



Our Shaping Virtues: Gratitude Psalms 50 **Matthew Williams**

INTRODUCTION

I have an older friend who is increasingly aware of death. He feels his body breaking down. Breathing is more difficult. He does not consider himself a Christian. When asked if he's ready to meet the Lord, he dismisses the question with some version of, "We'll see what happens when I get there." As best I can tell, he's agnostic. He wouldn't outright deny the existence of God. He's simply convinced we can't know who he is or what he requires until we get to the other side, so to speak. Anyone who claims to know otherwise is blowing smoke.

On one level, it sounds humble. Who are we, as mortal men, to think we can grasp the divine? On another level, however, it's a profound lack of humility. How so? Because the God with whom we have to do and before whom are all our ways has told us exactly who he is and what he requires of us.

The standard is not a mystery. The test is not unknown. Because our God is not silent. He speaks through the inerrant words of Scripture, revealing his priorities and purposes. And he speaks through the incarnate Word of his Son, the Savior who brings all God's priorities and purposes to pass.

So yes, the final day of judgment has yet to arrive. But through the illuminating work of the Spirit, we already know the kind of devotion God is looking for, the kind of worship justice demands. The answer in Psalms 50 may surprise you. Today, no less than the final day, God is looking for a grateful heart. He's seeking a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

A grateful heart toward God is the distinctive mark of genuine faith in God. And it's the only kind of faith that is vindicated, not condemned, in the courtroom of heaven. If you want to take the temperature of your spiritual condition, then answer this question. Are you thankful? Does Godward gratitude, especially gratitude for all God has done for you in Jesus, characterize your life?

Here's the good news in Psalms 50! **The gratitude God requires is the gratitude grace enables.** Yes, gratitude is the distinctive mark of genuine faith. But it's not something we create in ourselves. It's something God produces in us through the power of the gospel. 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Give thanks in all



circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” When you come face to face with the scandal of God’s grace toward you in the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus, and respond by trusting and obeying him, gratitude will be the theme of your song.

I love Psalm 50 because it describes both why gratitude matters and where it comes from. And for that very reason, Psalm 50 begins not by turning our attention to gratitude, but by turning our attention to God.

1) GOD IS THE JUDGE, NOT US (verses 1-6)

The psalmist, Asaph, wastes no time in identifying who God is. Verse 1, he’s “The Mighty One,” Elohim, the King of the universe. But he’s more than our Creator. He’s our Redeemer. He’s “The LORD” or Yahweh, the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God who pursues a people for his own possession. As a speaking God, he is not like the mute idols of the nations around Israel. His nature, his ways, what he requires from us as his creatures, are known because God has made them known.

He’s the One to whom mankind is accountable. North, south, east and west, he “Summons” (verse 1) all who dwell on the face of the earth. He is glorious in transcendence and supreme in power! And yet he is also the God who delights to dwell with his people. Verse 2, “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.”

What makes Zion, a city representing the people of God, so beautiful? The fact God displays the perfection of his character through us. That’s why the way we live as members of the church ultimately matters. We represent him. He purchased us with his own blood to make his glory known.

With that privilege comes tremendous responsibility, a responsibility God will not ignore or overlook, because his glory is on the line. “Our God comes” (verse 3) to address us, to test us, and where necessary, to discipline us that we might fulfill his purpose for our lives. Hebrews 12:10, “He disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” That’s the heart behind the summons in verse 5. “Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”

Praise God for Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross through which we receive forgiveness and relationship with God! The covenant relationship we enjoy with



God is superior by far to the covenant relationship the ethnic people of Israel enjoyed. For them, all their animal sacrifices never actually took away sin. For us, there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

But that does not mean there is no more divine evaluation or judgment. Indeed, judgment begins at “The household of God” (1 Peter 4:17) or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:4, “It is the Lord who judges me!” Through his Word, by the Spirit, God is faithful to judge us by opening our eyes to see in our attitudes and actions what he sees. As David prays in Ps 139:23-24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”

Our judgments of ourselves and one another are readily corrupted by self-righteousness and comparison. God’s judgments are perfect. Verse 6, “The heavens declare his righteousness.” Nor does he judge in ignorance or weakness the way we often do. “Before him,” verse 3, is a “Devouring fire.” The God who caused Mt. Sinai to quake is the Spirit who illuminates and purifies the darkest corners of our hearts. And his judgments do not come to us in the form of spiritual suggestions or moral recommendations. He is robed with the strength of “A mighty tempest.” His Word invades our lives with authority and power to transform us from the inside out.

In Psalm 50, the people of God are the defendant, heaven and earth are the witnesses, and “God himself” (verse 6) is judge. The divine court is in session. But even before the judge issues his verdict, before we hear his divine assessment, there’s something we do well to stop and consider. How often do we act as if the roles are reversed? As if we are the judge and God is the defendant. When does that happen? **Whenever we choose to grumble or complain.**

When we grumble and complain, we are summoning God into our courtroom and charge him with injustice, with failing to give us what we think is good, what we think is wise, or what we think we deserve. The arrogant role reversal is easier to see in others than in ourselves.

Numbers 11:4–6, “Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”



In their grumbling and complaining, the Israelites issued a judgment, didn't they? What's the verdict? God is not a faithful provider. Life without God in Egypt was way better than life with God in the wilderness. We do the exact same thing today, friends, whenever we grumble and complain. We say to the Lord, "I know better than you do, God. A different set of circumstances would have been SO

much better than what I find myself in right now. In the courtroom of human wisdom and understanding, I've found you wanting." Lord have mercy.

Friends, there is only one Judge, and he is righteous in all his ways. We do not test his ways. He tests our ways. And what does he require? What is the Judge looking for? He's looking for thankful hearts, for a grateful spirit. Justice demands God receive the glory due his name, and we glorify his name by giving thanks for who he is and all he's done for us. Verse 14, "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving." Why? Because gratitude speaks the truth about God! Gratitude proclaims his goodness. Gratitude proclaims his wisdom. Gratitude proclaims his steadfast love and mercy. Gratitude says, "Lord, everything I have is a gift from your hand, starting with Jesus."

When we come face to face with our need for a Savior and respond by trusting Jesus and obeying Jesus, our dead heart becomes an exceedingly thankful heart. Where grumbling and complaining once reigned, gratitude begins to reign. Does the struggle go away? Of course not. It's still a battle, which is why the rest of Psalm 50 is so helpful. Because the two judgments the Lord issues against Israel teach us something significant about growing in gratitude.

2) GRATITUDE REQUIRES DEPENDENCE (verses 7-15)

The Lord's first word of correction is directed at a surprising group of people. It's Israelites who are busy doing all sorts of things God requires. They're keeping the law, bringing the tithe, celebrating the festivals, circumcising their sons, resting on the Sabbath, not marrying foreign women, being generous to the poor, making all the required burnt offerings and sin offerings at the temple in Jerusalem.

And it's not just a show of outward religion. Unlike "The wicked" in verse 16, the men and women the Lord addresses in verse 7 appear to be genuine members of the people of God – active, faithful participants in their local church. They're doing the very things Scripture tells Christians to do. They're serving, giving,



discipling, sacrificially loving. In fact, they're running themselves ragged doing so many things for God!

What's the problem? Look at verse 8. "Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me." You're doing a lot of good things, the very sorts of things I command my people to do and "Continually" so! And yet (verse 9), "I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds." Why not? The problem isn't what they're doing. Their problem is why they're doing

it. Look at verse 10, "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of hills, and all that moves in the field is mine."

The "Mine" in verse 10 and the "Mine" in verse 11 reveal the problem. They thought of worshiping God primarily as a matter of doing things for God, as if he depended in some way on what they brought to the table, instead of rejoicing in all he had done for them. They were focused on what they were doing for God more than what God had done for them. Their spiritual busyness betrays an undercurrent of self-sufficiency, and perhaps a legal spirit that thinks, "If I give God what he needs, God will keep giving me what I need."

Brothers and sisters, God does not need us or depend on us. He is gloriously sufficient in and of himself! Verse 12, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine." Besides, God is spirit. He doesn't need to "Eat the flesh of bulls" (verse 13) or "Drink the blood of goats" to live. He's the Eternal God! No one else gives him life. He is life. He doesn't live or move or have his being in us. We live and move and have our being in him!

Christian, giving God the worship he deserves isn't about what you bring to the table for God. It's about rejoicing in what God has brought to the table for you! Giving thanks for how God has saved you. Giving thanks for how God has sustained you. Giving thanks for how God has restored and healed and delivered and forgiven and showered you with new mercies every morning of your life! That's the worship God requires. That's where pleasing the Lord begins. Look at verse 14. "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High."

Under the Old Covenant, sacrifices of thanksgiving were also known as peace offerings or freewill offerings. They were not mandated like sin offerings. They were offerings Israelites could bring whenever they desired to do so as an



expression of gratitude for the Lord's provision. They were also the only offerings Israel ate in the presence of the Lord instead of burning them on the altar.

A sacrifice of thanksgiving was volitional – the overflow of a grateful heart. It was relational – an expression of dependence on Yahweh as the giver of every good gift. And it was celebratory – a public proclamation of the Lord's goodness. Paul uses the same sacrificial language in 1 Corinthians 10 when he describes the Lord's Supper – the thanksgiving meal we eat in God's presence under the New Covenant.

Sometimes Israelites would say, "Lord, when you provide for me in a significant way, I promise I will give back to you a portion of all you have given to me. That's what the "Perform your vows" that the second half of verse 14 is about. Think of Samuel's mom, Hannah, who asked the Lord for a son and promised she would dedicate him to serve in the temple.

Bottom line, to offer a "Sacrifice of thanksgiving" or "Perform your vows to the Most High" is to worship God by living in grateful dependence on God. And therein lies the challenge. We like being self-sufficient. We like being in control. If dependence is the price of gratitude, is there any hope for us? God tells self-sufficient people like us exactly what to do in verse 15.

You can't make yourself grateful any more than you can make yourself joyful or humble. But you can choose to relate to God in the very way he has designed to work the gift of gratitude deep in your soul. The relational dynamic in verse 15 is the divinely ordained means of turning grumbling Christians into grateful Christians. "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

Anyone in this room familiar with trouble? Anyone ever had a day on earth where you were not in some way confronted with trouble within or trouble without? That's every day of our lives, friends! So what must we do when we feel the heat of trouble? Take a quick inventory of our own resources? No. We pray. We cry out to the Lord. We say, "Help God!" And what does God do in response? He delivers us! In the way we expect? Not always. But he never fails to save. He never fails to rescue. Joel 2:32, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."



And what does our daily experience of God's saving work produce as we cry out to him and find him faithful? A heartfelt gratitude that gives glory to God. "I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me!" It's his deliverance that produces our gratitude. It's his mercies that birth our thankfulness. Dependence leads to deliverance which leads to thanksgiving which increases our faith for continued dependence.

Must we make a conscious decision to give thanks in all circumstances? Absolutely. Colossians 3:15 doesn't say, "Wait around until God makes you thankful." It says, "Be thankful!" Why? Because God has already lavished us with mercy and given us all we need for life and godliness and eternal joy through the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Our problem is not that we lack a reason for thanksgiving, brothers and sisters. Our problem is that we've allowed God's goodness to us in the gospel to fade from view. When does God's goodness to us in the gospel start to fade? The moment we exchange dependence for self-sufficiency.

Whenever gratitude begins to wane in my life, and grumbling and complaining take over, it's not because I've stopped thinking positive thoughts, looking on the bright side, or counting my blessings. Without fail, it's because I have exchanged dependence for self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency destroys gratitude because it turns God's gifts into wages. Dependence nurtures gratitude because it receives God's gifts for what they are – undeserved, expressions of grace. How easy it is to cry out to the Lord for mercy, experience his saving power, and then run off to the next thing without stopping to give thanks, as if God's just doing his job, giving us the hope and help we deserve.

Ten lepers in Lk 17 were healed. But only "one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks." Why? Because he recognized what the Lord had done for him was an undeserved expression of grace. Let us not fail to experience God's provision for a lack of dependence. And when we experience his provision let us not fail to give thanks for his provision as a marvelous expression of grace. Gratitude requires dependence.

3) GRATITUDE REQUIRES OBEDIENCE (verses 16-23)



In verses 16-23, the Lord pivots to deliver his judgment against a different group of Israelites. Unlike the group, he doesn't describe them as his people. He refers to them as "The wicked." And this time it's not a lack of dependence that's undermining their gratitude. It's rampant hypocrisy.

Verse 16, "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?" Sure, they could recite God's Word or "Atatutes" from memory. After all, they grew up in the church. They even identified themselves as Christians. "Of course I'm part of the covenant people of God! Who isn't?"

But the conduct of their life reveals it's all a charade. The behavioral choices they're making expose their true spiritual condition. And God brings out three pieces of evidence. First, "You hate discipline" (verse 17). You despise anyone or anything that attempts to tell you what to do. Instead of submitting to my Word, you ignore and reject my Word.

Second, you delight in the company of the wicked (verse 18). You love listening to your friends talk about all the "Crazy stuff" they got into last weekend. You like swapping sin stories, boasting in all the boundaries you've broken. Your closest friends are men and women who flaunt God's commands, sexual ethics included. Third, you use your mouth to spin webs of lies and tear down other people instead of speaking the truth in love (Verses. 19-20). It's hypocrisy on steroids.

But they wicked are not troubled. Why not? Because God has yet to bring about consequences for their actions. We're having a great time and God's not stopping us. All this stuff about God's judgment is just a scare tactic religious people use to control others. God isn't any more concerned about what I'm doing than I am about what the people around me are doing. If you want to get all wound up about what "God" wants you to do, go for it. But that's not for me man. Why is obeying God even necessary? In the words of Allen Ross, "They had confused God's patience with God's permission."

Look at verse 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." What's the charge? verse 22, you've forgotten me. You've written me out of the story of your life. But I will vindicate my honor. I will glorify my name. Mark this. Know this. A day is coming when I will "Tear you apart," and there will be "None to deliver." My judgments will prevail. You cannot spurn the Almighty and get away with it.



What does God's warning to hypocrites have to do with gratitude? Verse 23 makes the connection. "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!"

Why is a heart of gratitude toward God, an attitude of thanksgiving, missing in the wicked? Because they have yet to experience "The salvation of God." They have yet to discover the wonder of God's grace in Jesus. Gratitude requires grace. And where grace is not amazing, gratitude cannot grow. Thus, the wicked are not thankful.

I wonder if some of you can relate. You feel like you've never really experienced God's salvation, at least not in the way the Christians you know seem to talk about it. You haven't seen God come through for me in any amazing ways. You can't point to anything in my life that demonstrates his supernatural power. Why should I be grateful, let alone bother with all God's commands, when he hasn't really done anything for me?

Friend, here's the problem. It's not a problem with God. It's a problem in you. The reason you have yet to experience God's supernatural power in your life, the kind of hope and help that gives rise to gratitude, is that you still refuse to order your way rightly. You refuse to walk the path of obedience. Experiencing the grace that gives rise to gratitude requires dependence. And obedience is the most important expression of dependence!

As long as you refuse to repent or turn from doing life your way to doing life God's way, you will not experience his salvation, you will not enjoy his grace, and grumbling and complaining will continue to rule your heart. But if you choose to repent, if you submit to God's authority, he makes a promise to you. I will show you my salvation! You will see and experience my supernatural power in ways you never dreamed possible. I'm the God who raises the dead - nothing is too hard for me.

Experiencing God's salvation requires walking the only path that leads to salvation, namely the path of obedient faith. You need to trust God. You need to obey God. You need to receive his loving discipline instead of hating his discipline. If you, friend, you will experience God's salvation, you will be amazed by grace, and gratitude will grow in your heart.

CONCLUSION

The life-giving cycle in verse 23 is the same life-giving cycle in verse 15 – obedient faith, deliverance, thanksgiving. Obedient faith, deliverance, thanksgiving. For those who are prone to self-sufficiency, the Lord emphasizes the need for faith, for dependence on God instead of running around like God depends on us. For those who are prone to hypocrisy, the Lord emphasizes the need for obedience, for submitting to God’s authority instead of clinging to our own.

From a behavioral perspective, turning toward the God who saves may look different for each group. But ultimately what both need, what we all need, is exactly the same. The gratitude God requires, the gratitude that proclaims his faithfulness, his goodness, is the fruit of obedient faith.

Do you want to grow in gratitude, friend? The means is not a mystery. Reject self-sufficiency. Reject hypocrisy. Embrace obedient faith in the God who saves. And as you do, you will discover to your eternal joy that the gratitude God requires is the gratitude grace enables.