

A Pure People
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Malachi 3:1-7,14-18; 4:1-2

Did you ever have an event you were looking forward to that didn't turn out the way you expected? Any stories you would share? (Julie's graduation; Natalia's baby)

Malachi three predicts the ministry of John the Baptist, then the earthly ministry of Jesus.

This "messenger of the covenant," the promised Messiah they were eagerly seeking would come suddenly. Not only would the timing be a surprise. Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they imagined. **How was Jesus' first coming different than the Jewish people were expecting? How do you think Jesus' second coming will surprise people today?**

Let me give you the beginning of where this lesson is going. Look at verses one and two:

Malachi 3:1-2 (NLT)

"Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

2 "But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes.

Don't you just love a lesson about God's judgment? It's enough to make a teacher think: "Can't we just do the 23rd Psalm?" Imagine how the Old Testament prophets felt? I know, they were called by God and the message burned inside them. But, humanly speaking it had to be tough to deliver to people. I bet they never got invited to parties! Yet, it's important that those of us who are followers of Christ not ignore the parts of our Bible that speak of God's judgment.

I wrote two thoughts on this:

- What about me as a follower of Christ? How should I feel about God's judgment?
 - If I fear the Lord, and am clothed in the righteousness of Christ, I don't have to fear judgment. For the believer, the fire of judgment is not *consuming* but *refining*.
- What about those around us who aren't believers?
 - Compassion for people can make us hesitant to speak about God's judgment. Compassion for people is why we **MUST** speak of God's coming judgment.

The big idea: Believers in Christ need not fear his coming judgment for ourselves; however we do need to warn those who don't believe.

- This was heavy stuff Malachi was delivering! Jesus is coming as a "refining fire."
- Let's learn about how a "refining fire" works in purifying metal.
- We're told: *"The melting point of silver is about 1,760 degrees Fahrenheit. As the molten silver was stirred, the lighter impurities in the silver would rise to the top, and the refiner would scrape them away. When the refiner could look into the molten metal and see his own image reflected, the metal was pure and ready for his purposes."* (*Explore the Bible Commentary*)
- **What's the difference between a "refiner's fire" and a forest fire?**
- **Why does God need to even have a "refiner's fire" when it comes to human beings?**
- We can't even go into the "refiner's fire" until we've accepted the free gift of Salvation.
- **Once we're a follower of Christ, how does He purify us? Examples?**
- The last sentence of that quote is a beautiful word picture! When Christ can look at us and see His reflection, we're pure enough for Him to use!

A thought: As long as there is impurity in us we reflect OUR nature. When our lives show His reflection, He's purified us. That's an ongoing process until we get to Heaven.

John Piper writes:

"We were created in the image of God with the potential to reverence God and trust him and obey him and glorify him, but we were born in iniquity and in sin did our mothers conceive us...we fall short of God's glory again and again.

So we are impure by nature and by practice. But God will have no alloys in heaven. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." ...therefore he must be a refiner's fire. If he were only an incinerating fire, heaven would be empty. And if he were no fire, heaven would be empty."

- If we have any doubt why God needs a "refining fire," let's understand the situation back then.
- Look back at 2:17 to see the situation then (and now.)
- The people had grown "cynical" about God. Malachi told them:

Malachi 2:17 (NLT)

17 You have wearied the Lord with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

You have wearied him by saying that all who do evil are good in the Lord's sight, and he is pleased with them. You have wearied him by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

- In Malachi's day (and our day now), the people "wearied" God by their cynical thoughts.
- You can go two ways with this verse: **How would verse seventeen reflect the feelings of someone who is frustrated by the evil around them?** (3:14-15 also reflect this attitude.)

Malachi 3:14–15 (NLT)

14 "You have said, 'What's the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying his commands or by trying to show the Lord of Heaven's Armies that we are sorry for our sins? 15 From now on we will call the arrogant blessed. For those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them suffer no harm.' "

- A different mind-set: **How would verse seventeen describe a society that had grown callous to the things of God?**

Larry Richards writes:

“This people had chosen to set God aside as irrelevant; they had determined to pay Him no more attention. They might go through the motions. After all, appearance at the temple was one of those things well-bred people did! But in their hearts there was no longer a place for God.”

- We live in a day that is so evil, some people are cynical that God will ever bring justice.
- We also live in a day when people believe you can live any way you want and it makes no difference. People look at the heavens and ask *“Where is the God of justice?”*
- Malachi answered that question in verses one and two we just read.
- *“The Lord...will suddenly come to his temple...like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes.”*
- Then, verse two poses two questions: Who can endure the day of His coming? and Who can stand when He appears? Verses three through five answer this:

3 He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites [the priests who were leading the people astray], refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord. 4 Then once more the Lord will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.

5 “At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

- Verses three and four: **Who was Jesus coming to purify? How would it change them?**
- According to verse five: **What kind of people need to fear God’s judgment?**
- The refining fire of God’s judgment came through Jesus’ first coming and is ultimately coming when He returns to earth.
- What are people to do about it? Look at verses six and seven.

6 “I am the Lord, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed. 7 Ever since the days of your ancestors, you have scorned my decrees and failed to obey them. Now return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

“But you ask, ‘How can we return when we have never gone away?’

- **Verse six speaks to two of God’s BEST characteristics. What are they?**
- **How does verse seven say we can be purified and not consumed by God’s judgment?**
- **How does the last sentence in verse seven show a mindset that hinders repentance?**
- We won’t cover verses eight through sixteen this morning, but you should read it later. It describes some very obvious ways the people of Israel has grown complacent about God.
- Now let’s get to some ENCOURAGEMENT for both believers and those not yet believers in Christ. We have to ask: *“How can a person be purified but not consumed by God’s fire?”*

Quoting John Piper again:

“The answer cannot be: get rid of your own sin. If you got rid of your own sin, you would need no refining. Refining is for sinners! You can’t answer the question by saying, Get rid of your sin! That’s what refining does—it starts to burn up your sin. But how, then, does a sinner qualify to have his sin burned up? If it takes the merciful fire of God to destroy the rebellion of sin, what can a man do to have that mercy?”

- In other words: How can we be purified but not consumed by God’s refining fire?

16 Then those who feared the Lord spoke with each other, and the Lord listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name.

- Look at the terminology of verse sixteen “those who feared the Lord,” spoke; “the Lord listened” and “In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of this who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name.”
- **What is that describing? How can anyone be purified but not consumed by God’s fire?**
- If we will turn to Christ and away from our sin, He will burn that sin up so nothing is left but the righteousness HE gives us...HIS righteousness.
- That “great exchange” of our sin for His righteousness comes with a wonderful promise!

17 “They will be my people,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child. 18 Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.”

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Verses one and two of Malachi 4 sum things up for us...

1 *The Lord of Heaven’s Armies says, “The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed—roots, branches, and all. 2 “But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.* And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture.

- Jesus came to earth the first time to save. He’s coming back to judge mankind.

J. Vernon McGee said:

“If you won’t have Him as your Savior, you’ll have Him as your judge whether you like it or not.”

- Believers in Christ need not fear his coming judgment for ourselves; however we do need to warn those who don’t yet believe.

- Compassion for people might make us hesitant to speak about God's judgment. But, compassion for people is the reason we **MUST** speak of His judgment!