

Malachi Chapter Three (vv. 1-5)

Dispute Four: Defaming God's Character [2.17-3.5]

The *fourth* dispute of Malachi is framed by the repetition of the word “judgment” (justice), 2.17; 3.5. Their expectations on return from Babylon had not transpired; in fact, their enemies enjoyed great prosperity whilst they suffered hardship. This caused them to question the character of God, supposing He delighted in evildoers and doubting the justice of His actions. Others, such as *Habakkuk*, *Asaph* (Psalm 73) and *Jeremiah* (Jeremiah 12) were also perplexed about God's apparent blessing of the wicked. The NT teaches that God's blessings fall on the just and unjust alike (Matthew 5.45), though *all* will ultimately experience the fearful hand of His judgment. Judah had misunderstood the ways and character of God. The divine response to such tiresome accusations is a second ‘interlude of judgment’ (3.1-5). The Judge himself would “come” and inaugurate the “day” of Jehovah's awful judgment (3.1-2) – a judgment that would begin with them (!), “*not initially to judge the Gentile nations, but to purge the temple and its worship*” (John Riddle), cf. 1 Peter 4.17. If they had grasped the true character and imminency of the coming of the Lord, it would have transformed their conduct (2 Peter. 3.11).

Misjudgement of Divine Character [2.17]

v.17: The endless complaints and charges of the people “wearied” the LORD. The word ‘weary’ indicates *fatigue* from physical toil, warfare or grief. As to His essential nature, God does not grow weary (Isaiah 40.28), but this language describes, in human terms, the tiresome nature of their incessant complaints – they had exhausted His patience. “Wherein?” suggests the people were oblivious of the impact of their behaviour on their relationship with Jehovah. Do we bring displeasure to God by our incessant unfaithfulness, selfishness, and worldliness? The common belief was that the wicked must be considered “good” in the sight of God because He did not appear to be judging them. He must therefore condone their evil ways and “delight” in their behaviour.¹ Where was the God of “judgment” (justice)? Little did they know what they were asking – for judgment *would* come and begin with them! The scoffers of Peter's day asked a similar question (2 Peter 3.4). They did not believe in divine intervention, sneering at His promise to return in judgment. Even believers, in a practical sense, can lose sight of the coming of Christ living for the world rather than Him.

The Messiah's Revelation [3.1]

v.1: Note the *three* persons mentioned in this verse. **1.** Jehovah is the speaker, “I will send”. **2.** The prophet announcing the coming Lord is called “my messenger”. **3.** The coming “Lord” or “messenger of the covenant” (Messiah). This “Lord” is clearly divine. *First*, He is the owner of the temple, “his temple”. *Second*, He is called “the Lord” (*'ādôn*), that is, the God of justice the people were seeking (2.17). Third, this verse is quoted by Christ in Matthew 11.10: “Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you” (NET). Note the change of pronoun from “me” to “thee”. *Jehovah* (in Malachi 3) is therefore identified with the *Lord Jesus* (in Matthew 11). AP Ross says, “*preparing the way for Christ Jesus is preparing the way for the LORD (Yahweh), either because Jesus will do the work of the LORD, or Jesus and the LORD are one and the same.*”

“Behold, I will send” is literally, ‘I am sending’ – expressing the immediate future, even though it was **400** years away. “My messenger” refers to a *herald* sent on behalf of a king to announce his coming. According to the Lord Jesus, this ministry was fulfilled by John the Baptist (Matthew 11.10; cf. Isaiah 40.3-5). John had the unique privilege of presenting Christ to the nation of Israel (John 1.29-31, cf. Luke 1.76). His specific responsibility was to “prepare the way”. It was the custom of Near Eastern kings to send messengers before them to prepare the highway, levelling the road, straightening its course, and removing any obstacles (cf. Isaiah 40.4). Thus, John was sent to *spiritually* prepare the people (through repentance and faith) for the coming of Messiah. He prepared their hearts in expectation for His coming.

“And the Lord” is the word *'ādôn*, a title for the Messiah in Psalm 110.1. The title signifies sovereign ‘master’, and, when used with the article, always refers to God. So, God is the sender, and God the one being sent – in the person of a divine Ruler! “Whom ye seek” is likely an ironic reference back to the question of 2.17, “Where is the God of justice?” Here He is! He shall “suddenly come to His temple”, the word “suddenly” implying *unexpectedly, quickly and without warning*. This prophecy received a *preliminary* fulfilment during the first advent in those occasions when the Lord Jesus appeared in His Father's house (cf. Luke 2.27, 46; 4.9; John 2.14; Matthew 21.12-15). But the word “suddenly” is almost always used in connection with disaster and judgment, and thus awaits the fulfilment of the second advent (Matthew 24.42). This verse is therefore an example of one that ‘crosses the centuries’ (cp. Isaiah 61.1-3), drawing together the *first* and *second* advents of Christ without referencing the intervening church period. Christ will come *suddenly* to His temple,

¹ *God delights, rather, in obedience (Isaiah 56.4), faithfulness (Hosea 6.6) and justice (Micah 6.8).*

destroying the idolatry of the Antichrist and building the millennial temple from which He will reign (Zechariah 6.12-15; Ezekiel 43.2-4). The “Lord” is also referred to here as “the messenger (angel) of the covenant” – the *fourth* messenger of the prophecy (cf. 1.1; 2.7; 3.1). This is a likely reference to the ‘Angel of the LORD’, who expressed the ‘name’ and *presence* of Jehovah and brought Israel into the land of promise (Exodus 23.20-23). This verse identifies him with the Messiah as One sent on business (a *messenger*), the business of the covenant made with the ‘fathers’ at Sinai (2.10). He will see to its fulfilment and establish its promises.

The Messiah’s Refining [3.2-4]

v.2: If the opening verse declares the *certainty* of the Lord’s coming in judgment, vv.2-5 explain the *character* of that coming and its impact on the priesthood and people. John the Baptist referred to this second coming in judgment in Luke 3.17. Whilst John uses *agricultural* language (winnowing), Malachi uses *industrial* language (refining). Not one person can “abide (survive) the day of his coming” or “stand” secure on their own individual merits when He appears. “*Who indeed could abide the application of the holiness of God, as the standard of judgment, to his walk and ways?*” As far as the people of God are concerned, the judgment associated with the coming of Christ is *refining* (as a fire) and *cleansing* (as soap). In both cases the element is purged of imperfections and impurity, but not destroyed. A *refiner’s fire* was used to refine metal by melting it and allowing the dross, which floated to the top, to be scooped off. The process was complete when the metal became like a liquid mirror, and the refiner could see his own reflection (cf. Romans 8.29). The “fullers’ soap” describes the laundry detergent of the ancient world – an alkaline salt used to clean clothes by treading and beating them in water.

v.3: Christ will act as Refiner by burning away the dross of Israel’s evil ways through the refining process of the tribulation (cf. Zechariah 13.9). In this verse, the Lord is not compared with the fire (as in v.2), but the artisan (silversmith) himself. Peter uses the figure of a refining fire to describe the purifying effect of trials and tribulations in a believer’s life (1 Peter 1.6-9). Even the Judgment Seat of Christ will be associated with fire (1 Corinthians 3.13-15). What dross will be found in my life? The judgment begins with the “sons of Levi”, suggesting the priesthood was the core of the problem. As “gold” and “silver” they should have perfectly reflected the *holy* and *glorious* character of deity. Their state of ritual impurity was such that no pure offerings could be offered to the Lord. But, having been ‘cleansed’ (Ezekiel 48.11) they will bring offerings in a “righteous” way – corresponding to the required standard of the law (cp. 1.13). **v.4:** Then the “offering” (singular) of Judah and Jerusalem will be “pleasant” (sweet) as in “former” years. The singular no doubt emphasises the corporate *unity* and *harmony* of a nation once again enjoying sweet fellowship with God. This is a clear reference to the re-instated millennial sacrifices and offerings (Ezekiel 43-45). The reference to “former” years is probably a general reference to a time when the people offered sacrifices in faith and obedience (a right state of heart) – the reference to Jerusalem suggesting a period in the monarchy possibly in the days of *Solomon* (2 Chronicles 7.8-10).

The Messiah’s Retribution [3.5]

v.5: The repetition of the word “judgment” (justice, 2.17) frames the fourth dispute. The justice the people had requested would “come near” (approach) in the judgment of the LORD of hosts. This is a terrible day of judgment and clearly illustrates the difference between the day of grace (church age) and the establishment of the kingdom age. “*Today, grace reigns through righteousness; but when the Lord appears, He will come to reign in righteousness. Justice and judgment will be the habitation of His throne, and consequently sinners – those who refuse to submit to His royal sway – must be destroyed out of the land*” (Edward Dennett). The LORD will stand as “witness” for the prosecution at the trial of the wicked. He has been the silent observer of the words and actions of every individual (cf. 1 Samuel 12.5; Micah 1.2). Four categories of sins are listed that invite swift judgment from God:

1. The “sorcerers” – a person who uses or claims to use magical spells to harness evil forces or spirits – witchcraft or any kind of occult activity. This was an abomination of pagan nations and punishable by death (Exodus 22.18).
2. “Adulterers” – sexual intercourse with a person other than a spouse (as a married or betrothed person).
3. “False swearers” – literally, those ‘swearing to the lie’ or ‘deception’ referring to dishonesty in speech, especially those who commit perjury in a court of law (Exodus 20.7; Leviticus 19.12).
4. Those that “oppress” (exploit) *workers*, by cheating them of their wages (cf. Leviticus 19.13; James 5.4), *widows* and *orphans* and refuse help (or justice) to the *foreigner* (immigrant) living among them (cf. Deuteronomy 10.18-19). Not caring for the poor and needy and the foreigner were serious matters in Israel. Psalm 72 makes it clear that the ideal king must champion these people.

These sins and abuses are symptoms of a deeper underlying disease – not “fearing” God. Every believer should have a healthy reverence for God that shrinks from *dishonouring* or *displeasing* Him.