

“THE JUDGMENT OF THE JUDGES”

I. Introduction

- A. The question that immediately arises upon reading Psalm 82 has to do with the identity of those who are referred to as “the gods.”
1. It will not surprise you to hear that it is popular among liberal scholars to contend that this is a remnant of polytheism, out of which Israelite monotheism supposedly evolved.
 2. Not only is that notion in sharp conflict with the consistent monotheism of the Old Testament, it is also utterly unrealistic to think that a psalm with polytheistic elements would have been retained by the final editors of the psalter.
- B. Among conservative scholars, there are three main options when it comes to the identity of “the gods” in this psalm.
1. Some suggest that the psalm is speaking of the false gods of the Canaanites, not to in any way affirm their existence but to expose how their lack of existence renders them incapable of upholding justice.
 2. Others argue that these “gods” are the demonic principalities and powers that exercise a measure of authority over this world.
 3. Still others say that the term “gods” is being used to refer to human judges and civil rulers.
- C. There are a number of reasons why this last option seems most likely.
1. First, the term “gods” is probably used to refer to human judges in Exodus 21:6 and 22:9.
 2. This is obscured in the ESV, which translates the term as “God.”

3. But if you look at the same verses in the KJV or NIV, you will see that those versions have “judges” instead of “God.”
 4. Another factor that supports seeing “the gods” as human judges in this psalm is that verse 7 says, “like men you shall die.”
 5. It is difficult to see how that could be said of false gods or demons.
 6. Another consideration is that Jesus’ citation of this psalm in John 10:34 suggests that he understood its use of the term “the gods” as a reference to human rulers.
 7. This was also how the Jewish rabbis understood this psalm.
 8. Lastly, this interpretation fits with the theme that unites many of the psalms contained in Book 3: the crisis over the Davidic kingship.
 9. The negative assessment of civil rulers in this Psalm reflects the spiritual decline that took place in Israel’s leadership in the years leading up to the Babylonian exile.
- D. The reason why human rulers can be referred to as gods is because they carry out a quasi-divine function when they execute their judgments.
1. Because they have been appointed by God, they are the instrument that God uses to administrate his justice in this world. (see Rom. 13:4)
 2. When the judgments of human judges and rulers are just, they are God’s judgments.
 3. Of course the problem is that no human ruler or judge ever upholds justice perfectly.
 4. And some of them grossly pervert justice.
 5. This is the reality that is being dealt with in Psalm 82.

II. Unjust Rulers (1-4)

- A. The psalm begins with the declaration, "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment."
1. The image that this brings to mind is a courtroom scene, with the rulers of the earth being brought before the judgment seat of the One who rules over all.
 2. The purpose is to warn those who have been invested with authority that they have to give an account of their actions before the bar of the Supreme Judge.
 3. This is an important thing for anyone who is in any kind of position of authority to remember.
 4. Whether it is a matter of governance in the state, the workplace, the classroom, the family, or the church, all authorities are subject to God and are therefore answerable to God.
- B. In verse 2, the Lord asks a question that functions as an indictment, saying, "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?"
1. God has measured these rulers against the standard of his justice, and he has found them wanting.
 2. Their rulings and pronouncements are unjust.
 3. In our culture the symbol for the right administration of justice is the statue of a blindfolded Lady Justice holding a sword and a pair of scales.
 4. The judges who are addressed in this psalm are carrying out their duties in the exact opposite manner.
 5. They are giving preferential treatment to the rich and powerful.

6. They are making their determinations on the basis of what will be most beneficial to them.
 7. Because they know that it is useful to have the rich and powerful on their side, they show partiality to them.
 8. And because the weak and needy have nothing to offer, they let people take advantage of them.
- C. Verses 3 and 4 remind rulers of the special obligation that they have toward those who have no power in society.
1. Civil magistrates are called to see to it that there is equal justice for all.
 2. A significant part of this is making sure that the vulnerable are not exploited by the powerful.
 3. Of course, this does not mean that favoritism should be shown to the poor.
 4. That too would be unjust.
 5. The point is that those who are powerful in society don't typically need protection in the way the weak do.
 6. Those who have wealth and influence often have sufficient power to ensure that their rights are not violated.
 7. But because the weak are more vulnerable, civil rulers have a special duty to watch out for them.
- D. One of the areas where we can see this so clearly in our own society is with regard to the issue of abortion.
1. The unborn are the most vulnerable and most powerless members of society.

2. Those who are still in the womb cannot speak for themselves.
3. They have no ability to defend themselves.
4. They are entirely dependent on others for their protection.
5. Yet many of those who have political power in our nation use that power to ensure that the murder of the unborn remains legal.
6. Instead of rescuing the weak and needy, they show partiality to the wicked, knowing that by doing so they will receive contributions and votes.
7. This is a great evil, and it is not hidden from God.
8. He is in his place in the divine council, and a day is coming when he will call people to account.

III. Incompetent Rulers (5-7)

- A. This brings us to verses 5 through 7, where God exposes the incompetence of wicked rulers.
 1. Because they lack knowledge and understanding, they walk about in darkness.
 2. The book of Proverbs says that those in positions of authority need the wisdom that comes from God if they are to be faithful in the stewardship that they have been given.
 3. We see this in Proverbs 8, where personified wisdom says this: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly... For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death."
 4. God has made his wisdom available to mankind in his two books: the book of nature and the book of Scripture.

5. Even non-Christians have access to a measure of wisdom through the light of nature.
 6. While the knowledge that God gives through general revelation is not saving knowledge, it is nevertheless true knowledge.
 7. It gives insight into the order that God has established in his world.
 8. But we are living in a culture in which it is becoming increasingly popular to deny that there is such a thing as a created order.
 9. When people live this way, and when authorities govern this way, their society will descend deeper and deeper into darkness, and it will become increasingly unstable.
 10. When God's wisdom is ignored, injustice prevails, and the foundations of society crumble.
- B. In verse 6, God says, "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.'"
1. Now, in saying this, God is not affirming polytheism.
 2. He is simply saying that he has invested human rulers and judges with a divine function and name.
 3. There is a special dignity attached to positions of authority because they are the means through which God works to express his authority in this world.
 4. But it is important for people in authority to remember their proper place.
 5. As John Calvin explains in his comments on this part of the psalm, "God, in appointing [rulers] his substitutes, has not divested himself of his own sovereignty as supreme ruler."

6. One of the ways that human authorities are kept mindful of this is by the fact of their mortality.
7. At some point, they will die, just like everyone else.
8. Sooner or later, those who exalt themselves above the Lord will be put in their place.
9. This is illustrated by what happened to King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel.
10. In Daniel 4 we are told that as Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his royal palace one day, he said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30 ESV)
11. The Lord responded to that boast by causing Nebuchadnezzar to go insane and live like a wild animal for an extended period of time.
12. And when that judgment ended and his reason was restored, Nebuchadnezzar said this of the Lord: "for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" (Dan 4:34–35 ESV)

IV. The Judge of All the Earth (8)

- A. Psalm 82 ends with a plea: "Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations."
 1. This prayer is instructive for us.
 2. It teaches us something about how we ought to respond to the injustice that we see in this world.

3. While we should certainly do what is within our power to oppose injustice and protect the rights of the weak, we need to remember that there will never be a utopia in this world.
 4. Perfect justice will only be established when God comes as judge.
 5. That being the case, we should pray for him to do so.
- B. When God comes, he will be seen for what he already is: King of kings and Lord of lords.
1. This is what this psalm means when it says that God shall inherit all the nations.
 2. The nations are already his.
 3. He is sovereign over everything.
 4. As Abraham Kuyper famously put it, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"
 5. But notice that in verse 8 the verb "inherit" is in the future tense.
 6. It is something that has not happened yet.
 7. The reason why the psalm speaks this way is because at present God does not appear to be reigning over all the nations and peoples of the earth.
 8. Many people are living in rebellion against God.
 9. Many of those in positions of authority are exercising their authority without any fear of God.
 10. The longer we live in this world, a world that is filled with many injustices and many sorrows, the more we will long for the day when we will see all things in subjection to Jesus Christ.

11. The good news is that the Bible assures us that that day will come.

V. Conclusion

- A. It is interesting that the final verse of Psalm 82 is echoed at the very end of the Bible.
- B. In Revelation 22, the apostle John concludes the cycle of visions that he was given in that book with these words: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"
- C. In the book of Revelation, Jesus' coming is a coming in judgment.
- D. Yet John responds to its announcement by saying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"
- E. This reminds us that the day of judgment holds no dread for the Christian.
- F. Because Christ has fully satisfied the demands of God's justice on our behalf, the day of judgment is the day that we are longing for.
- G. It is the day of the appearing of our blessed hope.
- H. As Martin Luther put it in one of his hymns,

*The dead in Christ shall first arise,
At the last trumpet's sounding,
Caught up to meet him in the skies,
With joy their Lord surrounding;
No gloomy fears their souls dismay;
His presence sheds eternal day
On those prepared to meet him.*