

This morning, picture sitting in a courtroom as an observer. Up front is of course the judge's position. On that bench, higher than everything else in the room, you know whoever occupies that position is most important. Below and off to one side is the witness stand. There important people will be called forward to tell what they know and what they saw. Sitting out from the judge's bench are two tables opposite each other. One table is where the prosecutor sits. From there charges are brought and evidence is put forward to hopefully convict the accused. The other table is for the defense. This is where the accused sits and listens as their fate is argued and ultimately decided.

I suppose if you're trying to picture all that you're probably using something you've seen on television or the movies. That's what most of you use to envision the inside of a courtroom because you've never seen it in person. Hopefully that remains true for your whole life. Courtrooms have one purpose. The seats and the people that occupy those seats in the courtroom are all there to determine guilt or innocence of the accused. This morning in the first lesson the prophet Micah takes all of us inside a courtroom.

As the court is called into session Micah begins by telling us who the judge is going to be. **"Listen to what the Lord says: Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say."** The Lord is in charge. It sounds like he's going to invite the accused to make their case first. But God has a case against his people. He's judge and prosecutor here, bringing the charges against them. We listen along as the Lord makes his argument against the accused.

You may have noticed the somewhat unusual witnesses in the courtroom. This case comes down to a covenant between the Lord and the people. The mountains and hills were witnesses when that covenant was made. They also were there watching and witnessing every time the accused broke that covenant. But these witnesses won't be saying anything. God doesn't need them as he presents his airtight case against the accused. If God accuses them of breaking the covenant, they broke the covenant.

As you listen to the opening statements of God, the prosecutor, you figure there will be no love lost. Usually the accused is being accused for doing something wrong, in some cases quite heinous. Why would the prosecutor be overly nice to them? Getting a conviction is most important. Listen as God takes a different tactic with the accused. **"My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me."** There's no listing of the wrongdoing that broke the covenant. There's no laundry list of sins the people committed against God. God is in charge, he's making an accusation, but he speaks tenderly.

You sense where this going, don't you? God's questions let on to it. No need to wait to hear the answer from the accused. God hasn't done anything against them. God had done nothing to burden them or frustrate them. Everything he did was to help them. Their history was one time after another of God coming to their aid. The evidence presented hits the high points. **"I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent you Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam."** The highest of high points was the rescue of the accused from Egypt. In Egypt, where they were slaves, they had no chance of freeing themselves. Their situation was lost. But God raised up strong leaders. God ushered in a rescue plan. God redeemed them from their slavery and brought them out of Egypt in a stunning fashion while the Egyptians watched. God kept his covenant because he loved them.

More history as God continued to help. **"My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal."** The names are somewhat unfamiliar to us, but the accused knew. Balak and Balaam teamed up against them. They wanted to curse God's people. God only let them be blessed. At Shittim the accused camped across from the Promised Land. God rescued them there from idolatry. Gilgal was their first camp in the Promised Land, the fulfillment of hundreds of years of promises from God to the people. Never was there a moment in their history or their journeys where the accused didn't have God's protection and grace. How could they possibly answer these charges?

You might expect a little humility, probably a confession. The proof has been presented. God made his case. The accused are guilty. Their response is less than stellar. **"With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"** The accused take an aggressive approach. They dig in and fight. Instead of hearing God's tender call for them to turn from their sins they throw things back in God's face. They speak as if God can be bought off with a bribe. Sacrifices in great quantities or in high enough quality they assume will satisfy God. So little is their view of God, so total their rejection, they don't care about God's grace shown to them at all. They spit in God's face, put out their bribe, and reject God completely.

These accused deserve every bit of what they get. You and I sit in the audience as Micah's listeners, observers of this courtroom. We figure the accused should be punished. But not so fast. Part of the reason you never want to see the inside of a courtroom is because most often you're not there to observe. In this courtroom Micah describes, you're not just to an observer. You switch spots with Israel as the accused. Now you're on the hot seat. Now God looks directly at you as the accused. Now you have charges hanging over your head. God makes the case against you for sin and rejection of God's grace and saving acts.

Things changed so fast. You went from observer to accused. Where are the facts? Could you really be accused of sinning against God? God makes a watertight case. Like the Israelites, is it true that at times you didn't appreciate being a Christian? Maybe times when you hid your faith because it helped you get ahead. The Lord rescues you and you respond by pretending you don't even know him at all. And like Israel, God examines how you've treated the leaders God sent you? Parents sent to care for you, teachers sent to instruct you, pastors and elders sent to watch over your soul. Have you mistreated them, hurt them, or simply haven't helped them or listened to them? In your mind they were more impediments to fun than servants sent by God to help. Have you made your money more important than God? Have you cut God out of your journey through life because it was harder to obey his laws than to just step around them momentarily? The facts of the case against you and me are simple. God expected perfection and we've given him anything but.

It gets hot in the chair of the accused. It isn't fun having God make his case against me. Truth is its necessary. God must make this case because sin must be called out. He can't overlook it. He can't pretend it doesn't exist. He must point out sin and hold someone responsible. We committed sins against God. We're responsible. What response will we give? We could act like the Israelites when they were accused. We could try and buy God's mercy. And we have done that too. We've tried to increase our offerings, volunteer more, cut something easy out of our lives hoping God wouldn't notice we kept everything else. We've had our moments where I've tried, you've tried, but it hasn't worked. God's love can't be bought...by us.

This courtroom can't be adjourned today without someone paying for the sins committed against God. Before you or I could step forward and try, God took the necessary step. The Light of the world bursts into the courtroom on our behalf. **"He has showed you, O man, what is good."** Just as the accusations mount and our fear of punishment begins to turn to reality, God's answer arrives. Jesus is here. God runs down your charges and Jesus takes your place and my place in the chair of the accused. Now he's under God's accusations, not you. He takes the lying, greed, denial of God, and every sin onto himself. He takes it all. God's justice demands payment, so Jesus made it. God's justice demands someone take the blame for sins, so Jesus took it. God's justice demands someone die for sins, so Jesus did. Jesus becomes the accused for us, taking your place and mine, and giving us grace we haven't earned.

Now standing outside God's glare you probably can't believe it. You're no longer the accused. Jesus is. But Jesus isn't either because the payment is over. God's justice is satisfied. Someone paid for sins. Because of Christ you're free. You're once again and always called by God, **"My people..."** He calls you with compassion, love, and mercy. He calls you in grace to a response motivated by grace. **And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."** God leads you to a repentant heart that recognizes sins against him but more important recognizes Christ Jesus as Savior from that sin. In humility and with God's forgiveness you can act justly and love mercy. Strengthened by the not guilty verdict because of Christ you walk humbly with God. This now is your response because today and everyday you and I were **shown grace in God's courtroom in Christ.**