

Our God of Justice

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[0 : 0 0] Let me ask you, who thinks a few good men are good? A few more hands? No. Anyway, if you don't know the story, it's of two low-ranking Marines who charged for killing a fellow serviceman using what is called a Code Red.

Now, that's an illegal extrajudicial punishment. You're not supposed to do it. And it was carried out by these two soldiers, and it goes horribly wrong. They die. I mean, not they, he dies, the other soldier.

Now, at the climax of the movie, which is at the end, Colonel Jessup, which is played by Jack Nicholson, he's the commander in charge at Guantanamo Bay. He's summoned to court to be a key witness.

And there, the defense lawyer, played by Tom Cruise, of course, he succeeds in getting the colonel to admit that he was actually the one that ordered the Code Red.

And so, therefore, absolved the Marines, because chain of command means they had to obey the orders. Now, it's a satisfying moment, because as the audience, we know that Colonel Jessup gave the orders from the very start.

[1 : 1 3] But it's when he traps himself with his own words, and without even realizing it, that the tables are turned, and this smug colonel, who is all self-righteous because he thinks, you know, I'm here defending the country, you know, America from the enemies, he condemns himself with his own arrogant views.

Well, in Psalm 82 today, we face a similar scene when a trial is played out in a courtroom, but not on earth, but heaven. Now, this is a short psalm, so let's begin by looking in verse 1, where God, as we heard, presides in the great assembly.

He renders judgment among the gods. So here we have the heavenly courtroom, a great gathering before God, who is presiding as judge. And the ones who are on trial are the gods.

Now, we'll get to who these gods are in a moment, but first let's hear the charges against them. Verse 2, How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?

Defend the weak and the fatherless. Uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy. Deliver them from the hand of the wicked. Now, obviously, these gods, whoever they are, they are ruling in some fashion.

[2 : 3 6] They have the authority to uphold justice. But they are charged with failing to do their job. Instead, they favor the wicked. They allow them to be oppressed by, sorry, they favor the wicked, and they allow the wicked doers to oppress the weak.

Hence, God's verdict in verse 5, the gods know nothing. They understand nothing. They walk about in darkness. Because all the foundations of the earth are shaking.

They've destabilized the earth. I said, you are gods. You are all sons of the Most High, but you will die like mere mortals. You will fall like every other ruler.

And afterwards, in verse 8, the voice reverts back to the psalmist, who cries out to God, inclines him to rise up to judge the earth.

For all the nations are your inheritance. That's verse 8. Because these gods have failed to do their job, the psalmist pleads for God to intervene.

[3 : 40] He's the only one whose judgment is right. What's more, he's the only rightful person that can do it, because all the nations are his.

Now, this call, therefore, is one of universal judgment, right? Not just judgment for those who rule over Israel, because God is the creator of the universe.

He's not just the God of Israel. So here we have a rather short, simple, straightforward psalm. It seems, except for that one tricky question, which is the second point on your outline.

And the question is, who are these gods? Now, there are a couple of main views about this. Some of them, some people think that the gods are heavenly beings, because they are in heaven, whom God has assigned to rule over individual nations.

So, you know, there's a heavenly being in charge of Australia, another one in charge of New Zealand, something like that. And somehow they have swayed over the earthly rulers.

[4 : 48] You know, someone's, some heavenly being now is sort of like the puppet master, pulling Anthony Albanese's sort of strings, because it's actually the actual rulers, aren't they?

The governments on earth that are the ones that actually, practically uphold or fail to uphold justice. Now, there's some support for this view, because there are references in the Bible to heavenly beings being called sons of God, as we see in verse 6.

So, if you look at Job 2, verse 1, on the next slide, hopefully, we find that sons of God, namely angels, are presenting themselves, the translation there is angels, but the literal words are sons of God, presenting themselves before the Lord, and Satan joining them.

But unlike in Job 2, here it's clear that these gods in Psalm 82 have actually not done the right thing. They fail to uphold justice. And so you have to think that if this interpretation is right, then the gods in Psalm 82 are demons or demonic beings, which sort of doesn't quite sit well with me, I don't think, with this psalm.

But I think the clincher for me is when we look at John 10, verse 34, because Jesus there quotes this psalm, and he has a different interpretation of the gods.

[6 : 17] It would appear that he, like the Jews of his time, read the word sons of gods to be references to humans. Thus, when the Jews accuse him of blaspheming, is what he's being accused on in John 10, they do so because he, in their eyes, just mere man, claims to be the son of God.

Jesus responds by quoting this verse. In John 10, verse 34, we read, he answers them saying, Is it not written in your law, I have said you are gods?

And here he's referring to Psalm 82. If God called them gods, to whom the word of God came, and scripture cannot be set aside, what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?

Namely, what about me? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy? Because I said I am God's son. Jesus is therefore arguing Psalm 82 as God's referring to humans, and that gives us a precedent, doesn't it, to understand human beings as gods or sons of the Most High.

In fact, if that is right, in Psalm 82, God himself is the one who is calling these humans gods. Now here, though, in John 10, Jesus adds an additional criteria.

[7 : 42] I don't know whether you can see it up there on the slide. He calls these gods the ones to whom the word of God came. And so that could mean these are the people to whom God gave his word, the Old Testament law, perhaps, or more generally, these are the ones to whom God's message or instructions came as to how to rule.

Now I think Jesus, in the context in which he was using it, was probably referring to Israel's rulers, people who specifically had the law, these Jews who knew God's word.

Because after all, the law, God's word, had already pointed to Jesus. It's got information in there so that they should have received him as God's son when he came, not accuse him of blasphemy.

But all that to say, I think that it helps us to see Psalm 82 as being understood at that time to be referring to the gods as human rulers, and more specifically, rulers or judges in Israel.

Now why they use the phrase gods, I will get to in a bit later. But I think this psalm then, however, is a bit wider than just referring to Israel's rulers.

[8 : 55] Because, as I've said earlier, in verse 8, the psalm's application is universal. The psalmist is calling God to judge the whole earth. So the failure of these gods is not just for Israel, but actually for the whole world.

But, however you look at it, the message is quite clear, isn't it? In this psalm, God is taking very seriously those he has given authority to rule. Because all authority comes from him.

Now if you read Romans 13, verse 1, Paul states this quite clearly. On the next slide, let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. Why? For there is no authority except that which God has established.

The authorities that exist have been established by God. No one on earth has any authority except that it's given or delegated to them by God.

No authority on earth exists except God has given it to them. And that applies even to secular and at times evil rulers.

[10 : 05] And that's why we have that command that everyone ought to be subject to the governing authorities. But in Psalm 82, the attention is not on those under authority as it is in Romans 13.

The attention, rather, is on those who have the authority. And so important and significant is they are responsibly the fact that they are meant to rule on behalf of God.

And that's why I think they're given the titles gods or sons of the Most High. This is not to say they are divine, but they are gods in the sense that they have a divine appointment.

Their authority to rule is given by God himself because all authority is given by God. They have been appointed by God. Now, this is actually recognized elsewhere in the Bible.

So, for example, if you look at the Psalms, like a coronation psalm, Psalm 2, for example, when God makes the kings of Israel, when they come to the throne, he actually makes them his son.

[11 : 11] So, if you look at Psalm 2, verse 7, it says, Today I become your father, you have become my son. And, you know, if you know your history in Europe, this is something that the kings of Europe in the past recognized as well.

Isn't it? I don't know what happened with King Frederick two weeks ago, but we saw that with King Charles, didn't we? When he was crowned, his coronation service was actually a church service, wasn't it?

It was not a secular thing because the kings in the past and King Charles himself saw that their rule were divine appointments by God.

Now, the good kings and the good queens, when they come to such a service like that, they would have been humbled by this. They would have gone, Wow, what an awesome responsibility I've been given by God.

I need to use it wisely. I'm humbled by this. Me, a mere mortal, God has appointed me. Now, on the other hand, the bad ones, they would come to the anointing and go, Ooh, I'm pretty special.

[12 : 16] God has made me king. And, you know, I'm probably better than the rest. You know, wrong thing to do. And so, if all authority to rule is given by God, then God intends it for it to be used as he commands to defend the weak, to protect the oppressed.

They're meant to judge the wicked rather than let them go free. But, as this psalm says, many rulers, these so-called gods, have failed in their duty.

They end up using the power not for the benefit of the poor and the weak, but for themselves. And so, the poor and the weak, they suffer. Now, I think the reality is that even the best rulers in the world, they all fail to some degree, don't they?

But the point of the psalm is this, that when the judges are appointed by God and fail in their duty, God will judge them. God will judge the judges.

God will judge the rulers. It's like Jack Nicholson, right? The tables are turned on those who rule over others. God, the ultimate judge, will put them on trial.

[13 : 31] We like to see all these leaders as people who are, you know, the ones that are judges and ruling over others. Well, no. God will ultimately judge them and put them on trial.

So, the first application from the psalm, which is in your outline, is a warning for those who rule and exercise authority. God will put them, us, all to account.

Now, it's very easy when we think of rulers, you know, that we think of evil ones like, you know, Vladimir Putin or your least favorite prime minister, I don't know who that might be, or a corrupt judge.

But, you know, to the extent that any of us have been given authority, delegated to us, you know, if you're a parent, if you're a leader, at work, even a leader of a small team, or me as a pastor in the church, there's a warning for us, isn't it, to exercise our delegated authority in a way that honors him.

We're God's agents for his justice and mercy over those we lead, over those with whom we have authority. And so, just to give you an example, if you're a parent, then your job is when your children are squabbling to actually exercise justice, to bring fairness to the situation, isn't it?

[14 : 59] Because when you deprive your children of that fairness, they actually miss out on the blessing that God intends for them. And so, that's the same in whatever positions of authority that you find yourself in.

Those you have authority over, you have a responsibility to act justly, because otherwise, you are depriving them of God's blessing. You are God's agent of blessing to them.

And that's why there's accountability to God for it. You know, I know that we all love to be in charge, most of us. I hear many of you coming up wanting to have the chance to lead.

Very good. And nowadays, we all think submission is a bad thing, isn't it? But do you know that if you want to lead, if you want to have authority, then the question that you need to ask yourself is, are you ready to give an account to God for that authority?

It's great that you want to do it, but do you know that God desires for you to use that authority, not to do things your way, for your own gain, but actually for the benefit of others, for the ones that God is seeking to bless, particularly the weak and the needy, those who cannot defend themselves.

[16 : 18] Now, on the other hand, for those of us who find ourselves defenseless and weak, you know, and from time to time we do, then this psalm is actually a great comfort for us, isn't it?

Because God wants us to know that he will judge the rulers and judges that he's appointed over us. If there's been unfair, if there's been injustice, he will judge.

Now, we may need to wait patiently for the day to come, and it could be the day he comes, but that justice will come.

Why? Because God's own reputation is at stake. Right? Because if he appoints that authority, then he, in one sense, has his reputation tied to that. And so, if that authority is unjust, well, he will do something about it.

And so, if you feel like you're being unfairly treated at the moment, whatever the situation may be, you can use the verse of Psalm 8, verse 8 of the psalm to cry out to God.

[17 : 23] pray, rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance, and God will hear you. And when you look around the world, and there's lots of it going on around, isn't it, and you see the poor and the oppressed being mistreated, and you feel powerless to do anything about it, then pray on their behalf, verse 8, rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance, and God will hear your cry, and he will answer it in his time.

But we ought to realize that when we cry out, often when we look at a conflict, we do take sides, don't we? And we cry out. But actually, God does not take sides with the nations, because he rules over them all.

He's appointed rulers for each of them. And so these rulers, whether it's Hamas, or it's the Israeli government, whether it's the Ukrainian president, or the Russian president, all of them will come under God's judgment at his great assembly.

Everyone will be answerable to God. And so it's not about picking winners ourselves, or taking sides, or working out which side God is on. No, all of them, and we don't know who's done right or wrong, but all of them will be judged by God.

And I think we quickly realize, don't we, that it's not just with the world leaders, but actually, it's with all of us, isn't it? That all of us, as I said earlier, we've all fallen short to some extent.

[19 : 02] We're all selfish. You know, I try to be a good leader, but I end up sometimes doing things that suit me rather than others. So we end up not upholding justice perfectly, do we?

We don't defend the cause of the weak and the needy all the time. But thankfully, the Bible tells us that there is one human that does. He is the true son of the Most High.

He's the one who perfectly defends the weak and the oppressed. And we sing his name every week, don't we? His name is Jesus.

And here's the amazing thing about how Jesus exercises this authority. You see, even though his rule over us, his authority is perfect, yet he still took God's judgment upon himself.

Even though he did not deserve to be punished, he had no wrongdoing to answer to his own, he took the punishment and judgment for our wrongdoing instead.

[20 : 07] And so as it says in verse 5, he dies like a mere mortal. He falls like every other ruler. And when it comes to exercising his authority, Jesus does the ultimate, doesn't he?

He doesn't just sit in the judgment seat and then rule over others. No. How he exercises justice is by laying down his life to defend the weak and the oppressed.

That's us. He defends us by laying down his life for us because we are too weak. We are too oppressed by our own sin to be able to free ourselves.

And so, Josh read in our New Testament reading in Philippians chapter 2, Paul describes Jesus in this way. Christ Jesus, who is in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made into human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

[21 : 22] And so, yes, God judged his anointed judge, Jesus, who submitted himself to death on the cross in order that he could rescue the weak and the needy, you, me, Niku, and all who turn to Jesus in dependence.

Jesus used the authority that the Father gave him not for his own benefit, but for ours. He rules justly, not to suit his own desires, but to attend to the desperate need of humanity, to free us from sin and death.

And as a result, God then made him the ultimate judge and ruler of the earth. He made him the Lord of lords and the King of kings and gave him, his son, all the nations as his inheritance.

And so, Paul writes, continues to write in Philippians, therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

And so now when we pray verse 8 of Psalm 82 and we say, rise up, O God, we can also direct our pleas to God's Son Jesus because he will judge the earth on the Father's behalf.

[22 : 58] which means for all of us living after the time of Jesus' coming, there are two additional things to take note of. One more warning and one more comfort.

If we've submitted to the authority of Jesus and Niku today at her baptism publicly testified to serving the Lord and as many of you have as well, whether it's at your baptism or confirmation, but remember it's not the actual act of baptism that does it but rather it's the life that goes with it.

That's the ultimate testimony. But if you submit it to the Lord Jesus then we can take great comfort that Jesus' rescue is already ours. God answers our cries to him in his Son and come the day of judgment when we come before the Lord, when we get into this great assembly, we're not going to be judged.

God will rise up to judge the earth but no, Jesus will be our Savior on that day and so not be condemned. As for the wrongs that everyone has done to us, any wrong, well Jesus will see to it that it will be dealt with justly.

So those of us who have people over us that fail us, you know, that are harsh to us, well, take comfort they will have to answer to God.

[24 : 24] Now we may need to wait patiently for that day but that day will come. We can take great comfort in that. But there's also a warning as a flip side, isn't it?

And that is, now that Jesus has come, if you do not submit to his rule then well, I encourage you to consider it urgently because on that day you will face Jesus as the judge.

you know, in Romans chapter 13 God said that we are supposed to be submissive to all authorities. And just think about this, if that is the instruction that God gives to us in relation to imperfect rulers, then what do you think he requires of us in relation to the perfect ruler in our life?

The one who exercises his authority over us perfectly rather than harshly. Don't you think that the Lord would want us to submit to Jesus?

Particularly because he exercises his authority over us, not by lording it over us, but actually by laying down his life for us. There's really no excuse, is there?

[25 : 39] One day, as Paul says, every knee will bow, every tongue confess, there will be no exception, everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

None of us, I'm going to say this, none of us will have a choice. We will all confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The only choice we have is whether we do it now and for the rest of our lives and then on that day Jesus comes to us as our Savior or we reject him now and then on that day sadly we will have to face him as judge and try and defend ourselves based on what we have done.

Well, I don't know about you but I'm going to take my choice as following Jesus now and finding him to be my Lord and Savior and not my judge on that day.

Let's pray. Father, your justice is perfect. you will judge those who have given authority over us on this earth.

Help us to use the authority we've been given to please you and please forgive us when we dishonor you with it. Help us all to cling to Christ and to wait patiently when you will rise up to save us and to judge the earth.

[27 : 08] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.