

Malachi 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Malachi chapter 3. 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. 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 full as soap.

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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years. 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. For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes, and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

But you say, How shall we return? Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, How have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.

And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you, and pour down for you a blessing, until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord. But you say, how have we spoken against you? You have said, It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge, or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evil does not only prosper, but they put God to the test, and they escape.

[2 : 2 8] Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.

They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. A fourth dispute in the book of Malachi was introduced at the end of chapter 2 in verse 17.

You have wearied the Lord with your words, but you say, how have we wearied him? 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? This dispute continues here in chapter 3. In the preceding chapter, the Lord rebuked and condemned the Levitical priests for their failure to maintain true worship.

The task of a faithful priest was described in chapter 2 verse 7. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. The language of the messenger is taken up again at the beginning of this chapter, as the Lord announces the coming of an eschatological messenger.

In the second half of the preceding chapter, the people's faithlessness was also central. They were condemned for their unfaithfulness to their brethren, their unfaithfulness to the Lord in intermarriage with idolaters, and their unfaithfulness to their wives. While there are distinct disputes, we should not think that they are simply detached from each other. The issue of the people's faithlessness continues to be prominent in the opening verses of chapter 3, where the Lord's coming will purge the people and their worship. The people are warned in advance, so that they will be prepared when he comes. A turn to faithfulness in the present should be motivated by the expected advent of the Lord in judgment and purification. The challenge of the verse with which the chapter opens, as Ray Clendendon observes, is that of determining the identity of the different figures that are involved. There is the I who is speaking, the one of whom he speaks as my messenger, the Lord whom you seek, and then also the messenger of the covenant. How many figures are actually here? We should recognize, for instance, that the first occurrence of the word Lord within this verse is not a translation of the word Yahweh, as it is at the end of the verse. In many biblical translations, this will be revealed in the fact that one has all caps and the other does not. However, the identity of this figure can be narrowed down by the fact that it says that he is coming to his temple. It would seem that this character is none other than the Lord himself. Presumably, there is at least a distinction here between the Lord who comes suddenly to his temple and the messenger who was sent to prepare the way. Is the messenger of the covenant the same figure as the messenger that's sent to prepare the way?

[5 : 24] It would seem more likely that the messenger of the covenant is associated with the Lord whom you seek. The messenger of the covenant is described as one in whom they delight, which would naturally connect him with the Lord whom you seek. We might also read the expression as, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, yea, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is another way of saying the Lord whom you seek. However, there seems to be a problem here. The Lord is the one who's speaking, but he seems to speak of a different figure, the messenger of the covenant, who seems in the context to be paralleled with the Lord whom you seek. Is the Lord speaking of himself in the third person and also describing himself as the messenger of the covenant? Or is something else going on here? There are other Old Testament verses that might give some clue. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, a voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. In Exodus chapter 23 verses 20 to 21, the Lord speaks of his preparation of the way for his people to the promised land.

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. In the next chapter in Malachi, in verses 5 to 6, the Lord also speaks of the way that he is going to send a messenger in advance, Elijah the prophet.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with the decree of utter destruction.

These statements are taken up within the New Testament, where they are related to John the Baptist and to Jesus. Mark chapter 1 verses 2 to 3. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. This takes Malachi chapter 3 verse 1, Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, and Exodus chapter 23 verse 20, and remixes them into a single statement of the Lord's advent that is being announced by John the Baptist. That advent is coming in Jesus Christ. This reading is strengthened by other verses, Luke chapter 1 verse 76, And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. That's Zacharias speaking about his son John the Baptist. John speaks of himself in John chapter 3 verse 28, You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.

[8 : 14] Putting all of these pieces together, we can perhaps come to a greater understanding of what this opening verse means. John the Baptist is the messenger that's sent in advance to prepare the people. The Lord whom you seek, certainly taken by itself, might be a possible reference to a messianic figure. The fact that he comes to his temple suggests that he is divine. He, I think, is identified with the messenger of the covenant in what follows. Understanding this figure as Christ helps us to put together the pieces. Christ is like the angel of the Lord who leads the people through the wilderness. He is fully divine, but he is also the one sent by God. As the messenger of the covenant, he is the archetypal prophet, the word of the Lord himself incarnate. In light of verse 7 of the preceding chapter, we should also see him as the archetypal priest. We shouldn't miss the element of sarcasm within this opening statement. This statement is, among other things, an answer to the people's charge. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. And their challenge, where is the God of justice? Both of which are mentioned in the preceding verse at the end of chapter 2. The Lord is saying in response, so you really delight in justice? Well, that justice that you are so seeking, that justice that you supposedly delight in, is about to come, but you're not going to be ready for it. When the Lord, the messenger of the covenant, comes to his temple, his holiness will be like a consuming fire, and no one will be able to stand before him. The unfaithfulness of the priests, challenged in the preceding chapter, would be dealt with by his presence. He would purify the sons of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver. While the priests' blessings were currently being treated as if they were curses, and their offerings were not being accepted, the purifying of the sons of Levi would lead to pure offerings being made. Once more, the sacrifices of the people would be accepted before the Lord. The once broken covenant relationship would be fully restored. These verses are also alluded to within the New Testament by John the

Baptist, who says in Matthew chapter 3 verses 11 to 12, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

The image of one coming with cleansing fire might be taken from these verses in Malachi. We should note that the threshing floor was the site where the temple was built. The clearing of the threshing floor is paralleled with the cleansing of the house.

The coming of the Lord would lead to swift judgment against the evildoers in the land, sorcerers, adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who oppress the poor and the weak and the vulnerable, those who do not show hospitality to the stranger, and more generally, those who do not fear the Lord. The people have been complaining that the Lord's justice is not being enacted, and yet they are not seeing the Lord's justice because they are being spared it. Were the Lord's justice to come at that moment, they would all be consumed by it. Their challenge, where is the God of justice, was a direct attack upon the nature of God, presenting the Lord as if you are fundamentally inconsistent or unreliable. Yet the truth of the matter is that it's God's unchangeable commitment to his people that has meant that they are not consumed, that his justice has not come near when its coming would mean their destruction. The Lord, by his nature, does not change, yet the only consistency in the people themselves is their fickleness. They have been turning aside all the time since the days of their fathers. The dispute between the Lord and his people continues in the second half of verse 7. He calls them to return to him in repentance, and yet they ask, what need they repent for? They have, he responds, been robbing him, a charge that they immediately question. Despite their denials, the charge has substance. They have not been bringing their tithes and contributions.

Much as the blessings of the priests were turned into curses, so the people, for their failure to give to the Lord what was his due, were suffering under the covenant curse of futility, until they remedied their failure to pay the tithes. They would not enter into the full enjoyment of the covenant blessing. Yet if they paid the tithes as they ought to, the Lord promises them the most dramatic covenant blessing. I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. All of the covenant blessings are there to be enjoyed, if only they will return to the Lord. The Lord is not withholding the blessings from them out of some malicious desire that they not enjoy them. It is the Lord's will. Indeed, it will be his purpose that they enjoy the blessings.

[12 : 54] But their grasping refusal to give back to the Lord tokens of the good gifts that he has given to them is preventing them from entering into the full enjoyment of the blessings that he has for them. The people's questioning of the Lord's justice is brought up again in verse 13 and following.

They had questioned whether it was worth living righteously at all, since evildoers seemed to prosper and be blessed by him. We might here recognize something of the struggle the psalmist experienced in Psalm 73 verses 13 to 18. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places. You make them fall to ruin. The psalmist, through his reflections in the house of the Lord, was able to discern the truth of the matter. However, the response of the people here was far more cynical. They fell into the trap that the psalmist narrowly avoided.

However, Malachi's message does not seem to have fallen upon entirely deaf ears. Some people did respond. In verse 16 we read of some who feared the Lord, the Lord paying attention and hearing them in response.

This can be seen as a natural fulfillment of his promise, return to me and I will return to you. The book of remembrance that was written was probably not a book that was written by or for the Lord, so much as for the people to be placed before the Lord. Perhaps some sort of covenant renewal document.

Not a book of remembrance of them, as many translations have it, but a book of remembrance for them. The Lord assures them that on the day of his visitation, they would be honored as his treasured possession.

[14 : 42] At that moment in time, the difference between the righteous and the wicked may not be obvious, but those who live by faith would see clearly on that day the distinction between these two groups. A question to consider. The word messenger is an important one within the book of Malachi.

Malachi's own name means my messenger. In chapter 2 verse 7, the faithful priest is described as the messenger of the Lord of hosts. And in verse 1 of this chapter, if our reading is correct, we have two messengers, the messenger who prepares the way, and the messenger of the covenant, who is the Lord who comes to his temple. Taking these various references together, how might we come to a fuller understanding of what the figure of the messenger represents, and what his task is.

