

## You are Gods

Psalm 82:1-8

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*January 1, 2006*

Please be seated. We continue working through the Third Book of the Psalms together, and we return to Psalm 82: a short Psalm, a Psalm about God and government. And if you sneaked a peek in The First Epistle at the title of this sermon or looked at your bulletin this morning and were wondering if I had slipped a cog — no, I really did mean to title the sermon You are Gods. You'll note those words come right out of Psalm 82.

Now, you may have wondered what in the world is this sermon going to be about; or maybe you thought "Ligon's been reading the Word of Faith health and wealth preachers, and he's going to give us a Kenneth Copeland spiel about how we're all little gods." Not to worry: I haven't, and I'm not!

Actually, it's important for us to know even before we read this Psalm together that there have been a variety of views about just to whom this phrase "You are gods" refers. Liberals in the last 50-75 years have suggested that this is proof of a remnant of ancient polytheism: this reference to multiple gods clearly is the residue of an earlier Israelite belief in multiple gods, even though eventually, under the influence of the prophets, ethical monotheism became ascendant and pushed out the older polytheistic beliefs.

Now, the problem, of course, with that particular view is this Psalm has ethical monotheism all over it. It's all about the one God ruling and reigning over His people and all the earth, including those who are governors over the earth. And if the author of this Psalm, in an era where it is acknowledged by all this belief in the one true God was being clearly proclaimed in all the pulpits of the land, why in the world would he have left something in this Psalm that witnessed to an earlier polytheism as a part of Israel's belief? It just doesn't make sense.

A second view (and it's a minority view as to what "you are gods" refers to, or to whom the gods are that are referred to in this Psalm) is that the gods here are demonic angelic rulers. Examples are given like Daniel, where Gabriel is sent out from God to Daniel in response to Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9, and he's intercepted, as it were, and engages in battles with powers and principalities on

his way to come to Daniel with God's answer, and it's suggested that there is an indication of those kinds of powers and principalities at play even in this Psalm.

For instance, if you look down at verse 7, advocates of this view will say notice that the psalmist says of these whom he calls gods, "Nevertheless you will die like men..." and they say 'Aha! That means these aren't men, because if they were men you wouldn't say of them 'you will die like men,' and so this is proof that this Psalm is not about humans being called gods, but it's proof that the Psalm is about demonic angelic forces.'

Well, apart from the major interpretative problem with that, which is that clearly the Psalm is an instruction from God to those who are in civil authority, the problem with the proof of verse 7 is that that proof cuts both ways. We can say definitively that the end of angelic demonic powers is not going to be like the end of men, in the sense that they will meet the second death first in the lake of fire.

And, secondly, we can know that the very expression "you will die like men" is in the context of people who are acting like gods but who are merely men. And so the phrase "you will die like men" is perfectly appropriate for them.

The older, majority view of this passage is that gods here refers to civil rulers. Throughout the Old Testament God is constantly enjoining government officials to rule justly; and in this passage He refers to them as gods (little "g") because they have been appointed by Him, because they are to rule in accordance with His word (God's word), and because they are to be the mediatorial administrators of His justice in the nation. They function as servants of God.

Now, it's interesting that Jesus Himself quotes this passage in an interesting context in the Gospels. Turn with me to John 10. We are going to get to Psalm 82, I promise, but turn with me first to John 10. In John 10, you will remember, at about verse 22 Jesus enters into a conversation at the feast of dedication in Jerusalem with the Jewish people who are gathered there, and in the midst of that conversation asserts (in verse 30) "I and the Father are one." Now, it's very clear that Jesus is testifying to His deity in this passage. The Jews themselves get the point. Notice what they in verse 33: "You, being a man, make Yourself out to be a god."

Now Jesus in response to them toys with them a little bit, and He quotes to them from Psalm 82, and He says, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said, 'You are gods'? If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'"

In that response Jesus does two things. First of all, He reminds those Jewish detractors of His from their own Scriptures that there are passages in which God

speaks of people as gods. But then, actually, you see the force of His argument is a lesser to greater argument. If these people to whom the word of God has been given, God's word of how to justly rule in the land of Israel, if these people to whom God's word has been given for them to administer can be called 'gods', how much more appropriate is it for the One whom God has sent into the world to be called God, "the Son of God." And so Jesus in this very passage witnesses to the proper understanding of Psalm 82. It is a Psalm that is addressed to the civil rulers of Israel.

Now let's turn in our Bibles to Psalm 82 and hear God's word. Before we hear it read and proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank You for its timeliness; we thank You for its authority. We thank You, O God, for its liveliness, its activity, for the way it is not merely a dead letter, but it is a living word. It's profitable for our growth, for our correction, for our training in righteousness, and it does show us the will of God in the way of salvation in the Savior and our God. And we thank You for this. As we read Your word tonight, we ask by Your Spirit to help us understand and believe the truth of Your word. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

A Psalm of Asaph.

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

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it.

This is a psalm, a song that was meant to be sung in worship. One commentator said of this Psalm, "This Psalm should never be sung in worship. It's about civil government. The church has nothing to do with civil government. We should simply wait for the One who is the righteous Judge of the nations to come, and we should never use this Psalm in worship."

Well, it's interesting, of course, that this Psalm would have for many hundreds of years been used in the worship of Israel, and it has continued to be used in the worship of the people of God for the last two thousand years. It was a Psalm sung in worship about God and government.

That very fact tells us that government is exceedingly important to God. It's not something that we shunt off to one side of our life, and we have a Christian life over here and then there's government over here. No, God is very much concerned about government. Martin Luther was expounding on the Psalm in the midst of the Peasants' War in Germany. He goes on and on about this Psalm. It's a relatively short Psalm. I think Martin Luther wrote far more words about this Psalm than are found in this Psalm! But one of the reasons he did was because of the high regard he had for good government and for the blessing that it is to have good government, not only to God's people but to all people. He makes the comment in commenting on this Psalm that he would rather be a good leader, a good governor (a good "secular prince" he would have said in his day), than to be a Hillary or a Jerome. Hillary was one of the men who had started the monastic movement in Palestine, and Jerome was of course a famous monk in Bethlehem who was responsible for the translation of the Latin Vulgate. But Luther was indicating what a high view he had of good civil government.

Calvin also shared that very high view of civil government. In fact, we often hear preachers today say that the ministry of the word is the highest calling that a person can have. Calvin thought that the calling to government was the highest calling that a person could have! Again, it was a recognition that government was appointed by God for the general welfare, and that there is nothing more beneficial to people and to the people of God in particular than good governance.

Well, this is a song about good governance that God meant His people to sing. You can imagine circumstances in Israel when it would have been seen perhaps by the kingly authorities who weren't doing a good job of ruling — it might have seemed seditious to sing this Psalm in temple worship in Jerusalem. Can you imagine? You're an unpopular monarch, you're misruling the people of Israel, and out comes the priest with old Psalm 82 again to sing in your presence. Why, you might would have run him out of town!

But God meant to teach His people several important truths, and I want to point you to three of them in particular in this passage tonight. In verses 1-4, I want you to see God's call for just government. In verse 5, I want you to see God's complaint against unjust government. And then, in verses 6-8 I want you to see

this warning of judgment that God gives to mortal governors, human governors, rulers over God's people — those whom He calls here “gods.” Let's look at each of these parts together.

## **I. God calls for just government.**

First of all, God calls for just government in verses 1-4. Listen to these words again:

“God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers. How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked? Vindicate the weak and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.”

Here we see God's pronouncement to His people about good government. In this passage we're introduced to what seems to be a courtroom scene; at the very least, it is a great official assembly of the people of God. In this case, God Himself convenes the court session. His people are assembled around Him. He is in the midst of them. And who is also there? The rulers...the judges. “He judges in the midst of the rulers,” we're told in verse 1.

And immediately, in verse 2, what happens? God brings an accusation against these rulers, against these judges: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” In other words, God stands in the whole assembly of His people, and He points to these rulers and these judges, and He says ‘You are judging unjustly and you are showing favoritism to the wicked.’ Now, having brought that initial charge against them, now He tells them what He wants them rather to do, what He expects of those who are administering good government. You see this in verses 3-4.

First of all, He tells them what He expects: that their rule is to look out for the interests of those who are most likely to be overlooked, to be mistreated, and He lists them: the weak, the orphans, the afflicted and destitute. And so their rule is to look out for those who are most likely to be overlooked and to make sure that they are given justice and protection from wicked aggression. Notice how He speaks of that in verse 4: “Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.”

So notice here God speaks of at least two elements of the kind of good government and just rule that He expects from the leaders of His people. First of all, they're going to look out for those who are likely to be overlooked. They're going to make sure, in other words, that there is equal justice for all. Secondly, they are going to defend those who are vulnerable from mistreatment and aggression by the wicked, and so there is a dispensation of justice and there is a

defense of those who are unable to defend themselves, and both of these elements are expected by God in terms of good government.

By the way, this is the reason why Bible believers have always believed that good government ought to foster equal justice under the law. That's not an idea invented by our founding fathers. They learned that truth from their Christian heritage, from the Bible: that equal justice under the law is something that God expects of all good government. It's a universal principle.

In fact, that would be a very useful discussion for you as a Christian to get into with a non-Christian. You might say to the non-Christian, "As a Christian, I have a reason why I think that there should be equal justice under the law. If you believe in Darwinian evolution and naturalism and you don't believe that there is a God, on what basis do you believe that there ought to be equal justice under the law? What's the philosophical underpinning of your worldview that allows you to say that there ought to be equal justice under the law?" There is no good answer to that from anyone who denies the Creator God who establishes the universal norms of right and wrong, of truth and justice. So that would be a very useful pre-evangelistic conversation to get into with an unbelieving friend sometime.

But here, God, in having the children of Israel sing this Psalm in which He berates unjust rulers, is actually doing what? He is enforcing in His people the belief that God Himself is the source of government; that God is the source of the enduring moral norms by which all good government is measured; that God is deeply interested in just rule in all societies. One of the things about this Psalm, of course, is that it continually emphasizes God rules not just over Israel, but over what? All the nations. They belong to Him. So God is concerned for just rule not only amongst His people, but in all societies, and God will hold accountable those who rule. So just by singing this Psalm over and over and over for hundreds of years, the children of Israel learned that God is the source of government, that He is the source of the enduring moral norms by which all good government is measured, that He is deeply interested in just rule in all societies, and that He will hold accountable those who rule.

Jesus, you remember, when He's before Pilate in John 19, says to Pilate — what? "I know that you have no authority but that which has been given to you." He's acknowledging that the rule of Pilate in Palestine ultimately doesn't go back to Caesar, it goes back to God. Paul will say the same thing in Romans 13. In the reign of Nero (for crying out loud!) he'll say that God has appointed government for our welfare. He is the source of government. He is the source of the enduring moral norms by which all good government is measured. He is interested in good government and just rule, and He will hold accountable those who rule. The people of God learned those things singing this Psalm.

## **II. God's complaint against unjust government.**

There's a second thing I want you to see, too, though, and that is God's complaint against unjust government. You'll see in verse 5 God complains of unjust government. Here in verse 5 you see God's assessment of Israel's rulers and leaders. They're there, remember, assembled with Him. He's already told them to stop governing unjustly. Now He continues His assessment in verse 5: "They do not know nor do they understand; they walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken."

Well, it wasn't a very good grade on their report card, was it? God says to them that as judges and rulers they are without understanding — that is, they lack wisdom and discernment. He says that they walk about in darkness — that is, they are engulfed in a dark fog of moral confusion. They lack wisdom and discernment, something essential to just rule and judgment.

And they're morally confused, because they have not adequately appreciated that their rule comes from God, and that it is God's norms that they are to be administering and it is to God to whom they are accountable.

And so what is the consequence? Well, he tells you at the end of verse 5: "All the foundations of the earth are shaken." In other words, the whole moral order is upset, is in turmoil because of this poor leadership. Not simply poor leadership, but wrong and unjust and immoral leadership. The foundations of the general welfare are undermined by this unjust government.

You know, it shouldn't surprise us, but in a fallen world there is a corrupting tendency at work in all exercise of human authority and power. Consequently, our founding fathers put in place checks and balances to try and address that problem of depraved people in power using that power corruptly, and in a way that doesn't promote the general welfare but in fact undermines it.

Well, here God is giving His assessment on these rulers and leaders. They have not acknowledged God as the source of justice and government, and so they lack wisdom and discernment and the people consequently suffer.

And then finally, in verses 6-8, we see God's declaration concerning these rulers. He warns of His judgment on these mortal governors whom He calls gods. Listen again to God's words in verses 6 and 7: "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High. Nevertheless you will die like men, and fall like any one of the princes.'"

In other words, God is saying 'Look, I appointed you in Israel as My representatives for the welfare of the people, and in that sense you are gods, you are sons of the Most High. You are people who have been vested with My authority to rule. Nevertheless, don't you forget that you're going to die like any other man, and when you die there will be a judgment waiting.'

God has appointed rulers in Israel. They're vested with His responsibility to administer justice according to His standards. They're accountable to God, and so He says to them 'You are gods. You've been appointed by Me to administer justice. But one day you'll die, and you'll stand before My assize in My courtroom and I'll assess your faithfulness. And I'm giving you a preview now of what that assessment is going to be unless you rule in accordance with justice, the standard of which is found in Me and is summarized in the moral law which I have given.'

Now in response to this, the people of God finally speak in this Psalm. All along they've been singing about God or they have been singing God's words to these rulers. Finally in verse 8 the people of God sing with their own words. And what do they sing? "Arise, O God, and judge the earth! For it is You who possess all the nations." Now, you see, finally the people assembled call out; and what do they say? 'Come, Lord, and judge the earth, because all the nations belong to You.'

One of the very last few words of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, "Come, Lord, come quickly." To do what? He's coming to judge just like Charles Wesley says in that great hymn...where is it in our hymnal, 318 or so? Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending - "Come to judgment, come to judgment, come to judgment, come away," He'll say. Because the Apostle Paul stresses that at the end God will judge the world through this man Christ Jesus, and all will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ; and, when He comes again He will come on clouds with glory and splendor to judge. And the people of God in the Old Testament are praying more than they know, aren't they, when they ask God to arise, and come and visit judgment on unjust rulers?

God is reminding us through this Psalm that He will hold accountable all those who rule and govern and judge.

Martin Luther's comments on this Psalm are so helpful. He strikes such a balance, even in that tumultuous time in Germany's history during the Reformation and during the Peasants' War. And he points out both aspects of government: the aspect of the honor which we ought to have for those in government and the aspect of the accountability that those in government have to God. Here's what he says:

Where there is no government, or where government is not held in honor, there can be no peace. Where there is no peace, no one can keep his life or anything else in the face of another's outrage or thievery or robbery or violence and wickedness; much less will there be room to teach God's word and to rear children in the fear of the Lord in His discipline.

So there's the one side: the blessing of government. Here's the other side: the accountability:

God keeps down the rulers so that they do not abuse His majesty and power according to their own self-will, for they are not gods among the people and overlords of the congregation in such a way that they have this position all to themselves and can do as they like. No so! God Himself is there also. He will judge, punish, and correct them. And if they do not obey, they will not escape.

I want to close with just a couple of thoughts. One is this Psalm does give you substance and content for how you can pray for those who are in rule and authority. You can take the positive instructions of God and pray for your governors and civil authorities, "Lord, grant that they would rule in accordance with these positive commands." You can take His negative judgments against the unjust rulers of Israel, and you can reverse them and pray that the Lord would grant our rulers not to rule in that way, but to rule in accordance with the principles of God's enduring moral norms.

But secondly, I want you to see this. Isn't it interesting that God is concerned for the welfare of all who are under the power of human civil government, not just Christians? So whatever we do in this increasingly anti-Christian environment, we as Christians should always make it clear that when we enter into the civil arena, our concern is not simply for our own particular personal self-interest and well-being. Our concern is for the general welfare, for the welfare and happiness of mankind, for those who are not Christians; because our God is concerned for them, too, and we image Him as we interact in public life by not only showing a proper concern for the enduring moral norms on which all good government is founded, but by showing our concern for unbelieving friends because we want to work for their well-being, too, as a witness to our good and loving heavenly Father.

May God bless His word. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for teaching us about government in the Bible. Who would have thought that You would have Your people sing a song in worship about good government? But You do, and we thank You for that. And how timely that is in our own day and age, where we see the foundations shaken by a government which has lost its moorings, has rejected those principles which were enshrined in our very founding documents, themselves deductions of Your truth. Heavenly Father, we ask that You give us wisdom as Christian men and women living in a crazy mixed-up world as to how best to represent our Savior in the public sector. And Lord God, above all we thank You that one day our Lord Jesus Christ will come and judge. Until then, grant us faith to trust in Him, and expectancy to call on His quick coming. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Would you stand for God's blessing.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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