

¹⁷ You have wearied the LORD with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

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?"

¹ "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵ "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

⁶ "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

■ Malachi 2:17-3:6

"I have loved you," says the LORD.

Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, begins with the words that all of us long to hear. Not whether God exists, not whether God is all-powerful—but whether he's good. Whether he loves us. This oracle not only begins with this bold proclamation, but also ends with it. In Malachi's final chapter God tells his people that for those who revere his name, *"the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays, and you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves."*

This is the picture of being loved that God wants us to hold in our hearts. A baby calf, wobbling around on its spindly legs, intoxicated by the freedom of the open pasture, kicking its hooves at the sun and sky, secure in the safety of the fold. When we move beyond knowledge into *apprehension* of love, we become free to follow, to

worship, to adore. The first and last verses of Malachi serve as declarative bookends to the nation of Israel: *“I love you, have loved you, and will love you,”* says the Lord.

It’s important we hear this first and last because what this tells us about Malachi is that it is a love letter. God knows we don’t have very long attention spans. Somehow, in his infinite wisdom, we tend to remember only the first and last things that are said to us. And if “I love you” is the first and last thing we hear in this oracle, then this is what the LORD of Hosts would have ringing in our ears as we go on. *“I love you, have loved you, and will love you”* are the anchor points we need to secure before we descend into the message of Malachi, otherwise we risk free-falling into a false picture of God as petty or fault-finding.

This becomes especially clear when we take a look at the structured argument of Malachi. There are six disputations leveled by God at Israel; six charges that he lays at their feet as evidence that despite his constant love for them, they have not loved him in return.

Israel protests: *“But we’re still performing all the sacrifices and tithing to the Temple. What do you mean we’re not loving you?”*

God replies: *“It’s not the blood of bulls or the money in the box that matters—your lack of reverence for me shows up in how you just mail it in.”* Israel had grown complacent with God. The honeymoon phase of returning from Exile had worn off, and Israel had started going through the motions—even finding ways to cut corners, not thinking God would notice or care. But God does notice. God does care. Everything we read between the brackets of love describes a God who suffers from an unrequited

longing. “*Love me back,*” God seems to implore. “*Love me as I have loved you. With your whole heart, without reserve, love me back.*”

The *minor* issue was that Israel—led by its priests—was disobeying the strict regulations regarding what kinds of animals got sacrificed and how much they should be giving to the Temple. But God has never needed burnt cow carcasses and has never been all that impressed with the clink of a coin in the coffer. The major issue, as it has been all the way through the Old Testament up until this point, is that Israel’s witness to the nations surrounding them was being spoiled by their hypocrisy. A Persian would see Israel as having an inferior religion because they had only *one* God. An Egyptian would see that monotheism being the same as any other religious system. An Edomite would see this quaint belief in one God and say “*what’s the big deal about this Yahweh?*” The big deal was that by failing to carefully observe the rigors of worship, Israel was showing its lack of reverence for God. The bigger problem with this was that this carelessness showed the nations who watched Israel that God could be relegated to the sidelines as a sort of Hebrew mascot. At the time this oracle was given, all around Israel donkey carts were flashing bumper stickers that said “*God is my co-pilot.*”

Carelessness with God wasn’t just a religious problem that could be confined to Temple practices. In fact, no “religious problem” can ever be truly separated from the political, because what a person believes inevitably colours the way they act towards others. And for Israel, their belief that God was distant or slumbering (or both) filtered down into the way they lapsed into cruelty and selfishness.

This is how the passage we have just read begins. It is not enough that Israel cruises through the defining aspect of their lives—being a nation of priests for the world that Yahweh loves—but they are also failing at loving each other. Some in Israel had seen the prosperity of the wicked and thought that God helped those who helped themselves to pretty much everything. Others—probably those under the heel of the unscrupulous—questioned God’s goodness: “*How come they get away with everything? Where is Yahweh’s justice now?*”

God’s reply is an unusual one. He doesn’t throw up his hands and roll his eyes. He doesn’t draw himself up and say “*you want justice? Here’s your justice!*” He says “*look here, I’m sending my Malachi—my messenger.*” Here we come up against one of the oddities of Malachi when we consider that this oracle might not be named for an actual prophet who lived during the period this oracle was given. So, in a weird twist, this book might be named for the central character and not the prophet. This book is named for what God is going to do about injustice stemming from lack of reverence for God and for each other: “*malach’i*”—my messenger in Hebrew. In response to unrighteousness and injustice, God sends his messenger.

The first messenger God sends is one who will prepare the way. Prepare the way for whom? For the second messenger, the *malach ha’berit*, the messenger of the covenant, the one who will make what the priestly nation offers to be pleasing once more. Though some recent scholarship says these two messengers are probably *not* John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus of Nazareth, the pieces fit too well to think anything different.

For when the messenger of the covenant comes to purify the priests, what the priests offer will once more be as pleasing as it was in the past when the priesthood was justified with Yahweh. As the messenger of the covenant refines and washes clean this holy nation, this royal priesthood, what they offer will once more be acceptable to God.

Sound familiar? What if I were to say it a different way? As Jesus refines and washes clean the royal priesthood of God, our relationship with God is reconciled and restored. Even more, because the relationship that once was broken by our desire to be self-reverent has been restored, we are now free to offer right worship. And by right worship, I don't just mean the stuff we do when we sing. True worship lies in loving God and loving our neighbour.

As if this were not enough, the text goes on to say in v. 5 "*So I will come to put you on trial.*" Here, we see the Lord directly associating himself with the messenger of the covenant, the one who will purify the priesthood and rectify all the wrongs perpetrated on the widow, the orphan, and the resident aliens. In other words, God *himself* comes to tear down those who dare oppress the least and last in our world: the unloved, the abandoned, and those who live on the fringes of polite society.

I doubt it's a coincidence that the book called "my messenger" features a messenger so prominently. We are called to attend to the messenger in the context of love.

The bookends of love, like the edges of a parabolic mirror, focus our attention on the messenger in the middle. In the center of this love letter from God is the appearance of not just any messenger, but the messenger of the covenant to which God has been

faithful. God spells it out in v.6: *“I, Yahweh, do not change. Though you may try to trick me, like Jacob, into believing you love me with your whole hearts, I am the one who is faithful. I am the one who is faithful to the promises I have made to you as a people. You are still to be my chosen ones, a light to the nations, a community that loves me and loves each other and so displays my character for all to see. This is why I persist with you. This is why I have not given up on you. The world will know who I am through you.”*

However, Israel is not left to figure it out by themselves. Israel thinks God has sunk into his divine Barcalounger, never to emerge, but God’s radical involvement with his people is in the Incarnation. In response to those who say God is gone, God sends himself to once and for all restore what was lost. The heart of the people had gone lackluster and dim as the questions piled up: how have you loved us? Where is God’s justice? God replies, but the answer is not in recounting what God has done with manna and water and miracles in the desert, but with the words *“I am coming soon.”*

All of us at one time or another have questioned God’s justice. Can a loving God sit back while systemic and personal sin takes bites out of all our lives? Where is the loving justice of God for the drug dealer, the single mother, the mentally ill—for me? So we ask the same questions as Israel: How have you loved us? Where are you? *Here.* The messenger comes to purify the people. *Here.* Jesus comes to restore what was lost. *Here.* In Jesus, God is manifest amongst us. *Here.* In Christ, God is *here.*

Jesus is the living justice that is not only meant to justify and gather us as the new Israel, the new people of God. In Christ, we are also justified with each other so that

we can actually learn what it means to forgive, reconcile, and pursue mercy and justice. More than just speaking and singing, it is the quality of our love for God and for each other that bears witness to the glory of God. The great fix for the broken world is not divine duct tape on the wound. The great fix is a radical restructuring of reality that is borne out by Christ working in us to transform us into Kingdom people for this life and the next. The great fix is a great message, the message we proclaim to this day. It is finished. God has done it. And because of him, we are now becoming a race of lovers.

The messenger is coming. The messenger is here.

i.) How is God leading you into deeper love?

Charges God brings against Israel:

- i.) Doubting God's Love (1:2)
- ii.) Contempt for God's name (1:6-14, 2:1-9) → reflects badly on how Israel was to witness to the nations (additional charge against priests was because they had failed to respect/fear God in this way, and being the worship leaders of Israel, they were very much at fault for not being stricter in their teaching and leading)
 - Cf. with 1 Peter 2:9 → the Church is now a holy nation, royal priesthood, therefore irreverent worship is not to be tolerated by any of Jacob's children
- iii.) Unfaithfulness in Marriage (2:10-16) → purity of covenant realities defiled
 - Intermarriage with non-Jews is careless and faithless because it introduces impurity into nation
 - Adultery is faithless because it introduces unrighteous behaviour in the nation, thus corrupting its witness
- iv.) Tithing in Unrighteousness (2:17-3:7) → because of injustice in the Land, Israel was "unrighteous" and therefore its sacrifices were unacceptable. (cf. Matt 5:23-24)
 - People questioned God's just nature, so God will send a messenger before the messenger of the covenant who will purify and set men righteous once more
 - Righteousness is a matter of preserving "peace and prosperity of the community by fulfilling the commands of God in regard to others." (TWOT, Harris, Archer, Waltke, p.1879) Covenant faithfulness is righteousness because observing the demands of the covenant sees to the peace and prosperity of the community.
 - God is just, even though the wicked prosper → in order to alleviate the perception that God is not just, he is sending his messenger to purify those who have led Israel astray and to restore right worship in the Temple as well as right worship by righteous behaviour
 - Root sin of those who practice injustice is contempt for God (cf. 1:6, 2:5)
- v.) Stingy with God (3:7-12) → God is not saying he will bless Israel more if they would just give him more, he is saying that he will be rich with them if they only observe the "whole tithe"
- vi.) Arrogance in front of God (3:13-15) → Israel does not believe that observing right worship of God is important and moves into unfaithfulness. "It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?" (v.14)