

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. Assyria conquered the northern kingdom Israel. Over a hundred years later Babylon conquered the southern kingdom Judea. Another hundred years or so Babylon falls to Persia. King Cyrus the Great had expanded the Persian Empire to be largest empire in the world at that time. He was friendly to captive Jews so when the exile ended 42,000 Jews were allowed to go back to Palestine. Three years later they start building the temple in Jerusalem. But soon they start having problems once again, they stop building the temple in order to rebuild their own homes. So, more prophets are needed to lead the people back to the will of God. Zechariah and Haggai enter the picture and the people finally finish the temple. But then they have even more problems as the people fall back into sin. The tithes are ignored, the Sabbath is broken, people intermarry, and the priests are corrupt.

In 436 BC Malachi enters the picture and begins to prophesy in Jerusalem in order to awaken Israel. The sin that Malachi addresses is very similar to our world today. The spiritual life has deteriorated to a state of complacency; they go through the motions but only do the bare minimum. The hope that Malachi offers is that they will experience God's blessing if they repent. The only way to reformation is through repentance.

They would bring injured or sick animals to God for offerings. Try offering them to your governor and see how pleased he would be with you. An example might be it's your Dad's birthday and the gift is broken, worn, or torn. I don't think he would be pleased and I don't think you would do that. Marrying people of other religions is not a problem for us here today. But, back when Solomon married foreign wives it led to false worship. And Jezebel, the wife of Ahab in the northern kingdom of Israel used her power to promote worship of Baal the fertility god. So, what Malachi calls for is to stop false religious infiltration. Malachi also calls for the tithe. You must bring a minimum of one tenth to God. This was not a suggestion or a recommendation. This is the required minimum. It is very serious, according to Malachi; if you fail to offer at least ten percent to God you are robbing God. It is not a burden or a hardship. This is a joyous response to God's love and blessing.

In today's Scripture Malachi explains why they did not perish during the exile. In the past, God promised them the Promised Land and gave them the Promised Land. But, they broke

the covenant so they lost the Promised Land. But we know from Malachi that the Lord does not change. So, through the Lord they get to return to the Promised Land. Today's Scripture provides some very important details. Repent and the Lord returns to you and a very specific vital detail "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." Now let's advance forward 400 years and it is time for God's promised redeemer. We see in the New Testament John the Baptist has a baptism of repentance. The Gospel writers proclaim that this is the messenger that is to prepare the way and that this is fulfillment of prophecy. The messenger is necessary to help the people get ready through baptism of repentance and to point to the Savior through personal testimony that this is the one. This is not a prophet that has come. This is the Savior that saves us. This is the Son of God.

This brings us to a new covenant with God; a new relationship with God. The previous covenant was based on law. The new covenant is based on love. God gives God's love to the people. God gives the very best that God has to give. Our response is to give back to God our very best. The covenant that is based on the law is subject to human obedience and broken by human disobedience. A covenant that is based on God's love is subject to God's grace. So, Malachi testifies that the day of the Lord is coming. We know that the Lord came, not as they expected, not to support their perceptions, but to purify our hearts.

What wonderful joy we have. God has fulfilled all promises better than expected. We can't help but celebrate with great joy the wonderful blessings God has bestowed upon us. God changed the covenant from law to love and gave us the best gift imaginable.