

Longing for God's healing intervention 1

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Preacher: David Calderwood

[0 : 00] The reading is from Malachi 2.17-3.15. The reading is from Malachi 2.17-17.

As in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. 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 man rob God? Yet you are robbing me.

But you say, how have we robbed you? In the tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse. For you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

[2 : 00] Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts. If I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need, I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts.

Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord. But you say, how have we spoken against you? You have said, it is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evil does not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape. Well, good morning, everyone.

The ranks certainly are thinned when you come up and stand and look out this way. The concept of justice. It's always been important to people.

[3 : 17] Whether we're thinking about justice in our own little family unit, or thinking about justice in our global village. People long for justice.

People easily recognize acts of injustice or lack of justice. And they brand the worst of those as evil. And rightly so.

But currently in our society, the longing for justice has become distorted. Even malicious. We see that maliciousness in what we call the social media phenomenon of moral outrage.

And it's got a twin that goes with it. Cancer culture. Cancer culture, rather. Cancer culture writes people off completely and viciously.

Writes anyone who's not totally for us off. Moral outrage is expressed as a longing for justice in pretty well everywhere in our society.

[4 : 31] We've got a clamor for wages justice. Legal justice. Family justice. Workplace justice. Racial justice. Even climate justice now.

But the thing about it is that almost always when we see and hear moral outrage and longing for justice, it's distorted and driven by mixed emotions.

For example, we can demand justice, but in part, we're secretly hoping for revenge. That is, we want the person who has wronged us to suffer as we have suffered.

And we, at times, aggressively demand justice, but in part, we're also covering our own sense of guilt.

And the way that works is that we feel better about ourselves when we rant most about the failures of others.

[5 : 39] In other words, we cancel others, thereby putting ourselves in the right, and even in our minds, putting ourselves beyond challenge.

Moral outrage, I have to tell you, is not new. It might feel new in our society, but it's not new. I would suggest to you that in Malachi's time, God's people were expert in the cult of moral outrage.

That is, in chapter 1, we see God declared his unfailing love for his people. God cited evidence for proof beyond doubt of his total commitment to blessing them.

And how do God's people respond? Well, instead of owning their own failure to live in the light of God's love, what do God's people do?

Well, they ease their guilt by responding in moral outrage. That is, they blame God for everything that's wrong. Everything they think is wrong, everything that is actually wrong, has got to be down to God.

[6 : 46] And thereby, they find themselves able to ignore the sin in their own hearts. Well, through Malachi, God examines their words.

And we have this conversation, as it were, between God and his people. And God alternates in the conversation between addressing the nation as a whole. And when he addresses the nation as a whole, it's a big picture.

That is, it reveals how God's people as a whole thought about the Lord and responded to him generally. And then, at times, the Lord zooms in and focuses on the priests.

And that is a zoom-in picture revealing how people thought about their sin in respect to God. How they balanced their sin against God's holy character or God's holy name.

How they thought about the basis of relationship with the Lord. And the impact of sin on that relationship. And so, constantly, we're going from the big picture to the small zoom-in picture.

[7 : 58] As God examines their word. As God examines and gets behind their moral outrage. And the tension, as we come into chapter 2, verse 17 this morning, is almost unbearable.

Because there's just this constant diatribe of character assassinating words. Rubbish words. Delivered and fired at God by his people.

And if you're looking at the outline, you'll see I've said that. That was a bracketed thing. So, we're looking at 2, 17 first. And then, we'll look at chapter 3, verses 13, 14, and 15. Chapter 2, verse 17.

You have wearied the Lord. That is, you become really annoying and tiresome. Says the Lord. You've just been bombarding me with this constant stream of rubbish words.

Things that are patently untrue. You just keep spewing them out. And those words were more than just words.

[8 : 58] They actually mocked God's character. They were suggesting he was a fraud. You say, how have we wearied you? By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord.

Now, that is a big call to take up to the Lord, isn't it? He delights in evil. Or by asking, where is the God of justice?

God makes a big thing of justice. But in the end, they're saying, God's not really interested in justice at all. The same accusation is in chapter 3, verses 14 and 15.

And that brackets this whole section. I'll come back in a minute and tell you why I think it's a bracket. And what the power of the brackets are when we look at the intervening bit. Again, in verse 14 and 15.

The Lord says, your words have been harsh. But you say, how have we been harsh? You have said, it is vain to serve God.

[10 : 10] What is the profit of our keeping his charge or walking as in mourning? That is, showing remorse for our sins. And now we call the arrogant list.

Evil does not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape. And we'll notice that word, the test. We'll come back to that in a minute as well. Now, this is outrageous because arrogantly, God's people are essentially demanding, God, you need to get your act together because currently, we're telling you, it is not worthwhile our serving you.

We're doing all the right things by you, but we're not getting any benefit. On the contrary, nations ignore you and they're thriving.

And God challenges us people. And again, they manage to sound hurt and surprised, self-defensive. Which of our words could possibly be tedious and tiresome and hurtful or harsh and accusatory?

It beggars belief that they can claim that innocence before the Lord. And yet they do. My friends, I would suggest to you that's moral outrage in full flight.

[11 : 39] Angry at God. Wanting to make him pay for failures to give them the good life of blessing and prosperity. They believed they were entitled to. And the truth is that they were covering something in their hearts because in their hearts, they'd shown themselves actually to be more jealous of the lifestyle of surrounding nations than horrified by it.

Moral outrage directed at God and the sin of the nations allowed them to avoid the awful sin in their own hearts. And so when they thought about God's justice, they thought about something out there that God needed to do to people out there.

God should take down the nations and deliver us what we want and are entitled to. A rather distorted concept of justice and judgment.

But then in sharp contrast, and we'll move into chapter 3 verses 1 to 12 now, in between those two outrageous brackets, once again we have proof of God's steadfast love for his people.

As we hear, God's, the Lord's healing words to his rubbish people. Now I put that in inverted commas, so if you trip over that, just ignore it. It might be too outrageous. But I just wanted to play on the idea of rubbish.

[13 : 02] Rubbish words to God. And in actual fact, the real issue was that his people were being rubbish before God. God's response to his people in the accusations is immediate.

Chapter 3 verse 1. It's immediate, but it's somewhat lost in our English translation. So chapter 3 verse 1 should begin, Behold me.

Or, here I am. So the accusation has been, where is the God of justice? And immediately God fires back, Behold me.

Here I am. And it's got a numinous feel to it, hasn't it, in response. Be careful what you ask for. Here I am.

Now, God has already made clear, back in chapter 1 verse 14 and chapter 1 verse 11, He's already made clear that he is a great king, and he will act to be seen to be a great king throughout the world.

[14 : 06] And now, he says, you're going to see my greatness, and feel my greatness, and experience my greatness, my holy character, my holiness, my justice, because I am already planning to intervene.

I have always been concerned for justice, and I intend now, even now as you call me out for being, accusing me of being disinterested in justice, I am planning on intervening to deliver the justice you demand.

And I think just in passing, I think that of itself would say to God's people, Now listen, that of itself, if you just stopped and considered who I am, that of itself would expose the emptiness of your moral outrage.

And the Lord continues to say, Well, you've asked for my justice, but I'm here to tell you that my justice will be very painful, and it will begin at home with the sin of my own people.

The Lord's saying, My justice will be very, very different to what you guys expect and demand. You'll not like it because it will expose your horrible injustice.

[15 : 45] So there's the play again, you see. They question God's justice, and God immediately turns the table and says, Well, actually, I'm about to come to you guys, and we'll have a look and see some of your commitment to justice in respect to responding to me.

See, God's people had come to think of God's justice as a great future judgment event out there. It would be directed at the nations around about Israel, and to use modern parlance, familiar in American politics, the result of it would be to make Israel great again.

So judgment was something that was out there. But the Lord corrects their thinking. God's justice will be experienced by God's people as well as the nations.

And indeed, the Lord is saying here in chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, that it's already happening in part through the words of my messenger, Malachi. Malachi. In a sense, God's saying, Malachi is an early warning sign, an early warning system, saying that I am concerned about justice, and I will come, and I will deal seriously with the sin of my people in a just, judgmental way.

[17 : 15] But then notice, ducting in verses 3, 1 and 2, we start to see something that will come out in the subsequent verses that says something else is happening here as well. Because it says, Behold, I send my messenger.

That's how Malachi was introduced. Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, and then the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. It seems that there are two different messengers. One called my messenger, which probably refers to Malachi.

Then we've got to ask, well, who is the messenger? The fact that this person is called the messenger suggests it's a future and final messenger, the greatest messenger, perhaps, of God's judgment.

Who is he? Well, we need to look across to chapter 4, verse 5. Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

[18:25] Before the great day of judgment comes. So, who is Elijah, the prophet? Why does he pop up here? Well, if you go back to chapter 3, verse 1, it talks about the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold, he is coming. Now, when you go back and think about Elijah for the people of Israel, he was, as it were, the pin-up prophet for God's people.

He is the one they would look back to as the one who really took on the nations and showed that God's people could triumph over foreign gods and triumph over foreign nations and make Israel great again.

Now, that was a very nationalistic, narrow way of thinking about Elijah because he was primarily concerned about sin among God's people. But no, they had caricatured Elijah as being the champion of truth for Israel.

So they would be delighted to know that he was coming because in their mind that would be the very thing they were going to expect, that God would finally act to deal with the nations and make Israel great.

[19:33] God then follows up quickly just as they're starting to think, whoa, looking forward to this.

Verse 2, but who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? That's giving them something to sit back on their heels and think about.

God's people will not be able to bear that day of justice that they're demanding. Why not?

Go over to verse 5. God's saying then, and it's not chronological, it's simultaneously, then, I will draw near to you for judgment.

I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker and his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord.

[20:35] Ping, ping, ping, ping, every time God speaks, he's hitting on his people. You will not be able to bear my day of justice and judgment, says the Lord, because on that day I will itemize your every sin.

And let me tell you, says the Lord, it's a long list. God will itemize their sin, proving beyond doubt their faithlessness and proving beyond doubt that they deserve the full force of God's justice and judgment upon them.

God's The nation of Israel was supposed to reflect God's character to all the nations.

But the reality was that the nation of Israel reflected more of the character of the nations back to God.

God's God's And three pictures then in these verses describe the ominous, the impending doom which will come with God's justice and judgment, which these guys have blithely and carelessly demanded.

[22:08] Three pictures. First one, verse two, is a military one. Who can endure the day of his coming? The idea there is of an army formed up in rank facing the onslaught of an enraged enemy.

Who could possibly stand and hold rank against the onslaught of God's wrath at the way he's been treated?

Then there's the refiner's fire. God's justice will be like an incredible crucible, such a hot torch that will actually literally melt down God's people and bring to the surface every impurity of their hearts.

That's a violent picture. And then there would be like a launderer's soap, a fuller's soap. Now, nobody really knows what this is, but perhaps the best guess is it's a strong alkaline solution.

And it was used, as Ian said, to whiten clothing. And the way it works like a bleach or peroxide is, if you know bleach or peroxide, and we all do, it will burn you.

[23 : 30] Burn you deeply. So God's justice would be like a bleach or peroxide, it will burn deeply but transform God's people at the same time making them distinctive among the nations.

These are scary pictures, but they have to go alongside the concept of God's justice and God's judgment. Because God's justice and God's judgment is focused primarily on the sin of his people, measured against his holy and just character.

So the clouds of doom are just building, but then we're in for another surprise. So the people have been surprised because they want God's justice and that's not going to look like they think it's going to look.

And just as we get used to the heaviness of God's justice, then another left field thing comes in. Look at verse 3, the second half of verse 3. He will sit as refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver and they will bring offerings and righteousness to the Lord.

Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. what's going on here?

[25 : 07] Given the awfulness of experience in God's judgment and we've just seen the pictures of that and given the guilt of God's people deserving the full force of God's judgment and justice, then we would expect destruction.

But in actual fact, God is talking here about delivering renewal, not destruction. God is talking here about his justice producing total renewal among God's people.

It would renew the priests and it would renew God's people in generally so that they become a delight to the Lord again. And so that they start to act in righteousness again.

So verse four, the results of God's just judgment on his priests and his people would be new righteousness, new obedience, new acceptance before God, a new desire to honor the Lord, who in turn would once again delight in them, rather than find them wearisome and tiresome and harsh. change. And then keep going. Verse six, for I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore, you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

[26 : 38] God reminds us people that since the days of Jacob, a pattern has been evident that they should have known. that is, that the only reason since the days of Jacob, the only reason they have not been consumed by God's just judgment on their faithlessness, their disobedience and their betrayal of his name before the nations, the only reason those things haven't led to their being totally consumed, is because God has loved his people.

He has stayed true to his covenant promise to love them and bless them. And so, we're moving through this dark period of God's justice, but there's a light appearing in it because we're saying now that God has always exposed the sin of his people.

Ever since the days of Jacob, and Jacob was a bad lad, God has always exposed their sin in the context of renewing them. not destroying them.

That is God's covenant love, God's covenant promise at work throughout history. That ultimately, as I've said, is the only reason they still exist as a nation.

So what we find now is that God's justice and judgment, though real, though imminent, will as always, for God's people, be bound by his grace and mercy.

[28 : 17] And it will result in renewal for God's people, but also, next step forward, it will result in renewed invitation to return and to test the Lord.

Verse 7, from the days of your fathers, you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Here's the invitation, return to me, the promise, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

Now, this is the Lord of hosts speaking. This is the one who has the power to make it happen.

Return to me, and I promise, I will return to you. And then, he says in verse, let me see, verse 10, put me to the test.

I mean, this is the Lord saying to his people, come on, guys, put me to the test. That's an incredible offer from the Lord, is it not?

when he has every right to smash them off the face of the earth, he invites them to put them to the test. Put my faithfulness to the test.

[29 : 42] Put my love to the test. Don't keep spraying me with just these empty rubbish words that you're whinging in my ear with.

Actually, treat me seriously and put me to the test. Try my faithfulness, try my love, and see if you're disappointed in it. Their unjust, shameful treatment of God was systematic and habitual over generations.

And yet, God continues to offer immediate hope of healing and restoration for God's people. If only they would repent.

turn back to God and lean into his love and grace and mercy.

And in that context, even more generously, the Lord invites his people to test his faithfulness properly. Now, that takes us into that section where, I'll read it again, to do with tithing and money.

[30 : 54] So, let's just read through it. Will man rob God? Picking up with verse 8. Yet you are robbing me.

So, they're taking something and treating it as their own, which they have no right to do, which belongs to somebody else, in this case, the Lord.

But you say, how have we robbed you? Well, here's the answer. In your tithes and contributions.

You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts. Put me to the test if I will not open the window of heaven for you, and pour down for you a blessing, until there is no more need.

I will rebuke the devourer for you, so it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the fields shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight.

[32 : 08] So what's going on there? Well, I think it's something like this. Because of the covenant, God had committed to providing every need of his people.

In response to that, God's people were to acknowledge that every single thing they had and were was down to God, and it was actually God's entrust to them.

God was to do his part, and they were to respond, and the way they showed acknowledgement of everything belonging to the Lord was to commit to paying a tithe, a percentage of all their possessions, all their income, all their worth, all their assets, back to the Lord.

So it was a symbolic thing. But this tithe, or the tenth, was a symbol that all that they had belonged to the Lord. Now, how did God's people rob him then?

Well, God's people robbed him of the honour, of his honour, by acting as though the things they had were produced by themselves, and were owned by themselves, and were therefore there for themselves to dispose of as they pleased.

[33 : 42] And they failed, therefore, to give God what was his. And we're told then in verse 9, that the result of that was they brought a covenant curse upon themselves, whatever that was, some sort of disease through the crops, or whatever it was.

But God said, there's a penalty for that. I'm making you guys realise what's going on here. God says then, test me.

Stop pretending to be self-reliant. Stop acting as though you're self-reliant and self-existent. Stop acting as though you can provide for yourselves and that everything you have is yours to dispose of as you please.

rather, says the Lord, entrust yourselves to my faithful care and provision and see that I will deliver extravagant, satisfying blessings every day of your life.

That's it. God's people thought, well, we'll just give less because, well, we need that money over here for doing this and this and this and this. And if we give too much here, then we'll be short over here. And so they just arranged it for themselves as if all of that was theirs to arrange.

[35 : 00] And God is horrified and shamed at their self-reliance. Now, friends, how awful, if we just ponder in that for a moment, how awful that God's people seem to have lost any sense of indebtedness to the Lord, have seemed to have lost any sense of God's generosity and grace.

have seemed to sort of become so independent from the Lord that they think that what they are and what they've been in history is all down to themselves. And I think coming back, I said I would come back to the brackets.

I think that's why verse 13, 14, 15 are after what the Lord says because 2, 17 and 13, 14, 15, they just bracket the awfulness of God's people.

And thereby throw into highlight the graciousness of God's response. And again, through the graciousness of God's loving commitment in those verses, once again we hear the whisper of

Jesus.

Three or four questions just as I tidy up here. We ask the question, why the need for justice and judgment? Well, very simple. God has always demanded righteousness or obedience from his people.

[36 : 27] And God knows that a sinful people cannot deliver his demands. Their rebellion, their sin in their hearts, meant they could never deliver.

Even worse, they would continue to walk away from him rather than have any desire to return to him. The Lord just knows that. That's been shown in history. The history of God's people.

So why do we need justice and judgment? Because the awfulness of sin and rebellion demands it. What is their hope of healing in the face of God's judgment?

Well, God's people need more than just reminders or even threats. God's people need God to intervene and rebuild them from the inside out.

History has shown that God's people will not come to him. So what does God do in his graciousness? He has planned all along that he will come to them in the person of Jesus.

[37 : 37] How amazing is that? How amazing is that? How amazing is that God's God's character? Nothing, I think, displays God's character, God's gracious character more clearly than that.

But then the big question is this. How can God's people be healed, cleansed, and renewed at the same time as God says he's going to apply the full force of justice and judgment upon their sin?

The two seem incompatible. answer? Because God had always intended that the penalty for sin would not fall on his people but would fall on his suffering servant Jesus.

And we see something more of God's gracious, loving commitment to us as people. God's justice would be demonstrated. His offense at sin would be satisfied.

And with God's plan, God's people would not only survive but would thrive in news of life and relationship with the Lord.

[39 : 05] Wow. Wow. Jesus would be, as we've said each week here, Jesus would be the true priest who would truly mediate with God on behalf of the people.

He would be a true priest offering himself as the true sacrifice. The sacrifice of righteousness which would turn the Lord to see his people with delight and enable them to renew them.

my friends, as Christians, we've already experienced the reality of God's judgment in full as we observe Christ destroyed by the Lord, the Father on the cross.

That's God's justice unleashed. But quite literally, and this is not a swear word, quite literally, thank God that it was unleashed on Jesus and not us.

We've already been healed from the inside out, renewed. We're not complete yet, but it's real and substantial that which we have in fullness in the Lord Jesus Christ. So my friends, let's respond to God's love wholeheartedly and indeed whole of life.

[40 : 38] That's what God was calling his people to come back and worship me with whole hearts and whole minds. It had particular form in Malachi's day, got very different form in our day under Jesus.

Romans 12, 1 and 2, come back and worship me with the whole of life, whole of heart, because that's the appropriate response to my loving kindness to you.

And what does whole of life look like? Well, we can go back and look at the tithing there. Whole of life means all are recognizing that all we are and all we have is God's goodness and kindness and provision to us.

All our money, all our assets, all our time, all our energies, all our giftedness, all of it is down to the Lord's goodness in our lives.

What does the Lord want in response for his life? No longer a tithe, as per the old covenant, but he does want acknowledgement of his goodness.

[41 : 46] That acknowledgement is a whole of life. Since we've been redeemed, everything is the Lord's. God's. So the question is very simple to you this morning, brother and sister, if you're in Christ.

Are you worshipping or robbing? And there'll be some here this morning who aren't yet Christians, which means that you're in immediate danger of experiencing the awfulness and the fullness of God's justice and judgment.

my friend, don't make light of that. Our world thinks little of this sort of stuff writes it off as nonsense. Well, you've heard God's word this morning. If you write it off as nonsense, well, that's a dangerous

thing to do without at least giving it a good hard think.

I would encourage you not to just write it off as nonsense, but I would encourage you to hear these heavy words of justice, impending justice on the sin of God's people so that God will be shown to be the great king.

Rather than just write them off as nonsense or fairy tales, think of it like a smoke alarm. You know the smoke alarms? Incredibly loud noise. Dare I say it, an annoying noise.

[43 : 09] And you just want to get rid of the noise. But when you stop and think about it, the smoke alarm is there to tell you there's danger. There's danger. You've heard God's word.

Consider the danger you are in if you're not yet a believer. And then look to what the Lord says. The Lord says to you, as he said in Malachi has to say, return to me and I will return to you.

Put it in layman's language. God says, I will if you will. So, what say you? What say you? Pray with me please.

Lord, we find it very, very difficult to balance and keep the tensions of your word. For Lord, here we have the incredible tensions between the heaviness of your justice and judgment.

And yet, Lord, the path of escape and renewal you've provided for your people. Lord, so quickly we move from there to undercutting your justice and playing it down and playing up our safety without realizing the enormous cost that our safety as Christians has been to you in the death of your son.

[44 : 31] Lord, help us to focus on both and bounce from one to the other so that each might illuminate the other and enrich the other. And Lord, that each might stir us up to love and good deeds as servants of you.

Help us to worship you, Lord, with whole of life, whole of heart commitment. Lord, that is exactly what we've experienced from you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.