

Where is the God of Justice?

You have wearied the LORD with your words; Yet you say, "In what way have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, And He delights in them," Or, "Where is the God of justice?" Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts. 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness.

4 "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem Will be pleasant to the LORD, As in the days of old, As in former years. 5 And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien-- Because they do not fear Me," Says the LORD of hosts. 6 "For I am the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. (Mal 2:17-6)

Several years ago a Jewish rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner wrote a book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner wrote that book to try to answer what we call theodicy – the presence of evil in world made by a good God. Why do evil things happen, if the world was made by a good God? Why did the Holocaust occur? Why have humans been allowed to savage each other for millennia, in war, genocide, rape, torture, and all forms of malicious crime? Worse, why do the bad guys often get away with it, and why do the apparent good guys seem to suffer?

There appear to be only three options. Perhaps God does not know that evil is happening – so He is not omniscient, bad things happen because God is ignorant. Second perhaps God is unable to stop the evil happening – He has created a world where man's free choice has literally gotten out of control, and God cannot stop men from doing what they do – so God is not omnipotent. Third, perhaps God is not willing to stop the evil from happening – He has the power to do so, but it doesn't bother Him, He doesn't think it is that bad, so He doesn't do anything about it. In any of the three, you no longer have God. A God who does not know all is not God. A God who lacks the power to achieve His will is not God. A God who does not mind evil is evil Himself and cannot be God.

So we seem to have a real dilemma. If God is all-knowing, and sees the evil, if God is all-powerful and can stop the evil, if God is all-loving and all-holy and hates the evil, why is there still evil?

If we think these are the only three options, and if we see evil multiplying around us, we can be led to a place of cynicism. The dictionary defines cynicism as “an inclination to question whether something will happen or whether it is worthwhile” Believers can look at growing evil, what appears to be unpunished sin, growing injustice, apparent lawlessness, and we can question whether justice will ever happen. We can begin to wonder if serving God is worthwhile. I am certain that there are many people in the world who claimed to have once been Christians but who turned out to be mere professors and not possessors, because the presence of evil in the world pushed them to unbelief.

This had happened to some of the Israelites in Malachi's day. Their spiritual apathy, their spiritual backsliding had brought them to a place of hardness and cynicism towards God. We've already seen how they doubted God's love, how they presented defective worship, and they were willing to betray God and man in who they married and how they divorced. In this passage, we'll see how they became cynical about God being there at all, about God being fair and just.

Since we are in an age with increasing evil, we need to know how to respond to apparent injustice. Jesus even predicts that in the last days because iniquity will abound, the love of many will grow cold. You confront this question every day – every time you read the headlines, every time you hear

the news, every time you are questioned about why does God allow this stuff, and every time you ask yourself those questions.

This passage has some of the answers. The answer will come as we see Israel's cynical pessimism, and then how God answers that.

I. Israel's Cynical Pessimism

You have wearied the LORD with your words; Yet you say, "In what way have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, And He delights in them," Or, "Where is the God of justice?"

Israel's words 'wearied' the Lord. Their accusation was a source of grief to God. Once again, Israel asks 'in what way have we wearied Him?' The reply: You have been saying evil doers are actually good in Yahweh's sight. God is pleased with them. How do we know? Because they are doing well! Adulterers and perjurers and exploitative people get away with it. They get richer, they have their cake and eat it. No one catches them, stops them or punishes them.

Which led Israel to their second statement – where is the God of justice? Where is He? If He is just, and powerful, why doesn't He do something? If He never shows up to judge, maybe it is because He doesn't exist.

Aren't you glad that the Bible tackles this issue? It does not gloss over this matter at all. In fact, long before Malachi, many believers had struggled with this question.

Job struggled with this, as he reflected on how he was suffering, while wicked men went about living full and prosperous lives. Asaph, in Psalm 73 said he had nearly lost his faith altogether when he thought about how unjust the world seemed. Frequently, the psalmists ask "How long, O Lord?" Frequently they say, "the wicked say, 'Does God see?'" Solomon wrestled with this in Ecclesiastes 15 *I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness. (Ecc 7:15)*

14 There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. (Ecc 8:14)

The prophet Habakkuk struggled with this:

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?...4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds. (Hab 1:2, 4)

The amazing thing is, Asaph, Solomon, Habakkuk all resolve the issue in the same way that Malachi does. And the answer is not any one of those three options.

II. God's Certain Promise

Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts.

Here is God's response. You who say, where is justice, know this: I am sending justice and justice will come in the form of a person. When this person comes, you will know that justice has come. So who is this person?

In fact, there are three persons here. First, there is Yahweh God who is speaking. Second, He says He is going to send a messenger who will prepare the way before Me. Third, the one who is going to come is the Lord, the Messenger of the covenant, who will come to His Temple.

So who are the second and third individuals? Well, the New Testament applies this very verse to John the Baptist.

Mat 11:10 *"For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.*

So if John the Baptist is the messenger who prepares, who is the next person the verse talks about? Notice some very significant things about this Person. It calls Him 'the Lord', that's not a title you give to a mere human. It says He will come to *His* Temple. We know the Temple was considered the house of the Lord. So if it is His Temple, who is He? He is somehow the same as God. Notice Yahweh says that the messenger (small-m) will prepare the way before Me, but Yahweh speaking is not coming, because the Messenger is coming. So He is Yahweh and yet He is sent by Yahweh.

And what's interesting is that He is called Messenger, which in Hebrew is the same word for Angel. We know that there is someone who keep appearing in Israel's history known as the Angel of the LORD, the Angel of Yahweh. He appears to Abraham, to Jacob. God promises in Exodus 23:23 and 32:34 that His Angel will go ahead of Israel. He appears to Manaoh, to Gideon. And the strange thing about this Angel is that He speaks for God, but He also speaks as God. Several times when these people speak with Him, they say they have seen the face of God, or they worship Him.

Who is this? This is God the Son, the Lord, the second Person of the Trinity, who will come to Israel as Messiah. A son will be born to Israel, a child will be given, and the government will be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace, the everlasting Father.

Where is the God of justice? Justice is coming when Messiah – the God-Man will come suddenly to His Temple. So why is that going to bring justice? Why will that answer the cynic? Look at what the Lord says Messiah will do:

2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness. 4 "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem Will be pleasant to the LORD, As in the days of old, As in former years. 5 And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien-- Because they do not fear Me," Says the LORD of hosts.

So the image is that when Messiah comes, He is going to be like a refiner, purifying the people, purging out evil, purifying what is good, and bringing justice.

Notice, he is not like a forest fire, like an incinerator's fire. His fire has one goal, but it does two things. A refiner's fire, when applied to metal, begins to separate pure from impure. It allows the dross to rise and be consumed and removed. It allows the gold or the silver to be purified. A refiner's fire refines gold, and consumes dross. That's justice – reward the good, punish and destroy the evil. Make a distinction between the worthy and the unworthy.

So, here's the big question. Jesus has already come. He did go to the Temple. And after He died and rose again, there was still injustice in Israel, and there is still injustice in the world. . Messiah was

supposed to bring justice and peace to the world, and since we don't have that, it is obvious that Jesus is not the Messiah. So what is the answer to that?

Do remember that the Jews who wrote the New Testament Gospels were quoting these verses, and they did not think that Jesus had failed to fulfill this prophecy. They saw Him as the precise fulfillment of this prophecy. So what did they know? What did they see?

When the Lord Jesus came to the Temple, He presented Himself to Israel as her King and as the Passover Lamb to be inspected. Israel inspected Him, rejected Him, and then according to God's determined counsel, put Him to death. But in so doing, they brought about the very centrepiece of God's justice: the Cross. The crucifixion was God's ultimate statement of justice and mercy. There on the Cross, God poured out His anger and justice for all the sins committed onto one innocent Man – his Son. Likewise, because His Son was innocent, God could vindicate Him in the resurrection, and impute His righteousness to anyone who believes, and charge our guilt to Christ. On the Cross you have God's justice satisfied, God's mercy provided. On the Cross you have God's loudest warning and loudest invitation. God says to mankind through the Cross- I take sin this seriously, and I love you this much.

The Cross is God's statement in human time and space that sin and evil and injustice are not permanent, that God will judge the world in righteousness. God is not making idle threats. The cross says to the world: every sin, that has ever been committed will either find justice on the Cross, or in Hell. You either accept God's mercy in Jesus on the cross, or you refuse it, and face His justice in Hell. When Paul preached to the Greeks he said, God *"now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."* (Act 17:30-31)

Once we have full New Testament revelation, we find out that Messiah comes in two phases: once to pay the penalty of justice, the second time to apply justice. The first time to announce the in-breaking of the kingdom of justice, the second time to consummate and bring in the kingdom of justice. The first time He comes to provide the basis for justice and mercy to meet in the cross, the second time He comes to bring perfect justice and mercy to the world.

And the world we live in is the world between the two comings of Messiah. So we speak about an already and a not-yet.

Already the refiner's fire is burning, but it has not yet completed its work. Already Messiah has come to his Temple, brought judgement, but he has not yet come again and brought final judgement. Already God purified the sons of Levi and purified the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem and made them as pleasant as the days of old when He saved a Jewish remnant in the early church, and continued to do so over the years. But not yet has He swept in multitudes of Jewish people into the faith, as Romans 11 predicts will happen one day, as Zechariah 14 predicts will one day happen. Already God through the preaching of John the Baptist and then of Messiah Jesus did God indict sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien, but not yet has God widely and publicly removed these things, as He says He will when He rules the Earth with a rod of iron. When he returns and judges people at His judgement seat, there will be a full and final purging out.

So we live in the tension between already justice and not-yet justice. And here's the thing about being between two comings. We don't have the perspective to tell how God's justice is unfolding, what it means in each case, how the Cross of Christ is doing its work now, how it will be resolved in the end.

We know that His fire is doing two things: it is purifying God's people, and it is consuming the wicked. First Peter 1:17 speaks of the fire this way: **1Pe 1:7** *that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,*

2Th 1:7-8 speaks of the fire this way: *when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

God's justice mysteriously works out pain and pleasure on a mixed multitude, and where we cannot see the final outcome until we are out of the fire. Only from the perspective of eternity, only once we have seen God write the last lines of the human story and close the book, will we see the scales of justice perfectly balanced.

Most people have a very elementary understanding of justice. Good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. But that's like saying the fire must only burn up the dross, not melt the gold.

Let's say I get a terminal disease. My enemies say – finally, God is repaying David and he is getting his just desserts. My friends say, God is purifying one of His loved ones and allowing David to earn rewards. Who is right? You can't know for sure when you are in the fire.

The prosperity of the wicked may be God allowing them the only happiness they ever know. It may be God allowing them to harden their hearts and go further into independence. It may Satan blessing them and so blind them. It may be God being gracious to them and giving them less excuse on the day of judgement. We don't know.

When the wicked suffer, it may be God making an example of them that others may fear. It may be God repaying them for their evil in this life. It may be God graciously warning them of what is to come. It may be Satan simply being cruel to his own. We don't know.

When the righteous are blessed it may be God delighting them with good gifts to bring joy to their heart. It may be to begin to show them how ultimately unsatisfying this world is. It may be to test their hearts to see where their treasure lies.

When the righteous suffer it may be Satan afflicting them by God's permission. It may be God purging them of idols. It may be God giving them a taste for Heaven. It may be God giving them a chance to earn rewards. It may be God maturing them and allowing them to grow and strengthen in faith and endurance and hope. It may be God disciplining them and breaking patterns of sinful behaviour.

When we are in the flow of time, we can only guess how God is working out justice in the present moment, and how it will finally resolve. We know that He is. Justice does not wait only for a future day. God is apportioning justice and mercy as we speak. But only the perspective of eternity can give you the full picture.

Only seeing the end from the beginning can show you total justice. Only seeing a person's entire existence – not simply his life from birth to death, much less his life in any given year, but a person's total existence, from birth all the way to either Heaven or Hell, can tell you the whole picture.

That's what Asaph concluded. He said, “Then I saw their end.” That's what Solomon concluded. He realised life lived only under the sun is futile, but life understood in the fear of the Lord, from an

eternal perspective, is joy. It's what Job concluded when He said He would again see His Redeemer in a resurrected body, and that once tried, he would come forth as gold.

But what we can be sure of is that the Refiner's fire is already burning. It is already purging out sin from God's people, and purging out sinners from God's world. The same fire refines and consumes. When you're in the fire, it just seems hot. In the fire, you can't understand why some things are burning away in your life and not in others. You can't understand why the righteous seem to be getting smaller. The point is not to try to interpret what the fire means to everyone around you. The point is to make sure that you are gold, not dross.

But the intervention of God by sending His Son the Messiah should forever end the question, Does God care? Does God see? Is God going to do anything about it? All three of those options are wrong. God does see. God is sovereign and able. God does hate sin and love holiness. The cross and the promised Second Coming tell us that He does. Delayed justice does not mean denied justice. Delayed justice is not injustice. In fact, Peter tells us that the delay in justice is actually mercy. He tells us that when people scoff at the idea of Christ returning in judgement because of the delay in time, the answer is actually this: *9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2Pe 3:9)*

So what should the truth of already and not-yet justice cause in us?

First, humility. As the Israelites were saying "Where is the God of justice?" they didn't realise what they were asking. As someone said, they got what they asked for, but not what they wanted. Because when Israel cried out for justice, who did that include? If you want justice for all, who is included in that?

Judgement is going to begin at the house of Judah, with the sons of Levi. God says in verse 5, "5 And I will come near you for judgment;

As we look around and we see evil in the world, and see the injustice, and we long for the Lord's return, let us remember, it was the fact that He didn't return that gave you time to accept His mercy. Had he returned in justice before you were saved, how would that have been for you?

Amo 5:18 *Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! For what good is the day of the LORD to you? It will be darkness, and not light.*

The thought of the Lord's return should chasten our double-standard. We want God to return in justice on others, but to return with mercy for us. Instead, we should be filled with grateful humility. By the Gospel, we are on the right side of justice. God reminds Israel in verse 6 why they have not been consumed by His fire: *6 "For I am the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.*

Because of my faithfulness, my covenant with Abraham, my unconditional grace – that is why my justice has not found you guilty and destroyed you. ***Lam 3:22*** *Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not.*

Second, hope. For the Jews of Malachi's day, this was all future. For us, part of it is future. With that humility that realises we are sinners saved by grace, we can confidently wait for God to punish evil and let righteousness prevail in the end. We can look at this broken world and know, it will not always be this way. There is coming a day when justice will break in with the Son of God's return, and what we call the way of the world will become a memory. The evil people inflict on one another will fade, the wars, the crime, the fear, the powerful oppressing the weak, the wicked

wealthy manipulating the poor, will be a rumour, a page in history.

How can you be sure? Because He came once. Our calendar reminds us – it is 2015 years since He came. He entered our world. He will enter it again.

What do we do with injustice in our world? Humble hope. Humble, since we are sinners, and God's justice could have consumed us. Hope, because we are redeemed, and this is God's Word to us:

4 "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (Rev 21:4)