

The Ultimate Messenger

Malachi 2:17-3:6

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An illusion by definition is “an erroneous perception of reality. For a while I was really interested in magic tricks. I learned a couple of card tricks myself and enjoyed watching other people perform them too. I remember one instance where a magician asked a woman to choose a card from the deck and then after a few moves directed her to look up where she found her card tacked to the ceiling.

I have no idea how he did it, but of course that is what makes it entertaining. That said some illusions can be really dangerous. Chasing a mirage in the desert can be fatal. But hands down the most dangerous illusions we experience are the spiritual ones where we trick ourselves into believing wrong things about God and our relationship with Him.¹

If you have been with us over the last several weeks you know that we are going through the book of Malachi. Malachi is the last of the prophets of the Old Testament and in many ways he is a transitional prophet preparing people to make the jump from the Old Testament to encountering God in human skin.

Throughout the book, God’s Messenger – Malachi – has been pointing out the life of duplicity that the people were living. They thought they were doing everything right, they thought they were living lives that glorified God, but this was an illusion – they had convinced themselves that everything between them and God was good when in fact God wasn’t impressed with them at all.

All the sacrifices they were offering, all the prayers they were lifting up all the service they were performing was falling on deaf ears because the sin in their lives, both the sins of the people and the sins of the priests, had caused God to tune them out.

Friends can you imagine anything worse? Could you imagine spending your life thinking you were honouring God only to find out that everything you had dedicated to God was actually despised by Him? That thought is absolutely terrifying to me, and it should be.

Please turn with me to Malachi chapter 2 and verse 17. Page 676 if you are using a pew Bible.

In Malachi 2 verse 17 we come across the fourth of seven questions that the people of Israel asked God. Actually the whole book of Malachi is driven along

¹ Illustration adapted from Dennis J. De Haan (Our Daily Bread) taken from http://preceptaustin.org/malachi_sermon_illustrations.htm (accessed June 12, 2013)

by these questions. Before this the people have asked “How have you loved us” and “How have we despised your Name?” and “How have we defied You?” And now they ask “How have we wearied You God?”

Look with me at verse 17.

[Read Malachi 2:17]

“How have we wearied You LORD?” What have we possibly said or done that has caused God Almighty, the long-suffering God of patience to become exacerbated? The people of Israel wanted to know, and the people of Prince George need to know too – because if God is wearied by us we need to change.

And so in both boldness and fear let’s pray that God would give us clarity into this question today.

[PRAY]

So the question God answers for us in our text today is the question of verse 17 “How have we wearied You God?”

And God gives two answers to this question, first in verse 17 He gives an initial answer that is fairly straight forward. And then in chapter 3 verses 1 through 6 He gives a deeper answer that wouldn’t be fully understood for over 400 years.

Let’s look briefly at the first answer and then spend most of our time looking at the second. So first notice how God immediately responds to this challenging question. “How have we wearied You?”

And God responds: “By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and He is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?”

This is how the people of Israel and we today can weary God with our words. God says we weary Him when we look out at the world and accuse God of blessing the wicked.

“Why am I struggling relationally and financially and emotionally God while my neighbours who do not love You are doing so well?”

Have you ever asked God that question? I think we have all probably been there at times. But the problem with this question is that at its core is the accusation that God is not just. “Where is the God of justice?” – God You’re not fair! I’m trying so hard to live my life in a way that honours You and I’m losing my job, I’m losing my family, I’m losing my safety, I’m losing my sanity! God You aren’t fair!

And God is not impressed with this accusation at all. In fact it tries God’s patience. Malachi says it “wearies God” and the word here implies that God is

“utterly exhausted by it” or He “labours to endure it” when we accuse Him of being unjust.²

And I can think of two reasons why this accusation wearies God.³

First being accused of being unjust wearies God because with this accusation we, sinful creatures who live just a few years and have virtually no perspective, charge the eternal, omnipotent Creator of the universe to come down and defend Himself and His actions to us as though we were His judge.

Do you see the problem with that?

Two year olds have a very limited ability to understand that something they can't see could be there. And so when I tell Elliana that she has to hold my hand as we cross the street even though there are no cars to be seen I'm wasting my breath to try to get her to understand that sometimes there will be cars and that's why she needs to hold my hand. I hope she will learn that as she gets older. Till then all she needs to know is that every time we walk on the street she has to hold my hand.

It's the same way with God. The scope of His actions far surpasses our ability to understand and so it is pointless to ask why He allows the things He allows to happen because we couldn't understand His answers even if He gave them. And it wearies God when we demand answers from Him that we can't understand.

The second reason God is wearied by this accusation is because it is one He has been receiving every day since the fall. You will remember back when Adam and Eve ate the fruit and found themselves exposed in their sin before a holy God. Both of them passed the buck of responsibility rather than acknowledge their own guilt. God asked them “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” And Adam responded in classic manliness:

“The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” (Genesis 3:12)

And Eve, taking her cue from her loving husband responded in kind:

“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:13)

But these aren't simple admissions of guilt like they may seem to be. Instead Adam and Eve were both blaming God for their sin. “God, You put this woman here and You made this serpent and You allowed him into the garden. It's because of You that we sinned.”

² Strong's Concordance #3021 <http://biblesuite.com/hebrew/3021.htm>

³ Idea for these two wearying reasons adapted from James Boice “The Minor Prophets” (Grand Rapids: Kregel Pub. Co.), 1996. pg 248.

And rather than accepting responsibility we've been perfecting that faulty line of logic ever since. And God is wearied by our continual accusation that He has sinned.

Friends, don't fall into the temptation of trying to blame God for the consequences of your sin. We are sinners, the people around us are sinners, but one thing we know is that God is not a sinner – we must stop accusing Him of being one.

And that is God's first answer to the question "How have we wearied You?"

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I want to turn now to God's second answer to this question and to the big idea that will draw us through the rest of this text: **When the unchanging God walks among us we change.**

Look ahead with me to verse 6 as we will unpack the first part of this idea – **The unchanging God...**

[Read Malachi 3:6]

As we have already been talking, God is wearied with His people for their accusing Him of being unjust. And when we get wearied – our patience gets tested – the implication is that we are close to snapping.

Now it should make us nervous to think of God being close to snapping! But verse 6 gives those of us who have put our faith in Him great confidence. While God may punish His children, indeed Hebrews tells us:

The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. (Hebrews 12:6)

He will not destroy us because He is the unchanging God.

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This verse is the link in this section back to the context of the whole book – chapter 1 verse 2. While God knew that the words of this book were going to cut deeply, the first word He gave to His people was that He has loved them unconditionally. Before we loved Him, He loved us. Before we did anything deserving of His affection He loved us and chose us.

And God hasn't changed. God is still the same God He was when He made His covenant with His people – while it wearies Him to endure our accusations, we won't be destroyed or some other translations read "consumed" by the weariness we have induced because He does not change. That's good news!

But do you see how the focus of this section has changed? This text started with us accusing God, but here God says the only reason we aren't destroyed is because He is faithful and doesn't change like we have accused.

Oh how the tables turn when we remember that it was not because of our righteousness that God chose us. God loved us first, God chose us first, God made us His people first. And only after that, after He put His Spirit within us are we ever able to live in a way that honours Him. And throughout all of this God has been faithful, it is us who have wavered.

When I was a teenager there was a Christian band called the Newsboys that had a song that said “When we don’t get what we deserve it’s a real good thing.” And that’s the picture here. It’s a real good thing that God isn’t fair because if He was we would be in a heap of trouble because we’d be getting what we deserve. It is only because we worship an unchanging God that we don’t.

But then God speaks about something so unexpected that I believe even Malachi didn’t understand the full weight of what he was writing. And here we get to the second part of our big idea. **When the unchanging God walks among us...**

Look back at verse 1.

[Read Malachi 3:1]

Did you notice the 3 different individuals that this verse talks about? First we have the speaker. This is God the Father, YHWH, or as He is named 17 times in this book “The LORD Almighty.”

Next He speaks of sending “My messenger.” Now this should be familiar to you. This is the title of the series because this word is the Hebrew word “Malachi”. So this could read “See I will send Malachi, who will prepare the way before Me.”

And this is the way Malachi probably would have taken this word. He would have thought God was speaking about him.

But here there is a hint that God is speaking about more than just Malachi because He uses the future tense: “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way”. If you have been around the church for any period of time you will recognize these words as a famous prophecy. In fact Jesus quotes these words in Matthew 11:

As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? ... A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you. (Matthew 11:7-10)

Jesus uses these words to refer to John the Baptist who appeared four hundred years after Malachi wrote.

And of course this prepares us for the third person this text talks about. Verse 1 says:

[Read Malachi 3:1]

There is another messenger, an ultimate Messenger, who is coming beyond Malachi, beyond even John the Baptist. And this Messenger is referred to first as “The Lord you are seeking” and “the One you desire.”

God says this person will come to His temple. In Israel there is only one temple and only One who owns this temple – YHWH Himself.

And God uses the pronoun “Me” to refer to this messenger. My messenger, will prepare the way before Me.” And so this person is interchangeable with YHWH Himself. Malachi wouldn’t have used this language to talk about himself or any other person.

Friends you have been in church way too long if this doesn’t give you tingles. What God did for us in Jesus was completely unexpected and crazy. There is no way any of us could have imagined that this is what God had planned.

The exalted God of the universe, who spoke into existence everything that exists would lower Himself to our level, empty Himself as Philippians tells us, to be made in human likeness and become obedient to death – even the death of the cross!⁴ Only God knew that He would be His own Ultimate Messenger. And this Ultimate Messenger came to give the ultimate answer to the accusation – “God you are not just.”

Not only is God just, but He is unfairly merciful in our favor taking on our flesh to pay the price we owed God.

Now it is essential to remember at this point that while the Jews were looking forward to a messiah. Really they were looking for a saviour like David who would expand their kingdom geographically, who would draw their hearts back to God, yes, but more importantly would lead them back to the glory days of Israel. But their picture of who the Messiah would be was far too small. That’s why they rejected Jesus when He came.

But things are different for us because Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit enables us to read the Old Testament with Him in mind, and so when we come to a text like this we can see truth that even Malachi couldn’t see.

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⁴ Philippians 2:6-11

So where does this leave us today? What are the implications for how we must live?... Here we get to the final section of our big idea: **When the unchanging God walks among us we change.**

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There are two ways that our text says people are changed when they encounter the unchanging God – some are judged and destroyed and others are refined. And both of these ways prove God is just in His actions.

First, in verse 5 God tells us what He will do to all those people who seem to be prospering in spite of rejecting Him.

[Read Malachi 3:5]

God says “don’t worry that the wicked seem to be prospering, I will judge them because they do not look like Me.”

God loves covenant keepers as we talked about last week because He is a covenant keeper; God loves people who speak truth because He is truth; God loves those who are fair and generous and kind and compassionate because God is all of those things. And people who fear Him, who realize that He, not they, is God, live the way He lives in order to honour Him.

Friends what does your life look like? Have you given yourself to the pursuit of holiness and generosity and kindness? Are you someone who looks like your Creator?

If not, God’s word from this text is that He is a destroying fire of justice. And that isn’t the kind of change we want to experience. But there is another group of people who experience change when they encounter the unchangeable God, but they are refined not destroyed by His fire. And these are the people who have God’s Spirit within them though they still doubt His justice sometimes. Here God is speaking to His covenant children – to us.

Look at verse 2

[Read Malachi 3:2]

All people who encounter the unchangeable God encounter a fire of holiness. And nobody, not even His children, can stand before Him in their own righteousness. This is why Hebrews urges us:

Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28-29)

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So what does it mean that God is a consuming or refining fire? Well verse 2 defines this further for us where it says “For He will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.”

God’s fire always has purpose, sometimes it burns to destroy and sometimes it burs to purify, but it always burns. And this is important to remember.

Throughout this book we have seen how easy it is to forget that God is the LORD Almighty. We focus on Jesus as friend and God as Father, and God is those things, but He is also the standard of holiness and the judge and jury of that standard.

Friends, do not live under the illusion that God does not demand holiness from us. Do not give yourself to thinking “I can go on sinning and God will just keep on forgiving.” When we encounter the unchangeable God His fire either destroys us or it changes us into His image.

When Jesus encountered the woman caught in adultery in John 8 He forgave her completely, but He also did not allow her to go back to her life of sin. He told her:
Neither do I condemn you.... Go now and leave your life of sin. (John 8:11)

And this is always what happens when the unchanging God walks among us. He forgives completely but demands total life change.

Look at verses 3 and 4 when God tells us the purpose for His refining fire.

[Read Malachi 3:3-4]

When we encounter God, when God walks among us we are all changed so that the sacrifices we offer become acceptable to God so that our lives of service are not wasted.

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If you were here last week you will remember talking about how God’s word is sharper than a two edged sword which cuts deep into our lives even separating bone from marrow. But it is a disciplining sword not a destroying sword. Or we could talk of it as a surgeon’s knife. It cuts to heal, it cuts to remove cancer and only as we embrace God’s knife can we offer Him a sacrifice that He will accept.

Brothers and sisters, where is your heart today? Are you ready to embrace the refining fire, the surgical knife of God?

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There are two ways that God’s refining fire wants to change us today. First is in the area of personal sin. Like the woman caught in adultery we must choose whether we want to be refined by God’s fire and leave our sin behind, or whether

we love our sin too much and would prefer to encounter God's destroying fire. Choose wisely.

The second way God wants us to change is corporately as a church. Our God is a dynamic God and if we are going to have a church where He feels comfortable to attend we can not stay the same as we were yesterday.

One way we are trying to implement this is as deacons every meeting we start now begins with the question: "What is God wanting to do in our midst, where does He want us to go?"

Now change is not easy for anyone. Young people and old people alike hate change because it forces us out of our comfort zones.

Often younger people talk about wanting change and feeling like the older generation is holding us back but the reality is younger people just want things the way we want them. We don't want to change; we want to wrestle the control out of the hands of the older generation.

That's not the change that God wants to perform in us or here at Fort George. See, God doesn't care about stuff like what we wear, or what the order of our service is, or whether we sing hymns or contemporary music.

What He does care about is what kinds of hearts we have towards each other; whether we prefer those around us before ourselves; whether we use our power and resources to serve the less fortunate. That is the worship that God receives and that is what God wants to do in us and in our church.

So ask yourself what might God want to refine in my life? How could I look more like Him today? What might this mean for me personally? Is there sin in your life that God wants to burn away?

And what might this mean for us corporately? Are there things here that are more important to you than they are to God?

So I urge you, pledge today to let go of any illusions you may be living under. And prepare yourself to be changed because the unchanging God we worship is a consuming fire, and when He walks among us we are all changed; either we are destroyed or we are refined into His image.