

God Shines Forth

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Psalm 50:1-7, 14-23 NIV

The Mighty One, God, the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.
From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.

Our God comes and will not be silent;
a fire devours before him,
and around him a tempest rages.
He summons the heavens above,
and the earth, that he may judge his people:
“Gather to me my consecrated ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”
And the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for God himself is judge. *Selah*
“Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, and I will testify against you:
I am God, your God. . . .

Sacrifice thank offerings to God,
fulfill your vows to the Most High,
and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”
But to the wicked, God says:
“What right have you to recite my laws
or take my covenant on your lips?
You hate my instruction
and cast my words behind you.
When you see a thief, you join with him;
you throw in your lot with adulterers.
You use your mouth for evil
and harness your tongue to deceit.
You speak continually against your brother
and slander your own mother’s son.
These things you have done and I kept silent;
you thought I was altogether like you.
But I will rebuke you
and accuse you to your face.
“Consider this, you who forget God,
or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue:
He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me,
and he prepares the way
so that I may show him the salvation of God.”

Little Abigail clutched her father’s hand. She was still tired from the long climb up to Mount Zion, to the house of the Lord. It wasn’t only the climb, for everyone coming to the festival had to go up the hill to the holy city. But Abigail had not just walked up like her father and mother and her older brother Eliezer when the ram’s horn had sounded its call. No, Abigail’s friend Miriam had brought an extra tambourine, and had invited her to dance with the girls from their village as the heads of their tribe led them up to the sanctuary.

What a thrill it had been to be part of the festival procession, snaking back and forth across the road between the singers in front and the minstrels coming behind. And then, exhausted, they

had gazed in awe as the white-robed priests had brought the Ark of God solemnly up the hill and returned it to its place in the house of the Lord, that most holy place where only the priests could go. It had been a sight to behold, and one they might not see again very soon, for it happened only once a year at this particular festival, and Abigail's family couldn't afford to come every time.

Abigail was tired, but she eagerly took in all the sights and sounds and smells of the feast. Somehow, amidst all this crowd, her father had squeezed them into the courtyard of the house of the Lord, and they could just glimpse the smoking altar where the priests were sacrificing. One group of priests was filing out of the sanctuary, their white robes spattered with blood, while another group in fresh linen garments took their place. Music filled the air as the singers lifted praise to the Lord: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." Once in a while the singers would stop, and in their place the musicians played freely on their lyres and other stringed instruments, sounding their different kinds of cymbals. Abigail's dad said that was called the *selah*.

And there were other sounds — the pitiful cries of bulls and goats as the priests got ready to slit their throats and offer them to the Lord, the eager cries of vendors on the edge of the crowd hawking their foodstuffs or trinkets, the happy roar all about of a multitude keeping festival! And the smells! There's always a smell to a crowd on a hot day, when people just arrived from a long trip from their village have had no place to bathe for a while. But the smell of burning flesh from the smoking altar is even stronger, strong enough to cover the smell of this weary crowd.

The sights, the sounds, the smells! But suddenly Abigail heard a new sound, a voice speaking from the center of the courtyard. Her dad lifted her up for a better look. A man was standing there, lifting his arms for silence.

"Who is that man, father?" asked Abigail.

"Hush, my daughter!" he cautioned. "It's one of the prophets. He has a word for us from the Lord. Let us listen."

And in a strong voice the word came forth:

"Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Solemnly the people answered the prophet, reciting the words of the Ten Commandments that Moses had taught them of old. When they had finished, the prophet went on.

"'Yes, my people,' says the Lord, 'I want you to offer me your worship — your offerings and sacrifices. I want you to call to me in time of need, and I will deliver you and help you. But if you are wicked and forget me, you have no right to recite my laws, to take my covenant on your lips and claim you are still my faithful people. If you disregard my instructions and just live the way you want to, hurting your neighbors with selfish deeds, don't pretend you still serve me! And don't think that I'm like you! If you forget me, you'll bring judgment on yourselves and your life will be torn to pieces. Put me at the center of your life — always be thankful that I am your God, and honor me — and then you will know the salvation I want to give you!'"

The crowd stood silent for a moment as the prophet finished. A few people wept and bowed to the ground. Abigail's father held her tightly.

"O Lord God," he prayed, "thank you for this word from you. Keep us faithful to you — my wife and me and our children and all those we love. Bless my son Eliezer, and my dear little Abigail, and keep them always in your covenant and the truth of your way! And help us to listen for your voice."

But soon the crowd began to murmur as before. The vendors took up their cries, the priests threw more wood on the altar and went back to their slaughtering, and smoke rose afresh above the house of God. The singers again took up their chants, while the animals uttered their final

protest and slumped under the knife. Abigail looked for the prophet who had spoken, but he had disappeared into the crowd.

The Book of Psalms is a rich tapestry of the worship of the people of God. I have drawn this picture not only from Psalm 50, our reading for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost, but also from Psalms 68, 81, 132 and several others. The Psalms, in one place or another, express every mood of worship from praise to penitence, and they have been used in Christian worship from the very beginning. While I'm with you I will try to use one of the Psalms somewhere in every Sunday worship service.

The Bible is the Word of God, and in most of the Scriptures we hear God speaking to us. In the Psalms, on the other hand, the voice that speaks is usually the voice of the worshiper — the servant of the Lord appealing for his help, the congregation of the Lord singing his praise. But a few of the Psalms are different. Psalm 50 belongs to that group we might call the prophetic Psalms, for in them we hear not the voice of the worshiper but the voice of God speaking to his gathered people. It's a Psalm with an important message, a message about being faithful to our covenant with the Lord. Let's take a closer look.

The Psalm begins with these words:

*The Mighty One, God, the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.
From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.
Our God comes and will not be silent;
a fire devours before him,
and around him a tempest rages (1-3).*

What a tremendous picture of our awesome God — a God who is not to be trifled with, a God who can be approached only in fear and trembling. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, “‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:30-31).

I'm sorry to say that in most Protestant worship we seem to have tamed this fearsome God almost beyond recognition, for there's seldom anything in worship that strikes us with that sense of awe and mystery. We've explained everything about God and reduced him to a set of neat doctrinal statements and propositions. Has it occurred to you that, just because God is God, there might be things about him that we will never understand, and that can only fill us with awe and wonder and dread? That's certainly the attitude of biblical worshipers like John who said, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.” (Revelation 1:17).

Only one thing lets us approach this awesome God, and that's the cross of Jesus Christ, who took upon himself the penalty our sins require at the hand of the living God. In the crucified Son of God the veil has been torn, and we may behold God face to face without fear. Any other approach to God is either false or destructive, for Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Through Jesus, and Jesus only, we may come to this God of majesty and mystery. So, as Hebrews says, “Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (12:28-29).

God is in our midst, and he appears to us. The high point in the worship of the Psalms is that place where God comes, where he shines forth to his people. If God doesn't come in our worship, we haven't met with him. If he doesn't *shine* forth, we haven't seen him.

How did the Lord *come* in the worship of Israel? Not through some magical, Wizard-of-Oz-like contrivance, as if people could manage or control his appearance. Not in some scene like in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I believe that he *came*, he *shone forth*, in the recitation of the

Commandments, as the people heard the solemn words, “I am the Lord your God,” and took his covenant upon their lips.

How does the Lord *come* in our worship? He comes in the risen Jesus, the Word made flesh. As Paul writes: “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). But specifically how does Christ *come*, how does he *shine* in our worship together? First, through his *Word* as the Holy Scriptures are opened to us, for he is the Word. Second, through his *table* as we receive the symbols of his life, the bread and the cup. Third, in his *Holy Spirit* that moves each of us, releasing the life of the risen Jesus for praise and witness and service. We don’t have to be overly concerned about when Christ will come, for *he is here already* in the gathering of his body, and no one who seeks him here will be “left behind!”

God speaks further in Psalm 50:

*Sacrifice thank offerings to God,
fulfill your vows to the Most High,
and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me* (15-16).

A thank offering in Israel was a particular type of sacrifice, but in the Psalms there’s always this undercurrent that says, “The real sacrifice isn’t the animal that is laid on the altar, it’s the outpouring of praise from thankful hearts.” In the Psalm we read last week, Psalm 116, we said, “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord.” (13, 14, 17).

Thanksgiving, in the Bible, is more than gratitude, more than just saying, “Thank you.” The Hebrew word for giving thanks is derived from the word for *hand*. It refers to the act of lifting the hand, which then, as now, was a symbol of taking an oath. To give thanks is to *take the oath of allegiance* to God. It is our response to his offer of a covenant with us, when he says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

The only claim we have upon God’s help in our lives is our relationship with him as part of his family, his household, his covenant. He’s a merciful God, but he’s not bound to help anyone who hasn’t bonded with him. To give thanks to him, and to pledge our love and loyalty, is the first step in receiving his help and healing. When we honor him this way, he will deliver us when we call upon him in the day of trouble.

Psalm 50 ends with a warning and a promise. The warning is this:

*But to the wicked, God says:
“What right have you to recite my laws
or take my covenant on your lips?”* (16)

The prophet goes on to indict the people for their disobedience. If you read closely you’ll notice that the things he mentions parallel some actions forbidden by the Ten Commandments: tolerating thievery, adultery, false witness against fellow worshipers of the Lord. It is not just that we excuse our own sin, but we excuse sin in people who ought to know better. The prophet warns, “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue” (22). A life that ignores God is a life that is broken and torn and shattered.

There’s only one way to deal with sin: “But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2). We have the word of Christ that he won’t cast out anyone who comes to him repenting of sin and seeking his cleansing and forgiveness. But first we have to *come* in penitence so that he may *come* in mercy.

Then, when God looks at us he sees the blood of his Son, and remembers our sins no more. How *thankful* I am for this glorious truth.

And, last of all, the promise of the Lord in Psalm 50:

*He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me,
and he prepares the way
so that I may show him the salvation of God (23).*

It may be a sacrifice for you to say, “Lord, I thank you and I love you and I pledge myself to you.” It may cost you something dear, which is what a sacrifice is. It may cost you your pride and self-sufficiency to express your dependence on him. It may cost you your dignity to behold him, to “fall at his feet as if dead.” But that is how we receive the salvation, or healing, of God: by emptying ourselves, as Jesus emptied himself, that we might be filled with his fulness, and so become, as Peter said, “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

The sun was hot and the path was dusty, and they were still a day’s journey from their village. It had felt so good to stop at this well to water their donkeys and refresh themselves from the cool spring. But it was time to move along. As little Abigail’s father lifted her up on the donkey’s strong back, he hugged her.

“Remember, my daughter, what you’ve seen and heard on this trip to our holy city, for it may be some time before we can afford to go up again.”

“I will always remember it, father,” she answered. “How could I forget those sights and sounds and smells, and how excited I was when Miriam asked me to dance with her? Or how tired I was when we finally got up to the house of the Lord?”

“Yes,” replied her father. “Remember all those good things. But one day, when you’re older, some fine young man will take you as his wife. Your mother and I will see to it that your husband is from a good family that loves the Lord. And he’ll want to bring you, and your children, up to the mountain of God to worship as we have done.

“Remember, my daughter, to remind your husband what you learned on this visit to the holy city. God wants you to honor him with your gifts, your dancing and your songs, and he wants you to enjoy all the fun and festivities of worshipping him. But in all of this he also wants you to listen to him, to hear and obey his voice, and turn to him for help.

“You must never forget the Lord, my daughter, as the wicked do. Remind your husband, and all who are dear to you, of this truth. Always be thankful to the Lord, and faithful to his covenant, and remember that you belong a special people he has called to serve him. Then it will go well with you, and you will know that God saves you.

“And, Abigail, if you are faithful, perhaps one day your eyes will behold *your* daughter and her friends dancing up the hill toward the house of God.”

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