15 address the faithful people who were coming. These verses now address those within the spiritual community who are living lives that are not in accordance with the covenant God made with his people. God, as the judge, is still testifying on the stand.

He's not asking for permission from the wicked to testify against them. He castigates the hypocrisy of reciting religious words and not having a conduct to match the profession.

In that sense, Asaph's psalm is a forerunner to what John the Baptist would preach. In this section, three of the Ten Commandments are especially singled out as having been violated by the wicked or the hypocrites of Asaph's day. The eighth commandment—"Thou shalt not steal"

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(Exodus 20:15)—He says, “When you see a thief you join with him” (Psalm 50:18). The seventh commandment—“Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14)—“You throw in your lot with adulterers” (Psalm 50:18). And the ninth commandment—“Thou shalt not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16)—“You use your mouth for evil and speak continually against your brother and slander [malign someone else’s reputation—say an untrue word about them] your own mother’s son” (Psalm 50:20).

We, as spiritual people, are often the wickedest to judge the violators of the stealing and adultery commandments, and do not have as much to say in regard to the seriousness of the sin of speaking ill of someone, even a family member. This psalm treats all three in the same category and takes more time to denounce the person who is speaking against a family member, than denouncing the other sins. That ought to make us think twice about our speech and it also ought to keep us from the mistaken notion that some sins are more offensive to God than others.

When God is through with this analysis of the hypocrite, He says, “These things you have done and I kept silent” (Psalm 50:21). That’s insightful—God admitting that He does not act immediately to judge sin. People misread God’s silence. But part of the value of God being silent is that it allows us to be ourselves and therefore to reveal ourselves. By God not acting immediately in judgment, He has given the chance for the intents of the heart to be manifested. God is warning the hypocrite and the wicked, who are in the covenant community of generally religious people, “Watch out!” It’s a warning.

IV. The fourth part of the psalm then comes in verses 22–23, which is the conclusion, which might be called “The parting charges.”

The psalm has talked about two groups—the pious religious and the hypocrite. They were dealt with in that order. In the concluding charges, the order is reversed, and God first of all talks to

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the hypocrite. The wicked are dealt with first: “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue” (Psalm 50:22). There’s time for you to get your act together, but don’t wait forever, because when God’s wrath is unleashed, however reluctantly, it is overpowering, once he unleashes, it’s all over. Rather fierce and stern language. But to the pious religious, the Lord concludes, “He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God” (Psalm 50:23). It is the person in worship who is grateful to come to God and filled with thanksgiving for what the Lord has done in his life. It is to that person that God gives grace. And relationship. As in another part of Scripture, which says, “He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

Psalm 50 is an admonition to true worship. When you come privately, don’t come just to keep your religious routine. Routines are important, but what God is looking for is a heart response. Not just chalking up another thing on the slate. When you come corporately, take a moment to stop and think about who you’re coming to.

I get appalled at times at how casually people come to worship—coming at all times during singing or worship, with no thought of what’s going on or what’s happening. Take a moment, before you come to a public worship service, to think about why you’re going. What are we offering to God in that moment? It seems we need a more mature view of worship than I see in the lackadaisical worship of God’s people in the body of Christ today—just an observation.

“They that worship the Father,” Jesus says, “must worship in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23).

The exact same thing Asaph is saying, “Don’t focus on the ritual, focus on the reality!”