

Psalm 82

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[0 : 00] So this morning, we're continuing, as I mentioned, in our summer psalms. And this morning, the psalm that we're looking at, you may know that there's different categories of psalms. Some that are all about praising God. Some that are all about thanksgiving. This morning's psalm is really a lament.

It's a psalm of when we don't know what's going on, and we cry out to God about something that is bothering us.

And there's lots of psalms of lament in the book of psalms. This one, this psalm, is really all about leadership in God's people.

It could be leadership on a national level throughout the world, but I think it's more pertinent to think that it's about leadership within God's people.

[0 : 59] And so for us, that means leadership within the church, as we'll see. But really, the question that I want us to ask is, that I want us to think of, what is it that makes leadership or a church to drift?

What is it that makes a leadership and therefore the direction or the agenda of a church to go awry? I want to suggest to you that the reason that a church can drift is ultimately because of fear.

It is ultimately because of fear. It's when anxieties creep in, and we all get anxieties and anxious about things, but it's when anxieties creep in, and we don't take them to God, that leadership begin to ask questions, not based on what God says, but on perceptions of human, but human perceptions of reality that cause bad decisions, and it affects the way that a church is, that a leader makes decisions, and that a church is wrong.

What if we spend money, and it doesn't bear any fruit? Maybe we should hold on to our money so that it doesn't run out.

It is fear. It is an anxiety. What if we run out of money? Let's not spend in it. What if we preach the gospel, and it offends people, and we get a bad name in the community?

[2 : 32] Let's say, let's not talk about sin or judgment. What if people come to the church who aren't like us, and it changes the atmosphere?

Let's not get involved with social groups that are different to us. What if the church gets too big, and we lose the family intimate connection that we have, and that feeling of family and community seems to disappear, because not everyone knows each other?

What if there's conflict? What if? You could fill in the blank with whatever it is that you might fear.

When we start with what if, and we make a decision to negate the perceived anxiety from happening, it leads to bad decisions.

Bad leadership, and ultimately, a church will drift, if that is the way that it goes, that it takes its anxieties and negates them with human, worldly wisdom, rather than taking them to God in prayer, and hearing what He has to say about them.

[3 : 41] The only way to do that is to bring our decisions to the living God, by bringing our anxieties to Him in prayer, and hearing Him speak to them in His Word.

Psalm 82, as I mentioned, is a lament that addresses when bad leadership has happened. It's a community lament that would have been sung by the assembly, it says, the congregation, about what the leadership should be doing.

And so as we consider that for ancient Israel, about what they should be doing, we'll think about how that applies in today's church. And really, it should drive us to think about that and lament about where we've seen perhaps bad leadership and hopefully pray for ourselves that it doesn't happen that we don't do this, that I don't do this.

Psalms are interesting things to preach because it is poetic language, and often they are prayers and songs, and they're designed and written to be felt. Which is, how do you...

So, with everything that I'm trying to say, I'm praying and I hope that you feel this. I hope this is not just information to you about what God is saying, but I hope that you feel the emotion in this psalm because a lament is filled with sorrow and pleading to God for what is happening.

[5 : 18] Before we dive into this passage, though, I just want to provide a little bit of context, set the stage, so to speak, to help us understand a little bit about what's going on in the psalm.

Because there is some elements of it which perhaps might be confusing. We see in verse 1, if you look with me or turn in your Bibles or on your phone, we read, God presides in the great assembly. He renders judgment among the gods. The picture is poetic language, so there's a lot of metaphors and pictures used to explain real truths. The picture is of God holding counsel with other, and then we've got it in brackets, with other gods.

And what happens in the psalm is God is dishing out judgment on the counsel, on the gods. Now, just as an aside, this is important.

The key thing to understand, this psalm, is who does the psalmist, Asaph, we read, mean when he speaks about gods? Now, there is a debate about who the gods are.

[6 : 24] And to be honest, it is one that is up for grabs. There's fine reasons to think on both. Some people think that the gods are angelic, supernatural beings.

Some people think it's false gods, gods from other nations, the gods that we read about, the surrounding nations. And there's really good reasons that you could go with that.

I don't agree with either of those. I think that the gods are human leaders. And the term is, in one sense, slightly ironic, because the bad leaders have set themselves up as gods who have authority. That is really important. Now, just we define what he means by gods because it changes the way you read the whole psalm. So that is what I'm talking about. When it says gods, I mean human leaders.

The other thing, who is Asaph? It's also really important. Asaph is put in charge by David of the songs that were sung in the sanctuary. Now, we don't know if Asaph wrote these psalms himself or if he copied them from David.

[7 : 32] And also, we don't know which leaders he's referring to. But the last thing, the final thing to say, just as a bit of context, is that the bulk of the psalm, which is quite unusual for the psalms, is a speech not from the psalmist, but God speaking himself.

It is God, there is a council with gods, human leaders, and God is speaking to the council. He's pronouncing judgment on those leaders. It is only the last verse, verse 8, where the psalmist actually speaks and turns it to a prayer.

Verse 2 to 7 is God speaking to those leaders. And what we see is that he's reproving and rebuking them for how they should lead, which is where we're going to go for our first point. God reproves his leaders.

From verse 2, this is to the gods, the leaders he's put in charge. This is God speaking to them. He says to his leaders, 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. It is an indictment on them that they've failed to lose.

[8 : 48] Instead of defending the weak and the fatherless, the orphan, the poor and the oppressed, the marginalized, they have looked after those with influence, those who go about their ways oppressing with corrupt means, trampling on the forgotten nobodies.

And God is asking them, how long? How long are you going to continue doing this? How long will you see that this is not my way? Justice and equality are hallmarks, attributes of God's character. There is no partiality in God. Every single person in the whole of history is made in God's image and has human dignity given to them by God because they bear his image.

We see that in Genesis 1. When the living God looks at humanity, he sees us all the same. Yes, we have different gifts and skills and positions and roles.

But those roles and skills, they don't elevate our status when we're stood before him. Everyone is born with the same dignity and status given by God. Whether you're born with a silver spoon in your mouth or you're from a shanty town in South America, from Aberdeen to Athens, Paris to Peru, every single person, every single person is born with the same dignity and status given by God

because they bear his image.

[10:11] This is not the view that everyone has. This is not the view that even we have maybe. When we look at people, do we see people as equal?

I remember a few years, well, you might remember when you were little, I remember watching Looney Tunes and if someone came across somebody that had loads of money, you'd see their eyes like turning to dollar signs and start going round as they looked at someone or an opportunity where there was money.

That's how people, that's in our world, that is how people judge people. Who has the better social status? Who is worth talking to? Who can scratch my back?

That is how people, there is a judgment that goes on in each of us still when we meet people.

Sometimes it's unconscious bias that we don't even realize we're doing.

God has none of that. He looks on every single person the same. God's leaders, God's leaders are to see people, look at people as they truly are, how He sees them.

[11:21] It means that in church, whoever walks through those doors should be treated exactly the same. Whether it's an investment banker in an Armani suit or someone who walks through with all his possessions who's walked straight in off the street, we need to treat exactly the same.

I'm just going to turn to James chapter 2. Let me find it. James 2.

We read, Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.

If you saw special attention to the man wearing fine clothes, and say, here's a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, you stand there or sit on the floor by my feet. Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

We're not to be like that. We're to look at everyone the same way God looks at everyone, not showing partiality, but looking at people in the same way that He sees them in the image of God.

[12:48] As the image of God. And just to say, that also works both ways, that equally, there's no reverse snobbery in Him either.

He doesn't turn up His nose at those who have money either. Because they bear His image as well. We could easily assume that someone really poor might need our help because we can see it, but the rich investment banker, he has it all together.

Just because someone has money doesn't mean we should assume that they have it all together and neglect their spiritual condition because they're equally spiritually poor and been spiritually oppressed.

The living God, the living God, put those, put those gods in leadership positions to execute justice as He would. To represent Him, to look at all people equally in need of mercy and grace.

Physically, emotionally, and spiritually. You see the verbs that we've read, that we see in the psalm. Defend, uphold, rescue, deliver. And I take it to mean that when it comes to church, those four things means holistically doing that for all people.

[14:06] Physically, emotionally, and of course, most importantly, spiritually. But if we neglect one of those aspects, we neglect part of who they are as a person. And depending on how we think, we will show partiality to those that fit our criteria and not offer the justice that God wants us to offer.

In the church, I think this is quite a recent thing. There might be elements of it historically, but very recently, maybe within the past 20 or 30 years, this is not what the church has done.

And often, you get churches falling into one camp. Either they're a church that is all about offering physical, social support, social justice causes and putting all their energy into that, but are not as clear on spiritual matters.

Or, you get ones that are the other way that fought us exclusively on spiritual matters, which is fantastic. We preach the gospel, but not consider the situations that people find themselves in.

I think, oh, we'll leave that to those other churches or to Oxfam. The history of the free church is not like that. The history of the free church started with a guy called, one of the guys who started it with the founding members, Thomas Chalmers.

[15:32] He preached the gospel, He spoke of repentance and faith, that there's no salvation but in the cross of Christ. And of course, we maintain that. But equally, He set up orphanages, He set up schools across Glasgow, He cared for those who had nothing and gave way generously to provide for the poorest of the poor.

And of course, isn't that what Jesus was like? Of course it was. You think how much He cared for people. He fed 5,000 people. He healed people from sickness and disease.

He allowed the women and the children, the marginalized in society, access to Him when the disciples told them to go away. But He wasn't just about that.

He also told them, unless you become like a child, you'll never enter the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is near. Repent and believe the good news.

Yes, Jesus cares for your spiritual condition. Absolutely. But He also cares about the complexities and the difficulties we face.

[16:35] It matters to Him. Your sin matters to Him. He wants you to repent. But He also cares about your suffering. He's the perfect leader. He's the perfect leader.

He's the one we looked at. The chief shepherd who leads His sheep. And He appoints under-shepherds to follow Him in how they lead His sheep.

Not our sheep, His sheep. When we see leadership that doesn't represent this, we should be men.

We should be men. Why is this, why is this allowed to happen? Why are you allowing this, Lord? Leaders that don't follow after your example.

Okay. So God reproves His leaders. Secondly, God humbles His leaders in verse 5-7. In verse 5-7, we see God speaking of the leaders and what they are when they act like this.

[17:39] See verse 5. What does He say about them? He says, they know nothing. They understand nothing. They walk about in darkness. All the foundations of the earth are shaken.

You see how those two statements are saying the same thing? That walking in darkness is equal, is the same as having no understanding. It is the opposite to having the knowledge and walking in the light.

Being able to have the wisdom, being given the wisdom of what to do and how to execute God's way. The conclusion we must make is that when leaders operate in this manner, they don't do it with God's wisdom, but they do it with their own.

Looking to the manner in the way the world operates and adjusting it accordingly. Verse 6, God says to them, because they do it with human wisdom, I said, you are God's.

You are all sons of the Most High. But then He brings them down and shows them what will happen. You will die like mere mortals. You will fall like every other ruler.

[18:47] God gave them a position to execute His justice in the right way, but they look to themselves and the power has gone to their heads. It is ironic. They were supposed to represent God, but in being given that position, have acted as equal to Him, looking to themselves and their own wisdom to apply their own agenda.

The word for mortals there is actually the word Adam, or sometimes the word Adam is used as men or man. They think, they are going to die like mere Adam, as mere men.

Perhaps they thought they were all touchable, but we all enter the world and leave it in the same way. Remember, the very best of men are men for the very best.

all leaders are able to make errors. But that's not really the point. The point isn't about making mistakes. The point is what you do when you make them.

We all make mistakes. The point is what you do when you make them. Do you take your anxieties to God? Do you take your mistakes to God? Humility.

[20:00] Humility is actually the answer we're really looking for. Leaders will make mistakes, of course. I know that I'm going to. I probably already have. Recognizing that God, we need to, recognizing that God is God and we are not.

And it is taking, it is humility, it is taking the place of a servant. A servant doesn't give orders to his master, but takes orders from him. We've seen enough period dramas, I suppose, to know what that does.

I don't know if you've watched down to Nabi, but we know what that's like, don't we? That the servant isn't the one who asks the master, it's the master who tells the servant what to do. And if we were looking, if we wanted to see this any clearer, the pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry where he models humility when he washes the disciples' feet.

A job for the lowest people in society. You remember what he says after he's washed the disciples' feet? That job was for the lowest of the low. It wasn't like what we think of today.

People would, their feet would have been covered in whatever was on the road. Muck, from animals, all sorts. It was the lowest of the low. Nobody would do that.

[21 : 17] And he's the king. And he says afterwards to them, he says, I have set you an example that you should do as I have done. Very truly, I say to you, no servant is greater than his master.

humility. Humility is putting the interest of others above yourself. That is humility. We talked about fear earlier, wrong decisions, unwise decisions come when we fear and act to negate the fear by compromise.

Instead of giving away money, hoarding it. Instead of looking out for the poor, looking to attract rich members. or instead not wanting people with money because of what that might look like.

Humility is looking for their best interest. Looking for their interest above your own. That is humility. Humility is putting the need of salvation, the need of salvation as more important than your own rejection or feeling awkward.

or what people might say about you behind your back. That is humility. Putting their best interests as more important than your own. When we make decisions without involving God, we lack humility because we put ourselves in his place and leave it out the picture.

[22 : 41] And we should lament for our church and maybe lament when we know we've thought like that as well and sing this song and prayer to one another and to ourselves. But hallelujah, praise God that the chief shepherd Jesus Christ is the Lord of us.

Hallelujah, that he is the leader, the king we need. You see, Jesus didn't walk in darkness because he's the light of the world. He understands perfectly the world he created and has unlimited knowledge.

God might have said ironically to the leaders, you are God's. But Jesus Christ is God. And whilst he said to his leaders, you are called sons of the Most High, he said to Jesus Christ, you are my beloved son and with you I'm well pleased.

These gods, these gods, these gods would die like mere Adam and so would Jesus Christ. Would die like a mere man. In fact, worse than a mere man, he would die a shameful death as a cursed man.

So that all these men, these leaders, those who've made a mess and walked in ignorance might actually become true sons of God, the Father, by being adopted through the precious blood of the Son.

[24 : 01] Isn't that astounding once again that I include myself in this and at some point where bad decisions have been made because we feared the what-ifs and put the bad plans into place, yet the Lord Jesus who was God chose willingly to come and experience the death of a mortal, a man, so that we could walk free that the sins of bad leadership would be covered by his grace.

But what God requires in his leaders is humility to look at him and look at ourselves with true honesty when we've messed up.

but along comes Jesus who humbled himself to death and a cross to save those who've made a mess, to save those who've overlooked the oppressed and looked out for themselves.

How we need to lament for when God's leaders are proud and wreak havoc, but oh, how much do we need to rejoice that the true king, the true leader we have is Jesus Christ.

Okay, finally, God will judge. Comes in our final verse, verse 8, God will judge.

[25 : 18] The final verse finishes with a prayer in response to the bad leadership that they've been singing about. Verse 8, Rise up, O God, judge the earth for all the nations are your inheritance.

That last line is a prayer that God replaces bad leadership. And there are two ways actually in which the prayer is answered. The first way is that God could judge the earth and indeed his own people by giving them new leaders.

Leaders who would reflect his character. And we know that God does do that in history when God's people, the Israelites, were under the oppression of the Egyptians.

God's people cried out and asked that he would judge the earth. And he raised up a leader, Moses, whom he would work through to do what the psalm says, to defend their cause, to rescue and deliver them.

We see it in the same, in the time of the judges, the Israelites cried out. God sent judges. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, Samson, who judged the oppressors. And God can answer that prayer today.

[26 : 29] If there is and has been bad leadership, we can ask God to judge the earth and send leaders who reflect him in how they lead his people. Jesus himself tells us to pray a very similar prayer for good gospel workers.

Matthew 9, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. It is a prayer to send leaders that will come and in preaching the gospel, the gospel itself is judging people.

It's telling people to turn to him. That's what we need for our churches. And I'm not being in any way kind of clannish about this.

I don't just mean the free church. I mean all churches of God's followers to be filled with good, godly leaders who care about people spiritually, emotionally and physically who are humble, who look to Jesus Christ, who are servants, servant judges, whatever you want to call them, servant leaders, proclaiming that repentance and faith and the need to follow Jesus Christ, leaders who are led by Jesus, leaders that are led by Jesus Christ.

So that's the first way that we want God to answer that prayer. Rise up God and fill this nation with godly men and women who will proclaim the gospel, who will love people in the same way Jesus did, who will love people spiritually, who will provide for their needs too, that will see them holistically as people that need caring for and will preach the gospel without fear, that will take their anxieties to him.

[28 : 18] But the second way that God will answer that prayer is when he returns in the person of his son to judge the earth. Because the truth is, the truth is, the only God who can truly, eternally, defend truly and eternally, obtain the rights, rescue forever and deliver from sin and death from our corrupt world, from illness and pain and suffering is the Lord Almighty, it is Jesus Christ.

There is no other name. While we aspire to represent Jesus faithfully, there is only one name by which we can be saved, the name that is above every name.

It is entirely right that we remind ourselves that these are the promises that we can hold Jesus to. We hold him to them and therefore we know that when we pray them back to him, we can be assured that he is going to answer.

He will return to judge the church, he will return to judge the earth, sin, death and the world will be judged, there will be no stone left unturned, no sin will remain, he will judge the earth and he will reign forever and that is our great hope.

Romans 8 says, hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. We hope, we wait for it patiently.

[29 : 42] We know that one day all misery will be over forever. That every time you've been mistreated, sinned against will be dealt with, but everything that you've done to anyone else is already paid for.

And we can hold Jesus to it. We can hold Jesus to it. Did you see the reason why we can hold Jesus to it? For all the nations are your inheritance.

The reason Jesus will judge his earth, the earth, his creation is because he will receive the earth, all the nations for himself. It belongs to him.

He's going to receive that. I don't know, in families, you often get, particularly if a family member dies and they've got a lot of money, who will inherit what can cause a great lot of tension and fighting, can't it?

Who will receive the inheritance? Especially if there's a lot of money at stake. But here there's no fighting. There's no fighting.

[30 : 45] This is what Jesus receives as his own. And it's because of his death. It's actually because of his obedience to be humbled to death that he is raised and exalted and receives the inheritance for himself, the nations to his own.

We pray this prayer because we appeal to his promises. Judge the earth because you'll receive it as your own. Cleanse the earth so the nations are a worthy, fitting inheritance for you to receive.

In Psalm 2, God speaking to Jesus, which is repeated as it is baptism, you are my son. Today I've become your father. Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth, your possession.

In line with what the son asks the father, we ask the living God to judge the nations because they belong to you. Scotland, Scotland belongs to Jesus Christ.

And so we want him to judge it today and to judge it eternally because he will inherit Scotland for himself. He will inherit Scotland for himself. And so as we come in for landing, we want to be people, we want to be a church.

[32 : 05] We want to be leaders who reflect Jesus Christ. And we lament over the church when we don't see that. We lament where we see leaders wanting their own agenda, anxious because

church's attendance is dwindling and so choose their own way of trying to attract members.

Compromising the message or compromising loving people practically. Lament that leaders are proud and pray for humility.

Pray that we'd realise that leaders who've been put on a pedestal need to be humbled and remember that we are in the hands of the living God and that it is his church.

And that as we heard from Psalm 127 last week that he will build it. We ask God to judge because he will inherit Scotland for himself. He will inherit the nations for himself.

Let me pray. Almighty God, oh do we want, so want your church to be one that reflects you.

[33 : 22] we want, we pray Lord that you would raise up leaders, godly men and women to lead your church. We pray that you would, where there is unhealthy leadership and unhealthy churches, we pray that there would be repentance.

repentance. But we pray that also if there is no repentance, we pray that you'd raise up faithful gospel workers because it's your harvest field, it belongs to you.

These are your sheep that you care for as the chief shepherd. We pray that you'd install under shepherds. We long to see that, Lord Jesus. We pray that you would rise up and judge the earth because the nations belong to you.

And I pray, Lord Jesus, that you'd forgive. Forgive me and forgive us where we've not taken our anxieties to you, but we've tried to sort them out by negating them, we've compromised.

Where we've thought where human wisdom has been the answer, where we've worried about how the message is going to be received and not wanting people to hear it, where we feared rejection and awkwardness in conversations.

[34 : 44] And it's, those anxieties, we've not looked to you as to how we should live. Forgive us, Lord. Change us. Make us bold. Help us change our fear into living trust and faith.

We ask for this. In the name of Christ. Amen.