

Jason Upchurch - Malachi 3:13-18 - The Wicked Won't Prosper Forever

As we near the end of this short letter, the Lord confronts the Jews with a hard reality that I think we can all relate to: how do we handle injustice in the world? And not just injustice, but how do we handle wicked people who get away with injustice.

We have politicians who make low six figures but somehow their net worth is tens of millions of dollars through some really lucky stock trading.

We have bank executives with golden parachutes that plunge tens of thousands of people into poverty while they walk away with millions.

We have doctors doing unfathomable things to children in the name of gender affirmation, ruining the lives of countless people, and there is no consequence.

There are judges who make the most ridiculous rulings on every level of life and they seem to never be held to account.

I know people who don't work - or they work for cash under the table - and they live very nicely. They eat better than I do, drive nicer cars than I do, take more lavish vacations. Meanwhile we spend weeks buried in dozens of pages of tax forms that the government will almost inevitably mess up.

We see athletes who live superstar lives all the while steeped in rampant sexual immorality, parties, drunkenness. They're wearing watches and driving cars that are worth more than our 401ks.

There are a lot of abuses "out there" that we could point to as galling and frustrating. But usually where we are affected the most is when it hits home, When we are the victim of abuse and the perpetrator gets away or smears us in the meantime.

When we are the ones who lose financially while someone else gains from our loss. When our lives are upended by those who get away.

When it's our kids or our brothers or our spouse who is wronged by someone and there's no repercussion.

When that happens - and I promise you it will happen - you're going to start asking questions. And the questions we usually ask are some version of the problem of evil. How can this happen? How can God let people like this just get away with it?

It's basically the problem of evil, but for Christians. How can the God I serve let this just happen? Is there no justice? I prayed and I prayed. I fasted and I fasted - I did everything right and in the end it blew up on me.

I walked in integrity. I walked in purity. I did all the right things. And this is what I'm left with. And especially for those who have a proper understanding of the providence and sovereignty of God we know that at the end of the day all things come to pass under the sovereign direction of the Lord.

How do we deal with that? How do we deal with the prosperity of the wicked? That's what this section is about.

The Big Picture: The wicked won't prosper **forever**. And it's that last word that's extremely important for us to remember. The wicked will often prosper for a season. Maybe even a long, long season or maybe even all their lives. But ultimately they will have a day of reckoning.

And we have to prepare ourselves for that truth. So let's break down this passage into basically 4 parts.

1 - Sinners will prosper. Read 14-15

This is the reality of the sinful world we live in: sinners are going to prosper. They will prevail over us, they will get away with what they've done, they will often even be rewarded for the evil thing they've done.

I think I told you a few years ago I read a book called the The Billion Dollar Whale about Jho Low, a businessman who basically amassed a billion dollar fortune by scamming governments and stock holders. The scam was found out and now he probably lives comfortably in international waters on a yacht worth billions. He got away with it all.

Many people do.

Now, obviously there are times when this is not true. It's not that wicked people are always rewarded or always get away with it. But certainly we don't believe in instant karma where everything is sorted out instantaneously.

As I was thinking about this I was thinking through the Bible and the people who got away with stuff. Sort of a biblical theology of true-crime thrillers. And let me tell you, it's everywhere in the Bible.

Turn to Gen 4:8-16 for a minute. You're familiar with the story of Cain and Abel. They were bringing sacrifices to the Lord. Abel sacrifices were accepted by God, Cain's were not. And what was the result? In jealousy Cain killed Abel. But did you ever stop and think about the aftermath? You'd think lightning bolts would come down from the sky and destroy Cain just like the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel but that's not what happened.

Watch this. **Read 8-16**

What happened to Cain? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He killed his brother in cold blood. Lied about it to God. God tells him the consequence is that gardening is going to be harder. He whines about that. Then complains that people are going to kill him. And for the cherry on top: God protects him so that no one will kill him in revenge. He gets married, has a kids, builds a whole city, has grandkids. **Read 17-18**

As far as we know Cain lived to a ripe old age. **Turn to 1 Kings 21:25-29**

This is King Ahab, easily one of the most wicked people in all of Scripture. **1 Kings** says he did more evil in the sight of the Lord than any other king before him. He also married Jezebel - a wicked woman - and they both worshipped Baal together. He also made an Ashterah - basically a totem pole promoting cult prostitution in Israel as a matter of official policy. You remember he stole Naboth's field because he wanted a nicer summer home. His wife raised up false witnesses against Naboth and he was stoned to death and then they took his land. **Read 21:25-29**

For all his idolatry and murder and treachery the Lord spares his life. Now, he'll die in the next chapter in battle. But ironically he goes to battle because he believes false prophets rather than the prophet of God. And you're thinking, "Why would God let him get away with this?"

You know how long Ahab reigned? Twenty two years. That's like from George W Bush til now. That's a long long time of an evil reign. People were murdered, lives were ruined, immorality was rampant, wars fought.

There are many other examples throughout the Bible we could give: Sanballat and Tobias, the rabble that stoned Stephen to death. All the crowd who called for Jesus to be crucified.

Jot down 2 of these psalms. **Psalm 10** and **Psalm 73**. These are psalms that are really wrestling with how the wicked are able to prosper. And they give hope that God won't forsake us.

But I want to show you something way more depressing. **Turn to Psalm 88**. I want us to revel in the injustice and calamity and sorrow a little bit.

And I'm doing this for a reason. We really need to consider that life is hard and wicked people do prosper for a time. If you don't get you're head around that reality it will be hard for you in the day of difficulty.

I remember being in high school working at JC Penney and I was talking to this guy I worked with named Ryan. And he was kind of a preppy guy and he told me one night as we were closing our cash registers that he was joining the Marines. That was a big deal for him. And I asked him why the marines. And he said he went to each of the recruiters and asked what it would be like and he thought the Marines were the only ones who told him the truth of how bad it would be. They told him how tough training was, how rigorous the job requirements were, how low the pay was and how they would do everything to break him. And he signed up because he knew what to expect going in, he knew how hard it might be all along so he could actually count the cost. He knew what lay ahead.

In the same way you need to be prepared in life for the worst. Jesus gives the parable of the two houses - one on the rock and one on the sand. Both houses get battered by the hurricane. If you think following Jesus exempts you from hurricanes you'll be in for a surprise. The reality is you're not escaping the hurricane. But will you still be standing at the end of the hurricane? **Read Psalm 88**

Not a lot of hope here, is there? There's none. Life is the worst and God doesn't seem to be answering. Amen.

There are going to be ridiculous seasons of life where there seems to be zero hope. You don't feel like going on. You don't feel like serving the Lord. You feel like complaining about God. You're walking through the valley of the shadow of death and you are fearing evil. You can't see ahead. Maybe you're not there now, but you will be.

And just like the 3rd soil - the weedy soil - you'll be tempted to walk away from the Lord. This Psalm will be your prayer. Many of these psalms will be your prayer.

These seasons will likely not be the only ones you face, but know that they will come.

Now **look back in Malachi 3**. Sinners will prosper, the wicked will prosper.

2) Be very careful how you respond to that reality. Read 13-15

The actual reason for this whole section is that God is charging Israel with being hard against him. What does that mean? It means they're criticizing God. They're complaining about God.

This is the number one danger we need to be on guard for when we come into a difficult situation, when we see the wicked prosper, when our way is hard. Our knee jerk reaction is to complain. And complaining - any complaint - ultimately, is complaining about God. Since God is sovereign and does all things according to his providential decree, every complaint is toward him.

Eph. 4:31: let all bitterness and wrath and anger and **clamor** and slander be put away.

Clamor is complaining, noise making in discontentment. We put that all away.

The Lord says several things here that are worth noting.

A - He says their words are hard, or harsh. One version says "You've criticized me sharply."

This is really an issue of our attitude before the Lord. Especially if you read the prayers of the saints in the OT, and even throughout the psalms, there is almost always a reverence with the Lord in times of trouble. Yes things are bad, yes everything feels hopeless - but there's always a fear and awe and respect.

You think of Abraham negotiating with God over how many people might be righteous in Sodom so he doesn't destroy Lot along with the wicked. Abraham is bargaining with God. But when he does he is incredibly humble and respectful.

God can handle us being honest with our situation. He can handle crying and fears and frustration. He's Father. But we can never forget that he's also God our King. And in our angst we don't want to step too far.

B - A second thing they say is that it is vain to serve God. What's the point of serving God if the wicked are better off than we are? This is spiritual cynicism. Or pessimism. What good is it to serve God if the outcome is no better than being wicked?

Have you ever thought that? What gain is it to do the right thing if life is easier doing the wrong thing?

Why obey laws? Why not commit sin? Why not cut corners? I mean if there's no consequence for doing the wrong thing. And if there's no benefit from doing the right thing, why do it?

That's mocking God. That's basically saying that there is no ultimate good outcome for the saints. That whatever reward in heaven there is for following Jesus isn't worth it if we don't have a perfect life this side of heaven.

C - Third they say there's no profit in mourning. What is that about? What are they mourning? Sin. This is the hard thing about the Christian life: we mourn the very things the world exalts. We're sad about our lusts, our greed, our arrogant words, when we cheat or lie and we should rightly feel bad about those things. We should rightly mourn them.

Jesus says blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Again, the issue mourning for our sin. Mourning that we're every day wretched and need to be reminded of the grace of God.

But our hearts become hard when we hate mourning our sin because we look around and see so many other.

And if we're honest, I think how this creeps in is that we just stop feeling bad for our sin. We make excuses for it, ignore how severe it is. We know it's wrong but we're not concerned about how wrong it really is. Because it doesn't seem as though we're any more blessed by mourning.

D - Fourth is that those who mock God get off free. **Read 16**

I think if we're really honest we've all said this in our hearts. People who mock God escape. They put the Lord to the test, they challenge his authority and they just walk away.

These are ways we're tempted to sin with our hearts and mouths when the wicked prosper.

How do we sustain ourselves when we're tempted to sin when we see the wicked prosper?

3 - Commit to fearing the Lord. **Read 16-17**

So the result of this back and forth is that those who actually followed God - those who feared the Lord - wrote their names down in a book. They made a public vow of sorts, they took a stand that no matter what would come they would continue to follow God and serve him faithfully.

They made a book of remembrance. A book that listed them down as those who would follow God no matter what come.

There are many record books in the Bible of God's faithful, those who chose to do the right thing and God honored them for it. The lists of the returning exiles comes to mind. If you've read through Ezra or Nehemiah lately you know there's these lists of people and their families who came back. And you think: what an odd thing to record in Scripture. But God honored those who honored him in doing the hard thing of leaving comfort and leisure behind and risk life and comfort to travel 600 miles on foot to go rebuild a city from rubble.

Most importantly we see books opened in the courtroom in heaven of God's faithful. The names of those who are written in the book of life. It's God's list of those who he has chosen to give eternal life to.

I remember in high school there were all kinds of parachurch things - Promise Keepers comes to mind - where they'd pack all these guys in a stand and they'd make a promise to serve God. And I don't know that that was really the way to go, but I will say that at some point you need to make a stand that you're going to follow God

in joyful faithfulness no matter what comes. To ensure that your name is written on a proverbial book of remembrance that you will take joy in following the Lord no matter the trial.

Listen, you're going to meet people - and many of you have - who claim to follow God. They claim that they are Christians or were Christians but they stopped when things didn't go their way. They got a disease, someone got hurt - or hurt them, a child walked away from the faith, a grandma died. Listen: that's what grandma's do: they die. You better be ready for that and just because it happens doesn't mean God's not worth following.

We say with Job: though he slay me, yet will I put my trust in him. The Lord is worthy of all our devotion and honor and joy. And that really gives way to the 4th point:

4 - Look to the judgement. Read 17-18

What's he talking about? He's talking about the time when we know that we know we are the Lord's treasured possession. That's glory.

In glory we will be spared whatever wrath is coming on the disobedient and ungodly. We will be spared just like a father would spare his son from ultimate destruction.

When push comes to shove, a father will do whatever is necessary to save his child from danger and bless him any way he can. The same is true with our Heavenly Father. We will all stand in judgment and we will all feel the weight of sin and guilt knowing that we stand before an absolutely holy God.

That was the feeling of Isaiah as he stood in the presence of the Lord. He was overwhelmed by the weight of the holy glory of God and he couldn't stand it. What will save us on that day is that we will be spared from wrath because we are God's sons. We are God's treasured possession.

How? Through Jesus. Only through Jesus are we made to be sons of God. Only through faith in Jesus do we become God's treasured possession. And on that day we will finally see the distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous. **Read 18**

The problem with this life is that we can't see the distinction. In fact it often feels like the unrighteous are better off than we are.

We are called to live by faith. By faith that one day we will be divided like sheep and goats. Sheep on the right who go into eternal life. Goats on the left who go into eternal destruction.

The righteous and the wicked.

The sons and the slaves.

The one who serves God and the one who does not.

This is our hope. This is our lifeline: that one day the Lord is coming. And he will put everything right. He will account for all wrongs. He will reward all acts of malice.

And we will enter into a life that is a million times better than we can even imagine here. This is our hope in the midst of harsh times.

Pray