



Psalm 50 - The Acceptable Sacrifice

A Psalm of Asaph.

Introduction

It is probably best to describe this psalm as an 'oracular hymn,' i.e. with it the worshippers sing God's pronouncement about how they should live as part of his covenant people. The God who speaks and summons the earth (v.1) especially plans to judge his own people (v.4), particularly to warn any of them who presume on the privileges of the sacrificial system, thinking that it is a way to buy God off, apart from a living relationship with him.

Scholars have determined that a psalm's attribution to Asaph can mean a variety of things. It could mean that the psalms were a part of a collection from the Asaphites, a name commonly used to identify temple singers. Another possibility is that the psalms were performed in the style or tradition of the guild bearing Asaph's name. Asaph himself is said to either be the author or the transcriber of these psalms for some say that he may not have said these psalms but rather that he transcribed the words of David. A specific time period is not known to be associated with these psalms.

Psalm 50:1-6 - God Summons the Earth to Assemble before Him

The Lord, the God of Israel, is the mighty one, who made and rules heaven and earth; when he speaks and summons the earth, he has the right to expect all mankind to pay attention; he especially expects it from Israel, whose very calling was to be the first instalment of renewed mankind. When the song goes on to say that God shines forth from Zion, it focuses the reader's attention on God's particular people, Israel, and their privileged position as confirmed by Exodus 19:4-6, they are his faithful ones, who made a covenant with him by sacrifice. Great privilege brings with it great responsibility, and thus God will judge his people, i.e. exercise his righteous rule over them, not necessarily punish them.

- 1 The mighty one, God the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- 2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
- 3 Our God comes and does not keep silence,
before him is a devouring fire,
and a mighty tempest all around him.

Psalm 50:1-3

The mighty one, God the Lord. The psalmist began by referring to God in terms of utmost majesty, using several of the words or names in Scripture to refer to the God who is really there. He is the one who will judge his people: <<*The Lord, God of gods! The Lord, God of gods! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith towards the Lord, do not spare us today*>> (Joshua 22:22).

God speaks and summons the earth. The idea is that God has come to Jerusalem to judge the world, and the entire earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting is gathered for that purpose: <<*From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised*>> (Psalm 113:3).

Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire. Using reminders of God's coming to Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-19), the psalmist built anticipation for the righteous judgement of God about to be performed. This time God comes to Zion, not Sinai.

- 4 He calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
- 5 'Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!'
- 6 The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge. Selah

Psalm 50:4-6

That he may judge his people. As God assembled the heavens and the earth for his judgement, he did not begin among the nations. God began his judgement

among his people, his faithful ones, those, he says, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.

In the psalm this feels like a surprise, but it should not be. Many centuries later the Apostle Peter described the principle: <<*For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*>> (1 Peter 4:17).

Gather to me my faithful ones. God gathers his saints for judgement before the witnessing world. When God deals thus with his people he often does it before a watching world. Most would prefer that he deals with the sins of his people privately, but if they will not listen to his correction the day will come when he deals with their sin with the earth as an audience.

Who made a covenant with me by sacrifice! It can be argued that Psalm 50 only has in direct view God's judgement of Israel because they are the nation joined to him in covenant as described here and in Exodus 19:5-6 and 24:5-8. Yet by extension, and the principle of 1 Peter 4:17, this has all the people of God in view. Both aspects are true.

Believers will not face a judgement unto their eternal destiny; they have trusted in Jesus and his work for them and are saved: <<*Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life*>> (John 5:24). However, they will face what Paul called the judgement seat of God in Romans 14:10 and the judgement seat of Christ in 2 Corinthians 5:10, where their works and motives as believers will be judged, presumably, for the sake of reward and measure of authority in the age to come.

The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. God most certainly will judge the earth, all the wicked, and do so in righteousness. Yet he absolutely has the right to begin his judgement among his own people: <<*Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser*>> (Job 9:15).

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Psalm 50:7-15 - He Speaks to His People: Worship Him from the Heart

God's act of judgement is an oracle, explaining what it really means to be his people. He speaks to their use of sacrifices (v.8); in the light of vv.10-13, as well as v.16, he is addressing people tempted to think that God somehow needs the sacrifices, and that they can be used almost as a bribe to satisfy him. God's reply,

an obvious one for those who think clearly about the creation account, is that he owns the entire created order and does not depend on it in any way.

The oracle then turns to the right use of sacrifices, focusing on the sacrifice of thanksgiving and vows (v.14); refer also to the comments made on Psalm 40:6-8. These were both kinds of peace offerings (Leviticus 7:11-16), which was the only kind of sacrifice in which the worshipper ate some of the sacrificial animal; its primary function was to eat a meal, in company with the sacrificer's family and the needy, with God as the host. First Corinthians 10:16-18 shows that this is the basic meaning of the Christian Lord's Supper. Membership in God's people is about being welcome in his presence (v.14), depending on him (v.15), and dealing justly with others (vv.19-20 and v.23); thus it engages the heart.

7 'Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.

8 Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt-offerings are continually before me.

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

10 For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.

11 I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.

12 'If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.

13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?

14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.

15 Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.'

Psalm 50:7-15

Hear, O my people, and I will speak. The point from the previous verses is repeated and emphasised. God speaks here to his people, beginning his judgement among them.

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you. God did not rebuke his people for offering sacrifices. He commanded them to do that. Yet, he was not interested in receiving more animal offerings apart from their trusting obedience, i.e. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. This was a rebuke of ritualism, of empty repetition of religious ceremonies.

Believers under the New Covenant no longer offer animal sacrifices, but are still tempted to practice their Christian duties in a spirit of ritualism. This must be actively avoided; God is not pleased by ritualism or empty gestures: <<*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings*>> (Hosea 6:6), and: <<*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*>> (Micah 6:8).

For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. With a little thought, it is easy to see how ritualism does not please God. He has no need for the meat of sacrificed animals; if I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. When a sacrifice is offered to God he is not being given something he does not have; in this sense the sacrifice is for the giver's sake and not his. Ritualism defeats its work for their sake.

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble. God described what he wanted more than rituals of sacrifice. He wanted a thankful heart, a life of obedience, and a living trust in him. This God rewards; to this he says, I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. The ordering of this final statement can only be considered as an act of grace, since God delivers and then the people glorify him.

Psalm 50:16-21 - He Speaks to the "Wicked": He Rebukes Them

It is clear that the wicked here are members of the covenant people who despise the privileges of the covenant: in v.16 they take his covenant on their lips, but they lack the right to do so; in v.17 they hate the fatherly discipline that God gives his children (Proverbs 3:11-12); and in v.22 they forget God, implying that they knew something of him to begin with. The covenant should have knit them together with all of God's people in the great project of showing forth true humanity for the sake of the world, but instead they prefer the thief and adulterers, and use their tongues for destructive purposes (vv.18-20). They misinterpreted God's silence; they thought he was as greedy as they are; but God in his mercy now issues his rebuke (v.21) and invites them to change their ways.

16 But to the wicked God says:
‘What right have you to recite my statutes,
or take my covenant on your lips?
17 For you hate discipline,
and you cast my words behind you.
18 You make friends with a thief when you see one,
and you keep company with adulterers.
19 ‘You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.
20 You sit and speak against your kin;
you slander your own mother’s child.
21 These things you have done and I have been silent;
you thought that I was one just like yourself.
But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.

Psalm 50:16-21

But to the wicked God says. It might be thought that God has now turned away from judging his people for their ritualism and has turned towards the nations, to judge them for their wickedness. This is not the case, as the following references to declaring God’s statutes and taking his covenant show. He speaks to the wicked among the people of God.

What right have you to recite my statutes. God questioned their right to speak forth his word when their lives were stuck in fundamental disobedience. Their words, indicated by declare my statutes and my covenant on your lips, spoke of God, but their lives and lifestyle choices dishonoured him.

For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. Their lives showed a hatred and disregard for the Word of God, no matter what their words said. How they lived spoke louder to God than what they said: <<*The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote*>> (Isaiah 29:13).

You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. ‘You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. They had specifically broken many of God’s commandments, including the

eighth, seventh, and ninth commandments. This was another way they displeased God, in addition to the ritualism mentioned in the previous verses.

It is possible to translate, you thought that [the] I [am] was one just like yourself; refer to Exodus 3:14 and the comments made there. This sharpens the rebuke, as God's name is especially connected with his promises of faithfulness and kindness to his people: <<*He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain'*>> (Exodus 3:12), and: <<*Say therefore to the Israelites, "I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord"*>> (Exodus 6:6-8), and the wicked are abusing this.

One way that they forgot God's holiness was in mistaking his patience and longsuffering for not caring about sin, i.e. these things you have done and I have been silent. Christians often make the same mistake and confuse the generous space God gives for confession and repentance to mean that he does not really care about sin.

But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you. They had misjudged God's graciousness and forgotten his holiness. In his love, God would not allow that to continue among his people.

Psalm 50:22-23 - He Sums It Up: Worship Him with the Heart

The final thought sums up the psalm, with its interest in what membership in God's favoured people should mean: joyfully to delight in God's presence, i.e. thanksgiving as his sacrifice, and a just and kind life in fellowship with God's people.

- 22 'Mark this, then, you who forget God,
or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver.
- 23 Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honour me;
to those who go the right way
I will show the salvation of God.'

Psalm 50:22-23

Mark this, then, you who forget God. Graciously, God offered those who forget him an opportunity to consider and change their thinking and their ways before he came to them in the judgement described in the first few verses of this psalm. Others speak of those who forget God: <<*Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish*>> (Job 8:13), and: <<*For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge; therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and set out slips of an alien god, though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow; yet the harvest will flee away on a day of grief and incurable pain*>> (Isaiah 17:10-11).

Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honour me. This speaks to the aspect of forsaking ritualism and coming to God not in empty ceremonies but with surrendered heart.

To those who go the right way. This speaks to the aspect of forsaking the hypocrisy and wickedness, coming to God in confession and repentance.

I will show the salvation of God. Performing these two things, forsaking ritualism and wicked hypocrisy, even those do not earn salvation. It simply puts them in a place to receive what God reveals and gives - the salvation of God: <<*He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God*>> (Psalm 98:3), and: <<*The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God*>> (Isaiah 52:10).