

Here Comes the Judge

Psalm 50:1-23

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I'd invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me to Psalm 50. Before you get to 50, allow your eyes to fall upon Psalm 49, and remember from a couple of weeks ago, as we continue to go through the second book of the Psalms, a couple of weeks ago we were looking at Psalm 49 which is a very different kind of psalm. It sounds a lot like Proverbs or some of the other wisdom literature from the Old Testament, like the book of Ecclesiastes. In fact, we found a lot of phrases that reminded us of the book of Ecclesiastes in Psalm 49. Well, tonight we're going to be looking at the next Psalm. And just as Psalm 49 is a little bit different kind of a psalm, so also Psalm 50 is a very different kind of psalm. Psalm 49 and Psalm 50 have their own surprises for us. So before we hear God's word read and proclaimed, let's look to the Lord God and ask His Spirit to illumine our hearts as we hear His word. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we bow before You. Your word is truth. It's a lamp to our feet; it's a light to our path. It also reflects to us the royal law... as a man or a woman looks in the mirror and sees his or her reflection. That is, Your word shows us ourselves. It shows us our sins. It reveals to us our need for Your grace. This Psalm reveals to us our need for Your grace. It reveals to us, even as Your people, our need for grace and forgiveness. We ask that You would open our eyes, then, to see Your truth for us; that before we sought to apply it to another we would apply it to our own hearts; that before we would take the speck out of our brother or sister's eye, we would take the log out of our own. We ask, then, by Your word that You would show us ourselves. But more than that, O God, we pray that You would reveal Yourself and point us to our Savior and to the grace which is in Him. We ask this in His name. Amen.

Let's hear God's word in Psalm 50.

A Psalm of Asaph. The Mighty One, God, the Lord, has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth. May our God come and not keep silence; fire devours before Him, and it is very tempestuous around Him. He summons the heavens above, and the earth, to judge His people: "Gather My godly ones to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me

by sacrifice.” And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge. “Hear, O My people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before Me. I shall take no young bull out of your house, nor male goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all it contains. Shall I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of male goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High; and call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.” But to the wicked God says, “What right have you to tell of My statutes, and to take My covenant in your mouth? For you hate discipline, and you cast My words behind you. When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you associate with adulterers. You let your mouth loose in 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 kept silence. You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you, and state the case in order before your eyes. Now consider this, you who forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; and to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God.”

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

This Psalm contains a surprise. A summons is sent out to all the earth. The world is summoned to come to Zion, to Jerusalem, to the place where God makes visible His dwelling with His people. The whole world is called to judgment, but something strange happens when the world arrives in Zion. It's not the world who's up for God's scrutiny. It's not the world that will fall under the center of God's righteous and searching judgment. It's God's people. The people of God at the beginning of this Psalm anticipate God's judgment against the nations. They even cry out, ‘God, reveal Yourself! Show Yourself!’ They expect the nations to be judged; they expect to be vindicated...but that's not what happens in this Psalm. Now this Psalm surprises us. It surprises us because it reminds us that precisely because of the special relationship that we bear to God, because of the grace which He has shown us in His Son, we fall under a Fatherly scrutiny and discipline. And He searches us out to see if there is any unclean thing in us. And this meeting is not so much a meeting for final judgment; it is a meeting for God to call His own people to repentance.

I want you to see four parts in this meeting that God has called. The first part is in verses 1 through 6 where we see God's summons to His people and to the world. Then the second part you'll see in verses 7 through 15 where He addresses a grave problem which exists in His people. They have a low view of God, and they

have a misunderstanding of worship and especially of the sacrificial system. And the third part you'll see in verses 16 through 21 where he addresses the issue of hypocrisy: people who say that they love God with their mouths but show that they do not with their lives. And then finally in verses 22 and 23 where he presses home the preacher's call to repentance. It's in these verses that we see that God's desire is not to bring down final judgment upon those who do not know Him as they ought, upon those who are straying in their wickedness while professing to be religious and to love God, but His desire is that sinners would turn from their ways and be converted unto Him.

I. The Mighty God, the Covenant Lord, summons the world to court.

Let's look at each of these four parts, beginning in verses 1 through 6. Here we see God's summons. "The Mighty One, God, the Lord, has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting." The picture is God calling all the nations to assemble in Jerusalem. We're told in verse 2, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth." And so God in His character, God in His righteousness, God in His purity, God in His awesomeness— shines forth in the midst of His people in Zion. And this Mighty God, the covenant Lord, the God of His people— by covenant summons the world to come to what is a courtroom setting. And the people of God, you see it in verse 3, expect God to judge the nations when they get there: "May our God come and not keep silence." And then the people of God, having called upon God to come and called upon God to speak when He gets into the courtroom, then they begin to describe a scene from Mt. Sinai, not a scene from Zion. We just talked about Zion in verse 2, but it's a scene from Mt. Sinai that dominates in verse 3. "Fire devours before Him, and it is very tempestuous around Him." We see the thunder and the lightning of Mt. Sinai. This is the image that the people of God themselves call up. Little do they know what's coming in verse 4. They have actually called down God's searching judgment upon themselves because we read, "He summons the heavens above, and the earth, to judge." And you're expecting, because He's called the nations to be there, you're expecting Him to say, 'He summons the heavens above, and the earth, to judge *the nations*.' The nations have not followed after Him. The nations have rejected His rule. The nations have gone after their own way. The nations have persecuted His people. Those bad, old peoples out there, God is going to judge. And that's not what comes.

What comes is God's judgment against His own people. "Gather My godly ones to Me," He says, "those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice." It's those people that I'm going to speak to. It's those people who are going to be searched out by God. So the summons goes to the world. Even the nations are called to be a witness of what God is going to do in this searching judgment of His people. And there, my friends, in Psalm 50 we see in Technicolor, in graphic depiction, what Peter talks about in 1 Peter chapter 4, verse 17, and frankly what

many of the prophets talk about: that is, the principle that judgment begins at the house of God.

Now that is so vital for us to take in. God has summoned the world to this court of judgment. Lives will be weighed; motives, deeds will be counseled. Israel is expecting the nations to be judged, but in fact it is Israel who will be judged and the nations will serve as witnesses. When we are tempted to point our fingers at the wickedness of the world around us, we must remember that when God moves to judge, and judge He does, He begins with His own people. How often has this been the case? When God is prepared to bring His judgment against that mightiest of usurping powers in the ancient world, the power of Rome described as far back as the book of Daniel, where does that judgment begin? It begins with the children of Israel in captivity for seventy years and then kingless for 490. Judgment begins at the house of God. When Jeremiah is called to bear the word of God in judgment against Israel, who is it who keenly in his soul feels the judgment of God, above everyone else, even as he preaches God's message? Jeremiah. God gives him the very last message that he ever wanted to preach to Israel. Jeremiah would have preferred to preach "health and wealth." He would have preferred to have preached God's comfort to His people in a very dark time, but Jeremiah was called to preach judgment. And because he was called to preach judgment, you know what happened to Jeremiah? He was judged. He was judged by his own people. He was rejected by His people. He was considered to be a traitor by his own people though he had grown up in the courts of Israel and loved God's people and God's nation with all his heart. He was judged. You see, just as God breaks the prophet's heart in judgment as He comes to the nation in judgment, so God breaks our hearts in judgment as we bear witness to the world of God's judgment.

You know, there is no doctrine that the world hates more from the lips of the church than God's judgment against the world. How do we faithfully speak that word to the world without the world saying, "Oh, that seems a bit self-serving, doesn't it? That God's judging us but He's not judging you." Well, God has the answer. Judgment begins at the house of God. My brother, my sister, in the world as we speak...as Christians, my brother, my sister, my friend, my fellow human, when I speak judgment to you, I recognize that God's judgment begins with His own people. We have been weighed and found wanting, and our only hope is not in our own righteousness or in our own deserving but in God's mercy in Jesus Christ. My judgment over against you is God's judgment against you, not my own bias, not my own prejudice. This is God's word. I too have fallen under that judgment. Judgment begins at the house of God, and so the children of Israel are brought before God's court for judgment.

II. God brings an indictment against formalism and a misunderstanding of worship.

And in this passage he has two particular things that He wants to bring to bear upon our hearts, upon *their* hearts. The first one is this. You see it in verses 7 through 15. Here God specifies the sin. He's found something lacking in Israel's piety. He's found something lacking in Israel's walk with Him and He specifies it. God brings an indictment here against what we might call "formalism." There's a misunderstanding of God in Israel and consequently there's a misunderstanding of worship, or maybe there's a misunderstanding of worship in Israel and consequently a misunderstanding of God, or it may go both ways.

But whatever the case is, Israel has too low a view of God. They have a misunderstanding of worship, particularly of the way that the sacrificial system works. What's described in verses 7 through 15 is the problem of a serious misunderstanding of the meaning and importance and significance of the sacrificial ritual which is leading some people in Israel...though they are faithful in doing the sacrifices as God has appointed in His word, they are doing it for the wrong reasons. They don't understand why God has asked them to do the sacrificial rituals, and consequently they don't understand what God is like. They have a misconception of who He is. And so this misunderstanding of the sacrificial ritual may *flow from* a low view of God or it may *create* a low view of God. But whatever the case—that is, whether it's one way or the other or both—there's a problem. And the problem is that Israel doesn't understand her worship and she doesn't have a sufficiently high view of God. And so the Psalmist says this, "Hear, O My people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you." He brings a lawsuit against His own people. "I am God, your God."

And now He says what He's not going to criticize them for: "I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before Me." I'm not going to criticize you now for not worshiping. You are worshiping. Every time I turn around, you're bringing a sacrifice. He's saying, 'You've been faithful to obey the letter of my commandments. You *are* bringing sacrifices. It's not that you've forgotten to do it, and it's been a long time since you've come to Jerusalem for the Day of Atonement; it's been a long time since you've brought a sacrifice of atonement...' No, no, no, no. That's not what he's challenging them. He's saying this: 'You don't know *why* you're doing it. You've got a misconception of why I ask you to sacrifice.' And He explains this beginning in verse 9, "I shall take no young bull out of your house, nor male goats out of your folds." In other words, 'If I need a bull or I need a goat, I'm not going to come knocking on your door. They all belong to Me! If I need a bird, I'm not going to come knocking on your door. I made the birds; they're Mine! I know where to get them. I know what they're like. I know more about them than you do.' God is emphasizing that the sacrifices that Israel is making are not given because God needs something from them, because God is going to benefit in some sort of a quid pro quo relationship from their bringing sacrifices. And apparently there are some people in Israel who because of the way that images are used in the Scripture to speak about God have misunderstood some things about Him. Remember in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, sometimes God is described both in terms of human physical

features and human emotional features? And occasionally, we are told things like, “The sacrifice of incense is a sweet smelling savor in the nostrils of God” or “that God delights in”—as if He were sitting down to enjoy a meal at the offering of certain burnt offerings. And apparently that language misunderstood upon the part of some of the people has led them to think that the sacrifices are brought to God because God needs them.

Now that sounds crazy. But I want to tell you, friends, it was probably twenty years ago, my brothers had this terribly bad habit—of course, I didn't have this habit—my brothers had this terribly bad habit of liking to watch some of the goofier TV preachers, especially the ultra-dispensationalists because they had the greatest charts and the weirdest hair. And one of them one night...I caught this! I promise you I caught this. One of them one night, while going through the incense sections of the book of Revelation, explained that the reason why the temple was going to be set up again during the millennium and that sacrifices were going to be reinstituted was because when incense wafted up from the temple into heaven it stimulated some aspect of God's cranial nerve. I am not joking.

Now, I'm not sure whether it got that goofy in Israel, but clearly there were some people who thought that when they were bringing a sacrifice, it was somehow doing God a favor. Now, in so doing, they'd made two mistakes: One, they'd misunderstood why God gave the sacrificial system. The reason the sacrificial system is there is because we need something! We need forgiveness. And that sacrifice doesn't get us forgiveness; it reminds us that we need forgiveness.

What does the author of Hebrews say? “The blood of bulls and goats cannot forgive sin”! But they jolly well can show you that only blood can pay for sin. Only God-provided blood can pay for sin. And so the giving of the sacrifice doesn't get you forgiveness; it reminds you that you need forgiveness. And the giving of the sacrifice doesn't do God a favor; it reminds you that you need a favor from God. And thinking that worshiping is somehow going to do a favor for God, of course totally contorts the function of worship. Worship is giving to God the glory due His name from hearts filled with gratitude for what He has already done for you in grace. It's not giving to God something that He lacks which only you can supply. In worship, He supplies what we cannot. He gives what we lack, and so the whole of worship is in response to what God has already given to us. When we worship, we worship as debtors to God, as needy and thus as grateful and thankful for a supply that God has given to us. You see, the Lord does not need us to give to Him the glory due His name, but we desperately need to give Him the glory due His name, because He has shown us His mercy in Jesus Christ.

And, my friends, this is yet another Bible passage that shows us that how we worship and why we worship matters to God. It's not enough to go through the motions. We need not only to be here; we need not only to be under the means of grace—the word read, the word proclaimed, the word sung, the word prayed—

but we need to know why we're here, and we need to worship in accordance with the reasons that God has told us for worship. And apparently there are some in Israel who don't understand this, and it's led them to a low view of God. And isn't it interesting that wrong worship always brings about a wrong understanding of who God is, and a wrong understanding of who God is always leads to wrong worship. Isn't that interesting? Because everything in the Christian life flows from whom God is. And that's why when we worship, it's so important for us to worship in accordance with God's word, else we end up worshiping something other than the God of His word. Now there's the first problem: there's an indictment against formalism and this misunderstanding of worship and this misunderstanding of God.

III. God brings an indictment against the hypocritical.

But the second thing is this: it's the problem of hypocrisy. And that's crystal clear, isn't it, in verses 16-21? God here brings an indictment against the hypocritical in Israel. When He says "to the wicked," He's making a distinction. The people in verses 7-15 seem to be well meaning. There's no conscious lack of integrity on their parts. They're trying to do what's right. They're falling short, but they're trying to do what's right. There's sincerity and integrity there. The persons in 16-21 however are hypocrites. They're one way outside; they're another way inside. They're one way in worship; they're another in the rest of life. And God brings an indictment against them

But I want you to note again: He's speaking to whom? He's speaking in Zion to Zion. He's speaking in the gathering of the nations, but to His people. And so the wicked here are not the wicked in the nations. He actually goes through the Ten Commandments, especially the Second Table of the Ten Commandments, in verses 16-21, and so it's very clear here that God is speaking to the people who have received those commandments: Israel. And so He addresses those numbered among His people—they've professed Him; they're reputation is to be followers of Him; they are nominally religious, but they are wicked. And He brings an indictment. "But to the wicked God says, 'What right have you to tell of My statutes, and to take My covenant in your mouth? For you hate discipline, and you cast My words behind you. When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you associate with adulterers. You let your mouth loose in 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 kept silence. And you thought that I was just like you.'"

What He is saying here is that those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth, and must worship with the whole self in the whole of life, and must worship in the beauty of holiness. Remember what He had said in Psalm 15? "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may enter into the Holy Place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart." You see, because God is righteous, He can only

be worshiped in righteousness. And the worst thing that you can say about a hypocrite is that he pretends to be righteous while actually being the opposite.

And, my friends, this is a reminder again of the fact that we cannot worship God apart from Christ. Everyone knows they ought to worship God. Paul says that in Romans 1. But no one, *no one* can worship Him aright apart from Christ because we are not righteous. And how can the unrighteous give glory with lip and life to the God of righteousness? They can't. That's why we need Christ: we need to be clothed in His righteousness; we need to be transformed by His righteousness.

And the author is just reminding us again that apart from Christ, we lack the basic equipment to worship God. Here as He speaks to His people He says, 'Look. I'm not looking for ritual worship that doesn't flow in righteousness of life.' And especially He points to those Second Table commandments and the way that we relate to one another. You know, every sin that we see in our hearts is just so much of an admission that we fall short of really knowing and taking in what our God is like. Was it Anselm who said, "I fear sin more than hell, and I would rather be cast into hell without sin, than to enter into heaven with it"? I think that says to me that Anselm knew something more about God than I do. Every known sin is just so much of an admission that we fall short of the glory of God, and so we need to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and then we need to be transformed by the Holy Spirit to enter in and to give God the glory due His name. And so He is speaking strongly against hypocrisy.

I ask you, friends, to search your own hearts out tonight, and ask yourselves about the hypocrisy that may exist in your own life. It may manifest itself in your family: in your marital relationship, in your relationship with your children. It may manifest itself in your business relationships or in your neighborly relationships. It may manifest itself in the witness that you bear in the community in relationship with those who are unbelievers. I don't know, but ask yourself. This is an indictment against the people of God who claim to be God's people but who live otherwise.

III. God send an urgent warning and a call to repentance.

God's words...and you'll see them in the very last verses...God's words cause the heart to tremble. This is the last thing that the Psalmist reminds us. Here in verses 22 and 23, he sends out an urgent warning and a call to repentance. You see something of our need for forgiveness and faithfulness here. First, God addresses the hypocrites: "Now consider this, you who forget God." Isn't that an interesting way of saying it? These people are sacrificing. They're obeying all the sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. They're there every time the temple door's open, but their lives say that they have forgotten God. And I could translate that now: 'You're there every time the doors open...or you're there sometimes when the doors open...and yet your lives say that you've forgotten God.' And here's

what God has to say, "I will tear you to pieces, and there will be no one who can deliver you from Me." That's God's word to you, friend. That's God's word to you. Worship Him with your lips, forget Him with Your life, He will tear you to pieces, and there will be no one to deliver you.

You see something of God's heart, don't you, in verse 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." He started with the hypocrites, now He focuses on those who misunderstood the nature of true worship, and He encourages us to live in thankfulness and faithfulness and thus come to see the fullness of the salvation of God. He points out here, doesn't he, that our hope is in repentance?

A sacrifice of thanksgiving is an interesting choice of pictures because the sacrifice, the thank offering, was an offering that was not wholly consumed on the altar. The thank offering was in part consumed by you, and so it visibly showed that the sacrifice that God calls us to offer to Him is actually intended by God to benefit us. What better sort of sacrifice to offer for a thank offering, a thanks to God for redeeming us from the deserving punishment for our own sins? You see, in salvation the giving is on God's side; ours is to receive it. Now how do we receive it? We receive it with delighted thanks and obedience that flows from His prior work of salvation in our hearts. That's how we receive Him.

Now here's a warning, my friends. It's a warning to every single one of us. We've been given so much. You know, if this warning could be given to people under the old covenant, how much more applicable is it to us upon whom the end of the ages has come, and those of us who are under "a better covenant," the author of Hebrews says? We've been given so much. May God grant us to live up to something of that glorious light. Let's pray.

O Lord and God, Your word searches us out. It catches us right where we don't want to be caught, but it tells us the truth, and we thank You for that. It doesn't flatter us. Your word is not the word of a sycophant; it's the word of the judge of truth, but it's also the word of the God of grace who tells us before it's too late. O God, You've told us in Your word. By the grace of Your Holy Spirit, cause every heart to respond now in repentance and trust and faithfulness flowing from that trust, for the night comes when the darkness descends and it will be too late. Thank You for this intervention in Zion before Your final intervention in judgment. Thank You for telling us now before it's too late. Grant us the grace to respond, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing? Peace be to the brethren and love with faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the daybreak and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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