

**Malachi 3:1-7**

1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight — indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. 5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. 6 For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. 7 Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?" (NRSV)

You are familiar with the Exile. In 722 BC Assyria conquered Samaria and the ten tribes of Israel were slaughtered. In 605 BC Babylon invaded Judah and the two remaining tribes were captured. Then in 539 BC Babylon fell to Persia and King Cyrus freed the Hebrews. The Exile ended and 42,000 Jews were allowed to go back to Palestine. Three years later they started building the temple in Jerusalem, built an altar, and resumed offerings. But soon afterward, they stopped building the temple and built their own homes instead. The Jews fell back into sin, tithes were ignored, the Sabbath was broken, and priests became corrupt. More prophets were needed by God to lead the people back to God.

A hundred years later, Malachi entered the picture and began to prophesy in Jerusalem. As a post Exile prophet he addresses the sin of apostasy. Spiritual life had deteriorated to complacency. They went through the motions of religion but it was only tokenism. This is very similar to our world today where most people do the minimum. All of the prophets proclaimed that this is not good enough for God. A second rate service is never good enough for God. Lip service not followed by action is never good enough. Malachi offers hope in the decadence, a promise from God that they will experience God's blessing if they repent. The word "if" is a pivotal key word. The only way to reformation is through repentance.

They were bringing injured and sick animals to the temple for offerings and saving the best for themselves. You can't impress an important person with a subpar offering. Let's say, for example, it's your Dad's birthday. The gift is used, broken, worn, or torn. It just doesn't work. They were marrying people of other religions. The problem of Solomon was that his foreign wives lead to false worship. Jezebel the wife of Ahab in the Northern kingdom used her power to promote worship of Baal the fertility god of the Canaanites. The call of Malachi is to stop the infiltration. Malachi calls for the tithe to be reestablished. You must bring 10%. This is the minimum. The least amount accepted by God. This is not a suggestion or recommendation; it is the required minimum. The wording indicates just how serious this is. If you fail to offer 10% to God, you are

robbing God. It is not a burden or a hardship. It is a matter of attitude. The offering to God is a joyous response to what God has done for you. It is how we respond to God's blessing. You live in fertile land, you have the Lord's love, and you get the blessing. It is appropriate to express your thanks. If someone gives you a nice Christmas present, you express your thanks in many ways. Your tithe is one way of expressing your thanks to God, it is a joyous response for what God has done for you.

Malachi explains why they did not perish during the Exile. In the past, God promised them the Promised Land. In the past, God gave them the Promised Land. In the past, they broke the covenant with God and as a consequence, they lost the Promised Land. God allowed the consequences of their actions. If you fire up a wood stove and tell the kids to stay away and not touch it, but they don't listen, they have to have the moment of life to learn the lessons of consequence. Sometimes you have to let them have the painful moment so that they can learn and remember. The Hebrew nation was freed from the Exile and allowed back home in the Promised Land. But they ended up doing the same thing that led to the Exile. They turned away from God and still the Lord does not give up on them.

Today's Scripture is a lesson on repentance. Return to me says the Lord and I will return to you. This is tit for tat; a fair exchange. I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. Four hundred years in advance the word of God says "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." To put the time frame in perspective, four hundred years ago, this part of the world was an European colonization where the New World was being explored. God's promise is a redeemer that will save us. We see in the New Testament the fulfillment of God's promise. John the Baptist had a baptism of repentance. What is needed is repentance. Then we see in the New Testament, the gospel writers proclaim that John the Baptist is the messenger, not the Messiah. He is one to prepare the way for the Messiah. It is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of Malachi that he is coming. John the Baptist is a confirmation that he is here. He points to the Lord. The messenger is necessary to help the people get ready through repentance, and to point to Jesus as the Messiah. His testimony is this is the one promised to you. This is not prophet. This is the Savior. He is coming here to save us.

In the New Testament we have a new covenant with God. This is a new relationship with God. The Old Covenant was based on law but laws get broken. The New Covenant is based on love. God gives love to the people. Love is not something you can break. Promises you can break and law you can break, but love is enduring. When it comes to love you either accept it or reject it. God gives the very best form of love that God has to give. The least we could do is be thankful and follow the instructions. The transgressions that are addressed are sorcerers, adulterers, those who swear falsely, and those who oppress the hired workers in their wages. The transgressors are those who oppress the widow and the orphan, thrust aside the alien, and those that do not fear the Lord. We have to understand how we fit in with the scriptures. Our response is to give our very best back to God. The covenant based on law is subject to human obedience and broken by human disobedience. The covenant based on love is subject to love and grace.

Malachi said "The day of the Lord is coming." We know the Lord came to the earth, not as they expected, not to support their preconceived attitudes, perceptions, and desires, but to purify our hearts. Purified hearts don't oppress, judge, and condemn. Purified hearts love and forgive. What wonderful joy we have! God fulfilled the promises

better than expected and better than deserved. We can't help but celebrate with joy and thanksgiving the wonderful blessings God has bestowed upon us.