

The rule of God over the nations is a significant theme in this sequence of Zion psalms (Ps 46-50). The nations are commanded by God, “the King of all the earth” (Ps 47:7) to “Cease and desist!” from their wars and rebellions (Ps 46:10). God alone “reigns over the nations” and he “is seated on his holy throne” (Ps 47:7-8). From Mount Zion, God strikes terror in the hearts of the kings who advance against the “city of the Lord Almighty” (Ps 48:8) and God gives peace and assurance to his people who rest secure in his presence. His “praise reaches to the ends of the earth” (Ps 48:10). This big picture of God’s royal rule over all the nations sets up the summons to “all who live in the world” to hear the psalmist explain the riddle of life and death (Ps 49:1). The poor and the rich alike are equally vulnerable to death, because no one has the wealth to redeem a human life. “No one can redeem the life of another. . . no payment is ever enough” (Ps 49:7-8). Even if someone were to gain the whole world, they would not have the means to redeem a single life. Only God has the power to redeem us from the realm of the dead and take us to himself (Ps 49:15).

The global scope of these Zion psalms celebrates the rule and reign of the Kingdom of God over all the earth and sets up Psalm 50’s prophetic focus on the “consecrated people of God” (Ps 50:5). The whole earth is summoned by God to witness his reassurance and judgment of the people of God. Heaven and earth are commanded to hear what God has to say about worship! In Psalm 51 the focus will narrow down to the individual in need of repentance, restoration and renewal.

The psalmist moves us from the royal wedding of the King (Ps 45), to “the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps 46), to the universal celebration of God’s rule over all the nations (Ps 47), to the joy and peace of Mount Zion (Ps 48), to a warning to “all who live in the world,” rich and poor alike, that redemption is found in God alone (Ps 49), and finally to what it means for the people of God to worship in Spirit and in Truth (Ps 50).

This sequence of Zion psalms written by the Sons of Korah is climaxed by an Asaph psalm. Asaph was the “worship pastor” during the reigns of David and Solomon.¹ He was a poet and a prophet with a distinctive, edgy style that was forceful and intense.² All twelve of Asaph’s psalms are soul-searching and passionate.³ Psalm 50 is a forceful reminder of what God expects from his “consecrated people.” Instead of empty ritual and a form of godliness, God calls for the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving from lives devoted to his will.

On the day that Jesus drove out the sheep and goats and money changers from the temple courts, he might have prayed Psalm 50 in his morning prayers (John 2:13-22). Psalm 50 may have been on his mind when he said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “. . . True worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the father seeks” (John 4:23). The impact of Psalm 50 lines up well with the apostle Paul’s spiritual direction: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy

¹ 1 Chron 6:39; 15:17; 16:5

² 2 Chron 29:30; Neh 12:46

³ Psalms 50, 73-83

and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1).

Call to Worship

*The Mighty One, God, the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to 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 a tempest rages.
He summons the heavens above,
and the earth, that he may judge the people:
“Gather to me this consecrated people,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”
And the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for he is a God of justice.*

Psalm 50:1-6

These first six verses invite reflection and provide a necessary correction to our casual approach to God. The coming of the Mighty One, God, the Lord, invokes the fear-of-the-Lord reverence.⁴ The issue is not head-knowledge, but direct personal encounter with the living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “We don’t so much lack knowledge, we lack reverence.”⁵

Asaph’s powerful lyrics, pulsate with brilliant images of light and sound, but we can only imagine how this ancient percussionist scored this cosmic inclusive summons. Psalm 50 restores the awesome “wow” and dreaded “woe” to vital worship. Asaph’s images of the living God refuse to be contained, explained, or domesticated. God is “inexhaustible, immeasurable and unfathomable—eternal, immortal and invisible. The highest mountain peaks and the deepest canyon depths are just tiny echoes of His proclaimed greatness. And the blazing stars above, the faintest emblems of the full measure of His glory.”⁶

From Mount Zion, the center of unlimited power and unyielding justice, the Mighty One, God, the Lord, summons the earth and shines forth in beauty. This unique and majestic array of titles, El, Elohim, Yahweh, identifies the mighty God who transcends all other gods, the one who makes himself known in person is the “I Am” – the God of Exodus and Sinai, the God of Abraham, Moses, and David.

This blazing and torrential manifestation of God, this epiphany of Divine activity and judgment has more to do with Revelation 1 than with Luke 2. Yet the church calendar associates Ps. 50:1-6

⁴ Bruce Waltke calls the phrase, “the fear-of-the-Lord”, “the quintessential rubric, which expresses in a nutshell the basic grammar that holds the covenant community together.” See Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 44.

⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 44.

⁶ Matt Redman, *Facedown*, 24.

with Epiphany when we celebrate the coming of the magi to worship the King of kings and Lord of lords. The four hundred year silence of God is broken at the first Advent with an almost incomprehensible humility: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The apostle John’s Lord’s Day vision of the Son of Man fits with Psalm 50 (Rev 1:12-16).

Heaven and earth are summoned to the supreme court presided over by the God of justice. Kidner writes, “Everything at first points to a diatribe against the heathen, who are summoned to Zion, where sinful man must meet the impact of a deity at its most dazzling and overwhelming.”⁷ But suddenly the tables are turned. It is not pagans who are judged but the so-called “faithful ones.” The apostle Peter’s admonition corresponds with Psalm 50: “For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17).

The “consecrated people” of God are subpoenaed to appear before the Righteous Judge. In some circles God is on trial. Well-meaning believers feel compelled to defend God on a host of issues, including the sanctity of life, the holiness of sexuality, the purity of marriage, the reality of the miraculous, the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the inclusiveness of the mission of the church, and the exclusiveness of the gospel. But in Psalm 50, God is not on trial, we are! It is our empty rituals and hard hearts that are being scrutinized by the God of justice and the whole world is watching. A young man who was raised in a harsh and judgmental religious home said to a friend of mine, “Sometimes I feel like I need to forgive God.” To which my friend responded, “Maybe what you need to do is to forgive the people who painted a false and distorted picture of God.”

Asaph is something like the court bailiff, declaring, “All rise! The God of justice is now presiding.” We are not idle observers taking in the judicial proceedings, but the actual defendants who have been brought up on charges. Believers are on trial for the way they worship the Lord. There are two different types of defendants: The first group of defendants (Ps 50:7-15) are thoughtless worshipers, who are merely going through the motions, fulfilling their ritualistic duties without heartfelt understanding and thanksgiving. The second group of defendants (Ps 50:16-21) are hardened hypocritical worshipers whose blatant duplicity thinly conceals wilful collusion with evil doers.

“Hear This, My People!”

*Listen, my people, and I will speak;
I will testify against you, Israel:
I am God, your God.
I bring no charges against you concerning your sacrifices
or concerning your burnt offerings, where are ever before me.
I have no need of a bull from your stall
or goats from your pens,*

⁷ Kidner, Psalms, 186.

*for every animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know every bird in the mountains,
and the insects in the fields 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 on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”*

Psalm 49:7-15

Asaph describes two vexing problems: sacrilege up and sacrilege down. Desecration goes upward in the form of embellishment, theological over-thinking, spiritual fantasizing, and obsequious piety. Desecration goes downward in the form of a dismissive and cavalier attitude, moral indifference, and hard-heartedness. Empty formalism and flagrant disobedience cover the two ends of the spectrum.

God commands a hearing reminiscent of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. . .” (Deut 6:4). The Shema summarizes beautifully the heart of the case the Lord has against his people. What was missing in their worship was not their sacrifices but their heartfelt love and genuine thanksgiving. They were in full compliance with the prescribed sacrifices and rituals, but they misconstrued the reason for sacrifices. Instead of their burnt offerings and sacrifices being a grateful expression of their dependence upon the mercy of God, the people thought that God was in need of their sacrifices. They projected their felt needs onto God by implying that God wanted what they themselves wanted – someone to meet their needs. Whether or not they ever went so far as to compare the Lord to “hungry” pagan deities is hard to say. The pagan Sumerian notion of “the care and feeding of the gods” was a foreign concept to the Israelites, but sadly in practice, a familiar habit.⁸ Religion that revolves around ritual observance invariably makes God out to be needy for our attention.

In God’s court, the Judge takes the people to task for their indefensible misunderstanding of true worship. God ridicules the idea that he somehow needs their blue-ribbon bulls or goats from their herds (Ps 50:9 MSG). Don’t they know that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and all the animals in the forest? Besides, God doesn’t eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats anyways. The purpose of this mocking put-down is intended to show mindless ritualists how ridiculous they have been. When empty ritual replaces genuine faith and trust in Yahweh all that is left is pagan religion.

⁸ Wilson, Psalms, 762.

Psalm 50 awakens the Church to the danger of Christian idolatry. It is possible for well-intentioned believers to reduce worship to a performance that is self-satisfying but offensive to God.⁹ Danish Christian thinker Soren Kierkegaard echoed Asaph's concerns when he wrote,

“Verily there is that which is more contrary to Christianity, and to the very nature of Christianity, than any heresy, any schism, more contrary than all heresies and schisms combined, and this is, to *play* Christianity. But precisely in the very same sense that the child plays soldier, it is playing Christianity to take away the danger, and in place of this to introduce power, worldly goods, advantages, luxurious enjoyment of the most exquisite refinements. . . .”¹⁰

“Mere outward ceremonies possess no value,” Calvin argued as he reasoned from the prophets (Jer 7:22; Mic 6:7; Hos 6:6; Isa 1:12; 58:1-2; 66:3), driving the truth home that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Calvin warned against our “a strong propensity . . . to form our estimate of God from ourselves, and to degenerate into a carnal worship.”¹¹ He claimed that in our fallen humanity we are “addicted to ceremonies” until we experience a vital relationship with the Lord that leads to the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.¹²

Like the prophets before them, the Mayflower Pilgrims were distressed over heightened religious formality in the absence of personal confession and commitment to Jesus Christ. At the risk of severe persecution they separated from the state church, the Church of England. Robert Cushman wrote *The Cry of the Stone* in 1619 (published in 1642), having fled from England to The Netherlands. What Cushman and his fellow Pilgrims found objectionable was the imposition of an external Christian identity on a population of unconverted souls – that is, calling “Christian” people who had no intention of following Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Church buildings staffed with officials administering ordinances did not make for true religion. “The visible Church of Christ,” Cushman explained, “is a company of people externally holy,” who voluntarily meet together “intending to perform the whole will and worship of God” according to the revelation of God.¹³ Cushman was quick to add that many believers may be weak and ignorant of the faith, especially at first, but it is their earnest desire to grow in their faith and faithfulness. The mere practice of baptism, holy communion, and preaching did not constitute real worship. Cushman describes the visible Church as a body of believers, gifted in the Spirit, practicing Christian love and church discipline, serving their neighbors outside the church, preaching the Word, administering the Sacraments, and sharing their provisions with the

⁹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), p. 94. Barth: “We must remember that everything will depend upon the Christians not painting for non-Christians in word or deed a picture of the Lord or an idea of Christ, but on their succeeding with their human words and ideas in pointing to Christ Himself. For it is not the conception of Him, not the dogma of Christ that is the real Lord, but He who is attested in the word of the Apostles. Be it said to those who account themselves believers: May it be given us not to set up an image, when we speak of Christ, a Christian idol, but in all our weakness to point to Him who is the Lord and so, in the power of His Godhead, the sovereign decision upon the existence of every person.”

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom”* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 8

¹¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 268.

¹² Calvin, *Psalms*, 269.

¹³ Robert Cushman, *The Cry of the Stone*, Editor Michael R. Paulick, Transcription by James W. Baker. The General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 2016. 53.

needy.¹⁴

Charles Spurgeon described the tension between ritual and relationship this way: “Sacraments (so called) and sacred rites are the main concern with unconverted but religious men, but with the Most High the spiritual worship which they forget is the sole matter. Let the external be maintained by all means, according to the divine command, but if the secret and spiritual be not in them, they are a vain oblation, a dead ritual, and even an abomination before the Lord.”¹⁵

The positive solution to “sacrilege up” is surprisingly simple. Augustine asks, “Say then, Lord our God, what do You want?” The psalmist’s answer is simple and straightforward, “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.” Augustine’s reaction was relief, “I feared that you might expect something beyond my power to give. . .but this sacrifice of praise, that I can do!” We don’t have to raise millions of dollars to build tall steeples or travel to Timbuktu or mount a campaign to change the world. “We are without anxiety,” Augustine declares. “God requires of us the sacrifice of praise.”¹⁶ Augustine’s examples are easy to grasp: Zacchaeus knew exactly what to do; the poor widow had it in her purse; the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth had it in their hearts. In other words, to those who have been moved by their dependence on the mercy of God, authentic praise comes naturally and spontaneously.

Hardened Hypocrites Confronted

*But to the wicked person, 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 sit and testify against your brother
and slander your own mother’s son.
When you did these things and I kept silent,
you thought I was exactly like you.
But I now arraign you
and set my accusations before you.*

*Consider this, you who forget God,
or I will tear you to pieces, with no one to rescue you:
Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me,*

¹⁴ Cushman, *The Cry of the Stone*, 61-63.

¹⁵ Spurgeon, *Psalm 50*,

¹⁶ Augustine, *Psalm 50*, 185.

and to the blameless I will show my salvation.”

Psalm 49:16-23

The second constituency before the Mighty One includes hardened hypocrites, or the “sacrilege down” group. These people pay lip service to will of God and then do as they please. They are covenant-breakers, violating the Ten Commandments one by one. The psalmist profiles them with a series of “synonymous pairs.”¹⁷ They are aficionados of god-talk and masters of religious rhetoric. They pretend to love the Word of God, but they really hate it and they throw it away like garbage. They collude with thieves and befriend adulterers. Their mouths are trained for evil and their tongues are weapons of deceit. No one, not even family, is safe from their false witness and slander. The psalmist’s profile of hardened hypocrites fits with the apostle’s warning to Timothy, “People will be lovers of themselves, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having *a form of godliness but denying its power*” (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

Not surprisingly, given human nature, these hypocrites assumed that Yahweh was just like them. They mis-interpreted God’s silence as permission, when in fact it was an indictment against unambiguous evil. But now God has come and “will not be silent” (Ps 50:3). The God of justice has set his accusations before the hypocrite. He warns him of terrifying consequences. If anyone refuses to remember God and turn from his wicked ways, God will come and tear him to pieces. Like a lion ripping apart his prey, the hypocrite will die like a slaughtered lamb (see Ps 49:12, 14).

Anyone tempted to blame God for hollow and hypocritical religion ought to take seriously the clarity of God’s will and the severity of the judgment awaiting mindless religion and flagrant disobedience. Implicit in the conclusion of Psalm 50 is a call for repentance. Pure, heart-felt, life-changing thanksgiving coupled with a grace-filled determination to walk in the way of salvation is the best way to honor God. The antidote to religious performance and hypocrisy is as radical as it is simple. We hear it throughout scripture. “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Ps 51:17); “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8); “The true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23).

God graphically disabused misguided worshipers of any notion of his neediness by asking, “Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” Jesus used an equally graphic image when he said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (John 6:54). God doesn’t need us; we need God. How could it be said more dramatically than that?!

¹⁷ Wilson, Psalms, 763.