

The Question of Justice

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Date: 06 July 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Well, you may have been watching Wimbledon Tennis Championships on this past week on the BBC. You may even have been in Wimbledon. I know some people are keen on tennis.

And I discovered this week that if you win Wimbledon, then you become a lifelong member of the Wimbledon Tennis Club. I say discovered that. I didn't personally discover that.

But I realised that if you win, you become a member. Now, the big story of Roger Federer, who's eight times winner of Wimbledon, he was refused entry when one day he decided that he would go to Wimbledon unannounced.

And he would go inside and have a cup of tea with one of his coaches. But the security guard on the gate he went to wouldn't let Roger Federer in because she didn't recognise him or know who he was.

And she insisted that he had to have his membership card if he was to get access into Wimbledon.

And so there was a big long discussion and Federer tried to say that, well, he's not his card with him, but he is a member.

[1 : 0 6] And if she could just let him in, then it would all be fine. But she stuck to her guns and said, no, he can't get in. And so after this conversation, Federer eventually had to say to her, I've won this tournament eight times.

Please believe me, I am a member. But she still didn't believe him and still refused him entry. But he went away and what happened was another security guard saw him standing beside a fan getting a selfie and then realised, oh, this is Roger Federer.

So can you come, Roger, you're welcome to this club because you're a member here. And it's remarkable that the security guard didn't recognise who he was, didn't know that it was Roger Federer and got his identity wrong.

Now, as we come to the book of Malachi again this afternoon, as we continue our series in it, what we see is the people. The people get God wrong. They get God wrong because they continually question him.

They don't understand his nature and his character and they misjudge God. And in our text this afternoon, what we see is that the people question God about his justice.

[2 : 1 8] So they ask, verse 17, where is the God of justice? So as they look around the world, as we often do, they see all of the injustice and they wonder, what is God going to do about all of this?

Where is he? It's an accusation that they make against God. But they get God wrong because God is just and they will come to see and realise this fact.

And so the message of Malachi chapter 2, verse 17 to 3, verse 5, is for any who would wonder or question God's justice.

It's warning us not to get God wrong. Not to mistake his identity. Not to think that he is other than he really is. Because what we see in this passage is that God is just.

And because God is just, God will bring about his justice. And of that we can be sure. And his justice will come with a messenger who will both purify and judge.

[3 : 2 3] And so this messenger that we discover in the passage is the answer, not just to the people in Malachi's days search for justice, but he is the answer to this world's search for justice too, including ours.

So we look at three points as we work through this text. First, God's justice is questioned. Second, God's justice is guaranteed. And third, God's justice is personal.

It's questioned, it's guaranteed, and it's personal. First, God's justice is personal. This is chapter 2, verse 17. The people question God's justice. Look again.

You have wearied the Lord with your words. How have we wearied him, you ask? By saying, all good and evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them.

Or, where is the God of justice? Now remember, the good Malachi is essentially one long debate between God and his people.

[4 : 22] Israel is like a courtroom scene, and there are six disputes where the people question God, and God reveals himself to them. But the people continually question everything that God says.

And God is weary with the people's words. So, it's as if the people want to put God in the dock, and they want God to listen as they fire all their accusations against him.

And so, if you remember, Malachi chapter 1, verse 1 to 5, they challenged God. They challenged his love for them. That's how it started.

And then now, in chapter 2 and chapter 3, he challenges justice. They're basically saying, God, you condone evil. You don't see what is going on, and do something about it.

But it's an insult to the character of God. And yet, the people weren't even aware that they were wearying God with their words. So, how have we wearied him? they asked.

[5 : 26] And so, they made the wrong assumption that God doesn't care about evil, or that God doesn't care about injustice. That is how many people think today.

As if they think, well, God just turns a blind eye to all of the injustice in the world, and God does absolutely nothing about it. And so, they may echo the words of the people in Malachi's day and say, where is the God of justice?

And I think the people in Malachi's day began to wrongly think that they cared more about good and evil, about right and wrong, about justice and injustice, than the Lord God Almighty.

And so, they reason that if God is a God of justice, why does he let all of this bad stuff happen? And it's a question human beings have always asked, and still ask today.

If God is so good, then why is there so much evil and pain and suffering in this world? But the people here in Malachi's day jumped to the wrong conclusion.

[6 : 34] Because they assume that if there is evil, well, then God must be okay with it. And because evil people do seem to prosper, then they wrongly assume, well, God must be pleased with these people, because he seems to be blessing them.

But they couldn't be more wrong about God. And so, it's likely that it wasn't just a noble concern about injustice that troubled them. It was also a selfish concern for themselves.

Because they regarded themselves as being good people, because they were Israel, they were God's people, his covenant people. And so, they thought, well, we're the good people, but we don't seem to be prospering.

Whereas the evil people do seem to be prospering. Now, Malachi said after God's people had returned from the exile in Babylon, and so now they're back in their homeland.

No longer in exile. And their temple had been rebuilt. And they had all of these great promises from God about prosperity and about blessing and about how God would bring judgment on their enemies.

[7 : 43] But instead, what they seem to be facing was social and political oppression. And so, they struggled economically, and we've realized that they're spiritually unhealthy as well.

And so, as they looked over the fence and all the surrounding pagan nations around them, it seemed as if the grass was greener on that side than it was for them.

And for them, it just wasn't fair. Where is the God of justice? How can this be? And so they're complaining to God, and they're questioning, is justice?

And of course, you and I should be concerned about injustice in this world. Whether it's on a large scale, and impacts many people, or countries even, or whether it's just simply on a small scale, and it impacts me or you.

We should care about injustice. And I wonder if we're prone to fall into the same trap as the people in Malachi's day. And of course, we may not verbalize the fact that we're concerned by asking or saying, where is the God of justice?

[8 : 55] Or we might still think it, in our heads or in our hearts. And we might wonder whether God sees, God knows, God cares about the injustice in our world.

I mean, where is he? What is he doing? And that's why people ask questions like, how could God let this happen? Why doesn't God stop all these wars?

Why does he allow floods to kill people? Why doesn't he kill these leaders who seem to kill everybody else? Why aren't they ever held to account for their crimes?

Or we may even feel it in a personal way from time to time. Especially if we've been misled into thinking that being a Christian should always lead to health and wealth and prosperity.

We might be thinking, well, how could God allow this to happen to me? I mean, I seem to be trying to live a life where I am faithful to God.

[9 : 58] A bunch of people aren't living for God. They don't even believe in God. And yet, they seem to be getting on the law of every life than I am. How come? Or why this illness for me?

Why right now? Why is this happening to my family member? Why am I overlooked at work for promotion when all my colleagues seem to be scheming and cheating and lying?

I try and work with integrity, but I never get promoted while they do. Where is the God of justice?

Like, where is he? Well, you see that God is not impressed by this kind of thinking from the people of Malachi.

In fact, he says it wearies him. He's a bit fed up listening to the people and they're questioning and challenging everything he says. But why?

Well, because it questions God's love. It questions God's justice. It questions God's ways. It misrepresents God's character.

[11 : 01] Because God is perfect. And so if God is perfect, then of course he will be perfectly just. And yet the human heart still is prone to question and to challenge and to doubt God.

As if somehow God gets it wrong a lot of the time. And we know better than he does as to how things should be done and how this world should be ruled.

And yet we shouldn't make the same mistake as Israel. Because we are in no position to sit in judgment of the Lord Almighty. And so we've got to be so careful that we don't adapt or adopt a wrong view of God.

Because while it may seem as if God ignores justice, he definitely doesn't. And while it may seem as if God is impotent or does nothing about injustice, well, he definitely will do something.

So God assures us here that his justice is guaranteed. And that's what we're told next. So first, God's justice is questioned. Second, God's justice is guaranteed.

[12 : 13] Chapter 3, verse 1. So God responds to the questioning of his people by guaranteeing his justice. So they're asking, where is the God of justice?

God answers by saying, well, my justice is coming. It will come in the messenger that he's going to send. So chapter 3, verse 1. I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.

And suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, says the Lord Almighty.

So the Lord says his messenger is the answer to his people's search for justice. He is the one that they're seeking and he is the one that they desire.

Now, who are we talking about here? Well, God is speaking about sending the Lord Jesus Christ.

For these verses, in a sense, begin to unfold and unpack the person and work of Jesus Christ.

[13 : 16] But I wonder if you noticed that there are two different messengers in chapter 3, verse 1. So the first messenger we read would prepare the way.

So this is John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus, who prepared the way for Jesus. And Jesus quotes this part of Malachi in the Gospels, basically showing how this prophecy in Malachi is fulfilled in John the Baptist.

So that's the first part of verse 3. And then we read, So saying, So saying, Jesus would come.

And he is the Lord the people are seeking. And he would come to his temple. And he would be the messenger of the covenant. So God is saying, The Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is on his way.

He is coming. So this long promised one that the people seek, This one that the people desire, Will come. And he will come and bring God's justice.

[14 : 28] So God's justice is guaranteed. He will bring about God's judgment through his life and death and resurrection.

And then he will return again as judge. And so what God is doing here to the people in Malachi is he's revealing his plan and he's telling how he will fully satisfy the requirements of justice.

So this is the hope. So this is the hope. This is the hope that no other religion offers. No other philosophy or worldview gives the hope that there will ultimately be justice in the end.

But God's saying, It's damn things. Because I will bring it and my son will do it. And so justice will be enforced. But for the people, it would come in a far greater and more perfect way than Malachi's contemporaries would ever have conceived of.

So, yeah, they get justice alright. And some. Because it would be ultimate justice. And so all the people wanted justice now.

[15 : 40] God's saying, You'll get justice. You'll get full justice. It is coming in the future. And so they would get the justice that they longed for.

Well, that justice would encompass everybody, including them. And so this is a prophecy pointing forward to Jesus when the process of justice would begin in the coming of Jesus to this earth.

And so that's the first coming of Jesus. Jesus came, his first coming. Jesus will come again, his second coming. And so these verses in Malachi chapter 3 have been fulfilled in part.

But they will be fulfilled or they will be fulfilled with the second coming of Jesus when he returns and brings the final judgment.

Now, so it would be great to understand prophecy like this is to think of a mountain range, just like the Monroes. And if you've ever climbed any Monroes or any mountains, you know that before you start to ascend, you're in the car park, you look up at the mountains, and all the mountain peaks just seem as if they're the exact same distance away from where you are.

[16 : 56] And then as you start to climb up the hill, you discover when you reach one peak or one summit, that there are more, and they're further away than you had first imagined.

They're in the distance. And so you've come so far, you've fulfilled part of your climb, but there's still a further way to go until you get to the end of your climb.

And that's a helpful way to understand how justice is spoken about here in Malachi. Because the people in Malachi say we're waiting for the first coming of Jesus.

Whereas we live after the first coming of Jesus, and we await the second coming of Jesus. And so the messenger, the Lord, Jesus, the Messiah, was coming in the future.

For the first coming of Jesus, with his death and resurrection, was the outworking of God's justice. God's judgment came as Jesus died on the cross.

[17 : 56] But we still await for the second coming of Jesus, when he will come as judge, and there will be a day of judgment, and God's justice will be fully complete.

And that's still to come. And so God's justice may be questioned by some, as it was back then in Malachi's day. But we can be confident that God's justice is guaranteed.

That process of judgment started in the first coming of Jesus. And when Jesus hung on the cross, he bore God's judgment for our sin. So Jesus came to bear God's judgment with his first coming.

His second coming will be different because he will come to bring God's judgment. First coming, bear God's judgment on the cross. Second coming, bring God's judgment for everybody.

And so what God is doing here is assuring his people and us that his justice is coming. And also that his justice is personal. And that's what we see next.

[18 : 57] So first God's justice is questioned. Second God's justice is guaranteed. And third God's justice is personal. So God's people were asking, where is the God of justice?

Complaining that God was absent, that he had abdicated responsibility. And so they basically wanted God's justice on tap, to be dispensed whenever they wanted, on whoever they wanted.

They expected God to judge everybody else whilst they got a divine pact on the back. But God is saying to them that his justice is personal.

So God's justice would not just fall on other people. It would also fall on them as his people too. And that's why Malachi outlines the purpose of the messenger's coming.

Because it would be a personal challenge for them. And then, verse 2, but who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?

[20 : 04] God and the Lord Jesus would come to save and to judge. Whereas judgment would involve the twin work of purification and judgment.

So there's purification in verse 2, the second half of verse 2 to verse 4. That's purification. And then there's judgment in verse 5. So let's look at these. First of all, purification, verse 2 to 4.

Let me read. For he will be like a refiner's fire on a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness. And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord as in days gone by, as in former years.

So that takes us to verse 5. So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless and deprive the foreigners among you of justice. But do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty. Just look at the tone and the language here. This is a courtroom scene.

[26 : 54] The terms put you on trial testify against justice. And so this dispute that began with the people accusing God of injustice concludes with the Lord putting them on trial and testifying against their injustice.

And you notice that the Lord here is not only the witness to their sinful behaviour, but he is also the prosecutor and the judge and the jury. And what he does here in verse 5 is stack up all the evidence against them because all the specific sins mentioned in verse 5 are sins that are forbidden in the law of God.

And so their wrongful behaviour was religious because they practised sorcery. It was relational because they committed adultery. It was legal because they mourned false witness.

It was commercial because they cheated workers out of their wages. It was political. It was oppressed widows and orphans and immigrants. And so the irony is that while these people questioned God on his justice, they were guilty of all kinds of social injustice.

And so God's verdict was that the people do not fear me. And God's justice should terrify those who are guilty. But God's justice should also bring hope to those who are victims of injustice.

[28 : 25] Because we should leave this passage aware that God does care about all sin, all evil, all injustice in our world. It all matters to him because people matter to him.

And so any level of injustice, however big or small, matters. Because God's justice is personal, it means everybody will be called to account.

And that's why knowing that he is the God of justice is actually a brilliant thing. Oh, it's such a relief. How do you live in a world where there is no guarantee of justice?

It would be absolutely unbearable. The Holocaust. All the needless, pointless wars. All the innocent people killed.

How do we live and think, oh well, that's just how it is. That's not how it will be. God will bring about his justice. And that's why Christianity gives the only satisfying solution to the problem of injustice and evil and suffering in our world.

[29 : 40] God is not only angered at injustice as we are. God has also got the power to do something about it.

So he will judge and he will punish sin and evil. God will be evil. And it will happen when the Lord Jesus Christ returns as judge.

And so it was a very brave thing for Israel in Malachi to cry out to the God of justice to do something. God will be evil. God will be evil.

Because of course we all want justice to be dished out on evil people, don't we? The terrorists, the murderers, the rapists, the paedophiles, and so on and so on.

We want justice to come. We'll be sick if we didn't want justice to come for all the atrocities in their world. And the promise is that God will bring it.

[30 : 38] Because justice won't just stop with them, the really evil people I mean. And of course we'd like to think that there was some kind of cut-off line and that God comes so far in judging people that he stops at our worst death.

But there is no cut-off line. God can't stop at our doorstep. Because he is perfectly, purely just. And he's got to come right through our door, the door of our heart, and he must judge us too. This is what Johnny Wilkinson, the former English rugby player, he says this in his autobiography, My World.

He says, I'm not quite sure where I stand on organised religion, but I like to believe in judgement from a greater power. I live my life as if a 24 hour surveillance camera is trained on me.

At the end of my days I want to be able to hand over and sign away the video, happy that his contents accurately reflect the person I am. But like Johnny, we all like to believe in judgement from a greater power, don't we?

[31 : 53] But unlike Johnny, we shouldn't believe that the recording of our life, the videotape, is going to be good enough. Because when the day of judgement comes, we will only survive that day if the videotape of our lives is white cream.

