

(un)Just Justice

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[0 : 0 0] seated. Well, please do turn in your copy of God's Word to Malachi chapter 2. Malachi chapter 2, we're going to read from verse 17. That can be found on page 802 of the Blue Church Bible.

Malachi chapter 2, starting at verse 17, and we'll read through to chapter 3, verse 5.

Malachi chapter 2, verse 17. You have wearied the Lord with your words, but you say, how have we wearied him? By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. Or by asking, where is the God of justice? 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. And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. And he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner.

[2 : 1 6] And do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. Amen. Well, as we turn to God's word, then let's pray and ask for God's help. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that although the grass withers and the flower fades, the word of the Lord endures forever. And so we pray that as we come to your word, that you would speak to us by the power of your spirit, we ask that you would teach us. We are dependent and needy and we want to hear you. We want to behold you. And so be with us now, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Christmas is about... How would you finish that sentence? How would you finish that sentence? Christmas is about...

Time with family, good food, turkey, those crackers that only ever really seem to break at one end rather than the other, and the little hats that you've got to wear on Christmas day.

Lights, decorations. Many of us would say, of course, that the birth of the Lord Jesus, the incarnation of the Son of God. But this evening, I want to add something to that list, or at least to add something of our understanding of what it means for the Lord Jesus to come into this world.

[3 : 5 4] And to tell you, and to say that this passage tells us that Christmas is all about justice. That Christmas is all about justice.

About God visiting his people, visiting the world to put everything right. To put everything right and to deal rightly, deal justly with all the wrongs that have ever been done.

And to assure that they happen no more. As we arrive in Malachi this evening, the people are longing for justice. It's 450 years or so before the birth of Christ, right at the end of the Old Testament.

And the cry of God's people is a cry for justice. And perhaps it might be the cry of our hearts this evening. Or perhaps it's been the cry of our hearts before.

Lord, please come and put all that is wrong right. You see the question there right at the end of chapter 2, verse 17. Just cast your eyes down.

[5 : 0 1] Can you see it? The people say to God, where is the God of justice? And in chapter 3, verse 1 to 5, that is God answering the question.

He's giving his solution. And he says, justice is going to come. And so the message of the passage this evening is a simple yet glorious one.

Justice is coming. Justice for all the wrong in the world. From every person in every place at every time that's been done. The gavel that the judge's hammer will fall on every crime.

On every wrong. God is coming. Justice is coming. So they're glorious words, right? All wrongs righted.

Who doesn't want that? And if you're here this evening and you think you don't want it, think about how you felt the last time someone jumped in front of the queue as you were doing your Christmas shopping.

[6 : 00] Or the last time you were in a car park indicating to take a space and someone just nipped in front of you and took the space from you. What is the cry of our hearts? Justice. Justice. And yet these people are in for a bit of a shock in God's answer.

God is going to come and right all wrongs. Yes, it's glorious. But there's something unexpected.

There's something they weren't anticipating that God says as well in his answer.

But before we get there, before we get there, let's look at their complaint. Let's look at their longing for justice. Why they're making this cry. As I said, the movement of the passages is kind of their complaint, chapter 217, and God's answer in 3, 1 to 5.

And so it kind of lends itself to two quite simple points. And those are our two points for this evening. Let's look first at their complaint and then at their answer. So first, the people's complaint. Where is the God of justice?

Just look at verse 17 again. You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, how have we wearied him? By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them.

[7 : 13] Or by asking, where is the God of justice? God's people in the time of Malachi. Here we are, the last of the prophets in Judah.

It's after their time of exile. They've been brought back into the land. And it's a great time of need.

And it's a time where as a nation, things aren't going well.

They've come back from exile. They've rebuilt the temple. But it really isn't as good as it was before.

They've been in exile. They've returned. But as there was a king on the throne before exile, there's no king now.

If you just cast your eyes down to chapter 3, 10, and 11, I won't read it. But next week, we're going to come to the fact that these people aren't tithing. They're not giving things. It hints that this is a time of poverty.

They're in need. God is saying you'll open the storehouses again. There's a lack of food and provision. So as a nation, they're not thriving. God's people are suffering.

[8 : 14] They're not doing well. And so in times like that where things aren't going well, we can be tempted to have similar cries on our hearts, can't we?

Why is there so much evil and wrong? And often what we're seeing is that evil people seem to be thriving. And it's God's people are people who seem to be in the right where things are going wrong. We see that sometimes, don't we, in the world. Just causes often treated unjustly. Unjust things seem to go okay. That is what these people are seeing.

Do you see the charge that they bring there against God? What's going on there in the middle of the verse? Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them. You see what's happening there? They're seeing around them nations that are doing well.

And things aren't going well from them. So they think that there is no justice in the land. We sometimes think of that in our own world or circumstances, don't we? Think of the bosses in the post office scandal.

[9 : 19] They seem to walk scot-free while the sub-postmasters, they're sent to prison and charged. Or think of corrupt world leaders who live in palaces of luxury and feast on the best food and wine while ordinary people starve and have nowhere to call home.

Or think about people in workplaces, maybe our workplace, who have cheated and played the system to climb the ladder while others who have always put in an honest day's work seem to never get ahead.

Or we can think about it in persecution around the world, can't we? Christians in parts of the world who suffer while those who persecute them seem to be getting away with it.

And of course we see things in our own life, don't we, that don't seem just. Jobs lost. Lives cut short far too early. Broken marriages. Kids, friends, others who have turned from the Lord.

The list goes on. Lord, where are you? Where's the justice? Where's the justice? But their complaint goes further, as we've just said. Their complaint goes further.

[10:25] They've wearied God with their words. That's what it says at the start there. They've wearied God. They've burdened him. And as they've looked around and seen things, as they don't think it should be working out, what's happened?

They've charged God with evil. God's people suffering. Evil nations prospering. And they conclude that God finds evil good and delights in wrongdoing.

They conclude that God is for those who are evil. So once again, as we come to Malachi this evening, and if you've been here the last few weeks, we find a people who are blasphemous. Blasphemous. God-loving evil. That's what we've seen in the last few weeks in Malachi, isn't it? God's people have forgotten God. They've turned from God. It's lip service religion.

It's heartless love. Lip service living. And God is now almost unrecognizable to them. They would walk past him in the street and they'd have no idea who he was.

[11:24] And so as we come to their complaint, they've gone beyond an honest question to putting God in the dock and conducted a kind of character assassination because they don't know who God is.

And so here, before we get to God's response, we have a lesson for us. We have a lesson for us. Dear friends, always bring, always bring your cries of pain and anguish and questions to God, always.

But even in the most trying of times, we need to ask God to guard our hearts, to guard our hearts against bitterness, bitterness and turning from God and charging him with wrong when he can never do or sanction any wrong.

This past week, I listened to a podcast from the Tron Church down in Glasgow. And it was an interview with one of their ministers. One of their ministers is called Phil Copeland.

He's mid-30s, married, two young children. And earlier in this year, he was diagnosed with a very, very serious and aggressive form of cancer.

[12:38] Came out of nowhere and he was taken very seriously ill. Weeks and months in hospital, tests and treatment and all that comes with that.

But what struck me in the interview as he was speaking about his experience was this. He said, of course, every day he has that question to the Lord Jesus, that question to God.

Why? Why? And yet you could hear that as he does so, he knows his hand is wrapped right up in the loving hand of God.

And more than his hand, him and his whole family, they're all held in the secure and safe arms of God. He speaks of how years of sermons and Bible reading and seeing other saints suffer equipped him and helped him for this time and this season.

They were real questions from a suffering son of God. But they were not questions, if you like, from a prosecuting lawyer. So, dear friends, whatever your burden this evening, whatever your burden, health, work, future, marriage, friends who don't know and love God, children, whatever it is, come to your heavenly father through Christ and know that he loves you.

[14:00] He loves you. Anyone here this evening asking, where is the God of justice? Crying out to God. Bring that cry to God. With all your heart, cast your cares upon Jesus.

He cares for you. He cares for you. But, dear friends, dear friends, guard your heart. Ask others to pray. Walk with others who will help you.

Not forget who God is. So that you don't become bitter to him and ultimately estranged from him.

And, dear friends, if you're not asking that today, if you're not asking that today, then see today as a day of preparation.

Remember and rehearse who God is. Think about what we've even just seen about God here in Malachi, chapter 1, verse 1. He loves us. He loves his people. He chose us.

Chapter 1, verse 6. He's our father. We keep hearing the Lord of hosts. He's the God of armies. There's nothing he cannot do. He's the Lord, capital L-O-R-D.

[15:02] That is his covenant name. He's a covenant, faithful God. And in chapter 3, verse 6, just down there, cast your eye. It's the verse after we read that the Lord does not change.

Dear friends, our circumstances may change. My circumstances may change. Yours might. But God does not change. God does not change. So trust him and get to know him as best you can in these days that we have.

But these people haven't done that. These people have wearied God. But in response to their complaint, God gives an answer and says, justice is coming.

So that takes us to our second point. Justice is coming. Chapter 3, verses 1 to 5. Just look at verse 3 with me. God answers the question by saying this. 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. And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

[16:08] So God's answer to where is the God of justice, his answer is, I'm going to send someone, but I'm coming to.

The verses can be a little bit confusing. So just have your eyes down on them there. And we'll walk through it to understand who it is that's being sent. So we see there just at the start of 3.1, I'm going to send a messenger who will prepare the way.

So that's one who is to come. But then there's another one who is to come, isn't there? Because the messenger is going to prepare the way before who? Before me.

Before me. And the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple. And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. He is coming, says the Lord of hosts. Now the language there in that second bit is a little bit complicated.

But essentially, those are two parts of saying the same thing. That the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple. And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. It's Hebrew parallelism.

[17:11] It's the same person. And who is it that they seek? God. So although the tense jumps from prepare the way before me. And the one whom you seek.

It's speaking about the same person. So we have a messenger. And then God himself is coming. That's the simple part of all this.

That is the answer to God's cry of justice. The idea of heralds might seem a little bit outdated for us here. But they still have some kind of place in a society, don't they?

People who are going to kind of make announcements or prepare for people coming. Perhaps if you think of a wedding, you could think of the role of kind of a best man. But part of his job is to make sure the groom kind of makes it to the wedding.

And later on, he'll give a speech, won't he? Or he might even kind of emcee or coordinate the evening to kind of make sure it all goes smoothly. To herald, to prepare, to make everything smooth.

[18:10] That all goes well in the day. And that's what God is saying here. A herald will come. And he will herald the coming of God himself. So 450 years after God says this, through Malachi, this happens.

That's what we read earlier. Jesus quotes Malachi 3.1. Speaking of that first little bit, the messenger being of John the Baptist himself. He, if you like, is the best man to the wedding. He's the best man who's come to point away from himself and point to the groom and say, Yes, the groom is here.

And he precedes, of course, the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus, who we can see from these verses, what? It is a claim to be God. Jesus, as he says these verses, speak of John the Baptist.

He is claiming, of course, then to be God. So Christmas is about justice. And God's answer to the problem of justice in this world is found in a person.

God himself coming in the person of the Lord Jesus. Fully God and fully man. To right every wrong. And so what will that look like?

[19:20] What is it that God needs to do as he comes? Well, there's two things that are going to be done. There's kind of two acts, if you like. And we're going to look at both of these up front and then ask, what have they to do with us?

Let's see what he's come to do. So first of all, he's come to purify. Look at the end of verse 2. For the one who is coming, he is like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. And he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. And they will bring offerings and righteousness to the Lord.

Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be praising to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. So the pictures here are really clear, aren't they?

It's the one who is coming, is coming with fire and water. Part of the work of the one who is to come is to refine.

[20 : 21] Refine like silver. I have no idea how you refine silver. So I had to look it up. But apparently some of you here must know. You heat it up. The impurities come to the top and you scrape them off.

So he's coming to refine. And he's coming to clean. Fuller soap there is kind of the fairy non-bio or whatever it is you put in your washing machine at home, right?

Of the ancient world. It's what they used to clean. And it's going to clean everything out. He will purify and refine. And who's he going to do that to?

He's going to do it to the sons of Levi. Do you remember in chapter 2 what was going to happen to the sons of Levi? God was going to spread dung on their faces. He was going to spread dung on their faces and send them out of the camp.

But now God says, I will make them clean. So that they can make offerings to the Lord and all God's people can come and worship him. So already we see that this work of refining, this work of cleaning is a gracious work.

[21 : 25] It's a hugely gracious work where God is coming to clean and make right again that his people can be brought to worship God. You often get cleaned when you've got to be prepared for something, don't you?

After a football game in the rain, those knees are covered in mud and you need to get them clean for heading to grandparents for dinner or perhaps even just getting inside of the house.

I wonder if anyone here had parents that used to kind of hose them around the back after those things. I used to do a week's scout camp in the summer every year and it was no showers, no nothing, whatever it was.

So I was not allowed back in the house after the week. I tell you, it was round the back and here's, I don't know if they ever got the hose, but it was you need to get clean before you come in. You need to get clean before you come in.

Maybe mum and dad coming to visit the student flat. It's time to Hoover. Part of Jesus coming is a gracious, wonderfully gracious act to wash and clean, to refine and fire that we would come to worship God as we were made to.

[22 : 31] But that isn't all that he comes to do. That isn't all that he comes to do. Let's look at the second point and then we'll ask where do we fit in all this. He also comes to judge. So he comes to refine and purify, but he also comes to judge.

Verse 5, Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in his wages, the widow, the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner. And do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. So what we have is this great day of the Lord. This great day of the Lord where God himself will come to refine and purify.

But also to judge and to destroy. In two weeks' time we're going to pick up speaking about the day of the Lord again to see what it's like.

But just look to chapter 4 verse 1 and we'll read a little more of it. Speaking of the same day, chapter 4 verse 1. For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble.

[23 : 39] The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. Root nor branch.

And so the question for the people as they heard this is, where am I in all this? Where am I in those being refined?

You see, if you're one of those priests who said, dung is going to be on your faces, and God's now saying, we're going to refine and wash you clean. You're thinking, ah, good, great, grace. But actually, here's the rub of all this.

Here's the rub. God's people wanted justice. They were crying out for justice. But they forgot, or maybe overlooked the fact that for God to bring justice meant that God had to right their wrongs as well.

That God had to right their wrongs as well, that they were included in this. For as the people here are hearing these words of Malachi, where are they seeing themselves?

[24 : 46] They're likely seeing themselves in what's being described in verse 5 onwards. Those who swear falsely. Well, look back to chapter 1, verse 14.

What are they doing? Chapter 1, verse 14. God says, cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock and vows it or swears it, yet sacrificed what is blemished. Swearing falsely.

Those who are adulterers. What did we speak about last week? They're committing adultery in divorce. They're divorcing those who shouldn't be. And to kind of catch it all, right at the end of these verses, God said he's going to bring judgment against those who do not fear him.

Do these people fear him? What have they said about God so far in this book? God has said, I loved you. They say, how do you love us? They've despised God's name.

They've wearied God. They've called God a lover of evil. These people don't fear God. And so here's the twist of all this.

[25 : 53] God is saying, you'll get justice, but it's going to include you as well. And it's kind of hinted in these verses with the sarcasm that they're going to get more than they bargained for.

Did you see the verses how it says, the Lord in whom you delight is going to come. If you've read Malachi so far, it's clear these people don't delight in God.

And God is saying, oh, the one in you delight. Oh, he's coming. These people should have been careful what they wished for. They're going to get more than they bargained for. In the movie, A Few Good Men, there's a powerful interaction between Tom Cruise, who is a lawyer, and Jack Nicholson, who plays a Marine Corps colonel.

I've never actually seen this movie, but the line is a famous one. You'll know it when it comes.

Cruise is examining Nicholson, who is in the witness stand, because he wants him to admit that a Marine recruit died when a kind of hazing activity went wrong.

And at the end of a lengthy examination, Cruise shouts to Nicholson, I want the truth. And Nicholson explodes back, you can't handle the truth. That the truth of the one who is to come, that the arrival of the Lord Jesus at Christmas, the baby in a manger, that we're going to sing about and we're going to see in nativity plays and all the rest, is that that baby came to put into motion God's great work of righting every wrong.

[27 : 19] Of setting everything straight in the world for all time. But it isn't just out there. It includes you and it includes me as well.

And that work is so great that it's no wonder in verse 2, what does God say through Malachi? Look at verse 2, but who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can stand when he appears? No one. The answer to that is no one can stand. The whole story of the Bible to this point says that in their own way, that no sinful, unholy man or woman can stand before a holy and righteous God and live.

But where's the hope? So where's the hope? Because there is great hope. For although they're going to get more than they bargained for, there's actually something even greater here.

A greater surprise. Oh, it's a shock to them. This could be us who comes into judgment. But there's a more glorious shock. A more glorious invitation.

[28 : 27] That they can be safe. Just look down at chapter 3, verse 6. Where's the only safe place? Chapter 3, verse 6. For I, the Lord, do not change.

Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. The only safe place is to belong to the one who's doing the refining.

To be a child of Jacob, which is to be a child of God. To be a child of God. It is chapter 3, verse 7. We've come to this week after week.

It is to take God up on his invitation to return to him. And that he will return to us. That is the place of safety. That is the place where God will do his refining work.

And he will do refining work through fire. And we will not be consumed. So dear friends, how is it? How is it that God has done his refining work in such a way that we have not been consumed?

[29 : 28] Where are we safe? Please look up. Where is it we're safe? Here. How has he done his refining work? Bread. And wine.

That's where he's done his work. On the cross. Blood shed. Body broken. On the cross. That is where the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus, the refining fire, has taken our place.

Has gone to die so that we are not consumed. And made a way for us to be safe and adopted into his family forever. And he gives us a meal to remember that great grace and love.

Christmas is about justice. And it's God saying, I want to put the wrongs of my people right. And I'll come to die in their place to do it. They should have died, but I will die.

They're full of sin, so I'll become sin. Their record is guilty, but I'll take their guilt so they can go free. Justified. Adopted, as we were hearing about this morning.

[30 : 35] What an act of grace. These people have been faithless, loveless, turned from God. And God says, I will come and wash all that away with fuller soap.

That you can come to worship and know your Father again. Friends, if you know the Lord Jesus and you are in him, then you are clean. You are clean.

He has refined you in his blood. He has washed you clean in the refining fire and with the fuller soap. He has done that in himself. And he will keep sanctifying us until we see him in glory.

So know that in the Lord Jesus, you are safe forever. He has done it all. You are a child of God who pleases him. And as we were thinking about this morning, gloriously, we're adopted as heirs with him.

If you know and love the Lord Jesus, you are safe. You're safe and made clean. But if you do not know the Lord Jesus, if you do not know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, if you've never asked him to refine you, to purify you and wash you clean, dear friend, you cannot do it yourself, only he can do it, then this evening come and ask him now to do it.

[31 : 48] And he will, he will wash you clean. But dear friend, if you do not know and love the Lord Jesus, be under no illusions and take this of your notice, that the day of the Lord has started in the coming of the Lord Jesus in his incarnation.

But it will not finish with him coming again in a manger in Bethlehem. No, the Lord Jesus is going to come back and he will come and he will split the skies open and he will judge the world.

And the only safe place is to belong to him. Either you need to pay the penalty for your sin or let his nail-pierced hands pay for you.

The coming of the Lord Jesus in judgment is not good news for everyone. It's not good news if you're not safe inside him. So take safety, take shelter in his wings tonight.

So dear friend, let me ask you, let me ask you this question to finish. Are you ready for Christmas? Are you ready for Christmas? Or let me put it another way.

[32 : 50] Are you ready for God's coming justice? God's coming judgment? If you know and love the Lord Jesus, then you are. And our cry of come, thou long-expected Jesus will be answered.

Christ has come. But this Advent season should remind us of the Advent to come, his second Advent. Christ has come and he is coming. And if you belong to the Lord Jesus, then you are ready. So stay sheltered and trust him this day and always. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are our great saviour.

And we thank you that we are safe in you. May we shelter under the shadow of your arm, both this day and evermore. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.