

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## RITUAL OR REALITY?

Psalm 50

By

Steven J. Cole

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## Ritual or Reality? Psalm 50

In recent years, many have left evangelical churches to join the Roman Catholic or the Orthodox Church. One reason often cited is that they love the ancient rituals, which were absent in evangelical churches. Some from evangelical backgrounds have gone into old cathedrals and had a moving spiritual experience as they marveled at the architecture, art, or religious ceremonies. Even among the so-called emergent churches (which are hardly traditional!), there is an emphasis on religious rituals.

Some may shrug and say, "Well, if it helps them feel close to God, what harm is there in it?" Isn't it just a different religious preference? Some like worship to be casual and some like it more formal. Does it really matter?

The Bible says, yes, it matters greatly! The gospels show us clearly where religious ritualism leads. They repeatedly show Jesus clashing with the religious ritualists. For example, in Mark 7, the Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus why His disciples did not go through the ritualistic hand washing that the Pharisees' traditions prescribed. Jesus answered (Mark 7:6-8):

"Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."

There is a similar confrontation in Luke 11:37-52. In that text, Jesus pronounces six woes on the religious leaders because their religion was outward, but not from the heart (see my sermon, "Why Jesus Hates Legalism," April 11, 1999). They performed all their rituals flawlessly, but it was they—the ritualists, not the tax collectors and sinners—that ultimately crucified Jesus. The problem was, their hearts were not right before God.

In Psalm 50, Asaph presents a heavenly courtroom drama. God, the awesome Judge, calls His witnesses and the defendants

and takes His seat. He levels two felony charges against the defendants: they have fallen into religious ritualism rather than worshiping God from the heart; and, some of them are openly rebellious religious hypocrites. They still followed the religious rituals, but they lived in flagrant disobedience. The psalm ends by calling on both groups to turn to God and worship Him from the heart.

The psalm is permeated with imagery from the story of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. On that occasion, we read (Exod. 19:18), "Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently." Then God gave Moses the two tables of the law, prescribing how God's people must relate to Him and to one another.

In our psalm, the setting is not Mount Sinai, but rather Zion, or Jerusalem. But when God appears (Ps. 50:3), "fire devours before Him and it is very tempestuous around Him," reminding us of Sinai. In verse 6, the phrase "the heavens declare His righteousness," also reflects the thunder and lightning imagery of Mount Sinai. The first section of the psalm deals with the first table of the law, how we are to worship God. The second section deals with the second table of the law, specifically citing the seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments against adultery, theft, and false speech. Also, the Ten Commandments begin with, "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2). In Psalm 50:7, God says, "I am God, your God." The overall message of Psalm 50 is:

When we stand before God, what will matter is not that we've performed religious rituals, but that we have worshiped and obeyed God from the heart.

In verses 1-6, God, the mighty Judge of all, enters the courtroom and summons the heavens and earth to His tribunal. In verses 7-15, He calls the first defendant: His covenant people who have exalted their sacrifices above a close relationship with Him. In verses 16-21, God calls the second defendant: those that profess to belong to His covenant people, but are hypocrites. They violate God's commandments and think that He is okay with them! Finally (50:22-23), God speaks to both groups. He warns the hypocrites that they are in danger of God tearing them to pieces. He instructs

the ritualists and the hypocrites that the true sacrifice is a thankful heart that honors Him and an obedient life.

1. We all will stand before God for judgment (50:1-6).

Verse 1 doesn't mess around! It brings us face to face with Almighty God: "The Mighty One, God, the Lord has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting." In Hebrew, the three names for God here are "El," "Elohim," and "Yahweh" (see Josh. 22:22). "El" points to God as mighty. "Elohim" points to Him as the Almighty Creator and Sovereign of the universe. "Yahweh" is His name as the eternally existent covenant God. The three names are piled together to impress us with the solemnity and fear of standing before God as the judge (see v. 6).

The only times that I have been summoned to court is for jury duty. But if you were accused of a serious crime, it would be a fearful experience. The bailiff commands, "Please rise!" The judge enters in his black gown. All is silent until he bangs the gavel and pronounces, "The court is now in session. We will hear the case of Steven J. Cole against the Court of Heaven." Yikes! And this is no human judge—this is "the Mighty One, God, the Lord"!

The psalmist sets the courtroom (50:2) in "Zion, the perfection of beauty," where "God has shone forth." Zion is the perfection of beauty because of the temple that was there. God shone forth at the temple through His shekinah glory. So the perfect beauty of Zion is the beauty of God in His holiness.

At the opening (50:2), God summons the whole earth and then repeats the summons (50:4) to "the heavens above, and the earth." Up to this point, God's covenant people may be thinking, "Finally, God is going to judge all those wicked pagans! It's about time!" After all, the prayer of verse 3 is, "May our God come and not keep silence."

But then (50:4b) the psalmist surprises us. He reveals that God has summoned all of heaven and earth to be witnesses in the courtroom as He judges *His people*. He calls them His "godly ones" (50:5) "to remind them of what they ought to be in consistency with their calling" (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 50, p. 263). So He is going to judge them according to what they are supposed to be, namely, His godly ones who have made a

covenant with Him. And the psalmist reminds them (50:6) that the standard for judgment is the very righteousness of God Himself.

Do you think often about the fact that one day soon, you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ? Some, even some of those who have served Christ (may it *not* be any of us!) will hear the awful words (Matt. 7:23), "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." They will be thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30). Others will watch in horror as everything that they labored for goes up in smoke. They themselves will be saved, but as through fire (1 Cor. 3:12-13). Still others (may you and I be among them) will hear the Lord say (Matt. 25:21), "Well done, good and faithful slave.... Enter into the joy of your master." The Bible repeatedly warns us about the coming judgment so that we will live daily in view of it.

2. When we stand before God for judgment, what will matter is not that we have performed religious rituals, but that we have worshiped God from the heart (50:7-15).

God first speaks to His people who had kept the prescribed sacrifices, but they had drifted from the reality of worshiping God in spirit and in truth. God had no complaint with their outward compliance to the sacrifices and burnt offerings (50:8), but their hearts were not right before Him. They weren't thankful to God, acknowledging His blessings. And, they weren't connecting their religious rituals with their daily lives. When they were in trouble, they weren't calling to God in dependence and faith. Perhaps they presumed on the fact that they had offered sacrifices. They thought that God should deliver them because of their sacrifices. And so they didn't honor Him when He rescued them. Rather, they congratulated themselves for keeping the rituals. Note three things:

- A. There is a human tendency to fall into ritualism rather than to maintain a close relationship with God.

Because of the fall, we all are prone to perform the religious rituals, while our hearts are far from God. But then we soothe our guilty consciences by thinking, "I did the ritual this week!" Protestants often point the finger at Roman Catholics, who go to Mass and Confession and do penance, but they don't live the rest of the week in a close relationship with God.

And yet we Protestants also fall into our own forms of ritualism. We feel that things are okay between God and us because we've been regular in church attendance. Or, we took communion. Or, we feel especially spiritual because we had our quiet time every day this week. Or, we put our tithe in the offering. We serve on a church committee or we even teach Sunday School. So things must be right between us and God! But at the same time, we tolerate all sorts of sin in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Even preachers fall into this trap, as we've seen when it comes out in the news that well-known preachers have been living a double life. So fight against your own tendency to fall into ritualism rather than to maintain a close relationship with God.

B. Ritualism gives the ritualist a sense of pride, whereas heartfelt worship humbles us before God.

These Hebrews were priding themselves for their generosity in offering *their* bulls and *their* goats, but God pointedly reminds them that He owns it all! When they offer something to Him, it is only because He first gave it to them. And He doesn't need their offerings to sustain Himself, as if He were hungry! He owns the world and all it contains (50:12). Idolaters think that when they offer food to their idols, it's to appease their hunger. It may have been that the Hebrews were falling into this superstition. But that insults God, to say the least! He needs absolutely nothing from His creation. He existed in eternity just fine without any of us and without anything that we can give Him.

If we find ourselves taking pride because we follow the *biblical* form of worship or because we *tithe* our income or because we *haven't missed a church service* in years, then we're guilty of ritualism. Certainly, we should seek to be biblical in our forms of worship. We should give generously to God, while remembering that everything we have belongs to Him. We should be faithful in gathering each week with the saints. But we should do it out of a grateful heart for all of God's gracious blessings. We recognize that He owes us nothing but judgment, but He showed us mercy. True worship humbles us before God.

Some may wonder, "What if we perform religious rituals from the heart? Isn't that okay?" After all, God isn't condemning sacrifices here. He instituted the sacrificial system. Rather, He's con-

demning sacrifices when their hearts were not right before Him. So what if a person performs various religious rituals, but does so from the heart? Isn't that proper?

The answer is, it's proper *if* these rituals are prescribed in the New Testament. The New Testament does not, for example, command us to pray the rosary or the stations of the cross or to cross ourselves or to light candles for the dead. It *does* command us to be baptized, observe communion, read the Bible, pray, and sing, both in private and public worship. It's easy to allow these things to become empty rituals, which is sin. The solution is not to stop doing them, but to fight against doing them ritualistically and instead do them from the heart with gratitude to God.

C. Heartfelt worship involves thanksgiving, faithfulness, and dependence on God.

Asaph gives the remedy for empty ritualism (50:14-15), "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."

The psalmist sets thanksgiving and prayer over against ritualism as a summary of all true worship (Calvin, p. 269). Thanksgiving acknowledges that God has given us every blessing by His grace. You cannot genuinely thank God unless you're in submission to Him and trusting Him, especially if you're thanking Him in the midst of trials. Nor can you thank Him or call out to Him in prayer in a time of need if you're harboring sin in your heart. So genuine thanksgiving and prayer presuppose holiness on the heart level. Calvin (p. 270) points out that praise and prayer are set in opposition to ceremonies and rituals to teach us that the worship of God is spiritual. Praise is mentioned first, he says (*ibid.*), because, "An ascription to God of the honor due unto his name lies at the foundation of all prayer, and application to him as the fountain of goodness is the most elementary exercise of faith."

The psalmist also says, "pay your vows to the Most High." There is no command in Scripture to make vows to God, but if we do make them, we need to be faithful to keep them. The most important vows that we make are baptism and (if we're married) the marriage vows. Not all would agree with me, but I don't recom-

mend making many other vows, because doing so tends to put you on a legal basis with God, rather than a grace basis. But if you do make a vow to God, be faithful to keep it.

So the court has now finished with the first defendant for the time being. Next, God summons the second defendant:

3. When we stand before God for judgment, what will matter is not that we have performed religious rituals, but that we have obeyed God from the heart (50:16-21).

God next calls “the wicked” (50:16). These are hypocrites, who can quote God’s statutes and who claim to be His covenant people, but they’re tolerating sin in their lives. The ritualists needed to remember that God must be worshiped in spirit and truth. The hypocrites need to be reminded that God is holy and those who worship Him must come with obedient hearts.

H. C. Leupold notes that there is some overlap and progression between the two groups. He says (*Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 395), “Formalism cannot be cultivated with impunity; progressive degeneracy is the outcome.” In other words, the danger of continuing in heartless ritualism is that you drift into disobedient thinking and living. But to keep up appearances, you continue the rituals. This was the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. They didn’t want to defile themselves by going into Pilate’s courtyard, while at the same time they crucified the innocent Son of God (John 18:28)! Note three things here:

- A. It is possible for religious people to cast God’s Word behind them.

God charges (50:17), “For you hate discipline, and you cast My words behind you.” *Discipline* is used often in Proverbs in the sense of *instruction*, or disciplining the mind through wisdom. It refers to correction through instruction. It implies that we need to change, which is always threatening and difficult. It means that when we read God’s Word or hear it preached, we don’t shrug it off or apply it to others. Rather, we take it to heart and correct whatever is wrong in our thinking, words, relationships, or behavior. We all have blind spots. The Bible is like a mirror to show us where we need to clean up. Make sure that you use it often!

- B. Tolerance of sin in others is not much different than engaging in sin yourself.

“When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you associate with adulterers” (50:18). Perhaps these religious hypocrites did not engage in thievery or adultery themselves, but they were pleased to have such people as their friends. They were proud of their tolerance. They were not judgmental! They were open-minded! But God knew that in their hearts, they secretly enjoyed hearing stories of greed or sexual sin. In our day, this would include watching movies with graphic sex scenes.

These hypocrites also engaged in deception and slander, even against close family members (50:19-20). I am often amazed at how professing Christians engage in these sins of the tongue without a twinge of conscience! They're familiar with the many portions of Scripture that forbid deception, slander, and gossip, and yet they never give it a thought as they keep on doing these things!

- C. We are prone to invent God in our own image so that we don't have to deal with our sins.

God says (50:21), “These things you have done and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you.” They mistook God's patience for His approval of their evil deeds. So they also mistakenly thought that God was “a good ol' boy,” just like them! Since He hadn't judged them, He must not mind a dirty joke or two. He understands that we all have to tell lies once in a while. Since their “god” was just like they were, they could go on living in sin, just as they had been doing. It's safe to say that if your “god” is just like you are, then he isn't the God of the Bible!

Then God gives a final appeal to both groups:

4. If we live in view of the coming judgment, we will not forget God and we will worship and obey Him from the heart (50:22-23).

God begins with the disobedient hypocrites (50:22): “Now consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you in pieces, and there will be none to deliver.” God hits these hypocrites hard, because otherwise they will deride all correction. But His direct confrontation is at the same time “a remarkable proof” of His grace “in extending the hope of mercy” to such corrupt sinners (Calvin,

p. 279). But they need to respond quickly because the door of mercy may not always stand open. Like a fierce lion, the Lord may tear them to pieces and it will be too late.

To those that repent, God shows the way to live (50:23), "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; and to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God." Or, as the NIV translates, "He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God." In other words, by sincerely offering thank offerings, we honor God and prepare the way to experience further instances of God's salvation or deliverance.

The problem with the rebellious hypocrites was that they forgot God (50:22). But the ritualists were not much different, in that they did not acknowledge God's many blessings by offering Him a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Calvin (p. 280) applies verse 23 by saying, "We do not assign that importance to the duty of praise which it deserves. We are apt to neglect it as something trivial, and altogether commonplace; whereas it constitutes the chief exercise of godliness, in which God would have us to be engaged during the whole of our life." He adds (pp. 280-281), "There must be an experience of the goodness of the Lord before our mouths can be opened to praise him for it, and this goodness can only be experienced by faith."

### Conclusion

An American newspaper asked William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, what he regarded as the chief dangers ahead for the twentieth century. He replied tersely, "Religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God and heaven without hell" (*The War Cry*, Jan. 5, 1901, p. 7, cited by Iain Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism* [Banner of Truth], p. xi). Booth succinctly described religion (or ritual) without reality. Psalm 50 warns, make sure that this doesn't describe you! When we stand before God, what will matter is not that we've performed religious rituals, but that we have worshiped and obeyed God from the heart.

## Application Questions

1. What are some “Protestant rituals” that we’re prone to? How can we keep our hearts right before God in these matters?
2. Is it hypocrisy or ritualism to obey God when we don’t feel like it? Why/Why not? How can we get our feelings right?
3. Do you agree that we should avoid making many vows to God? Why/why not? When are vows legitimate?
4. Since we’re prone to dodge the hard commandments of God’s Word, how can we avoid this?

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