

PSALM 82

This psalm is calculated for the meridian of princes' courts and courts of justice, not in Israel only, but in other nations; yet it was probably penned primarily for the use of the magistrates of Israel, the great Sanhedrim, and their other elders who were in places of power, and perhaps by David's direction. This psalm is designed to make kings wise, and "to instruct the judges of the earth" (as 2 and 10), to tell them their duty as (~~10B~~ 2 Samuel 23:3), and to tell them of their faults as 58:1. We have here,

I. The dignity of magistracy and its dependence upon God (v. 1).

II. The duty of magistrates (v. 3, 4).

III. The degeneracy of bad magistrates and the mischief they do (v. 2, 5).

IV. Their doom read (v. 6, 7).

V. The desire and prayer of all good people that the kingdom of God may be set up more and more (v. 8). Though magistrates may most closely apply this psalm to themselves, yet we may any of us sing it with understanding when we give glory to God, in singing it, as presiding in all public affairs, providing for the protection of injured innocency, and ready to punish the most powerful injustice, and when we comfort ourselves with a belief of his present government and with the hopes of his future judgment.

~~10B~~ PSALM 82:1-5

THE DUTY OF MAGISTRATES

A psalm of Asaph.

We have here,

I. God's supreme presidency and power in all councils and courts asserted and laid down, as a great truth necessary to be believed both by princes and subjects (v. 1): *God stands, as chief director, in the congregation of*

the mighty, the mighty One, *in coetu fortis* — *in the councils of the prince*, the supreme magistrate, and he judges among the gods, the inferior magistrates; both the legislative and the executive power of princes is under his eye and his hand. Observe here,

1. The power and honour of magistrates; they are the *mighty*. They are so in authority, for the public good (it is a great power that they are entrusted with), and they ought to be so in wisdom and courage. They are, in the Hebrew dialect, called *gods*; the same word is used for these subordinate governors that is used for the sovereign ruler of the world. They are *elohim*. Angels are so called both because they are great in power and might and because God is pleased to make use of their service in the government of this lower world; and magistrates in an inferior capacity are likewise the ministers of his providence in general, for the keeping up of order and peace in human societies, and particularly of his justice and goodness in punishing evil-doers and protecting those that do well. Good magistrates, who answer the ends of magistracy, are as God; some of his honour is put upon them; they are his vicegerents, and great blessings to any people. *A divine sentence is in the lips of the king*, ^{<360>}Proverbs 16:10. But, as *roaring lions and ranging bears*, so are *wicked rulers over the poor people*, ^{<385>}Proverbs 28:15.

2. A good form and constitution of government intimated, and that is a mixed monarchy like ours; here is the might one, the sovereign, and here is his congregation, his privy-council, his parliament, his bench of judges, who are called the *gods*.

3. God's incontestable sovereignty maintained in and over all the congregations of the mighty. *God stands*, he *judges among them*; they have their power from him and are accountable to him. *By him kings reign*. He is present at all their debates, and inspects all they say and do, and what is said and done amiss will be called over again, and they reckoned with for their mal-administrations. God has their hearts in his hands, and their tongues too, and he directs them *which way soever he will*, ^{<371>}Proverbs 21:1. So that he has a negative voice in all their resolves, and his counsels shall stand, whatever devices are in men's hearts. He makes what use he pleases of them, and serves his own purposes and designs by them; though their hearts little think so, ^{<307>}Isaiah 10:7. Let magistrates consider this and be awed by it; God is with them in the judgment, ^{<496>}2 Chronicles 19:6; ^{<317>}Deuteronomy 1:17. Let subjects

consider this and be comforted with it; for good princes and good judges, who mean well, are under a divine direction, and bad ones, who mean ever so ill, are under a divine restraint.

II. A charge given to all magistrates to do good with their power, as they will answer it to him by whom they are entrusted with it, v. 3, 4.

1. They are to be the protectors of those who lie exposed to injury and the patrons of those who want advice and assistance: *Defend the poor*, who have no money wherewith to make friends or fee counsel, *and the fatherless*, who, while they are young and unable to help themselves, have lost those who would have been the guides of their youth. Magistrates, as they must be fathers to their country in general, so particularly to those in it who are fatherless. Are they called *gods*? Herein they must be followers of him, they must be *fathers of the fatherless*. Job was so, ~~READ~~ Job 29:12.

2. They are to administer justice impartially, and do *right to the afflicted and needy*, who, being weak and helpless, have often wrongs done them; and will be in danger of losing all if magistrates do not, *ex officio* — *officially*, interpose for their relief. If a poor man has an honest cause, his poverty must be no prejudice to his cause, how great and powerful soever those are that contend with him.

3. They are to rescue those who have already fallen into the hands of oppressors and deliver them. (v. 4): *Rid them out of the hand of the wicked. Avenge them of their adversary*, ~~READ~~ Luke 18:3. These are clients whom there is nothing to be got by, no pay for serving them, no interest by obliging them; yet these are those whom judges and magistrates must concern themselves for, whose comfort they must consult and whose cause they must espouse.

III. A charge drawn up against bad magistrates, who neglect their duty and abuse their power, forgetting that God standeth among them, v. 2, 5. Observe,

1. What the sin is they are here charged with; they *judge unjustly*, contrary to the rules of equity and the dictates of their consciences, giving judgment against those who have right on their side, out of malice and ill-will, or for those who have an unrighteous cause, out of favour and partial affection. To do unjustly is bad, but to judge unjustly is much worse, because it is doing wrong under colour of right; against such acts of injustice there is

least fence for the injured and by them encouragement is given to the injurious. It was as great an evil as any Solomon saw under the sun when he observed *the place of judgment, that iniquity was there*, ^{<2186>}Ecclesiastes 3:16; ^{<2187>}Isaiah 5:7. They not only accepted the persons of the rich because they were rich, though that is bad enough, but (which is much worse) they *accepted the persons of the wicked* because they were wicked; they not only countenanced them in their wickedness, but loved them the better for it, and fell in with their interests. Woe unto thee, O land! when thy judges are such as these.

2. What was the cause of this sin. They were told plainly enough that it was their office and duty to protect and deliver the poor; it was many a time given them in charge; yet they judge unjustly, for *they know not, neither will they understand*. They do not care to hear their duty; they will not take pains to study it; they have no desire to take things right, but are governed by interest, not by reason or justice. *A gift in secret blinds their eyes*. They know not because they will not understand. None so blind as those that will not see. They have baffled their own consciences, and so they walk on in darkness, not knowing nor caring what they do nor whither they go. Those that walk on in darkness are walking on to everlasting darkness.

3. What were the consequences of this sin: *All the foundations of the earth (or of the land) are out of course*. When justice is perverted what good can be expected? *The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved*, as the psalmist speaks in a like case, ^{<973>}Psalms 75:3. The miscarriages of public persons are public mischiefs.

^{<9826>}PSALM 82:6-8

THE DUTY OF MAGISTRATES

We have here,

I. Earthly gods abased and brought down, v. 6, 7. The dignity of their character is acknowledged (v. 6): *I have said, You are gods*. They have been honoured with the name and title of gods. God himself called them so in the statute against treasonable words ^{<1228>}Exodus 22:28, *Thou shalt not revile the gods*. And, if they have this style from the fountain of

honour, who can dispute it? But what is man, that he should be thus magnified? He called them *gods* because *unto them the word of God came*, so our Saviour expounds it (^{491B}John 10:35); they had a commission from God, and were delegated and appointed by him to be the shields of the earth, the conservators of the public peace, and revengers to execute wrath upon those that disturb it, ^{490B}Romans 13:4. All of them are in this sense *children of the Most High*. God has put some of his honour upon them, and employs them in his providential government of the world, as David made his sons chief rulers. Or, “Because *I said, You are gods*, you have carried the honour further than was intended and have imagined yourselves to be *the children of the Most High*,” as the king of Babylon (^{294A}Isaiah 14:14), *I will be like the Most High*, and the king of Tyre (^{292B}Ezekiel 28:2), *Thou hast set thy heart as the heart of God*. It is a hard thing for men to have so much honour put upon them by the hand of God, and so much honour paid them, as ought to be by the children of men, and not to be proud of it and puffed up with it, and so to think of themselves above what is meet. But here follows a mortifying consideration: *You shall die like men*. This may be taken either,

1. As the punishment of bad magistrates, such as judged unjustly, and by their misrule put the *foundations of the earth out of course*. God will reckon with them, and will cut them off in the midst of their pomp and prosperity; they shall die like other wicked men, *and fall like one of the heathen princes* (and their being Israelites shall not secure them anymore than their being judges) or like one of the angels that sinned, or like one of the giants of the old world. Compare this with that which Elihu observed concerning the mighty oppressors in his time. ^{493B}Job 34:26, *He striketh them as wicked men in the open sight of others*. Let those that abuse their power know that God will take both it and their lives from them; for wherein they deal proudly he will *show himself above them*. Or,

2. As the period of the glory of all magistrates in this world. Let them not be puffed up with their honour nor neglect their work, but let the consideration of their mortality be both mortifying to their pride and quickening to their duty. “You are called gods, but you have no patent for immortality; *you shall die like men*, like common men; and *like one of them, you, O princes! shall fall*.” Note, Kings and princes, all the judges of the earth, though they are gods to us, are men to God, and shall die like men, and all their honour shall be laid in the dust. *Mors scepra ligonibus aequat* — *Death mingles sceptres with spades*.

II. The God of heaven exalted and raised high, v. 8. The psalmist finds it to little purpose to reason with these proud oppressors; they turned a deaf ear to all he said and walked on in darkness; and therefore he looks up to God, appeals to him, and begs of him *to take unto himself his great power: Arise, O God! judge the earth;* and, when he prays that he would do it, he believes that he will do it: *Thou shalt inherit all nations.* This has respect,

1. To the kingdom of providence. God governs the world, sets up and puts down whom he pleases; he inherits all nations, has an absolute dominion over them, to dispose of them as a man does of his inheritance. This we are to believe and to comfort ourselves with, that the earth is not given so much *into the hands of the wicked*, the wicked rulers, as we are tempted to think it is, ^{<K12>}Job 9:24. But God has reserved the power to himself and overrules them. In this faith we must pray, “*Arise, O God! judge the earth*, appear against those that judge unjustly, and set shepherds over thy people after thy own heart.” There is a righteous God to whom we may have recourse, and on whom we may depend for the effectual relief of all that find themselves aggrieved by unjust judges.

2. To the kingdom of the Messiah. It is a prayer for the hastening of that, that Christ would come, who is to judge the earth, and that promise is pleaded, that God shall *give him the heathen for his inheritance.* Thou, O Christ! shalt *inherit all nations*, and be the governor over them, ^{<H13>}Psalms 2:8; 22:28. Let the second coming of Christ set to-rights all these disorders. There are two words with which we may comfort ourselves and one another in reference to the mismanagements of power among men: one is ^{<6916>}Revelation 19:6, *Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth;* the other is ^{<6221>}Revelation 22:20, *Surely, I come quickly.*