

THE BURDEN OF GOD'S LOVE

STUDIES IN MALACHI - PART 9

The Joy of Being Refined

TEXT: MALACHI 4:1-3 (ESV)



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Inevitability

As we near the end of Malachi, we should revisit where we've been so we can grasp this last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament. Malachi began with God declaring He has loved His people. But their lives have been hard and they can't accept God has loved them well at all. So for 3 chapters God has shown His love by pursuing them so they might not only see how He has loved them, but also why they're blind to it. He doesn't just want to win the point. He wants His people to relate to Him as they were meant to.

All along the way God has said several times that He will come to judge the world such that every living soul will attest to the glory and greatness of God, either by right of being His beloved child or by being shown their guilt in rejecting Him. ^(1:5, 14, 3:1, 5, 12, 18) For three chapters not only has the Lord established that He will judge the world, but that He will judge from a perfectly informed position. In other words, He knows, sees and has an opinion on all that's going on in the world, and He'll judge it all.

Yet even here is a picture of grace to God's people. They were acting as though God was either fiction, sleeping or distant, but in His indictment of them He has shown them He knows what's in their hearts. He proves His intent to redeem them by pursuing them in their rejection of Him so they might be restored to Him. It is gracious for a father to tell his children when he knows they haven't lived as he knows they should.

And it is gracious of God to pursue His children when they have a need He recognizes, even when they can't see it, and even when they don't understand how important meeting that need is for them. The need they have is for God to judge the world in righteousness. This is a need we all have, but one I doubt many have ever articulated. But we need God to judge the world, ourselves included. And inevitably He will.

Something inevitable happens at our house every night between 8 and 9. Our older kids know the drill and have accepted it mostly with joyful hearts. But our dear sweet Jane Bug, age 2, reacts to bedtime in a way that amuses me, but also perplexes me, if I'm honest. I know she knows when it is bedtime because I don't even say a word, I just start walking toward her, and she takes off and tries to hide. I kid you not, the other night she tried to hide by draping her blanket over her head and sitting really still. No kidding. I asked myself, "Do kids really do this?" What does she want? To stay up? To do what? She's two.

Still, every night we begin the round-up and every night she tries to avoid the inevitable—always with the same vigor and always to the same result. And it will stay that way because we know what she needs for tomorrow that she can't anticipate today, much less want. There's just so much she can't see that we do. So not only does she need sleep, she also needs us to judge how much sleep she needs and require it of her.

This is often what it feels like when God works in our lives. We don't always understand why He does what He does, and even often wish He would stop. Sometimes we even try to escape Him, like Jane under her blanket. But one thing God is saying to His people by giving them this letter of Malachi, is that when He acts, it is for a Holy, essential purpose. When God says He will judge the world, it is not just something He has decided to do. It's something this broken world needs, and thus inevitable. As our text today will repeat, this will happen... inevitably.

Malachi 4:1-3

¹*For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.*

²*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.*

Behold, The Day Is Coming

I imagine Malachi has been as much a surprise as an indictment for Israel. Remember, they thought God had abandoned them. But God has been quite **detailed** in His analysis of Israel. Here He gets equally detailed about what His judgment will look like—including the ruin it will bring to those who oppose Him as well as the healing it will bring to those who turn to Him.

Malachi's Israel has long been a people living in the dark end of a long cave. And God has been drawing them out, closer to the light, illuminating the true condition of their hearts. Malachi has given a long litany of Israel's short-changing the convictions God has called His people to live by, exposing their half-hearted worship, dishonesty, faithless marriages, attacks on God's character and refusal to trust Him to care for them.

In the previous text, the Lord boiled it all down to this—God's people see no profit in serving Him, and in fact believe it is better not to. They're angry. But it is because God has loved them that He won't let them in turn deal harshly with Him without consequence. If you feel under God's prosecution, it is not to ruin you. It is to love you, and to defeat your countersuit for what Israel envied—the prosperity of the wicked. He does not want you to want that. He wants you to want Him.

What do you want from God? From life? From this world? Our answers to these questions reflect the truth of what we believe is really of value. We're all pursuing something. Some pursue money, others freedom from responsibility. Some success, others ease. Some pursue the approval of a parent, maybe even into our forties or fifties. Some an unimpeachable record of getting things right, or at least not wrong. Some pursue the glory and enjoyment of God. All of our motives, through perhaps even unknown to us, are known by God.

In Malachi, God has exposed Israel's desire to determine for themselves how to regard and approach God. At the heart of this is that His people have not esteemed His name. They have not sought how they might serve and honor Him, but how He might serve and perform for them. This rearranging of who is the master and who is the servant is the boast of the arrogant and wicked who would place themselves above God.

God will judge this for what it is. See what He says in verse 1: "Behold, the day is coming burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evil doers will be stubble. The day is coming that will set them ablaze, says the Lord of Hosts." Notice, this is God speaking, and He is speaking comprehensively. Nothing in all creation will escape His judgment. Nothing. Do you believe this?

A Word of Warning

When you hear a pastor insist God will judge the world, or when you see the words on the page in Malachi or so many other places from the Old Testament to the New Testament, what thoughts fill your mind? When you read that the wicked will be scorched like stubble until all evil is utterly and finally destroyed, should this concern you? If you are someone who will inevitably come under that judgment, it should. And the Bible teaches that the judgment of God is always all-inclusive.

We cannot presume the judgment of God is simply a matter of personal opinion. It either will happen or it won't. Many presume it won't, thinking God would never judge anyone—not a loving God, anyway. But we must be careful here not to pit one attribute of God against another. You cannot say, "God is so loving that He wouldn't insist upon perfect righteousness." His love is perfect because He is perfectly holy. To try and loosen one of these attributes for the sake of the other is to lose both. Perfect love must be holy. Holiness must be perfectly loving.

Jesus says many will stand before God thinking they were fine, only to discover God didn't know them to be people who worshiped Him as God. (Lk. 7:21-23) So I offer a word of warning today because our text does. "Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

My question is: Upon what basis have you concluded whether or not this is true, or if it is, how you will fare when you face the judgment of God? If you're going at this purely on a hunch, or on some enlightened concept of peace, love or spiritual relativity made popular in the last 100 years, I implore you to consider carefully if that is worth staking your eternity on.

Christianity gives a reason for our hope. We have a redeemer who took upon Himself the sins of those who'd believe on Him so there'd be no penalty left for us to pay for our sin. For the Christian, our confession isn't that we're somehow better than those around us. Our confession is "Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left its crimson stain. He washed me white as snow."

The Sun of Righteousness Will Rise

Judgment is coming. This has been the warning of the book of Malachi. But here in chapter 4, God's judgment takes another function as the **source of hope** in the message of God's love to His people. See what the judgment of God will bring in verse 2.

HOPE WHERE THERE WAS DESPAIR: "The sun of righteousness will rise..." When God talks of His coming judgment, He talks of a darkness lifting. I do not take the "sun of righteousness" to be a specific reference to Christ Himself, but rather to the effects of His dying and rising again, which will illuminate everything. Where the people lived in danger, under constant threat of war or famine, God says His refining work would bring hope where there was despair, and security where there was a prevailing sense of danger. Hope will break like the dawning of the sun.

HEALING WHERE THERE WAS BROKENNESS: "with healing in its wings..." As the sun brings life to whatever it shines upon, God's judgment will have a profound healing and rejuvenating effect on our lives by erasing forever everything that was broken, making His people whole and alive in the newness of life like you find in a spring bloom. If you've ever been sick for any length of time, you might remember when the sickness began to break and you began to become well again. This is what God is talking about, only multiplied to perfection.

JOY WHERE THERE WAS SADNESS: "You shall go out leaping like calves..." How long since you last leapt? I have a daughter who doesn't walk. She skips, runs, dances, leaps, scoots, even skulks, but never walks. She wears her joy or sorrow in her gait and on her countenance. Watch children and you'll see what it is to "go out leaping." Can you imagine that after the final judgment, for those who esteemed the name of the Lord and put their faith in Jesus, joy you have never known will infect everything about you and you will never simply walk again. You will leap.

FREEDOM WHERE THERE WAS BONDAGE: "Leaping like calves from the stall..." This image is beautiful. You've been cooped up, hunkered down, penned in. I get this way in the winter—antsy, restless, a bit depressed. But when that first hint of spring sticks in the air and you feel the warmth of the sun for the first time in months, you just want to run, to do everything with vigor under the life-giving sun. After God's final judgment, though we may now be acclimated to living in a darkened hemmed in kennel of a world, on that day when the sun of righteousness rises with healing in its wings, a joy will overtake us and a sweetness will so fill our lungs and we will taste a freedom, the delight of which we have never known.

Hope in the Inevitable

The inevitability of God's judgment is meant to comfort His people. This will happen and there is nothing anyone can do to stop God from accomplishing this. When God judges the world in righteousness at the last day, there will be no despair, only hope. There will be no brokenness, only healing. There will be no sadness, only joy. And no bondage, only freedom.

You and I were meant to want these things—to want them for our world **AND** for ourselves. I should want God not only to restore everything broken around me, but everything broken in me too. And the reason I should is because I should want more than anything else to be perfectly restored to Him for all eternity. Even my weak desire for Him will He strengthen.

Yet for this to happen, He must call only what is holy holy. But Christians have hope that when the inevitable happens, we will be found holy because we have a Savior who took our sins upon Himself, and bore our punishment for us. If our hope is in Him, we have hope that we will find the inevitable coming judgment of God to be something that will give us hope, healing, joy and freedom we have only begun to imagine. Is this you?