

Where is the God Of Justice

by Steve Zeisler

As I was thinking about the passage from the book of Malachi that we will be looking at this morning—a passage dealing with a warning by God to his people I was reminded of a story my mother told me about her childhood. Her father kept several hives of bees in their back yard, and she and a young friend discovered one winter's day that when they beat on the hives with a stick they got a furious, buzzing, vibrating response from the bees. It being the dead of winter, that was the only response they got. One warm day, however, they made the mistake of tormenting the bees again. This time the bees attacked and stung my mother and her friend on every exposed part of their bodies, even inside their mouths and in their ears and hair. The bees, which had been angered all winter long, finally gave vent to their anger when the warm day arrived. Malachi 2:17:

You have wearied the Lord with your words. 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 I them," or, "Where is the God of justice?"

The people of Malachi's day were shaking their fists at God, pouting and feeling sorry for themselves because evildoers seemed to get away with evil, and demanding that God act in justice. They were accusing God of being less righteous than themselves, and of failing at being God. They were asking, "Where is the God of justice? Why doesn't he do something about those who are reveling in their sins?" God's answer begins in Mal.3:1:

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear 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.

This description tells of a pattern to God's response, one that will be repeated twice in history. Elijah will come as a forerunner for the messenger of the covenant, the Messiah. The people claim to delight in Messiah, claim to be for the things of God, yet the suddenness with which the Lord will come to his temple is very arresting as it is declared here. This occurred once, in the first advent of our Lord, when he was preceded by a forerunner, John the Baptist; then Jesus came to his temple with a frightening upsetting suddenness to that generation in the first century. That pattern will be repeated much more forcefully again at the end of time, when Christ's second coming will be preceded by a messenger, Elijah, and the Lord will return in judgment.

The Lord's answer to the objection raised by these people is that something is going to be done; the God of justice will in fact come, but he will come with a surprising and upsetting suddenness that will teach them a lesson about the kind of question they are asking. The temple of God, the place where God's people gather, will be the first place to be attended to by the Lord when he comes. God's own people will be purified of what sin and rebellion remains in them, and then, as we will see, he will turn his attention and speak a word of judgment to those who are still committed to wickedness. Mal.3:2 of the chapter asks a profound question:

"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. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness. 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; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers

and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts. For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

This section is bracketed by two pointed phrases from the prophet to the very people who were complaining: "Where is the God of justice?" To that question comes the response, "But who can endure the day of his coming?" Then the second part of the bracket comes at the end of this section, when the Lord says of himself, "I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."

Do you see the point the Lord is making? When God comes he will not only judge those whom these people do not like the troublemakers who annoyed them all of their life but God will also attend to those who were asking the question in the first place. The Lord will deal in justice with all of us when he comes. Just like the girls who beat on the beehives, not realizing what it was they were stirring up, the people of Malachi's day were saying, "God, we want justice. We want you to come and do away with wickedness." They assumed that they would be on the sidelines then, watching, but in fact they themselves would be the subject of God's inquiry as surely as any other individual or nation. They were calling for the God of justice, but, like the sorcerer's apprentice, they were playing with something much bigger than they imagined. They were asking for a response, but the response they would get would be much more dramatic than anything they could conceive of.

There are two activities described in the section I just read. The first is the purification of those who are God's people. They will be purified when he comes and that process, as Malachi describes it, will not be a particularly happy or pleasant one. Secondly, the Lord says, he will judge the wicked; he will be a "swift witness" in judgment.

Consider the two figures used to describe the process of purifying his people. The Lord is likened to "Laundry Man", soap, "fullers' soap." Modern detergents claim to be "softer than soft." We can leave our hands in them all day long and our hands will be softer than ever, we are told. Such are the claims made of our twentieth-century detergents. But the laundry man's soap to which Malachi refers is a caustic lye that was used in a very rough process to clean garments. God will come like that, like a "fullers' soap," a purifier.

The other figure Malachi uses is that of a smelter, a worker in fine metals who purifies silver or gold of the impurities embedded deep within it. He does this by heating the metal until it liquifies so that the impurities come to the surface. The great refining actions of God will bring to the surface the things in us that are in opposition to him. When we call for the God of justice to come, when we call out for God to do something about human wickedness, do not forget that he will deal with us too. He will deal with us just as certainly as he will deal with the people we do not like, those who have irritated us, the people whose sin we reject.

Malachi 3:5 talks about judgment, not merely the purifying of those who are his, but his "swift witness against the sorcerers, the adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who oppress the wage earner, the widow and the orphan, those who turn aside the alien, and those who do not fear me," says the Lord of hosts. We all oppose four square certain elements of wickedness; we speak out against them at a moment's notice. But rarely do we have lists as comprehensive as this. You may know, for instance, people who are concerned about economic oppression, the plight of the poor, etc., but not infrequently you will find that such people would just as soon not have God examine them concerning their sexual practices, their adultery, whether or not they tell the truth, etc. You may know some hardheaded American capitalists who are glad that certain cults and sorceries will be exposed by God, who would just as soon not have the question of the exorbitant rents charged to single mothers examined too closely by God. Spokesman for unions are quick to demand wage increases for their own members, but they do not want immigrants to be given work in the United States; they are dead set against sojourners and aliens earning a living in this country. Everybody has a list of wicked things that he is much more sure will come as a judgement to

those who he wants to see eliminated, but God's list is comprehensive; he is against all of it. He is a "swift witness" in judgment against those committed to their sins.

As I said, the pattern given in Mal.3:1 is a twice-repeated pattern, one that will happen twice in history. The first time it happened, in the first advent of Messiah, Jesus came in a startling, an upsetting manner, yet his purpose in that first coming was to die for his people. He came as Savior, not judge; he came with tears, not with a rod; he came to be the sacrifice for his people, "meek and lowly of heart," the Scripture calls him. Yet even then he was very upsetting to be around. Even then his purity and his insistence on purity made many people uncomfortable. Even then when his power was veiled, when his control and his willingness to stamp out sin was restrained, even then he was a hard person to live with. He stormed at the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and greed; he challenged his own followers who shunted the children away and argued over who would have the seat of highest honor; he refused the violence of the zealots and befriended Roman soldiers; he cleansed tax-collectors and adulterers; he terrified demons. He was a source of both fascination and fear to the great leaders of Rome. Both Pilate and Herod saw in him a kingdom and a power that was greater than anything Rome could ever aspire to. Even in the veiled version, even in his humility, Jesus was a very upsetting person to be around.

The promise of Scripture is that he is coming again; then he will do away with everything that yet remains of sin, both in his people and in those who oppose him. In one of his books, C. S. Lewis said of him, "Aslan is not a tame lion." He is good, but he is not safe; he will come as a refiner to bring about righteousness. When we call out for the God of justice, when we rail at God to act against sin we had better be willing to let him examine us too. The book of Second Peter brings a similar message (2 Pet.3:3-4):

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."

"Where is the God of justice?" the mockers will ask. "Where is the coming one? Where is the Sovereign Lord who is committed to righteousness? It is all a sham." But, Peter says,

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. 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. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

The slowness of God to come in justice is not because he is dilatory, not because he has forgotten what to do or how to act. He is slow to come because he is patient, longing for people to repent. That is what has delayed his coming. Then in 2 Pet.3:11, the apostle asks the very natural question,

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be?

If this is true, if the God of justice is delaying only because he is patient, what does that imply in terms of our response? What kind of people ought we to be? Having made the same announcement that a refiner is coming, that is exactly the question that Malachi answers. Since God indeed is coming in judgment, what kind of people should we be? Mal.3:7:

"From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes, and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. "But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there

may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until there is no more need. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the Lord of hosts. And all the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts.

Since the beginning, since the fathers, the Patriarchs, the Lord says, no one in Israel has really tried risky faith, no one has tried believing God so thoroughly that they risked themselves. The nation has never had one generation that totally trusted God. So the appeal of the Lord is, "Return to me. Trust me. Live as I command you to live and see if I will not respond. See if I will not pour out blessing."

At a wedding in this church not long ago I overheard a friend of the groom who was here for the first time read the words inscribed here, "You are not your own. You are bought with a price." She commented, "This church is just like all the others all they ever want to talk about is money!" It struck me that that comment illustrates the reputation that the church often projects. She could not conceive of any other "price." Let us take a moment to think about what Malachi is saying about "tithes and contributions," because this passage and others like it have been abused by preachers determined to selfishly wring the last possible dollar out of unsuspecting sheep, thereby totally misrepresenting God and his purposes.

The word tithe means one tenth. The tithe in Israel was instituted by God basically to make a statement. The people of Israel were to give the first tenth of their produce, whether it was lambs, the produce of their agriculture, or whatever, and give it to the temple service as a way of declaring the truth that God owned everything they had, that their Lord was master over everything in their possession. The purpose of tithing was to show that they were stewards and nothing but stewards of the Lord's possessions. Here Malachi is saying that you can usefully examine yourself as to whether or not you have returned to God, as to whether or not you are wholehearted in your repentance, as to whether or not you love God more than you love anything else by your attitude toward your money. He has already told the people of Israel that they ought to examine the animals they brought for sacrifices to see if they were the best. He has already told them to examine their family life to see if they were being faithful in marriage as a way of discovering whether or not they placed the Lord first in their lives. Now he asks the very normal question, "What about your finances? Does your life reflect God's Lordship in that area? Are you a steward, or do you think of yourself as the owner of your money? Are you carrying out the purposes of your Master with his goods? Is he directing you as to how they ought to be used, or do you in some sense think you are benefiting God by allowing him to occasionally have part of what you rightfully own and possess?" Tithing raised that question for Jews.

The language the Lord uses of himself is probably an allusion to the vassal state in which Judah found itself at this time. "You are robbing me," said the Lord, "you are robbing me of my rights." That is exactly the kind of statement that the Persian authorities might well make of those on whom they levied taxes. Already in Mal.1:8, the question of comparing their response to God to how they responded to their governor has been raised. That is happening again here. An empire taxed its vassal states to raise money to run the empire. But, equally important, taxes were raised to inflict humiliation on the conquered foe; it was equally important that people pay their taxes with alacrity and enthusiasm as a way of showing that they were under the thumb of the authorities. They had to pay taxes because they would be dealt with severely if they failed.

The Lord is raising that issue, perhaps with subtlety, here: Are you in humility before your Lord? Do you recognize that the very breath you breathe is a gift from your Master and Sovereign, the very giver of life itself? The brains by which you have made your money, the strong right arm you have used to turn the crank that has brought about whatever finances you own, everything you are and have come to you as a gift. You ought to be on

your knees in humility before the Lord in the same way that vassal states had to pay taxes to their sovereigns as an act of humiliation.

God does not need our money; he is Master of all the universe. But preachers sometimes abuse this passage by saying that God is in desperate straits, that he has a cash-flow problem, that he needs your money right now and that by giving it to him you can place him in your debt so that he is later bound to give you back all your money with interest; he has got to open up the windows of heaven and lay a lot of money on you later because you managed to get him out of the bind he is in at the moment. That is blasphemy. The Lord does not need anything from us. What he is saying is this: that we can examine our patterns of giving and discover whether or not we trust him, whether or not we are living in humility before him, whether we have called ourselves stewards rather than owners. The promise of God here is that if you really will trust him, if you will live with a total abandonment of faith where you stop protecting yourself and give him the right to be Lord in your life and money is a good test to apply here-- if you will live like that, then he will open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings. People who have taken that kind of risky leap of faith never ask the question that was raised in Mal.2:17. They never shake their fist at God and say, "Where is the God of justice?" They never feel that God is mistreating the world, because they have been able to see that his hand is at work everywhere. They find themselves living with the blessings of God.

I have always been struck by the fact that Corrie Ten Boom titled the book she wrote about her experiences in Nazi Germany, "The Hiding Place." She lived in a concentration camp, under the worst possible conditions. She was beaten; her sister and her friends died. She might well have titled the book, "The Hell Hole," "The Misery," "The Sadness," or whatever, but what she called it was "The Hiding Place." Looking back, what she remembered was the protection of God, the windows of heaven opened for blessing. She could see, even in those times, that she was the recipient of the blessings of God, rather than that she had to live under the lash of the Nazis. "Oh, yes," she would say, "during that period of my life, that was when God hid me with his hand. I lived in 'The Hiding Place'." The little miracles, received with joy, were tremendous evidence of God's blessings. Those who risk themselves, those who stop hedging their bets, are the ones who find that the blessings of God are indeed magnificent; and they would never have it any other way.

The question raised by these people, "Where is the God of justice?" is an insolent question. They imagined that they knew God's business better than he, and they were calling him to task. But Malachi's inspired preaching turned the tables on them. What he is saying is, "If you want the God of justice to come you had better be ready for serious business. When he comes you are certainly going to be just as much the object of his attention as anyone else. The God of justice will come and smelt his own people to make them pure; as well as come to judge those who are committed to wickedness." Here is a warning about the question they had been asking. Like the little girls who aroused the bees in the winter, they were stirring up something the end of which they could not predict.

Then, having issued the warning, God appeals to them: "Return to me. Trust me. Give over control of things to me again." If you want a way to measure how you are doing in that area, look at what you are doing with the checkbook you have in your pocket. Are you a steward rather than an owner? Does your financial condition indicate humility before the Lord, or arrogance at your own giftedness?

People responded to Malachi's preaching in one of two ways. In Mal.3:14 he talks about the first way:

You have said, "It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge."

They heard the message and said that it was ridiculous that the smart money was on vanity. They regarded themselves as the insightful ones; those who rejected the promise of God's coming and promise of God's blessing, and took care of number one instead. The second group is identified in Mal.3:16:

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it.

I want to read for you the paragraph that describes in more detail those who are arrogant. This passage is given so that we might examine ourselves. We need to pray that we do not end up, even subtly, in the camp of those who have decided that the arrogant are the ones who are blessed. Mal.3:13:

"Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?' "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts? So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also test God and escape'."

Those people concluded that it was the arrogant who were blessed. Those who take care of themselves and flaunt the purposes of God escape; they get away with it. That is the way life really is, they thought. But we need to realize how dangerous that position is. A good examination question has been offered us this morning. Are we the kind of people who have risked ourselves in trusting the Lord because we have believed his promises, we are sure he is coming? Or are we the kind of people who have decided, having heard everything, that we are better off prizing arrogance and disregarding the Lord?

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