

It's very difficult for us to be patient, especially because we live in a time in which we expect everything to happen right now. We expect our food to be right now. We expect our packages to be right now. We expect everything to be right this instant. Our movies on demand, everything has to come right now! And we don't like to wait for things. But because we don't like to wait for things, Christians, when it comes to something like the evil which we see around us in the world, I think sometimes we want a solution to that right now. We live in a time where we have all kinds of things that promise quick fixes. You just do this. All the problems will disappear. You just vote for this. All of these troubles will disappear. And we'll find that justice that we so desperately want!

But that doesn't always happen, does it? We live in a sinful world, after all. And when those things don't work out quite the way we want them to, we become rather cynical, rather jaded. Maybe things just are never going to change. Maybe I don't need to pay attention to what's happening in the world around me, because it's just going to be the same anyway. And so you kind of give up on it all, and say, "It's not going to make a difference anyway."

But Christians that's exactly where Israel was in our reading for this evening. Because when God brought them back into the promised land, they were really excited about everything that was happening! "God has brought us back!" they said. "God has kept his promises!" they said. It was an exciting time to be alive. But because of that, they probably also thought, "Well, if God has done all of these things, then maybe he's going to go a step further. Maybe he's going to set everything right. Maybe he's going to take care of all of these evils that we have suffered. All the bad things that we had to deal with will be paid back. And after all, God is going to make things perfect! And it's going to happen so soon," they said, "we can taste it!"

But it didn't happen. Here they were decades later, and things were still the same. In fact, in many ways things had gotten worse. And so Israel became jaded too and cynical about the Lord and his justice. That's why they say here in verse 17, chapter 2: "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." It's as if they were saying, "God obviously must like evil, because he hasn't done anything about it. He hasn't done a thing to change it. He hasn't done a thing to pay it back. So this must be what he wants. Maybe he's not going to do anything at all." But they also said: "Where is the God of justice? He seems so far off. He seems like he doesn't care. Like he's not paying attention to our problems. And so maybe nothing is going to change after all."

Christians, do you ever feel a temptation to think that way too? When you look at the evils surrounding us in the world today, all of the things that I don't even want to mention, being so evil--we would blush to even think about it--and you see all of those things going on, what do you say? Do you say that God is going to take care of it? Or you say: "Well, nothing we can really do about it. Maybe they're just going to get away with it. Maybe God isn't going to take care of this problem. Maybe the best we can hope for is that we'll go to heaven and we won't have to think about it anymore." Are we tempted to think that way, the way that Israel did in the days of Malachi?

If you are, resist it! Fight back! Because that's the devil talking. Because think about what that says about God, if we say that he's not really going to do something about evil, that evil is just

going to get away with it, and the best we can hope for is to ignore it. It makes God into a liar. Because God said he's going to do something about it. God has promised to judge the world in righteousness. And when we give into that temptation of becoming cynical about his justice, then we are saying that he's not trustworthy, that we can't take him at his word.

But Christians, God will do something about evil. God will take care of all of these problems. And that's exactly what he is saying in Malachi, chapter 3, as he answers the accusations of his people. Because he says, first of all, to those who say that "everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them"--in other words, that God must want this, because this is just the way things are--to them he says, "No!" God hates evil. God wants to do something about evil. He's going to take care of this problem. And even if he seems far off right now, Christians, even if it seems like he's not paying attention, the Lord will appear suddenly and without warning. "The Lord whom you seek," Malachi says, "will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming." And when he comes, Christians, he will destroy evil. He will put it all to right, so that nothing will be left, because God is a righteous and a holy God. And he will do something about these evils that we have to struggle with.

But that day isn't going to be pleasant, Christians. As Malachi says in verse 2: "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" Because our problem is not just the evil around us. The problem is that when God comes to destroy evil, to purge this world of all the sin that has corrupted us, that includes our sins too. And when he comes to purify us, to cleanse us of that sin, it's not going to be all that pleasant. Because think of how God describes it here. He says that he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap. Fuller's soap here is an old word, what we now call ammonia. In old days, it was used to whiten clothing, so that it would clean it and make it bright again. If you'd ever cleaned with ammonia, you know it's not the most pleasant thing to work with. But God is saying that we are like dirty clothes in need of whitening, dirty clothes which need to be cleansed. And God is coming like that soap to cleanse us of those sins. But more than that, he says he is like a refiner's fire, like a silversmith or a goldsmith melting it down in order to take away its impurities. Because in those days, they would sit over top of their forge and watch it very, very carefully, until they knew the right moment. At which point they would then clear away all the impurities and all of this slag that was contaminating the gold or the silver. And you can imagine what it would be like to be inside that hot forge, hot enough even to melt metal. Not exactly the most pleasant image in the world! But in that moment, God is destroying evil. He is purging it. He is cleansing it away, so that it is no longer a problem for us or for him.

But Christians, the same fire which burns and consumes is the same fire which refines. The same soap or ammonia which is caustic and toxic to us is the same soap which purifies and cleanses. God has not come to destroy his people. God has come to make them clean once more, to purify them of their sin. And that's exactly what he does for Israel. He says that he will purify the sons of Levi, to purify the priests so that they would no longer speak lies, so that they would no longer lead the people astray. And when he refines them like gold and silver, then they will bring an offering in righteousness to the Lord as they did in former days. God is coming to cleanse his people, not to destroy them.

And he has done this, above all, Christians, in his Son, Jesus Christ. Because as Jesus himself says in Matthew chapter 11, speaking of John the Baptist: "What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way for you.'" So Jesus, by quoting Malachi, by quoting our reading for today, is saying that John the Baptist is that messenger, the very messenger that Malachi is speaking of. And he is the one who goes before the Lord to prepare his way, calling people to repentance. And that means that Jesus Christ has come to cleanse, not to destroy. He has come to purify Israel and to purify the sins of the world. And when he comes with the fire of the Holy Spirit, he will purify us and refine us, so that we will be spotless, so that we will no longer be contaminated with our sins. But scrubbed clean with the water and the Word, we are now righteous in his sight. That is what God has come to do, Christians, to make you righteous, to make you holy, to make you white from the darkness of your sins. And that is what Jesus does for you today.

But to those, then, who would say, "Where is the God of justice?" Malachi tells us that Christ will come near for judgment. Christ 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" him. Christ will witness against them. What a fearful thing that is, Christians! To come to the judgment day and to have Jesus speak against you if we persist in our sins! Because if God is the prosecutor in the case of your life, and God knows all things, what makes you think that we have anything in ourselves that we would be able to withstand such an examination?

But for those who repent and turn away from their sins, as 1 John 2 says, "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." For those who turn away from sin, Jesus will speak in their defense. Jesus will speak for them, holding up his own righteousness, holding up his own blood, so that we are forgiven in the sight of the Father.

Yes, Christians, Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead. And on that day, he will make all things right again, and all evil will be purged away, so that it will no longer be a trouble in his sight. But on that day, he will give you the fire of the Holy Spirit, the fire which purifies you, the fire which makes you clean in his sight. And so, being purified by him, we can bring offerings in righteousness and come before him as his own people. Christians, let us walk in that righteousness. Let us do what God would have us do. And let us fear the Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given your Son, Jesus Christ, to judge the world and to make all things right. We plead his blood would cover over our sins and that you would make us white in your sight through his intercession. Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, and for all that he has done for us, and for the confidence which he gives us, knowing that he will deal with all evil. In his name we pray. Amen.