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Psalm 50

The Well-Ordered Life

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not too long ago, around the time we first moved here, Psalm 50 was my go-to for one-off pastoral conversations. If we were meeting up, and I wanted to lay out something of a high-level vision of the Christian life, doctrinally, practically, more than likely, we talked through Psalm 50, or at least bits and pieces of it. To my mind, it does a really good job of laying out the major thrusts, the major movements of the Christian life.

Psalm 50 follows up on Psalm 49. Psalm 49 and 50 are calls to repentance, and Psalm 51 is the model prayer of repentance.

Psalm 49, that Michael preached last week, is basically a call to non-believers to set aside their idols (specifically wealth), and trust in the one true God.

But then Psalm 50 is a call to professed believers, those who claim the name of Jesus, to not trust in mere formality, to not trust in the bare appearance of faith.

This problem goes by many names. At its most extreme, this is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is where your life and your profession are opposite. You claim Jesus with your words, but with your actions you outright deny him.

But on the tamer side this is formalism, or nominalism. This is where your life has the form of faith – you go to church, you don't cuss, you profess correct things about Jesus – but you're a Christian in name only. There's no power in your faith, no substance.

For the hypocrite, your life contradicts your faith.

For the formalist, your life doesn't necessarily contradict your faith, it just doesn't demonstrate your faith. Your life isn't opposed to your faith, it's just irrelevant to your faith.

Formalism, nominalism is a very real danger today. The danger today isn't so much that you will deceive your neighbors and coworkers into thinking you are something you're not, but that you might deceive yourself into thinking you're something you're not. When church attendance and claiming the name of Jesus are entirely optional, even social negatives, it can be easy to think that mere religious activity and profession prove something that they just don't.

So, this is Asaph's main point: formalism, religious form, is not the same thing as faith.

Psalm 49 says 'turn away from your irreligion – your atheism, your paganism – and be saved.'

Psalm 50 says 'turn away from your formal, dead religion – your Christianity-in-name-only – and be saved.'

Psalm 50 will give us *three principles of true and living faith*.

Here's my roadmap for this text.

Verses 1-6, true and living faith *beholds God as he is*.

Verses 7-15, true and living faith *comes to Christ with empty hands*.

Verses 16-21, true and living faith *produces righteous living*.

Then verses 22 and 23, are a conclusion and summary of the three points.

I want you to see the logic of this passage, I think this is instructive. It's helpful to not just see *what* the Bible teaches but to also see how the Bible *relates* what it teaches, the order and proportion of what it teaches. I won't dig into these in detail, but I want you to see them.

Verses 1-6 is the nature and attributes of God - it all begins with WHAT God is.

Verses 7-15 is justification by faith alone - we have *and can have* absolutely nothing to bring to this God but our empty hands (and he even gave us the hands)

Verses 16-21 is progressive sanctification - true faith results in true and growing love for God and love for neighbor that day by day transforms your life.

Nature of God, Justification, Sanctification.

II – Nature of God

Ok, look at the first six verses. The Psalm opens with a display of God's glory. The first principle is right here: true and living faith beholds God as he is. Before we can say anything about what it means to be reconciled to God, or to live for God, we have to say something about what God is.

Look at verses 1 through 6.

Notice what this passage says about God. He is the Mighty One, he is the perfection of Beauty, he is righteous.

Notice the extent of his authority – from the rising of the sun to its setting – the whole earth.

Notice how this section underlines God's authority. He has authority by nature – he is the perfection of power, and beauty, and righteousness. He has authority by right – the whole earth belongs to him. And he has authority again by covenant – he is our God and we are his people.

Before God even begins to address the present problem, he addresses the root problem. A well-ordered life begins with a right apprehension of God – seeing him for what he really is.

The root of most of our problems is a small view of God. We're anxious because we have a small view of God's providence. We're cold in devotion because we have a small view of God's beauty. We're tempted by sin because we have a small view of God's holiness, goodness, and omnipresence.

In our age we tend toward a rather high view of man and a low view of God. One theologian gave a rather tongue-in-cheek label to one common view of God in modern Christianity. He calls this view "Mono-polytheism." Basically, he says, this view of God sees God more like Zeus than the God of the Bible, but of course, he's all alone. Mono-polytheism. It's a silly name for a serious problem.

Basically, in this view, like the pagan gods of old, God is like us but bigger, stronger, and older. He is not the transcendent Absolute that the Bible presents. But a tamed God with limits like us. A domesticated God that we can relate to. This thin view of God leads to a thin faith, which makes room for formalism, moralism, and hypocrisy.

Zeus can be dazzled with religious activity.

Jupiter can be impressed with outward moral virtue.

Odin can be tricked into thinking you're something you're not.

The Almighty God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has no patience for any of that silliness.

Ok, that's the first principle: *true and living faith beholds God as he is.*

III – Justification

Look next at verses 7 through 15. Here's basically what God is saying: "your religiosity is impeccable. There's nothing wrong with the *form* of your devotion. But, all these ceremonies and observances are worthless by themselves. True faith is empty handed thankfulness."

Look especially at verses 9-13. This is really the core. We have nothing whatsoever of ourselves to offer to God.

Look at verse 10, this is important to see. **"Every beast of the forest is mine."** Then verse 11, **"all that moves in the field is mine."** Not one sacrifice has ever given anything to God. There is absolutely nothing that we can give to God that doesn't already belong to him.

Your cattle already belong to God. Your money already belongs to God. Your time already belongs to God. Your skill, energy, zeal, already belong to God.

Then again, I love this, look at verse 12, **"If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine."**

This one really puts us in our place. He gives a sardonic hypothetical. *Even if I were hungry* – a ridiculous proposition, clearly not a real scenario. *Even if I were hungry, I still wouldn't come to you for help.* "Even if I had needs, I still wouldn't talk to you about it."

So, the problem here, for the formalist, is believing that your religious activities, in themselves, satisfy God.

Verses 14-15. What then is the religion that pleases God?

Thanksgiving, faithfulness, and trust. Essentially, emptyhandedness.

"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High." Note, neither of these things add anything to God. Lift up glad and thankful hands to God, and simply be faithful to your promises. God doesn't need your stuff, and God doesn't need your works. But God desires your heart. Offer thanksgiving. Offer integrity.

Verse 15, **"call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."** This is interesting. We don't primarily glorify God by what we do, but by what he does for us. We glorify God chiefly by being the objects of his mercy, and his saving power.

I come only with my empty hands, and go out with gratitude, and out of that gratitude, fulfill my obligations. So, I fight sin, but not to earn God's favor, but out of gratitude for his grace in Christ Jesus.

I give mercy to others, and I fulfill my duties to my neighbors, not to earn God's favor but as an overflow of gratitude because of all that God has done for me. Thankfulness first, and then faithfulness.

Again, we glorify God most not by what we do for him, but by what he does for us.

And I'll add this too. That shouldn't lead to a kind of pacifist spirituality. Often, God will glorify himself the most, God will deliver us the most gloriously, in the way of things we are attempting for his glory.

In the middle of fighting your sin, God shows up and delivers you. In the middle of trying to share your faith with your classmate, God shows up and delivers you.

Ok, that's the second principle of true and living faith. True and living faith comes to Christ with empty hands. We're not trying to impress him with our religious formality. We're not trying to impress him with our moral seriousness. We're not trying to impress him by attempting great things for him. We're coming simply with empty hands, and living lives of gratitude, faithfulness, and trust in light of all that he has given us in Christ.

There is one point of reflection I want to make before moving on.

I want you to see how this emptyhandedness relates to both pride and despair.

Both pride and despair essentially have the same root. They both essentially believe that my standing before God, and even my place in his Church, come down ultimately to me.

On the pride side, we think, "my standing before God and his church comes down to me, and I'm doing great."

On the despair side, we think, "my standing before God and his church comes down to me, and I don't think I have what it takes - I'm not like everyone else."

Now, this passage is primarily addressing the pride side, but it applies to the despair side as well.

To the pride side, this passage says, "you're wrong, you don't have what it takes, all that you offer to God was his already. Even with morality, all your moral uprightness at best is just the bare minimum, it's nothing impressive to God. All that you can bring is your empty hands."

And to the despair side, this passage says, "you're actually right, you don't have what it takes. But Christ does. You have sin, you have uncertainty, you have confusion and brokenness, good news, you have empty hands. That's all you need."

And that's all of us. All of us are just a bunch of empty-handed sinners gathering up at the foot of the cross. Not one of us deserves to be here. Not one of us has anything that we didn't receive. Not one of us has anything going for us beyond an empty pair of hands.

All that I have going for me is Christ.

I have questions.
I have sin that I'm fighting.
I have shame.
I have stupid things I wish I didn't say.
I have twisted things I wish I didn't feel.
I too have that gnawing anxiety that one day everyone's going to realize that I don't really belong – that I don't really fit in.
All that I have going for me is Christ.
I have no righteousness of my own, but Christ alone.
I have no holiness of my own, but Christ alone.
I have no beauty to point to, but Christ alone.
And he is enough.
You are in no better shape than me or anyone else - you need Jesus.
You are in no worse shape than me or anyone else - Jesus is enough for you.
So, come with empty hands, that's all you have, and that's all you need.

IV – Sanctification

Ok, then the third principle is from verses 16-21.

True and living faith beholds God as he is, it comes with empty hands. And true and living faith *produces righteous living*.

Again, notice the order here, notice the logic of this passage. True faith begins with seeing God rightly, in all his power, and beauty, and authority. Next, true faith comes with empty hands. Then true faith works through thankfulness. True thankfulness always produces a growing seriousness about doing what is pleasing to God.

Now, look at verses 16 through 21. Remember, here Asaph's basic point is a rebuke to the formalists. In verse 16 he charges them with inconsistency. **¹⁶But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?"**

Basically, "you want me to be your God, but you don't want to live like my people. If you won't live according to my covenant, what business do you have taking any comfort in my covenant?"

Next, look at 17 through 20. Here we see the charges. This is what the formalists were doing.

Notice again how the issue isn't just the things themselves, but the heart in the things. In 17 the charge isn't just that you are undisciplined, but that you *hate* discipline.

There are many who *are* undisciplined, but not everyone who is undisciplined hates discipline. There are some who are undisciplined but *love* discipline, or at least want it. They are genuinely eager for someone to give them a path, to give them some instruction, some pattern. "I want to be more godly, just tell me how. I want to be a better husband, just tell me how. I want to be a better father, just tell me how. I want to be more faithful, just tell me how." They aren't moralists, or legalists, they just want some real practical instruction. They want discipline, they just don't have it.

This is often the tell, I think this is why Asaph starts here. To the formalist, he likes the idea of religion but not the power. To the formalist, discipline just is legalism. The formalist hates discipline. To the formalist, clear and specific application just is legalism. The formalist hates discipline.

Then, we get to verse 18. **"If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers."**

Now remember, this Psalm is a rebuke to the formalist, not the hypocrite. The formalist keeps company with the adulterer. The hypocrite doesn't keep company with adulterers, the hypocrite is the adulterer.

So, if you're the formalist, you'd never cheat on your wife, at least so you say, but if your buddy does, you might mildly chide him, but in the end you'd just get back to the status quo in the friendship.

The point here, is that true faith produces true moral judgment. There are two sides to a Christian response to sin. There is both a radical gospel hope – no sin is too great for the cross of Jesus Christ. And, like we see here, a stern moral seriousness about sin.

Now, this isn't an abstract example is it? Hopefully, if you're a member, you saw the email this last Wednesday. You saw that one of our members has been caught in an adulterous relationship.

God, in his providence, has given us a text to help us talk about this a bit. So, what do we do?

The first is prayer. Pray for _____. Pray for her and the kids. Pray for her to know the love and peace of Christ. Pray for her to have strength. Pray for her to have wisdom. Pray for her to grieve well and wisely.

And pray for _____. Pray for him to feel the weight of his sin, to feel conviction. To have true godly sorrow, not mere fleshly sorrow. Sometimes, we can use fleshly sorrow as a way of avoiding the conviction of true godly sorrow. We condemn ourselves, "Oh I'm so bad, I'm the worst, I've done so much evil," sometimes we condemn ourselves as a way of avoiding the much more severe condemnation of God.

Fleshly sorrow can be a way of trying to get off easy. True conviction, conviction from God and his law, cuts deep. But this, and this alone, is the conviction that has any hope of leading to true repentance. Pray for true conviction.

Tangibly, come alongside _____ in practical ways. We sent out a meal train the other day, sign up for that if there are any openings left. If you're close with _____, reach out to her. Talk if she wants to talk. Offer to come do house chores for her, or just sit with her.

Similarly, if you feel so inclined, and you have some relationship, reach out to _____. Having been caught, he's been receptive. He hasn't been combative or defensive. He hasn't been equivocating or blame shifting. So far, he's owning it.

Tell him you're angry. Tell him you're upset. Tell him you're disappointed. Tell him you're praying for him. Tell him about Jesus. Tell him about the cross and the empty tomb. Tell him that you're praying that he'd be restored – that one day he'd walk in full gospel light again.

What I want to press on you is the two poles of thinking Christianly about this.

On the one side, we need to have a Christian seriousness and Christian sternness about sin. This is Asaph's point here. One of the indicators of a merely formal faith is that your buddy's adultery doesn't really change the friendship.

There's a fleshly and worldly sternness; a severity toward sin that is sub-Christian. Christian seriousness about sin is not petty, or vengeful, or vindictive, and certainly not prideful. But for the grace of God, you are him. But for the grace of God, I am him.

And on the other side, we need to have a Christian hope and a Christian desire for restoration. Again, there's a carnal and worldly so-called grace that's just an indifference and a papering over sin that just wants to get back to the status quo and doesn't actually deal with sin. Christian hope believes that by the blood of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit there can be true restoration.

Restoration is certainly not assumed. But for the sake of his soul, we hope for restoration.

Christian grace deals with sin. Worldly grace brushes sin under the rug.

So, pray for them both. Help where you can. And think Christianly.

Ok, back to Psalm 50.

Verses 19 and 20, the formalist is seen in evil speech, lying, and slander.

Again, the issue is the heart. Actions follow the heart. The heart shows itself on the tongue. Remember back to the James series. Remember how significant controlling your tongue is for James. True faith, pure religion, is seen, or not, in how you speak to others.

Then look at 21, here he circles back to where he started. ²¹**"These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you."**

Getting justification wrong starts with the doctrine of God. Getting sanctification wrong starts with the doctrine of God. Remember mono-polytheism? **“You thought that I was one like yourself.”** The formalist gets faith and works wrong because he gets God wrong.

You thought that God winked at sin like you do. He doesn’t.

You thought that God approved of wickedness like you do. He doesn’t.

You thought that God looked on behavior and outward appearance like you do. He doesn’t.

Getting the Christian life right – behavior, practice, community – flows out of getting the gospel right. And getting the gospel right flows out of getting God right. He is the infinite. We have nothing to give him. He is the Holy One. Imperfect righteousness does not impress him. We need a perfect savior. We need a perfect salvation. Doing better and making amends does nothing to satisfy the justice of God. Only death for sin, and perfect righteousness can satisfy the Holy Law of the Holy God. Only Christ in your place – to live for you and die for you – can give you peace with God.

V – Conclusion

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

Here is a summary to round out the whole Psalm. Note where he starts, what’s the problem: **“you who forget God.”** They lost sight of God. Then he says, **“lest I tear you apart.”** In case he was unclear, he’s making the stakes very clear. A formalist faith, a dead faith, a ritual-but-no-substance faith is not a saving faith. Mere religious practice will not save you. Ceremony will not save you.

Then 23, **“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me.”** Come with empty hands. I so appreciate this. Even at the end of this rebuke to the formalist, it isn’t just a condemnation. It ends with an invitation. Come. Lay down your ritual. Lay down your works. Come with empty hands. The door is open for you even still.

“To one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!”

Again, this is both an invitation and a rebuke to the formalist. Christ is not your savior if he is not also your lord. But if you will turn at this rebuke, the door is open for you.

Behold your God. So many of our problems would simply vanish if we would really believe the things we affirm about God. He is *almighty* – why am I so anxious about the future? He is *good* – why am I so hesitant to believe his promises? He is *wise* – why do I fret so much about how things will turn out?

Come with empty hands. Your sin is not too big. Your shame is not too dark. Your works are not enough. You do not have what it takes to *earn* peace with God. You need the cross, today as much as ever. And the cross is enough for you, today as much as ever. Maybe you are the formalist that this Psalm has been rebuking. The cross is enough for you. Maybe you aren’t the formalist, maybe you’re the hypocrite. Maybe you don’t keep company with adulterers, maybe you are the adulterer. The cross is enough for you. *Come with empty hands.*

Order your way rightly. Faith without works is dead. True faith results in works. True heart change results in love for Bible-formed discipline. True works flow from thankfulness.

Behold your God. Come with empty hands. Order your way rightly.