



WHERE IS THE GOD OF JUSTICE?

Text: Malachi 2:17-3:5

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

Date: 11th June, 2017

There is so much ongoing evil and injustice in the world that it can leave people asking 'Where is God? Where is God in this evil? Where is the God of justice?' This is the question raised by the people of Israel here is Malachi 2:17 *"Where is the God of justice?"* By itself this is a reasonable question. I don't think God minds when the oppressed, or the victims of terrorism, cry out to him in their suffering. In fact we see such questions in the psalms like Asaph in Psalm 73. He struggled with God when he saw the wicked prospering while he, striving to do good, was suffering. And yet when we look here at Malachi we see that there is something very wrong with how the people of Israel raise that question. Malachi approaches the people with a startling message. (2:17) *"You have wearied the Lord with your words."* The Hebrew word for 'wearied' is 'yaga' which means 'to work one self to exhaustion'. So this is extremely serious stuff. We are at a major crossroad in the history of Israel. God has had enough. That is really surprising. Don't forget God revealed himself as (Exodus 34:6) *"...compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love..."*. He is the one (Psalm 121:4) *"...who watches over Israel...and never sleeps"*. There is no divine attribute more wonderful than the patience of God. His patience with the wayward characters of the Old Testament like Jacob and Lot, and Israel itself, is extraordinary. We know that God's ears are always open to hear our prayers. Yet with the words of Israel, God has completely run out of patience. He is saying through Malachi 'Enough! I have reached my limit'. So why this strong reaction?

The problem is the attitude that lies behind their question. We get a sense of it when we see how the people respond to God (2:17) *"How have we wearied him?" you ask. By*

saying 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?' Do you see it there? The attitude is seen in the complaint that 'God delights in evil'. That is a complete denial and denigration of God's character. It belittle's his worth. So why would they say that? Well, they have returned from Exile for quite some years now. The temple has been rebuilt. But Israel has not returned to its former splendour. They longed for the cloud of God's glory to come as it did with the first temple. But it hadn't happened. Inwardly they resented God not doing that. [POWER POINT PICTURES x4] They wonder why the Persians reign in splendour and wealth while they languish as a poor backwater province. They self-righteously felt they had done enough to warrant God's blessing. They were envious and bitter against God that others were so well off and they weren't. They saw people doing wrong and not being struck down by God. So they assumed the wicked could get away with it. Their focus, you notice, was on other people and not God. They envied what they saw as the success of those others. They wondered if it was 'profitable' (3:13) to worship God. This is a dangerous attitude to have. Those who were sinning and getting away with it were trading on God's patience. The Israelites observing this were confusing God's patience with God delighting in evil. This was a deep mistake about God's character. Their thinking was leading them away from God because they were relying on what they saw around them. Not on how God reveals himself in Scripture. If we just look at the world around us these days and see the abuse and terrorism and suffering we could easily conclude God doesn't care. Or God is not even there. That is the direction Israel was going in. By asking "*where is the God of justice?*" they were not fervently desiring for God to act and right all the wrongs. They were challenging God's ability or his willingness to act for them. The question they put has the sense of 'If God exists, where is he?'

The further tragedy in this is that the Israelites were not struggling with God in prayer over these issues as Asaph did. They talked to each other. They talked about God. They complained about God. But they did not tell God what was on their hearts. They didn't struggle with God but ended up denegated the character of God as they complained to each other. And as they did that they spread a mood of unbelief. It is difficult to say 'I trust God' when all around us others are complaining about God or denying there is a God. So they were failing to do what they should have been doing. Which was to be encouraging each other in their daily conversations to love God and to trust God. It seems that in their whinging to each other about God they were not aware of what

they were doing. As Malachi notes (2:17) *"Yet you say 'How have we wearied him?'"* When you do something so often, you are no longer conscious of it. It becomes automatic. It's like driving a car. You can change gears and steer and use the indicators all while holding a conversation. When you constantly repeat a sin you become blind to it. You don't see how terribly you are offending God. It becomes normal for you. It has certainly become the norm in our society to doubt God's justice and love. In fact its become the majority view to doubt he even exists.

Sometimes we may wonder if it would be better if God judged sins immediately. Then no one would doubt God's existence or his justice. We would know immediately that we had done something wrong. If God acted immediately to defend those under a terrorist attack, to rescue the abused and oppressed then we would never have to ask 'Where is the God of justice'. Life would be simpler and more straightforward. So why does God make us wait? That really is a bit of an odd question because it assumes that God should serve us. He should meet our expectations and our timetable. It makes out God is answerable to us. We need to realise that is not the case and rethink our view of God. He is not a genie in a bottle. God is not at the beck and call of our wants and desires no matter how nicely we express ourselves in our prayers. But the Bible does give us reasons why God waits. Paul writes in Romans (6:23) that *"the wages of sin is death"*. So God's justice says if you sin you die. Well if we die the moment we sin, we would have no time to repent. Peter writes in his letter (2 Peter 3:9) *"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."* You see the reason God is not immediate with his justice is so that the gospel can be preached. God wants more men, women and children to believe and be saved. Don't mistake God's patience and grace for not caring about justice.

We see this coming out in God's response to the Israelites question *"Where is the God of justice?"* He says (3:1) *"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come" says the Lord Almighty.*" God is saying two people, two messengers are coming. Who are they? Well the first is John the Baptist. Jesus told his disciples that his cousin fulfilled the role of preparing the way for Jesus when he quoted these very words of Malachi in Matthew 11:10 *"I will send a messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you"*. The second messenger

is Jesus. He is God himself, the one who keeps and fulfills his covenant. The people complained about the absence of God. They wanted to see his glory in the temple. Well, God is saying he will come alright. Behold there he will be! But be careful what you wish for. God warns that the arrival of his justice might reveal more stuff than they anticipated. (3:2) *"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"* Will the Israelites themselves endure? They are making complaints about others doing evil. There are complaints 'Why does God not act?' But God says 'Are you ready for my justice? Because you will get caught up in it too'.

Notice how God says in 3:5 *"So I will put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me" says the Lord Almighty.*" Here God is having a shot at the Israelites. This description bears directly on the social injustices in that community. These injustices were perpetrated by those in power. They failed to pay just wages. They victimised the helpless. They arranged for false witnesses in court. They divorced their wives unjustly. They went to sorcerers rather than God with their concerns. The foreigners (refugees) were discounted as nothing. Does any of this ring a bell? This was not just a random list of sins. It reflected the system that was worked to the benefit of the powerful and that marginalised the weak. Malachi was confronting the systemic problems of that society. When they complained 'Where is the God of justice?' it was more out of envy that others, like the ruling Persians, were doing so much better than they were. But they themselves were ruthless towards their own people. 'Where is God with his justice? Oh, he is coming alright. But be warned as to whether you can stand yourself. Will you be able to endure?' God said to the Israelites he had had enough and for 400 years was silent. He let the priesthood and Israelites go in their corrupt ways until they reached the pinnacle of religious corruption with the Pharisees. Then came Jesus to the temple. Through the priest's corruption Jesus was crucified. But his death and resurrection removed the need for the sacrificial system. And 40 years later Jerusalem and the temple were completely destroyed by the Romans.

Yes, God will come with justice. (Malachi 3:2-4) *"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring*

offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. Now, I want you to recognize that in those words are a stern warning and at the same time words of hope. The Bible often describes God's judgment in terms of fire. But look at what Malachi says of the Lord coming to his temple. His is a '*refiner's fire*'. It's not a bush fire. A number of years ago we had those devastating fires here in Victoria, Black Saturday. A bush fire is indiscriminate. It destroys everything in its path. The devastation is horrible. Now a refiner's fire is different. It refines, it purifies. It melts down the silver or gold. It separates out the impurities that ruin its value. It burns them up and leaves the silver and gold intact. Now that raises a few questions. If God is going to bring justice it will affect everyone of us. Israel cried out for justice and rightly found themselves under judgement. So if God is truly just, no one would 'endure'. No one could 'stand' unscathed. So how can Malachi speak of a '*refining*' fire?

Well, we come back to the "*messenger of the covenant*". We come to Jesus. Jesus well knew God is just. He knew God's judgment was deserved by all of us. But he made sure that he himself went to the cross to suffer the utter desolation and suffering that comes from God's judgment. Why do it? Well, here we see the astonishing grace of God come through. In (3:6) we read "*I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*" Justice will be done! God will bring justice to all the world. But remember in Malachi 1:2 God said "*I have loved you.*" From before time God had set his love on those he had chosen. He would do, and will do, whatever to hold onto those he loves. So God provides a way of justice where his full wrath is expressed. Yet those he loves are spared. Thus we see God's justice and mercy embrace at the cross. "*I have loved you, says the Lord Almighty... I the Lord do not change, so you...are not destroyed.*" God keeps his Word. What God promises he does. Therefore there is always hope. We who deserve to be consumed by the fire of judgment are saved. Not because we are some how better. But only because of what Jesus did on the cross. God offers forgiveness and life for anyone who trusts in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Let's be quite frank about it. We who come to church and call ourselves Christian, are no better than others. We might look at the evil in the world and ask 'Where is the God of justice?' But like the Israelites we in our society are also involved in systemic injustices. We are not more deserving of God's grace. Come the Day of Judgment, we will be spared only because of Jesus. But if we are spared the full fire storm of God's judgment, we don't go unscathed. We will go through the '*refiner's fire*'. All of us have our own

sufferings to go through. Some caused by our own (unhelpful) actions. Some more generally because we live in a broken world cursed by sin. God uses all of that to refine us, to bring us closer to him, to have us become more like Jesus. When the refiner has done his job well, the gold or silver is so pure, so clear the refiner can see his own image in the gold. We may struggle with God's patience with evil in this world. But then realise his patience is an act of grace. His justice will be done.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Why was God 'weary' of the Israelite's words? How do we ensure we don't weary God? How does the attitude of our culture affect us in this?
- Why do we need to heed the warning about 'enduring the day' of God's coming? What are some of the systemic injustices in our society?
- Why is there grace in the concept of a 'refiners' fire? How is God's justice maintained while also saying he 'does not change' so 'Jacob is not destroyed'? Where is hope for us in that?