

THE CERTAINTY OF JUSTICE

(judgement, justice)

MALACHI 2:17-3:7

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Yesterday's Denver Post gave the story of a 42 year old father who held a pillow over the face of his young child so he would stop crying - the child suffocated.

For the past several months television has brought us daily pictures of the atrocities being committed in Bosnia.

Muslim women and children burned out of their homes and then shot like animals.

The barrage of pictures and the sheer magnitude of the pain and suffering in the world usually allows us to escape feeling anything about what we see.

But every so often we hear a particular story or see a specific event that bothers us deeply and we wonder how such injustice can be allowed.

By the time Sharon was 2 her parents knew she was different from her two older sisters.

She couldn't talk right and she seemed slow.

Probably out of embarrassment her mother began to treat Sharon differently. She withdrew from Sharon emotionally and even physically.

By the time Sharon was kindergarten age someone realized she could get help with her speech problem and slow learning ability.

But her mother didn't want Sharon to get the help - saying it was a waste of time and money.

Every day on the bus on the way to Sharon's therapy her mother would remind her that Sharon was the reason she, the mother, did not have a new coat.

Everyday she would be reminded that her therapy was depriving the rest of the family from things they wanted.

I can only imagine the pain in that little 5 year olds heart when day after day she would hear her mother express such rejection.

I can only imagine the panic in that little child, mentioned earlier, as the person he trusted most in the world forced a pillow across his face and wouldn't let up.

Whether it is in Bosnia, or Somalia, or a little child in Denver - there are things that go

on day after day and year after year in our world that I can't explain and I most often just dismiss from my thinking because I don't know how to handle them emotionally. However as one who believes in God, every so often something inside of me wants to scream out - "Why doesn't God do something about that?"

Recently I saw part of a television program where they were interviewing Hugh Hefner - the man who built the Playboy empire.

Here is a man who has made millions exploiting women and pridefully engaging in every kind of indecency imaginable.

Here is man bragging about his past immoralities.

And here is a man living in his later years in the lap of luxury.

I see that and then I think of the godly men and women I have known who have struggled in their lives just to make a living and then they die miserably painful deaths while they are yet in their prime.

And I say where is the justice? Why doesn't God do something?

Apparently the people in Malachi's day found themselves thinking some of the same things.

Look with me please at Malachi 2 beginning at verse 17

Up until 150 years before the time of the events described in this book, the people of Israel had lived an independent country.

But at that time, 150 years earlier, their country was conquered, their king and most of the people who had not been killed had been taken into slavery in another country.

Now 150 years later and even 80 years after some of the Jews had been allowed to return to their country, these people were still barely eking out an existence and were still dominated by a foreign government.

They were supposed to be the chosen people of God and yet their lives were a daily grind.

And worst of all the immoral heathens around them were living it up at the expense of the Jews.

How did these people respond?

According to the last part of verse 17 many of them were making the following comments (whether they said them or not they thought them):

READ 17b

When they saw injustice around them day after day, when they didn't get in life what

they thought they deserved they began to make these comments.

I call them comments rather than questions for a reason.

Some time ago we looked at Psalm 73 together and read how King David faced this same issue - a belief in God and yet all the injustice around him.

He wrote, "I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles and their bodies are healthy and strong. They are proud and they scoff at the idea of God. SURELY in vain I have kept my heart pure - all day long I'm plagued."

But in David's situation, although he had those thoughts he turned to the truth about God and satisfied his troubled heart by reflecting on God's promise that justice would come.

In the situation of the people in Malachi's day they drew different conclusions.

The questions they were asking as indicated by the context were actually conclusions they had drawn.

They looked around them and concluded there is no God of justice. They thought about it and concluded that if there is a God he is as unmoved by injustice as He is by justice, he is as pleased with evil as he is with good. God makes no difference in our lives.

Do you get a sense of the progression of thoughts they probably went through?

I suspect that like most of us they started out believing in God after all that is what they had been taught from childhood.

But as things didn't go the way they thought they should a doubting began. as life pressed in on them in ways that were painful, when they were the victims of injustices, and when people they cared about were victims as well, the doubting increased.

And when life began to settle in as something of a disappointment, the questions formed - "Why doesn't God do something about this?" Is he unwilling? Unable?

As time went on and the injustices weren't corrected and the disappointments increased the doubts turned to cynicism.

They settled into a conviction that God wasn't going to do anything about life.

These weren't atheists, mind you, these were people who said they believed in God. But if you listened carefully looked closely - they didn't.

Oh, they would never say there is no God but they lived as if he didn't exist.

Do you remember some of the things God has been challenging these people with thus far in the Book of Malachi?

They were thoughtlessly going through the motions of worship and grudgingly giving their offering of gifts and time just to comply with others' expectations.

They were men and women whose lives demonstrated their affections were set on things other than God. They hadn't made it their life goal to honor God.

They were men and women who were marrying people who did not trust in and follow God.

They were breaking their marriage covenants by divorcing one another.

And as we will see next week they were robbing God by their disregard of their offerings that belonged to him.

Their lives were open testimony to their belief that God's will didn't matter because to them God didn't matter.

They had concluded nothing in life changed because they believed in God. Injustices went unpunished, sin seemed to bring pleasure not pain, obeying God seemed to result in misery not happiness.

They became functional atheists.

They no longer made their decisions in life based on whether it was God's will or not. They no longer even considered God in the equation of life.

To what extent have we done that?

Have we grown cynical of God's apparent inaction in the injustices of life?
Have we given up on God making any difference?
Have we effectively ruled him out of consideration in our decisions?
Have we ceased to believe He matters in real life?

"Now wait a minute" you say, "I can understand why people would doubt God." "It is almost impossible to accept the injustices that exist in this world."

And you go on, "I too have been confronted by the apparent contradiction of Christianity.

"How can I believe in God as all-powerful and all-good and yet account for the presence of evil in the world.

"Either he is all powerful and he doesn't choose to do anything about injustices in which case he is not all good OR

He is all-good but powerless to do anything about evil.

In either case he ceases to be God."

Having such thoughts about the apparent contradiction of a good God and the presence of evil in the world is not of itself wrong but drawing the conclusions many people draw is wrong.

Malachi says in verse 17 "You have wearied the Lord with your words."

God is sick and tired of your blasphemous conclusions. - the ones quoted at the end of v 17.

For you remember in Habbakuk 1:13 God says his eyes are too pure to even look on evil.

In Psalm 5:4 God says he takes no pleasure in evil.

and yet these people have the audacity to say God must be pleased with those who do evil. A "flat-out" contradiction of God .

Elsewhere God said, the soul that sins will die.

God said he will vindicate the righteous.

God said he will defend the widow, the orphan the alien.

God said truth and justice will prevail.

and yet these people say in essence, God is not just. By their conclusions and their lives they call God a liar.

Taken together their questions declare they don't trust God - they don't believe Him.

Have we done that? Have we effectively ceased to believe God?

As I said earlier, it is not wrong to understand the apparent problem raised by the presence of evil in a world the Bible claims is ruled by a good and all-powerful God.

The sin is not in understanding the apparent problem but in the conclusions drawn by too many.

The conclusion that in real life God doesn't matter.

That I must take care of myself because God is either unwilling or unable to make a difference.

We conclude the only justice that will ever come to our situation is the justice we make:

So we lay up treasure on earth rather than in heaven because we don't believe God.

We marry non-Christians because we don't believe obedience has better rewards.

We divorce our spouses because we don't trust God that justice will come and that faithfulness is better than life.

We treat religion and our faith as trifling matters because we don't believe God is actually coming back.

We go ahead and sin, disregard the commands of God, because we are convinced it won't matter. "Where is the God of justice?"

Beginning at chapter 3:1 God responds.

I sense God responds both to the honest questions raised by the problem of injustice in this world and to the sinful conclusions drawn by too many.

The problem of evil in the world has often been called the achilles heel of theistic religion and particularly of Christianity.

Down through the centuries philosophers of religion have attempted to defend God by thinking of "theodices".

Theodicy is from the Latin and it comes from the two ideas of God and justify. It is an attempt to justify God - to exonerate God from both the charge of not caring about evil thus not being good or the charge of not being able to do anything about evil thus being powerless.

There have been lots of attempts made by people to explain away the problem.

What is particularly interesting in Malachi 3 and in the Book of Job is that when God is faced with the problem he doesn't attempt to justify it - to create a theodicy.

God just states the facts and calls on people to believe Him.

Is God then avoiding the problem?

NO! GOD SIMPLY CUTS THROUGH THE ISSUE AND DECLARES THE OUTCOME OF THE WHOLE MATTER.

Do you have questions about whether God is good and just?

Do you have questions about whether God is powerful?

Do you have questions about whether being good is worth it?

Do you wonder if evil will ever be punished?

GOD'S ANSWER IS: "I AM COMING AGAIN AND I WILL BRING JUSTICE!"

In 3:1-5 God spells it out.

IN 3:1 God says, "Look", see, behold, "I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me."

Just 400 years later Jesus stood in Jerusalem and said John the Baptist was the one of whom it was written in the prophets: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

And so in Malachi 3:1 The Lord Almighty goes on, "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come.

The first part of vs 1 declared that a messenger whom we now know to be John the Baptist would come.

Now in the second part of vs 1 God declares that another messenger would come: Who is this messenger?

The verse tells us: It is the Lord himself who is to come.

Furthermore he is the "messenger of the covenant".

Most of you know that Jesus came announcing a new covenant, a new agreement between God and people.

This agreement would be established by Jesus own death and resurrection.

He would pay the penalty for our sins by his death in our place. And then he would freely offer us forgiveness and life if we would repent of our sins and place our faith wholly in Him.

God declares that he, himself, would come to set in motion real justice and yet real justice with an offer of mercy.

Verse 1 refers to the First Coming of Jesus - when God the Son came to earth taking on humanity. When he came to die for us and rise again from the dead.

When he came that first time he said he did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. And that anyone who would believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life - Justice with mercy.

But in verse 2-5 we see a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus - when God will come to earth to finish the task begun in his first coming.

Having offered to us a just mercy based on his death in our place, he will return to take to himself all who trusted in him.

But as is so clear from these verses, those who had not trusted in him would be judged.

Let's look at this more closely:

God says, (v 2) "Who can endure the day of His coming?"
"Who can stand when he appears?"

The obvious answer is "no one".

The Bible declares that when Jesus comes again in all his power and glory every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

God goes on to say, the Lord at his coming "will be like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap" or lye.

A refiner puts metal to the fire to separate the slag from the precious metal.

A launderer puts lye to clothing to separate the dirt from the pure cloth.

So when Jesus comes, as He said in Matthew 13 he would separate the weeds from the wheat - the fake from the real thing.

Likewise in Matthew 25 Jesus said in that great parable of the sheep and the goats, when he comes - let me read it READ Mt 25:31-33, 41-46

Your lives proved you didn't believe me, you didn't trust me.

Look at Malachi 3:5: Here the Lord says in essence the same thing.

I will be quick to testify against you and I will judge you.

Why? Because your lives proved you didn't believe me.

They proved you didn't fear me - hold me in respect - believe that I would bring justice.

You thought I was toothless, that I was insignificant in life, that I would make no difference ever. YOU ARE WRONG!

I am the God of justice. Justice will come.

But in these verses God speaks not only of judgment but he also speaks of mercy.

Look at vs 3-4 READ

In language consistent with the worship of that day, God tells what He will do with those who are truly His - those who did believe him, did trust him and accepted his mercy and followed His ways - God will finish the work He began in them, He will separate them out from the rest and they will have an eternal relationship with God.

God summarizes the whole thing in v 6 READ

The very fact that we have not yet been destroyed is proof of God's trustworthiness.

He said he would offer forgiveness - that he would make a way whereby sinful people could have a relationship with God.

Through all these years and through all our rebellion, He has not forgotten that promise - he offers it today.

But as certain is his mercy so certain is his justice.

Do you find injustice in the world?

God says trust me, I will bring justice.

Do you doubt the goodness of God?

God says believe me, justice will prevail. That which is good and right will be vindicated. Faithfulness will be rewarded.

Do you wonder if anyone is in charge in this world?

God says, I am coming and when I come I will judge the earth.

Will you believe Him?

In vs 7 he says that even if we have not believed him there is still time . READ v 7
If we will acknowledge our sin, our unbelief, and trust in Him, God will forgive.

All of life truly does hang on this question: Do you believe God?

Not do you believe in Him, but do you believe Him?

With all the evil, injustice, pain and suffering that exists in this world I think there are really only two rational ways to think:

One is to accept that God isn't there, isn't just, isn't capable of making a difference.

In that case it seems to me you are forced logically to despair - there is no hope - life is absurd because it is out of control.

The second way is to trust God for who he is and what he says he has done and will do.

This week I looked and every book of the New Testament except 3 John explicitly declares the Second Coming of Jesus. He is coming again - and when he comes he will right every wrong, he will bring justice.

Will you trust Him today? Will you live your life as if God makes a difference?

Will you believe Him?

RETURN TO HIM AND HE WILL RETURN TO YOU.

Have you been living as if God makes no difference?

Have you concluded there is no justice, no fairness, no happiness no pleasure besides what you make happen?

Call to repentance

Benediction: Gal 6:7-9