

E. Psalm 50 – Sonship and Idolatry

As songs of worship grounded in Israel's sonship, the Psalms speak to all of the issues of sonship, including the various challenges and obstacles the Israelite people encountered in seeking to live faithfully as Yahweh's children. Those challenges are reflected in the psalms of lament and imprecation, but also in psalms that address Israel's rebellion, hypocrisy, and propensity toward idolatry. For all their desire and commitment to faithfully fulfill their sonship, the children of Israel discovered and often lamented the fact that they were utterly incapable of doing so. Yahweh had raised up and nurtured sons and daughters as a faithful Father, but His children continually strayed and abused that relationship and its privilege and obligation.

It's not surprising, then, that numerous psalms center on Israel's waywardness, and Psalm 50 is one of them. It is one of the twelve psalms ascribed to Asaph, yet it isn't grouped with the other eleven that begin Book Three of the Psalter (ref. 73-83). Again, Asaph was a composer and seer, and under David's direction, the Levites appointed him as the chief musician among those charged with overseeing Israel's worship (ref. 1 Chronicles 15:16-19, 16:4-7, 25:1-6; also 2 Chronicles 5:12, 35:15). Some of his psalms are deeply personal (Psalm 73, 77), while others are communal and speak on behalf of the Hebrew nation (Psalm 74, 78, 79, 80). And consistent with his status as a seer, some of Asaph's psalms speak on behalf of Yahweh Himself (Psalm 81, 82). Psalm 50 is one such psalm, and in it Asaph gives voice to Yahweh's indictment of Israel's idolatry and its bad fruit in their relationship with Him and their brethren.

1. The psalm conveys the image of a courtroom scene, and Asaph began by introducing Yahweh, the judge, much as a court representative announces a judge's entrance at the start of proceedings. Asaph introduced Him as the almighty sovereign over all creation, but especially as the covenant God of Israel. Yahweh summons the earth from its rising to its setting, but does so as the Lord who is enthroned in glory on Mount Zion. And He here summons the earth and heavens together, as comprising the entire created order (Genesis 1:1), to stand as witnesses to His judgment of His covenant people (vv. 1-6). Asaph portrayed the creation as standing together with its Creator in His indictment of Israel, thus underscoring that it is faithful to Him in a way that His covenant sons are not.

Furthermore, he depicted Yahweh as coming forth from Zion as a consuming fire that rages like a tempestuous whirlwind (v. 3). But he employed this terrifying imagery to emphasize God's fearsome power in *judgment*, not destruction; when He arises to judge, no one and nothing can escape the fire of His gaze and discernment. Here, He calls His *covenant people* into judgment, designating them His "godly ones" to indicate at the outset that the issue is their failure to fulfill their calling as His image-children (vv. 5-6).

2. After introducing Yahweh in this way, Asaph began to speak for Him, as if He Himself were addressing the sons of Israel. This address comprises the balance of the psalm (vv. 7-23), and sets out God's indictment of Israel's faithfulness. It consists of two primary sections, with the first setting out the *essential issue* behind Yahweh's indictment (vv. 7-15), and the second presenting *specific particulars* as evidence (vv. 16-23). The two sections correspond to each other also in the fact that each concludes with a similar directive to repent and reorder their relationship with Him (cf. vv. 14-15, 22-23).

- a. After summoning His witnesses (the created order as *jury*) and the people of Israel (the *defendants*), Yahweh began to address them, establishing the reason for His indictment and the nature of Israel's offense. And His words show that the fundamental issue in their offense wasn't their behavior, but their *perspective*: It wasn't so much what they were doing or not doing, but how they were thinking and perceiving their relationship with their God; their culpable actions were simply outward expressions of the perversion in their hearts and minds. Hence Yahweh's opening remark (v. 7): "*I am God, **your** God. I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before Me.*"

This remark illumines the people's sense of their relationship with God, and so their expected counter-claim against His charges. *In effect, Yahweh articulated in advance the very argument that He knew Israel would offer in its own defense*: How could He charge them with violating the covenant relationship? They had demonstrated their faithfulness to the covenant and its demands by being scrupulous in presenting the offerings and sacrifices He prescribed.

God answered this unspoken objection in a way that is perhaps unexpected, but that gets to the very heart of His concern (vv. 9-13). The defendants believed that their dutiful observance in offering sacrifices proved their devotion, but the truth of the matter was something else altogether. Yahweh's answer shows that Israel's worship, for all its conscientiousness, was actually *idolatry*: The covenant children believed they were giving something to their God, and so situated themselves at the center of their worship. Yes, they were presenting their sacrifices to Yahweh as required, but *they* were doing so out of *their* provision.

*Israel's worship was to express their **unilateral** relationship with their God; instead, it followed the **bilateral** pattern that characterizes all human religion – the idolatry that is human spirituality centered in oneself.*

God's reply to Israel's sacrificial offerings exposed the truth that their worship was really about themselves. Whether or not they were conscious of it, they perceived their offerings as something they were providing to God, not as His gracious provision to them. They saw themselves as giving Him gifts out of their flocks and fields, when every creature already belongs to Him (vv. 9-11). There is absolutely nothing that He lacks, but even if He did need something, He would never ask them, for the reality is that they had nothing to give Him; everything they have access to is already His (vv. 12-13; cf. Isaiah 66:1-2).

Thus God confronted His covenant children with the shocking truth that their worship, whatever they believed it to be, was no different from the ritual practices of the pagans. The Israelites disdained the Gentiles as ungodly idolaters, but they were guilty of the same perspective and mindset. People in the ancient world viewed their acts of worship as tending to the needs of their divine masters. The gods were greater than men, but they, too, required sustenance and provision. Thus sacrificial offerings were believed to supply the deity to whom they were presented, and the hope was that this provision would secure the god's favor.

So God framed His indictment to show Israel that they shared that same perspective in their worship; in some sense they, too, believed that they were providing for some need in Him. In His words, they were giving Him sacrificial flesh to eat and blood to drink (v. 13). But in fact, Yahweh needed nothing and received nothing from them. Every created thing – including *them* – already belongs to Him as Creator and Lord, so His relationship with all of His creatures is entirely unilateral; *He gives and they receive* (Psalm 104).

There was nothing the children of Israel could give to Him, but this didn't mean they had no obligation to Him. They *were* obligated, in their worship and daily lives, to acknowledge their unilateral relationship with Him by offering to Him their sincere and perpetual gratitude and humble dependence. This is what they owed Him, and this is what He required from them (vv. 14-15; cf. Psalm 51:14-17; Isaiah 66:1-2; Micah 6:6-8; also Romans 11:33-36).

- b. The people of Israel would have expected God to point to practical failures in any indictment He brought against them, but He instead insisted that *idolatry* was their fundamental offense. Their actions weren't the issue so much as their perspective and attitude; they were worshipping Him in the way the Gentiles worship their gods, “scratching His back” in the hope that He would reciprocate. In the end, their worship wasn't about Him, but about them (cf. Isaiah 44:9-17).

But this didn't mean Yahweh found nothing to condemn in Israel's conduct; indeed, idolatry always leads to ungodly behavior, for it is axiomatic that people begin to resemble what they worship. The Lord set Israel apart to be a *godly* people (v. 5) – a people who mirrored Him as His image-children. But instead they joined with the nations in being *ungodly*, reflecting the idols fashioned in the minds and hearts of humans who are severed from God's life and mind. And this inward ungodliness expressed itself in every sort of ungodly conduct.

And so Yahweh advanced His indictment from Israel's idolatry to the evil practices that flowed from it (vv. 16-21). And the marrow of that evil was the nation's flagrant hypocrisy and hubris. In the face of their overt wickedness, the Israelite people continued to congratulate themselves that they were God's holy election, uniquely set apart and bound to Him by covenant. *They* were above the pagans and their detestable idolatry; *they* were a royal and priestly nation. But in fact, it was precisely their unique privilege that incurred for them greater guilt than that of the unclean Gentiles they so despised. *They were confidently self-assured in their covenant status, but Yahweh insisted that they had no right to even speak of His covenant Torah – not among themselves and certainly not to the Gentile peoples.* For all their dutiful obedience, the covenant household was an undisciplined and unfaithful son who hated Yahweh's words and instruction. He had chosen them and set them apart to be His light to the nations, but instead they stood in the darkness in rebellious solidarity with the rest of mankind. Despite their unique privilege and high calling as sons of the true God, Israel had become an idolatrous house indistinguishable even from Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 18-20; cf. Isaiah 1:10-15, 66:1-4; Jeremiah 2:1-13, 16:1-18; Ezekiel 16, 23).

3. The children of Israel were blind to their own arrogance and ungodliness, and they tacitly ascribed the same blindness to their God. They were oblivious to their true condition, and they acted as if Yahweh were equally oblivious. Indeed, His silence in the face of their idolatry and wickedness reinforced their delusion that they were faithful children whose devotion in sacrifice and offerings honored and pleased Him (v. 21).

But this was far from the truth. The Lord had held His peace while His covenant sons continued to dishonor and disobey Him, inflating themselves in their own eyes even while their hearts and hands were defiled. This pattern marked their lives with one another, but also their relationship with their God. He had remained silent for a season, but now He was confronting His people with their offense and the judgment they were bringing down on their own heads (vv. 22-23): Their dutiful observances didn't cloak the truth that they'd actually *forgotten* their God. He saw through their apparent piety and recognized that their worship was self-centered and self-concerned. And so they must not conclude that His previous silence indicated His ignorance or indifference. Whether or not *they* discerned it, *He* recognized that they had reimagined Him in their own image, and their idolatry would not stand. If they didn't consider His words and repent, He would arise and "tear them to pieces" in devastation, desolation and exile, just as He'd pledge through Moses centuries earlier (Deuteronomy 28-29).

Israel's *idolatry* was its core offense, and all of its evil practices were simply the rotten fruit of that ungodly root. This idolatry desecrated the nation's relationship with Yahweh and polluted the people and their institutions, and it was from this perspective that He warned them to consider and repent: In terms of their *idolatry*, this would involve rethinking and reordering their relationship with Him – offering to Him "*sacrifices of thanksgiving*" that express humble, dependent and grateful hearts (v. 23a). And forsaking their idolatry would bear its good fruit in all of the dimensions of their lives as God's covenant children. It would find them "*ordering their way aright*" (v. 23b).

Yahweh called His people to return to Him, and He reiterated, as He had done so many times over the centuries, that He would meet their gratitude and dependence with His protection and deliverance. If His children would but trust Him and submit to His care with thankful hearts, He would arise on their behalf and show Himself to be their Savior.

This was Yahweh's word to Israel through Asaph, and the psalmist made no mention of how the people received his song. But the scriptural record suggests that it fell on largely unresponsive ears, if not deaf ones. For the trend of Israel's covenant life was ever-downward; David's kingdom would soon fracture and be reduced to two small tribes, with both sub-kingdoms (Israel and Judah) moving inexorably toward desolation and exile. Judah would watch Israel's destruction, and yet not learn from it. Indeed, at the very threshold of Judah's desolation, Yahweh observed that "*from the least even to the greatest, everyone is greedy for gain; from the prophet even to the priest, everyone practices deceit. And they heal the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, saying 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace*" (Jeremiah 8:10-11). The covenant son seemed to be incurable, but the Father would yet show Himself to be Israel's Savior. In due time, He would arise and heal Israel by embodying Israel and bearing its brokenness in Himself in the person of His incarnate Son. In that day, Israel's God and Great Physician would fulfill His own name, *Yahweh our righteousness* (Jeremiah 23:5-6).