

Going Through the Motions

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Al, for reading that for us. I'm just going to pray very briefly before we get going in this psalm. Heavenly Father, we do ask you to draw near to us this morning and open our ears, give us soft hearts as you speak to us.

And I just pray that you would give me the right words to say, Lord, as I share this psalm with everybody here. And we ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So I wonder if you in life, if you've ever found yourself going through the motions.

I wonder if you've ever found it easy to coast along in life, just getting by day to day. Maybe you've slipped into the mentality at times of living for the weekend.

We've heard that people speaking that way, living for the weekend. Or maybe you have found yourself living for the holidays. And maybe if you're a teacher, that's quite an easy thing to do with those big holidays.

Maybe you've slipped into that mentality of going through the motions. Maybe your view of work isn't the best. Maybe your heart just isn't in your work or in what you're doing.

[1 : 19] I wonder if you've ever felt that way. I remember, so before I did this job, I worked as an engineer for a while. And I remember very early on in my work as an engineer, in the coffee station, a few of us from our team were going through and making some coffees.

And I remember one of my colleagues saying, isn't it just wonderful? We've made it to Wednesday. Oh, we're on our way to the weekend. We're more than halfway.

And I just remember thinking, gosh, how have you slipped into that mentality of living for the weekend? We've still got a whole two days, three days if you include today.

There's more days left in this week than there is in the weekend. How have you slipped into that mentality? I think her heart just wasn't in it in her work.

She was going through the motions. And it can be really easy for us to do that as well. But I wonder if you've ever gone through the motions in your faith. Is your heart in it?

[2 : 26] Are you going through the motions when God is trying to speak to you? Maybe you have found it quite tempting to coast through a Sunday message.

Maybe not paying any attention at all. Happily daydreaming along. Are you going through the motions when you praise God?

When you sing to God? Are you just singing for singing's sake? Are you thinking about what you're singing? Are you going through the motions when you serve him?

When you serve God, are you doing it because you love him? Are you going through the motions in your faith? Are you content to crack on with life and not care about being transformed by the word of God?

Or maybe you're here this morning and you're pretending to be a Christian. You say all the right things. You do all the right things.

[3 : 25] To all intents and purposes, you look like a genuine believer. But deep down, you're rejecting Jesus. I think we all need to sit up and take notice this morning because God cares about where our hearts are this morning.

Whether we are genuine believers or not. God has left us Psalm 50, which speaks all about our heart posture. And Psalm 50 cuts straight through our congregation this morning.

And it divides the collective people of God who gather together before him. And it speaks to the two camps who are here this morning.

Those who are faithfully following Jesus and those who are not. And I think there's a possible third category. And I just want to say a word to you.

Maybe you are here this morning and you are earnestly seeking the Lord Jesus. But maybe you're not quite sure yet. You're exploring these things. And that is wonderful.

[4 : 29] And you're really welcome here this morning. And I say to those people in that third camp, do sit and listen to what we have to say today. And yeah, maybe that will give you some more things to consider as you weigh up whether to follow this Jesus or not.

But we're going to look at this Psalm in three parts. So do keep it open. We're going to look, first of all, verses 1 to 6. How God summons and speaks to his people.

Then in verses 7 to 15, God testifies against coasting Christians. And then verses 16 to 21, God testifies against pretend Christians.

So God is pulling no punches here in Psalm 50. It's a serious word this morning. But let's look at the first six verses. God summons and speaks to his people.

So you may have noticed Psalm 50 has a really dramatic and powerful opening. Let's have a closer look at these verses. So God is drawing back the curtain of reality so that we can see into the spiritual realm.

[5 : 39] That is what God is doing. And we see a heavenly courtroom. Have you ever been to court? I wonder. This is Inverness Castle.

I grew up just north of Inverness. And people would joke in Inverness that the only way to see inside this castle was by committing a crime and attending the court that was inside it.

I've still never seen the inside of Inverness Castle. Have you ever been to court? Well, hopefully you weren't in the dock. But maybe as a juror. And here in this powerful prophetic vision of this heavenly realm, we see God, the mighty judge.

And we see in verse 1 that God speaks and he summons the earth. We read in verse 4, he summons the heavens above and the earth that he may judge his people.

And then in verse 6, the heavens proclaim that he's a righteous God of justice. God is a judge. And he summons his gathered people to come and be judged.

[6 : 53] But he is no human judge. He's not the fellow that sits up the front of the woman with the curly wig. In verse 1, he's called by three of his names.

Not just one, but three. Did you notice that? He is the mighty one. He is God himself. And he is the capital L-O-R-D. The Lord.

The one who makes and keeps covenant promises with his people. Then in verse 2, it tells us a little bit more about what he's like. His glory is bursting out of his heavenly realm.

He is perfect in beauty. Verse 3, he comes with fire. A fire which devours everything before it.

Think of those wildfires that we sometimes see on the news that rip through tender dry forests, tender dry forests, and they devour everything in their path. Our God is surrounded by a raging, tempestuous fire.

[7 : 59] He is an all-powerful, beautifully glorious, yet terrifying and awesome judge. And if we were to see a vision like this one, we would be absolutely petrified before him.

And he is the same judge who summons us to come and listen to him today. Now, these verses, the first six verses of Psalm 50, they're supposed to remind us of two scenes from the Bible.

So the first one is from the past. So there's one from the past, which we'll look at first of all. And then there's a vision, sorry, a scene from the future that we are also reminded of.

So here's some verses from Exodus 19. And in Exodus 19, God gathered his people before him at Mount Sinai, and they were utterly terrified by his presence on the mountain.

They were petrified before him. And it says these words in verse 18. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

[9 : 14] The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. So God came to them on the mountain.

His presence was there. They were terrified. And God made a covenant with them, a commitment to be their God and to make them his treasured possession if they will likewise dedicate themselves to him, him alone, and live according to his rules.

So this was a covenant that God made with his people at Mount Sinai. And this covenant was sealed by offering sacrificial animal blood. That was what they did to seal these promises.

So that was Exodus 19, a scene from the past that we're reminded of. And now for a scene in the future, a day in the future that we read about in Revelations chapter 20.

And I'm just going to read these verses. Then I saw a great white throne, And him who was seated on it. And then just skipping on a few words.

[10 : 26] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life.

The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. So Psalm 50 is also a picture of the day to come when God will judge all people according to how they lived their lives.

Whether they've lived for Jesus or whether they've lived for themselves. So this God who is dazzlingly glorious, who's fiercely mighty, whose presence is a literal furnace, this is the one that we worship and who speaks to us this morning.

And he is the one who we will have to give an account to on that final day. So are we paying attention to him? Or are we content to keep going through the motions?

Okay, let's look at our next point. So God testifies against coasting Christians. So we've already seen that God is an awesome judge.

[11 : 36] He summons and he speaks to his people. But now in verse seven, he takes the witness stand and he testifies against his covenant people.

God says, listen, my people, and I will speak. I will testify against you, Israel. I am God, your God. I'm the God you entered into a covenant committed relationship with.

But there is something I'm not happy about. Why is God taking issue with his people in this psalm? What does he seek to correct in his people?

Well, we see in verse eight that God says, I'm not rebuking for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings. So that's just a wee image of the temple worship, burnt offerings that were offered for sin.

And God says, I'm not rebuking you for these things, for your sacrifices. You're actually very good at offering your sacrifices to me. Now, I don't need your bulls or your goats.

[12 : 48] Don't you remember that they are mine already? Every animal of the forest, all the cattle on a thousand hills. And if you think about that for a moment, that is a lot of cattle. Every bird in the mountains, every insect in the fields, all animals in every place on this earth, they are mine already, he says.

Verse 12, we read, the whole world is mine and everything in it. This is not about the sacrifices that you offer, that my law stipulates.

You're very good at offering me those sacrifices. But don't you know that I own it all already? This isn't just about the animals.

And then he goes on in verses 12 and 13, and he's talking about the people feeding him. And that's quite a strange image because we know that God is spirit and he doesn't eat. But what does God mean when he says this?

What God is saying is, I don't need you to feed me. I won't wither away if you fail to give me your bulls and goats. So under this old covenant that we thought about a minute ago, when God came down to them on the mountain, he made them this covenant promise to be their God.

[14 : 03] Under this old covenant, sacrificing animals and offering their blood was the means that God chose to cover over sin. But he says in Psalm 50, it's never been about the animals.

What God really cares about in his people is the heart behind the sacrifice. Now we see parallels to this in some other Psalms and perhaps the most memorable similarity to this idea of it being about the heart, we see in Psalm 51.

And we're actually going to go there next Sunday and Colin Adams is going to come and preach Psalm 51 to us next week. But it says in Psalm 51, you do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it.

You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, oh God, is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.

You, God, will not despise. So David in this moment, he has sinned terribly before God and he's utterly broken before God.

[15 : 13] And David recognizes that God cares about the heart posture behind the religious action. In this case, God cares about David's repentant heart rather than David offering the right sacrifice for his sin.

So it's Psalm 51. But what heart posture is God seeking in Psalm 50? Well, I think the key verses are verse 14 and 15.

You can look at them again now. God says, sacrifice, thank offerings to God. Fulfill your vows to the Most High and call on me in the day of trouble.

God desires gratitude. God desires commitment. God desires dependence in his people.

God says, instead of offering bull after goat after bull, give me your heart. Serve me because you love me.

[16 : 18] Depend on me because you can't depend on yourself. By going through the motions of worship without giving God the devotion he desires, the Israelites' worship has become empty.

Now, here today, I think that maybe our worship has become empty. Are we going through the motions in our faith?

Are we just coming to church because we know we should rather than because we want to? Maybe it would look bad if we didn't show up. Are we nodding along and saying our amens in church without giving any thought to what is being prayed?

Are we singing to God mindlessly? Are we thinking about what we're singing? Are we offering him empty words? Are we serving him on the church rota because we love Jesus?

Or because we think our church needs us? Do we serve God because God needs us? Does he need our skills? Remember, God has said he doesn't need anything from us.

[17 : 33] He owns it all already. We ought to examine ourselves this morning. And I find this a challenge as well. As I serve you guys as a pastor in training, am I doing this role because I love Jesus?

Or am I just going through the motions, just trying to get by, just getting through that next sermon? This is a challenge to us all. And earlier we thought about the difference that Jesus makes.

So Jesus makes a big difference to us today as Christians living after the cross. I actually meant to say this paragraph, but in the excitement of the moment I skipped it.

But basically what I was going to say a little bit early on when we thought about that old covenant, new covenant, we know today that Jesus, by offering himself as a sacrifice, by offering his blood on the cross, Jesus seals this new covenant.

Jesus' blood seals this new covenant for us today. God commits to forgiving us and calling us his people and helping us through life and preserving us and bringing us to be with him in heaven if we will trust in his son Jesus.

[18 : 43] And Jesus' blood seals that promise, this new covenant. Now, so Jesus makes a big difference for us living today as Christians post-cross, so living after the events of the cross.

And we know that in Jesus' life, he never went through the motions. His life was marked with total gratitude to the Father, total commitment to God's will, and complete dependence on the Father.

And we, living today as Christians, as his people, we are covered by his perfect record. Now, we know we struggle to live as God desires.

Sometimes we do lose focus. Sometimes we're not thinking about what we're saying, what we're reading, what we're praying. And that's okay. Jesus knows that we struggle to live as God desires.

But when God looks at us, he sees Jesus' perfection, that unblemished life, that perfect record. But also, Jesus has left us his Holy Spirit to help Christians to live a life of complete devotion to God.

[20 : 02] So look to him for help as you seek to live in devotion to God. Not having empty worship before him. Not saying empty words, but giving him your heart.

So God speaks to coasting Christians, but now God testifies against pretend Christians. We're going to look at the last few verses.

And the psalmist could easily have stopped at the end of verse 15. That would have been quite a succinct ending, quite complete. But God has not finished speaking. He remains in the witness stand in that court.

And in verse 16, he says, I'm going to testify against the wicked person now. I have some words for you. When God testifies against the wicked person, who are we talking about?

Who are the wicked? Well, I think in the context of this passage, the wicked were Israelites who were part of the people of God, part of the gathered congregation of God.

[21 : 07] But in their hearts, they were rejecting God. That is key. They were part of the people of God, but deep down, they didn't believe it. They didn't believe that God was good.

In verses 16 and 17, God says, What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips? You hate my instruction.

You cast my words behind you. You are a hypocrite if you call me one of your people. Yet you do these things. You cast my word behind you.

You shut down your ears and your heart and you say, No, I don't want to hear what you have to say. When God's word is spoken, he speaks it to our hearts.

There's something supernatural going on when we read his word, when we have it taught to us. He speaks it to our hearts. He convicts us of our sin. He draws us near to himself.

[22 : 05] But the wicked person hates it when God speaks to their heart, when he convicts them. They hate it and they reject it. They cast it behind them, as the psalm says.

I don't want to hear it. Now, I distinctly remember a time in my life when God was speaking to my heart. He was telling me to submit myself to him.

He said, Craig, give me your heart. Listen. But I would keep drawing down the shutters. I remember drawing down the shutters Sunday after Sunday and saying, No, I don't want to do it.

I don't want to listen. God wanted to soften and soften my heart and for me to submit myself to him. And he was persistent. When God challenges you about something, when he convicts you in your heart, when he asks you to submit, do not cast it behind you.

This is a serious word that he speaks to us in verse 50, Psalm 50. God continues in verse 17. He says, You're a hypocrite. If you call yourself one of my people, yet behind the scenes, you are doing everything that the other wicked people are doing.

[23 : 25] Do we see that? In the verses, you are stealing from others. You're committing adultery. Behind the scenes, you are using your words to deceive people.

You're lying to people. You're using your words to harm people and throw them under the bus. You're using your words to slander those people who are close to you, even those that you love.

You're willing to throw them under the bus. Now, these actions are obviously wicked. But what God says is truly wicked is to call yourself a Christian while you're doing all these things in secret.

God continues his rebuke to pretend Christians. And that's key. God is speaking to pretend Christians in these verses.

And in verse 21, he says, When you do all these things and I keep silent, you think you're getting away with it. If God isn't confronting me as I do these things, maybe it must be fine.

[24 : 28] I'm getting away with it. I think it's extremely sobering when we stop and we imagine how much evil has been done on this earth that nobody has witnessed and nobody will ever know about.

And I wonder how many wicked people in this earth have done these things and who think they've gotten away with it. Well, we know that God sees everything.

And God says to wicked pretend Christians who've been doing all sorts of evil behind the scenes while presenting themselves as one of God's people, God says, I have been silent, but now I rebuke you.

And I set my accusations before you. Don't take God's silence to mean that you're in the clear. God has been gathering evidence of your evil hypocrisy and he's going to lay it out.

He's preparing the case for the prosecution. Now we're just going to bring this psalm to a close. And this has been some hard words from the Lord, but we're going to conclude the psalm in the same way that the psalmist does, looking at the last two verses.

- [25 : 43] He wraps things up in verses 22 and 23. And he's got a word, first of all, for pretend Christians, those who are part of God's people, but inwardly, they reject the Lord Jesus. And then he has a word for those Christians who are maybe going through the motions. And he wants to speak to the wicked, pretend Christians, first of all. And he wants to stop them in their tracks. And he says, verse 22, consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces with no one to rescue you. God says, consider, consider what I have just said to you. I have seen what you're doing. I know you're only pretending to be one of my people. Yet I've witnessed what you have been doing behind the scenes. we looked at that terrifying, awesome, fiery judge at the beginning.
- [26 : 44] Jesus is coming back in blazing glory as the judge. And he will judge the living and the dead according to what they've done and whether they've trusted in him or not. God says, turn around. Trust in my son, Jesus, before it's too late. And there will come a day when it's too late. But the good news of the gospel is that there is still time for the wicked to turn to Jesus and ask for his forgiveness and salvation. Jesus has already suffered the punishment that the evil hypocrite deserves. He was torn to pieces on the cross, but now he offers rescue even to the vilest sinner. That's the good news of the gospel. Consider what God says. Turn around. Trust in him before it's too late. But then the psalmist continues in verse 23 with a word for believers who are going through the motions in their faith. God says, those who sacrifice thank offerings, honor me, and to the blameless I will show my salvation. Remember, it's not about your religious activity.
- [28 : 04] It's not about the rotas that you're serving on. It's about your heart posture behind everything that you do for the Lord. God says, offer your heart to me. Not empty worship. And there's a promise in these verses as well. Those who are blameless will see God's salvation. For Christians living this side of the cross, those who have trusted in Jesus' work on the cross, God looks on them and he sees Jesus' perfection. Those who trust in Jesus have been made blameless and they will see God's salvation in action. Yes, Jesus will return as that same awesome, fiery judge, but the blameless will receive him with joy because he will be coming to rescue them. Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we just thank you for these words that you've left for us in Psalm 50 that you've preserved for us, Lord. Lord, I appreciate these are hard words but thank you that you do not let us just sit along and coast but you do speak to us into our minds and in our hearts in church and we thank you that you are persistent as well and we thank you for giving us these words from Psalm 50 and to your gathered people, Lord, those that are maybe going through the motions and Lord, we know that we all lose focus and we take our eyes off you and we do, we live for you for other reasons, Lord. We do it for ourselves. We sometimes look to worship ourselves but thank you for this reminder to stop and to look on your son, Jesus, his perfect blameless life and he has given us his spirit to help us to walk with gratitude, with wholehearted commitment to you and expressing our dependence to you in prayer, Lord, and we know that we can't depend on ourselves so thank you for giving us your spirit and for these words and help us to just offer you our hearts and not empty worship, Lord.
- [30 : 28] And Lord, for those that are maybe here who've been putting on a good show, Lord, who are calling themselves one of your own yet behind the scenes they don't believe it.

God, I do just pray that you would have mercy and that you would just help these people to come back to you and you know who they are and would you help them to trust in your son, Jesus.

Would you open their eyes and that they would trust and believe it, believe in your son. We thank you for your mercy in giving us this psalm and we pray that you'd help us as we turn to sing to you now.

Would you help us to offer you our wholehearted praise because you've done so much for us and you've suffered on the cross for us and we thank you so much.

We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.