

“Arise, O God, Judge the Earth”

Psalm 82

The superscription gives us only a brief note: “A Psalm of Asaph.” It tells us whose collection this psalm belongs to, but it does not tell us the historical situation behind it so no speculation will be made.

This psalm is a shorter one, but it carries important truths. It opens in a courtroom setting, with God Himself standing in judgment. From there, the psalm exposes the evil of unjust rule, the neglect of the weak, and the disorder that follows when truth and justice are abandoned. It ends, not with a rebuke, but with a prayer — that God would arise and judge the earth. In a world where human judgment so often fails, this psalm reminds us that the Lord is still the righteous Judge.

I. THE SCENE OF JUDGMENT (V. 1)

A. God stands forth in authority

“God standeth”

1. The idea of the verb is that He rises to act, indicating He is both ready to act and will act in His time.
2. The thought is not that God was just now noticing the injustice, but that He now stands forth in judicial authority.
3. The Judge of all the earth is not to be seen as being summoned — He is already present. Before anyone else is addressed, God is seen standing.

4. The wicked may imagine that no one sees, and the oppressed may fear that no one cares, but this first phrase of the psalm declares that God has taken His place in the matter.

B. God stands above every lesser authority

"In the congregation of the mighty..."

1. This phrase (בְּעֵדוּת־אֱלֹהִים) is literally, "the assembly of God."
2. It describes an assembly under God's authority. It is a gathered company in which God is the supreme One. The stress on this verse is not first on who the others are, but on the fact that God stands over them and judges them.
3. All lesser powers answer to Him.

C. God judges those who judge others

"He judgeth among the gods."

1. The word for *"the gods"* here is *elohim*, the Hebrew name most commonly used for the God of the Bible.
2. It can, however (and does elsewhere in Scripture), refer to false gods, rulers, or supernatural beings, dependent on context.
3. Here, it most naturally refers to human judges/rulers acting in delegated authority.
 - a) The duties in verses 2-4 are judicial and social.
 - b) Verse 7 says, *"But ye shall die like men."* The psalmist is saying that though you bear a lofty

title and occupy a high office, you are still mortal and will fall under judgment.

- c) This understanding of the “*gods*” being judges is seen in Exodus 21:6 and 22:8-9, where the Hebrew “*elohim*” is understood in connection with judges.

Exodus 21:6

⁶ Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever.

Exodus 22:8

⁸ If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges, to see whether he have put his hand unto his neighbour's goods.

- d) This is how Jesus uses verse 6 in John 10:34-36.

John 10:34-36

³⁴ Jesus answered them, *Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?* ³⁵ If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; ³⁶ Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?

4. They are called “*gods*,” not by nature, but by office and accountability. In Scripture, rulers can sometimes be described in exalted terms because they represent God's authority in judgment. That is especially important here because the Lord is rebuking them for failing in that entrusted role.

II. THE SIN OF INJUSTICE (vv. 2-4)

A. Their corruption condemned (v. 2)

This is a sharp rebuke. The phrase *"How long"* shows that this is not an isolated failure — It is ongoing. God is confronting a pattern of injustice.

1. The persistence of their sin — *"How long..."* — this question is often used in Scripture when evil has gone on long enough and divine intervention is near.

2. The perversion of their office — *"will ye judge unjustly"*

This is especially grievous because these are people entrusted with judgment.

3. The partiality of their judgment — *"and accept the persons of the wicked"*

This phrase has the idea of showing regard for outward status, influence, position, power, or advantage rather than judging according to truth and righteousness.

4. The weight of the pause — *"Selah"*

Before the Lord goes on to say what they ought to have done, He first lets the evil of what they are doing stand in full view.

B. Their calling commanded (vv. 3-4)

1. They were to defend the helpless — *"Defend the poor and fatherless"*

a) This speaks of those who cannot defend themselves or secure favorable treatment against

the oppressors.

- b) This does not mean favoritism toward the poor merely because they are poor. It means that justice must not be denied to them because they are weak. Their lack of status must not become the reason they are abused or neglected.

2. They were to administer true justice — *"do justice to the afflicted and needy"*

- a) To *"do justice"* means to judge rightly, uphold what is right, and to ensure that the afflicted are not crushed by corrupt power.
- b) The poor (afflicted) and needy (destitute) are often those who suffer most when authorities are unjust. So, God measures rulers in part by how they treat those who cannot help themselves.

3. They were to rescue the oppressed (v. 4)

- a) This verse uses a different word for *"needy"* than verse 3. This refers to the lowest class of people in the country.
- b) Justice is not only deciding law; it is intervening against oppression.

III. THE SPREAD OF DARKNESS (V. 5)

This verse explains why the injustice of verses 2-4 is so serious. When those entrusted with truth and justice fail, the damage spreads.

A. Their blindness declared

"They know not, neither will they understand"

- 1. *"They know not"* — points to a lack of moral and spiritual perception. They do not truly grasp

justice as they should.

2. *"Neither will they understand"* — this suggests refusal. They are not simply unable; they are unwilling.
3. These rulers were in positions where they ought to have had understanding. They were responsible to know better, yet they neither know nor seek to understand.

In other words, they were blind to truth, and worse still, they were settled in that blindness.

B. Their darkness described

"They walk on in darkness"

1. This is the result of the blindness just mentioned. It's because they don't know and won't understand that they continue in darkness.
2. The phrase *"walk on"* (וַתֵּלֶכְוּ) suggests a continuing course of life and conduct.
3. Darkness in Scripture often speaks of moral confusion, spiritual blindness, separation from truth, wickedness in practice.
4. These leaders were not walking in the light of God's truth.

C. Their disorder displayed

"All the foundations of the earth are out of course"

1. The result of corrupt rule is not confined to the rulers themselves. It affects the whole order of society.

2. The "*foundations of the earth*" here most likely does not mean the physical creation, but the moral and social foundations upon which human life rests — justice, order, truth, righteousness, stability.

"Justice is at the head of all the institutions in a well-regulated state: when that gets poisoned or perverted, every evil, political and domestic, must prevail; even religion itself ceases to have any influence." (Clarke)

3. The phrase "*are out of course*" carries the idea of being shaken, moved, or thrown out of place. What should be firm has become unstable; what should support the life of a people has been disturbed.

IV. THE SENTENCE OF DEATH (VV. 6-7)

In verses 2–4 God exposed their injustice. In verse 5 He declared their blindness and the disorder it had produced. Now in these verses He pronounces sentence.

A. Their dignity acknowledged (v. 6)

1. Their exalted title — "*Ye are gods*"
 - a) This does not mean they were divine by nature. Rather, they are spoken of in exalted terms because they occupied positions of delegated authority under God.
 - b) That is why their corruption is so serious. They were not ordinary men in an ordinary role. They were men entrusted with a public trust under the God of heaven.
2. Their privileged standing — "*and all of you are*

children of the most High"

To be called "*children of the most High*" in this text is to be understood as those who stood under His authority and were meant to reflect His rule in a particular sphere.

B. Their death announced (v. 7)

"But" — however lofty their title, they will not escape judgment.

1. Their mortality declared — "*ye shall die like men*"
2. Their downfall described — "*and fall like one of the princes*"
 - a) "*Fall*" adds more than simple death. It indicates collapse, overthrow, or humiliation.
 - b) "*Like one of the princes*" points to the fall of mighty rulers.
3. Their accountability confirmed — rank does not remove judgment. In other words, there will be no exceptions.

V. THE SUMMONS TO GOD (v. 8)

The psalm closes, not with further explanation, but with prayer. After the scene of judgment, the exposure of injustice, the spread of darkness, and the sentence of death, the final word is a cry for God to act universally and finally.

A. The plea for God's intervention

1. A call for divine action — "*Arise, O God*"

Not that He was inactive, but this is biblical

language asking God to manifest His rule openly and decisively.

2. A call for divine justice — *"judge the earth"*

Earthly judges have failed; the weak have not been defended; darkness has spread; and the foundations have been shaken. So, the psalmist turns away from confidence in man and appeals directly to God.

B. The confidence in God's dominion

1. His right over the nations — *"thou shalt inherit all nations"*

Men may rule for a time; princes may rise and fall; judges may corrupt justice; but the earth and its nations ultimately belong to God.

2. His rule goes beyond all human rulers.

3. His reign is certain and universal.

Conclusion:

This psalm shows us that earthly judges may fail, but God never will. Authority may be abused, justice may be corrupted, and the foundations may seem shaken, but the Lord is still on the throne, and all nations belong to Him. Because of this, the answer to the failures of men is not despair, but prayer: "Arise, O God, Judge the earth."