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The Voice of the Judge

Psalm 50

Pastor Bryan Clark

This morning, in thousands and thousands of churches across our country, hundreds of thousands of people who consider themselves to be people of God will gather to worship. But I wonder what those people have in mind in terms of their view of God and what they really expect to encounter today. There is nothing more important in our Christian life than our view of God. Our view of God is something that we are always working on. We are growing and we are trying to better understand God. But I wonder how many people who attend church really have an accurate view of God. What if this morning, in the midst of every church service across our county, God actually emerged and directly encountered His people?

Annie Dillard, in one of her writings, talks about the way too many people come into the presence of God. She says,

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we could never return.

- Annie Dillard in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

C.S. Lewis, in one of his writings, talks about a similar thing of how we create this view of God we are comfortable with. It is a God who makes little demands on our lives, and we are comfortable with Him. But what would happen if somewhere along the way we actually encountered the real God of the universe? He equates it to a group of children who are pretending to be burglars, and all of a sudden somebody stops and says, "Wait a minute. Were those real footsteps in the hall?" From there he goes on to say, "There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that." (from *Miracles* by C.S. Lewis)

What do you suppose would happen today in the middle of every church service if God appeared and made His presence known to the people who consider themselves to be the people of God? If God were to gather together all His people, to hold court, and to call His people to account, what would He say? What would His conclusion be?

That is exactly what happens in Psalm 50. This is a psalm of Asaph. The first six verses of the psalm basically set the scene. It is a magnificent picture of God as the judge. God emerges from His dwelling place in order to hold court. Those who are on trial are His people. He gathers them from every corner of the earth and brings them into this divine courtroom. There He is going to assess his own people and He is going to bring down a verdict.

The Mighty One, God, the LORD has spoken... (v. 1a, *NASB)

Here are three names for God. The first one is the Hebrew *El*, translated the Mighty One, the God of all gods. The second one is the Hebrew *Elohim*, which is the all-powerful God, the Genesis 1 God, the Creator God. The third name is *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*, the Covenant God, the personal God

of Israel. He is the God of all gods. He is the all-powerful God. He is the personal God of Israel. And He has spoken.

And has summoned [or we might use the word “subpoenaed”] the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. (vs. 1b)

This means from one end of the earth to the other He has sent out His divine subpoenas.

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth. May our God come and not keep silence; fire devours before Him, and it is very tempestuous around Him.
(vs. 2-3)

This is really a magnificent scene, if you can imagine it in your mind. Zion is descriptive of the dwelling place of God. Sometimes they are referring to a mountain, sometimes the temple. It is best to think of it as a place where God dwells. The psalmist talks about its perfection. Imagine a dwelling place for God that is so majestic it is fit for God to dwell there. In the midst of this magnificent scene, suddenly without warning the door opens up and out steps God. God shines forth, and the text says that there was fire—talking about lightning. It was tempestuous—talking about thunder and the storm.

There is no question that God is the God of the dramatic. It is very much like the scene in Exodus 19 when God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was characterized by lightning and thunder. In your mind, imagine this dwelling place of God. Suddenly the door opens and out steps God. There is lightning and there is thunder. The light shines forth and God appears as the judge. He has sent subpoenas to every corner of the earth. The angels are responsible to go to every corner of the earth with these subpoenas and to gather together the people of God, because He is about to hold court.

“Gather My godly ones to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice.” And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge. Selah. (vs. 5-6)

Not only do these angels go out with these subpoenas, but they are declaring that this judge is absolutely just. He is right; He is fair. They gather together in order for Him to judge His people.

Most people think the word *Selah* means to “stop and think about this.” This is really quite a magnificent introduction. If you can use your imagination and create this scene in your mind, it is this courtroom where God emerges as the all-powerful judge. He is about to call His people to account.

It is worth noting here that the judgment is on God’s own people. These are not the pagans. I think historically as a church we have always been very quick to blame everybody else for the problems in our culture. We blame the media; we blame the schools and the government. But in both the Old and New Testament there is a consistent theme that the judgment starts with the house of God. Until we have our own house in order, we probably should not be too quick to point fingers at everybody else. That is exactly what is happening here.

In a sense, in this *Selah* period God holds court, and what follows are His two indictments. These are the two charges that He brings forth against His own people. The first one we might call “Empty Religious Rituals.”

“Hear, O My people, and I will speak: O Israel, I will testify against you; I am God, your God. I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before Me.” (vs. 7-8)

First of all, God says, “The problem isn’t that you haven’t been bringing the sacrifices. You have been bringing them day in and day out. That is not the problem.” So what is the problem?

“I shall take no young bull out of your house nor male goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains. Shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of male goats?” (vs. 9-13)

What is God saying here? You have to understand that in the ancient world the pagans believed that their gods had needs just like them. And it was the responsibility of the followers of those gods to somehow meet those needs. One of those was that the gods got hungry, so you brought sacrifices and all kinds of food in order to give to the gods because they were hungry. That typically happened several times a day so that they would be well fed.

Apparently that same type of thinking had made its way into the Hebrew people. In their own minds they think that God has required these sacrifices and that the people need to carry out what God has required because God has some need. They think God has some lack, and they are somehow doing God a favor by following through on this. So God responds and says, “You know, I don’t need any of this stuff. I am the God of gods. I have everything I need. I have no lack. I have no want. I don’t need any of it. I don’t need your bulls and your goats. If I were hungry, I wouldn’t ask you. I would just take it; it is all Mine.”

It is ridiculous to think that somehow God has some need and these people are meeting His need. He says, “It is all Mine in the first place. You are not giving Me anything I need.” God has no self-esteem problem where He needs them to come and worship Him to build up His sagging self-esteem. God says, “Do you really think I would eat the flesh of bulls and drink the blood of goats? I don’t need that stuff. I am God!”

So what does He want? He tells us:

“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to the Most High; call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.” (vs. 14-15)

When He says, “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving” He is saying, “The point is not that I need this food, that I need these bulls and goats. What I want is your heart. I want you to offer Me a sacrifice of thanksgiving. This is an expression of your heart. This is your way of saying to Me that you love Me, that you understand this grand privilege you have been given and you give out of a thankful heart.”

To think that somehow we are doing God a favor is backwards. God has done us the favor. God has not asked us to come into His presence and to know Him and serve Him and worship Him because He has a lack or because He has some need. He has not asked us to come to Him because He needs us to do Him a favor. The favor has been extended to *us*! Realize what a magnificent thing it is that sinful men and women, through the shed blood of Jesus, gain access into the very presence of God. We are called into His presence to know Him and to worship Him. We are called to love Him and to serve Him and to give to Him—not because God needs it; not because God lacks anything. God does not ask you to give because He has a cash flow problem. God does not ask you to worship because He has a sagging self-esteem and He needs you to build Him up. None of this is really about God having a lack or a need.

But rather, think of it in terms of God's presence as being this unimaginable majesty and in the midst of that, because of His goodness and grace, He opens up the door and He invites a select few that He calls His people to come in. "Come in and know Me. Come in and worship Me. Come in and talk to Me. Come in and serve Me. Just come."

We aren't doing God a favor. God has done us the favor. Sometimes I think we just get the whole thing backwards. We start to think that because of our salvation, we owe God and we have this duty or obligation. We are expected to go to church once a week and we should probably serve somewhere. We should probably give God some of our money. We are just doing God these favors like it is a checklist. We rush in and we rush out. We check that off the list and that should keep God happy for this week. In our own minds we're thinking somehow we are doing God a favor, and we have got the whole thing backwards.

God does not see it that way at all. God says, "You know, this is an amazing thing that I have opened up My presence and I have invited you in. You have access to come and to know Me, to love Me, to worship Me and to serve Me. This is the most remarkable gift that you have ever been given. This is the most remarkable privilege I could ever allow you."

Rather than coming as a sense of obligation and duty, we should come overflowing with thanksgiving that we have been granted such a magnificent opportunity. It should be the highlight of our lives that we get to know Him. We get to worship Him. We get to serve Him.

I think sometimes in service we are just cranking it out because we think we owe God that. God says, "That isn't the way it is. This is not some duty you are fulfilling. This is the greatest privilege you have ever been granted. You can actually serve Me. You can be part of what lasts forever."

We should be knocking the doors down saying, "I want to worship more." We should be lining up at every ministry booth saying, "I want to serve more; I can't get enough. It is the greatest thing that has ever been granted to me. It is the highest privilege that I could know, as a person made in the image of God." Therefore, we come with hearts of thanksgiving, hearts overflowing with appreciation for who God is and what He has granted to us.

Oftentimes when we talk about worship we say, "This isn't about us. It isn't about me; it is about God." That is true. We are talking about moving away from having a consumer heart and realizing, *This is not about me and my style of music. It is not about what I like. It is about God and what is true.*

But in another sense, it *is* about me. It is all about me. We are not meeting some need in God. This is not about fulfilling some lack in God. God has not invited us to do this because He needs anything from us. This is about me. This is about me being granted the most remarkable privilege that one could even imagine—that God would throw open His doors through the blood of Jesus Christ and say, "You can know Me. You can come into My presence. You can worship Me. You can serve Me. You can give to Me." This is, in some way, all about us and the most remarkable privilege that God can extend to us. And He says, "I just want you to know that and to recognize that and to respond out of that."

If we do, then it overflows into obedience, which is what He means by "paying your vows." It would overflow into obedience and we would live our lives in the worship of God. He says, "When you do that, when you know Me, when you celebrate Me, when you call upon Me in your day of

trouble, I will rescue you. I will be there for you and you will love Me all the more. You will honor Me or value Me.”

That is what God wants. God does not want us going through these religious rituals as if we are doing God some sort of favor, meeting some unmet need in God. But we are to see it for what it is: the most remarkable privilege that we have been granted—to enter into His presence and to know Him, to serve Him, to give to Him, to love Him, and to experience His salvation.

The first indictment is that He does not want His people coming out of a sense of duty or obligation, but out of a thankful heart. The second indictment is what we might call the hypocrisy of God’s people. When He talks about the wicked, He is not talking about the pagans. He is talking about those within the camp who consider themselves the people of God.

But to the wicked God says, “What right have you to tell of My statutes and to take My covenant in your mouth? For you hate discipline [It could be translated instruction: You hate instruction.]. And you cast My words behind you.”
(vs. 16-17)

What He is saying is that there are those people who claim to be among the people of God and they like to quote the Bible. They like to quote His statutes, and they come off as being a friend of God and representing God. And yet God says, “You hate My instructions. You cast your words behind Me. You pretend that you are representing Me. You pretend that you are one of My people, and yet you don’t follow Me. You don’t listen to Me. As a matter of fact, you hate My instruction. You throw My words behind you.”

There are hundreds and hundreds of churches this morning where people will gather, and they will consider themselves to be counted among the people of God. They will read from the Bible and they will talk about Jesus. They will talk about God and give the impression that they represent God. Yet, what they promote and practice is contrary to the very truth of God. They have taken God’s instruction and they throw it behind them. They are more similar to the culture than they are to the truth of God’s Word.

There are a couple of hot buttons in our world today. One is this whole discussion on same-sex marriages. There are many churches that not only tolerate it but promote it. They will stand up and wave the Bible and they will claim to be counted among the people of God. Yet they will promote that which is clearly offensive to God. God is saying, “Stop doing that! Who do you think you are, representing Me and then offending Me?” The reality is that God is the author of marriage. I understand that politicians may struggle to come up with a politically correct reason to oppose same-sex marriages. But we are not politicians; we are The Church. We don’t struggle with the reason. The reason is right here in God’s Word—because God said so. I really don’t care where the culture is at. I really don’t care what people think. I only care about what God has said. We as the people of God are to represent God.

Another hot button in our culture is the whole issue of abortion. But let us understand the only choice in this matter is God’s. When God chooses life, nobody has the right to choose otherwise. In Genesis to Revelation, God is the author of life and the only choice is His. When He makes His choice, we accept it. For the Church of Jesus Christ to speak otherwise is offensive to God. It is taking His truth and throwing it behind us and having the culture speak with more authority than the Scriptures themselves. God says, “Stop doing that! Who do you think you are saying you are My people if you are going to do that?”

He goes on and talks about specifics among the Hebrew people, which certainly we can identify with.

“When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you associate with [or condone] adulterers. You let your mouth loose in evil [filthy] talk. And your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son. These things you have done and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.” (vs. 18-21)

He goes through this list of examples where you talk the talk but you don’t walk the walk. Your walk is more like the culture apart from God than it is properly representing God. He goes through this series of examples, and then He says, “Just because I remain silent...” In other words, “Just because I did not strike you dead does not mean I tolerate this. It does not mean I agree with this. It does not mean everything is okay.”

He is saying that He is going to call His people on the carpet. He is going to lay the case out and He is going to hold them accountable. He says, “Just because I didn’t wipe you out, you start to think that I am like you.”

People will construct their theology to fit their morality. They will redefine who God is in order to justify their lifestyle. Rather than becoming like God, we try to make God like us. And that is what He is saying: “Because I remain silent, you thought that I was like you.” He says, “I am not like you and I don’t like this. I am going to appear and I am going to call you on the carpet. I am going to let you know that this is completely unacceptable. It takes more than talking the talk.” God says, “If you are going to be My people, then you properly represent Me. You walk the walk.”

The guide to truth is the Bible. The guide to morality is the Bible. It is not the culture. It is not the opinion polls. It is what God has said. In verse 22 He says, “Now consider this, you who forget God.” This is very important. He is saying to stop and think about this.

“Now consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you in pieces, and there will be none to deliver.” (v. 22)

In other words, He is saying, “You had better consider this, because I am serious here. This is what I expect from My people. If you choose otherwise, there will be a price to pay.”

“He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; and to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God.” (v. 23)

God does not want this to be a secret. He does not want us to be surprised one day when we say, “God, I never knew this.” He is saying, “Hey, I am laying it out for you. Stop and think about it while you can still respond.”

I realize we could get in this debate about this being Old Testament and we are in the New Testament—“that is old covenant and we are in the new covenant; that is law and we have grace.” But understand this: from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is God’s self-revelation. This is God revealing Himself, saying, “I am God and I am going to be the judge. This is the indictment I have on My table.” God is the same yesterday, today and forever, and this indictment is the same whether you are in the old covenant or the new covenant. God does not tolerate this from His people.

Ultimately what God says is, “I do not want your empty religious rituals, where you think you are somehow doing Me a favor, and somehow you are meeting some need in Me by showing up at

church or serving in a ministry.” God says, “I don’t need that; I don’t want that. I don’t have any needs. I don’t have any lack. I am complete. You are not doing Me a favor. I have granted *you* a favor—the most remarkable privilege possible—that I would throw open the doors of My presence and you can come. You can come and know Me. You can come and worship Me. You can come and love Me. You can give to Me. You can serve Me.”

This is the highest priority that we have in life. We come with thankful hearts overflowing with this wonder of what God has granted us, and because of that it overflows into obedience. If we are going to call ourselves the people of God, then we properly represent God. We stand on His truths. We stand according to His statutes, and His Word becomes the standard. We don’t just talk the talk, but we walk the walk. We truly experience what it means to know God and to be counted among God’s people, so that in our day of trouble when we call out to Him, He will hear us. He will respond to us. He will deliver us, and we will just love Him all the more.

It is very easy in a message like this for a person to think about other churches: *I can think of a whole list of churches*, or other people: *Oh yeah, that is so and so*. But what about you? What about me? Are these indictments true of me? Do I sometimes lose sight of the wonder that I, as a sinful person through the blood of Jesus, have been granted access to the presence of God? I am not fulfilling some duty or some ritual. I am not trying to win some points with God today. I have been granted the most remarkable privilege that I could ever be granted. I can enter His presence. I can worship Him. I can love Him. I can know Him. I can serve Him. It comes from a heart of thanksgiving, and it overflows into my obedience.

I am not asking you if you can talk the talk. I am asking you: Are you walking the walk? Is there anything in your life that does not line up with what pleases God? Is there anything in your life that you say, “I know this is not what God wants”? Deal with it! God is saying, “Don’t talk the talk if you aren’t going to walk the walk. If you are going to be counted among My people, then deal with your stuff. Clean up your act. Walk according to My truth. Know Me.”

We can experience His salvation. We can experience the joy of our salvation. We can experience that life that God promised to His people.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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