

# Debate with God: A Question of Justice

Malachi 2:17-3:6

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 9 October 2005

## An absent judge

In the paper last week there was a story about a female brothel keeper who appeared in the Wellington district court charged with procuring a 14 year old child prostitute – a young girl – for sex with her clients, 24 adult men, all of whom could be now be classed as paedophiles. The brothel owner was convicted. The charges carried a maximum sentence of seven years imprisonment. But, incredibly, the judge sentenced the woman to only 300 hours of community service and permanently suppressed her name. His rationale? The brothel keeper's mental health was "fragile." The investigation, arrest, and trial had taken a lot out of her, and a harsher sentence might affect her mental stability. Michael Laws, commenting on this case, said: "Getting caught committing a criminal act, and being taken to task for profiting from a little child slavery does tend to do that." What was the judge thinking letting her off like that? Where's the justice in that?

Do you ever ask that question? You watch television coverage of hurricanes that kill hundreds of innocent people. You read statistics that say that 2.5 million people die in Africa each year from AIDS. You hear about a newborn baby that dies in his mother's arms. Why doesn't God do something? Where's the God of justice? Sheldon Vanauken once said: "If only villains got broken backs or cancers, if only cheaters and crooks got Parkinson's disease, we should see a sort of celestial justice in the universe. But, as it is, a sweet-tempered child lies dying of a brain tumour, a happy young wife sees her husband and child killed before her eyes by a drunk driver; and ... we soundlessly scream at the stars, "Why? Why? ... How could a good God, a loving God, do that? How could he even let it happen? And no answer comes..." Where is the God of justice?

That's the very question Malachi's contemporaries are asking. It's the fifth century BC. Israel has been decimated by civil war and foreign invasion. Some Israelites have returned from exile to re-establish their nation. They have restored the walls of Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple for worship. And they're waiting for God to bring back the glory days when Israel ruled the world and reigned supreme. But God's nowhere to be found. Israel's political power is still on the wane. Her economy is still blighted by droughts and plagues. The good people of Israel are suffering, while the very people and nations who ignore God are the ones prospering. Instead of punishing them, as they deserve, God seems to be "pleased with them" (v 1). "Where is the God of justice?" they cry.

And God's answer is, "I am on my way. I'm coming." Verse 1: "'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.'" Sound familiar? Who's this referring to? Four hundred years after Malachi spoke these words, Matthew, Mark and Luke all quoted this exact verse in reference to John the Baptist (Matt 11:10; Mk 1:2-3; Lk 7:27). He was the messenger preparing the way for the Lord, for Jesus. "Then 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.' In other words, justice is coming. Jesus is coming. But he's not going to come as they expect. Malachi uses two images or metaphors to describe how Jesus will come.

## An expert refiner

First, he says, Jesus will come as a refiner. Verse 2: "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." The picture is of a silversmith heating molten silver over a blazing furnace until it's purged of all the impure and unclean elements. Do you know how a refiner knows when the molten silver is pure? When he can see his own image reflected in its mirror-like surface. That, Malachi says, is God's purpose for his people: to burn away all the impurities in their lives until they reflect his image. So God is going to come and restore his people, but not in the way they are expecting.

And notice where his focus will be. Verse 3: "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." Why the Levites? They – the priests – were God's representatives among the people. It was because the priests had not done their job that the whole nation was in spiritual decline. So they – the Levites – are the ones who will be subjected to this refinement. Do you ever look around at society and think, "How did it come to this?" Maybe if New Zealand society is morally and spiritually corrupt, it's because we, the church in New Zealand – God's priests – are not representing God as well as we should. I've been reflecting on this at a personal

level, and wondering why my wider family and friends show such little interest in God and his kingdom. It's as if God has been whispering to me, " Maybe, John, they're not seeing me clearly enough in you. Maybe it's you that needs some refining."

It's true. I do. That, of course, is why Jesus came. John the Baptist said of Jesus in Matthew 3:11, "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Throughout the Bible fire often symbolises trials and suffering. So Peter, for example, writing to Christians who were suffering, said this (1 Pet 1:7): "These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world". We all know that moral character gets formed through hardship – overcoming obstacles, enduring pain. Dentists know it. Athletes know it. Parents know it. Our little Emma is currently waking up during the night and calling out to us – sometimes seven or eight times a night. It's killing me. So to teach her to stop calling out we've developed a reward system. She gets a star on a chart – and a box of raisins – every time she goes through the night without calling us in. Five stars and she gets to buy a present at the two dollar shop. You think she'd never call out again. But she does. Often. Whenever she fails the test and wakes up to learn that there'll be no star and no raisins she wails and gnashes her teeth. It's ugly, painful. But in the long run it's what's best for her (and for her parents' sanity!). In much the same way, Malachi suggests that God allows suffering in our lives in order to refine our character. Because, as our mission statement says, "we honour him by expressing his love, reflecting his character." Maybe you're in the furnace at the moment. It's hot. Painful. And you're worried that you'll be able to endure it. God won't let you be tested beyond what you can bear (1 Cor 10:13). Don't try to escape. Ask his Spirit to strengthen you, and keep obeying him. He's refining you.

### **A prosecution witness**

For those who refuse to obey God, Malachi says justice will come – but it will take another form. Jesus will come not as a refiner, but as a witness to testify for the prosecution:

<sup>5</sup> "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

This is a reference to Christ's second coming, the Day of Judgment, the day when justice will finally prevail and evil will be defeated forever. It is described more fully in Revelation 20:11

<sup>11</sup> "I saw a great white throne, and I saw the one who was sitting on it... <sup>12</sup> I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before God's throne. And the books were opened, including the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to the things written in the book, according to what they had done... <sup>15</sup> And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire."

For these people, the furnace is a lake of fire. People don't talk much about hell today. I wonder if it's because we don't believe in it any more. Michael Laws, who I quoted earlier, wrote this in last weekend's *Sunday Star Times*: "Fundamentalists may well preach that their God sends gays, liberals and other evildoers straight to hell, but there are plenty of Anglican apologists out there who say that God is so loving that he couldn't possibly condemn anyone... Then there is the growing rank of agnostics and atheists who are sure that nothing much except incineration or decomposition happens after you're dead... " God is so loving that he couldn't possibly condemn anyone to everlasting punishment. Is that true? G.K. Chesterton once said, "Hell is God's greatest compliment to the reality of human personality and the dignity of human choice." In other words, God is loving, so loving that he gives us the freedom to choose between life with him or life – and eternity – without him. God doesn't send anyone to hell. We choose it. Every time we refuse to submit to him, every time we refuse to do what we know is right. Every one of us deserves to be consumed in the lake of fire. Yet we're not. Look at the last verse in this passage (v 6): "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." Because God does not change, because honours his covenant promise to forgive and restore those who turn to him, he sent us Jesus – the "messenger of the covenant" – to confirm and seal that forgiveness with his blood (Heb 10:16-18; 13:20).

I was reading this week about someone else who's forgiveness was sealed in blood. Back in 1987 an IRA bomb went off in a small town west of Belfast, among a group of Protestants who had gathered to honour the war dead on Veteran's Day. Eleven people died and sixty-three others were wounded. What made this act of terrorism stand

out from so many others was the response of one of the wounded, Gordon Wilson, a devout Methodist. The bomb buried Wilson and his twenty-year old daughter under five feet of concrete and brick. "Daddy," I love you so much," were the last words Marie spoke, grasping her father's hand as they waited for the rescuers. She suffered severe spinal and brain injuries, and died a few hours later in the hospital. A newspaper later proclaimed, "No one remembers what the politicians had to say at that time. No one who heard Gordon Wilson will ever forget what he confessed ... His grace towered over the miserable justification of the bombers." Speaking from his hospital bed, Wilson said, "I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie Wilson back to life. I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive them." His daughter's last words were words of love and Gordon Wilson determined to live out his life in the same spirit of love. After his release from the hospital, he became an ambassador for Protestant-Catholic reconciliation. He met with the IRA, personally forgave them for what they had done, and asked them to lay down their arms: "Enough blood has been spilled." The Irish Republic ultimately made Wilson a member of its of its Senate. When he died in 1995, the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland, and all of Great Britain honoured this ordinary Christian citizen who had gained fame for his uncommon spirit of grace and forgiveness.

Because it cost him his child, God can offer the same grace and forgiveness to you and me. And he does, this morning. Before that great and terrible day when Jesus comes again, and justice is fully and finally realised, he wants us to offer it to our friends and loved ones. That's our mission: "to honour God by expressing his love and making followers of Jesus."

### Questions

1. The theologian John Stott said, "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith." Do you agree?
2. Rick Warren says: "Jesus did not die on the cross just so we could live comfortable, well-adjusted lives. His purpose is far deeper. He wants to make us like himself... This is our greatest privilege, our immediate responsibility, and our ultimate destiny." Discuss.
3. If God's goal is to restore his image in us, how does this happen? See, e.g., 2 Cor 3:18 and Job 23:10.
4. Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist, said, "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral; character, and that is that he believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment." What do you think of hell?
5. How would you in one short sentence explain the gospel to someone scared of hell?
6. Read 2 Pet 3:9. Why does God's justice sometimes seem far off?
7. What is this church's mission statement? Does it capture God's purpose for the church expressed in this section of Malachi? How could it be improved?
8. What one practical step could you take this week to share God's grace with someone who doesn't yet believe?