



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

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When the God of Justice Comes Malachi 2:17 – 3:5

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”¹ That’s how Charles Dickens begins his classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

For the Jews of Malachi’s day, it was *the worst of times*—a time of hopes deferred and promises delayed.

The prophets before Malachi had foretold a glorious return from the exile in Babylon. They had painted a picture of coming prosperity and a glorious kingdom. But now, nearly a hundred years later, there was only poverty for most people—poverty so relentless that many had actually sold their children into slavery.

Fifty years earlier the prophets Haggai and Zechariah had seen the people’s failure to complete the rebuilding of the temple of the LORD that had been destroyed by the Babylonians as the problem. Rebuild it, they said, and the LORD would return in glory to His temple and the land would be blessed. So the people rebuilt the temple over a four-year period. But a half-century later, the priests as well as the people had become corrupt and sinful, and the conditions in Judah had declined even more.

It got worse. The prophets had told how God would give Israel victory over her enemies, but she was still under Persian rule, and would be for another century and a quarter. Though not as oppressive and ruthless as the Babylonians, they were oppressive and ruthless enough! They levied heavy tributes and taxes on the people, and required them to furnish provisions for the Persian soldiers occupying the land. Add to that pressure from hostile neighbors, and triumph was just a distant dream.

It got even worse. Not only were hopes deferred and promises delayed as they faced poverty and oppression from other nations; now injustice and oppression had spread throughout the Jewish community! Sorcery, exploitation of the vulnerable—laborers, widows, orphans, resident aliens—anything went! The few who had plenty were getting rich at the expense of the poor. Someone has termed it “the survival of the slickest.”

It’s not really so hard to understand, is it, how the bright hopes of 75 years earlier had turned to skepticism and despair? Solomon had understood it when he said in Proverbs 13:12 (NASB), Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life.² The people and even the priests had become indifferent and arrogant toward God.

In some ways, it sounds a lot like today, doesn’t it?

Malachi the prophet

Enter Malachi the prophet. His name meant “my messenger.” We really don’t know much about him except that his passion for holiness and for God’s honor burned white-hot. Time and again in this little book, he responded to the people’s questions and accusations against God with his own questions and charges about their unfaithfulness and unrighteousness, calling them to repentance. His approach was different from other prophets. To draw his hearers into the oracles the LORD had given him, rather than simply declaring the message, he asked questions, often questions he anticipated the people would ask in response to the charges he was bringing against them.

In the first two chapters, Malachi dealt with the people’s questioning God’s love by pointing to how God has favored them over Edom, the descendants of Jacob’s twin brother Esau. Then he called the priests to task for offering polluted and blemished offerings to God and for failing to minister faithfully among the people, teaching them the LORD’s ways. He also condemned those men who had divorced the wives of their youth to marry foreign wives who led them astray after pagan gods.

Then in our text, Malachi leveled this charge against the people: “You have wearied the LORD with your words.”

They responded, “In what way have we wearied Him?”

Malachi laid out his case as if he were in court. They have made unfounded, slanderous accusations against the LORD. They’ve called His righteousness into question when they say, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD.” They’ve called His integrity into question when they say He delights in those who do evil, blessing them, even taking pleasure in them. And they’ve called His justice into question when on the heels of those two accusations, they say, “Where is the God of justice?”

Now earlier prophets and psalmists had raised similar questions and lodged similar complaints on occasion. But they’d done so in a much different spirit. They were truly righteous people who were seeking to live faithfully but didn’t understand why things were happening the way they were. And in the end, they always rested in God’s goodness and righteousness, trusting Him to act in His own time and way to rectify the situation.

But here in Malachi, people who had corrupted the covenant, who were *faithless rather than faithful* and *disobedient rather than devoted*, were accusing God of corruption. Evil-doers were accusing God of evil-doing. The prophet *could not* let this stand! So he challenged their insincerity and infidelity with a word from God. They wanted to know where the God of justice is. Through Malachi, He responded, “I’m on my way!”

Preparing the way

Before the God of justice would actually come, He would send His messenger to prepare the way before Him. This is the image of the king’s messenger going ahead of him to announce his coming, clear the highway, and make preparations for the king’s arrival. The Gospel writers and the early church, following Jesus’ own declaration, interpreted John the Baptist and his ministry as forerunner of the Messiah as the fulfillment of this passage. He prepared the way for Christ.

Ever since the rebuilding of the temple, the Jews were waiting for the LORD to return to it, for His holy presence to take up residence there again as it had when Solomon dedicated the original temple. *But it hadn’t happened.*

They looked for it, longed for it, even sought it—but as a matter of protection, not piety. They thought that as long as God was present among them in the temple, the land would prosper

and all would be well. They weren't concerned with their covenant obligations as God's people and His call to them to be a light to the nations.

Reminiscent of His word through the prophet Amos, who preceded Malachi by three hundred years or so, the LORD turned the tables on them again. Amos' hearers thought that the Day of the LORD they longed for would bring the defeat of their enemies. Instead, Amos had declared that it would bring judgment *on them!* It was the same with the Jews of Malachi's day. They were seeking for the Lord to come to His temple, and took delight in this idea of His coming as the messenger of the covenant.

The LORD will come

The LORD declared that He *would* come; indeed, He would come *suddenly*. It wasn't a matter of *if* the God of justice would come, but *when*—or even more, *how!* It would *not* be as the people thought.

Look at how Malachi described it. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" It wouldn't be the Sunday School picnic they were expecting, and He wouldn't be coming to eliminate their enemies as they thought. No! When He would come, He would be like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. He would bring judgment *on His own people*, beginning with *the priests!* Like a refiner of gold and silver, He would purify the Levites—putting the heat to them and skimming off the dross—so they could bring offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Judah's offerings would be pleasing to God as in the days of old.

Then He would turn to the people and draw near to them for judgment—not final judgment, but judgment with a view to *redemption*. He would deal with the sorcerers, the adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who oppress the hired workers and the widows and orphans, those who mistreat the resident aliens, and last but not least, those who do not fear Him. He would judge His people *in order to* cleanse them and restore them. He would bring justice, *real* justice, *among them!*

The God of justice would come! The prophet assured the people of it. But it wouldn't be the way they thought.

He came, comes, and will come again

We have a big advantage over the Jews of Malachi's day. We look back from two millennia this side of the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, and see that *the God of justice has come—but not as they expected.*

He came *incognito*—through the "back door" as a peasant child born to a young virgin in a stable, cradled in a feeding trough. No one had any idea that this little baby boy was the God of justice come in the flesh, except His mother Mary, Joseph (the man to whom she was pledged to be married), and the shepherds to whom the angels announced Jesus' birth. But in Bethlehem that night, *the God of justice came.*

Just as the prophets foretold, God sent His messenger, Jesus' cousin John the Baptist, to prepare the way. He was the prophesied messenger, the forerunner of the Messiah who would prepare the way before Him.

When the God of justice came as the man Jesus—truly God, truly human—He came righting wrongs, healing the sick, cleansing sinners, calling for justice. His very coming brought judgment, as John 3:19 puts it:

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

He has come.

But His coming is not done; *He continues to come.*

He comes to bring salvation, to set people right with Himself, to save a people for Himself. His Holy Spirit uses human witnesses to prepare the way in people’s hearts so they might respond to Him in faith. This is the most wonderful way that He comes, but not the only way.

In the events of life and the movements of history, He comes to those who are in need, to those who are hurting and oppressed. He brings deliverance and help, often in unlikely ways. Is it by chance that oppressive nations and leaders fall as well as rise? Or could it be that the God of justice is *still* active in history, and comes to bring justice for the oppressed, to free slaves, to put down a Hitler, to tear down the Iron Curtain, to remove oppressive rulers?

But does He give His own people a pass? Or does He judge them *first*? Peter declared that the time had come for judgment to begin with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17-18). The church historian Eusebius, writing in the early 300s, viewed the persecutions of his day as the work of divine judgment to purify the church from its envy and strife among leaders, its rival factions among the laity, and its general hypocrisy.³ Maybe when we see the difficult state of the church in our nation we should take time to consider whether the problem is with our efforts or *with our relationship with God and with one another!* Could it be that the God of justice may have come to us to sit as a refiner to purify us—not judgment for judgment’s sake, but for redemption’s sake? When those who have been redeemed return to their old ways, sometimes God *judges* them in order to *restore* them.

But the coming of the God of justice is also *yet to be*. Scripture teaches us that at the last day, Christ will come in power and glory to judge the world in righteousness, to right all wrongs, and to impose final retribution on those who reject Him. That judgment is not for redemption, but for *final justice*.

The God of justice—He has come, He comes, and He will come. We don’t know when, for He comes in *His* time, not ours. The promise seems delayed, but our hope isn’t deferred. With Peter, we know that scoffers come and go, asking, “Where is the promise of his coming? . . . All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” And we hear Peter’s response (2 Peter 3:4, 8-10, 13):

But beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should to come to repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up . . . Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

And to that we say, Thanks be to God! Amen!

†MEG

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Signet Classics/New American Library, 1936), 13.

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

³ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. II, trans. J. E. L. Oulton in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1994), 253-257.