

## **God Is Bigger than You Think**

### Psalm 50

There's a strange but common notion among people that when you do something wrong, if nobody sees it, or no one says anything, you've gotten away with it. Which then often leads to doing it again.

It's like the young child at the dinner table, who thinks that they're being all smooth, secretly dropping the parts of their dinner they don't like on the floor (as if you don't notice, or won't find it later). And you can sit there and watch them out of the corner of your eye, and until you say something, they'll keep doing it. It's the same way with so many of our sins. We think that because there haven't been any consequences yet, it must be no big deal. So why not have another go?

But just because God hasn't said anything yet, doesn't mean he hasn't seen, or doesn't care. At some point he will break his silence. And that's what we see in our psalm this morning.

### **Court Is in Session**

We're looking at Psalm 50 together. And this psalm is framed in the language and imagery of a courtroom scene, where God is the judge, the whole earth is invited to observe, heaven and earth are called as law officers, and the defendants are none other than God's covenant people, Israel, who have been carrying on in sin, thinking that they have evaded God's notice since he has so far said nothing in response. But God is about to break the silence.

In vv. 1-6, court is called into session. Verse 1 introduces God with three titles, which draw immediate attention to his power and authority: "The Mighty One, God, the LORD." This is Israel's covenant God, Yahweh, the only God, who has all power. And he has come to speak: he speaks and summons all the earth (from the rising of the sun in the east, to its setting in the west, and everywhere in between. He has universal jurisdiction. Verse 2 rehearses his majesty of his courtroom—the highest court in all creation: "out of Zion, the perfection of his beauty, God shines forth." Verse 3 describes his holiness and power in breaking his silence and speaking to his people: "Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest." When this judge shows up and opens his mouth, you better listen. He is deadly serious. In vv. 4-5 he deputizes heaven and earth to round up the accused and bring them to court, and we see that those defendants are his own people. Ancient Israel, his covenant people, are the ones on trial—"that he may judge his people. Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (echoing Israel's covenant with God at Mount Sinai in Exodus 24). Then in v. 6 the heavens serve as bailiff, as if to say, 'All rise for the honorable judge, YHWH.' "They declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!" Court is now in session.

So what is this trial about? In vv. 7-21, God the judge also acts as the prosecution. Verse 7: “Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God.” And what are the charges? Two counts of *fraudulent worship* in vv. 7-15, and four counts of *covenantal misconduct* in vv. 16-21. We’ll look at the first charge of fraudulent worship.

### ***Two Counts of Fraudulent Worship***

Look at v. 8. The problem here is not Israel’s failure to show up and offer sacrifices at God’s temple. As he says in v. 8, “your burnt offerings are continually before me.” The problem is the heart with which they offer those sacrifices. They come with the wrong purposes and wrong motives, therefore their worship is fraudulent. Fake. Phony. It looks good on the outside, but it’s not the real deal.

So what’s fraudulent about it? The first count comes from their *false sense of ownership*. When they offer a sacrifice to God, they do so as though they were giving him something he didn’t already have. ‘Here God, here’s a bull from *our* house, a goat from *our own* fold—how generous of us! We’re giving to God what actually belongs to us; aren’t we nice?’ They offer sacrifices to God like he’s a sad toddler sitting in the middle of the room with no toys, and they, out of their own generosity, are doing him a favor. But God rebukes them in vv. 9-11: he is the rightful owner of every creature; there isn’t a goat in your fold or a bull in your stall that you can offer *that doesn’t already belong to me*. “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.”

The second count of fraudulent worship comes from their *backward sense of dependence*—who’s serving whom? They approach worship as though God is somehow dependent on them—like a needy boyfriend, if they don’t call everyday he’s going to get insecure; or like an ailing parent, if they don’t cook him a daily meal (show up with their offerings at the temple), he’s going to go hungry or something. Again, God rebukes them in vv. 12-13: “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?”

Not only have the misunderstood the nature of God (as though the sacrifices they offered were actually food for him, as was believed in other paganistic worship around them), but worse, they approached their worship as though they were doing God a favor. As though he needed them—rather than remembering that they are the ones who are dependent on him, and coming to him with gratitude and thanksgiving, instead of smugness and pride (cf. 14-15, 23).

So the first charge against them is fraudulent worship. The second is *covenantal misconduct*, which we see in vv. 16-21.

### ***Four Counts of Covenantal Misconduct***

Here we see a gap between what God’s people confess with their lips, and what they do with their lives. Verse 16, they recite God’s statutes, they take his covenant on their lips. They are professing followers of God. They agree with the statement of faith; they reaffirm their covenantal commitments to him. But what right do they have to do so, God asks, when their lives say something entirely different?

He charges them with four counts of covenantal misconduct—breaking their deal with God. The first is their *rejection of God's Word* in v. 17: “For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you.” Simply put, they do not like what Scripture has to say about their lives and how God calls them to live. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, they question the wisdom and goodness of God, thinking they know better. So they hate God's instruction and ignore his word, doing what they want instead.

The second count comes from their *celebration of sin* in v. 18: “If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers.” This count flows naturally out of the first: they make much of what God condemns. They look at sin and think, “Now that's living! God doesn't know what he's talking about.”

The third count of covenantal misconduct comes from their *evil speech* in v. 19: “You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit.” Instead of honoring God with life-giving words, they despise God with deadly words saturated with deception and filth.

Finally, the fourth count comes from their *slandering betrayal* in v. 20: “You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son.” Instead of loving their own, they eat their own. They bear false witness against their own family for the sake of selfish gain.

God's covenant people are in breach of contract. They are walking in unrepentant sin, thinking they can get away with it. “These things you have done, and I have been silent . . .” (v. 21). But just because God hasn't said anything yet about our sin, doesn't mean he doesn't see it or won't judge it.

And what's underneath all this? Where does their fraudulent worship and covenantal misconduct ultimately come from? God identifies the root in the second half of v. 21: “These things you have done, and I have been silent; *you thought that I was one like yourself.*” Or another possible translation: “*You thought the I AM was altogether like you*” (a reference to God's personal name revealed to Moses at Sinai). “But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.”

The essence of Israel's problem was that they overlooked or underestimated the holiness of God. They thought God was just like them. ‘Sin's not that big a deal to us, must not be to him. We really help people when we share what we have with them; God must need our help in a similar way, so let's make a sacrifice.’ They, like so many people today, suffered from a small view of God.

### **The Holiness of God**

But God is not just like us. He is *holy*. Set apart. He is set off from everything else. Some of you have a cabinet full of dishes that you almost never use. You only pull them out for special occasions. That's an earthly kind of holiness—those dishes are set apart. They are unlike the other dishes; they have a special value and are used only for special purposes. Or sometimes we speak of Sunday (for the church) or Saturday (for the synagogue) as being holy. It's unlike other days in the week; it's special, set apart for the purpose of worship.

Holiness is an attribute of God. One of the many qualities or virtues that are true of God's in every way—his character, his conduct. God is holy; he is *set apart*. But in what way? A lot could

be said here, but I think we can summarize the biblical picture of God’s holiness by saying he is set apart in three ways.

**1. God is holy with respect to his *unique transcendence*.** Now “transcendent” is a big word that we don’t use very often, but here it means that God is *above* his creation, and *unlike* his creation. He is above it—he is not part of his creation. He is Creator, not creature. And he is unlike it; he is different in quality. For instance, creation exists in time; God is eternal, timeless. Creation is limited in scope, finite; God is unlimited, infinite—the universe can’t contain him.

It’s like the difference between a portrait of someone and the artist who painted it. There are certainly similarities (both express a human form), but the person making the painting is above and unlike the person in the painting—he’s outside the canvas, his eyes see, his mouth speaks. He’s on a completely different plane of existence. So God is above and unlike his creation.

Theologian J.I. Packer helps us understand this aspect of God’s holiness:

“Holy” is the word which the Bible uses to express all that is distinctive and transcendent in the revealed nature and character of the Creator, all that brings home to us the infinite distance and difference that there is between Him and ourselves. Holiness in this sense means, quite comprehensively, the ‘God-ness’ of God, everything about Him which sets him apart from man.<sup>1</sup>

This unique transcendence is what the heavenly creatures around God’s throne recognized and praised in Revelation 4:8, as “day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’” Unlike his creation he has no beginning, no end. He is holy, holy, holy with respect to his unique transcendence.

**2. God is holy with respect to his *supreme majesty*.** That is to say that he is *over* and *bigger* than his creation. Just as he is above his creation in terms of who he is, he is over his creation in terms of authority, and bigger than his creation in terms of value. He is supremely majestic.

Again, the artist analogy helps us out here. At the end of every school year, our kids come home with a grocery sack full of their artwork. And some of our children, being rather nostalgic, have attempted to keep all of their artwork over the years, stuffing it away in their closets. Now, should we ever get to the point where our child’s room is filling up, and it’s either them or their artwork (one of them has to go), the obvious decision would be to keep the child. Though we don’t often think of things this way, as the artist (and as a person no less), he is infinitely more valuable than his or her artwork. In the same way, as Creator and King, God is infinitely more valuable than what he has made. And therefore nothing that he has made can satisfy his people more than the Maker himself.

This is what Israel recognized and responded to when God delivered them from Pharaoh and Egypt in Exodus 15:11: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” God is holy with respect to his supreme majesty. He is our King, and he alone is worthy of our worship and ultimate satisfaction.

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<sup>1</sup> J.I. Packer, *18 Words: The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know* (Christian Focus: 1981, 2008), 165.

**3. God is holy with respect to his *moral perfection*.** He himself is the source and standard of all that is good, just, and loving. In terms of his moral perfection, God is like the sun. As the sun is the source of all light, so God is the source of all goodness and justice. He decides and defines what is good. But he's also the standard. We not only see what light is when we look at the sun, we also see everything else in the light it provides. So it is with God's moral perfection—you know what is good and just and true only in the light of God's goodness, justice, and truth. He is the only sure and perfect source and standard of what is right. As 1 John 5:1 says that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

And in his moral perfection, God is too pure and holy to even look upon sin. Habakkuk 1:13 acknowledges that God is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong." Nor can he even allow sin into his presence. As Psalm 5:4 says, "For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you." If it did, his holiness would destroy all that is unholy, just like any object that tries to approach the sun—it would be annihilated by its radiance and light. That's why God says to Moses in Exodus 33:20, "man shall not see me and live." That's why, when Isaiah has a vision of God in ch. 6 he cries out "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" He's pretty sure he's doomed for that one.

Another way of putting this is to say that God in his holy moral perfection must respond to sin and immorality with judgment. Sin, or disobedience to God, robs God of his glory and rejects his rightful rule over his creation. It's like trying to replace the sun with a 50-watt flashlight, and then trying to convince people that this is what true light is. How insulting to the sun! Or even worse, it's living as though light is dark and dark is light—completely rejecting God's perfect standard, and turning it on its head. Sin is an assault on God's holiness, and God in his holiness must respond to it in judgment. He is too pure to let sin into his presence, and he is too good to allow it to go on unpunished. Which is why he shows up in Psalm 50 to break the silence and bring Israel to account. God is holy with respect to his moral perfection.

God is holy in every way. He is altogether above us, unlike us, over us in authority, bigger than us in value. Pure, perfect, and radiant in every way. He is God, we are not.

### **The Danger of a Small View of God**

And when we miss this, when we overlook or underestimate the holiness of God, we begin to think that he is altogether like us. Not transcendent or unique, not supreme or majestic, not morally perfect. Not interested in answering sin. And so our worship becomes fraudulent, as though God is somehow dependent on us, and our conduct becomes sinful, rejecting God's Word and God's ways.

In modern sociological terms, we buy into the religious attitude of what has been identified as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," which has become the functional religion of most "Christians" in America. Author Joshua Harris gives us a nice summary:

*A moralistic outlook says if I live a moral life, do good things, and try not to do bad things, God will reward me and send me to a 'better place' when I die. For most people a good life involves not killing other people or robbing old ladies and babies. The bar is not real high. A therapeutic orientation to God says his primary reason for existing is to make me happy and*

peaceful. So God is a form of therapy, of self-help. He exists for me. *Deism* says God exists but he's distant and mostly uninvolved. Or we could say conveniently uninvolved. He won't interrupt my plans or get in my business. He doesn't tell me what to do. "In short," [as sociologists Christian] Smith and [Melinda] Denton write, "God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process."<sup>2</sup>

What's so interesting thing about this god is how much he's just like me! Made in my own image. No longer is he above us and unlike us in his unique transcendence; he's become very much like us, and a bit below us. He no longer reigns over us with authority; we reign over him, telling him what he needs to do to make life go the way we want it. He's no longer bigger than us; in fact, he's become rather unimpressive. He's lucky to even be able to hang around us. And his moral perfection has become at best a moralistic ideal to shoot for, and at the end of the day, not that important (because God's down with a little bit of sin; he wants you to have fun, doesn't he?). Which makes it hard for us to understand how he could stand in judgment over anything.

It's no surprise that one of the first things to go when we begin to think of God as altogether like us is his *wrath*—his holy anger against sin and rebellion. We don't think that's very nice. I thought God was nice, and we're supposed to be nice. Wrath's not very nice. How dare God weigh in on judgment over someone? And all of a sudden we've turned Psalm 50 on its head. It's not longer we humans who sit in defendant's seat. We have, as C.S. Lewis put it, put "God in the dock." We now stand in judgment over him, as prosecutors demanding that he defend his own existence, he defend his right to rule, his holiness, his Word. And we'll make the verdict as to whether he's made a case.

Truth be told, this is the god many of us want. But it's not the God we need. And it's not God as he's revealed himself to be. We've lost sight of his holiness.

But when God the judge speaks, when he breaks his silence and reveals his holiness, when his indictment thunders from his lips, it resonates in our souls: *We are guilty*. We know it. We have fallen desperately short of his holiness. Our worship has been fraudulent; our conduct deeply sinful. We thought God was just like us. We have approached a lion as if it were a little newborn kitten. So God warns us in v. 22: "Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!" God is holy; he is not to be trifled with.

### **The Gospel and Gratitude**

So where does this psalm leave us? *Right where we need to be*. Ready to receive and rely on the gospel of Jesus and live in humble dependence and joyful gratitude before our holy God and King.

Without the holiness of God, all that's really left of Christianity is the Liberal Protestantism of the early twentieth-century, what Richard Niebuhr described as "a God without wrath brought

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua Harris, *Dug Down Deep* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 40. Citing Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>3</sup>

But when we recognize God’s holiness, it’s only then that we truly begin to understand his love and grace, what it cost him to shed his love on us, how truly satisfying he is, and what it looks like to follow him as his redeemed children.

Joshua Harris writes:

Most people assume it is God’s job to love them. . . . He needs us. He pines for us. And if we pay him any attention—go to church, do a good deed, recycle, or maybe meditate while listening to soothing music—then we’ve done him a really big favor. The love of God is wonderful news only when we understand his transcendence—when we tremble at his holiness, when we’re awed by his perfection and power. God’s love is perceived as amazing only when we realize that the one thing we truly deserve from him is righteous wrath and eternal punishment for our disobedience and disloyalty. Seeing God for who he is leaves us asking with the psalmist, ‘What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?’ (Psalm 8:4).<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes we think for God to be merciful he has to suspend his holiness, or set aside his justice. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, his holiness is not just an independent attribute of God, it also describes every other attribute he possesses. As Jerry Bridges explains, “His power is holy power, His mercy is holy mercy, His wisdom is holy wisdom.”<sup>5</sup> To which we could add, his purposes are holy purposes. His love is holy love. Everything about God is holy, unique, perfect, above and beyond us. Our wisdom and power are limited by our humanity and our sin. Our love and mercy are often tainted with selfish motives. But God is unmatched in knowledge, unparalleled in power, perfect in mercy, flawless in love.

Which means that God’s holiness and his mercy and grace are not at odds with each other. God’s holiness is displayed not only in his judgment against sin, but also in his mercy toward sinners. And the only way that’s possible is through the cross, where God the judge dealt justly with sin and mercifully with sinners. Where sin was dealt with in full, because Jesus took the full weight of God’s holy anger against it on himself, and where sinners can therefore receive mercy, because the debt they owed has been paid in full. We only need take hold of Christ through faith.

And so what is our proper response according to this psalm? Repentance from a small view of God, and gratitude for how big God really is. That’s what he tells us in vv. 14-15. Stop worshiping as though you were doing God a favor, and instead approach him with thanksgiving and dependence on him. “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.” He says it again in v. 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!”

When we truly grasp the grace of the gospel, that we who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13); that we who were dead in our trespasses and sins have

<sup>3</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.

<sup>4</sup> Harris, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1978), 29.

been made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:1, 5), how can we approach God with anything but gratitude? There's no boasting. There's no entitlement. There's a humble thankfulness. If you receive a birthday gift, you write a thankyou note. How much more when we receive the gift of eternal life? If you've ever been let out of a speeding ticket, you say thank you to the office. How much more when we are freed from eternal punishment in hell?

When we see God in his holiness, we're able to see our sin in its bitterness, and therefore taste Christ in his sweetness. So that all our worship—the songs we sing, the gifts we bring, the prayers we pray, the deeds we perform—it all becomes an act of thanksgiving to our holy and merciful God.

So may our hearts be both afflicted and comforted at the holiness of God. May we see him for who he is, and give him the worship he deserves as our holy God and King.