

God's Justice

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much, Johan, for reading. We're in this series in the book of Malachi. The series is titled, as you'll see on the screen, Return to Me. And we didn't read it, but in verse 7 of chapter 3, that's where that comes from.

If you see, God says there, return to me and I will return to you. That's where we're driving this morning, to that verse, return to me. Do have Malachi chapter 2 and 3 open in front of you. If you've got a pew Bible in front of you, it's page 961. Let me begin with a massive spoiler. If you haven't seen The Avengers, if you don't know what The Avengers is, it's really a comic book brought to life on the big screen.

The sort of famous Marvel comics, if you know them, turned into film. There are loads of them. I think there are over 30 films. But the sort of central storyline is in this one series within them, The Avengers. And in 2018, The Avengers Infinity War came out.

And if you've seen that film, you know exactly where I'm going. This is a massive spoiler. I guess if you were going to watch it, you'd have seen it by now. So here's how the story goes. Thanos. You've got this collection of superheroes.

[1 : 10] And they're fighting to save the universe, to save it from the intergalactic bad guy, Thanos. Thanos is trying to collect all these special stones that will allow him to reduce the population of the universe by half.

He's literally trying to kill 50% of all of life. And here's the spoiler. Thanos wins. Thanos. The film ends as he clicks his finger and half, randomly selected, half of all of life, vanishes into nothing. And cut screen to him retired on some paradise planet, sipping a cocktail. I remember sitting in the cinema with Katie, watching that film, and just thinking, are you kidding?

The bad guy wins. Not sure how to feel, because we're sort of not used to that in films, are we? I appreciate this isn't always the case. Some films do have Thanos-like winners.

But more often than not, you watch a film, and throughout the film, the bad guy seems to be winning. But in the end, basically always, it ends up with good triumphing over evil.

[2 : 15] And that storyline is really weird. Because the truth is, life isn't like that. It just isn't. Very often, as we look around us, in the world that we live in, the bad guys are winning.

It's true in some pretty obvious ways. Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The massive multinational companies that are destroying our planet and exploiting people and taking massive profits as they do it.

Politicians who seem heartless and ruthless and power-hungry, rising to the top. Bad guys are winning all over the place. Maybe closer to home.

Maybe you've experiences of this at work. As cutthroat people are the ones getting promotions and bonuses in the inside line. Maybe you're at school and there's that kid that just always seems to get away with it.

No matter where you look, there is injustice everywhere. Maybe this is something that's actually really very raw for you. If someone has wronged you personally, or if you're sick or you're suffering, or someone you know and love is sick or they're suffering, however you've experienced it, isn't the human heart just calling out for justice?

[3 : 34] Marvel, the Avengers, at least in that one film, they got something right about life, I think, because very often, as we look around us, the bad guy seems to be winning.

And I guess then it would be very natural for us to ask, not least in a place like this, in a church where we preach about a powerful and powerfully loving God, shouldn't we be asking, why would that God let this happen?

If he is a God of justice, and the Bible says that he is a perfectly just God, then why on earth would evil be prospering all around us? Have you ever asked that question? Well, the people in Malachi's time, in our passage this morning, essentially that is their question of God.

Did you see it in verse 17 of chapter 2? This is what they're saying. Have a look at chapter 2, verse 17. All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them.

Or, in other words, where is the God of justice? Where is he? This is their question. Why does the bad guy always seem to win?

[4 : 48] And we'll see how God answers. But before we do, let's just see where we've been in this book so far. It's helpful, I think, to think about the book as a whole, to see where this question that they're asking today comes from.

It's helpful to see, actually, the other questions that they've been asking of God. If you've got Malachi open in front of you, the first one is in chapter 1, verse 2. Chapter 1, verse 2.

God tells the people that he has loved them. How have you loved us? They ask. And God responds by pointing to the history of their nation.

His choosing them, the descendants of Jacob, through no merit of their own. He favours them. He gives them a good land to live in. He sees them prosper. He has loved them.

But despite his love for them, they have turned their back on him. See in chapter 1, verse 6, what God declares of them. It is you priests who show contempt for my name.

[5 : 49] And again, here's the next question as it comes. How have we shown contempt for your name? And in verse 7, how have we defiled you? And then through the rest of chapter 1 and 2, God responds to those questions.

This is what they're doing. And if you've been here over the last few weeks, this will be familiar. The priests are offering dodgy sacrifices. They're engaged in dodgy teaching. And they're allowing dodgy marriages.

And what all of that points to is a deep-seated unfaithfulness to the God who loves them. As they fail to live according to the way that he has given them to live. It starts with the priests and it's spreading to the people.

And so in our passage this morning, we come to their fourth question. Malachi says, if you see it, that they have wearied the Lord with their words. In other words, with their questions.

And so comes another question. How have we wearied him? And in some ways, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? As they ask all these questions. How have you loved us? How have we shown you contempt? How have we defiled you?

[6 : 54] Of course, this questioning is wearying. For it's as if they're saying, what difference does it make? What difference does it make if we offer the right sort of sacrifices?

What difference does it make whether we teach false instruction? What difference does it make whether we marry those who worship foreign gods? What difference does it make? Where is the God of justice? This apparently just God is nowhere to be seen.

People get away with evil left, right and center. So why would we bother doing those things? Why would we bother living his way? What difference does it make? Do you see they're questioning God's justice?

And we've got to ask, is that really such an unusual question? Doesn't part of you just sympathize with them a little bit? Again, as we look around at a world where the bad guy often wins, where Thanos clicks his fingers, as we look around at a world that is full of injustice, it's everywhere. Christian, don't you ever look around and ask, what difference does it make? Why bother turning up to church on a Sunday? Why bother seeking out true biblical teaching?

[8 : 04] Why bother seeking to honor God with all of your life, including your sex and sexuality? In all of that, have you ever thought, why bother? Why bother living faithfully?

Why bother doing things his way? Maybe there's a very specific sin that plagues you, a guilty secret that you hate but love to return to.

And every time there's that voice of temptation, what difference is it going to make? Go on. It's not as though God's going to do anything about it. But you've always gotten away with it before.

And right at the heart of that temptation and at the heart of that question, it's the same as the question in Malachi's day, isn't it? Where is the God of justice? Well, God responds here.

And we'll see how he responds. He says, God's justice is coming. God's justice is complete. And God's justice is calling. So first, God's justice is coming.

[9 : 03] Do you see the promise of chapter 3, verse 1? It's actually loads going on in this verse. Let's unpick it together. First, God says, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.

The God of justice says he is coming. But first, his messenger comes to prepare the way. Now, of course, if you've spent much time in church at all, you might know how John the Baptist applies this language to himself in the New Testament.

In fact, I read that just earlier in our service, and we will get there. But for now, as is the way with Old Testament prophecy, this is fulfilled in multiple ways.

So let's see how that works. First, Malachi is the messenger. In fact, in your Bibles, in chapter 1, as Malachi's name is first mentioned there, you might have a footnote that says that that is actually what the name Malachi means.

He's talking about Malachi here. Before we even think about John the Baptist, Malachi is the messenger, and his message is exactly what we are reading. For the people of his day, he is preparing the way.

[10 : 12] That's what this book is supposed to do for them. And notice what he is preparing them for. He will prepare the way before me. This is the very God of justice speaking.

Indeed, in the rest of verse 1, Notice these two phrases.

You are seeking and whom you desire. The one who is coming is precisely the God of justice that they are looking for. Where is the God of justice? Well, he is coming.

And he will be the messenger of the covenant. In other words, as the Lord comes himself, and his message is the fulfillment of all that has been.

All of his promises, often known as the old covenant, his promises, and he comes with the beginning of something new. That is the new covenant, his new promises.

[11 : 12] And in the Gospels, as we see John the Baptist apply that preparation language to himself, it is so that the one who comes after him is the messenger of that covenant.

The one who comes after him is the God of justice come. It is Jesus. Now, of course, as we sit here this morning, and with that same question at the heart of so many of our questions, where is the God of justice?

I think there's something pretty awkward here for us, isn't there? We'll return to this, but isn't it just a little bit awkward that the one that Malachi speaks of here has come? That's the claim that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this, that he is the one for whom the messenger prepared the way, and that a little over 2,000 years ago he came.

The God of justice has come, and yet the question remains, doesn't it, for us, where is the God of justice today? For we still live in a world where the bad guy often wins, where injustice is everywhere.

If he's come, well, where is he now? And the Bible's answer is clear. It is that the God of justice will come again, because Old Testament prophecy has multiple fulfillments.

[12 : 31] It doesn't just happen once. Jesus has come. Jesus will come again, a great and final and decisive coming to execute complete justice.

If you're here this morning, and if you're not a Christian and you're asking that question, if you're asking how could these people in this place possibly believe in an all-powerful and an all-loving God of justice, I mean, look around you in a world like this, where is their God?

If that's you, then you need to know that the Bible doesn't shy away from that question. It says that the world that we live in has an end in view, that the God of justice is a just God, that he has come, and that he will come again, that he came and made a way for his justice to be done, and that he will come with final justice.

And for us as a church, as we ask what difference does it make, as we ask why bother living faithfully, well, this is why.

It's because we know that he will come again. The God of justice will come again. And just as Malachi was the messenger preparing the way for his coming, just as John the Baptist was the messenger preparing the way for his coming, so too we, the church, are his messenger, preparing the way for his coming.

[13 : 59] Together, as we proclaim the gospel, as we live lives of love, faithful to him, as the world around us asks, where is the God of justice? Well, we respond.

We respond with the words of Revelation chapter one, look, he is coming, coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. And so as a church, we are his messenger.

We point to him. This is our message. The God of justice is coming. And as we work through the rest of the text, we'll see exactly what his coming means.

For secondly, his justice is complete. If you have a look at verse two of chapter three, do you see the two images that he uses to help us understand that?

[14 : 58] The image of refiner's fire and the launderer's soap. Both of those things really carry exactly the same idea. Do you see the idea in verse three? They refine and they purify.

Now there is a sense, of course, in which that is a very brutal and painful image. The intense heat of a fire hot enough to melt metal and separate out the impurity.

The intense power of soap abrasive enough to clean the dust and the muck from pure sheep's wool. But it is also a simple and wonderful image.

It's a brutal and painful image, but it is also a simple and wonderful one. They burn away and wash away the dirty and impure, but they leave only what is clean and pure.

In other words, God's justice is complete. It will leave behind a people for himself, a perfect and a holy people.

[15 : 58] And so creating in the rest of verse three, men who will bring offerings in righteousness, offerings in verse four, acceptable to the Lord. So the promise is that he will come, that he will clean up his people, that they'll no longer ask them what difference does it make?

They'll no longer ask what difference does living faithfully make. Instead, they'll gladly offer themselves up in service to him. Now you might imagine Malachi's readers feeling one of two things here.

If they've been reading this book in a very superficial way, they might be feeling quite self-righteous. This is a message for those who need to be cleaned up, and that's not really me.

But I suspect much more likely they'd be feeling deeply unrighteous. Uncomfortable. Aware that this is just aimed sharply at them. Indeed, did you notice in verse two, back in verse two, the warning, who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can stand when he appears? The implied answer, of course, is no one can endure it. No one can stand.

[17 : 08] It is, I think, a hint of what is to come in verse five. See, in verse five, just very directly, he says, I will come to put you on trial.

In other words, reader, don't think that you're exempt from this. God's justice is a complete justice. Your bad sacrifices, and bad teaching, and bad marriages, they make all the difference in the world. You're the ones in need of refining and purification. And God offers, in the rest of verse five, a list of some of the things that they'll be on trial for.

You see, in the rest of verse five, I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages. I guess that might seem like quite a random list of things.

But probably these things are things that are just especially in view in Malachi's day. Sorcery, for example, we know was a big deal in Babylon where they've just been in exile.

[18 : 15] So perhaps magical looking things that they might have seen and picked up there. Adultery, we've seen already in this book, is a big problem for Malachi and the people around him.

And so I guess the others, things like perjury, which is lying in court, and the failure to pay a fair wage, probably these things are just especially convicting for Malachi's readers.

Indeed, as he continues, it's the mistreatment of widows and the fatherless and the foreigner. Very often in the Bible, these three groups, they're the most vulnerable and neglected people.

I guess that these are injustices then that Malachi's readers know they are guilty of. They know that there are ways that they have failed to care for widows and orphans.

They know that there are ways that they failed to offer justice to the foreigner. And so I think this whole section is designed to make them think, not self-righteously, not this message is for them over there, but it's designed to make them think, this is a message for me.

[19 : 19] When we watch films and we're expecting the good guy to win, because, well, lots of stories are like that, aren't they?

We expect the good guy to win. Good stories, they have all these ups and downs where the bad guy gets all these little wins, but we know that the good guy is going to win in the end. But again, the truth is that life isn't like that. And not just because in real life, the bad guy often wins, though he does, but also because the uncomplicated good guy doesn't exist in real life. There's no such thing as an uncomplicated good guy. In fact, the very best stories actually don't present a perfect person as their hero at all, do they? But a complicated and flawed sort of character in need of redemption.

They're the best sort of stories, and it's such an attractive storyline because it's real life. As we look around us and as we examine our own hearts, don't we know that we are all complicated and flawed sorts of characters in need of redemption?

[20 : 24] Maybe you look at that list in verse 5 and declare yourself to be innocent. You're definitely not a sorcerer. You've never pursued that sort of intimacy outside of marriage.

You've never told a lie in court, never failed to pay wages to someone working for you, or oppressed widows and orphans, or injustice for the foreigner. Maybe you look at that list and you do feel as though you're doing a pretty good job, actually.

Feeling, if you're honest, quite self-righteous. But the point of that list is not to be specific, but to say, do you really live a faithful life?

Can we really say that we've lived absolutely faithful lives? Are we a perfect and holy people not in need of this sort of cleansing? No, the Bible is very clear about what humanity is like.

That there are ways that we all fall short. That each of us has turned away from our Creator. That we are all complicated and flawed sort of characters in need of redemption.

[21 : 28] Even as we cry out, where is the God of justice? There are ways that each of us contributes to the injustice of this world. And so for complete justice to come, we too must face it.

That's what Malachi seeks to convince his readers of. That each and every one of us must face it. That God's justice is coming and that his justice is complete. And yet, do you see the glimmer of hope at the end of verse 5?

God says, do not fear me. Don't know about you, but that seems like quite a surprising thing to say, doesn't it? In the context. I am coming to bring total justice.

To burn away all of your impurity. To scour away all of your uncleanness. I am coming to bring justice to you. But do not fear me. It's strange.

Why ought they not fear if this justice is coming? Well, we're just going to dip into next week's passage briefly. If you have a look at verse 6 with me. I, the Lord, do not change.

[22 : 42] So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. I see what God is saying here. He says, you, that is, God's people, the descendants of Jacob. Just as he said in chapter 1, I have loved you.

Through no merit of your own, though you deserve to be, you are not destroyed. For I continue to have mercy on you. But in verse 7, As he says to his people, You have continuously abused my merciful and gracious love for you.

You have turned away from me and my law. And so return to me. Return to me and I will return to you. This is the call of God's justice. If you're here this morning and you have never heard that call, having turned away from God and what he says is good, if you've never turned back to him, you need to know this morning that this promise can be yours in Jesus.

Because he was the one who came, the God of justice, the one for whom the messenger prepared the way, and he came in justice and in love.

So that the right punishment for all injustice could be paid. And he paid it for you on the cross, dying in your place, rising again, so that now you might return to him.

[24 : 18] So that you might experience the lifelong process of refinement and purification that he offers in his word. Now let me just be very clear about how this works.

Christ died to justify the unjust. If you're here this morning and you feel like you're not good enough to be a Christian, or you look at the person next to you or the person on the street and you think to yourself, this person is living a life totally unworthy of the God of justice.

Do you see this morning that you are absolutely right? That we all desperately need God's mercy? What you're hearing this morning, it isn't for the unjust, the less than good, who are prepared to do a bit better to get more justice done.

No, instead it's for the unjust, broken, tired, humble souls who know that they're not good enough and are prepared to stop pretending that they are.

And that is just brilliantly good news. At least it is for someone like me. Return to me and I will return to you. And if you're here this morning and you have followed Jesus, but you find yourself asking what difference does it make?

[25 : 38] In your heart of hearts, you know that there are ways that you continue to be turned away from him. If you feel yourself to be under the burden of a weight of guilt, see that he calls you to return to him, to find freedom and forgiveness.

And that as we do that, his justice continues to be worked out in our lives. As by his spirit, he returns to us. And in his presence, we are cleansed and purified and continue to become more and more like him in a lifelong process.

Not so that we might earn a justification, but so that we might live out of the justification already won for us on the cross. So that one day, when Jesus returns to execute final justice, we might rejoice, knowing that in Christ we have been and will be justified.

Return to me and I will return to you. God's justice is calling. In many ways, stories where bad guys win, films like Infinity War with Thanos clicking his fingers, in a world where stories like that seem more realistic in some way than the triumphant hero story, in other words, in a world where injustice reigns, the people of Malachi's day ask, what difference does it make?

Why bother pursuing faithfulness to him in a world where God is apparently absent? Answer, God's justice is coming.

[27 : 17] God's justice is complete. And God's justice is calling. Return to me, he says, and I will return to you.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are a God of justice.

That as we cry out to you, you hear our prayer, that you see the injustices of this world and are grieved by them.

And Lord, we pray, God of justice, come. Lord, we're so grateful for all that Jesus has done for us, for the down payment of that promise of justice on the cross.

And we declare now that we believe that he will come again to do justice once and for all.

[28 : 29] And Lord, we hear your call to return to you. Help us, we pray by your spirit to do that and to live faithful lives as servants of you.

In Jesus name. Amen.