

A Case For The Supreme Court

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[0 : 00] Did anybody read this passage? It went quick, didn't it? Well, I... You know, I worry a lot about you people because sometimes I come down here terrified of you and sometimes I'm vastly inflated with overconfidence.

And I was... It's sort of like... I think of that fellow at the back of the room there, who... Herb Reeser, who puts that food on the table for you.

And I guess that's what I do. Like I put a raw carrot and a raw potato and a raw tomato and a raw hunk of meat on the table. And some of you, it maybe turns your stomach.

Others of you probably can make something quite good of it and do some work on it. But most of the work is for you to do. I just... It just helped me to think that what my job is mainly is to deliver the groceries and then you do with them what you can.

Some of you can't do much. And some of you probably are pretty good at putting them together in some way or other. You have this fellow Moses still preaching his sermon, still to the people that are on their way across the Jordan into the Promised Land, still trying to set up the structure of things.

[1 : 32] And in this chapter, in the particular verses that we're looking at today, he has the problem of... In order to get... He's got... He's got a big problem, which you can read about.

I thought I had it written down here, but it has to do with the extent of the problem that he was facing personally when he said to them, How can I bear your problems, burdens, and disputes all by myself?

They grew to be too many for him. And you know how society breaks down. And so, because of lawsuits, it was interesting how...

Who's that guy whose hair hangs down over his face and everybody loves him? And he sings songs. What's his name? Warren Perry. Which one?

Michael Jackson, yeah. Michael Jackson is apparently in hospital and in under... Consider being indicted for something.

[2 : 42] And his lawyer said to him, It'll just take 120 days before we get a hearing, which implied that justice was not all that it should be.

And that was the same problem that Moses was having, was how you were able to produce justice among so many people who had grown to such great numbers.

And how are you going to do it? So he said, What you have to do is you have to give me men who represent each of your different tribes, and I will appoint them.

You need someone to write it down. That's what the lawyers do. You need someone to dole it out. That's what the quartermaster does.

You need someone to carry a gun to make everybody else behave. I mean, Moses didn't put it quite that way, but he had that in mind. And you need someone who can tell the difference between what's true and what's false.

[3 : 44] Now, those are basically rudiments of our own society in that we need all those people, somebody keeping the records, somebody handing out whatever's available, somebody making everybody else behave with a big stick, and somebody who, in the midst of all the chaos and confusion of the interaction of people, can say this is true and this is false.

And that's the function of the judge. And we do that in society all the time. I mean, you need a commanding officer if you're in the army.

You need a ship's captain if you're at sea. You need a judge if you're in the city. You need these people, in a sense, set apart in order to do what they have to do.

I mean, it's fascinating to me. I wish I knew more about this. And if any of you are lawyers and can contribute to this picture, please do, or judges or whatever you are. But judges are people who are set apart.

They are... You don't know whether they're liberals or they're conservatives. Or they're NDP. Or if they're NPAs. They are people who are set apart because they need to be different.

[5 : 08] They need to have space between them and the people around them. The reason they need to have this space is that they are to show no partiality in judging.

They are to hear both small and great alike. They're not to be afraid of anyone and that they are, in a sense, they have this responsibility heavy on their shoulders that ultimately judgment belongs to God.

And so, in some way, they have to be in touch with him. Now, you may wonder as to just how they get in touch with him nowadays.

And that's part of the problem that I want you to look at. But Moses was saying that this is what's needed.

What's needed in society is someone who can say, as far as the truth is concerned, this is where the rubber hits the road.

[6 : 15] This is where the guy climbing up the fir tree is right and Macmillan Bledel is wrong, or Macmillan Moldel is right and the guy up the fir tree is wrong.

Somebody has to make that decision. That's an important part of society. And it has to go on all the time in all the places in which we find ourselves.

And Moses tells them that those are the people they need. But what he sets up for them is some kind of a legal system so that if the land looks like this, over here and over here and over here, there are to be in the land three cities of refuge because of the danger of people killing somebody. He uses, Moses uses the example of you going out to cut a little wood on a Saturday afternoon. The head comes off your axe and lands up in the head of your neighbor.

And so that isn't premeditated murder, but it still arouses quite a lot of sentiment on behalf of the person's family whose head has an axe in it.

[7 : 28] And so that the thing for you to do is to head for one of these cities of refuge. And there you will be protected from the avenger of blood.

Because in a society, there's a terrible need for revenge when something like that happened. So they had these cities of refuge. The judges were there also to ensure that if you sort of hid behind a tree till your neighbor came along the path, and just after he passed you, you sunk your hatchet in his skull, and then you went to the cities of refuge, the judges had the power to extradite you and to make sure that you faced the law.

If somebody was found murdered and lying in a field and what passed for the local detectives couldn't figure out how it had happened, then the judges went out and they measured the distance from the body to the nearest town, and the nearest town had to accept responsibility for the murder and go through certain ritual and religious cleansing to absolve themselves from the guilt of the murder.

Because it not only applied to the murderer whom they didn't know, it applied to the community whom they suspected he came from. Because they assumed that he would have come from the nearest village.

[9 : 08] Then he says, this is a bit sobering, parents with a stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, profligate, and drunken son take him to the judges and the judges will have him put to death.

Now that's not a course of action that probably any of you have followed, but I'm sure many of you would like to. It's the temptation sometimes there.

If you're walking along the road and you find a lost donkey, then you're to return it to your neighbor.

If you don't know who owns it, you're to keep it until your neighbor comes along, and when he comes along, you're to give it back to him.

If you are out in the woods on a beautiful spring day and you find a bird's nest and there is a mother bird sitting on three eggs, you're allowed to take the eggs, but you mustn't touch the mother bird.

That's a little mosaic law that you can remember when you find the Ten Commandments a little heavy. And realize that it covers a lot of things.

[10 : 29] Marriage laws are laid out in extraordinary detail because it was a problem then, I suppose as it is now.

If a man raped a virgin, he was to pay the father and he was to take her as his wife and he was to keep her forever as his wife.

I'm not sure that the feminist movement would approve of that little scheme, but that was what Moses laid down. So that judges were concerned to do justice.

And Moses gave them all these precedents on which they were to use to pass judgment. You shall appoint judges and officers in all your settlements, which the Lord your God is about to give you. According to your tribes, they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. That was really important to the health of society.

[11 : 40] Now, one of the things that comes out when he's talking about why the judges have to do this is in order to purge the evil. Because he says this over and over again, if you look, purge the evil.

That when a crime is committed in the city, it affects the whole of the city. And therefore, you have to try and find the source of it and deal with it at source to purge it away from the city.

That a city that tolerates a great deal of criminal activity ultimately will be destroyed by that. And so you have to be careful to purge it out.

Again, another verse which might have been added to the reading today, you shall not pervert justice. You shall not show favoritism. You shall not take a bribe.

For the bribe blinds the eyes of wise men and undermines the words of righteous men. In other words, you start seeing things a little crookedly and then you start speaking a little crookedly in response to a bribe.

[13 : 02] And so judges are to be meticulously careful not to be in that situation. And some of the bribes are very subtle, I'm sure. You shall pursue justice and justice alone in order that you may live and take possession of the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

So that they were to have a central focus on establishing amongst them justice. And the justice was undoubtedly the justice of God.

So that he's saying a land, a city to be healthy must be committed to the pursuit of justice. And you might ask where is justice to be found in Cleoqua?

Is it with the government in Victoria? Is it with the multinational pulp and paper industry? Or the lumber industry?

Is it with the aboriginal peoples? Is it with the environmentalists? Is it with the scientists? Is it with the person on unemployment insurance who's spending his time sitting in front of bulldozers?

[14 : 24] Is it with the RCMP? Is it with the labor unions? Is it with the international environment community represented by that young Kennedy boy?

Is that John? Is that John John of as they used to is it the courts and the judges who are having to receive these people who are arrested and to deal with them?

Is it with the I mean is justice only to be done by the the guy who in his garage is building a whole a homemade bomb to try and build bring the whole situation into the open?

Or is justice in the mixed motives of the media who cover it? So that you see if you have a situation like that as we do here in British Columbia and you say this country is living in the pursuit of justice how on earth do you do it?

Now we have created that problem by of course finding that we can get along without God and remember if you go back to the verse it says judgment belongs to God that's what is needed when you have so many conflicting parties you need you need to recognize that judgment comes from God now you can't just say that in our society because it sounds to people like you're saying things go better with God and so if you want them to go better you get God back but it's it's not that it's not that it's that things don't go at all without God and evil infects the land the blessings of freedom destroy families freedom from God that is moral freedom infects the land with disease all these things happen and Deuteronomy is very simplistic about it much too simplistic for a sophisticated society like ours because

[16 : 48] Deuteronomy says well you will enjoy the blessings or you will enjoy the cursings and the blessings and the cursings as I talked to you last week come from God so what kind of land are you you see if you've given up the centrality of God then that's what happens now one of the stories that Jesus told tends to illustrate this fairly well and that's the story he tells in Luke chapter 24 where he says a certain malignant spirit was kicked out of the house and he went wandering up and down in the earth and after a while came back and found the house swept and put in order everything was lovely and so he went back in and lived there and brought with him seven worse devils than he had

than there was there before so that the situation became a good deal worse now Jesus told that as a kind of picture of what humanly inspired moral reform accomplishes we you see it's a kind of picture of our society our society says the evil spirit is the church is God let's get rid of them and we'll put this world in order the way it should be run we'll see that justice is done we'll see that the rights of the victims are maintained we'll see that the place of women is honored we'll see that sexual freedom is established we'll see all these things minority groups are recognized all these things will happen we will make a great world of it well it's kind of turning this picture that

Jesus had upside down but you see what happens is that you get rid of one thing which you consider to be an evil and that evil is that paternalistic patriarchal hierarchical male dominated thing we call bible religion which you know the only thing that's hard about accepting that statement is that you can't read the bible and think that's what it's about but a lot of people see it as that we get rid of that then we will have freedom but what happens is we get rid of that and then we no longer have any justice to pursue in order to set up a system of justice we have to have women on the bench gays on the bench aboriginal people on the bench all sorts of people from all sorts of things because we don't believe in

God anymore and the only thing we can do is be subject to the good opinion of one another and the judges whoever they are and whatever their origin is and I'm not foolish enough to be thinking I'm antagonizing feminists by saying that all I'm saying is that even if you are a lady judge of the Supreme Court of Canada your responsibility is still to be the conveyor of the judgment which comes from God not the judgment which comes from you as a person but you see in the course of what happens and develops in our society we lose our trust in God and we suspect that every judge is under a bribe that he is blinded so he can't see that he can't speak straight any longer because he obviously if you are you know look at the factions in the

Klee Aquat dispute you know the cops are compromised the courts are in the hand of the government the government is in the hand of the multinational corporations everybody is bribed by everybody and the only way you can get justice is to let off a bomb or do something like that to break with the whole pattern so that we we we we we just can't face the the terrible reality of being under the judgment of God we've got to compromise that in some way to make allowances for ourselves we can't we can't bring ourselves under judgment I think I told you this story once but I'll tell you again because it was so helpful to me in retrospect it wasn't very helpful at the time when I went out the very first time to visit somebody as a student minister

I went to visit a farmer up north of Hamilton and he was in his bedroom and his family were out in the front room and he was very ill and I went in and saw him met him for the first time talked to him prayed with him read to him and then went out and had a cup of tea with his family ten minutes later he was dead which didn't make my career as a pastor not very successful at the beginning at least but that was a what happened then was I began to hear stories about this farmer what a good man what a hard-working man what a thrifty man what a man who had done so much for the community and so on and on and on it went for two or three days until the funeral was over and then he drank too much he was a liar he cheated he was he was I mean he just got torn to pieces by the community in which he lived after they had done their respects then they they came up with the truth and

[23 : 10] I thought to myself at that day as I do on this day that it is a far far better thing to submit yourself to the judgment of God than to your fellow man you'll find it's a lot better in the long run your chances are way better and that's why we look at it but what we see is that that we cannot accomplish by ourselves the moral reform or the sort of sorting out of our lives which is necessary we can't do it we try it but it doesn't work we have to come back to submission to the God who has created us the God who has redeemed us and the God before whom we ultimately must stand under his judgment and we can fight we can fight against it or deny it but ultimately we have to face it

I'm going off to Toronto this weekend to talk to another to a parish for a week for Saturday and Sunday and I've been looking at John the Baptist and King Herod quite a lot to talk to them about it but it occurred to me that it had a certain sort of relevance to what we've got here you remember that John the Baptist was the one who went around preaching the kingdom of God is at hand and telling people the axe is laid to the root of the tree and that God can make children of Abraham out of these stones and he called his loving congregation a generation of vipers and he did a lot of things which in a sense put it all up front so there was nothing hidden and when he came to Herod

who was the king he said to him you have gone against the law of God by marrying your brother's wife and of course that didn't appeal to Herod and it appealed even less to his wife and so you had this you have

John the Baptist being thrown into prison Salome dancing for her stepfather her stepfather in his drunkenness and with his friends all around him saying ask of me anything and I'll give it to you you know he was so taken in by this magnificent dance and she as any young lady should went and consulted her mother and her mother said I'd like the head of John the Baptist on a platter and there he was you see now what you have there is a wonderful confrontation between the absolute moral law which was John the Baptist and total compromise which was King Herod those are the that's the polarity you have and if you look at it and supposing you're the person that has the axe and you're there and John the Baptist is there and Herod is there whose head would you cut off if you could choose well we'll come back next week and look at the answer to that the fact is that I think most of us I mean I think we have to side with Herod I don't see because when absolute truth comes up against total compromise we are compromisers we have to compromise with the judgment of God we cannot tolerate it we cannot accept it and when God sends along somebody like John the Baptist to say thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt all those things when we say that I believe all that but I can't live with it my life has to be a compromise so that if you were to sit down with a blank sheet of paper and write down the compromises of your life that you're living with at the moment you'd probably find you had quite an extensive list of compromises with the absolute of God's demands well I think that's that's the position that a people are under when they acknowledge that judgment is to come from

God you know I mean it's it's like this it's it's like you were to take the foresters and the truck drivers and the mothers of the and wives of those people and then the RCMP and then the judges and then the multinational corporation executives and then the members of government and put them all together in a room and say now all together I'd like you to bow your heads and say all of you together almighty God unto whom all hearts be open all desires known from whom no secrets are hid cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy holy spirit that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name what a miracle of grace it would be able to bring a group like that together to say that to acknowledge that they weren't under the condemnation of one another ultimately they ultimately were under the judgment of God and that that's how they had to relate to one another as human beings that they could no longer hide behind their particular passion or their particular conviction they had to recognize one another and they had to recognize one another as being like themselves under the judgment of God and that's the place that we have to come to and that's why God sends John the

[29 : 36] Baptist around to say this is the way it is this is the law of God and you are under the judgment of God and you must face the consequences of that judgment both now and in eternity I mean I don't want to over dramatize it but that's the way it is and you see what happens and you know that it is my purpose and conviction and desire that in the last minute we have you should confront the person of Jesus Christ in the midst of the precedent of the law the precedents of the law that are set down in the book of Deuteronomy there is this peculiar statement which says and Paul reading his Bible picked it up right away peculiar statement which says cursed is he who hangs upon the tree now most people think that religion has to do with the absolute moral authority of

John the Baptist on the one hand and that life without the kind of King Herod compromises is impossible on the other hand and they live all their lives in the tension between those two dismissing one or the other either becoming John the Baptist in condemnation of the world or Herod's who are so utterly compromised as to have no significance for the world but what happens you see is that John the Baptist says before he goes to his own ignominious death he says there's coming one after me who's greater than I am far far greater than I am and he's going to accept the condemnation that belongs to Herod to restore you to the relationship that belongs to John the Baptist and so what you need is to put your faith in

Jesus Christ Christ that's the kind of world you need and when you put your faith in Jesus Christ what you are doing consciously and deliberately is bringing yourself under the judgment of God so that you know the inescapable of reality of God's condemnation upon you and then you learn that that condemnation meant for you has been born by another person who is Jesus Christ and that therefore your life is under the judgment of God through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ Christ

let's pray our God we pray for our country the chaos and confusion of our country the the fractionalization and fragmentation of of our country into little interest groups and cluster groups and self serving groups sometimes we see that and we long that we as a country may by the work of your grace and being subject to your word may come to the place where the pursuit of justice will not be hindered and that pursuit of justice in our own lives and in the lives of all the people of this country might bring us under the judgment of God and that in the place of judgment we might find him who for our sakes bore our sins in his body on the tree who became a curse for us in order that we may know the blessings which your love would confer on us through him help us help our country help us as a city help us as individuals to come to this place and to be prepared to live in this place to live with that kind of tension to know from our own experiences the inevitability of Herod's compromises and the immutability of John's claim and then between them to come to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray amen pray