

# “God Himself is Judge”

## A Sermon on Psalm 50

*Texts: Psalm 50:1-23; Hebrews 8:1-13*

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Courtroom scenes on television or in film often make for good drama—especially when the case takes a surprising turn, or when justice itself is on the line. In Psalm 50 we have a dramatic courtroom scene in which YHWH himself summons the whole world to the foot of Mount Zion to appear before his divine tribunal. But when the charges are read, those assembled in the court realize that the defendant is not who or what we expect. Judgment begins in the house of the Lord.

As we continue our series on select Psalms, we will take up Psalm 50, one of twelve Psalms attributed to Asaph. So far in our series the Psalms we’ve covered Psalms written by David, Moses, and the Sons of Korah. We now add a Psalm to our list attributed to the aforementioned Asaph (whose name, in addition to Psalm 50, is also attached to Psalms 73-83). During our time in the Psalter, have we covered Psalms of praise, Psalms of trust, royal Psalms, wisdom Psalms, and Psalms used during worship in the temple. Psalm 50 (which appears in Book Two of the Psalter—which includes Psalms 42-72) is yet another genre (or type) of Psalm called a prophetic (or oracular) Psalm, because in this Psalm, God appears in a theophanic vision, apparently to accuse the nations and warn them of a judgment certain to come, before calling them to repentance.<sup>1</sup>

As we have done throughout this series, we begin by looking at the setting and historical background of the Psalm. We’ll then go through the text of the Psalm, before we make a number of points of application. As we have also done throughout this series I’ll assign you a bit of homework (read Psalms 46-53), and then we’ll sing this Psalm, a distinctive practice of confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches who believe that the Psalter is the primary hymn book for the people of God.

We begin by looking at this Psalm’s place in Book Two of the Psalter. Psalms 46-49 speak of God’s rule over his creation from a cosmic perspective. In Psalm 50, God declares that he has no human limitations. He does not hunger. He does not need sacrifices. He hates pious platitudes and self-righteous religious speech. Psalm 51 (which, Lord willing, we’ll cover in several weeks) speaks of human sinfulness and guilt before God, as well as reminding us of God’s forgiveness and mercy. Psalm 52 contrasts human folly and God’s wisdom, while Psalm 53 mocks the fool who says in his heart, “there is no God.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the most interesting historical questions surrounding this Psalm has to do with its authorship. We know that Asaph was one of the musicians or singers in the temple choir founded by Heman during the reign of David. This circle of temple singers/musicians also includes the sons of Korah and Jeduthun (Ethan). According to 1 Chronicles 16:4-7, “*then [David] appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the Lord, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel. Asaph was the chief. . . . Asaph was to sound the cymbals. . . . Then on that day David first appointed that thanksgiving be sung to the Lord by Asaph and his brothers.*” Asaph is mentioned again in 2 Chronicles 29:30. “*And Hezekiah the king and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of*

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<sup>1</sup> VanGemeran, Psalms, 426.

<sup>2</sup> VanGemeran, Psalms, 427.

*David and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped.*” Whether Psalm 50 was written by Asaph, or dedicated to him is not clear. But we do know Asaph was appointed by David for this role, and that Asaph was considered a seer (or had some sort of prophetic gift). Asaph’s prophetic office is reflected by his composition of those twelve Psalms attributed to him.

In terms of its structure, Psalm 50 is divided into five sections. Verses 1-6 warn of the righteous judgment of God when the judge appears and summons the whole earth to Zion. In verses 7-15, God warns his people by bringing truth about them into the open, so that his chosen people seek to repent. Then, in verses 16-21, God warns the wicked of the danger of hypocrisy, by informing them of their fate unless they repent. As the Psalm comes to a close (vv. 22-23), the author returns once again to the theme of the righteous judgment of God.<sup>3</sup>

So with this background before us, we now turn to the text of Psalm 50.

Psalm 50 opens with a vision of God summoning the inhabitants of the earth to appear before his seat of judgment. We read that “*the Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.*” In the Hebrew text El, Elohim, and YHWH (two general words for God), appear together with God’s personal name revealed to Israel (YHWH), presenting us with a very majestic and solemn opening to what follows—a word of warning and a promise of forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> “*The Mighty One, God the Lord* (YHWH) summons his people Israel to appear before him (because they are his covenant people and he is their sovereign Lord). But YHWH’s summons extends beyond Israel to include all the inhabitants of the earth, because he is their sovereign creator. So, the visionary scene before us is that of the creator-redeemer summoning all the creatures of the earth to appear before him.

Since God is said to dwell in Zion (in the midst of his people Israel, where his temple is located in Jerusalem), therefore it is “*out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, [that] God shines forth.*” In Psalm 48:2, Zion is described as “*beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.*” God’s glory was evident at Sinai in the glory-cloud which accompanied Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness. According to Exodus 13:21-22, at that time “*the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.*” In the visionary scene of Psalm 50, we see that same covenant-keeping God who was present with his people at Mount Sinai (when he gave Israel his law and established this nation as his covenant people) continues to reveal his glory from Mount Zion in Jerusalem where his temple now stands. And the inhabitants of the earth will see his glory.

As one writer very insightfully points out, when God summons the whole world to his judgment seat, every eye is on God, yet God’s eye is fixed upon his people Israel. This visionary imagery serves to make the point that God has already revealed his glory to his people, Israel. Yet the revelation of his glory is not just limited to Israel. The whole earth will also witness his glory. The reader suddenly realizes that the Psalm is not directed to the world’s inhabitants, but to God’s covenant people, who, in

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<sup>3</sup> VanGemeren, Psalms, 426.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 186.

the light of that judgment which is to come upon the whole earth, are commanded to repent.<sup>5</sup>

It is in verse 3 of the Psalm, that this dramatic turn of events takes place. “*The Mighty One, God the Lord, issues the divine summons, and calls the heavenly court into session to mete out judgment. “Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest.”* The picture of a fiery tempest (storm) is intended to remind God’s covenant people that the people of the earth must be aware of with whom it is they are dealing. In the 66<sup>th</sup> chapter of his prophecy, Isaiah connects this fire and tempest with the day of judgment. “*For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many*” (vv. 15-16). In Hebrews 12:29, the author reminds us of the frightening truth that “*our God is a consuming fire*” (echoing the words of Psalm 50).

Even as YHWH summons Israel to appear before him at Mount Zion, the heavenly witnesses enter into the heavenly court as the charges are about to be read. As we read in verse 4, “*he calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people.*” In the vision, Israel is expecting that God is going to judge the heathen Gentiles—they are wicked and ungodly, they have rejected YHWH’s rule. The people have assembled, the heavenly court is in now session, the witnesses have entered the courtroom, when suddenly it becomes clear that the purpose of this court is not to hear God’s verdict read out against the Gentile (and unbelieving) nations. No, YHWH’s case is being brought against his people Israel. As Peter reminds us (1 Pet. 4:17), “*for it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*”

The ground for God’s judgment upon Israel are the words which the representatives of the people of Israel swore on oath in his very presence during the ratification of Israel’s covenant with YHWH on Mount Sinai. Recall the events from Exodus 24:3-8. “*Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” The leaders of Israel swore the oath of ratification on behalf of the people—“*all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.*” But did the Israelites do all of these things? Were they obedient to the commandments of God? No, Israel has sinned against God. And so YHWH has called the heavenly court to order. The witnesses will testify. The charges against Israel will be read. Indeed, judgment begins in the household of God.*

As the covenant people of God, it is Israel, not the nations who have been consecrated unto YHWH. They must be judged before the nations are judged at the end of the age. In verse 5-6, the judge begins the proceedings when he declares, “*gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!*” *The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!*” Just as a bailiff tells the assembled court to stand, informs them that judge “so and so is presiding,” and then instructs those in the

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<sup>5</sup> Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 185-186.

court to sit, so that the judge can call the court to order, so too we see the same kind of legal procedure here. God addresses his covenant people (those who are his through the offerings of sacrifice—probably a reference to the blood of the covenant, which had sprinkled upon the representatives of the people when they gathered in the Lord’s presence on Mount Sinai). If the Israelites thought that everything between themselves and the holy God was OK, they were badly mistaken. The court is in session, YHWH presides from the throne of judgment, and it is Israel, not the world, which is on trial.

As the case proceeds, it will also become clear that no final sentence will be meted out *if* the people of Israel repent of their sins. And yet, instead of a heartfelt and sincere repentance by Israel when God’s charges are read, the Israelites simply repeat the same religious words before YHWH that they have mouthed their whole lives. Their hypocrisy is about to be exposed for everyone in the visionary court to see.<sup>6</sup> In verse 7, the “*The Mighty One, God the Lord* declares, “*hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God.*” It is God himself who will bear witness to Israel’s faithfulness, or lack thereof. He alone truly knows what is in the hearts and minds of his people.

The pagans around Israel offered the gods their sacrifices to appease the various cravings of the these gods. But YHWH has no such cravings as if he needed anything from his people. In fact, as he states in verse 8, “*not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me.*” The divine rebuke will not come because Israel offered sacrifices and expressions of thanksgiving. The rebuke will come because these offerings were made out of a sense of duty, not faith. They were also made with the false assumption that YHWH depended upon them, just as the pagan gods depended upon the sacrifices of the Canaanites. There was no real gratitude in the hearts of the Israelites, no faith in his promise to save the people from their sins.

In verses 9-11, God reminds the Israelites that he needs nothing from them. “*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.*” No, these things are not “yours,” YHWH says, all of these things are “mine.” In fact, there is a fair bit of sarcasm here when YHWH speaks of “your house,” “your fold,” when ultimately all of these things are YHWH’s. He gives these things to his people because he is gracious. YHWH does not rebuke Israel for doing what he commands. No, he rebukes Israel because his people are offering these sacrifices for all the wrong reasons. They do not see themselves as sinners who offer these sacrifices to turn aside the wrath of God.

YHWH is not like the ancient pagan gods (who like modern super heroes—they have great powers, and can help people, if coaxed into doing so). These demi-gods rule over small aspects of creation. In verses 12-13, God corrects any false assumptions about him on the part of the Israelites. “*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?*” The Israelites are not to offer sacrifices because God is hungry—as if he has need of them. The act of offering of these sacrifices which he has commanded is not the issue. The issue is that Israel offers these sacrifices without gratitude and with the false (and pagan) assumption that God commands these offerings because he needs them and is dependant upon them.

The reason for the heavenly trial is now clear. The charges against Israel are revealed. God did not command sacrifices because he needs to eat. He commands animal sacrifices because the Israelites are sinful and these sacrifices are teaching them about a coming Messiah who will die upon a cross for the

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 186-187.

sins of his people. That this is a matter of the people's attitudes becomes clear in verse 14 when YHWH commands, "*offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High.*" The issue is not the act (the sacrifice), but the reason for it (thanksgiving). Are we to give to God to get something back in exchange? Or do we offer to God our heartfelt thanksgiving because of what he has already given us?

Thank offerings in ancient Israel were strictly voluntary. Those who made Thank offerings shared them by eating a portion of them with the others making Thank offerings. These offerings reveal that God desires that his people to commune with him, and with others who are thankful. In an obvious foreshadowing of both the Lord's Supper and the marriage feast of Christ the Lamb (Revelation 19), "the Most high" invites his people to celebrate a banquet in his very presence.<sup>7</sup> This is why the author of Hebrews exhorts us, "*through [Christ] then let us continually offer up ta sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*" (Hebrews 13:15). This is why our fathers in the faith were so wise in speaking of the Christian life in terms of guilt, grace, and gratitude.

As we have seen throughout our series on the Psalms, YHWH is gracious and desires that his people repent of their sin, renounce their own righteousness, and seek his help in times of trouble. As YHWH informs the heavenly court in verse 15, "*and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.*" YHWH is not only that one who gives the law and makes covenant with his people, he is also the great deliverer who stands ever ready to help his people in times of trouble. The Lord does not want his people to make showy displays of righteousness to impress others or to demonstrate their great piety. God wants his people to make sacrifices with grateful hearts and with the expectation that God will help us in times of trouble if only we call upon his name with true faith (believing that he keeps his promises) and demonstrate true repentance (that we are sorry for our sins).

What follows in the Psalm—the next scene in the heavenly court—amounts to the reading of the law as commanded in Deuteronomy 31:12-13. "*Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.*" The law is being read in the court, and the law will do as God intends it to do, expose our sinfulness.

This is why in verses 16-17 of Psalm 50, God promises to keep his covenant if his people repent of their hypocrisy. "*But to the wicked God says: `What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you.*" God hates hypocrisy. He looks on the human heart, not the words which roll off our lips. He hates it when the Israelites mouth the words of the law when they have no intention of keeping the statutes they are reciting. Such people are a law to themselves (autonomous) hating both the discipline the law brings, as well as the very words they repeat. The wicked (which designates those who are unregenerate and who do not have faith), do not recognize their own sinfulness when the law is read. Deep down, they hate the law.

In verses 18-20, God continues to expose Israel's sin with a list of charges which are representative of the whole of the Ten Commandments. "*If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers. `You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son.*" In light of the mention here of Israel's

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<sup>7</sup> VanGemeran, Psalms, 430.

violation of the seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments, we should consider the point made by James (2:10). *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”* Israel stands guilty before God. Those who among them who love the Lord and have faith in YHWH’s covenant promise to save them from their sins, they will hear these words, be convicted by them, and then repent. But the hypocrites and wicked hear these words and they only worry that their hypocrisy might be exposed. As YHWH declares to the court in verse 21, *“these things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and play the charge before you.”* Just because God is silent does not mean that he approves or is indifferent to our conduct. The law has been read, Israel’s sin is apparent, and YHWH’s word of rebuke thunders in the heavenly court.

In verses 22-23, Asaph brings Psalm 50 to a close with a call for Israel to repent, lest the court mete out justice immediately. *“Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver! The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!”* There are two kinds of people within Israel who hear these words. There are those who offer sacrifices out of faith and in true thanksgiving, and who will find the way of salvation—just as YHWH promised. But those Israelites who forget their God will find themselves receiving all of the covenant curses. God himself will tear them apart. There will be no mercy. Judgment does indeed begin in the house of the Lord. God himself is judge!

**T**he heavenly scene in YHWH’s court points us ahead to the new covenant and to the coming of Jesus Christ, who is our defense attorney and advocate in the heavenly court.

In 1 John 1:5-2:2, we read of how the heavenly court functions during the new covenant era, that covenant about which we read in our New Testament lesson taken from Hebrews 8:1-13. Beginning in 1 John 1:5, John tells us: *“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

In the heavenly scene in Psalm 50, although YHWH promised forgiveness, Israel had no advocate, no one to plead for mercy in the court. But in John’s epistle he reminds us that Jesus is our defense attorney—our advocate before the Father. Furthermore, Israel stood condemned before YHWH because the nation had violated the terms of the covenant God had made with Israel at Mount Sinai—Israel had sinned against YHWH by breaking the Ten Commandments. And yet, YHWH promises mercy and help on the day of trouble but does not specify how he will accomplish this.

What is clear from the perspective of New Testament hindsight is that Jesus serves as our defense attorney because we are no longer under that covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. We are under a new covenant, established by the merits, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our covenant mediator and heavenly defense attorney. When we appear before YHWH, Jesus Christ appears with us, as our advocate and friend. As we read in Hebrews 8:1-2, *“now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places [i.e., in the heavenly court].”* Jumping ahead to verse 6, we read, *“Christ has obtained*

*a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.”* Now that Christ has come, the law of God no longer condemns us. The old covenant has passed away and God has established a new covenant in its place. God now declares to us, *“I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”* God himself is judge, and in Jesus Christ we have our verdict. Not guilty! This is only because Jesus has died for our sins and was raised for our justification. Through the mercies of the mediator of this new and better covenant, we have been found not guilty and have even been declared righteous.

With that, the heavenly court is now adjourned. For us, Psalm 50 is not a warning of judgment, but yet another reason to offer heartfelt sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God who is himself our judge.