

## IS GOD JUST?

Have you ever questioned God's justice? Have you ever watched news reports of horrific crimes or gross perversity and wonder why God doesn't step in and act decisively? After 9/11, did you ever pray that God would bring those responsible to justice?

It's an age-old question. Even God's prophets, those holy men who spoke for God, wondered out loud about the apparent moral inversion of the universe. For instance, Jeremiah affirmed God's justice even as questions about that justice plagued his soul: "You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? You have planted them, and they have taken root; they grow and bear fruit. You are always on their lips but far from their hearts" (Jeremiah 12:1-2).

The prophet Habakkuk cried out: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted" (Habakkuk 1:1-4).

Saints like these clung desperately to their absolute confidence in God's righteousness and justice. And, as mere mortals with admittedly limited perspectives, they puzzled deeply over evil that seemed to prosper unrestrained and unanswered.

But there are always others for whom the question of God's seeming indifference to evil moves them to contempt. In the face of intractable wrong, they abandon faith, or they carefully partition off their faith from *real* life. The question of God becomes moot. God is at best distant; at worst absent, irrelevant or non-existent. Their inability to reconcile God's claims to be just and do justice with the overwhelming evil they witness in their worlds causes them to discard their faith in any practical sense. They are left with an external form of religion from which any vital authenticity has been sucked away.

There were people like that in Malachi's day. They were repatriate Jews, back in the land of Israel after two generations of captivity in Babylon. They came back to their homeland with fresh exuberance and high expectations that God would restore their fortunes. There was a lot of talk about God's promised Messiah and their dreams of the messianic age he would bring—dreams of prosperity, freedom from domination, and restoration to international prominence not seen in Israel since the glory days of David and Solomon.

Hard realities had long since tarnished those dreams:

- They faced constant pressure from outsiders, foreign people who had been resettled in Israel by Assyria and Babylon. This transplanted population resented the Jews who had returned to claim Jerusalem once again as their capital.
- They were still a vassal city in subjection to Babylon.
- Prosperity that seemingly came so easily to the irreligious and ungodly around them was perpetually out of reach.

It seemed to them that God favored wicked people. The God of justice had stepped away and no longer concerned himself with their welfare. And, just like us, they dismissed God as irrelevant to their lives in the real world.

Understandably, God had something to say to people who dishonored him with their complaints. Let's listen to God's next dispute with his people: Malachi 2:17-3:5.

In short, God was saying: "If you think my restraint is a problem for you, what will you do when I actually show up?"

Israel missed something about God's justice. It was tempered by mercy. For instance, the Apostle Paul wrote: "...do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Romans 2:4)?

When God stays his hand against injustice, it is not to allow evil to win, but to give evil-doers a window of opportunity to repent. We wish God would act more quickly in specific cases. But when we turn the searchlight of God's justice upon our own sinful selves, we become profoundly grateful that God has not acted immediately, treating us as our sins deserve; that God has not answered the prayers of some against us, seeking justice for the evil we have done.

Praise God for his patience! Peter reminds us: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation..." (2 Peter 3:15).

But God's patience does not mean he has abandoned justice. Look at Mal. 3:1 again.

What is this verse predicting? First, that God would send his messenger to prepare his way. Just like today, when heads of state traveled in ancient times, they sent an advance team to alert people to their coming and to make all necessary preparations. God promised to send his messenger in advance of his coming. Malachi repeats this prophecy with more detail in chapter three, verse five.

Isaiah also speaks of this: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken'" (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Has this prophecy been fulfilled? Matthew tells us that John the Baptist was God's messenger, sent to prepare the way for the Lord. Jesus also identified John the Baptist as God's messenger: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 11:11-15).

John the Baptist was God's messenger, sent to prepare the way for Adonai, the Lord. This means that Jesus, in his first coming, at least partially fulfilled the rest of Mal. 3:1. He is our Lord who came with the message of the new covenant. In his first coming Jesus did not come to judge, but to save.

By his own admission, Jesus said: "...I did not come to judge the world, but to save it" (John 12:47). The Bible says that when Jesus came: "...[he] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:16).

Jesus' coming represented the breaking in of God's Kingdom in this world—the King was here! Throughout his public life on earth, we got glimpses of what life would be when the rule of God would permeate the entire world. One of those previews came when Jesus entered the temple, made a whip of ropes and cleaned out the temple. Jesus effected the kind of cleansing

Malachi predicted.

Jesus did, however speak of a second coming, when he would return to judge: “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son...” (John 5:22). This judgement, the Bible tells us, “...will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ” (Romans 2:16).

On that day, the rest of Malachi’s prophecy will reach its fulfillment. Malachi anticipates two kinds of judgements. The first is one of purification—v. 2-4.

How are we to read this? We have noted before in this series that Jesus “...has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father...” (Revelation 1:6). You and I sitting here are a royal priesthood, called to offer up pure sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, good works and generosity, and even our own selves as living sacrifices for our King.

Some day each of us will stand before Jesus and give account of our lives. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). On that day, all the junk in our lives will be torched. The Bible says: “...[our] work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

What will that day be like? We don’t know entirely. For those who have entrusted themselves to Jesus by personal faith in his gospel, it will not be a day of condemnation. That’s gone forever. It will be a day of accountability, however. And we are assured that when that day is done, “At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Cor. 4:5).

God will have settled his accounts with his people. We will have received our rewards, and we will also have been transformed into the perfect likeness of Jesus. “ Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness...”

By the way, God isn’t waiting until that day to purify his people. When we come to faith in Jesus, God begins cleaning up our lives, as we read earlier, “...[purifying] for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:16). Even now we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Paul urges us: “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

What God started now, he will bring to completion in eternity. On that day, Malachi’s prophecy will have reached its final fulfillment.

But there is another word in verse five. When Jesus comes again, he will purify his people, and he will come in judgement—v. 5.

This judgement falls upon those who by their conduct reveal that they do not fear God. They never took God seriously. Seen on this side of the cross, these are people who never turned to Jesus to rescue them from their sins.

Malachi’s list of sins is representative, not comprehensive. On that final day when the righteous Judge of all the earth holds court from his great white throne, those who have not received the grace of Christ by believing his gospel will get what they deserve. The Bible says: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son”

(John 3:17-18).

God will bring justice to the earth. It will be a terrible, awful judgement. The Bible likens the fate of men and women who face that condemnation without Jesus to consignment to an eternal cosmic dump where fires burn out of control and worms devour forever. Jesus called it Hell. In Hell people will be cut off from God's presence forever.

Each and every one of us will stand before Jesus' someday. God has provided through Jesus, an eternal pardon. The one who will sit as our judge, also stood in our place. On the cross, Jesus received what we deserved for the wrong we have done. He took the entire ledger of our sinful conduct and attitudes and nailed it to his cross. He did that so he wouldn't have to confront us with it on the day of judgement.

If we are willing to accept it, the cross becomes the place where our judgement was carried out. Because of what Jesus did, we can receive God's pardon and forgiveness. We can be reconciled to God. We can become citizens in Christ's eternal Kingdom and kids in God's family.

Receiving Jesus begins with fearing God—taking God seriously. It requires repentance. Repentance is a change of mind. It's a reality check that affirms as true God's just assessment of us as people who have done much evil. Repentance means we become sorry for our sins and move toward God for forgiveness.

And it requires faith—faith to believe that God's story in the Bible is true; faith to believe that Jesus's death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead squared our debt with God. Faith to believe in a love from God that is incredible beyond words!

Where is the God of justice? In a world such as ours, it can be tempting to ask that derisively, as if God is either absent or impotent to respond to human evil. From the perspective of heaven, this is the time of God's patience when people don't immediately get what they deserve, in hopes that they will turn to God in repentance and faith.

But there is a date fixed on God's calendar when the Lord Jesus will return. He will sit in judgement and the books will be opened. The book of your life will be opened and everything you have ever done will be laid bare before the righteous Judge of all the earth. God will right *every* wrong.

Those who have rejected God's grace through Jesus will get exactly what they deserve.

But those who have received Jesus, who have put their trust in him, will get what they don't deserve. That's the good news! They will be purified—made holy, special for God, inside and out. And they will inherit everything God has prepared for his children.

In this life we face a choice: bow before Jesus now and acknowledge him as Lord, or bow before Jesus in eternity and face him as Judge. We only go around once in this life. There are no second chances. How will you respond to Jesus?