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Malachi 3:1-4, English Standard Version

¹“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. 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 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. 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.

A Messenger in the Maze.

Malachi is one of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament. Now, most of us would probably be quite happy with being considered a “minor” prophet. But why were they considered minor? First, the prophets were intermediaries between God and humans; God spoke through them, and often, through visions, the prophets conveyed God’s unhappiness with a people who had lost their way, and God, through the prophets, offered a promise of hope for those who had found their way. The so-called minor prophets are minor simply because their books in the Bible are so short. Even the longest of the twelve books of the minor prophets is very short compared to the books of the three major prophets, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. Malachi’s book is at the end of the Old Testament, at least in most Protestant Bibles, and it represents the last

prophetic words in the Old Testament, as the events described in this Book also take place the latest in time. The book covers events that occurred somewhere after the completion of the second Temple in 515 B.C. Five hundred years later, Jesus would be born.

The Book of Malachi tells of a time when many Jews in Judea, which is more or less the southern part of modern Israel, and importantly, included the holy city of Jerusalem, were disillusioned with their fate and their faith. After the second Temple had been built in 515 B.C., they had expected an abundant life. Since they varied heavily in their beliefs about a pleasant afterlife, their focus was on God providing them a good life on Earth, not with an eternal life with God. Many Jews, including priests, turned away from their religious and moral obligations. Malachi confronts people with their shortcomings in the eyes of God and calls on them to renew their commitment to God. But from a spiritual perspective, the people were deeply unmotivated, and it threatened to tear their community apart. The Temple rituals were continuing to be held, but people felt that if God wasn't going to provide for them, if there was no profit in following their faith, why should they bother? People neglected the Sabbath and turned it into a business day, instead of a day to honor God. Business cheating was rife, and Jewish men divorced their Jewish wives so they could marry foreign women who had no loyalty to the Jewish faith. The economy was terrible; people sold their children

into slavery to pay their debts and their taxes. This period of time occurred after the return from exile in Babylon, and the farms and agricultural terraces had been left in great disrepair. Crops were poor. People stopped paying tithes to the Temple, so priests had to leave the Temple and work in the business world. Leadership and morality broke down.

Please listen carefully to Malachi 2:17 to 3:5.

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?"

¹ "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. 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 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. 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 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.

As I was reading Malachi in preparation for writing this message, these words referring to people being refined by God made me think of a story involving my father and me. I was in the first weeks of second grade and had been given what I remember as my very first homework assignment. It was a maze. We were supposed to take the maze home and find the path through it. To us, today, as adults, we realize that it was just a teacher, in this case a Catholic sister, sending some kids home with something she

probably thought would be fun. She told us to do it that evening and bring it back the next day. But I was a serious kid – very serious. And I was very determined to do my first homework assignment properly. I was going to get it right. But, as it turned out, I was very scared that I wouldn't be able to do it. I sat down with the maze, it was about four inches by four inches, and with a crayon – wrong tool, too blunt, I realized later. I tried to trace my way through the maze. I ran into a dead end. So, I tried again. Dead end. To make a long, agonizing story short, I made a horrible crayon-y mess of the maze and never did find my way through it. Soon, all I had was a square of paper covered in crayon. I was scared that I would fail my first homework assignment. I was shaking.

Let's look at the Book of Malachi. We don't know who Malachi was. This wasn't even a person's name. It simply means "the Messenger", something that could describe any prophet. Like most of the Bible, the book originally had no name. The name that was later given for the Book might have been taken from Malachi 3:1 - *Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.* The Book of Malachi also tells us very little about the person who is called the Messenger. The Book of Malachi teaches the importance of both living by a strong moral code and taking part in religious ritual. Malachi captures the fierce anger of God, as well as God's deepest love and concern for God's people. Malachi, because he challenged the sinful people of his day, found himself at odds with his neighbors, the leaders of the Jewish community, and with his friends. The

Book of Malachi is organized around a series of questions and answers, and this style is often referred to as “prophetic dispute” – we see this format in our quote today.

Before we look at the Book of Malachi, here is something to note. We’re going to look at a second passage from Malachi, as well. Both of them span chapter boundaries. These are two examples – of many – that illustrate that the chapter boundaries that were added to Scripture in the 1500s often are not fully logical. So, please consider each of the two passages as being internally continuous, despite crossing chapter boundaries.

One thing that’s difficult for us to appreciate is just how powerful Jewish Scripture has been to the Jewish people. It is a body of literature, much bigger than the New Testament and much more complex, and it held a people together and gave them hope and kept their eyes on the future. The Old Testament contains Jewish law, covers an immense period of detailed history, includes a store of amazing poetry, and presents the teachings of prophets that cover thousands of years. It has allowed a culture to remain intact under circumstances that have destroyed thousands of other cultures. Through the teachings of Jesus Christ, we inherit all of this from Judaism. The Old Testament, which might be better called the Hebrew Bible today, is the foundation of Jesus Christ’s teachings, contains prophecies that were met in the New Testament, tells us much about our God, and has been actively preached in the Christian church since the days of Paul the Evangelist. But because of the Old Testament’s breadth, length, and

complexity, and because of the modern Christian's focus on the New Testament, Malachi is little known among Christians.

What do we get from this first quote? God's people have been having trouble reconciling what they have been taught about God's justice with the evil, injustice, and unfairness that they see in the world. Does this sound familiar to us today? But Malachi tells God's people that God has grown tired of their cynicism. He tells them that God is weary of their lack of faith. He also assures them that God has a plan for dealing with evil – but they must accept that they are part of the problem. One day, God will indeed judge the wicked – and they need to be on the right side of God when that occurs. Let's look at a passage from the next chapter of Malachi, 3, verses 3:13 to 4:3.

"Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' ¹⁴ 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. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ "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. ¹⁸ 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.

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. ³ *On the day when I act, you will tread upon the wicked as if they were dust under your feet,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.*

In this passage, Malachi promises the people that the day will come when they will no longer question whether they should or should not serve God. Those who have faith will indeed be rewarded. Those who are evil will be destroyed. Through the prophet Malachi, God tells his people: *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.* (Note that the word “Sun” there in “Sun of Righteousness” is S-U-N, the sun in the sky.)

Here’s a bit from this passage that struck me particularly powerfully: *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 sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.* This says more than that God will punish the wicked and reward the faithful. It is more than a message of hope. It tells us that God will refine us as if we were impure gold or silver. It tells us that we can do better, and that it is through God that we achieve far more than we could on our own. We aren’t just dependent upon God for our happiness. We aren’t just under the threat of punishment from God. We are held to a high standard by our God, one that demands constant improvement – and through this, we are turned into the purest of silver and gold.

You're wondering about my homework assignment and the mess I made of the maze with my orange crayon. As it turns out, in the midst of my despair, my father came home from work. I blurted out that I had made a big mess of my first homework assignment and was going to get an F for sure. My dad, who sold car tires and worked on cars for at least twelve hours a day, six days a week, was probably dead on his feet. His hands and clothes were, as usual, covered with tire dust. But he simply asked me calmly where the maze was. I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it to him. He looked at it, nodded, and then pulled out a knife out of his pocket. He scraped enough of the crayon off until the maze could be seen again. Then, in one continuous swipe with a red crayon, he drew the correct path through the maze. But he didn't stop there. She showed me the maze – for just a moment. There, he said, there's only one way through the maze. Then he took it away and scraped the crayon off again. Now, you try it, he told me. You can do this, Buzzy, he said, it's easy. Just relax, sit down, and try it again. Well, my father wouldn't lie to me. The maze must be easy to do, I decided. Plus, I had seen a quick glimpse of his answer. Yep, I got the thing done in a minute.

My father knew the lesson of Malachi, not in a literal sense, I am sure. His knowledge of the Bible was, well, fairly thin. Back then, Catholics were told to *not* personally read the Bible; they were to rely on the priests to teach them about God and

to interpret the Bible for them. This is no longer true, and many Catholics are very dedicated Bible scholars. But consider how Malachi 3:3 was meant to be interpreted. Remember that in the Old Testament, the prophets spoke for God. In this passage, the Messenger, the prophet, is speaking for God and saying that God doesn't simply want to punish people. God doesn't want to just let us off the hook, either, then give us a free ride. God wants us to become better. God wants us to grow. God knows that we make mistakes, that we are imperfect. One thing we need to improve is our confidence. We need to know that we can do better. Just like any parent wants for their children. My father intuitively knew what was best for me. The answer wasn't for me to fail on my homework. It wasn't for me to just get my father to do it for me. It was for me to learn that I could do it for myself. Developing a belief in myself was more important, in fact, than literally doing the maze on my own.

That's what Malachi is about. God won't simply punish evil and reward those who do good. God will help us improve - and God will be proactive about it. Look at the end of our second passage: *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.*³ Healing wings! That is what God brings to us. Fear is talked about a lot in the Bible, in the context of good people having a fear of God. But this is often greatly

misunderstood. Fear in the Old Testament was a fear born out of the awe of God. It was a pious fear. Fear of God means that we hand over our hearts and minds to a God who can do astonishing things. If we trust God, we will be lifted up by healing wings. That is the lesson of Malachi: God doesn't simply punish those who do bad and reward those who have faith: God helps us refine ourselves into the purest silver and gold. God builds our confidence as he helps us find our own way, step by step, through the vast complex and terrifying maze of life. The story of Malachi is that there was a messenger speaking for God, providing that guidance as people worked through that maze on Earth. For us, as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit within us. That is our connection to God. The Holy Spirit guides us through the maze of life. When we're done, we're ready to go home.