

Call to worship: Psalm 47

We’ve been using Psalm 47 as our call to worship each week in this series,
because Psalm 47 stands at the heart of the opening series of Psalms in Book 2.

Since we’ve already looked at Psalms 45-49 in previous series, we won’t be covering them here.
Instead, what we’ll do is sing through them,
to remind ourselves of what this portion of Book 2 of the Psalms is doing.

Psalms 42-49 are all Psalms of the Sons of Korah.

Over the last two weeks we looked at Psalms 42-44,

Psalm 42-43 provides hope for the downcast –
the reminder that God *will save* his people (where Psalm 50 will end).

Psalm 44 then gave encouragement for the persecuted church –
God will bring justice in the end!

Psalm 45 is a love song –
the wedding song of the Son of David,
as it describes the beauty of the King,
and the beauty of his bride,
concluding (as is fitting for a wedding song)
with the promise of children and an everlasting inheritance.

[Sing Psalm 45]

Psalm 46 then celebrates Zion – the holy city of God.

Those who have been in the Revelation study at IUSB
will quickly notice that there is a connection
between the “bride” and the “city”;
and we should not see this as an accident here either!

Psalm 45 spoke of the King and his bride –

Psalm 46 speaks of God and his city –
and concludes by speaking of God’s judgment against the nations,
how God will be exalted among the nations,
because he himself is our rock and fortress.

[Sing Psalm 46]

Psalm 47 [which we used as the call to worship]

speaks then of the enthronement of God on his heavenly throne.
Yes, God is king of his holy city – Jerusalem – in Psalm 46 –
but Jerusalem sits uneasily in the description of Psalm 46,
because there is a river that makes glad the city of God in Ps 46,
but there is no river in Jerusalem!

Psalm 47 makes clear that God sits on his holy throne over *all* the earth –
(not just Jerusalem) –
and “the princes of the peoples
gather as the people of the God of Abraham.”

Psalm 47 already suggests what Revelation 21 will make clear:
the glory of the nations will be brought into the heavenly city,
because the nations will be *judged* – yes –
but also the nations will be *cleansed*.

Psalm 48 adds to the complexity of the “holy city”
by describing the city of the great king as “Mount Zion, in the far north.”
There is no way that you can reasonably speak of Jerusalem
as being in the far north of *anything*.
Psalm 48 describes Mount Zion as the city of the great King –
the glorious citadel where God himself is a fortress.
This city is what makes the daughters of Judah rejoice –
because this city (understood in the context of Pss 42-47)
is the place where God’s praise reaches the ends of the earth.
And Psalm 48 concludes by calling the people to walk around this city,
“consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels,
that you may tell the next generation that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever (literally, he will guide us beyond death).”
Jerusalem could only ever be a shadowy picture of this city.
[Sing Psalm 48]

And that’s why the last of the Psalms of the sons of Korah is **Psalm 49**.
Psalm 49 is *very different* from the rest of the psalms of the sons of Korah.
There are some connections to Psalms 42-44 –
the opening songs of the sons of Korah in Book 2.
But Psalms 42-44 had a definite emphasis on the King –
whereas Psalm 49 sounds more like Ecclesiastes
with its relentless focus on the inescapability of death.
But Psalm 49 shares the same resolute confidence as the rest of Korahite Psalms.
After all, the question, “why should I fear in times of trouble?”
receives the answer:
I shouldn’t fear!
Yes, Man in his pomp will perish like the beasts.
“But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,
for he will receive me.” (v15)
If I need not fear death,
then why should I fear anything else?
[Sing Psalm 49]

That gives you an overview of the Psalms of the Sons of Korah.

But tonight, we are turning to the “hinge” Psalm of Book 2.

Psalm 50 is the one Psalm of Asaph in this collection.

(In Book 3, the Psalms of Asaph run from Psalm 73-83 –

before leading into a smaller collection of the Sons of Korah (84-89).

In Book 2, a larger collection of Korahite Psalms (42-49) is followed by one of Asaph.

What follows, in Psalms 51-72,

are a large collection of Davidic Psalms –

most of which have “historical” titles that connect each Psalm

with a particular episode in David’s life.

There have been a number of fascinating studies

that demonstrate how carefully the Psalms were compiled.

If you count verses, poetic lines, even letters in each of the 5 books of the Psalter,

you frequently come up with combinations of 7, 10 and 12 –

in such eerie regularity as to make it impossible that it should be accidental.

Indeed, it suggests that the anonymous Psalms

were probably composed by the editors

in order to fill up the required number of lines!

(in book 2, Psalms 66, 67 and 71 are anonymous).

[Then read Psalm 50]

Most psalms consist of the people’s cries to God.

There are many Psalms in which the king or the priest calls the people to praise God –

but Psalm 50 is a rare song in that it consists of God’s call to *us*.

If you think about it,

there are very few Psalms (or hymns) that use the divine first person singular.

Psalm 81 (also a Psalm of Asaph) and Psalm 95 both use the divine first person singular.

Psalm 89 includes a section where Israel *remembers* what God said,

and Psalms 2 and 110 have brief sections where God addresses the Messiah.

But *usually* the Psalms are either speaking to God or speaking to one another about God.

In Psalm 50, God himself appears in judgment.

In many ways, Psalm 50 draws together many themes from Psalms 42-49

and also concludes them with a vision of the Last Judgment.

1. God Is the Judge of All the Earth (50:1-6)

a. God Shines Forth from the Beauty of Zion (v1-2)

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.*

Psalm 50 begins with a reminder of who God is and where he dwells.

The first three words of the Psalm are the names of God:

El, Elohim, Yehvah.

I suspect that the Trinitarian pattern there is not accidental on God's part!

The Triune God speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

The emphasis here in Psalm 50 will be on the people of God,
but there are universal overtones as well.

Yes, God will judge *his people* (judgment begins with the household of God),
but all the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting
is called to assemble before him!

Verse 2 then refers to Zion as "the perfection of beauty."

Ezekiel 27-28 refers several times to the city and the king of Tyre
as the perfection of beauty.

Lamentations 2:15 uses the same phrase to mourn Jerusalem,
speaking of how the nations mock and say,
"Is this the city that was called 'the perfection of beauty'?"

Zion is the perfection of beauty.

Beauty is not your own – and it is not for yourself.

Narcissus was the ancient Greek youth who became so enamored of his own beauty
that he could not stop gazing at his own reflection –
and so died! (or committed suicide because he could not have himself as a lover,
depending on which version you read).

But the point is that beauty is for another – not for yourself.

On his wedding day, my nephew (who is a generally good-looking guy),
became positively radiant when his bride came into view.

His beauty was for her.

Likewise, the church – Zion – has a beauty that is not for herself,
but for her bridegroom.

And when God shines forth from Zion, then you see her in the perfection of her beauty.

We live in a culture that thinks of beauty in sexualized terms.

We don't say "beautiful" – we say "hot".

We need to recover the idea of beauty.

It will not do to say that what *really* matters is "inner beauty" –
because that divides beauty in two:

inner beauty and outer “hot-ness.”
It also will not do to say that “everyone is beautiful” –
because that’s not true.
(The ugly and the grotesque also exist!)

But even more, verse 2 refers to “the perfection of beauty.”
The idea is that of completeness:
that all beauty is found in Zion.

Perhaps we can start to get at the idea if you think of it this way:
Zion is the definition of beauty – all beauty resides in Zion.
Anything that is beautiful reflects her.
And therefore, *everything* that reflects Zion is beautiful.

In the book of Revelation, there are two women contrasted:
the Bride/Zion – and the Harlot/Babylon.

Babylon is a counterfeit bride (after all, that’s what a prostitute is! A counterfeit bride).
The reason why she is attractive to the kings of the earth
is because she deceives them with a counterfeit beauty.
But Zion’s beauty shines forth because she reflects the true beauty of God himself.

There is a recent study that asked a woman to describe herself to a sketch artist.
They then asked a total stranger to describe the same woman to the same sketch artist
(neither the subjects of the study, nor the sketch artists knew what the point was).
The results are striking.
In almost every case, the stranger described a much more attractive person.

Of course, the modern explanation is that women have a “negative self-image,”
and the solution is to help women realize their “true beauty.”
But that misses the point!
It may be true that women today have a negative self-image –
but the solution is *not* to make them focus more on themselves!
That will never work!
All it will do is make you more obsessed with thinking about how you look!

C. S. Lewis points in the right direction when he describes a dressing room with no mirrors.
When a modern woman complains that she cannot see how she looks,
an older, wiser woman replies that mirrors only feed our vanity.
We ought to be mirrors for each other.
Looking at yourself in a mirror is not where you will find beauty.
You will find beauty in looking at others.
And the way that you look at them will reveal their beauty.

(And guys, if you look at a woman for your own selfish pleasure,
then you are not treating her as beautiful –
in fact you are destroying her beauty by turning her into a harlot.)

So God shines forth from Zion, the perfection of beauty –
and he gathers his people together for judgment in verses 3-6:

b. God Gathers His People for Judgment (v3-6)

³ *Our God comes; he does not keep silence;^[a]*

*before him is a devouring fire,
around him a mighty tempest.*

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*

The backdrop to this picture is Exodus 24.

The wording “who made a covenant with me by sacrifice” is very specific.

While Israel offered many sacrifices to God,
only once did they *cut a covenant by sacrifice*.

(Israel will often renew the covenant –
for instance it says that Joshua “cut a covenant” with Israel in Joshua 24:25,
that they would be the LORD’s people –
but that is a covenant between Joshua and the people
Only once did Israel cut a covenant with God).

At Mt Sinai God established his covenant with his people by sacrifice.

In Exodus 19-24, Israel is gathered at Sinai.

God first gives them the Law – the Ten Commandments –
along with the Book of the Covenant.

And having given them the book of the Covenant in chapters 20-23,
he enters into a covenant with them by the blood of the covenant in 24.

And in 24:17 we are told that “the appearance of the glory of the LORD
was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain
in the sight of all the people of Israel.”

Likewise the description of 19:16 states:

“On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings
and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast,
so that all the people in the camp trembled.”

As God had summoned Israel at Sinai –
so also God summons his people once again:
this time to render judgment according to his covenant!

Psalm 50 is a song of judgment,
reminding Israel of how God will judge at the final day.

2. God's Reminder to His [Faithful] People (50:7-15)

a. I Don't Need Your Sacrifices – I Have Everything! (v7-11)

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.*

And God starts by testifying against Israel.

He starts by saying that in terms of their ritual obedience
in offering sacrifices and burnt offerings,
they are doing well.

He has no complaint – no rebuke to offer.

It is worth remembering the difference between “burnt offerings” and “sacrifices.”

Burnt offerings are the first thing offered.

The animal is butchered, skinned, and then all the flesh is burned in the fire.

God says that their burnt offerings are continually before him –

which is good, since that is the *point* of the burnt offering!

The burnt offering says, “Here I am to worship you.”

Sacrifices (or peace offerings) are then butchered, skinned –

and then the fat, liver, and kidneys are burned in the fire,

a choice portion is given to the priest,

and then the worshipers partake of the rest.

Sacrifices communicate the idea of peace and fellowship between God and man.

And God says that he does not object to their sacramental worship.

But he *is* a little concerned with the way that they are *thinking* about the sacrifices:

Israel seems to be thinking that they are giving God something
in these burnt offerings and sacrifices.

And so God says:

⁹ *I will not accept a bull from your house*

or goats from your folds.
¹⁰ *For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.*
¹¹ *I know all the birds of the hills,
and all that moves in the field is mine.*

You are only giving me what is already mine.
Every parent has had this experience.
Your child gives you a present – purchased with your own money,
or at least, made from supplies that you had purchased.
When Israel brings animals for sacrifice,
they need to remember that they are only giving what is already God's!
Do not think for a moment that you are adding anything to God's resources when you give!

Indeed, God says in verses 12-13 –

b. But Offer Your Sacrifice of Thanksgiving and Call Upon Me (v12-15)

¹² *“If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and its fullness are mine.*
¹³ *Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?*

Burnt offerings and sacrifices are not given for *God's* benefit.
The image of the burnt offering is that God himself “consumes” the animal in fire.
The image in the peace offering is that God “consumes” the fat, liver, and kidneys,
and the worshipers share a meal with God, as they eat the meat.
But God says, don't think for a moment that I am literally “eating” the animal.

Burnt offerings and sacrifices do not “feed God”!
Rather, their purpose is for *us*.
Notice how God says it in verses 14-15:

¹⁴ *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,^[b]
and perform your vows to the Most High,*
¹⁵ *and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”*

This is exactly the same as the NT doctrine of the sacraments!
Leviticus describes two different kinds of peace offerings:
the thanksgiving offering,
and the vow offering.
Both are peace offerings, which means that the worshiper partakes of both,
but the thanksgiving offering is a response to God's faithfulness,

while the vow offering is offered in fulfillment of a particular vow.

Verse 14 makes it clear that God is not discouraging the offering of offerings –
rather he wants Israel to remember the *point* of their offerings.

Because if you offer your sacrifices with the right attitude, then

“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

Our Shorter Catechism asks,

“How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?”

“The sacraments become effectual means of salvation,
not from any virtue in them [don’t think that just offering sacrifices will work!],
or in him that does administer them [the priest in the OT, or pastor in the NT],
but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit
in them [the people] that by faith receive them.”

That’s exactly what verses 14-15 are saying.

Offer your thank offerings and vow offerings –

these sacraments will be effectual means of salvation (I will deliver you) –
but not because of any virtue in the sacrifices themselves!

But only by the blessing of Christ – only by the working of his Spirit –

in those who offer the sacrifices *by faith* (“call upon me in the day of trouble!”)

And this becomes even more powerfully clear in God’s warning to the hypocrites:

3. God’s Warning to Hypocrites [= “the Wicked”] (50:16-21)

a. How Dare You Talk Like My People When You Don’t Act Like One (v16-18)

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 *If you see a thief, you are pleased with him,*

and you keep company with adulterers.

Once again, the imagery of Exodus 24 comes to mind:

First, they offered the burnt offerings and the peace offerings.

Then Moses read the *book* of the covenant,

and then sprinkled the *blood* of the covenant on the people,

and then the 70 elders of Israel partook of the covenant meal.

The book of the covenant and the blood of the covenant are tightly bound together.

Think about the relationship between the book of the covenant and the blood of the covenant.

Apart from the blood of the covenant, the book of covenant – the law –

would only condemn us.

(Indeed, that's exactly what happened when Israel heard the Law in Ex 20.

They said "do not let God speak to us, lest we die!")

The book of the covenant is powerless apart from the blood of the covenant.

Think of it this way:

if God gave us the Bible, but Jesus never really died on the cross,

and never really rose from the dead,

then the Bible is not really *good news* – because our sins are not covered!

The book of the covenant is powerless apart from the blood of the covenant.

But apart from the book of the covenant, the blood of the covenant is meaningless.

What would happen if Jesus died and rose again,

but God never told us about it – and never explained what it means?

The Word of God is what gives meaning to the sacrifice.

And here in verses 16-18 God addresses the "wicked."

But note, these are the wicked who "take my covenant" on their lips.

These are the "covenant wicked" you might say,

those who say that they are God's people,

but who then cast God's words behind them –

who prefer the company of thieves and adulterers.

In verses 19-20, then, God says:

b. You Slander Others – Now It's Time for Rebuke (v19-21)

¹⁹ *"You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.*

²⁰ *You sit and speak against your brother;
you slander your own mother's son.*

They have rejected the Word of the Lord,

and so their own words wreak havoc.

²¹ *These things you have done, and I have been silent;
you thought that I^[c] was one like yourself.*

But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

God may be silent for a time.

God may not deal with sin immediately.

But judgment day will come.

When God comes in splendor – out of Zion, the perfection of beauty –

then God will bring judgment against the wicked for their slanders.

As God concludes:

4. God's Promise: Pay Attention and Offer Thanksgiving as Sacrifice! (50:22-23)

²² *“Mark this, then, you who forget God,
lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!*
²³ *The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;
to one who orders his way rightly
I will show the salvation of God!”*

Notice that the conclusions includes both a warning to the wicked,
and a promise to the faithful.

Remembering and forgetting are at the heart of the covenant.

If you remember the LORD your God, then you will live.

If you forget the LORD, then you will turn to other gods –
you will worship the creature rather than the Creator –
and you will perish.

God himself says, pay attention!

“lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver.”

Only God can save.

If you forget him – if you turn away from him – no one else can deliver you!

But “to the one who orders his way rightly” –
God will show his salvation.

What does it mean to “order your way rightly?”

The first line of v23 explains this:

“the one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me.”

It could also be translated,

“the one who sacrifices a thank offering glorifies me.”

The attitude here is exactly the same as our catechism:

“the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them,
or in him that does administer them,
but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit
in them that by faith receive them.”

The one who not only takes the covenant on his lips,
but also receives the covenant promise by faith –
and thus walks (orders his way) aright –
giving thanks to God and calling upon him in the day of trouble –
that one will see the salvation of God!

John Brown of Haddington (PODIM), the 18th century Scottish pastor says it this way,
“The Psalm may be considered as a rebuke to the carnal Jews,
who rested in, and boasted of their external ceremonies in worship,
to the neglect of the weightier matters of the law,
mercy, judgment and faith:
or, [it may be seen] as a prediction of the coming of Christ,
to abolish the ceremonial worship, eject the Jews from his church,
and establish a more pure and spiritual form of worship under the gospel:
or, in fine, [it may be seen] as a representation of the last judgment;
in which Christ shall come, to render to every man according to his deeds.” (p126)

And so let us take heed,
and let us not forget the Lord our God,
but let us offer thanksgiving as our sacrifice,
as we sing praises to God,
as we take his words upon our lips,
and as we partake of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice.