

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

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[0:00] Eucerotomy 16. Regime change has been a kind of, what is that common word? It's been something! We're used to hearing about in the news over the last few years, isn't it? It all began! It all began when the American-led coalition marched into Iraq, attempting regime change to get rid of Saddam Hussein. And I guess it was on British and French minds a couple of years ago, as we supported rebels in Libya to get rid of Colonel Gaddafi. But where did those efforts of regime change get us? We got rid of Saddam? We got rid of Gaddafi? Did that bring peace to Iraq? Did it bring stability to Libya? No. Of course, the reason is not just that democracy was not embedded in those countries, whereas it is in ours. The problem is much deeper than that. The problem is the problem of the human heart, isn't it? As Libya in Iraq illustrates. It's a hard thing to establish a coherent peaceful nation. And yet, to go back in time, that is what the Lord God was doing with the Israelites. Here are a bunch of people whose fathers and mothers and great-great-grandfathers a long way back have been slaves in Egypt.

They've been a bit of a rabble, really. They never had to organize themselves very much. They were told what to do by the Egyptians. And now, after 40 years of wandering in the desert, they're preparing to go into the promised land and to be a nation-state. What was the Lord going to do to provide for them? What structures would he put in place? I mean, if you were building a nation-state today, starting from scratch with a bunch of people who'd basically been grown up in slavery or wandering around desert, where would you start? Where would you begin? With a modern democracy or something else? So we look through these chapters, we see four offices, four roles that the Lord provided to make this group of people not just a rabble of rebellious ex-slaves, but a fruitful nation living in covenant with the living God. We're going to look at them very briefly. We see what the Lord provided for his old covenant people and how they're fulfilled now for us as his new covenant people. So first of all, he has judges to pursue the justice of God, a king to embody the faithfulness to God, priests to enable fellowship with God, and prophets to announce the word of God. And even as I read those headings, I hope it's clear who the true ruler was, who was setting the agenda, who was directing, who was in charge.

It was, of course, the Lord God himself. The judges, kings, prophets, and priests were to get their direction from him. He was the center of it all. He was the Lord ruling over it all, as he rules over us, his people today. So let's just whiz through these old covenant institutions and see how they were there for them, that they might live faithful and therefore fruitful lives as God's people.

And see how these provisions enable us, through Christ, to live faithful and fruitful lives for the Lord. Let's start with Judges. Chapter Deuteronomy 16, verses 18 to 20.

[3:12] Moses speaking to the people, you shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to the tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. See, Moses starts, or the Lord starts from the bottom up. It's not top-down imposing judgment. It's from the bottom up. There's to do justice in every community. These family leaders who'd be selected by local communities. The judges won't be imposed on them.

See, they were to appoint the judges. They won't be imposed, just as elders are not imposed on you. Paul said that in his email this week to church members, didn't he? Elders don't get imposed on you, you have to vote for them. And so it was there. The local community were to choose the

judges, select them themselves. Back in chapter 1, Moses had described a little bit how this had happened during the wilderness years. They were family heads, people with natural responsibility, and who assumed that responsibility well. They had to be, if you're only one, verses 13 and 14, wise, experienced, understanding men. Understanding the law of God that was directing them. And they represented the Lord. So back in chapter 1, verse 17, as Moses urged the initial judges to act justly, he said, it is the Lord's judgment you are giving. It's at a higher level than just you and your plain decisions. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear small and great alike, he said. And you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's.

They were God's representatives. So that was the first step, they had to appoint judges. The second step was that each Israelite was to pursue justice, and not merely self-interest, so that they could enjoy fruitfulness together. It had to be a communal effort.

Look at verse 19. Remember, Moses isn't speaking to the judges here. He's speaking to the whole people of Israel. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality. You shall not accept a bribe. For a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.

Justice and only justice you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you. So the whole community were to embrace this. But of course, whose justice is this? Whose idea of justice was it to be? There's an article in the Guardian this week, quoted in the week paper, which I get. It said this, every society has to set its ethical norms.

[5:42] The settled position of our society is, speaking about homosexual marriage, that is allowed, that is a settled position in both law and public opinion. So where is justice defined?

Who decides justice? Well, according to the Guardian, it can be a matter of public opinion, or above that perhaps the legislators, the lawgivers of the land. So it can either be set by the majority or by a few powerful people. Is that really a good way to run ethics? Where do you end up? Well, if the majority always make the decisions, then the minority are always going to be persecuted. Ask a Jew in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Or if it's the powerful who decide what is right and wrong, then those who have no power are left out of the frame and can be treated unjustly. Ask anyone black or colored who lived in South Africa during apartheid.

So what we need for justice is not the majority or not the powerful to decide what is right and wrong. We need the living God to tell us what is right and wrong. So that was to be the source of the justice that these people were to enforce. But what the Lord himself said, and we don't have time to look at all the details from chapter, from verse 18 down to the end of chapter 17, verse 13.

But they deal with the kind of cases that judges would have come across in their local communities to begin with. People engaging in false worship, for example, at the end of chapter 16. Or indeed, from 17, verses 2 to 9, verse 17. Engages with people who are turning aside from the living God. So what was the standard of justice? It was God's law that he had given. We see that even further in verses, chapter 17, verses 8 to 13. The title in the ESV is Legal Decisions by Priests and Judges.

[7:43] It was a higher court established in the land. The difficult cases, the local judges couldn't decide. They were to go to the place where the Lord would choose for his name to dwell, which is ultimately Jerusalem, where the temple was. And there, they could find out God's will about decisions.

So look down to verse 9 of chapter 17. You should come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision.

Why go there? Why have the Levitical priests involved in this? Well, because the priests were the experts in the law. And this judge who was appointed would obviously be a senior in mercy, who had lots of experience and wisdom.

And why go to the place where the Lord had made his name dwell? Well, partly to show that it's a decision that came from the Lord, but also because the priests would have had the urim and thummim, the mechanism the Lord had given the priests for discerning God's will in difficult cases, difficult situations. So it all shows that ultimately, the Lord is the judge, and he is the source of justice in this case.

He is the source of justice. He is in God's presence with the teachers of the law to help make those judgments. It's God's word that is directing the affairs.

[9:05] Now, what does that mean for us now, several thousand years later? Well, first of all, the point Moses makes back in verse 18 of chapter 16, justice.

Justice only you will pursue. That as God's people, we should be pursuing justice with one another. Justice, the Old Testament word, means having right relationships or working towards right relationships amongst God's people.

What's going to facilitate that? Well, for Old Testament Israel, that meant having judges. As we work on through into the New Testament, as God's story of redemption unfolds, those judges becoming the elders of the church.

Family leaders, wise men, who understand God's word as the New Testament defines them. And who are, of course, appointed by the local community, the local church.

You can decide whether I fit that category later on. And more importantly, read what the New Testament says to give further details about elders, what they should be like. So, two things. We should pursue justice.

[10:13] We have elders to help lead the church, just as judges led those local communities. And thirdly, it's worth realizing, Israel knew they were accountable to the Lord.

Every Israelite knew that, as it was the Lord's word that rules. And so we, as believers today, are pursuing, depending on the Lord, and pursuing the justice commanded by his word.

Living as those who are accountable to our great Redeemer God. Well, that's the judges who are to enforce the justice of God. Let's look at the next office.

The Kings, verse 14 of chapter 17. Notice Moses didn't start with them. The Lord doesn't start with them. They're not the be-all and end-all. But they are still important.

Now, of course, up to this point, Israel had never had a king. The Lord had promised, back in Genesis, to Abraham, that some of his descendants, kings would come from his descendants.

[11:13] Back in chapter 17 and chapter 22. In chapter 49, as Jacob blesses his sons, we get the promise that kings would come from the tribe of Judah. But this is now 400 years later.

There still have been no kings. And look at what Moses says here. Verse 14. When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, I will set a king over me, like all the other nations that are around me, you may indeed set a king over you, whom the Lord your God will choose.

See, the kings weren't there right from the beginning, even if they were in God's plan. But they're actually a gracious gift of God. A king didn't come until much later. About another 400 years after this, in 1 Samuel, chapter 8.

That was when the people came to Samuel the prophet and said, look, we want a king like the nations around us. And at that time, it was actually a pretty rebellious thing. They didn't want to have God ruling over them. God, the true king.

They want to have a king like the other nations. But see how God in his grace had made a provision for that. Knowing that one day his people would want a king, he established the parameters for a king, even here in Deuteronomy.

[12:27] And as one theologian puts it, in the story of Israel's king, we witness grace indeed. A rebellious people reject the law's direct rule and ask for a king like all the other nations have.

But God enfolds Israel's demand into his sovereign purposes. And transforms it into something that someday will exceed even their wildest dreams.

And that he has done, as we see as we go on. Look what they had for their king. Look at the parameters set by the Lord. It had to be the Lord's choice, not their choice. It wasn't just the man they wanted, verse 15.

It also had to be one of their own, verse 15. For among their own brothers. It couldn't be a non-Israelite who would lead them astray, lead them into worshipping other gods. It had to be God's man from amongst God's people.

And what was his king to be like? Well, the kings of the other nations were big men, weren't they? Not Israel's king. Not a big man, but a faithful man.

[13:24] Look at the restrictions, verse 16. He's not allowed to amass weapons, women, or wealth. Verse 16. He must not acquire many horses for himself. That's the weapons.

If you've got a horse, then you have a cavalry. You have horses pulling chariots. The tanks of the day. He's not to have many weapons. Then verse 17. He shall not acquire many wives for himself. Royal harems would have been very impressive in the ancient Near East. Israel's king is not to be like that. Lest they turn his heart away. It wasn't so much about sexual exploitation.

It's more about wives for a king would be alliances with other nations. Therefore, other gods, for him to fray, would turn the king's heart astray. Which, of course, is what happened with King Solomon, David's son, hundreds of years later.

So, not amassing weapons, not amassing wives, not amassing wealth. Nor shall he acquire for himself excessive gold or silver. All these things could draw his heart away from the living God.

[14:32] The king of Israel was not to be a big man like the nations around had. He was to be a faithful man. He was to be the sort of person who would seek the Lord. And you see that as you look at his job description.

Verse 18. What did this king have to do? Doesn't give details about how to direct armies. Doesn't give details about how to organize the administration of the government. What does it say he has to do?

Verse 18. When he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law approved by the Levitical priests. So, he couldn't change the bits he didn't like.

Because the priests, the experts, would have to look over it and give their approval. And it shall be with him. He shall read it all the days of his life. That he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of his law and the statutes and by doing them.

And why did he have to do all that? So he'd be humble. So that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers. And so he'd be faithful. And he may not turn aside from the commandment.

[15:34] See, in other countries at the time, in other nations, the king we looked up to as a reflection of divinity. As an embodiment of their God. Not in Israel. In Israel, the king was to embody faithfulness to the living God.

That's why he was to learn to fear the words. Which is something all the Israelites are supposed to do. And what we see there in verses 19 and 20. Fear the Lord, keeping all his words of the Lord, doing them. They are things that are commanded time and time again throughout Deuteronomy. For example, at the end of chapter 5, at the beginning of chapter 6. All Israelites were supposed to do that. So the king of Israel was to embody faithfulness. He was to embody the nation. He was to be the faithful Israelite.

If Israel was to fulfill his mission of being a faith, a royal Christian, a holy nation. Bring God's light to the world. Then Israel's king had to be faithful.

Because the way the king went, the nation would surely follow. As we read through the Old Testament, we find exactly how it happens, don't we? Time and time again, you see Israel's kings and then Judah's kings going astray.

[16:39] The result is disaster. Ending in exile. Even the best kings were never good enough. So for example, at the end of 2 Kings, 2 Kings 23, describes Josiah's reign as a faithful king.

2 Kings 23 verse 24. Moreover, Josiah put away the mediums and the necromancers and the household gods and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem.

That he might establish the words of the law. Before him there was no king like him. Who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might.

Just as Deuteronomy 6 had commanded. According to all the law of Moses. Nor did any king arise like him after him. And yet the very next verse says, Still, the Lord did not turn away from the burning of his great wrath.

Which was his anger. His anger which was kindled against Judah. Because of all the proselycations with which Manasseh, an earlier king, had provoked him. So here there was a king supposed to embody faith from us.

[17:42] But even the best kings were not enough to avert God's justice. So what kind of king could be needed to lead God's people in faithfulness?

So that their mission could be fulfilled in the earth? Of course we find the answer in the New Testament, don't we? As we turn over the pages. The very first page of the New Testament. As Jesus is shown to be descended from David.

As shown to be the great king. In Matthew chapter 2 he is the one who embodied Israel. Matthew says, Out of Israel, out of Egypt I called my son. Jesus, in Egypt, as an infant, sent to Egypt. And brought back out of Egypt. Embodying Israel. Or John chapter 15, when Jesus stands up and says, I am the true vine. He's claiming to be the true Israel.

The vine was the image from many places in the Old Testament. Particularly Jeremiah chapter 2, 21. Where God had taken a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the land. See, Jesus is the embodiment of Israel.

[18:43] He is the true Israel. And the true king of Israel. The true faithful one. Who would indeed have God's law in his heart all the days. Who would obey the Lord perfectly.

And as our king now can lead us to be faithful in the mission the Lord has given us. To take his life to the world. To make disciples of all nations. That mission can prosper in his hands.

Because he is the faithful king. That's why Psalm 72 can end by saying, May his name endure forever. His fame continue as long as the sun. May people be blessed in him.

All nations call him blessed. Promises to Abraham. Fulfilled in Jesus. So the Lord gave his old covenant people. Judges. To pursue the justice of God.

Our king. To embody the faithfulness to God. Which our king Jesus has done. Then thirdly. He gave priests. To enable fellowship with God.

[19:41] Look at chapter 18. Verses 1 to 8. And these verses are mainly concerned with the material provision for the priests. Not the actual duties of the priests. Verse 1.

The Levitical priests. All the tribe of Levi. Shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel. They shall eat the Lord's food offerings as their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers.

Now let's make sure we get the background here. All priests came from the tribe of Levi. So they were all Levites. But not all Levites were priests. But all the tribe of Levi. All the Levites.

Were involved in. Or could be involved. In serving in. Well in the tabernacle. When they were in the wilderness. And then later on in the temple. When they were settled in the land. And none of the whole tribe.

Had land of their own. Land in which to grow their own crops. And to look after their own animals. So how were they to be provided for? They should be provided for. In part. Out of the offerings given to the Lord.

[20:39] The priests. And some of the Levites could eat. Some of those things. But also out of the regular giving of God's people. As they gave their tithe. Especially their tithe every three years.

That's how the people would be sustained. Sustained by the giving of God's people. Now what were the Levites to do? Well verse 5 tells us. They minister in my name.

Now how do they do that? Well there are two parts. The roles. Firstly. All Levites had a teaching job. So Deuteronomy 33. If we live long enough. We'll get there one day.

Deuteronomy 33 verse 10. Moses. In blessing the tribe of Levi. Gives them this job. He says. They shall teach Jacob your rules. And Israel your law. So the priests.

Or the Levites. Were to be teachers. They'll be teachers of the law. The experts. And so the Levites were actually scattered across the nation. You know. Tired to look at it now. But we find they were actually spread out. As you read the book of Joshua.

[21:36] And they were spread out all over the nation. So everyone was quite close to a teaching center. Where the Levites could teach them God's law. As they ministered in his name. And of course the other thing they were to do. Was to offer sacrifices in the temple.

And those sacrifices were to enable fellowship with God. Enable the people to come. Have their sins atoned for. To eat the peace offerings. Literally a fellowship meal with the living God. So that was the priest's role. To teach the people. And to enable the people to enjoy fellowship with God. Now how does that work out today in the New Covenant? Well. Today we have elders to do the teaching.

Particularly. So Paul borrows the language of supporting the priests in the Old Testament. As he talks about teaching in the New Testament. So 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 17 for example. He said. Let the elders who rule well. Be considered worthy of double honor. Especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. Or Galatians 6 verse 6. Let the one who has taught the word. [22:38] Share all good things with the one who teaches. Just as all things have to be shared with the Levites. To support them in the Old Testament. Of course that's the only part of the priestly ministry. That continues amongst the people on earth today.

How do we enjoy fellowship with God now? It's through our great plant priest. The Lord Jesus. Who offered the perfect sacrifice of himself. To fulfill the Old Testament law.

To fulfill all the Old Testament sacrifices. And yet after offering himself. He's raised to life again.

And he now does the second half of the priestly work. Of having offered the sacrifice.

He now stands in the presence of his Father. Making intercession for us as people. Holding forth his wounded hands. So as Hebrews chapter 7 puts it. He's able to save to the uttermost.

Those who draw near to God through him. Since he always lives to make intercession for them. So we have the perfect priest. Yes we have by God's grace those gifted to teach.

[23:40] But most importantly we have the high priest. Who is able to bring us into fellowship with God. He is the only one who can do it. No human has.

So there are three officers we looked at so far. The Lord provided for flourishing his people. The judges to pursue the justice of God. The king to embody faithfulness to God. The priest to enable fellowship with God.

There's one more. The priest. The prophet. Let's turn on to chapter 18 verse 15. See what about when it all went wrong? What would happen if Israel started to fall away?

What would happen if the king was corrupt? What would happen if the judges took bribes? What would happen if the Levites forgot to teach God's law? What would happen if temple sacrifices were not done properly?

All those things happened in the Old Testament. So what would happen? Well God provided the prophets to make sure that God's word would be heard.

[24:42] Now the funny thing is people always have a natural desire to hear from God, don't they? Or at least to have some sort of idea of what's going to happen in the future. So all the nations around Israel, all the nations they defeated, thrown out on promised land, they all had lots of ways of trying to get in touch with divinity.

Trying to get in touch with the higher power to find out what's going on. And those are the things that are lambasted by the Lord and forbidden by him in chapter 18 in verses 9 to 13.

Or verse 14 rather. Let's look at that briefly. Verse 9. It's interesting, isn't it?

Everyone today knows child sacrifice is a terrible and horrible thing. What would be the common attitude in our culture to horoscopes or mediums and psychic fans? Oh, that's harmless, aren't they?

But they are not. That is why the living God puts the two things together in the same category. Sacrificing your children to a false god is just the same as trying to worship a false god or get in touch with a false god through a fortune teller.

[26:08] Or a horoscope. Or a necromancer. Or divination. Or whatever it is. They are both in the same category for the living God. Why? Because they are both rebelling against him.

Both doubting that he is the one who is in charge. Both looking for some other way to get a grip on the future. That is wrong. So the Lord forbids those things.

But instead he provides another way for his Old Testament people. A way they could hear his voice. And hear it reliably. And so, verses 15 onwards, chapter 18.

He promises that one day he will raise up a prophet like Moses. Now what was the prophet to do? The prophet was to announce the word of God. The prophet's job was not particularly to tell the future.

Although that incidentally does happen. But the prophet's job was to be a covenant enforcer. So we read through the Old Testament. We find that prophets are basically pointing out where the people are failing to keep the covenant.

[27:06] Failing to do what Deuteronomy teaches. And are really prophesying that the curses that come later in Deuteronomy will happen. If they continue and persist in this. The prophet was a spokesman for the Lord.

Just like today we are used to hearing on the news a spokesman for Downing Street or a spokesman for the White House. We know that those people are authorized to speak the words of the power behind them. And they're authorized only to speak those words.

And so it was with the prophet. Look at verse 18. The Lord says, I will raise up for them a prophet like you, like Moses, from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth.

And shall speak to them all that I command. And whoever will not listen to my words, that he shall speak in my name, I myself will acquire it of them. So the prophet is the Lord's spokesman.

Speaking his name with his authority. And this was an occasional office. The Lord would raise up prophets when they were needed. The regular teaching was done by the Levites.

[28:06] It was when that was failing, the prophets were wheeled out by the Lord. To speak his word. Which of course would raise the question, well how do we know this is a real prophet or not? So the Lord provides a couple of tests.

Down in verse 20. The prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak. Or he speaks the name of other gods. That same prophet shall die. So just speaking on their own authority.

Don't listen to them. They're speaking apparently on the authority of another god. Don't listen to them. In fact, kill them in fact. There's a big punishment for that. So how were they to know whether the prophet was genuine or not?

Look at the test there. Verse 22. When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word the Lord has not spoken.

The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. It's really two tests. Over the course of this prophet's lifetime, does what he's saying come true? And is he, secondly, like Moses?

[29:10] Is he one who speaks God's truth, even when it hurts? Is he one who serves the good of God's people, like Moses did? Is he like Moses? Does his words come true?

That's how you know whether he's a real prophet or not. So it comes to us. Do we have prophets today? Our Hebrews chapter 1 begins with these words. Long ago, at many times, in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in the last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. In Acts chapter 3, verse 34, Peter talks about Jesus as being the one who is a prophet, like Moses, raised up by God.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is constantly, or in many places, shown to be like Moses, but greater. He's the one who goes up the mountain to teach the law to his people.

The Sermon on the Mount, for example. So we don't need prophets anymore, because we have the ultimate prophet. The Lord Jesus himself, the Lord Jesus himself, he is the one who's spoken God's word to us.

[30:19] We have the word written down now in the scriptures. We can trust on and depend on. Far be it from us to resort to horoscopes, or any other nonsense, any other evil nonsense, to try and disown the future.

We have all we need, all the sovereign God needs for us to be fruitful and faithful. We need to pay attention to this word that he has spoken. Just as they needed to pay attention to those leaders, the Lord had given them.

Of course, I'm sure we all know the story of the Old Testament. It's a story where the judges became corrupt. The kings turned away from faithfulness. The priests often neglected the law. The prophets were ignored or persecuted.

Until finally Jesus came. Can we do better? Will we do better? The problem is, we need regime change in our hearts, don't we?

That's why kicking out Saddam Hussein, or kicking out Colonel Gaddafi, didn't really solve the problem. The sinfulness of the human heart is still there. We need regime change.

[31:25] We need to get off the throne of our own lives and submit to the one the Lord has provided. The one who always pursued justice. The great king who embodied faithfulness. The great prophet who announced God's final word to us.

The great high priest, through whom we can have fellowship with God. The only one who can bring us to fellowship with God. This is the way we can be faithful and fruitful as God's people.

To bow the knee to King Jesus. To let him change our hearts by his spirit. And make us the kind of people we're supposed to be. The kind of people he has died to make us into. People who will, by God's grace, be faithful and flourish.

Because we have a great prophet, priest and king who is our leader and saviour. Let's pray.