



## The Lord's Justice Malachi 3-4

### Introduction

In the beginning of the prophecy of Malachi, the *Lord of hosts*, responded to Israel's irreverent questioning of His love, by graciously reminding and explaining how He loved them. Following this, He pointed out their sins. They had despised His name, defiled His altar, profaned His name, corrupted the priesthood, and been unfaithful to their marriage vows. Because they refused to repent, He will now declare judgment upon the complainers (3:13-15) and bestow blessing upon the faithful few (3:17-18).

The priests and majority of the people had been faithless and disobedient. They had tested God's patience with their self-righteousness and self-justification. Judgment was coming! But first the Lord promised to send a Messenger to refine and purify the hearts of His people. Because of God's unchanging love, mercy, and patience, He will generously hold out every opportunity for repentance before His judgment falls.

### Outline of Malachi 3-4

- I. The Lord's Messenger will be Sent - Malachi 3:1-5
- II. The Lord's People Need to Return - Malachi 3:6-15
- III. The Lord's Faithful will be Remembered - Malachi 3:16-18
- IV. The Lord's Day of Judgment will come - Malachi 4:1-6

### I. The Lord's Messenger will be Sent - Malachi 3:1-5

Two *messengers* are mentioned in verse one. The first will prepare the way for the second, who is called *the Messenger of the covenant*.

- A. A Messenger to *Prepare the Way* - Malachi 3:1

It was an ancient Eastern custom for traveling kings, to send messengers before them to smooth the way and prepare people for their visit. The *Lord of hosts* announced that He will send one to *prepare the way before Me*. There is no question about the identity of this messenger. Jesus identified him as John the Baptist in Matthew 11:10. The gospel writers also identify John the Baptist as *The voice of one crying in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord*. (See

Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). The Isaiah prophecy (40:3) was very popular with the Jews in Malachi's day as they looked forward to the coming of their Messiah and the one who would *prepare the way* before Him.

- B. *Messenger of the Covenant* - Malachi 3:1-5

This is the Lord, Himself, Israel's long-awaited Divine Messiah. We learn that He will come *suddenly*, a word which does not mean immediately, but rather instantaneously and unexpectedly. This unexpected coming was partially fulfilled when Christ came the first time. It will be fully accomplished at His second coming.

John MacArthur ([The MacArthur Bible Commentary](#)) believes that the statement *in whom you delight* is meant in a sarcastic way because the sinful people being addressed were certainly not delighting in the Lord, nor were they when He came to cleanse the temple (John 2:13-25). Neither will sinners be delighted when He returns in judgment.

The *covenant* mentioned is most likely the one which God had promised to make with Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:22-36; 37:26. He promised to give them new hearts with His law written there, to put His Spirit within them, and to forgive and forget their sin.

1. *Who can endure the day of His coming?* - 3:2

The coming of the Messenger was promised to be a day of cleansing and purification for all. There will be no one who will escape or stand on his/her own. All impurities will be removed as with fire, which removes dross and with fuller's soap (laundry soap) which removes stains.

2. *He will purify the sons of Levi* - 3:3-4

The priestly tribe will receive particular attention because of their greater responsibility. They were the spiritual leaders yet they led the people astray. The purging of the priests will be cathartic for the whole nation. With new hearts, the priests will be able to offer righteous sacrifices with righteous intentions. This will make the offerings pleasing to the Lord, as they were when God made His covenant with Levi (see Malachi 2:4-7).

## 3. He will judge all sin - 3:5

With righteous offerings restored, the Lord will draw near for judgment upon the unrepentant. Swift judgment is promised to all who *do not fear* the Lord. Particular sins mentioned are sorcery, adultery, perjury, extortion, and oppression.

**II. God's People Need to Return - Malachi 3:6-15**

The Israelites had been complaining of God's injustice. In their sinfulness and self-righteousness, they claimed that God had changed, that he no longer cared for them or blessed them. In this passage, God points out that He was not unfair or unrighteous, but rather merciful and patient while they failed to repent.

## A. The Lord Does Not Change - Malachi 3:6

Because God is perfect, He does not and cannot change. In theology, this is the doctrine of immutability. James Montgomery Boice, in his Commentary on the Minor Prophets, explains why God cannot change. He points out that in order for a moral being to change, he must either change for the better or for the worse. God cannot get better because He is already perfect and He cannot get worse because He would then become imperfect. If He were imperfect, He could not be God because God must remain perfect in all His attributes. The attributes which the Israelites were questioning included God's love, mercy, grace, and faithfulness. It is because of God's immutability in these attributes that the people of Israel were not destroyed. "Israel's existence was due only to the Lord's unchanging character and unswerving commitment to His covenant promise with the patriarchs." (John MacArthur, The MacArthur Bible Commentary).

## B. Return to the Lord - Malachi 3:7-15

The people of Malachi's generation were following in the footsteps of their fathers in disobeying God's laws. They were just as unbelieving and stiff-necked as their ancestors (Deuteronomy 10:16; 2 Chronicles 30:8; Jeremiah 19:15). God called the people to return to Him, just as He had called the previous generations. In response, they complained that they did not know how to return. "The Mosaic Covenant specified how they were to return, by trusting and obeying the Lord. So their question in verse 7 indicated a reluctance to change their ways" (Dr. Constable, Commentary on Malachi, [soniclight.com](http://soniclight.com)).

1. The people have robbed God -  
Malachi 3:7-12

God was more than willing to point out how the people needed to return. They had robbed Him by

not bringing in the required tithes and offerings. The purpose of the tithe was to provide sustenance for the Levites, the priests, and the poor (Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-32; Deuteronomy 14:22-29). The priests and Levites were God's servants whose duties included care for the sanctuary, offering sacrifices, and teaching the law to the people. The result of neglecting the tithe led to a breakdown in the priestly service because the priests and Levites were forced to resort to other ways of providing for themselves and their families. This robbed God of the services they performed. Furthermore, the land and all its produce belonged to God (Leviticus 25:23), so the people had stolen from God what was rightfully His.

## a. Bring in the tithe - verse 10

The whole nation was cursed because they had robbed God of the tithe. He called them to bring in the whole tithe, not just part of it, into the storehouse. The storehouse was a room in the temple set apart for storing the crops and the animals which the people brought. If the people would bring in the whole tithe, the storehouse would be filled.

b. Promise of blessing -  
verses 10-12

God had promised to bless the people if they would obey Him. Now he encouraged them to prove Him true to His word by bringing in the tithes. He promised to open the *windows of heaven*, giving them ample rain for their crops to grow and produce more than enough to fill the storehouse. He promised to hold back the locusts which destroyed the crops. He promised that the vines in their fields would be fruitful. As a result, all the nations would recognize that God had blessed them with a *delightful land*.

**NOTE:** Malachi 3:10 has sometimes been used to encourage Christians to tithe. The amount of the tithe in the Old Testament was ten percent of all livestock and produce. This was God's provision for a special class of people, the Levites and priests. But the New Testament does not specify an amount or percentage that we should give to the Lord. The New Testament teaches that Christians should give bountifully (2 Corinthians 2:9), not grudgingly or under compulsion but enthusiastically (2 Corinthians 9:7) regularly (1 Corinthians 16:1-2), and faithfully (Philippians 4:15-19), with a cheerful heart. Does this describe your giving?

2. The people speak arrogantly -  
3:13-15

The people ignored God's promises and spoke *arrogantly* (NASB) against Him. When He confronted

them with their disrespect, they asked the Lord for proof. He readily pointed out their sinful behavior.

a. Their complaint - verse 14

The people complained that serving God was a waste of time: they got nothing out of obeying God and mourning their sin. John MacArthur ([The MacArthur Bible Commentary](#)) points out that these people had “questioned God (2:17), disobeyed His laws (2:9), defiled His altar (1:7,12) and despised His name (1:6).” Now they openly spoke out against Him, showing a total lack of gratitude. The people remained unchanged after hundreds of years of God’s dealing with them and calling them to repent and return to Him.

b. Their denial - verse 15

The people were denying God’s love for them. They said He was not worthy of the best sacrifices or of the full tithe. They viewed Him as unreasonable in His call for repentance. They challenged God’s justice, claiming He blessed the proud and allowed the wicked to prosper. It seems they did not care for God’s blessing. They had decided to join the ranks of the proud and the ones who practiced wickedness.

### III. God’s Faithful will be Remembered - Malachi 3:16-18

As they heard God’s rebuke, spoken through Malachi, the fear of the Lord filled the hearts of some of the people. They got together and spoke with one another. Malachi gives them encouraging words.

A. The Lord Hears Those Who Fear Him - Malachi 3:16-17

The Lord heard their conversation and a *book of remembrance* was written in His presence. Esther 6:1-2 reveals that the kings of Persia had a custom of writing in a book the names and deeds of all those who had rendered service to the king so they could be rewarded at a future time. Psalm 56:8 speaks of a similar book. This group of people in Malachi was noted in the book of remembrance for fearing the Lord and meditating on His name. Are you noted for fearing the Lord and meditating on His name?

The Lord emphatically stated, *They shall be Mine*. On the Day of Judgment, they will be set apart as His *jewels*, or special treasure. Then the Lord will spare them, in the same way a man would spare his own children who serve him.

Are you one who fears the Lord, meditates on His name and speaks to others about Him? Malachi encourages you to know that God listens and hears! You are His!

B. Discernment Restored - Malachi 3:18

On the Day of Judgment, all will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. It will be clear who has served God and who has not. In our day, as in Malachi’s, it is often difficult to distinguish the motives of people. But all will be revealed on the future day of judgment. In the meantime, it behooves us to examine the motives of our own hearts.

### IV. The Lord’s Day of Judgment Will Come - Malachi 4:1-6

The day alluded to in the last two verses of chapter three is described further in the first three verses of chapter four. Elsewhere in Scripture, it is referred to as the Day of the Lord. It will be a day of destruction (Isaiah 13:6), a day of vengeance (Jeremiah 46:10), a great and terrible day (Joel 2:11), a day when your reprisal will return upon your own head (Obadiah 15), a day of wrath, trouble, distress, darkness, devastation, desolation, and gloominess (Zephaniah 1:14-15).

A. The Day of Judgment - Malachi 4:1-3

The Day of Judgment is coming! It may be postponed but God has not forgotten. “Delay is not elimination. Judgment will come.” (James Montgomery Boice, [The Minor Prophets, Volume 2](#))

1. Destruction of the wicked - Malachi 4:1

Malachi describes that day as *burning like an oven*. God’s judgment will come as a fire that will totally consume the proud and the wicked. In Malachi 3:2 the image of fire was also used, but there it was used to describe the work of purifying and purging God’s people. In this passage, the purpose of the fire is not for cleansing but for destruction of the wicked. Nothing will be left but stubble. The totality of the destruction is pictured vividly, the burning *will leave them neither root nor branch*.

2. Triumph of the righteous - Malachi 4:2-3.

In contrast to the wicked who will be destroyed by the fire of God’s wrath, those who fear Him will enjoy the warmth of His healing rays.

a. *The Sun of Righteousness* - verse 2

The *Sun of Righteousness* is capitalized in the New King James Version, leading to the assumption that the reference is to a person, namely Jesus Christ.

However, scholars differ in their interpretations. Some believe the *Sun of Righteousness* refers to the day of healing and blessing that Christ will bring. Others believe it is righteousness itself because righteousness is the “sun and substance of salvation” (Keil and Delitzsch, The Twelve Minor Prophets, Volume 2). All three options fit the passage and there is no reason that the *Sun of Righteousness* should not encompass all three.

Christ brings the day of healing and blessing promised in this passage where He is both physical and spiritual healer. Psalm 103:3 proclaims that He *heals all your diseases*. Isaiah writes in 53:5, *by His stripes we are healed*, and the apostle Peter echoes that He *bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed* (1 Peter 2:24).

Furthermore, Christ is our righteousness, and according to Psalm 84:11, He is a *sun and shield* and will give *grace and glory*. In Jeremiah 23:5-6, Christ is called *THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS* and a *Branch of righteousness* who will *execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell safely*.

#### b. Trampling down of the wicked - verses 2-3

On the day that the *Sun of Righteousness* arises, those who fear His name will no longer be oppressed. Like calves driven from the stall to the pasture, they will go out with joy and freedom. They will trample the wicked, who will have become ashes under their feet as a result of God’s judgment (verse 1). What a comfort this verse must be to those who are cruelly persecuted for His sake.

#### B. The Importance of God’s Law - Malachi 4:4

God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, also called *Horeb*, and Israel was charged to keep this Law (Exodus 24; Joshua 8:32. 23:6; 1 Kings 2:3). At the heart of the Law was the exhortation to *remember*. The people were to remember how they had been slaves in Egypt and how the Lord had brought them out *by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm* (Deuteronomy 5:15). It was important that they remember what God had done for them and the Law which God had given them. To forget the Law would be to forget God.

In Malachi’s prophecy, God has shown how Israel had disregarded His Law. In the closing words of the prophecy, God commands the people to remember the Law which was given through His faithful servant, Moses (Hebrews 3:5).

The priests and the people are exhorted to remember the Law in preparation for the coming day of the Lord. If they had listened to Malachi and remembered and heeded the Law of Moses, perhaps they would have recognized Jesus as their Messiah at His first coming. But although Israel had four hundred years after Malachi’s warning to obey and prepare, they did not know their Messiah when He came. In referring to the wisdom of God (which is contained in God’s word and includes His Law) the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:8, *which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*.

God’s Law is still important today as a standard by which to live. Obedience to God never goes out of style. Those who claim to be Christians and to have a personal relationship with God, must pay attention to Malachi’s warning to *Remember the Law*. It is in remembering and obeying that one draws near to God. Hebrews 2:1-2 exhorts us to *give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels (the Law) proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*

Do you faithfully read, study, and meditate upon God’s word so you may learn and obey His commands? In what way might you be neglecting your great salvation?

#### C. The Promise of Elijah - Malachi 4:5-6

Malachi’s prophecy ends with God’s promise to send *Elijah the prophet* before the *great and dreadful day of the Lord*.

##### 1. The person of Elijah - 4:5

Approximately four hundred years after Malachi’s prophecy, an angel appeared to Zacharias and told him that his barren wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son who would minister in the *spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children'* (Luke 1:17). This son was John the Baptist. Yet when John was questioned by the priests and Levites, he denied that he actually was Elijah (John 1:19-21). Jesus confirmed Malachi's prophecy that Elijah would come and *restore all things*. He said that John had come as Elijah but the people had not accepted John and neither would they accept Him (Matthew 17:11-13).

If the Jews had listened to John the Baptist and accepted Jesus as their Messiah, then John would have fulfilled the Malachi 4:5 prophecy of Elijah. But they did not. John did not *restore all things*, but he did

fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 3:1, as the messenger who prepared the way for the Lord.

## 2. The importance of Elijah - 1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 2:1-11

Elijah ministered during Ahab's reign as king of Israel. Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, had made Baal worship the official religion of Israel and led the nation in apostasy. Elijah was an important figure in Israel's history because he turned the people back to God and restored the worship of God when the people were furthest from Him.

John the Baptist came as a forerunner of Christ *in the spirit and power of Elijah*. He called for repentance, and although many did repent, the religious leaders failed to believe. John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded, *They did not know him but did to him whatever they wished* (Matthew 17:12). Before Christ's second coming, the prophet Elijah will come (either as Elijah, himself, or someone in the spirit and power of Elijah, as was John) to unite the hearts of people to return to the Lord and worship Him

The uniting of hearts to return did not take place at Jesus' first coming. In fact, Jesus spoke of the division in His day (Matthew 10:35-36; Luke 12:49-53). The days of Jesus were a time of sin, like the time which brought great sorrow to the prophet Micah (7:1-7): the faithful had perished from the earth and a man's enemies were those of his own house. It was a day which caused Micah to yearn for the day of the Lord.

## 3. The preaching of Elijah - 4:6

The future Elijah will precede Jesus at His second coming just as John the Baptist did at His first coming. He will prepare the hearts of the people to receive Him. The future Elijah will be successful. He will turn their hearts, in blessed unity, to their Messiah.

## 4. The curse - 4:6

The final statement in Malachi's prophecy gives the alternative to Israel's turning back to God. He will come and *strike the earth with a curse*. The Hebrew word for *curse* used here (*cherem*) is not the one which is commonly used. "Cherem" refers to the practice of devoting land, objects or people to God, usually for total destruction. In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, God commanded the Israelites to *utterly destroy* the cities and the people living in the land which He had given them for their inheritance. Sometimes in Scripture, this type of curse is referred to as being put under the ban (Joshua 6:17 NASB). The city of Jericho was *under the ban*. All that was in the city belonged to the Lord and all except Rahab the harlot, and her family, were destroyed. In light of this meaning of the word *curse*, it is clear that the alternative to changed hearts is utter destruction. Thus, the prophecy of Malachi, and the Old Testament itself, ends with a solemn and somber truth.

### Application

After the encouraging promises to those who fear the Lord, the consequence of the final hardening of the heart is made vividly clear at the close of Malachi's prophecy. There is a choice which every person will ultimately make in his or her life: "to turn to God here, or everlasting destruction from His presence there, is the only choice." (E. B. Pussey, Barnes Notes, the Minor Prophets). This is a serious note upon which to end the Old Testament. It is the note upon which every man's and woman's destiny turns. Have you turned to God through His Messenger, the Lord Jesus Christ? How do your thoughts and actions reflect your choice? Do not merely play at religion like the Jews of Malachi's day. Make sure that your heart and your life are right before God. A person's words and actions always reflect what is in his or her heart. What is in your heart?