

Psalm 82
July 11, '10

"HOW LONG?"

CONSIDER THIS LONG LIST OF FAMILIAR NAMES: SPENCER TRACY, GARY COOPER, DEMI MOORE, HUMPHREY BOGART, SAMUEL L. JACKSON, TOM CRUISE, SUSAN HAYWARD, PAUL NEWMAN, JIMMY STEWART, AL PACINO, GREGORY PECK, MERYL STREEP, DUSTIN HOFFMAN, MORGAN FREEMAN, ANTHONY HOPKINS, JULIA ROBERTS, RICHARD GERE, TOM HANKS, JACK NICHOLSON, HENRY FONDA.

IT'S OBVIOUSLY A LIST OF HIGHLY-ACCLAIMED ACTORS.

BUT WHAT ELSE MIGHT THIS GROUP OF HIGHLY-ACCLAIMED ACTORS HAVE IN COMMON?

EVERY ONE OF THEM STARRED IN A MOVIE COURTROOM DRAMA.

THAT'S A PRETTY IMPRESSIVE LIST, ISN'T IT?

AND I THINK IT POINTS OUT THE FACT THAT WE LOVE COURTROOM DRAMAS.

WE LOVE IT IN FILMS. WE LOVE IT IN BOOKS.

WE LOVE IT IN REAL LIFE.

THIS PASSAGE WE'VE JUST READ – THE 82ND PSALM IS, IN ESSENCE, A COURTROOM DRAMA.

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST UNUSUAL OF ALL 150 PSALMS.

IT'S NOT A HAPPY PSALM.

IT'S NOT ONE THAT MAKES YOU WANT TO SING OR SMILE.

IF IT'S PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD, I THINK IT'S REALLY A PSALM THAT MAKES YOU SQUIRM & SWEAT.

LET'S TAKE JUST A FEW MINUTES TO LOOK AT SOME OF THE OBVIOUS QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE HAD AS YOU OPENED YOUR BIBLE THIS WEEK & READ THIS PSALM.

WITHOUT EVEN LOOKING AT THE TEXT OF THE PSALM ITSELF THERE ARE QUESTIONS.

FIRST QUESTION - *"WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY THIS IS 'A PSALM OF ASAPH?'"*

ASAPH WAS A MAN APPOINTED BY DAVID TO SHARE IN LEADING WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE.

HE IS CALLED, IN ONE PLACE IN THE BIBLE, ONE OF THE "LEVITICAL SINGERS."

PSALM 50 & PSALMS 73-83 ARE PSALMS THAT ASAPH COMPOSED.

NEXT QUESTION – *"WHAT'S WITH THIS 'SELAH' THAT I SEE IN PSALMS?"*

WE DON'T KNOW FOR SURE.

IT APPEARS TO BE SOME KIND OF INSTRUCTION, EITHER FOR THE ONE LEADING THE MUSIC OR FOR THE PEOPLE.

IT MEANS SOMETHING ON THE ORDER OF "LIFT UP."

IT COULD MEAN THE MUSIC IS TO BE RAISED AT THIS POINT OR IT COULD MEAN PEOPLE ARE TO RAISE THEIR VOICES OR EVEN THEIR HANDS WHEN THEY SEE THIS WORD.

OKAY, BIGGER QUESTION WITHIN THE PSALM ITSELF.

"WHAT IN THE WORLD DOES IT MEAN WHEN IT SAYS 'YOU ARE GODS?' ISN'T THAT A BIT NEW AGE-ISH?"

IT'S NOT CLEAR WHAT THE PSALMIST MEANS WITH THAT STATEMENT.

IT COULD REFER TO A TIME IN ANCIENT ISRAEL WHEN THERE WAS AN ACCEPTANCE OF OTHER GODS IN THE WORLD – NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH *THE* GOD, BUT SIMPLY AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT THAT OTHER NATIONS & OTHER PEOPLES BELIEVED IN OTHER GODS.

IT COULD BE A REFERENCE TO HEAVENLY BEINGS – ANGELS.

I THINK IT'S MORE LIKELY, THOUGH, A REFERENCE TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL & ISN'T INTENDED TO BE NEW AGE-ISH AT ALL BUT SIMPLY AN UNDERSTANDING THAT FOLLOWERS OF THE ONE TRUE GOD ARE HIS REPRESENTATIVES IN THE WORLD.

WITH THAT BIT OF BACKGROUND, LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT HOW THIS COURTROOM DRAMA UNFOLDS.

WHILE THERE IS NO CERTAINTY ABOUT WHAT ALL OF THIS MEANS, I THINK IT'S HIGHLY LIKELY THAT WE'RE LOOKING AT A DRAMA THAT INVOLVES A NARRATOR WHO INITIALLY SETS THE STAGE & OFFERS COMMENT AFTER GOD HAS SPOKEN.

HE COMMENTS AGAIN AFTER ANOTHER WORD FROM GOD & THEN, IN THE FINAL VERSE, THE CONGREGATION – OR AUDIENCE – OFFERS ITS OWN RESPONSE.

LISTEN TO IT AGAIN.

AND REMEMBER – IT'S NARRATOR, GOD, NARRATOR, GOD – PEOPLE.

(Narrator) GOD HAS TAKEN HIS PLACE IN THE DIVINE COUNCIL; IN THE MIDST OF THE GODS HE HOLDS JUDGMENT.

(God) "HOW LONG WILL YOU JUDGE UNJUSTLY AND SHOW PARTIALITY TO THE WICKED? GIVE JUSTICE TO THE WEAK AND THE ORPHAN; MAINTAIN THE RIGHT OF THE LOWLY AND THE DESTITUTE. RESCUE THE WEAK & THE NEEDY; DELIVER THEM FROM THE HAND OF THE WICKED."

(Narrator) THEY HAVE NEITHER KNOWLEDGE NOR UNDERSTANDING, THEY WALK AROUND IN DARKNESS; ALL THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH ARE SHAKEN.

(God) "I SAY, 'YOU ARE GODS, CHILDREN OF THE MOST HIGH, ALL OF YOU; NEVERTHELESS, YOU SHALL DIE LIKE MORTALS, AND FALL LIKE ANY PRINCE.'"

(People) RISE UP, O GOD, JUDGE THE EARTH; FOR ALL THE NATIONS BELONG TO YOU!

WHAT THE PSALMIST IS TALKING ABOUT HERE IS THE DEMAND FOR JUSTICE FROM GOD.

HE'S TALKING ABOUT THE REQUIREMENT THAT WE HEAR OVER & OVER AGAIN FROM THE PROPHETS TO – AS MICAH SAYS, "*DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS & WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD.*"

LOOK AT THE GOSPEL READING THIS PSALM IS JOINED WITH IN THE LECTIONARY.

IT'S ON THE COVER OF YOUR BULLETIN THIS MORNING – THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN & THE COMMAND TO "*LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.*"

HERE IN THIS PSALM THE COMMAND IS – IN WORDS THE PSALMIST PUTS IN THE MOUTH OF GOD: "*GIVE JUSTICE TO THE WEAK & THE ORPHAN; MAINTAIN THE RIGHT OF THE LOWLY AND THE DESTITUTE. RESCUE THE WEAK & THE NEEDY; DELIVER THEM FROM THE HAND OF THE WICKED.*"

AND BEFORE THAT, GOD ASKS A QUESTION – A PROBING & PROVOCATIVE QUESTION – "*HOW LONG?*"

THIS IS WHERE THE PSALM BECOMES PERSONAL FOR US, DOESN'T IT?

WE CAN READ SO MANY OF THE PSALMS & FIND THEM UPLIFTING & ENCOURAGING.

THIS ONE DOESN'T FEEL LIKE THAT, THOUGH, DOES IT?

AND IT'S BECAUSE OF THAT QUESTION "HOW LONG?"

IT PIERCES US WITH ITS HONESTY.

IT CHALLENGES US WITH ITS STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS.

"HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE BEFORE YOU DO WHAT YOU KNOW YOU'RE CALLED TO DO?"

YOU SEE, I THINK THIS IS WHERE THE QUESTION ABOUT THAT ODD STATEMENT "YOU ARE GODS" COMES IN.

YOU & I HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE RESPONSIBILITY TO SERVE AS GOD'S REPRESENTATIVES IN THIS WORLD.

WE HAVE BEEN CALLED UPON TO ACT ON BEHALF OF THOSE IN NEED.

YOU KNOW THAT'S TRUE, DON'T YOU?

YOU KNOW IT BECAUSE YOU FEEL IT WITHIN EVERY PART OF WHO YOU ARE.

YOU KNOW YOU CARE ABOUT THOSE LESS FORTUNATE.

YOU KNOW YOU AGONIZE OVER THOSE WHO ARE HUNGRY & HOMELESS.

YOU KNOW YOU FEEL THE BURDEN OF ACTING ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO ARE LOST & FIND LIFE SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL.

YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO OFFER HOPE TO THE HOPELESS & A BRIGHT FUTURE TO THOSE WHO SEE NOTHING BUT DARKNESS IN FRONT OF THEM.

THE REASON YOU FEEL THAT IS BECAUSE YOU ARE, IN FACT, AS THE PSALMIST SAYS, "GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE IN THIS WORLD."

YOU CARE & YOU AGONIZE BECAUSE GOD CARES & GOD AGONIZES.

THAT'S WHY THE QUESTION "HOW LONG?" PIERCES YOUR SOUL.

IT PIERCES YOUR SOUL BECAUSE YOU KNOW – DEEP DOWN INSIDE – YOU KNOW THAT YOU'RE NOT FULFILLING YOUR ROLE AS GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE IN THE WORLD AS WELL AS YOU COULD BE – OR EVEN AS WELL AS YOU WANT TO BE.

YOU WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, DON'T YOU?

YOU WANT TO TOUCH THE LIFE OF SOMEONE IN A MEANINGFUL WAY.

YOU WANT YOUR LIFE TO MATTER FOR SOMETHING.

YOU HAVE TWO OPTIONS.

YOU CAN LET THAT QUESTION HANG THERE – UNANSWERED.

YOU CAN KEEP LIVING AS YOU ARE, JUST *THINKING* ABOUT MAKING A DIFFERENCE.

BUT IF YOU JUST KEEP THINKING ABOUT IT, YOU CAN BE ASSURED THAT THE QUESTION WON'T GO AWAY.

IT WON'T GO AWAY BECAUSE THE FACT THAT *YOU ARE GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE IN THIS WORLD* ISN'T GOING TO CHANGE.

THE OTHER OPTION IS TO RESPOND TO THE QUESTION “*HOW LONG?*” BY ANSWERING “*NO LONGER.*”
YOU CAN CHOOSE TO BE WHO YOU REALLY ARE AS GOD’S REPRESENTATIVE IN THE WORLD & TAKE
ACTION.

IN THAT CORRESPONDING LECTIONARY READING – THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN – IT WAS SO
MUCH EASIER TO PASS BY THE WOUNDED MAN ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD.

HAVEN’T YOU BEEN DOING THAT FOR FAR TOO LONG?

AREN’T YOU TIRED OF SAYING “*SOMEDAY I’M GOING TO GET INVOLVED IN SOMETHING THAT HELPS
SOMEONE IN NEED?*”

SOMEDAY IS NEVER.

WHY NOT NOW?

AND PERHAPS WE, AS A CHURCH, NEED TO HEAR GOD ASKING THE QUESTION OF US COLLECTIVELY –
“*HOW LONG?*”

AS GOD’S REPRESENTATIVES IN THIS WORLD, THE QUESTION WILL NEVER GO AWAY.

IT WON’T GO AWAY UNTIL WE FINALLY CHOOSE TO RESPOND TO THE QUESTION, “*HOW LONG?*” BY
ANSWERING “*NO LONGER.*” AMEN.

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