



Sunday School Lesson
Psalm 82
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A Rebuke of Injustice



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In this third study in the Smyth-Helwys Formations series of "The Church on Mission" the theme in the Sunday School quarterly is "Your Samaria." The association of Psalm 82 with that title is minimal at best, but is based upon the unusual nature of the contents of Psalm 82 which treats the topic of God's power over the deities worshipped by the Canaanite cultures surrounding ancient Israel in Palestine.

The complex process of interpreting the Psalms correctly has been previously treated in the study on [Psalm 84](#) and thus won't be repeated here in detail. In summary, it involves attempting the understand the original compositional starting point of the Psalm. Then one must probe how this hymn was used in temple worship in ancient Israelite worship, which may be centuries after the original composition. Finally, the exploration of its usage in the Jewish synagogue and early Christian worship provide clues about contemporary application of the Psalm to us in the modern world. At times only minimal information is available for each of these three layers of interpretative history. This makes the application to today more tentative and less certain. Yet valuable insights can still be gleaned for each of the psalms.

I Context

a. Historical

The **external** history of the Psalms is somewhat challenging. From a [previous study](#) in the Psalms, I will use the relevant materials. The beginning historical setting has to do with the composition of the psalm. With many of the 150 psalms, the challenge to identify the original compositional history is so great as to be impossible, because the content of the individual psalm provides few, if any, clues to such historical identification.

The contents of the Psalms stand under a variety of "authors" as is summarized in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*:

The Hebrew Bible credits David with 73 psalms, compared with 84 in the Septuagint and 85 in the Latin Vulgate. Asaph and Korah, the leaders of the Levitical singing groups, are connected with 12 and 11 psalms, respectively (although Ps 43 is almost certainly to be attributed to Korah also). Two psalms are ascribed to Solomon (72; 127), one to Moses (90), and one to Ethan (89), while Heman shares the credit for one psalm with the sons of Korah (88). The remainder are sometimes called "orphan psalms" because of their anonymity.

The book of Psalms was the hymnbook of ancient Israel. It also stands as an important source of songs for Christianity all the way from the beginning of the Christian movement. In Baptist tradition just a few centuries ago, many were convinced that the exclusive source of singing in church worship services were the psalms, and any other type of musical composition was inherently sinful if used at church. In more recent times, Baptists have moved beyond that, but the list of hymns based on texts from the psalms

remains large.

The **internal** history of Psalm 82 relates to two critical matters: (1) the identification of Asaph in the title (v. 1) and the identification of the “divine council” also in verse one.

Asaph is identified in the Old Testament some 31 times. He is described by B. T. Dahlberg (“Asaph,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach) as

A'saf [אָסַף, perhaps for (Yahu) *has gathered to himself*; in 3 below, possibly from some non-Hebrew root (see bibliography)]. 1. Apparently the father or ancestor of the JOAH (4) who was King Hezekiah's recorder II Kings 18:18, 37; cf. Isa. 36:3, 22). The precise signification of the phrase “son of” is, as often, uncertain; and this Asaph may relate to 2 below.

2. The eponymous ancestor or founder of one of the three chief families or guilds of Levite temple musicians, the “sons of Asaph” (e.g., I Chr. 25:1-2, 6, 9). Asaph himself, according to the Chronicler, was a Gershonite Levite, son of Berechiah, and, with Heman and Ethan (Jeduthun), was given by King David charge of the “service of song” in the tabernacle (I Chr. 6:39--H 6:24; cf. vss. 31-32--H 16-17). Whether or not Asaph himself was actually a Levite remains unknown, along with other details of his life; but his contemporaneity with David seems not improbable, even though mention of him is confined to the work of the Chronicler (cf. especially II Chr. 29: 30; 35:15; Neh. 12:46). Pss. 50:1; 73-83 contain ascriptions to Asaph in their titles, perhaps indicating a tradition of his authorship of them, or a style peculiar to them and originated by him, or again, perhaps referring simply to the Asaphite guild or to their hymnal.

In the Chronicler's history of Judah the sons of Asaph participated in nearly every major celebration relating to the temple, both before and after the Exile. Occasionally they are represented as striking the cymbals, but pre-eminently they were singers (I Chr. 15:17, 19; 16:5, 7, 37; II Chr. 5:12; 29:13; 35: 15; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:35). In I Esd. 1:15 they are called the “temple singers.” Because of their evident importance in the view of the chronicler it has been suggested that he himself was a member of this guild (see bibliography), but this remains a conjecture.

Their musical function was referred to in some instances as prophesying (I Chr. 25:1-2), and according to II Chr. 20:14-23 it was one Jahaziel, a “Levite of the sons of Asaph,” who, inspired by the divine Spirit, aroused Judah to victory over the Edomite coalition by means of song and praise to God. II Chr. 29:30 speaks, moreover, of “Asaph the seer” (cf. 35:15).

The guild is prominent in the postexilic name lists (I Chr. 9:15; cf. Ezra 2:41; Neh. 7:44; 11:17, 22; I Esd. 5:27, 59).

Although much remains unknown about Asaph, the one trait that stands out is the musical association with temple worship. This is true of Asaph himself and of his descendents and the guild of singers associated with him for centuries to come.

The other internal history issue has to do with the identification of the “divine council” in verse one. Although various views exist, the one set forth by J. Clinton McCaan, Jr. in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (iPreach) is most appealing:

As if to supply a rationale for Ps 81:9, Psalms 82 portrays the death of all other gods. In so doing, it offers a clear picture of the ancient Near Eastern polytheistic culture that formed Israel’s religious background. In Canaanite religion, the high god El convened the council of the gods (see this concept also in 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Job 1:6-12; and perhaps Ps 58:1-2). In v. 1, Israel’s God has displaced El and convenes what proves to be an extraordinary meeting. Israel’s God proceeds to put the gods on trial (see the trial metaphor also in Isa 3:13-15; Hos 4:1-3; Mic 6:1-5). After the gods are indicted and charged (vv. 2-4), the case against them is summarized in v. 5, and the sentence is announced (vv. 6-7). The psalmist then pleads for God to claim the dominion once held by the gods and to rule justly (v. 8). In short, the council of the gods is permanently adjourned, and so Psalms 82 affirms again the message that forms the theological heart of the book of Psalms: God rules the world (see Psalms 2; 29; 47; 93; 95–99; Introduction).

Thus the “divine council” was understood in the original setting as a meeting of God with the gods of the Canaanite traditions which surrounded the Israelites after entering the Promised Land under Joshua. While this may be problematic to our monotheistic viewpoint, in the OT era such a view would have seemed natural. For the Israelites who viewed their God as superior and more powerful than other gods, such a scene would have caused no difficulties at all. Therefore, there is no need to view these “gods” as angelic beings, nor as human rulers over people -- as has often been done. This represents an unwarranted imposition of a later monotheistic view down onto the text.

Thus the date of the origin of the psalm can range any where from the reign of David to a latter time at the close of the OT era. Marvin Tate, a Southern Baptist scholar who wrote the volume on Psalms in the

Word Biblical Commentary, takes the option of the later date, as he indicates in the quote below:

Generally, however, a later date seems more probable and is supported by most commentators. Jungling (*Tod*, 78–79) summarizes a series of reasons for giving the psalm a *Sitz im Leben* in the time of the exilic prophets, especially Deutero-Isaiah, or somewhat later. Gonzalez (*VT* 8 [1963] 293–309) rejects the Ugaritic parallels as determinative of date and also relates it to the time of Deutero-Isaiah. Jeremias (*Kultprophetie*, 120–25) argues for the context of the psalm in the late monarchy and says that it is a “prototype (*Urbild*) of cultic-prophetic proclamations of justice” (see also, Kraus, 154–55). It seems to me, however, that it is more likely to be a literary composition which has dependence on the preaching of the prophets (such as Micaiah in 1 Kgs 22) rather than being a “prototype,” and is probably from a later date. Years ago, Morgenstern (*HUCA* 14 [1939] 119–26) concluded that the psalm belongs to a date of c. 500–475 B.C.E., which is still a good guess.

With the later date the title referring to Asaph would imply one of the descendants in the school of Asaph, rather than Asaph himself. We know that this Levitical school continued to exist into the intertestamental era well after the close of the OT era itself about 400 BCE.

b. Literary

The Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is the first document in the third section of the Hebrew Bible. In the Jewish tradition tracing itself back before the beginning of Christianity what we Christians called the Old Testament and what Jews for the past several centuries have called the [Tanak](#) was divided up into three sections in Jewish understanding: [the Law](#) (Torah), [the Prophets](#) (Nevi'im), and [the Writings](#) (Ketuvim). [Jesus and the apostles](#) referred to the Old Testament in this threefold division, mostly using the first two sections. Although the content between the Christian Old Testament and the Jewish Tanak or Hebrew Bible is identical, the arrangement and division of the various ‘books’ is very different.

The following quote from the [Free Encyclopedia](#) on the internet provides a accurate, helpful summation:

Ketuvim is the third and final section of the Tanakh books. The Christian Old Testament (excluding the deuterocanonical books/apocrypha) counts them as thirty-nine books. This is because Jews often count as a single book what Christians count as several.

As such, one may draw a technical distinction between the text used within Judaism, the Tanakh, and the similar, but non-identical, text used within Christianity, the Old Testament. Thus, some scholars prefer Hebrew Bible as a term that covers the commonality of the Tanakh and the Old Testament while avoiding sectarian bias.

Hebrew Bible

Hebrew Bible refers to the textual canon of the Jewish Tanakh, which contains books that were originally written mainly in Hebrew. (There are two books, Daniel and Ezra, that have parts in Aramaic, but even they are written in the same Hebrew script.) Nearly all Hebrew Bibles since the middle ages reflect the Masoretic Text.

The Hebrew Bible includes the same books as the Protestant Old Testament, but not the deuterocanonical portions of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testament. The term Hebrew Bible does not impose a particular ordering of its books (as opposed to Tanakh and the Old Testament, each of which orders the books in different ways).

Psalms stands as the first and perhaps most important book of this third section, the Writings. Additionally, it served as [the hymn book](#) of ancient Israel by the time of the temple. Comprised of Hebrew poems [set to music for singing](#) first in the temple then later in the synagogues, the book itself is divided into five sections modeled after the five ‘Books of Moses,’ that is, the first section called the Law. Most English translations will preserve [the markers](#): Book 1, Pss. 1-41; Book 2, Pss. 42-72; Book 3, Pss. 73-80; Book 4, Pss. 90-106; Book 5, Pss. 107-150. This is explained in a helpful summary in the [Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia](#):

The Psalter is divided, after the analogy of the Pentateuch, into five books, each closing with a doxology or benediction:

1. The first book comprises the first 41 Psalms, all of which are ascribed to David except 1, 2, 10, and 33, which, though anonymous, were also traditionally ascribed to him. While Davidic authorship cannot be relied on this probably is the oldest section of the Psalms
2. Book second consists of the next 31 Psalms (42-72), 18 of which are ascribed to David and 1 to Solomon (the 72nd). The rest are anonymous.
3. The third book contains 17 Psalms (73-89), of which the 86th is ascribed to David, the 88th to Heman the

Ezrahite, and the 89th to Ethan the Ezrahite.

4. The fourth book also contains 17 Psalms (90-106), of which the 90th is ascribed to Moses, and the 101st and 103rd to David.

5. The fifth book contains the remaining Psalms, 44 in number. Of these, 15 are ascribed to David, and the 127th to Solomon.

Psalms 136 is generally called "the great hallel." But the Talmud includes also Psalms 120-135. Psalms 113-118, inclusive, constitute the "hallel" recited at the three great feasts, at the new moon, and on the eight days of the feast of dedication.

Psalms 120-134 are referred to as Songs of Degrees, and are thought to have been used as hymns of approach by pilgrims.

J. Hempel in "Psalms," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, provides a helpful summation of the five books, and especially book three, which is quoted here:

The third book is in its main part Elohist too. It contains the Asaph collection (73-83), four Korah psalms (84-85; 87-88) and one David psalm (86) left aside by the former collections, and a hymn of Ethan (89). Pss. 84:1-89, which are Yahwistic, were appended to the Asaph collection after its Elohist redaction.

In modern form critical studies, Psalm 82 is usually found in the "Prophetic Liturgies" category along with Psalms 12, 14, 50, 53, 74, 81, 85, 91, 95 and 132. For a listing of these see "The Psalms: Groupings" at Cranfordville.com: <http://cranfordville.com/Psalmlst.html>.

The literary **genre** of the material in the book of Psalms stands broadly in the category of ancient Hebrew poetry, which stands distinctly different from modern poetry in the English language. The organizing structure of the psalm is that of a chiasmus, as Prof. Tate asserts in the *Word Biblical Commentary* on Psalms:

The psalm seems to be developed with a familiar chiasmic type literary structure of ABCDC'B'A'. [A] v 1. God is judging in the divine assembly [B] v 2. Charge against the gods [C] v 3-4. Charge violated by the gods [D] v 5. Result of the failure of the gods [C'] v 6. Proclamation of the gods' former status [B'] v 7. Sentence of judgment on the gods [A'] v 8. prayer for God to rise and judge the earth.

This pattern indicates that strophe D is the central point of the psalm and becomes the basis for understanding the theme of the psalm. When expanded the literary structure of the psalm takes on the following shape:

A God is judging in the divine assembly (v. 1)

"God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:"

B Charge against the gods (v. 2)

"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?"

C Charge violated by the gods (vv. 3-4)

"3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

D Result of the failure of the gods (v. 5)

They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

C' Proclamation of the gods' former status (v. 6)

"I say, 'You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;'"

B' Sentence of judgment on the gods (v. 7)

"nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince."

A' Prayer for God to rise and judge the earth (v. 8)

"Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!"

This pattern clearly lays claim to the unique and superior existence of the God of Israel and condemns the Canaanite deities as worthless. The worship of them by the surrounding peoples, along with the tendency of the Israelites, is condemned by the psalmist. The heart of this pagan worship is to perpetuate social injustice and privilege for the wicked. This the God of Israel despised and condemned.

II. Message

Although this psalm can be viewed several ways, we will break it down in terms of the legal structure that it is built around.

a. Court is convened, v. 1

Heb	LXX	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>רְשָׁעִים תִּשְׁאֹרֶסְלָהּ אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט וּפְנֵי</p>	<p>Ἠσαμὸς τῶ Ἀσαφ ὁ θεὸς ἔστη ἐν συναγωγῇ θεῶν ἐν μέσῳ δὲ θεοῦς διακρίνει</p>	<p>1 God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers.</p>	<p>1 God has taken his place in the di- vine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:</p>	<p>1 A psalm of Asaph. God pre- sides over heaven's court; he pronounces judg- ment on the judges:</p>

Notes:

Verse one sets the stage for the remainder of the psalm. Two items do this. First is the title of the psalm, “A psalm of Asaph.” Although the NASB and the NRSV translations appear to not include this, in reality it is included, but as a heading with verse one beginning with the text of the psalm. This heading is found in both the Hebrew (מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף) and the Greek texts (LXX; Ἠσαμὸς τῶ Ἀσαφ) of the psalm. For the details see the discussion in the [Internal History](#) in section I. a. on page 2.

The second item, which is somewhat controversial, is the beginning part of the text: “[God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.](#)” Who are these individuals being judged? The NASB translation above reflects the view that these are human beings, perhaps the judges of Israel, being summoned into a court that God has convened. The NRSV reflects another view that God is judging the gods of the surrounding religious traditions. The NLT adopts a view that is somewhat between these two positions, but favors the first one. Although some evidence from other passages can be brought as favoring the first view, the overwhelming weight of evidence of the text itself favors the second view reflected in the NRSV translation. This certainly represents a more literal translation of both the Hebrew and Greek texts. Some discussion of this has already been given in the [Internal History](#) section. So we won’t go into a lot of detail here.

This view is summarized well by J. Clinton McCann, Jr. in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (iPreach):

As if to supply a rationale for Ps 81:9, Psalms 82 portrays the death of all other gods. In so doing, it offers a clear picture of the ancient Near Eastern polytheistic culture that formed Israel’s religious background. In Canaanite religion, the high god El convened the council of the gods (see this concept also in 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Job 1:6-12; and perhaps Ps 58:1-2). In v. 1, Israel’s God has displaced El and convenes what proves to be an extraordinary meeting. Israel’s God proceeds to put the gods on trial (see the trial metaphor also in Isa 3:13-15; Hos 4:1-3; Mic 6:1-5). After the gods are indicted and charged (vv. 2-4), the case against them is summarized in v. 5, and the sentence is announced (vv. 6-7). The psalmist then pleads for God to claim the dominion once held by the gods and to rule justly (v. 8). In short, the council of the gods is permanently adjourned, and so Psalms 82 affirms again the message that forms the theological heart of the book of Psalms: God rules the world (see Psalms 2; 29; 47; 93; 95–99; Introduction).

In the ancient polytheistic world, the remarkable aspect is the growing Jewish perspective that only one God exists, and all others are subjugated to God’s power and control. By the beginning of the New Testament era that Jewish perspective, which is adopted by early Christianity, is that all other gods have no real existence and stand as idols. For the apostle Paul any supposed power of idols is in reality the power of demons at work through the religious tradition of an idol (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-11).

What can we learn from this?

Several important truths come to mind. First, in our growing pluralistic world, the monotheistic belief of

historic and biblical Christianity needs to be reaffirmed. The God of the Jews and of Christians is the only deity who actually exists. Not Allah of Islam, not Buddha, not any of the multitude of deities in Hinduism. Although not popular in our culture today, this monotheism is foundational to Christian belief. The word “God” needs to be reclaimed as belonging exclusively to the God of Jews and Christians. The other claimed deities are in actuality just idols with a false claim to existence.

Secondly, the assertion of the court scene is that Yahweh reigns supreme in our world. No deity or human ruler can claim power that begins to approach that of Almighty God. In a pluralistic world, people tend to reach out to a variety of deities who claim power for particular aspects of life. There’s a god for healing, another for economic success etc. Such thinking is nonsense. All power originates in the One who created all things and who reigns over all things. Ultimately, then we stand accountable to that God for how we conduct our lives. This is especially true in how we treat other people, which is the main point of this psalm.

b. Court is in session, vv. 2-7

Heb	LXX	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>2 עַד-מֹתֵי עֲנֵי וְרֵשׁ הַצְּדִיקִים 3 שְׁפֹט־דָּל וְיִתְּמוֹ מִיַּד רְשָׁעִים הַצִּילֹהוּ 4 פִּלְטֹה-דָּל וְאֶבְיֹן יְמוּטוּ כָּל-מוֹסְרֵי בַחֲשֵׁכָה יִתְּהַלְכוּ לֹא יִדְעוּ וְלֹא יִבְיִנוּ 5 אֲרִי וּבְנֵי עֲלִזּוֹן כָּלְכֶם אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם 6 אֲנִי-אֲמַרְתִּי וּכְאֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְּלוּ 7 אֲכֹן כְּאֶדָם תִּמוּתוּן</p>	<p>2 ἕως πότε κρίνετε ἀδικίαν καὶ πρόσωπα ἀμαρτωλῶν λαμβάνετε διάψαλμα 3 κρίνατε ὀρφανὸν καὶ πτωχόν ταπεινὸν καὶ πένητα δικαιώσατε 4 ἐξέλεσθε πένητα καὶ πτωχόν ἐκ χειρὸς ἀμαρτωλοῦ ῥύσασθε 5 οὐκ ἔγνωσαν οὐδὲ συνῆκαν ἐν σκότει διαπορεύονται σαλευθήσονται πάντα τὰ θεμέλια τῆ γῆ 6 ἐγὼ εἶπα θεοὶ ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου πάντες 7 ὑμεῖς δὲ ὡς ἄνθρωποι ἀποθνή σκετε καὶ ὡς εἷς τῶν ἀρχόντων πίπτετε</p>	<p>2 How long will you judge unjustly And show partiality to the wicked? Selah. 3 Vindicate the weak and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked. 5 They do not know nor do they understand; They walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I said, "You are gods, And all of you are sons of the Most High. 7 "Nevertheless you will die like men And fall like any one of the princes."</p>	<p>2 "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? (Selah) 3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." 5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I say, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; 7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince."</p>	<p>2 "How long will you judges hand down unjust decisions? How long will you shower special favors on the wicked? Interlude 3 "Give fair judgment to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. 4 Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people. 5 But these oppressors know nothing; they are so ignorant! And because they are in darkness, the whole world is shaken to the core. 6 I say, 'You are gods and children of the Most High. 7 But in death you are mere men. You will fall as any prince, for all must die.'"</p>

Notes:

In this second segment, court is in session. In a way different from our court system, God is both the judge and the prosecutor. One structural point

relates to verse six. Some take the “I said...” to mean the psalmist, but this is a continuation of God speaking. The best way to grasp the thought flow in this section of God’s changing and sentencing the “gods” is to go back to Marvin Tate’s chiasmus given earlier. This part of the text contains strophes BCDB’C’, found in verses two through seven. The first two strophes contain the charge and accusation of guilt. The ultimate impact of these is found in strophe D: the gods are dumb and worthless. The fourth and fifth strophes then contain the sentencing of the gods. Strophe B’ establishes the foundation for sentencing, and strophe C’ delivers the sentence of non-existence.

B Charge against the gods (v. 2)

"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?"

C Charge violated by the gods (vv. 3-4)

"3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

D Result of the failure of the gods (v. 5)

They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

C' Proclamation of the gods' former status (v. 6)

"I say, 'You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;'"

B' Sentence of judgment on the gods (v. 7)

"nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince."

Let's take a quick look at each of these.

B Charge against the gods (v. 2)

"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?"

The basic charge against these deities is their lack of justice toward people. The shaping of the charge in the form of a question follows ancient Israelite tradition, as Tate (Psalms, WBC) explains:

The expression of the indictment in the form of a question, as in v 2, seems to have been a feature of Israelite judicial procedure (Ackerman, 336–37). See 1 Sam 22:13; 2 Sam 1:14; 1 Kgs 2:42–43. The use of the question form was probably to give the person (or persons) charged an opportunity to explain the offending actions.

But there is no satisfactory explanation for injustice, as Arthur Weiser (Psalms, *Old Testament Library*) describes:

God's reproof bursts in upon the assembled gods with a deep solemnity reminiscent of the style of the prophets' rebukes (cf. in this connection especially Is. 41:21 ff.; 44:7 ff.; 45:20 ff.). He is no longer prepared to tolerate their unjust way of administering justice and the partiality they show to the wicked, which are the real cause of the injustice that prevails on earth. The righteousness of God as the fundamental order, to which everything has to submit, holds good also in heaven. Injustice could persist on earth only because God in his superhuman patience has not already intervened sooner. Hence there is no reason to doubt the justice of the order which his will has decreed.

The fundamental trait of Almighty God is righteousness. The impact of this is justice universally in relationships. God relates to all in a just manner; He demands that everyone else relate in a just manner. Few things can incur His anger more than injustice. And when that injustice is unleashed upon helpless victims His wrath will be poured out in large measure. Add to that favoritism of the wicked and one cannot escape divine wrath. This was the message beginning with the eighth century prophet Amos to Israel in both the northern and southern kingdoms. Their concept of "The Day of the Lord" prophesied the pouring out of God's wrath first on the northern kingdom (Amos and Hosea) and later on the southern kingdom (Isaiah and Micah). The major reason for this was the injustice of the people. Peter Toon has a helpful discussion of "Righteousness" in the New Testament ([Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#)) and Gary Steven Shogren treats "Justice" in a helpful way in the [same online source](#).

What is applicable to us today? There is no more important message than the demand for justice and righteousness by God. A society must treat its people with justice -- a justice that ignores the social status of everyone. Most of all, God's people must treat others with justice and in a righteous manner. But what is justice? This is the problem in our American culture. The ideal of justice is built into our legal system, but is usually blunted by the way it is meted out. Our courts belong to those who can hire the highest priced lawyers. Business transactions have to be sealed with long legal contracts in order to protect both the seller and the buyer. Increasingly, our economy is driven solely by the motivation for monetary profit. Our

C Charge violated by the gods (vv. 3-4)

“3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

This strophe contains two commands delivered to the “gods” detailing what God expected in just treatment. This lay at the heart of their failure. Just treatment gave special concern for the helpless and weak in society, particularly from the abuse of the wicked who stand as the powerful in society. In the ancient world especially, those who possessed power over others flaunted that power usually in abuse of those without power. Most ancient middle eastern cultures saw their ruler as a god, or at least as a divine representative of the main god of their culture. Thus the condemnation of the “gods” for abuse of the weak applied especially to the ruler and his court.

One tradition that distinguished the Israelites from the surrounding cultures was their belief in justice for the poor. The Old Testament code (Leviticus through Deuteronomy) insisted upon fair treatment of the poor and weak in Israel. Early Christianity picked up on this tradition and developed it even further. Luke’s gospel especially highlights Jesus’ concern for the poor. The book of James (cf. 2:1-13 & 5:1-11) places intense stress upon just treatment of the poor.

Thus when Christians today get serious about justice one of the primary areas of focus must be upon just treatment of the poor and helpless. With the exploding population of homeless people in our nation, we have ample opportunity to show just treatment. This is but one way for us to treat others justly.

D Result of the failure of the gods (v. 5)

They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

The consequence of injustice is ignorance. Those in power demonstrate their dumbness in how they treat others. McCann (Psalms, *Interpreter’s Bible*, iPreach) effectively summarizes verse five:

The result of their ignorance and failure is disastrous. The shaking of “all the foundations of the earth” represents a worst-case scenario. In the ancient view of the world, the mountains were the foundations that held up the sky and held back the waters from flooding dry land. The shaking of the foundations meant that the whole creation was threatened by the return of chaos (see Isa 24:18-19; Ps 46:1-3). In short, v. 5 suggests that injustice destroys the world! Where injustice exists, the world—at least the world as God intends it—falls apart.

The irony here is that in their minds they are smart and clever since they rule. In reality, they are dumb and ignorant because they lack understanding of their accountability to God and His ways. How often do we see this in our world today! People of power feel they are exempt from God’s ways, and often even ignorant of God himself. Or else as in Islamic terrorism their vision of deity is so twisted and perverted that they have no conscience about treating others with violent injustice in order to achieve their aims.

C’ Proclamation of the gods’ former status (v. 6)

“I say, ‘You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;’”

Since God is the Creator of all things, the very existence of “gods” owes its basis to God himself. More than anything this proclamation asserts the absolute authority of God to control the existence of “gods” whether they be the gods of the Canaanites or in the modern world. They stand fully subject to Almighty God and totally under His control. This strophe sets the stage for the next one in verse seven.

B’ Sentence of judgment on the gods (v. 7)

“nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”

God’s decree is the death of these “gods” like that of humans, and even that of humans who rule over others. God stands as judge over even these “deities” whom mortals worship and consider all powerful. His sentence of judgment is the withdrawal of their divine nature and He subjects them to death just like human beings.

What can we learn from all this? God is both prosecutor and judge of all His creation. That surely includes us mortals. As prosecutor His concern is for justice and righteousness on earth. This is embedded into His character and thus in His expectation of all His creation. He holds everything and everyone in creation accountable. When we violate His ways, He will come after us in judgment. As judge He possesses authority and power to evaluate the actions of His creation. One of His measuring rods is justice, especially to the weak and poor of society. As God's people in Christ, we dare not ignore this foundational principle of our religious faith.

c. A plea from a witness, v. 8

Heb	LXX	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>קוֹמָה אֱלֹהִים שִׁפְטָה אֶת־הָאָרֶץ כִּי־אַתָּה הַנִּחַל בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם</p>	<p>ἄνάστα ὁ θεός κρίνον τὴν γῆν ὅτι σὺ κατακληρονο- μήσεις ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν</p>	<p>8 Arise, O God, judge the earth! For it is You who pos- sesses all the na- tions.</p>	<p>8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations be- long to you!</p>	<p>8 Rise up, O God, and judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you.</p>

Notes:

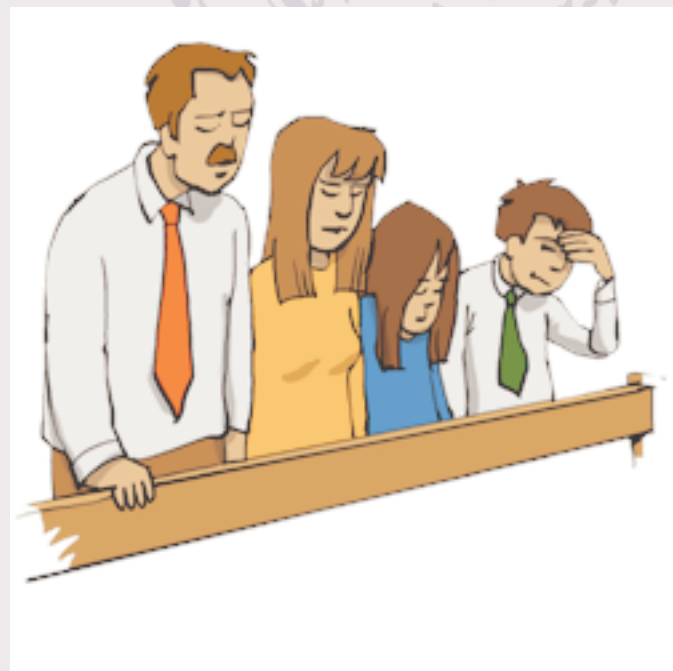
The psalm ends with a prayer from the psalmist. The claim to complete power by God is accepted. The right of God to judge His creation is accepted. Thus the prayer is for God to enforce His demands for justice. Luther Mays (*Psalms, Interpretation, iPreach*) has an excellent summary:

The concluding prayer is important. It calls on God to replace the false gods and set things right in the world by his rule. The court saying provides a revelation of what is happening in history; the false gods are being uncovered and condemned. But the congregation worships in the midst of a world where nations and societies are still ruled by false gods. The wicked still have power and the weak are deprived of justice. So the congregation prays the ancient prayer that Israel addressed to the LORD when the ark was moved as a symbol of the LORD's intervention in the affairs of earth: "Arise, O God" (see Num. 10:35; Ps. 132:8; 74:22). The liturgical movement of the psalm's recitation holds the "already" and the "not yet" of the LORD's rule in tension. Faith knows that the LORD rules over all the powers and forces that compel the hearts and lives of nations and societies. Living in the midst of history, faith can and must pray for the LORD's saving judgment upon all that denies the reality of the reign of God. The psalm helps the Christian congregation understand better what it means to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."



thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." As long as nations and their peoples do not see the reign of God as the reality that determines their way and destiny, there will be other gods who play that role. Faith must always see the LORD standing in the midst of the gods of the nations and know that to say "Thy kingdom come" is to pray for the death of our gods.

May we faithfully pray the same prayer with the psalmist! And may we live by that prayer every day.



Hebrew Text

¹ WTT מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹ בְּקֶרֶב
אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט² עַד־מִתִּי תִשְׁפֹּט־עוֹל וּפְנֵי רְשָׁעִים תִּשְׁאוּ־סֵלָה
שְׁפֹט־דָּל וַיְחֹם עֲנִי וּרֹשׁ הַצְּדִיקִי³
פִּלְט־דָּל וְאַכְיוֹן מִיַּד רְשָׁעִים הַצִּילוּ⁴
לֹא יָדְעוּ וְלֹא יָבִינוּ בַחֲשֹׁכָה יִתְהַלְכוּ יָמוּטוּ כָּל־מִוֹסְדֵי
אֶרֶץ⁵
אֲנִי־אֲמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם וּבָנֵי עֲלִיוֹן כָּלְכֶם⁶
אֲכֹן כְּאֲדָם תָּמוּתוּן וּכְאֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְלוּ⁷
קוֹמְנָה אֱלֹהִים שִׁפְטָה הָאָרֶץ כִּי־אַתָּה תִּנְחַל בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם⁸

LXX Psalm 81:1-8 (=Ps 82)

¹ψαλμός τῷ Ασαφ ὁ θεὸς ἔστη ἐν συναγωγῇ θεῶν ἐν μέσῳ δὲ θεοὺς διακρίνει ²ἕως πότε κρίνετε ἀδικίαν καὶ πρόσωπα ἀμαρτωλῶν λαμβάνετε διάψαλμα ³κρίνατε ὀρφανὸν καὶ πτωχόν ταπεινὸν καὶ πένητα δικαιώσατε ⁴ἐξέλεσθε πένητα καὶ πτωχόν ἐκ χειρὸς ἀμαρτωλοῦ ῥύσασθε ⁵οὐκ ἔγνωσαν οὐδὲ συνῆκαν ἐν σκότει διαπορεύονται σαλευθήσονται πάντα τὰ θεμέλια τῆ γῆ ⁶ἐγὼ εἶπα θεοὶ ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου πάντες ⁷ὑμεῖς δὲ ὡς ἄνθρωποι ἀποθνήσκετε καὶ ὡς εἷς τῶν ἀρχόντων πίπτετε ⁸ἀνάστα ὁ θεός κρινον τὴν γῆν ὅτι σὺ κατακληρονομήσεις ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν

NASB

1 God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers. 2 How long will you judge unjustly And show partiality to the wicked? Selah. 3 Vindicate the weak and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver *them* out of the hand of the wicked. 5 They do not know nor do they understand; They walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I said, "You are gods, And all of you are sons of the Most High. 7 "Nevertheless you will die like men And fall like *any* one of the princes." 8 Arise, O God, judge the earth! For it is You who possesses all the nations.

NRSV

1 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: 2 "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? (Selah) 3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." 5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I say, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; 7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince." 8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

NLT

1 A psalm of Asaph. God presides over heaven's court; he pronounces judgment on the judges: 2 "How long will you judges hand down unjust decisions? How long will you shower special favors on the wicked? Interlude 3 "Give fair judgment to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. 4 Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people. 5 But these oppressors know nothing; they are so ignorant! And because they are in darkness, the whole world is shaken to the core. 6 I say, 'You are gods and children of the Most High. 7 But in death you are mere men. You will fall as any prince, for all must die.'" 8 Rise up, O God, and judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you.

Psalm 82:1 ^{BHT 1} mizmôr læʾāsāp ʾēlōhîm nişşāb ba ădat-ʾēl bæqereb ʾēlōhîm
yişpōt ² ad-māṭay tişpəṭû- ăwel ûpənê rəşā îm tişʾû-sélā^h ³ şipṭû-dal
wəyāṭôm ānî wārāş haşḏîqû ⁴ palləṭû-dal wəʾebyôn miyyad rəşā îm haşşîlû
⁵ lōʾ yāḏ û wəlōʾ yābînû baḥşēkā^h yiṭhallākû yimmōṭû kol-mōsdê ʾāreş ⁶
ʾānî-ʾāmartî ʾēlōhîm ʾattem ûbənê elyôn kulləkem ⁷ ʾākēn kəʾādām təmûṭûn
ûkəʾaḥad haşşārîm tippólû ⁸ qûmā^h ʾēlōhîm şoptā^h hāʾāreş kî-ʾattā^h ṭinḥal
bəkol-haggôyîm