

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller  
Northwest Church  
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## **The Hope of the Refiner's Fire**

### **Malachi 2:17-3:6**

#### **Introduction**

You don't know how much I have been longing to look at this passage with you all. Malachi is a hard book; what we have seen up to this point in Malachi is rebuke after rebuke...

1. Rebuke for careless worship
2. Rebuke for careless leadership
3. Rebuke for faithlessness within community

We have experienced the dark clouds of God's rebuke for Israel's indifference towards God, now we see beams of radiant gospel light in Malachi 2:17-3:6. What we see in Malachi is the echo of 2 Timothy 2:13, "*if we are faithless, he remains faithful.*"

Israel was characterized as being a covenant breaking people throughout their entire existence, and Malachi is only an example of this. In fact, Israel's relationship with God illustrates the human condition: desperately flawed.

We see this even in some of the most admirable people of the Old Testament: People like...

- Adam and Eve who walked and talked like God, but when faced with the possibility to be like God took it.
- Noah who after being nominated by God to be savior to a select few during the flood, got so drunk that one of his sons was able to go into his tent and treat him in an inappropriate way.
- Abraham who was called by God to be the patriarch of a great nation was willing on two occasions to allow his wife to sleep with another man that his life might be spared (talk about an indecent proposal).
- Jacob who God named Israel had a habit of causing problems due to his habit of lying.
- Or how about Moses who had a hard time modeling his own teaching to his children, for his wife was the one who performed the spiritual duty of her husband by circumcising her own sons.
- What about David? Do you know what he said after he heard that his son Amnon raped his daughter Tamar? Nothing. David was guilty of some of the worst sins. A reading of David's story easily leaves the reader in disgust.

What amazes me is that in each of the lives of the individuals I mentioned, God offers Gospel hope:

- For Adam and Eve, God promises that one of their descendants would destroy the devil.

- For Noah, God promises that He will keep the promise He made to Eve.
- For Abraham, God promises that through him all nations would be blessed and calls Abraham to identify himself as a child of God through circumcision.
- For Moses, a leader in the midst of a rebellious people, God promises that He would circumcise the hearts of his people which would enable them to love and obey him. God also promised that this would be the result of a prophet who would come that would be like him but better.
- Even though David had some serious flaws, God promised that one of His descendents would sit on a throne forever.
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About 100 years before Malachi comes to the scene, the prophet Jeremiah comes onto a deplorable scene where God's people are in exile. The people are a mess, they are worshipping different gods, they are complaining to the one true God, the community is a mess, sin has infected the people like gangrene. What is Jeremiah's response? *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*

But in the midst of the dark clouds of sin and judgment shines the brilliant light of God's good news: there is change coming. Look at Jeremiah 31:31-34,

*"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

What we see is another situation where God promises that He will do a work to change the condition of human hearts; this is what we see in Malachi 2:17- 3:6. As is characteristic with the book of Malachi, there is a statement to the people followed by a question by the people followed by an answer to the people from God.

### **The Bad News: Israel is a Covenant Breaker (2:17)**

So the question that is asked by the people in this section of Malachi has to do with justice. God tells them, "You have wearied the LORD with your words." The people then ask, "How have we wearied the Him?" Notice how God answers Israel, "By saying, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'"

God tells Israel, "You have wearied me!" And Israel has the nerve to ask, "How?" God disciplined Israel by sending them off into exile under a foreign government and then under Ezra and Nehemiah's leadership, He allows many of them to return back to the land.

Israel is happy and excited about what God has done in their lives and in their midst, but not long after Nehemiah leaves, they sin by marrying women who worship other gods, they wind up worshipping other gods, their worship is deplorable, their priests are a mess, their covenant community is breaking down, and they have the nerve to ask, “How have we wearied the LORD?”

God tells them that they have wearied Him because their behavior is consistent with their opinion that God loves evil and is not interested in justice. Here again we learn that sin is irrational – there is no rational with sin.

So how does God answer the accusation that He is not interested in what is good or just? Look at Malachi 3:1

### **The Good News: God is a Covenant Keeper (3:1-6)**

*"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 the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a 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 in righteousness to the LORD. <sup>4</sup> Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. <sup>5</sup> "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. <sup>6</sup> "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."*

Israel questions God's goodness and His Justice, so He gives them an answer: “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...” Now there are some questions that I think we need to answer in order to understand this passage.

Who is the messenger? Let's look at Matthew 11:7-10, and notice what it says...

*"As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. <sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is he of whom it is written, " Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." (see also Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).*

Now let's look at Luke 1:16-17, while I read Malachi 4:5. Notice what Luke says about John the Baptist, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

So the Sender is God and the messenger is John the Baptist which leads me to my second question, who is the second messenger? It can't be John the Baptist because notice who Malachi describes him: *"And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"*

So this messenger is someone different, this is the messenger who comes after John the Baptist, so now we need to ask...

So who is this other messenger? Let's read verse 2, *"But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a 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 in righteousness to the LORD."*

Let's look at the passage, there are three things we learn of this messenger...

1. He is called "Lord" – Malachi would not call John the Baptist nor would he call Elijah lord, so this person must be someone greater.
2. He owns the Temple – Who designed the temple? Who owns the temple?
3. The Messenger seems to be the "Me" in the first part of v. 1. It seems that God is speaking in first person about himself in the first part of v. 1 then speaks in second person about himself in the second part of the verse.

This other messenger is Jesus Christ, for He is the one for whom John the Baptist prepared the way. So in answering Israel's question concerning God's Justice, God tells them that He will send a messenger, who we know as John, to prepare the way for the owner of the Temple, who we know as the second person of the Trinity: Jesus Christ.

What we see in this passage is that Malachi is prophesying about two events centered on the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus' appearing occurs two times in redemptive history: the first appearing already happened, which resulted in His death and resurrection. We are still waiting for the second appearing which will result in His reign as King and Judge on earth.

I want to show you something in Luke 4:16-20. Jesus walks into church (synagogue) one Saturday and is selected to the scripture reading, look at what he reads and then says after words, *"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, <sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." <sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah 61 that was written about the Messiah, and after reading tells everyone there that He is the person Isaiah was talking about. This is why they tried to kill him

immediately after saying this. Now let's look at Isaiah 61, notice what Jesus leaves out: *"to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor; and the day of vengeance of our God..."*

Now why in the world would Jesus leave out the rest of the sentence? Because the purpose of His first appearing was to call a people unto Himself and to begin the cleansing work of His refining fire in the lives of those whom He calls unto Himself. When Jesus comes again and makes His second appearing, he will come to bring the day of vengeance of God in Judgment (we see this in Revelation 19-20).

Often when an Old Testament Prophet prophesied, he usually only saw the mountain peaks of what God was about to do, not the valleys of what God would do between the mountain peaks. This is why we see in Malachi that when Jesus makes his first appearing, he comes as a refiner's fire, but when He makes His second appearing, he will Judge (Malachi 3:5; 4:1).

Jesus' first appearing was to come to seek and to save, but at His second appearing he will come to judge all those who have refused to embrace Him as Lord and Savior.

I find it very fascinating how Israel accuses God of being faithless when in reality they are the ones who are faithless to God and His covenant. (See Exodus 19) And yet God still offers them hope with His answer. God first tells them that He will deal with the flawed nature of those he calls His people and then will deal harshly with those who practice wickedness.

*"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."* (Mal. 3:5)

Now notice what He says in the verse that follows on the heels of this section, *"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."* What God is saying here is that you might have no problem breaking covenant with me and your people, but when I promise something, I keep my word; I the LORD do not change!

Praise God that He is a covenant keeping God! So deep is His faithfulness that He followed through with His promise by killing His own Son on a Cross.

Now I want to leave you with a homework assignment: I want you to think about what it means that Jesus' came as a refiner's fire. I suggest that you use your devotional time this week to meditate on some passages from the Bible to prepare for next week's sermon: Hebrews 7-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:7-20; Ezekiel 36:22-28; 2 Corinthians 5:1-21.