

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have shown us the true heart of a servant in Jesus Christ our Lord. May we show care and compassion in tending to the needs of others, as He did. May we act with honesty and integrity in all our dealings with others, as He did. May we find joy and happiness in giving ourselves to the advancement of Your Kingdom of justice, truth and love. We praise You, Lord God Almighty: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As you talk with people, listen; then make notes when possible, so you can pray about them and their needs

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people of other faiths** *Pray for Muslims; pray about the tensions between Christians and Muslims that are troubling our world*
- *Pray for Pensions providers and their integrity and security*
- *Give thanks for the good work done by the church in the world*

Meditation

May I learn those truths of life
Which God has given in Jesus Christ;
And may I find within the Word
The way which guides me out of death to life.

Free my soul from being consumed
By all that occupies my days;
And raise my sights to higher things,
Your gracious touch of mercy on my heart.

Stir up a zeal, a passion within
Which seeks to serve all those I meet;
And through such work, fulfil my call
To do my best, my all, for Christ and others.

Save my spirit from becoming mean,
Unwilling to share the grace of God;
And turn me round from death to life
To sow and reap a harvest for the Kingdom.

Bible passage – Malachi 2:17-3:5

¹⁷ You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him?' By saying, 'All who do what is wrong are acceptable in the LORD's sight, and He delights in them.' Or else, 'Where is the God of justice?'

^{3:1} Look! I am sending my messenger to clear the way before me, and suddenly, the Lord whom you seek will come into His Temple. Look! The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 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; ³ he will reside as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD as in the days of old and as in years gone by.

⁵ Then I will approach you in judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners, widows and orphans, against those who turn aside strangers, yet do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

Bible Study

Review

Malachi saw the most terrible ungodliness amongst His own people, and the Lord gave him a clear message about it. In what we have read today, we find ourselves at the heart of this message, explained by Malachi simply and astonishingly directly; God will shortly come to sort out the problems of His people's sins (3:1f.!) We now realise that up to this point in the prophecy of Malachi, all we have read has been about the sins of Israel and God's reactions to them. Malachi has uncovered the lack of faith and obedience on the part of God's people (1:2-5), the defiling of worship and the casual attitude of the Temple priests (1:6-2:3), the failure of the priesthood to lead and teach God's people (2:4-9) and the tragedy of marriage breakup because of greed and poverty (2:10-16). Each of these reflects a breakdown of trust between God and His people, but up to now, the main reaction of God has been His understandable offence at being rejected by His people.

The trouble was that despite Malachi's masterful exposure of the problems, the people did not accept they were doing anything wrong! So when Malachi said 'You have wearied the Lord with your words' (2:17), the people's reply was 'How have we wearied Him?' The people persisted in self-justification, and we can almost hear the comments of Israelites of the time, complaining that they had come from far away and given their time and energy to rebuild the Temple. They expected that as prophesied by Ezekiel (see chs 40-48), the renewed Temple would be filled with the glory of God in a remarkable and spectacular new visitation, as had never been seen before! But this had not happened, so the people stopped bothering with the rituals, teaching and covenant regulations!

When there is a crisis, many will often see what is happening, but only one will stand to speak the truth and confront the situation. Here, God chose Malachi firstly to challenge the people (1:2-2:17), but secondly, to prophecy in unforgettable terms what God would now do (3:1f.). The picture presented by Malachi is clear, precise, and startling. The Lord would indeed come in awesome majesty to dwell amongst His people again; He would 'come into His Temple' (3:1). More than that, His coming would be preceded by a 'messenger' who would prepare for Him to come just as Isaiah had prophesied (see Isaiah 40:3f.), and this would happen suddenly after the appearance of the messenger! This prophecy can hardly be more precise in foretelling John the Baptist's preaching and the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as early Christians quickly perceived (though the connection between John the Baptist and Elijah is found later in Malachi 4:5).

There is more to this prophecy, however. In the light of what he saw, Malachi prophesied that the Lord would come to deal with the essential problem of the breakdown of His relationship with His people. The Lord would come in judgemental power to finally get rid of the impurities amongst His people, just as a refiner burns away the dross whilst smelting silver or gold so that the precious metal may be purified (3:3,4), and like the action of soap in cleansing stains from filthy rags (3:2). In addition to these measures to eradicate all the evils mentioned in the prophecy so far, Malachi prophesied that the Lord would act with a far greater range of justice than so far hinted at. He would deal with every sinful and unjust practice amongst His people so that His people would learn to 'fear Him' again (3:5).

God would no more endure the errant sinfulness of His own people, and the picture of the refiners fire is that of a final and inescapable judgement. As God's people today, we must remember that although we find the talk of justice and judgement hard without the message of God's love, salvation has only come to us because Christ has dealt with sin and has fulfilled this prophecy! There is much more to the Gospel than Malachi's prophecy, but it suggests an extraordinary and powerful connection between the Old and the New Testaments.

Going Deeper

Verse 17 is like a final summary of the situation of God's people before the terrifying power of Malachi's great prophecy. Strangely, there are few difficulties in the translation of this powerful text. The words of the ancient Hebrew are powerful and direct, and most Bible versions are the same. The Lord will come soon, preceded by His messenger!

Notes on the text and translation

- V17** *'All who do what is wrong are acceptable in the LORD's sight'* Most Bible versions say 'all who do evil are good in the Lord's sight ...'. The Hebrew words for 'evil' and 'good' are very general words as they are in English, and I have translated them with the broader meaning the Hebrew suggests.
- V1** *'to clear the way'* The well known version is 'prepare the way' but the Hebrew tells us that this is an actions of putting aside objects that get in the way of the return. It is not easy to say this in a simple way, but this does have an important role in explaining the text (see study).
- V2** *'who can endure ... who can stand'* The Hebrew verb 'endure' comes from the idea of being sustained or keeping going. In other words, who can 'continue in their own strength'. The notion behind 'who can stand' is to take a stance in opposition to something, in this case, against God.
- V2** *'fullers' soap'* A 'fuller' is someone who washes things. I have retained the traditional 'fullers' soap' because there are few other words available for someone who washes things full time for a living!

Going Deeper

Upside down world! (2:17)

How many times in Christian history have we heard people say 'where is God', or 'why does God not listen to our prayers', or 'is God really interested in us?' Malachi perceived the same hopelessness within the people of his day, that we can see today when things do not appear to go well, or when people's own expectations do not appear to be met by God's response. Malachi knew that God always stands above the problems we perceive, and he had the courage to accept that the breakdowns that happen between God and His people are the fault of people and not God. Only when such faults are identified and dealt with can restoration occur. I believe that Malachi was someone who longed for the coming of Christ, and because his prophecies show evidence of his knowing the work of Isaiah, he may have had some idea of the potential of God's redeeming work through a 'suffering servant'. However, he was called to identify sin that had to be confronted.

The key part of this verse occurs in the middle, where Malachi reports what the people said in this stunningly awful comment; 'all who do what is wrong are acceptable in the Lord's sight' (2:17). The people had turned morality on its head; right was wrong and wrong was right! This was exactly what was happening when priests said to people that they could bring whatever they wanted (wrong) to worship God (right – see 1:6-10). It also describes what happened when the priests gave false instruction (wrong) even though they possessed the eternal covenants of God (right – see 2:4-9), and when the great covenant of marriage (right) was abandoned for the social convenience of divorce (wrong – see 2:10-16). God's moral law had been turned upside down because people believed that God would accept anything!

It is often commented that Jesus came into the world to turn it 'upside down', and people quote 'the first shall be last and the last first' (Matt 19:30), but the truth is that Jesus challenged the world to accept again the true moral nature of the world God made. People persisted in believing that conflict resolves problems (and still do today), but Jesus said no; only love does (Matthew 5:39f.). People said that only adults could understand spiritual things, but Jesus said no; babies can (Matt 18:1-5). Jesus came to turn the world the 'right way up'!

The Messiah and the Messenger (3:1-4)

Malachi did not use the word 'Messiah' when speaking about the coming of the Lord. He spoke forthrightly saying that Ezekiel's prophecy would be fulfilled and God would come into His Temple in magnificent glory (3:1), but what people would experience would be the purifying power of this Glory! As he says himself; who can survive such a coming of God (3:2)! Who can 'stand' when He comes (3:2)? Will the purifying power of God's coming consume the people together with the evil? The answer must be that although Malachi prophesied the judgement of God, when we read the whole of his prophecy, it assumes that after the purification, there will be something left for a new start. Something valuable is left after gold and silver are refined (3:3), however much dross is burned away, and the one who washes does so to clean and not to discard. The 'sons of Levi', therefore, are purified so that they can offer proper worship again in the Temple (3:3).

At the end of this small section of prophecy, Malachi says; 'then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord as in days of old and as in years gone by.' If we have read Malachi's prophecies with understanding, we will know that Malachi was aware that returning to the past was not an option; but he was confident God would do a new work that would deal conclusively with sin so that the truths of God available in the history of his people would be rediscovered again (3:4).

It is sometimes said that this does not fit well with the picture of Isaiah a prophet from earlier centuries. Isaiah rejected the idea that there were any who were 'good enough' before God or who could be purified, except the 'suffering servant' (Isaiah 53f.) who acted for the redemption of all those who would believe in

him. It is not easy for us to place ourselves back in the lives and times of people such as Malachi, but if the only other information Malachi had about the Messiah was to be found in the prophecies of Isaiah, then I do not see why he could not have accepted that great prophetic vision. Then, knowing that the appearance of the Lord God in the Temple would be something far beyond people's understanding, he was impelled by God to warn the people that this coming would purify them as through fire and through washing (3:2,3). Malachi knew that the people of his own day doubted the quality and worthiness of the rebuilt Temple (see Ezra 3:10-13, which describes some weeping in shame at the sight of the Temple), and may have been one who felt this way himself. He may then have perceived that what he was talking about was a physical coming of God of a totally different order.

Of course, the early Christian church was able to read Malachi's work from the Old Testament and connect the purification by fire with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and the purification by washing as a foretaste of baptism first practiced by John the Baptist and then by Jesus and the disciples (Matthew 28:19).

Judgement (3:5)

Malachi refused to stand back from confronting sin, reflecting the fact that God does not accept sin in His presence even to this day, and the list of what he identified in verse 5 is a fascinating comment on the life of God's people at the time. Malachi said of course that judgement was God's and God's alone, and it was He who would come to act in judgement. Malachi simply warned; he did not implement the judgement. He had just delivered a prophesy explaining how God would act, and this verse is like the address on the envelope of the package. It identifies for whom the just punishment of God is intended.

More is covered by the list than most people imagine, for the categories are very broad and are intended to be a representative list. Malachi identifies firstly 'sorcery', otherwise known as the practice of divination. This is the attempt to discover the mind or will of the gods using various earthly means, whether through throwing stones, reading stars (as in astrology) or in any other form of superstition. Sorcery is, of course, the most extreme form of idolatry in which dedication to a god other than the one true and living God is taken to extreme lengths. If the sin of sorcery reminds us of the sin of idolatry, then most of the other sins mentioned in this list equally remind us of the Ten Commandments. Perjury is, of course, the giving of false witness and this is subject of the Ten Commandments number nine, and adultery is also number seven. It would be exhaustive if Malachi listed sins relating to the whole of the Ten Commandments, but we get the idea. What is most interesting is that all these sins are also mentioned in the 'moral law' of Leviticus 19, frequently quoted alongside the Ten Commandments as summarising the laws of God. This also includes the exploitation of wage earners there (Lev 19:13). In addition to this, Malachi include the classical command from Deuteronomy to respect the alien, the widow and the orphan (see Deut 14:29).

This is not a casual list of sins, but a considered list that reflected both what Malachi saw and also a description of what he observed using the classical definitions of sin from the laws of Moses found in the first five books of the Bible; the great Israelite 'Torah', or 'Law'. Israel had abandoned God's 'Law' and they thought that it did not matter; as Malachi said 'yet they do not fear me'. This is why God had to come again in a new way, announced beforehand by a special messenger. It is Malachi's unique contribution to the prophetic heritage.

Application

This, the climax of Malachi's prophecy, appears on the surface to be a very mixed package. Judgement by 'refiner's fire and fuller's soap' does not sound pleasant, and possibly not survivable, but Malachi certainly regarded this judgement as something new that God would do with something positive on the other side. Levi would bring offerings 'acceptable' to God, people would fear God again, and the true heritage of God from the past would be recovered. It is tempting to wonder whether we must not simply cast Malachi in the mould of the prophet who told us about the coming of the Messiah preceded by one 'preparing the way'. This is of course of major importance, and we will see that as Malachi draws to a close over this and the final chapter, more is said about this amazing prophecy (see 4:1f.). Nevertheless, the passage we have read today implies something more to us about how God works in the midst of His people at any time, especially and significantly, at a time of renewal and revival.

The combination of the preaching of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus is worth recalling if we want to see how God works to confront sin in the world even today. Both had the same sermon 'repent for the Kingdom of God is near' (Matt 3:2, 4:17). However, it was the preaching of John that warned people of the absolute and dire consequences of sin; and the work of Christ built on that to give us the greatest gift of all, salvation. It is perhaps wise for Christian people to revisit the words of John the Baptist, Malachi and the Old Testament prophets so that they understand the truly endemic and destructive nature of sin in the world. I have frequently heard Christian people say of sin, quite lightly, 'I am sure that God will sort it all out', as if

sins such as anger, wrong attitudes in worship or relationship issues, were minor personality issues that do not affect Christian discipleship or faith. We suggest to each other that Jesus will deal with these things providing that we say the right thing when we die and do our best now; but this is not good enough. The Biblical message is that sin destroys, and all sin is an affront to God. I once said this in a teaching session to some preachers, and one person retorted quite crossly; 'really?'

Surely those of true faith long to be rid of any sin, knowing that it separates them and their Lord, and knowing that the smallest sins can often be the biggest obstacles precisely because they appear insignificant from a worldly perspective. The absolute call to purity as in a 'refiner's fire', is an important part of Malachi's abiding prophetic contribution to Scripture. We must ask ourselves whether we are prepared to be refined in this way, for to place our trust in Christ and the grace of God does not mean that we escape judgement, but that by submitting to the refiner's fire now, our lives produce gold and silver for the Kingdom of God!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do we weary God with our words, complaints and practices today? What do you reckon that He thinks of this?
2. Discuss in your group what verse you would each preach from in this passage of Malachi.
3. How does the image of the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap affect you, and what do they say to you about being cleansed from sin?

Personal comments by author

This passage of Scripture is one that I feel contains almost as much of God's Word as we will give it time to speak to us! The closer I look at each word and phrase, the more I find and the more I am captivated by the possibilities. There is more spiritual and practical truth for us to discover from the messenger, the Temple, the Lord's appearance, the sons of Levi, the offerings in Jerusalem, to name but a few features of the text. Perhaps the best result of any Bible study is to leave it knowing that you can return and gain so much more!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you can get hold of a Christian biography, read through as much as you can of it over several days, and assess in your own way the impact of sin on the life of the person you have read about. Compare this to what Scripture says about sin.*
 - *Pray for those who find the subject of sin difficult, and in particular the notion of the 'refiner's fire'. Pray that evangelists will have wisdom in deciding when to speak about sin and when to speak about the love and grace of Christ that overcomes it.*
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Final Prayer

Give us humility, Almighty Father, in the face of the great truths of the Gospel. May we handle them with dignity and care, and always remember that we are dependent upon You for everything, including our wisdom and understanding. Guide us in all truth, Almighty Father; AMEN
