

## **Malachi 2:17 – 3:5**

### **The story so far**

Today we are continuing a series started in September, but with a break during October. So we begin by reminding ourselves where we have got to.

We are working through the book of Malachi – the last book in the Old Testament. The Jewish people have been in exile in Babylon, and then they have returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, but things are not going well. Something seems to be missing. God doesn't seem to be there.

In their theology God's covenant plays a large part – and we can find some of that written down in the book of Deuteronomy. In summary God has made a covenant with his people. He will be their God and they will be his people, and when the people keep their side of the covenant they are blessed. But when they don't they are cursed.

So when they stopped keeping their side of the covenant they were sent into exile in Babylon. But then things started looking up and they returned to Jerusalem full of hope that things would be better. God had started to bless them again. They re-built the temple – a major building scheme - and then they discovered that the bright future that they had anticipated wasn't quite what they were experiencing.

That's the setting for the book of Malachi.

Alongside that we have a picture of a society where things have gone badly wrong. Their worship isn't what God expected. Instead of offering God the best they could offer, they are giving him sub-standard sacrifices. Morally they are not living as God intended and breaking the covenant, and rather than living in awe of God they are questioning his actions and criticising him.

And we have been looking at the world of the prophet Malachi and the world of today and noticing the similarities. Economic recession, social and moral unrest, fraud, violence, adultery and divorce, spiritual decline. It's all there in Malachi's time and it's all around us today.

We have looked at how Israel had doubts about God's love, and remembered how God has always loved his people.

We have looked at the behaviour of the priests and the behaviour of the people and realised that neither is living as God intended.

And today we move into the second half of the book of Malachi.

### **Where is the God of justice? (2:17)**

The passage begins with Malachi telling the people that they are making God weary. He has heard them saying "All who are evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them. Where is the God of justice?"

It doesn't seem fair. Remember the black and white theology of Deuteronomy – if you keep the covenant you will be blessed if you don't you will be cursed. And the people look around and see people who are not keeping the covenant – but instead of being cursed they are being blessed.

And lots of people today ask those kinds of questions. There are many books written about “why do bad things happen to good people?” and I am always coming across good people who are having bad things happen to them who start asking why.

This is actually the other way round “why do good things happen to bad people”. There is a whole branch of theology that looks at those kinds of questions – and I have explored some of those with you in previous services. I’m not going to spend too long on that this morning – but I’ll just share with you a cartoon I saw during the week.

In the first picture someone is on their knees praying please protect me – but in the second picture he is hit by a rock. So he starts complaining “you said you’d protect me”. Then in the next frame we zoom out and it shows lots of lots of rocks with Jesus standing in the way so they don’t hit the person – and he turns and says “sorry did I miss one”.

We are very good at looking at the small print of what seems important to us at a particular time, and not so good at looking at the big picture (or the large print) of all that Jesus has done for us. If you are going through a difficult time at the moment try then looking at the large print and remembering all the things you have to be thankful for – rather than focussing on the small print of everything that is going wrong at the moment.

However this book of Malachi isn’t really interested in trying to answer the question ‘why do good things happen to bad people’. It is far more interested in challenging the conclusion that the people have come to.

They have looked around and seen good things happening to bad people, and so they have concluded that the God of justice is not there. And they have taken that one step further and decided that if God is not there then they can behave in whatever way they like. And that is what has led to the problems we have already looked at in previous weeks, where the priests and the people were behaving in ways that broke the covenant.

### **God’s promise (3:1)**

As we move into chapter 3 the focus of the book changes. So far it has been mainly about what the people have done wrong. As we move into chapter 3 the focus changes to what God is going to about it. God’s promise.

Chapter 3 verse 1 is an important verse. “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come in his temple; the messenger of the covenant who you desire will come says the Lord Almighty.” Gods promise.

Many commentators link the title of the book to this verse. It is thought that Malachi means “my messenger”. Malachi is bringing a message from God. God will return to his temple.

But these verses are not just important within this book they are also important in the New Testament. In a few weeks time we will reach the season of advent when we will be thinking about John the Baptist and hear him described as Gods messenger, preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. These words in Malachi, at the end of the Old Testament, are fulfilled at the beginning of the New Testament as John the Baptist prepares the way, and Jesus Christ, God in human form, comes among us.

Here is the good news. God is not absent, the God of justice has not gone missing, but he is on his way.

### **God will come and put you on trial (3:5)**

So we can no longer complain (as they did in 2:17) that there is no justice, because the God of justice is coming. And as it says in verse 5, God is coming to put those who do evil on trial.

But wait a minute, because verse 5 doesn't say he will put them on trial, but that he will put you on trial.

Is it such good news now? Or is it getting uncomfortable. How many of us are worthy to stand in Gods presence? As Paul was later to say in his letter to the Romans 3:23 "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". If we stop looking at what other people have done and instead start examining our own lives and start recognising the times when we haven't given our best in worship, the times when we have failed to live as God intended, are we ready for the God of justice to come?

### **He will come as a refiners fire or a launders soap. (3:2-4)**

Here I find the images used by Malachi encouraging. He doesn't paint a picture of a God of justice coming to destroy everything, but a picture of God of justice coming to purify and to wash clean.

He describes a silver purifier sitting and waiting for the impurities to be destroyed in the heat so the pure silver remains – he probably waits until it becomes so shiny it can be used as a mirror.

And he talks about soap – some translations talk of Fullers soap which was used by the shepherds near Jerusalem to wash the wool of the sheep so it became white as snow.

In both these descriptions the bad stuff is being destroyed – but the good stuff is kept.

And God works like that in our lives. He doesn't want to destroy us. He loves us. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are. He does want to get rid of the things in us that are not of him. And that takes a lifetime. He works with us, if we let him, so we become more and more like him. We can probably look back at the way he has already changed us – but he hasn't finished with us yet he will continue to work in our lives purifying our hearts.

A final thought. A silver purifier knows when the silver is pure because it acts like a mirror and he can see his reflection in it. When God has worked in our lives with his purifying fire then other people can see his image in us.