



Malachi - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

The prophet now gives notice that God will send his messenger of the covenant, the one who will prepare the way for the long-awaited Messiah. However, for those, especially the priesthood, who have not sought God and who will not change, this coming will not be a blessing for they will not be able to stand before the might of the messenger because of their failure. However, because God is unchanging, he will not forget his promise to his people and they will not perish forever.

The prophecy then shows God's displeasure at those who have not given to him what he is due. Because they have not given their full tithes and offerings, they have robbed God. He calls upon them to test him by giving what they should and reaping the bountiful rewards as God responds to their piety.

The chapter ends with a promise to finally judge between those who have sought righteousness and those who have not. Each will receive the eternal rewards their faith in God deserves.

e. Malachi 3:1-7 - The Coming Messenger

The prophet begins by accusing the people of wearying the Lord with their cynical complaints: 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them' and 'Where is the God of justice?' Now that they had returned to the Promised Land and the temple had been rebuilt, many were distressed at the apparent failure of the prophetic promises of restored prosperity, international prominence, and wealth; refer to Haggai Chapter 2, Zechariah 2:1-13 and 8:1-9:17. Instead, Israel was experiencing only continued social and political oppression and economic privation (Nehemiah 1:3 and 9:36, and Malachi 3:10). Still worse, it had been promised that God would return to Jerusalem and to his temple, which he would again inhabit with his own glorious presence, e.g. Zechariah 1:16, 2:4, 2:10-13, 8:3-8 and 9:9-17.

Since Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple were filled with the visible glory of God as soon as they were completed, it was hoped that the same would happen with the rebuilt temple; refer to Exodus 40:34, 1 Kings 8:10, and Ezekiel 43:1-12. Indeed, Haggai 2:9 promised that the rebuilt temple would be filled with an even greater measure of glory than Solomon's. But far from enjoying such radiant glory, the temple of Malachi's day was devoid of any visible manifestation of God. Yet it would not always be so, for Malachi promised <<**the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple**>> (v.1). Simeon witnessed at least a partial fulfilment of this prophecy when he encountered in the temple the infant Jesus, who had come <<**for glory to your people Israel**>> (Luke 2:32b). The NT unfolds further fulfilment, for only the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ would be this greater glory; refer to Luke 2:29-32, John 1:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:6.

¹ See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ^{2a} But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

Malachi 3:1-2a

From the delight mentioned in this verse, it appears that Israel had repeated the error of their forebears in the days of another prophet: <<**Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light**>> (Amos 5:18), by supposing that the Lord's appearance would be unmitigated good news. When he comes, it will be not only for blessing, as they assume, but also for judgement – he will come to be a witness, the term in v.5 is the same as in 2:14, against all evildoers, including these blasphemous cynics!

In preparation for this fearful epiphany, the Lord promises, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. My messenger, who will prepare the way, is distinguished in v.1a from the divine Lord of hosts, who is the speaker and to whom the pronouns I, my, and me refer. So the messenger in v.1a is someone different from the Lord of hosts. And despite the fact that my messenger and Malachi are the same in Hebrew, the future-oriented context of vv.1-5 and the parallel between v.1 and 4:5 make clear that my messenger is not Malachi. Nevertheless, the play on Malachi's name suggests that his own ministry of preparation was intended to foreshadow the work of this promised messenger in v.1a. However, in v.1b another idea is in view, for v.1b speaks in poetic parallelism, in which two lines express the same idea in different words. Therefore, the Lord whom you seek is the same person as the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, and thus this coming messenger of the covenant is the same divine being as the Lord, who also is desired and will come. Then in

the following verses, the ministry described in vv.2-4 also indicates the divine nature of this coming Lord.

To prepare the way before me. In an ancient royal procession the messenger went before the King to announce his arrival, to indicate the route, and to remove any obstacles in the road. John the Baptist fulfilled this exact ministry for Jesus. The same idea is indicated in: <<*A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken'*>> (Isaiah 40:3-5). Indeed, John the Baptist referred to this Scripture when representatives of the authorities questioned him about his role; refer to John 1:19-28. God's purpose for bringing this specific prophecy through Malachi in his day was probably because Israel complained that the Messianic promises of Haggai and Zechariah were not fulfilled. Here Malachi shows that the way for the Messiah must be *prepared*, and they are not ready yet. The NT confirms this interpretation by its identification of John the Baptist as the promised messenger of v.1a, who prepares the way for the Lord who is predicted in v.1b; refer to Matthew 11:10-14.

Before me. The Lord promises that he himself will come - not merely a new or better prophet, but the Lord himself.

Who can endure the day of his coming? Verse 1 spoke of two messengers to come: one to prepare the way of the Lord, and one to be the Messenger of the covenant. The coming that man must endure is the coming of the messenger of the covenant, but it is his Second Coming.

^{2b} For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants 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 pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵ Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 3:2b-5

When the Lord comes, he will perform two complementary works: he will purify some sinners (vv.2-4) and judge others (v.5). The images used for that purifying

work, the refiner's fire and fullers' soap, stress both its thoroughness and its severity. The heat of the refiner's fire was intense in order to separate the dross from the molten pure metal: *<<But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the godless>>* (2 Peter 3:7). Similarly, the fuller washed clothes using strong lye soap, after which the clothes would be placed on rocks and beaten with sticks. If sinners prefer the Lord's cleansing work to his judgement, this is the price that must be paid as confirmed by Hebrews 12:7-11.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. The coming of this second Messenger will be awesome and terrible, but with a purpose. Both the launderer and the refiner work to clean, not to destroy, as Jesus later testified: *<<I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world>>* (John 12:47).

He will purify the descendants of Levi. In the first two chapters of Malachi, the Lord spoke out against the corruption of the priesthood. Here, God gives his ultimate answer for that corruption: the Messiah will purify and redefine the Levitical priesthood, making it redundant as he will be the sole high priest.

The Levitical priesthood passed into history following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70.

I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers. God's ultimate purpose is to cleanse society, and to change the hearts of men. When Jesus returns in glory and rules on this earth, evil will be quickly punished. The sin of sorcery is mentioned first because the Jews became familiar with sorcery and other magical arts during their captivity in Babylon. However, there are other sins mentioned and the Bible as a whole shows just how much God hates all sin.

⁶ For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. ⁷ Ever since the days of your ancestors 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?'

Malachi 3:6-7

I the Lord do not change implies that God's character and eternal purposes do not change, which gives a solid foundation for his people's faith and hope. However, God's unchanging character does not mean that the Lord is unchanging in his actions, for the very next verse, return to me and I will return to you, shows that God acts differently in response to different situations.

Therefore implies that God's purpose to bring blessing to the world through Abraham's descendants and through a Davidic Messiah will not be defeated, and thus the children of Jacob have not perished and are not consumed: their existence as the restored community is evidence of God's faithfulness. However, this does not mean that every Jew and every Israelite will pass final judgement: <<*It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel*>> (Romans 9:26).

Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. God's unchanging love for Israel should have made them more obedient and submissive to him, but they presumed upon his faithfulness and patience. They had returned to the ways of some of their ancestors: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (Judges 17:6).

Return to me, and I will return to you. In its most basic sense, repentance is turning away from sin and turning to God. It is not so much required if a person wants to return to God; repentance describes what the very act of returning is.

How shall we return? Israel did not know how to return to God. Either they chose not to know or they simply were ignorant.

f. Malachi 3:8-15 - Do Not Rob God

The prophet has returned to Israel's begrudging offerings, a subject treated in the parallel second disputation (1:6-2:9). There the emphasis was on the priests' failure, but here Malachi's concern expands to include the whole nation (v.9).

Perhaps the reference to Jacob serves as a reminder of Jacob's return from exile in Paddan Aram; upon coming back both to the Promised Land and to the Lord, he built an altar at Bethel and offered a tithe according to his vow in Genesis 28:20-22, and is confirmed by his resulting action in Genesis 35:1-7. Similarly, when Jacob's descendants returned from their exile, they rebuilt the altar at Jerusalem, but they were grossly negligent in offering their tithes, as confirmed by Nehemiah 13:10-13. This negligence may have seemed justified because of crop failure, drought, and pestilence (vv.10-11). The Lord reveals, however, that these natural disasters were not the cause of the nation's disobedience, but the cursed result (v.8); refer also to Haggai 1:9-11 and 2:16-19.

⁸ Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me – the whole nation of you!

Malachi 3:8-9

Will anyone rob God? When the people did not give the tithe, refer Iso to the comments made on vv.10-12, they were keeping wealth that rightly belonged to God. This is an astonishing statement:

- Astonishing because it is such a daring thing to do.
- Astonishing because it is shamefully ungrateful.
- Astonishing because it is senselessly self-destructive.
- Astonishing because it will certainly be punished.

God calls it robbery because they had unlawful possession of what belonged to God. It is not because only the tithes and offerings belonged to God. In fact, everything belongs to God: <<***The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it***>> (Psalm 24:1). Yet God does not normally command his people to give everything that belongs to him; he allows them to keep most of it as stewards on his behalf. But the tithes and offerings are different; they are not for personal stewardship; they belong to what the Lord calls my house (v.10), the house of the Lord.

You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me. Because God's people did not give as he commanded, God did not bless them materially or spiritually the way he would have otherwise. Their stingy hearts proved that their hearts were far from God, because God is the greatest giver: <<***For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life***>> (John 3:16). Many people with financial problems fail to do the most important thing first: obey and honour God with their resources: <<***But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well***>> (Matthew 6:33).

This in no way implies that God's blessing can be bought or indeed that salvation is by works. Those who give by faith will receive treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21).

¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. ¹¹ I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 3:10-12

As an evidence of wholehearted repentance (v.7), God promises that if his people become faithful in presenting their **full tithe** (the Hebrew word means 'a tenth'), then the desperately needed rain will come (v.10), pestilence and crop failure will cease (v.11), and the Abrahamic promise that **all nations will count you happy or call you blessed** (v.12) will be fulfilled. King Solomon wrote: *<<May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. Then all nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed>>* (Psalm 72:17). The tithes were given to support the priests and Levites: *<<And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse>>* (Nehemiah 10:38), and: *<<On that day men were appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites from the fields belonging to the towns; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered>>* (Nehemiah 12:44), whose ministry was essential if Israel was to be faithful to its calling.

So that there may be food in my house. The purpose of the tithe was primarily to support the priests who ministered before the Lord. When the people did not bring their tithes, the priests were not properly supported and there was not enough food for them in the house of the Lord. The tithe in Israel was also to be used to help the poor, and once every three years some of it was put aside for that purpose: *<<Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake>>* (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). Still, the main purpose for the tithe was to support the tribe of Levi and the priests: *<<As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you>>* (Deuteronomy 14:27). The same principle carries over in the NT. Some think that a paid ministry is an abomination before God, but Paul made it clear that not only do ministers deserve to be supported by those they minister to: *<<for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain', and, 'The labourer deserves to be paid'>>* (1 Timothy 5:18), and further expounded in 2 Corinthians 9:4-14, but also that their support is even more worthy than the poor: *<<Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching>>* (1 Timothy 5:17). Nevertheless, Paul voluntarily yielded his right to be supported when he thought it was in the best interests of the Gospel to do so: *<<for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God>>* (2 Corinthians 9:12).

By saying put me to the test God is challenging the people to give the tithe that they owed him and then watch to see if he would be faithful to his promise. God promises to meet all their needs, but not necessarily all their wants, and to pour down for you an overflowing blessing until there is no more need.

See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you. This is the response God promises when his people give as he tells them to. He will bless them both with provision and protection, i.e. I will rebuke the locust for you. The reference to the windows of heaven is a reminder of the glorious account of provision in 2 Kings Chapter 7, when God provided in a completely unexpected way. God has resources that humankind knows nothing about, and it is often of no help to try and figure out, or worry about, how God will provide: <<*He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing'*>> (Luke 12:22-23).

¹³ You have spoken harsh words against me, says the Lord. Yet you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' ¹⁴ You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts?' ¹⁵ Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.'

Malachi 3:13-15

You have spoken harsh words against me. Israel spoke against the Lord in a harsh and sinful way, and they apparently did not even realise they did so.

These verses precede the sixth disputation and begin with Israel's audacious and blasphemous complaint that it is vain to serve God. It looks like keeping his command and going about as mourners are parallel statements, which suggests that they refer to ceremonial or liturgical requirements such as the ritual mourning about which Israel boasts in Zechariah 7:1-6. Because of their hypocrisy, these acts had degenerated into meaningless formalities; refer also to Isaiah 58:3-9 and Malachi 2:13.

g. Malachi 3:16-18 - The Reward of the Faithful

This section echoes the first disputation; there, the focus was on his people and those not his people: <<*Then the Lord said, 'Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God'*>> (Hosea 1:9); refer to the comments made on 1:2-3, while here it is on those of his own people who do and do not embrace the covenant.

¹⁶ Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name.

Malachi 3:16

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. Discouraged by the sense that it was not worth the trouble to serve God, the people of God came together, spoke with one another, and encouraged each other in the Lord. This is a key purpose of church and their associated small groups: *<<And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching>>* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

In sharp contrast to the fault-finding cynics, a second group is now mentioned, those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. Just as the Lord recounts the contemptuous blasphemies of the first group (vv.13-15), so he overhears the faithful conversation of the second. Similar to the honour roll kept by King Xerxes, which recorded the long-unrewarded faithfulness of Mordecai (Esther 6:1-3), a book of remembrance is written in God's presence concerning these faithful believers. Similar books of significant deeds were kept by kings in the ancient world. This image of God's record book, which appears throughout Scripture, e.g. Exodus 32:32-33, Psalms 56:8, and 139:16, Daniel 7:10 and 12:1, and Revelation 20:12, indicates that God will never forget and will rightly judge both the good deeds of the righteous and the evil deeds of the wicked.

¹⁷ They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. ¹⁸ Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Malachi 3:17-18

The insolent complainers had charged that *<<evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape>>* (v.15). But in 3:17-4:3 the Lord promises that a day is coming when these complainers will see how wrong they were. For those faithful believers listed in the 'book of remembrance' (v.16), it will be a day when God will say they shall be mine, his special possession (v.17), although it was a conditional promise: *<<Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine>>* (Exodus 19:5), and they will be spared as parents spare their children who serve them.

Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked. One day this dilemma will be cleared up. In the end, the distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be evident, as Jesus confirms: <<‘*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life’>> (Matthew 25:31-46).*