

PSALLO

Psalm 82:1–8

You have before you a metrical version of Psalm 82. Our translation is very straightforward, with only a few words being added in italics to smooth the meter. The tune has some triumphal and majestic elements, as well as a proportionate section of threatening tone, as does the Psalm itself. The name of the tune is taken from the first verse: **בְּקִרְבֵּי אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט**: “He Judges among the gods.” Regarding the choice of certain words, in verse two we have chosen the word “exalt” to translate the Hebrew word **נִשָּׂא** which means to lift up, or bear. This seems to bring forth the idea of the Psalmist, who chides wicked rulers who accept, or lift up, the persons or faces of the wicked, rewarding to them an undeserved dignity and favor in judgment. In verse three we kept close to the original, translating **שֹׁפֵט** as “judge” and **צִדִּיק** as “do thou right” departing from the Authorized version but closer to the Scottish Metrical version of 1650.

Psalm 82 is an important and timely Psalm for us to consider here in 2020, for we have witnessed nearly unprecedented, and certainly unexpected exercise (and lack of exercise) of civil authority in the months leading up to our publication. From mandatory orders including the closure of business and churches, and wearing of respiratory masks on one hand, and the withdrawal of help and protection of businesses, widespread permission of rioting, looting, and destruction of private and public property on the other, the action or perceived lack of action on the part of civil magistracy and security forces is certainly a relevant topic for our concerned citizen of our society. Thankfully, the Lord our God has provided light in His Word as to what He expects from civil leaders, and Psalm 82 speaks to His expectations.

This can be a confusing Psalm for the Christian, either in reading in the common versions of the Bible, or in singing from the Psalter, because of the Psalmist’s use of the word **אֱלֹהִים** *Elohim*, or God. Students of the Hebrew original will recognize the ending on that word to be a typical Hebrew plural, used as a “plural of majesty” as this word is often used in the Old Testament to speak of the one true and living God, perhaps even referring to His Tri-Unity.¹ But the Psalmist also uses this term to describe the “gods” of the earth, the men who are in mediate positions in the world, administering justice and judgment to the people under their jurisdictions. It is an

interesting turn of phrase. Literally, the Psalm reads, “Elohim stands in the congregation of El, in midst of the Elohim He judges.” There is an obvious literary device at work here, where the Psalmist draws a line of similarity or affinity between the judges, the mighty of the earth, and the Lord God Himself, Who has the final Word and Judgment over all. They are called gods because they have the power to enrich or impoverish, restrain or liberate, kill or sustain. Hear Calvin, “But here it would appear, from the scope of the passage, that this name of the Divine Being is applied to those who occupy the exalted station of princes, in which there is afforded a peculiar manifestation of the majesty of God.”² This majesty is characterized by the Apostle Paul as encompassing the service or ministry that civil authorities have under God as His ministers (Rom. 13:1–8). The first verse of this Psalm sets the tone for the whole, in that the Lord declares His authority over the judges of the earth, yet all the while declaring that same affinity with them. He is the God, the Mighty One, over all the earth, and these other judges, civil authorities are in that sense “gods” as they are called upon to administer the judgment and justice of the true Judge of all the earth (See Deut. 1:17, 2 Chron. 19:5–8). They are not independent operators, but as the Psalmist says, will answer the call when the Lord God calls that assembly of judgment to judge those who have judged in this world.

Next the Lord speaks to those judges and accuses them, and in His accusation implies, anthropopathically, that His patience with their injustice is wearing thin, beginning verse two with “how long will ye judge unjustly?” The Just Lord calls them to account for their favoring the wicked, and for their refusal to do justice on behalf of the poor, needy and fatherless, who are the under-represented of the society. And while it is sometimes true that the poor and fatherless are often mentioned in Scripture as needing just judgment, and

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1. The significance of the plural form in the Hebrew usage seems to be that of a plural of majesty or of intensification. This is the God above all other gods. He is the God of all power and might. He is the God behind all of the creation (Gen. 1:1). When we realize, however, that the God who reveals himself in the Old Testament is the Triune God, it is not inconceivable to see in the plural a suggestion of that triune nature. This is not to say that the doctrine of the Trinity may be proved by the plural form. It is to say, on the other hand, that when the triune character of God is fully revealed in the New Testament, it is not contradictory to the revelation of the Old Testament. This plural usage prepares us for the fuller revelation of the Three Persons of the Godhead. This is especially true of passages that suggest inter-divine consultation, such as, Gen. 1:26, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology, Volume One: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, electronic ed. (Escondido, CA: Ephesians Four Group, 1999), 109.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 3 (Calvin Translation Society; repr. Baker, 1981), 330.

Psalm 82:1-8

A Psalm of Asaph.

B'qerev Elohim Yishpot

Todd L. Ruddell

¹God doth stand in the court of the might - y ones
³Judge for those des - ti - tute, for the fa - ther - less
⁵They know not nor will they, ev - er un - der - stand
⁶I said ye are gods all, sons of the Most High

He gives out judg - ment *true* in midst of the gods.
And do thou right un - to wretch - ed ones and poor.
For 'tis that they do walk on in dark - ness *deep*
⁷But you'll die; and as one of the princ - es fall

²Oh how long will ye judge work - ing un - just - ly
⁴De - liv - er thou the poor and the ones in need
And so the foun - da - tions *hold - ing* all the earth
⁸O God do thou a - rise, judg - ing the *whole* earth

And the face of wick - ed men will ye ex - alt.
And him take out from the hand of wick - ed men.
Made they are to sway *and pitch* back to and fro.
For that Thou in - her - it shall the na - tions all.

are often oppressed, let us also remember that the Just Lord forbids the wresting of judgment in their favor *simply* because they are poor. Note the wise ethic from the lawgiver of Israel, speaking by the Spirit of God: “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour” (Lev. 19:15). While it might be popular, and might please fallen human sensibility to believe that judgment ought always to go in favor of the poor because he is often oppressed, and therefore the scales ought to be tipped in his favor, note that the Just Lord requires equity in *every* case (See also Exod. 23:1–10; Deut. 1:17; 16:19.). However, there is an emphasis placed in our Psalm upon the common partiality against the poor and needy that must be acknowledged. Note that this idea compasses much of this Psalm, fully two out of the eight verses, indicating that perversity in judgment often goes against the poor, and judges here are warned against preferring the wicked who oppress them. Justice may be blind, but the Just Lord, the Judge of all the earth, is not (See Gen. 18:25).

The next portion of the Psalm speaks of the rulers of the earth, and the Just Lord condemns them for their willful ignorance, walking on in the darkness of their perverse judgment. Rulers are influential, and sin on their part often has destructive effects upon those whom they govern. Several Scripture texts make this apparent. When rulers forget that they are ministers of God, and that their judgments are supposed to be “for God,” and walk on in darkness, they are especially culpable, for as we said above, they have god-like powers in the earth. Hear the wisdom of the great King Solomon: “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn” (Prov. 29:2). Civil government is an institution given by our Creator to His creation in His goodness to us. But when it becomes perverse, the damage done is difficult to exaggerate. This is why the walking on in darkness of the rulers of the world is said to give rise to the shaking of the very foundations of the earth. When a ruler mocks the Just Lord he brings his government under His irresistible displeasure, causing his jurisdiction to totter and stagger under the weight of His judgment. Surely the foundations of any nation or government cannot stand against the judgment of the Just Lord, should He become angry. There is an invisible but real factor that judges and rulers ought to take into account in their executive, legislative, and judicial actions: They should seek the favor of the Just Lord, or, as Psalm 2:1–12 has it, instead of walking on in darkness, they should be wise, be instructed. Serve the Lord with fear,

3. William S. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms: Being a Critical and Expository Commentary, with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks on the Entire Psalter* (Philadelphia; Edinburgh: J. B. Lippincott Company; A & C Black, 1872), 782.

rejoice (in your position and ability to do good) and tremble (knowing that you too will be judged). Kiss, or do obeisance to the Son, let His anger be stirred, and you perish while in your way of wickedness. The pleasure of heaven is a necessary element to the perpetuity of any earthly kingdom, any nation-state, and ought to be a substantial portion of the calculus of any leader as he sets policy for his charge. When the law of the Lawgiver is ignored, when the judgment of the Just Lord is perverted, no nation that calls evil good, and good evil, that ensconces wickedness in law, and criminalizes that which is upright can expect to endure on the face of the earth for long. The Just Lord has given His fair warning.

Now hear the judgment from the Just Lord, and note the irony: “I said ye are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.” What an esteemed position to occupy! What an authority and ability to do good, glorify God, advance His cause in the world, and be a helper to His Kingdom! But alas, we hear the sentence: “But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.” None of them are found worthy, and the best among them must meet this undesirable end. Literally, the text could be translated, “Indeed, like Adam ye shall die.” That first ruler of the world proved unworthy to the task, and so will you all thus prove. These rulers who refuse the Word of the Just Lord will be brought down to the grave like men, although “god-like” in their positions of authority in the world, and given to administer justice and judgment in the world for God. Hear Plumer: “it is a remarkable fact that cruel, ambitious and deceitful rulers are not apt to prolong their lives. Every generation gives examples of sore and sudden deaths of tyrants and oppressors.”³

The final verse of the Psalm gives rise, from the analogy of Scripture, to the fact that this Judge of all the earth is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, who will inherit all nations, as the promised Seed who would rule the world (See Gen. 3:15; 22:17–18; Ps. 2:1–12; 72:8; Dan. 7:13–14 Rom. 4:13; Gal. 3:16). As the Great King who rises in the place of the fall of the first ruler of the world, and as the One who triumphs over the “ruler of this world,” Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18–20), and all judgment is committed unto Him (John 5:21–30), and He will inherit all nations (Ps. 89:19–37).

As we close, we must remember that there will be no true peace on this earth until it is brought by the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6–7). But there is hope even in our fallen world, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Judge of all the earth. The Great King David, of whom our Lord descended in His humanity, said this:

Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, ² The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me,

and his word was in my tongue. ³ The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. ⁴ And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain (2 Sam. 23:1-4).

We may not expect a perfect reign upon this earth, under the sons of Adam, but we might pray for our rulers that they would be just, ruling in the fear of God. As one ruler to another, with that knowing gaze of equals, David instructs the kings and rulers of the earth to take on not only a god-like authority and ability, but to be just, doing right, as the Just Lord instructs. When they do wickedness, the foundations of the world are out of joint, shaken out of their moorings. But when they follow the counsel of the Just Lord, they are like Him, in that they project the “light of the morning, when the sun rises, in a morning without clouds, and the clear shining after the rain.” They become healing, nourishing, ruling by right and doing good, and perform their true calling as

ministers of God, bringing their authority and ability to bear for his glory, and as gods upon earth, they give witness to the Judge of all the earth. In closing, hear and give heed to the word of the Apostle Paul:

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; ² For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. ³ For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; ⁴ Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Surely the “all men” of verse four pertains to those kings and others in authority, for whom we are to pray, that in being themselves united to Christ by faith, they will rule as He would have them do. And for the people of God in such a case, instead of the groaning we heard of earlier, we live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness. Lord, make it so!

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In Brief: David Dickson on Psalm 82:1, 8.

This Psalm agreeth with the time of David’s persecution by Saul and his counselors, the peers of the land, wherein the psalmist comforts himself in God’s supremacy, and his judging of all judges on the earth; for exercising whereof God comes unto their meeting, ver. 1. Then challenges them for their injustice and oppression, ver 2. Thirdly, reads the law and rule of their duty unto them, ver. 3. 4. Fourthly, condemns them as guilty ver. 5. Fifthly, pronounces sentence of doom upon them, ver. 6, 7. And then the psalmist closes the Psalm with prayer, ver. 8.

VERSE 1. God standeth in the congregation of the mighty: he judgeth among the gods.

From the Lord’s presence in the assembly of judges; *Learn:* 1. The name of a congregation or church is given in Scripture in the orderly meeting of rulers and governors, met for the execution of their office; as here, *God standeth in the congregation or church of the mighty.* 2. No judge is absolute lord over a people, but in subordination to God, who is Judge above all judges, and will judge of all the decrees of judges under Him. *God standeth in the congregation of the mighty: he judgeth.* 3. God does put His Name upon civil magistrates, and hath clothed them with honor; that as their eminency is a part of His image, so their decrees should be such as God will own. *He judgeth among the gods.*

VERSE 8. Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.

From the close of the psalm by this short prayer, wherein the oppressed servant of God prays that God would put order unto the government of His people, and redress the wrongs done to them; *Learn,* 1. Albeit the oppressed servants of God cannot find justice at men’s hands, yet there is help to be had from God, and prayer, shorter or longer, as the Lord furnishes unto them, must they seek their ease of mind and comfort; *Arise, O God, judge the earth.* 3. [*sic*] When magistrates or rulers do oppress God’s people, private persons may not go beyond their bounds, but must have their recourse to God, that He may set matters that are wrong in a better condition, as here the psalmist does. 4. As the Church of God among the Jews was acquainted with the prophecies of the enlargement of the Church and Kingdom of God among the Gentiles, and upon this ground prayed that He would not suffer His interest in His people then to decay by the malice of men: so may the Lord’s Church in any place or time upon the same ground pray for the like mercy; for still the reason holds, that God who is about to enlarge His Kingdom, will not lose what He has already; and so to pray: *Arise O Lord, judge the earth; for thou shalt inherit all nations.*

Amen. ■