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## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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### **Questioning God's Justice**

Malachi 2:17-3:6

In Matthew 11:6 we read of a ninth beatitude, "Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." There are many ways to stumble over Christ. Some have stumbled on account of the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" That no doubt has baffled its thousands.

Yet there is a question that has baffled its ten-thousands, a question on account of which many have stumbled throughout redemptive history, and that question: "Why do good things happen to bad people?" For example the prophet Jeremiah grappled with

the question:

Jeremiah 12:1: "Righteous art Thou, O LORD, that I would plead my case with Thee; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with Thee: why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?"

We see it in Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 1:13b, "...Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?"

This was one of the many problems Job had with God.

Job 21:7, "Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?"

That godly Psalmist, Asaph wrote this:

Psalms 73:12-14, "Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence..."

Even Solomon in all his wisdom couldn't get beyond the question:

Ecclesiastes 7:15, "I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness."

Truly, the question of "Why do good things happen to wicked people?" has plagued God's people. Yet would you notice, everyone of the men I just referenced who struggled with God blessing the wicked did so in faith! In other words, their struggle did NOT drive them away from God, BUT to Him.

Recall how Asaph's struggle ended.

Psalms 73:17, 25, "[Then] I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end... Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth."

Yes, Asaph struggled with the blessings God gave to the wicked, BUT that struggle led him to God!

Such was NOT the case for the people of God in Malachi's day. They struggled with the same question, yet for them it led to cynicism and unbelief such that they judgmentally questioned God's governance of this world — which in the context of mechanistic

Christianity makes perfect sense. As we have seen, Mechanistic Christianity flourishes in the context of Performance-Based Religion. *“If we do what we’re called to do, God will bless us.”* That is the thinking.

Accordingly, to look around and see wicked people on the receiving end of blessing quite naturally leads us to question God’s justice! And that was the problem in Malachi. Accordingly, the prophet addressed this in earnest. He begins with the indictment raised against God.

Malachi 2:17b, “You have wearied the LORD with your words.<sup>1</sup> Yet you say, ‘How 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?’”

The people of God here were leveling three accusations against God.<sup>2</sup>

1. Accusation #1: God is silent in the face of evil. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD: IOW, the prosperity of the wicked seems to imply that God has no problem with these wicked men. That is the accusation that many have grappled with through redemptive history — like Asaph, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Job, and Solomon. This is the question that you and I have grappled with no doubt many times as Christians. Yet, the accusation raised against God at this time didn’t stop with that objection.
2. Accusation #2: God delights in evil men and women. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them: family of God, this is slanderous! Whether they realized it or not, this was tantamount to saying that God is evil. He delights in sin! Now lest we make the men and women of Malachi’s day out to be monsters, we must recognize that they were God’s children — ones whom God loved (Malachi 1:2)! That means this sin is NOT beyond anyone of us here.
3. Accusation #3: God is uncaring, not near, nor is He involved in our lives. Where is the God of justice? This is the same criticism Elijah raised against the 450 prophets about Baal.

1 Kings 18:27, “And it came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, ‘Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.’”

In other words, where is your god? The idea here is NOT that God is not omnipotent, BUT that He is uncaring!<sup>3</sup> Again, these are the people of God who are raising these questions!

And why were they raising these accusations?

While we don't exactly know, scholars point out three things:

1. God's People were Struggling in a World that Seemed to be Against Them. We know at this time God's people were enduring a significant famine (Malachi 2:2; 3:10). In fact, the land was under a curse (cf. Malachi 3:11)! And rather than it being *"all for one and one for all,"* the wealthy were taking advantage of the weak and poor (Malachi 3:5b) which meant the vast majority of God's people were suffering and God seemed to do nothing about it!
2. God's People Remained a Vassal People at the Mercy of Pagan Overlords. The Old Testament is filled with Messianic promises from which the Jews derived the false expectation that when the son of David comes, God NOT ONLY will dispossess the nations, BUT He will make His people most powerful and dominant (cf. Isaiah 2:2; 11:10; 60:3; Jeremiah 16:19; Ezekiel 11:17-21; 38:17-23; Micah 4:2; Zechariah 8:22; 12:3-9; 14:16)! And yet, it had been 150 years since the fall of Jerusalem and God's people were no closer to a restored Davidic Kingdom. To the contrary, all it took was for the Persian king to whisper in his inner chambers and Jewish lives could be ruined!
3. And most significantly, God had yet to Fulfill His Promise to Restore His Glory to the Temple, the City, and so His People. In Exodus 40:34-38 we read of God's Shekinah glory filling the Tabernacle. In fact, in 2 Chronicles 5:14; 7:2 we read of the priests unable to enter the Temple on account of the glory of God's presence there! But then in Ezekiel 8, 9, 10 we read of the Shekinah glory leaving the temple, YET NOT without this promise. This is a prophecy that Ezekiel gave to the people of God of a future time when God's glory once again would enter a rebuilt temple

Ezekiel 43:4-5, 7, "And the glory of the LORD came into the house by the way of the gate facing toward the east. And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the house... And He [Christ] said to me, 'Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever.'"

In fact, it was this promise that Zechariah used to encourage God's people to rebuild the temple,

Zechariah 8:3: "Thus says the LORD, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain.'"

Why should God's people labor at rebuilding the temple and the city of Jerusalem? Because by rebuilding His house the Lord once again will descend upon it in glory!

Well guess what? It had been roughly eighty years since the temple and city walls were rebuilt and NOTHING! No glory, no power, no miracles, nothing!<sup>4</sup>

And so, God's people began grappling which led to grumbling which then culminated in foul accusations against God!<sup>5,6</sup> Yet unlike the men I referenced before- Asaph, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Job, and Solomon whose questioning of God led them closer to the Lord — the questions raised in our text came from a heart of anger, unbelief, and alienation!

Now before we look at God's response, notice the provision for the indictment.

### The Provision for their Indictment, Malachi 2:17a.

Malachi 2:17a, "You have wearied the LORD with your words.<sup>7</sup> Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him?'..."

Used of God, the word "weary" does NOT reference an emotion. It is an anthropomorphism to denote the impact of the people's sin when it came to God.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is the very reason He sent Malachi to them!

Yet implicit in this word is God suffering long with His people's sin! Don't miss that! Part and parcel of their indictment of God was the fundamental question of His goodness! Yet, the fact that God was able to be "wearied" with their sin speaks volumes as to His kindness, forbearance, and patience. That is the point Paul makes in Romans.

Romans 2:4. "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

If ever you are tempted to question the goodness of God, just remember: the fact that you can question His goodness, and NOT immediately be struck by lightening, testifies to His love, kindness, and goodness! And so, it is because of His kindness/forgiveness that God's people were able to entertain such dishonoring questions! We are going to return to this next week (for Malachi does), so I won't belabor the point. Yet let us recognize that as great may be our sin, God's grace/kindness/forgiveness is greater! That brings us to the fact of God's justice.

### The Fact of God's Justice, Malachi 3:1-2.

Malachi 3:1, "Behold, [the language speaks of an urgency and an immediacy<sup>9</sup>...] I am going to send My messenger,<sup>10,11</sup> and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek,<sup>12</sup> will suddenly come to His temple ['suddenly' does NOT denote the concept of time, BUT that of surprise<sup>13,14</sup>]; and the Messenger of the Covenant [who is different from 'My messenger' who was just referenced] in whom

you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts."

This is an amazing promise which we know was realized in John the Baptist and then Christ! Both here are referenced. In terms of the first, "My messenger," he would be the forerunner of Christ (cf. Malachi 4:5-6). His job was to "clear the way before the Lord." What does that mean? God gave that answer years before in Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:3-5, "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then [speaking NOT of John, BUT the Messiah] the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'"

In the ancient world weeks before a king visited a city, men would be tasked to prepare the way/road which the king would travel. The ultimate goal was a smooth, uneventful journey. As such these stewards would:

- Fill in potholes in the roads which the king would take.
- If there were large boulders/mountains, they would be dug out and their hole filled.
- Bumpy roads would be leveled out into a plain.
- Rugged, tight terrain would be mended and widened.

Spiritually speaking, that was the role John the Baptist played in preparing God's people for the public ministry Christ!

Mark 1:1-4, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way [how would he do that? NOT by smoothing out a literal road, BUT by proclaiming the word of God...]; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.'" [notice therefore what we read of the forerunner or Christ] John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

What would be the fruit of this ministry? This is the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist:

Luke 1:13-17, "But the angel said to him [Zacharias], 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. [And this would be the fruit of his ministry... this is how he would 'prepare

the way of the Lord'...] And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

That is the preparation referenced in our text as it relates to "the messenger who would clear the way before" the Messiah.<sup>15</sup> When this occurred, notice from Isaiah 40 what God would do.

Isaiah 40:5a, "Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed [this is in reference to 'the Messenger of the Covenant' in our text who is none other than Jesus Christ!<sup>16</sup>], and all flesh will see it together..."

Recall with me, what was it that Zechariah used to motivate God's people to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple? The promise that if they did rebuild the temple, the glory of the Lord once again would fill it!

What was it that discouraged God's people when once the temple and city had been rebuilt? The unfulfilled promise that if the temple was rebuilt, then God's glory once again would reenter it!

So, did the glory of the Lord ever re-enter the city/temple? Yes! Listen to John 1 speaking of Christ.

John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

What was the nature of this glory? Listen to Christ speaking to Philip who wanted Christ to show the disciples the glory of God.

John 14:9, "Jesus said to him, 'Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father...'"

That means, every time Christ entered into Jerusalem as well as the temple, God made true on His promise in Ezekiel! All of this brings us to the ultimate problem of the people of God in Malachi's day. It wasn't that God was a liar! Or, that He wasn't just! That was the felt problem! It is that God's people read the promises of God and mistakenly expected them to be fulfilled in their lifetime!

We do this all the time! Because the world generally revolves around us, we take the promises of God and expect them to be fulfilled in a way that benefits us in the here and now!

That no doubt is why when God fulfilled the promise given to Ezekiel and restated in Zechariah — when His glory once again entered into Jerusalem and into the Temple — God’s people did NOT:

- Whisper in reverence when they entered the Temple!
- Worship!
- Reverently approach the Lord or the temple.

Rather, they opposed Christ, debated with Him, attacked Him, and eventually arrested, tried, and killed Him!<sup>17</sup>- which brings us to verse 2 speaking of the “messenger of the Covenant, “ Jesus Christ.

Malachi 3:2, “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 fullers’ soap.”

At this point the passage takes a sudden turn. The flow goes something like this: The people of God accuse God of being unjust (v. 1). Malachi’s response in v. 2: *Be careful what you ask for! For if you want justice, it is coming and it is aimed at you!!*<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the expression in v. 1 which speaks of Christ’s “sudden” appearance is used elsewhere in the Bible in reference to a definitive act of judgment (Isaiah 47:11; 48:3; Jeremiah 4:20). God’s people want justice? Well, they soon were about to get it! According to v. 2, the “coming of the Messenger of the Covenant” would be a day which:

- V. 2a: No man will be able to endure.
- V. 2b: No man will be able to stand. For it will be a day when...
- V. 2c: God refines His people.

Joyce Baldwin put it this way:

Who can endure the day ...? The question implies a searching ordeal, and the second question who can stand? is borrowed from battle imagery (2 Kings 10:4; Amos 2:15) and means ‘who will stand his ground?’. The prophet suggests that no-one will pass the penetrating tests which the Lord will impose. (Baldwin, 1972, p. 256)

And that is what we see here. The language of a “refiner’s fire” is that of a crucible in which gold is super-heated to purge it of all impurity. Recall, when is the purifying process complete when it comes to gold? When you can see your reflection in the molten gold!

Next, we read of “fullers’ soap.” This is referencing the work of a fuller whose job was that of bleaching wool so that it was white as snow.



The point of vv. 1-2 is to demonstrate that

1. God is in fact Just,
2. He is true to His promises, and
3. He does NOT look lightly upon sin!

Yet the people of God in Malachi's day (as well as you and me) must understand two things. God's timing is NOT our own. Speaking of the Last Days in which many will question God's integrity because of His perceived lack of involvement in this world where promised judgment has yet to be carried out.

2 Peter 3:8-9, "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. [Why then does God delay at times in fulfilling His promises?...] The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

In other words, any and all delay in the execution of God promises is NOT an indication that He is NOT just, BUT that He is kind, gracious, and forbearing! Secondly, the people of Malachi's day (and we) must understand this: Judgment begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17)- which is the point to which Malachi is going to return in vv. 4-6,

Let us take the point to heart. Christian, you want God's justice in this world? It must and will always begin with you! This should make us less mindful of the "blessings" God bestows on the wicked, AND ever mindful of the blessings that God has given to us which we look down upon on account of what we see in others.

And what are those "blessings"? The text before is very clear. In the face of His people's foul revolt against God's character wherein they accused Him of not being just, the Lord did NOT respond in wrath, BUT rather gave a promise which reflected both God's love for His people as well as His commitment to their growth in grace. Joyce Baldwin put it this way:

The prophet suggests that no-one will pass the penetrating tests which the Lord will impose. Yet the purpose of the refiner was not to destroy but to purify, and the fuller's soap, or rather alkali (soap in our sense was not yet in use), was applied in order to whiten cloth. According to these metaphors suffering fulfils a divine plan to remove impurities of character. (Baldwin, 1972, p. 265)

And so, with Habakkuk, God's people then and now must "wait quietly for the day of distress" (Habakkuk 3:16) by which God in His love molds and shapes His people that they might be all that He wants them to be!

May God give us the grace to wait patiently upon the Lord, trusting His character and purpose in our lives.

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## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> “The term ‘weary’ (*yg*) can refer to being physically spent as a result of prolonged labor, travel, or other activity. It can also refer to emotional disturbance (i.e., a sense of being annoyed) or exhaustion resulting from the persistent stresses, sorrows, and trials of life (cf. Pss 6:6; 69:3; Isa 49:4; Jer 45:3). In the sense of having diminished physical or emotional energy, the Lord cannot become ‘weary’; he is a source of strength to the weary (Isaiah 40:28–31). But since being ‘weary’ may imply prolonged and often unpleasant activity that is soon to stop, the verb can be used figuratively of God.” (Richard A. Taylor, 2004, pp. 371-372)

<sup>2</sup> “What do you blame for your misfortunes? Is it circumstances? God made the circumstances. Is it other people? God made them and has permitted them to come into your life. If you do not admit your own guilt in a matter (or at least acknowledge that God may be delaying the full execution of his justice for reasons that seem both wise and right to him), then you are saying that God acts sinfully. You are saying, as these people did, ‘All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them’ (Malachi 2:17).” (Boice, 2006, p. 594)

<sup>3</sup> “When they said, ‘Everyone who does evil is good [*tôb*] in the eyes of the LORD,’ they were explicitly challenging the Lord’s own declaration in Deuteronomy 18:12 that ‘Whoever does these things is an abomination (*tô’ēbâ*) to the Lord.’ Because they could not see a visible connection between sin and judgement, they came to doubt that there was any such connection. In fact, according to their reading of circumstances, it appeared that the Lord actually delighted in the wicked, rather than being concerned to bring them down.” (Duguid, 2010, pp. 222-223)

<sup>4</sup> “Disillusionment had followed the rebuilding of the temple because, though decade followed decade, no supernatural event marked the return of the Lord to Zion. So far as could be judged the Jews had done their part, but God failed to fulfil his promises (cf. Zechariah 8:3). His delays were being taken as an excuse for atheism.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 263)

<sup>5</sup> Speaking of 3:1 and “the messenger of the covenant”, Joyce Baldwin wrote, “The promise suggests that there was continuing disappointment with the second temple, despite the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah (Haggai 2:7; Zechariah 2:10, etc.), and it was a healthy reaction to be looking to God to do something greater than they had yet seen. When the Lord

comes Ezekiel's vision of the glory returning to fill the house (Ezekiel 43:1–5) will be completed, and the purpose of the rebuilding of the temple fulfilled." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 264)

<sup>6</sup> "Yet Judah, unable to recognize its own corruption, saw its current economic and social troubles (cf. Haggai 1:6, 9–11; 2:16–19; Nehemiah 9:32–37) as a sign of God's unfairness or unfaithfulness. They deserved divine blessings, they thought, but were receiving divine afflictions instead. Ignoring their own sins and aggravated by the sins of others, either within or around Judah, which they perceived were going unpunished, they were complaining of divine injustice (cf. Malachi 1:2)." (Richard A. Taylor, 2004, p. 370)

<sup>7</sup> "...[God] is never said to be wearied with human prayers and questions but only with human sin (Isa. 43:24)." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 264)

<sup>8</sup> "When we see the word 'wearied' we think of repetitious entreaties that tire the person hearing them. As it turns out, it is not so much the repetitiousness as the nature of the complaints that bothers God. God is offended that the people accuse him of injustice." (Boice, 2006, p. 593)

<sup>9</sup> The combination *hinneh* ('behold') + participle ('going to send') often has the sense of immediacy. Cf. (Bruce K. Waltke, 1990, p. 40.2.1b)

<sup>10</sup> "'My messenger' is literally *malā' kî*, the same word as the title of the book." (Duguid, 2010, p. 223)

<sup>11</sup> "It is interesting that in the Hebrew the phrase translated 'my messenger' is actually the word Malachi, the name of the prophet. Malachi means 'my messenger.' But Malachi is not thinking of himself when he records this important promise of God. The words 'prepare the way before me' are a clue that Malachi is thinking of the well-known prophecy of Isaiah 40:3–5, a prophecy that was extremely popular with the Jews of this period." (Boice, 2006, p. 595)

<sup>12</sup> "In whom you delight is probably ironical. Just as Amos had had to point out that the day of the Lord was to be dark and not light (Amos 5:18), so the coming of the messenger of the covenant would be less than welcome when the implications of his coming were experienced." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 265)

<sup>13</sup> "We see this same language in Matthew 21:12–13 (cf. Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–47; John 2:14–16). The Jews are going through the routine in the temple of exchanging money. The merchants are corrupt, but perhaps of even more consequence, they are meeting in the court of the Gentiles and thereby keeping foreigners from worshiping the Lord of all. Suddenly, Jesus, with whip in hand, overturns the tables and says, 'It is written, My house will be called a house of prayer. But you are making it into a den of thieves.' What is Jesus saying? At least in part He's communicating, 'This is my Father's house and I'm claiming ownership of it. What you see here is a foreshadowing of the cleansing that is on the horizon.' The warning has been given. Although the people had heard the words of Malachi, sadly, they did not heed them. God is both the proclaimer of the messenger and purifier of His people." (Micah Fries, 2015, p. Malachi 3:1)

<sup>14</sup> "The adverb *pit'ōm*, 'suddenly,' suggests not only a change from nonpresence to presence in the temple, but more importantly, a surprise element in the change and its immediacy." (Jacobs, 2017, p. 273)

<sup>15</sup> "Each of the four Gospel writers associate the messenger of these verses with the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1–12; Mark 1:2–8; Luke 3:2–18; John 1:6–8, 19–28). The question arises, How does John the Baptist prepare the way for the coming of the Lord? In the first century, and even centuries before that, the Jews believed that a person prepared for the Lord's arrival with one's body. That is, an individual removed distractions or impediments that would hinder holiness and, in turn, would hinder intimacy with God." (Micah Fries, 2015, p. Malachi 3:1)

<sup>16</sup> "The temple referred to here is the second temple, the one that was built by Zerubbabel and spoken of by Haggai and Zechariah. Also, it is the temple into which Jesus entered a week before His death. So, who is the approaching 'Messenger of the covenant?' He is the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, God incarnate. Jesus' entry into the temple precincts during the week of His passion is the fulfillment of this prophecy." (Micah Fries, 2015, p. Malachi 3:1)

<sup>17</sup> Christian, don't miss two important truths when it comes to the Promises of God. (1) Christ is the fulfillment of every promise of God (1 Corinthians 1:20)! (2) Most of the promises of God relate to His second coming!

<sup>18</sup> “Between the portion of Malachi 2 that deals with the sin of the people in divorcing their spouses and marrying unbelievers and the part of Malachi 3 that deals with their sin of robbing God of tithes and other obligations, there is a section dealing with the coming of the Lord in judgment (Malachi 2:17–3:5). But the coming of God is not the initial thrust of the passage. It begins with the people’s complaint that God’s rule is not just. God replies that he is just but that his coming in justice will mean judgment for the very people who are raising this objection.” (Boice, 2006, pp. 592-593)