

Religion or Relationship?

Psalm 50

Studies in the Psalms #51

“**I**DON'T have a religion, I have a relationship.” Has a sincere brother or sister said this to you? I've heard it. There's a sense in which I resonate and commiserate with those who have been burned by the church, scandalized by a preacher, or been shunned by a group of professing friends. If religion is *that*, I agree! But God has revealed himself in Scripture as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. He enters into covenant with individuals like Abraham, who offer religious rites and ceremonies back to God. He enters into covenant with entire nations, who offer the service of sacrifice in a temple by priests. True biblical relationship between God and his people is through means of religion. Religion is also how we express our relationship with one another. Doesn't James tell us, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas. 1:27).

Psalm 50 says it's a false dichotomy. Religion without relationship is superstition; relationship without religion is mysticism. We need both; God wants both! And turning to Psalm 50, did you notice something different about it? I've been saying that the Psalms are prayers, songs, poems, and meditations. But this Psalm is *God* speaking to us!¹ What is he saying?

YOU NEED TO RENEW YOUR COVENANT (vv. 1–6)

God first speaks to say YOU NEED TO RENEW YOUR COVENANT in verses 1–6. *Who is speaking?* **The Mighty One** (*‘el*), which is “God in his transcendent majesty and power;” **God** (*‘elohim*), which is “God in the completeness of the divine attributes;”² and **the LORD**, which is God as covenant making and keeping God to his people. Heaping up three titles like this say God is saying something serious.³ Interestingly, this group of titles is used in Joshua in the context of making a loyalty oath to the Lord (22:22).⁴ Psalm 50 envisions what Deuteronomy 31 commanded: every seven years the law was to be read to the people and they were to renew their covenant with him (vv. 10–13).

To whom is God speaking? This great God **speaks and summons the earth** (*‘erets*), which can be used of earth’s inhabitants, **from the rising of the sun to its setting** (v. 1). Like we’ve seen in Psalms 47–49, this Psalm is addressed to all peoples. When God speaks, everyone needs to sit up and listen!

From where is he speaking? **Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty—** remember Psalm 48—**God shines forth, our God comes; he does not keep silence** (vv. 2–3). This is action language. And the action is to judge. **Before him is a devouring fire** (Deut. 4:24; Isa. 66:16; Heb. 12:29), **around him a mighty tempest** (v. 3).⁵

So here's God the Judge, all the earth stands before him in judgment, and then his witnesses enter: **He calls to the heavens above and to the earth that he may judge his people** (v. 4). Why? We're getting the sense that there's something not quite right in the covenant relationship. God specifically addresses in this gathering "**my faithful ones,**" which is a form of *chesed*, the word for God's faithfulness, "**who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!**" (v. 5)⁶ Note that their relationship was established and maintained by means of religion. While they have the name of **faithful**, all is not right. But since **the heavens declare** [God's] **righteousness** and he **himself is judge** (v. 6), this means he is the restorer of an upright relationship with his people. God is saying to us that there are times when our relationship with him as a people is fractured and it needs to be renewed, refreshed, and restored.

BY HEARTFELT WORSHIP (vv. 7–15)

How does God restore a fractured relationship? By calling his ritually formalistic people to renewal BY HEARTFELT WORSHIP. "**Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God**" (v. 7). He's not just **the Mighty One** in his transcendent majesty and power or **God** in the completeness of the divine attributes; he is our God.

He first rebukes us. “**Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me**” (v. 8). Notice that. God has ordained and God approves religion. The problem is when *we* turn it into formalism! What is it to be formalistic? “**I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds**” (v. 9). Why not? “**For**” or because “**every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.**”⁷ **I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine**” (vv. 10–11). Because of this he says, “**If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine**” (v. 12). Formalism is not religion or repetition. It’s thinking that God needs *our* religion. God rebukes this attitude tonight saying, “If I did, why would I ask *you*? I own everything!?” When we think God needs *our* perfectly pre-scripted prayers or *our* perfectly pitched Psalms or *our* service that went off without a hitch, then we’re formalists! So God asks: “**Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?**” (v. 13) The gods around Israel all depended on man to eat. The Babylonian Flood story of Gilgamesh says because of the Flood, the gods almost starved to death! They learned *their* lesson not to flood the world again!

Then he calls us to renewal. Repentance in Scripture is turning *from* sin and turning *to* God. “**Offer to God a sacrifice** but notice it’s **of thanksgiving,**

and perform your vows to the Most High” (v. 14; cf. Heb. 13:15). **“Call upon me by prayer in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me”** (v. 15). Let’s commit to repentance tonight, brothers and sisters; turning from thinking God needs our worship and turning to him from the heart.

BY GRATEFUL OBEDIENCE (vv. 16–23)

How does God restore our fractured relationship? By calling his creedally formalistic people to renewal BY GRATEFUL OBEDIENCE. **But to the wicked God says** (v. 16). He’s speaking to **the wicked** within the covenant people. He’s addressing those living in contradiction to their profession!

He first rebukes us: “What right have you to recite my statutes,” meaning, the laws of God, especially the Ten Commandments, **“or take my covenant on your lips?”** (v. 16) The sense of this last phrase is rendered well by the New Living Translation: they’re “pretending to obey my covenant.”⁸

How so? **“For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you”** (v. 17). We know the biblical truth that those the Lord loves he disciplines. The flip side is true also: those who love the Lord accept, appreciate, heed, and receive his discipline. God has given his law to guide us from ungodliness to godliness. Yet of these **wicked** among the covenant God says, **“If you see a thief”** breaking the eighth commandment **“you are pleased with him.”** **“You**

keep company with adulterers” contrary to the seventh commandment (v. 18). **“You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit”** like an armchair quarterback **“and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son”** in contradiction of the ninth commandment (v. 19).

While they were doing **“these things”** God says, **“I have been silent”** (v. 20). Because of that, he says, **“you thought that I was one like yourself”** (v. 20). What an irony! **“You considered I AM to be like you!”**⁹ This is a warning not to presume on God’s patience! The God who once was silent speaks: **“But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!”** (vv. 21–22)

Then he calls us to renewal: **“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!”** (v. 23) As we reflect tonight, one writer said, “The observance of ritual, any ritual, without true dedication to God is, at best, a waste of God’s time, and more likely a form of magic.”¹⁰ May we delight in **offer[ing] to God** worship from the heart as **a sacrifice of thanksgiving!** May we delight in **order[ing] our way rightly** according to God’s commands!

Endnotes

¹ Longman III, 216.

² Motyer, 131 n31.

³ Futato, 180.

⁴ Motyer, 131 n31.

⁵ In the Old Testament this is language never used of a mere rainstorm but of an east-wind storm (Ezek. 19:12; Isa. 40:24; Hos. 13:15). Futato, 180.

⁶ They're "those in covenant" (Motyer 131 n37) but also "about to make a covenant" in this covenant renewal (Futato, 180).

⁷ On this phrase, see Motyer, 130, 132 n41.

⁸ Futato, 181.

⁹ Motyer, 132 n48.

¹⁰ Reardon, 97.