

Psalm 82:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked.

Analysis

Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. This verse intensifies the command of verse 3, moving from defensive justice (defending rights) to active rescue (delivering from oppression). The Hebrew paletu (פָּלֹטּוּ, "deliver") means "to escape, to rescue"—implying active intervention to free someone from danger. The poor and needy aren't merely to be treated fairly in court; they must be rescued from those actively harming them.

"Rid them" (hatzilu, הַצִּילוּ) means "snatch away, save, deliver"—the same verb used for military rescue or saving from mortal danger. This is urgent, forceful action against injustice. "Out of the hand of the wicked" (miyyad resha'im, מִיָּד רָשָׁעִים) indicates active oppression—the wicked have "seized" the vulnerable and hold them in exploitative power.

"The wicked" (resha'im, רָשָׁעִים) refers not to people who make occasional mistakes but to those who systematically pervert justice, exploit the weak, and oppose God's righteous order. They use their position, wealth, or power to prey upon those unable to defend themselves. God's judges are commanded not merely to maintain neutrality but to actively oppose such predators.

This verse reveals that justice isn't passive but combative. Righteousness requires taking sides—specifically, siding with the oppressed against the oppressor. Judges who fail to actively rescue the vulnerable become complicit in their oppression. Neutrality in the face of injustice is itself injustice.

Historical Context

Systemic Oppression in Ancient Israel and God's Response

Throughout Israel's history, the wealthy and powerful devised schemes to exploit the poor. They moved boundary stones to steal land (Deuteronomy 19:14, Proverbs 22:28), charged usurious interest (Exodus 22:25), took clothing as pledges and refused to return it (Exodus 22:26-27), and used corrupt scales in trade (Amos 8:5). When the poor sued for justice, wealthy litigants bribed judges to rule in their favor.

Prophetic literature documents this pattern. Isaiah denounces those who "decree unrighteous decrees" and "write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor" (Isaiah 10:1-2). Jeremiah condemns Jehoiakim for building his palace "by unrighteousness" and not paying workers (Jeremiah 22:13). Amos rails against those who "swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail" (Amos 8:4).

God's response was consistent: He would judge the oppressors. The Babylonian exile functioned partly as judgment for systemic injustice (Ezekiel 22:29-31). God declared He would "break in pieces the oppressor" (Psalm 72:4) and avenge the poor. When human judges failed to deliver the vulnerable, God Himself would act as their defender.

This pattern continues in the New Testament. James warns the rich who have "lived in pleasure on the earth" while defrauding workers: "the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth" (James 5:4-5). Jesus pronounces woes upon the rich who ignore Lazarus at their gates (Luke 16:19-31). God takes sides in conflicts between oppressors and oppressed.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to "deliver" and "rid" the vulnerable from oppression, and how might this look in contemporary contexts?
2. How should this command to actively oppose the wicked challenge Christian attitudes toward political neutrality or cultural accommodation?
3. In what modern systems might "the wicked" be holding "the poor and needy" in their hand, and what would deliverance look like?
4. When have you witnessed or participated in active rescue of vulnerable people from oppressive situations?
5. How does God's command for judges to take sides against oppressors inform Christian social ethics and political engagement?

Interlinear Text

פָּאֵלָה: רְשֻׁעַ יְמֵנָה אֶלְעָלָה וְאֶלְעָלָה מִתְּנִשְׁאָלָה
Deliver the poor and needy them out of the hand of the wicked rid
H6403 H1800 H34 H3027 H7563 H5337

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 140:12 (Parallel theme): I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor.

Job 29:12 (Parallel theme): Because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him.