

5. The Purifying of God's People

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[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, let's turn in our Bibles to the prophet Malachi.

And if you have our visitor's Bible, it's on page 802. We have just this short passage tonight from chapter 2, verse 17, to chapter 3, verse 5.

Now, if you're a fan of Handel's Messiah, you won't need me to tell you that the first three verses here in Malachi chapter 3 form an important early part of Handel's great work.

In fact, while I've been preparing this sermon over the last few days, Handel's tunes have been rattling around my head. Now, Handel quite rightly identifies the messenger of the covenant, verse 1, with the coming Messiah.

But as you probably know, Handel also sets to music the words of verses 2 and 3. But who can abide the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? He is like a refiner's fire and so on.

[1 : 1 6] Now, my question is, why does Malachi include these verses about the coming Messiah here? At this point in the prophecy. This famous passage, made even more famous by the fact that Handel sets it to music, this passage didn't just drop out of the sky as a message all on its own.

It's included, embedded in a context. And as usual, it's the context that really helps us to feel the thrust and the message of the passage. So look with me first at chapter 2, verse 17, so that we can see the immediate context.

That's the verse which will help to give us a sense of the force of the first few verses of chapter 3. So here again is chapter 2, verse 17. You, you people of Jerusalem, you have wearied the Lord with your words.

But you, obviously not understanding how we could have done such a thing, you say, how have we wearied him? And here's Malachi's answer. 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? So Malachi is taking his contemporaries to task for wearying the Lord with their words.

[2 : 3 4] Now that's a striking image, isn't it? The people are saying things, and you get the feeling that they must be saying them again and again and again, to the point where the Lord simply cannot stand having to listen to them any longer.

Have you ever been worn out by somebody's words? It can happen, can't it? A persistent parent can nag a child. And equally, a persistent child can lobby a parent to the point where the parent is crawling up the wall.

We know what this is like, don't we? So the people of Jerusalem here in 450 BC, Malachi's contemporaries, were wearying the Lord by the things that they kept on saying.

And as you look at these things in verse 17, you'll see that they're not things they're saying to him directly, they're things that they're saying about him. Malachi records two things that they were saying, and we'll look at the two things in turn.

So here is the first. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. Now what does that mean? And why should the Lord find it so unpleasant to have to listen to that?

[3 : 42] Well the phrase simply means that God approves of those who do evil. Now why should Jews, members of the chosen race, the covenant people, why should they think or say a thing like that about God?

The God of Abraham. The God who had rescued their forefathers at the Red Sea. The wonderful God who had brought their ancestors into the promised land, and had cared for them, and more recently had brought them back from exile.

What circumstances could conspire to produce that kind of speech, and the thinking that lies behind it? Well let's remind ourselves of the other charges that Malachi has had to lay before his people in the course of this book, because they help us I think to build up a kind of identikit picture of the Israelites in the 5th century BC.

Their first problem, which is expressed back in chapter 1 verse 2, is that they had forgotten God's covenant love for them. Now he had always loved them, and he had chosen them, not because of their merit, but he'd chosen them before all the peoples of the earth to be his special people, but they'd grown dull and forgetful of this covenant promise.

And this underlying problem, and in a sense that's the problem that underlies all the other problems, this underlying problem led them secondly to think that it was okay to bring weak and sickly little animals for sacrifice to the temple.

[5 : 08] Now they should have brought only healthy and strong animals, but they thought that they would cut a financial corner and bring ailing runts from the flock for sacrifice.

And thus, as chapter 1 verse 6 puts it, they were despising God. And then thirdly, their priests, who should have been their spiritual leaders, were lazy.

Not only were they colluding with the people in accepting these runty animals for sacrifice, but they were also failing to instruct the people properly from the law of Moses. And then fourthly, we saw this last week, some of the Jewish men were marrying pagan women, marrying outside the terms of the covenant.

And fifthly, some of them were divorcing their wives. And in all these ways, the people were neglecting the word of God, the law of Moses. Not completely.

They hadn't become total secularists. They were still bringing their sacrifices to the priests at the temple. They were still, therefore, going through the motions of the religious life of Israel. But somehow the heart had gone out of them.

[6 : 13] They seemed to have grown tired and weary of God himself. And the key to understanding this is to be found in their circumstances. Now, I'm not saying this to excuse them, but it does help to explain what was going on.

Think of their circumstances. They'd been trickling back from the exile from Babylon since the year 539 BC, when the Emperor Cyrus proclaimed that they could begin to return to Jerusalem.

Then some 19 years later, in 520 BC, they'd started to rebuild the temple. And under the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, by 515 BC, only five years later, they'd got the second temple built.

Now, the second temple wasn't a patch on the original one. It didn't have the glory of Solomon's 10th century temple. But at least it was a temple. And they were able to reinstitute the priesthood and the sacrificial system and so on.

But all that, 520 BC, that was some 70 years before Malachi was preaching in around 450 BC. And by the middle of the 5th century, by about 450, the life of the Jews in Jerusalem had grown very fragile and difficult.

[7 : 27] Back in the days of Solomon and David, five centuries before, they had been a united, strong, independent nation-state. But now they were an insignificant little part of the great, sprawling Persian Empire.

The Persian Emperor was their political master. And they had to pay taxes to his representatives in Jerusalem. They had no financial muscle, no military power. Even the walls of the city had not been rebuilt.

And they were surrounded by arrogant, non-Jewish people who often despised them. And we meet people like this in the 5th century books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Do you remember those men in the book of Nehemiah? Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab. People who looked down at the Jews and despised them.

Wealthy people. People who jeered at their attempts to rebuild the city walls. So the Jews were a small, struggling people. They were oppressed by their successful and powerful neighbours.

[8 : 29] And it's all this that helps us to understand their words of chapter 2, verse 17. They were feeling somehow that God had let them down. And it's perhaps helpful to imagine two Jewish men standing there amongst the still broken down walls of the city, looking out at the countryside around them and lamenting to each other their fortunes.

Benji, says one to the other, why has God treated us like this? We're back in the promised land, certainly. But it's not ours anymore, is it? And there's Malachi.

He's a good enough fellow, but he's been ticking us off for bringing poor specimens from our flocks to be sacrificed. But our flocks are so short of fodder and food is so expensive. Hasn't Malachi got a heart?

Doesn't he understand us? Yes, Ehud, says the other. I agree with you. We're the elect of God, supposedly. But it hardly feels like it, does it?

I mean, look out there at those pagan brigands out there across the plain in their prosperous little villages and towns, successful in their farming and trading, wealthy and arrogant and anti-Semitic.

[9 : 38] They thumb their noses at the God of Abraham. And yet, the God of Abraham seems to bless them. I mean, Ehud, I sometimes wonder what benefit there is to be a Jew at all if God blesses people like that with wealth and power and leaves his own people to eke out a paltry living amongst all this rubble.

It seems that God approves of those who do evil and blesses them for it. Whereas people like us, struggling Jews, who are trying our best to live by his rules, we seem to miss out.

It doesn't seem fair, does it, that God should delight in brigands. Then look at the second thing that the Jews were saying in verse 17. Where is the God of justice?

Yes, Abraham said back in Genesis that the God of all the earth will do right. He's a just God. But is he doing right and fair by us at the moment? If he really were just, he'd come to our rescue.

But wherever he is active in the earth, he doesn't seem to be very near Jerusalem. Now it's that kind of language verse 17 tells us that we're is God.

[10 : 48] That makes him sad, angry and frustrated. Now he loves his people to talk to him in prayer and praise and thanksgiving. But he does not love to hear that kind of talk.

He hates to hear that kind of talk because it so misrepresents the truth about him. Now friends, we have to allow the scriptures to search us.

At some level or another, every verse of the Bible will search us out. So we have to ask if verse 17 type talk is the kind of talk that we ever talk about God ourselves or at least if we don't quite dare to articulate it, perhaps to think it inside our heads.

Well let me suggest some possibilities. If the cap fits, then we must wear it. We might look around at our world today just as the 5th century BC Jews looked at their non-Jewish neighbours, their neighbours outside the covenant.

And we might say, why is it that people who are so anti-God can be apparently so successful? I mean for example, why have these Al-Qaeda people been able to do so much damage in the last 15 or 20 years around the world?

[12 : 00] And why have vicious and powerful forces in countries like Zimbabwe and the Sudan and Afghanistan and many other countries been allowed to get away with so much for so long?

Where has the God of justice been? Where was he on the 11th of September 2001? Or we might add, and why are the churches of the Lord Jesus not stronger?

Why is the evangelism that's taking place in the British churches not more fruitful? Or why is God allowing British society to become increasingly godless and increasingly hostile to the wonderful gospel of Christ?

Christ? Let me give you something which might be a specific example of this. A few days ago, just this last week, I was down in England for a small conference of ministers.

We'd been got together for encouragement and teaching by an old friend of mine. And there were about 30 of us there, 30 men. All of us had been ordained for I guess 30 or 35 years.

[13 : 01] In fact, I'd known every one of these men since we were all very young. And it was lovely for me to be able to spend time with them and catch up with some of them. Now, I was talking with one of these men, a man that I had known since we were both students together.

And this man has been the minister of his parish in the south of England for many years, 20 years or so. He's done a very fine work down there and he's a great example of Christian leadership.

Gracious, persevering, hard-working, very able, a wonderful preacher and teacher. And he said to me on Wednesday, he said, there are times, Edward, when I am tempted to feel disappointed with God.

Now, I respect this man very much. I was very gentle with him but I said to him, what do you mean disappointed with God? And he replied, disappointed that he hasn't done more, apparently, in our parish.

Disappointed that our gospel work has not been more fruitful. I mean, he went on, I mean, God loves the people in our parish far, far more than I ever could.

[14 : 08] We know that it's his will that they should be saved and not perish. So why doesn't he save more people through our labours? Now, my heart went out to my old friend as he bared his heart to me like this.

Here was a godly man asking, where is God in all our labours? Why is the harvest not more plentiful? Now, the people in Malachi 2.17 were not, I think, godly, like my friend, but they were asking a similar kind of question.

Why is God apparently not doing more for his people? Where is he? Where is the God who acts justly? So, friends, have you got this position of what these Old Testament Israelites were thinking?

I think we can understand why they were saying these things about God. But Malachi tells them straight that God finds their words wearisome because they misrepresent him.

They're not true about him. And in the first five verses of chapter 3, Malachi answers them head on and tells them why they can be sure that God does not approve of evil and that God's justice has not departed him or gone soft.

[15 : 18] And, to put this as shortly as possible, the answer to their complaint, the answer to their misrepresentations about God is the gospel.

And the gospel will always be God's answer to us if we begin to think as the people of chapter 2, verse 17 were thinking. So let's look together at these next few verses.

Chapter 3, verse 1. Behold. Now that means look up, friends, and pay attention. Sometimes if one of my young daughters at home is being a pain, a perfect pain, ministers, daughters can be a pain sometimes, sometimes my wife will say to her, now look at me, look at my eyes.

Do you ever say that? Look at my eyes. In other words, that forces the unwilling child to look at her mother eyeball to eyeball and await sentence. Now it's a method of securing attention, isn't it?

Behold. So when God says behold, he's saying, look at my eyes. He's forcing the people of chapter 2, verse 17 to pay very careful attention to him. So what is his message now to his wearisome people?

[16 : 29] Well, it concerns the sending of two men. First, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And second, 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. Now at first glance, you might think that there were three people there and not two. A first messenger, then the Lord and then another messenger who is called the messenger of the covenant.

But no, there are only two. First, there's the messenger who prepares the way and then secondly, the Lord who is the messenger of the covenant. Now we would only have to turn forward a few pages in the Bible to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and we would find that all four gospels are explicit and unambiguous about how to understand Malachi chapter 3 verse 1.

The messenger who prepares the way is John the Baptist and the Lord who is the messenger of the covenant is of course Jesus the Messiah. Now we'll look briefly first at John the Baptist.

His role as verse 1 puts it is to prepare the way. In ancient times if a great king or a great emperor were visiting different far-flung parts of his empire he would very often send a messenger or messengers ahead of him to prepare the way for him and the messenger's job was to tell the people of that country that their great lord was coming.

[18 : 04] In other words, spruce up, roll out the red carpet, provide the best food and accommodation, look lively friends, don't be caught napping, the king is on his way. So John the Baptist came for that purpose to prepare the way for Jesus but the way he prepared for Jesus is expressed in these words.

I'm going to quote now from John the Baptist's own words from Matthew chapter 3. He said, I baptize you with water for repentance but he who comes after me is mightier than I whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

So John's baptism is a baptism of repentance or baptism for repentance whereas Jesus' baptism is for cleansing and new birth by the Holy Spirit. But even for us today living as we do 2,000 years after these things in a sense we can still only come to Jesus via John the Baptist because we have to repent first before we can then be cleansed and born again by the power of the Spirit.

John's baptism for repentance is the necessary gateway to the great blessing of new birth by the Spirit's power. Well we'll leave John and we'll turn now to the Lord himself here the Messiah and his coming and let's see now how fully these first five verses of chapter 3 answer the tired wearisome complaints of chapter 2 verse 17.

Now there's an odd feature in verse 1 which you might have noticed and it might have made you raise an eyebrow. Don't you think it's rather odd to read the Lord whom you seek and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight?

[19 : 53] A bit odd because these people didn't appear to want him or delight in him at all. they seem really rather indifferent to him. Well it may well be that Malachi is being ironic here exposing a vein of religious hypocrisy in the people because perhaps the people as they went through the motions of their religious observations loudly professed how much they wanted the Lord and how much they sought him and loved him though Malachi himself realized only too well that their hearts were far from him.

So the prophet probably means the Lord whom you profess to seek and the messenger of the covenant in whom you claim to delight. Yes he's coming but have you any idea what his coming will mean?

Do you imagine that it will be all strawberries and cream when he comes? Because I'm telling you it will not be. So let's look at verses 2 to 5 which in prophetic language describe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The coming of Jesus 2,000 years ago divided people into two groups and his second and final coming will also divide all people all people of all generations and countries into two groups.

The two groups are the saved and the lost. Those who are condemned and those who are rescued. In fact the whole message of the Bible leads to these two groups being distinguished from each other and revealed.

[21 : 23] The saved are the Lord's people and the lost are those who have rejected the gospel. Now here in Malachi chapter 3 the saved are described in verses 2, 3 and 4 and the lost in verse 5.

So we'll look at verses 2 to 4 first. Verse 2 But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? Now at first sight that looks terrifying and indeed it is terrifying.

It shows that nobody can stand in his presence. Nobody so to speak can hold his head high in the Lord's presence. No one can require or demand that he be recognised by the Lord on the grounds that he's done rather well.

No. The only appropriate response to Jesus is to fall down before him because he is pure and we are not. But there's something wonderful here in verse 2.

When he appears fearsome in his glory and his perfection he makes it clear that he has come not to destroy his people but to cleanse them. He is like a refiner's fire not a forest fire which destroys everything in its path but a fire to refine and purify silver or gold and he is like fuller's soap.

[22 : 42] Fuller is an old fashioned word for a launderer and as we know the soap in our washing machines at least I'm told this is not there to destroy clothes but to clean them and to make them fit for further use.

So although his coming is so awesome the purpose of it is to cleanse and transform his people by ridding them of all the grime and impurity that makes them unacceptable to him.

And so we see in verse 3 he begins his wonderful work. he sits verse 3 tells us it's time consuming. In those days the silversmiths and the goldsmiths would have a little smelting furnace with fire underneath it to heat up whatever was in it and they would put the unrefined metal the unrefined silver into the furnace and heat it up to a very high temperature and then they would sit apparently for a long time looking in to the metal inside the furnace watching the colour of it gradually change until all the impurities were burned off and the silver finally became so bright that they could see the reflection of their faces in it and when they could see their faces in it they knew it was pure.

Now Malachi puts this in 5th century BC terms when the Lord comes he says he will purify the sons of Levi in other words the temple priests and he will change their hearts and when that is done they will stop bringing disgraceful offerings of sickly animals to the Lord they'll start bringing right offerings to the Lord and when their hearts are purified this will mean that the people too will be purified and their offerings as verse 4 tells us will then be pleasing to the Lord.

Now chronologically just think big history for a moment chronologically this prophecy is multi-layered very often the Old Testament prophets are like this we have them addressing first their own contemporary situation but then often speaking of the first coming of Christ and then sometimes also of the return of Christ and these three perspectives can get mixed up together and it's not always easy to see which layer of history is being dealt with.

- [24 : 55] So although verses 3 and 4 seem to refer to a revival in Malachi's own time they must also refer to the period after Christ's first coming because we know he didn't come suddenly to his temple until the first century AD so this cleansing and refining process of verses 2, 3 and 4 must be something that is still going on today.

These verses describe the way in which Christ deals with those who belong to him. So how is he dealing with his people? Well first he's taking his time he sits over his smelting furnace looking carefully at the silver working with it until finally he can see his own image reflected in it.

He wants you and me if we're Christians to reflect his very own character. Now when you think of this in terms of the teaching of the whole Bible you see that his purifying of his people happens in two ways.

First there's the eternal ultimate purification of his people which he achieved at the cross. As it's put in Hebrews 1 verse 3 after making purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

So his death on the cross is the ultimate means of purifying his people. But what he has done ultimately and eternally on the cross he also does by an actual progressive transformation of our lives here on earth which means that he takes the grimy raw material of our lives and he then heats it up to remove the disfiguring elements in it.

- [26 : 43] No wonder therefore that this is sometimes a painful process. if our lives are not being progressively and deeply changed by Christ we have to ask whether we're Christian people at all because this is his work this is what he does with those who belong to him.

He's not willing to leave the proud man's pride untouched. He's not willing to leave the jealous man's jealousy unchallenged. Whatever our particular sinful tendencies are he is determined to purify us.

Laziness, vanity, lust, contempt for other people, greed, indiscipline, lack of love, whatever it is it will be challenged. If we belong to him he will battle with us over many years if necessary to subdue everything that is hateful to him.

Now friends isn't that wonderful that he treats us like that? Isn't he kind? Once we belong to him he is determined to reshape us fundamentally.

But the passage helps us to understand why it can be painful to grow as a Christian. The silver and gold can only be refined by fire. If you were to take a soft cloth to these metals and rub it it would never get the impurities out.

- [28 : 05] They've got to be heated up to the point of melting. So for example it is a painful thing for a proud person to learn humility. A proud person who's for years swaggered about like a fighting cock he will find it very difficult to learn to put other people first and their needs first.

Or think of a person whose life has been indisciplined and chaotic perhaps through alcohol or drugs or promiscuous sex. That person will find it painful to be trained by Christ to live in a disciplined way.

Now in the end that person will be deeply grateful but the road to good order and discipline may be a long and difficult one. Or a person who has idolised music or sport or something else might find it hard to bend all the love and the joy and the affection of their heart to the Lord as the number one.

But the Lord is wonderfully patient and kind with us. He sits for a long time bending over the silver working with it until eventually it reflects his own face.

Then, verse 4, the offerings of God's people which they bring to him will please him. So in Old Testament terms they will stop bringing him sickly and weak animals that are worth nothing.

[29 : 28] They'll start bringing him fine unblemished sacrifices. And in terms of our lives we will delight to offer our love, our time, our energy, our labour, our money, so as to further his purposes.

We shan't just go through the motions of religion. We'll live for him because to serve the Lord Jesus will become our highest joy. He will become more important to us than anything else in the world.

But what about those who do not belong to him? Well, verse 5 tells us what he does with them finally. 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 of hosts. Now this is not an exhaustive list of sins, but it represents a number of different types of sinful behaviour, both personal sins and social.

[30 : 34] people. But the thing which unites all these sins is the attitude that underlies them. And that is that these people do not fear the Lord. They don't fear his retribution.

They don't think that he will ever call them to account. They imagine perhaps that he's rather like an indulgent old uncle who will let them get away with anything that they want to do. But the Lord says, I will draw near to you for judgment.

I won't play at judging. I will do it. And I will be both the judge and the witness. A swift witness, as verse 5 puts it. In other words, the whole judicial process is mine.

And I will condemn those who have no desire to fear me or revere me or love me. Now let me ask, friends, do you rejoice in your hearts to know that God is a just judge?

I do hope that you do. Because if God is not a just judge who condemns sin, it means that the universe has been filleted of its moral backbone.

[31 : 37] If God is not a just judge, then moral chaos reigns and the universe is without principle. But the truth is expressed in the final verse of the book of Ecclesiastes.

God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad. God will judge us for everything we do. So do you see how these first five verses of chapter 3 answer those wearisome words of chapter 2, verse 17?

In chapter 2, verse 17, the people are really saying God doesn't care. He's indifferent to good and evil and he doesn't seem to want to judge wrongdoers. But the Lord replies, Behold, look at my eyes, how wrong you are.

I will judge and condemn those who refuse to fear me and those who sin against God and man without a care. And I do care for my people, so much so that when I come to them in the person of the Messiah, I shall purify them.

Now we're dealing with big chronological vistas here. Here's Malachi speaking 450 years before Christ. God's time scale is very big.

[32 : 46] He is much more patient than we are. But Christ did come to his temple and his first coming did bring judgment upon those who rejected him and salvation to those who welcomed him.

And since then, another 2,000 years have passed and we must await his return, which will complete the story of the human race in the old world. And when he comes back, he will rescue for eternity those who belong to him, those who are waiting eagerly for him.

And he will judge for eternity those who refuse to love him and to fear the Lord. It wearies God. It frustrates him to hear people say that he doesn't care or that he's not interested in justice.

He does care and his justice is perfect and it is expressed to its fullness in the first and second comings of Jesus Christ.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Our gracious God, we do thank you so much for these wonderful words and we thank you that you care so much and that our Saviour, the Lord Jesus, is prepared to refine us and cleanse us, to sit as it were over the crucible until we begin to reflect his own features.

[34 : 15] And for all of us who are believers here tonight, we do pray that you will continue this wonderful process, even if it's painful at times, because we long to become conformed more and more to the image of your Son.

And for any here tonight, dear Father, who are not yet Christians, who have not yet bowed the knee, who have not yet capitulated to the Lord Jesus, we pray that you will have mercy upon them and show them your love expressed in the coming of Jesus and that you will give them grace to come to him and to find in him new life and a completely new future.

And all these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.