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The Justice of God

Psalm 82

Pastor Bryan Clark

Imagine that I were to invite five 10 year-olds up on the stage for a Bible quiz, with the prize being a \$150 bicycle. Now suppose that one of those five kids is my 10 year-old daughter, Jamie. When I begin asking the questions, one of them gives an answer that is *almost* right, but it's not *exactly* correct. I immediately dismiss that child by saying, "I'm sorry; you missed that." So we keep going through the questions until we get to my daughter. She gives her answer and it's only barely in the ballpark, at best. But I say, "Yeah, that's a pretty good answer" and I leave her in the group, while I keep weeding out the other kids. I ask Jamie another question and she is relatively clueless, so I decide she really didn't hear the question and I reword it in a way that kind of gives away the answer. I continue to go through that process until ultimately I've eliminated everybody else. Jamie is the one left and she wins the bicycle.

You would certainly be thinking, *That wasn't exactly fair*. It appeals to this sense of justice that we all have—that would not be fair. It wouldn't be *just*. We learn that as little children and obviously it stays with us our whole life. If you don't believe that, on Christmas morning have five presents for one child and three for the other and see if they notice. Of course they notice—you have to have an even number, even if you're wrapping empty boxes to come up with the same. You also might hear, "Why is this one big...and mine's small?"

Of course, when we get into school we have an expectation of justice. You expect your teacher to grade you fairly. If you do well on a test, you expect a fair grade. Just because this other kid in class has a mother who's a good friend of the teacher, you don't expect that to affect the grading. If you go out for athletics, you want to believe you have a fair opportunity with the coach. Just because one kid's parents have more money or more influence in the community, or because they're buddies with the coach, you don't expect that to affect your chances to play. There's a sense of expecting justice, and that's as it should be.

You get out into the marketplace and there is a similar expectation. When you do business with people you expect to be treated fairly. If you work 8 hours you expect to be paid for 8 hours. If you take your car to a garage, or you call someone to do some work in your home, you expect it to be done correctly and charged appropriately. Those are all ways that we deal with this whole issue of justice. When those expectations are violated, we have a sense of injustice, that somehow we've been cheated.

When you move into the level of law enforcement, there is even a higher expectation. It's their job to enforce justice—that's really what they're about. So let's imagine this morning you're driving home from church on a road where the speed limit is 35 mph, and you're going 35 mph. A policeman pulls you over and gives you a ticket for going 60 mph. You say, "I wasn't going 60. I was looking at my speedometer and I was just going 35." He says, "Then tell it to the judge." He gives you your ticket, and you say, "Well, that's what I'll have to do.

So you show up in court and explain to the judge, "I was looking at my speedometer and I was only going 35, so I don't know where he got this 60 thing." The judge is listening, and right before the judge renders his verdict, the police officer comes up to the bench and

whispers something in the judge's ear. You don't know what he's saying, but what he is whispering is, "Don't forget that your son plays on the Little League team that I coach. If your son ever wants to see another pitch, you might want to think this through." The judge then makes his decision and says, "You were going 60. That's the end of it."

You would walk away from that experience with a high sense of unfairness and injustice, thinking, *This just isn't right*. Part of what would fuel that feeling is that we expect *especially* a judge to be just. That is what they are paid for—to be the protectors of justice and enforce the law.

What happens when those, whose responsibility it is to oversee justice, become corrupt? In January there was an article in the Readers Digest about America's worst judges. It talked about judges who were on the take, who were receiving bribes and letting criminals go—some even involved in crime themselves. It was a horror story of what happens when those, whose job it is to protect justice, become unjust themselves.

That's exactly the problem that was going on in Israel. They had judges who basically decided any type of dispute among people. Whether it was a criminal offense, or two people who couldn't get along, or a neighbor taking advantage of a neighbor—whatever it was, these judges were responsible to make those decisions.

You have to put this all in perspective. In our culture we have all these different avenues that we can pursue if we feel like we're treated unfairly. We have different government agencies where you can go ... then you can go to court... and you can then appeal it in another court. If you take all of those agencies and put them together, those would have been all wrapped into these judges in Israel. If you came before the judge, whatever the judge said was final. There was no appeal; there was nothing you could do about it. That was just the way it was.

These judges were on the take. The norm was for them to be bribed, so the rich and the powerful took advantage of the weak and the poor. That just became a way of life. The only place that these people, who were being treated unfairly, could go to was to these judges. When these judges were no longer just, then the people had nowhere to go. They ended up living their lives being taken advantage of.

That's the mood from which Psalm 82 is written. The psalmist is frustrated with the fact that there is no justice and there is nowhere to turn. So he cries out to the standard of justice—God Himself—to do something.

Psalm 82 opens: "God takes His stand in His own congregation..." In order to paint the picture that I think the Psalmist is wanting to paint here, we could translate that a little bit differently. We could translate the opening verse: "God presides over his own courtroom." That's really what that opening statement is saying. God is the judge and He is holding court, presiding over His own courtroom.

Imagine this huge courtroom. God comes in and He's the judge over His court. There's a large gallery filled with people who have been taken advantage of and mistreated—the poor, the downtrodden, the afflicted. They pack into this gallery because they want to see what God is going to do to those who have caused them so much pain.

But who are those people who are on trial? The second part of verse 1 tells us: “He judges in the midst of the rulers.” It’s another way of saying He’s judging the rulers—meaning the judges, as he will define that a little bit farther into the psalm. So God the Judge is judging the judges.

In order to fully understand that, we have to understand that word *rulers* which is the Hebrew word *Elohim*. In fact, the opening name for God in the psalm is Elohim, and then rulers is Elohim. So it’s God (capital G) and gods (small g). It could be translated, “He judges in the midst of the gods.” Now that seems like strange language for us, but it wasn’t really strange language for the Hebrew people, and it isn’t even that strange in the Old Testament. There are times when those people who are put in positions of authority are referred to as Elohim (gods). It means they are put in positions where they represent God on earth. In this case, those judges were put in place because God knows that in a sinful world there will always be lawbreakers. There will always be the lawless who seek to take advantage of the weak, the afflicted, and the poor. God puts in place what is necessary in order to prevent that. In order to mediate out justice, God has to have someone or something in place to protect those who, otherwise, would be taken advantage of. So the judges represent God on earth, and in this case they are to represent God’s justice.

You see the same concept in the New Testament. In Romans 13 Paul has a discussion about the government and the role of government. I suppose people could debate all the different things that government is involved in today, and the rightness or wrongness of that. But, biblically, government was put in place in order to maintain law and order—to establish the laws and to punish those who break the laws. That’s the role of government. God knows that, without government, there would be utter chaos. It would be fair to say that it’s even true that a corrupt government is better than no government at all, because of the consequences of that. When Paul wrote in Romans 13 he was referring to the Roman government, and the Roman government was certainly far more corrupt than our government.

So it isn’t just that we obey good governments, but that we obey *government*. We could get into a discussion about civil disobedience and when it is that you need to listen to God over government. But that really isn’t the point, so we’ll do that another day. What we’re talking about here is just the idea of government and people in positions of authority. They, in a sense, act for God in maintaining law and order in administering justice and fairness. If you read that passage in Romans 13, it’s interesting that God calls government officials “servants of God” and “ministers of God.” He’s making the point that these people act on my behalf in order to administer justice and fairness and maintain law and order.

That’s exactly the concept here in Psalm 82. These people were supposed to be representing God on earth. That’s why they are called *gods*—because of who they represent. In verse 1 the psalmist is speaking, and now in verses 2-7 God Himself speaks. He says, “How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked?” God doesn’t exactly beat around the bush here. Imagine this courtroom scene with all of these people who have been mistreated in the gallery, and the defendants who are on trial are these judges. God says to these judges, “How long is this behavior going to continue? You are acting unjustly. You are showing partiality to the wicked.”

That word *wicked* is the Hebrew word which means the lawless, the law-breakers. They are showing partiality to the very people they are supposed to guard the community against. So there is a bit of irony in this, in that they were supposed to protect the people from

lawbreakers, but they, themselves, have become the lawbreakers. They themselves have become lawless and are showing partiality to the lawless.

We might say, in our vocabulary today, that what you have is a situation where the fox is guarding the henhouse. You have the very ones who were supposed to minister justice becoming the ones who are now lawless. And, of course, that was creating a lot of problems.

In verses 3 and 4, God basically reviews the job description of these judges. This was what they were supposed to be doing. It says, “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.” Notice the emphasis on the weak, the fatherless, the afflicted, the destitute, the weak, the needy. These are people who could easily be taken advantage of, and they couldn’t really defend themselves. There’s an assumption that, in a world in which sin exists, those people are always going to be vulnerable. There are always going to be lawless people who will take advantage of them. That’s a given.

But what God wants in place are those people who will protect them and provide a place where they can go and find justice. He’s saying to these judges, “This is your assignment; this is what you’re supposed to be doing.” In fact, the language is pretty graphic in the end of verse 4, when it says “deliver them.” It’s a Hebrew word that means to snatch a prey out of an animal’s mouth. So the imagery is that these lawless people are like a lion about to devour these needy and afflicted people, and it’s up to the judge to reach out and grab them out of the mouth of the lion before they’re devoured. But instead, what’s happening is that they’re just feeding them to the lions, and they’re being devoured one after another.

Now imagine our courtroom imagery. You have the people in the gallery who are shaking their heads, “Yeah, that’s exactly what’s happening.” The judges are staring at God with this blank look in their eyes, and they’re looking at one another because they just don’t get it. So God moves from talking *to* them to talking *to* the gallery *about* them. He says in verse 5: “They do not know nor do they understand; they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.” God looks to the gallery and He says, “They’re clueless—they don’t know, they don’t understand.” In fact He uses the imagery that they’re walking around in darkness, which means these people no longer even understand the difference between right and wrong. They no longer even understand the difference between what is just and what is unjust.

We would say they’ve completely lost their moral compass. They have no ability to even fulfill their responsibility anymore. God says they’re groping in the darkness, and He says because of that, the foundations are then crumbling. If these are the people who are put in place in order to protect against lawbreakers, and they themselves have become lawless, then everything begins to crumble. It’s like being in an earthquake, where there is nowhere you can stand where the ground is solid. That is what the psalmist is feeling, and that’s why he is crying out to God. Everything is coming unraveled, and the only place he can turn to is to the standard of justice Himself, and that is God.

Verse 6: “I said, ‘You are gods, {*Elohim*} and all of you are sons of the Most High.’” God is saying there, “I say you are gods, meaning I put you in a position of authority to represent Me. You are created beings, created in My image, put in the position where you were supposed to be the guardians of justice.”

But what happens is that when people receive that kind of authority they often become a law unto themselves. They often become filled with pride and arrogance and they are accountable to no one. They basically *are* the law. And that's exactly what had happened. These judges were accountable to no one, and nobody questioned their decisions. It was extremely common that they would take a bribe, and there was nowhere to turn. They were the law. There wasn't any other avenue or place to go and say, "This judge took a bribe."

Because of that, God now is going to come back and remind them. They thought they were above the law and answered to no one, but God reminds them that they answer to God. Verse 7: "Nevertheless you will die like men." There is this contrast between the gods and men, simply saying they have been put in a position of authority, but they will die like anybody else. He tells them they are nothing but mere men, and they will "fall like any one of the princes." That's God's way of saying, "You are accountable to Me. You're really not God; you're only representing Me on earth. You'll answer to Me and you'll give an account."

In verse 8 the psalmist comes back and closes the psalm. So you have the psalmist in verses 1 and 8, and God speaking in-between. "Arise, O God, judge the earth! *{that's what the psalmist has wanted all the way through}* For it is Thou who dost possess all the nations." In other words, "God, you are in charge and possess the nations. You are the only one ultimately that we can count on for justice." The psalmist is crying out for God to come and do His thing—to judge the judges so that there will be justice in the land.

The psalm seems fairly straightforward—it isn't that hard to figure out. The question is: What do we do with it? Unless you are a judge, you might be thinking, *That's good. Those judges need to be just*, and then just go your own way.

But certainly there's more to it than that. In thinking about this, we can broaden it out to anybody who's in a position to oversee justice or fairness. So we're talking about teachers, coaches, employers—any of you who are in a position of authority where you have a responsibility to see that people are treated fairly. You represent God, and it's God's justice that you represent when you oversee these people. It even comes all the way down to parents and their responsibility to be fair with their children. So there's a pretty broad application that we could consider.

But there is more to it than that. Whenever we study any passage of Scripture, one of the most important questions we need to ask is: Why is God telling me this? In other words, what is it that God wants us to know about Himself from the telling of this psalm? Because that is what the Bible is—it's God's self-revelation. So in every passage God is saying, "I want you to know this about Me."

In Psalm 82, what is it that God wants us to know about Himself? The answer would be pretty clear. God wants us to know that He is just. That while all these injustices go on all over our society, there is One who is always just, and He is the standard of justice. The reason that is so important is because we live in a culture where people want to dismiss this attribute of God. People like the fact that God is loving...that God is gracious...that God is merciful...that God is forgiving...that God is good. And He is all those things.

But when you get to the discussion that God is *just*, people start to squirm. People don't like to hear that, because the fact that God is just is the reason why He must punish sin. The fact that God is just is the reason why sinners are condemned to an eternal hell apart from

God. When you start talking like that, people start squirming and pushing back, because they don't want to hear it. What they're saying is, "I don't want to believe that God is just."

Think of it this way. Imagine someone broke into your home and violently committed some crime against you. This person is arrested, goes through trial, and the evidence is overwhelming—there's no question but what this person is guilty. So you're sitting in the gallery and you're waiting for the verdict, and the judge says, "There's no question that this person is guilty. I know this person did the crime. But I've decided just to look the other way and let him go free." So the charges are dismissed, and out he goes. You would be outraged and very upset, and you would say, "That is a total injustice."

But it's interesting that is the exact same thing most people in our culture want from God. They want to stand in God's courtroom, condemned with all these sins, and for God to simply say, "You know, let's just forget this ever happened. Let's just pretend like none of these things ever took place."

As a matter of fact, it goes farther than that. People think, *I can go to church now and then...I'll be a good person...I'll put a few bucks in the offering.* It's the idea that "God, surely you can be bought off." What they're saying is that God is as unjust as these judges were in this psalm. They're saying that God is as corrupt as the judges were—showing partiality to the lawbreakers.

The Bible is very clear that all of us have sinned. In the language we're using today, we are all lawless and we are all lawbreakers. We all stand in God's courtroom condemned. Romans 6:23 says that condemnation for that is death—not just physical death, but eternal death. God can send us to an eternal hell and He's completely just in doing that. It is God's justice that demanded a Savior.

Some people say, "If God is love, why couldn't He just let everybody into heaven?" The answer to that is because God is just, and to do that, God would be a corrupt judge. So God has to deal with sin. His solution to that was to send His own Son to become flesh and dwell among us and to be nailed on the cross. On that cross, the sins of the world were placed on Jesus. It was there that the sentence was carried out as Jesus was executed. There—on that cross—love and justice came together that we might be offered forgiveness of sin and a relationship with God.

Centuries ago, it was known far and wide that a certain tribal leader was the greatest in all the tribes. When power was measured by proving superior physical strength, the most powerful tribe of all was the one that had the strongest leader.

But this tribal leader was also known for his wisdom. In order to help his people live safely and peacefully, he carefully put laws into place guiding every aspect of tribal life. The leader enforced those laws strictly and had long ago acquired a reputation for uncompromising justice.

In spite of the laws, there were problems. One day it came to the leader's attention that someone in the tribe was stealing. He called the people together. "You know that the laws are for your protection, to help you live safely and in peace," he reminded them, his eyes heavy with sadness because of his love for them. "This stealing must stop. We all have what we need. The penalty has been increased from ten to twenty lashes from the whip for the person caught stealing."

But the thief continued to take things that didn't belong to him, so the leader called all the people together again.

“Please hear me,” he pled with them. “This must stop. It hurts us all. The penalty has been increased to thirty lashes.”

Still, the stealing continued. The leader gathered the people together once more.

“Please, I’m begging you. For *your* sake, this has to stop. The pain it is causing among us is too great. The penalty has been increased to forty lashes from the whip.” The people knew of their leader’s great love for them, but only those closest to him saw the single tear make its way slowly down his face as he dismissed the gathering.

Finally, a man came to say that the thief had been caught. The word had spread. Everyone gathered to see who it was.

A single gasp raced through the crowd as the thief emerged between two guards. The tribal leader’s face fell in shock and grief. The thief was his very own mother, old and frail.

What will he do? The people wondered aloud, a hushed murmur fanning out. Would he uphold the law or would his love for his mother win over it? The people waited, talking quietly collectively holding their breath.

Finally their leader spoke. “My beloved people.” His voice broke. In little more than a whisper he continued, “It is for our safety and our peace. There must be forty lashes; the pain this crime has caused is too great.” With his nod, the guards led his mother forward. One gently removed her robe to expose a bony and crooked back. The appointed man stepped forward and began to unwind the whip.

At the same moment, the leader stepped forward and removed his robe as well, exposing his broad shoulders, seasoned and solid. Tenderly, he wrapped his arms around his dear mother, shielding her body with his own.

He whispered gently against her cheek as his tears blended with hers. He nodded once more, and the whip came down again and again.

A single moment, yet in it love and justice found an eternal harmony.

-John MacArthur, retold by Casandra Lindell in *More Stories for the Heart*, compiled by Alice Gray, 1997.