

Malachi 3:1-5
The Coming of Christ: A Blessing
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Introduction

This will be our last week in this fourth section of Malachi. What this section primarily consists of is God's response to Israel's cynical prayer in Malachi 2:17. What we saw in Malachi 2:17 was that the Israelites were blaming God for being faithless to the covenant that he had made with them—they were questioning his justice because of his lack of action on their behalf. As was stated the previous two weeks, Israel was an oppressed nation, an afflicted nation, and what we find in Malachi 2:17 is a prayer of accusation. In essence, what they were praying was; "God, how can you call yourself a God of justice while such great atrocities happen against your own people? How can you claim to be against sin while you let the nations oppressing us get away with murder?"

What we find in 3:1-5 is God's answer to Israel's whining, accusatory prayers. God's response is not quite what one would expect. In essence, he says, "You want justice, Israel? You got it! Do you want me to come and deal with the injustice of the land? Get ready because I am coming. But since you are just as wicked, vile, and unjust as the nations surrounding you, my judgment will be poured out on you just as much as it will be poured out on the nations."

God promises to send His covenant Messenger, Jesus, who was going to come not as a fluffy cotton ball, a soft, naive grandpa, nor a ferry in the sky; rather, he was going to come as a "refiner of fire" and "launderers soap." God tells them that he is going to send Jesus as the one who will enforce the terms and conditions of the covenant that he had made with them. See, the Israelites called for a covenant Messenger/enforcer because they thought themselves to be more righteous and faithful than God—this is the essence of their plea in 2:17. They thought that the enforcer of the covenant was going to side with them and not with God; because they thought that God in his lack of justice failed to hold up his end of the covenant that he had made with them. This is how wrong they were—how messed up their own perception of themselves was.

Last week we looked at Matthew 3 and Matthew 21 where we see Jesus declaring the near end of the covenant that God had made with Israel *as a national, political entity*. What we see in this passage, however, is a double edged sword. We see that the first coming of Christ was much like what we anticipate in the second coming of Christ: it was simultaneously the most expected and hoped for day and the most feared and disastrous day in all of history. What we see in Malachi 3:1-5, read through the lens of the Matthew 3 and 21, is that the first coming of Christ was the most feared and disastrous day for Israel *as a nation*, because God sent him to fulfill and then annul the covenant that he had made with them *as a nation* because of their unfaithfulness to it. However, what we also see in this passage is that Jesus didn't merely come to set aside Israel as a nation (and thus the covenant that brought them into covenant with God), we see that he is going to replace the covenant that he made with national Israel much better, longer-lasting covenant.

A Conundrum: Has Jimmy Dug Himself a Hole too Deep to Climb Out Of?

This is exactly what we see with the coming of Christ, the Messenger of the Covenant, in Malachi 3:1-5: we see that he was to come as an agent of judgment (see vss. 2-3a); however, we must notice the purpose of his judgment, which was to purify and cleanse (see vss. 3b-4). Ultimately, it must be understood that Malachi 3:1-5 is a difficult passage to interpret. Without a doubt, God is warning the Israelites that he is coming in judgment; however, what we find in vss. 3a-4 is that God's purpose of judging Israel was to thoroughly cleanse them, to purify them. And why? Take a look with me at the passage:

“^{3b}Then they will present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD as in days of old and years gone by.”

So what it looks like from vss. 3b-4 is that God's purpose for judging Israel is for their purification, so that they might once again offer pure offerings to Yahweh. Then when we get to vs. 6 we see that God wanted them to know that although he is sending his covenant Messenger as a refiner's fire, he will not ultimately destroy them. Notice the text:

Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed.

Other translations (ESV, NASB, NKJV) translate the word “destroyed” as “consumed.” In other words, although God is sending his Messenger to judge them as a fire, they will be purified as opposed to consumed (thus they will not be destroyed by the fire). He comes as a “refiner” and not as a “destroyer.” Because of this, many Christians, primarily dispensationalists, question my interpretation of this passage. Does it not sound as if I am a few bricks short of a load to suggest that this passage in Malachi ultimately finds its fulfillment in God's dual act of annulling His covenantal relationship with Israel as a nation (the curse) through Christ and, at the same time, cleansing them through Christ that they might continue to offer sacrifices on his behalf (the blessing)? Should I also not be called into question by Malachi 2:1-5, which is a parallel passage to Malachi 3:1-5?

¹ "Therefore, this decree is for you priests: ² If you don't listen, and if you don't take it to heart to honor My name," says the LORD of Hosts, "I will send a curse among you, and I will curse your blessings. In fact, I have already begun to curse them because you are not taking it to heart. ³ "Look, I am going to rebuke your descendants, and I will spread animal waste over your faces, the waste from your festival sacrifices, and you will be taken away with it. ⁴ Then you will know that I sent you this decree so My covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD of Hosts. ⁵ "My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave these to him; it called for reverence, and he revered Me and stood in awe of My name.

What do we see here? We see that God is going to judge the priests of Israel “so My covenant with Levi may continue.” Really, Malachi 3:1-5 and Malachi 2:1-5 are direct counterparts. So how can I say that Christ came to annul the covenant with Israel

by fulfilling it in order to establish a New Covenant when the context of Malachi seems to suggest something different? The context of Malachi 3 seems to suggest that although Jesus was coming to judge, his purpose in judgment was purification and not destruction or annulment. Am I then off my rocker? The purpose of the judgment was the continuation of the covenant that God had made with the Levites as representatives of Israel (2:1-4).

Well, There are a few answers to this question. But this morning I just want to focus on one.

The Nature of Progressive Revelation

We must discuss the reality of “progressive revelation.” Although this phrase may seem a bit difficult, it really isn’t. Before I lay forth a definition of progressive revelation let me tell you what it is not. Progressive revelation does not refer to the belief that God reveals himself outside of the Scriptures (as we have them now have them, consisting of the 66 books comprising the Old and New Testaments). When I speak of progressive revelation I am not speaking of extra-biblical revelation as if God’s word were not complete. Rather, All we mean when we talk about progressive revelation is that *God’s “later revelation builds upon earlier revelation.”*¹

Millard Erickson suggests that *revelation is “a process even as redemption, and a process which moved to an ever more complete form.”*²

That is to say, David knew more about the nature of God and his redemptive plan than did Moses because David came after Moses; Isaiah knew more about the nature of God and his redemptive plan than did David because Isaiah came after David; John the Baptist knew more about the God and his redemptive plan than did Isaiah because John the Baptist came after Isaiah. It is to say that God progressively reveals himself, bit by bit, little by little, peeling off “one layer at a time,” revealing himself, disclosing himself incrementally.

This is probably most clearly seen in two specific areas: the Trinity and the Sermon on the Mount. Although you do find hints at the doctrine of the Trinity in the OT (such as Genesis 1 with the plural pronouns, us and we), you do not find a fully developed doctrine of the trinity until you get to the New Testament. Another evidence of the reality of Progressive Revelation is that we find Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said... now I say unto you.” In these passages Jesus is clearly adding new revelation, raising God’s ethical standard for his New Covenant, Spirit-filled, community.

One of the things that we must understand is that God’s revelation is progressive, but that it finds its climax in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate revelation of himself and his plan of salvation/redemption. First of all, he is God’s ultimate revelation of himself. Consider the following: according to Colossians 1:20, God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in Christ; Jesus is said to be “the exact expression of His nature” in Hebrews 1:3; Jesus himself states in John 10:30, “The Father and I are one;” and ultimately, after Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, he responds by saying, “The one who has seen Me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9). What we find in Christ is God’s

¹ Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 58.

² Ibid.

climactic revelation, the fullest revelation of the Father. We live in a privileged day. We know God better than Adam, Moses, or even David. After all, we have the revelation of God's Son—God in the flesh.

Not only does progressive revelation mean that God reveals himself, his character, progressively, (or “one layer at a time”) but he reveals his plan of redemption “one layer at a time.” We know more about God's redemptive plan through Christ than David or Moses because we live on this side of the New Testament. Since we have the written, Spirit-inspired record of God's climactic revelation of his character and redemptive purposes through Christ in the New Testament Scriptures, we are able to read and understand the Old Testament with much more clarity than did those who lived before Jesus. Because we know God's climactic revelation through Christ we know what God was up to in the Old Testament as we look back.

Those of you who have been attending the Wednesday night Bible Study/Prayer Meeting know very well the truth of this reality. After all, didn't Jesus tell his disciples in John 16:12, “I still have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now.” Why couldn't they bear them? For two reasons: (1) they didn't have the Spirit (see 16:13) and (2) they needed to witness his death and resurrection to put everything Jesus wanted to say to them in perspective (John 20:3-9). Once Jesus died and rose again they were able to understand more—they were able to piece God's revelation through Christ together because God had revealed more to them through the death and resurrection of Christ.

I want to draw your attention to Luke 24:13-27, 44-47 to show you exactly how Jesus spoke of himself after the resurrection:

¹³ Now that same day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ Together they were discussing everything that had taken place. ¹⁵ And while they were discussing and arguing, Jesus Himself came near and began to walk along with them. ¹⁶ But they were prevented from recognizing Him. ¹⁷ Then He asked them, "What is this dispute that you're having with each other as you are walking?" And they stopped [walking and looked] discouraged.

¹⁸ The one named Cleopas answered Him, "Are You the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ "What things?" He asked them. So they said to Him, "The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene, who was a Prophet powerful in action and speech before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified Him. ²¹ But we were hoping that He was the One who was about to redeem Israel. Besides all this, it's the third day since these things happened. ²² Moreover, some women from our group astounded us. They arrived early at the tomb, ²³ and when they didn't find His body, they came and reported that they had seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they didn't see Him."

²⁵ He said to them, "How unwise and slow you are to believe in your hearts all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Didn't the Messiah have to suffer these things and enter into His glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

Here we have in Luke 24 two men walking along the road to Emmaus discussing the fresh news that Jesus had risen again. Jesus strikes up a conversation with them as they discuss the events of the resurrection. Notice in vs. 27 what Jesus says to them. He showed them from “Moses and all the prophets” the things concerning himself. In other words, Jesus showed them how he is the fulfillment of the promises and prophecies given to Israel in Moses’ writings and the prophets.

Now look with me at vss. 44-47. Here we find Jesus talking with the disciples after his resurrection.

⁴⁴ Then He told them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you; that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He also said to them, "This is what is written: the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Jesus says to his disciples in the locked room, almost exactly what he told the two on the road to Emmaus. And what did he talk to them about? About how “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” ultimately point to Christ. It is vital that one understand the makeup of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Hebrew OT is not set up like our English counterpart. The English Old Testament is generally broken up into four sections: the law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the historical writings (Joshua-Esther), wisdom literature (Job-Song of Solomon), and the Prophets/Minor Prophets. The Hebrew Bible, on the other hand has a different composition, it is broken up into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. This is why Jesus mentions “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” It is his way of suggesting that the entire Old Testament points to him.

In other words, all of God’s redemptive purposes and works find their climax and ultimate end and fulfillment in Christ. Christ is the centerpiece of all of God’s revelation. As opposed to reading the Old Testament in light of the New Testament understanding that Christ is the climax and ultimate fulfillment of the Old Testament, many (namely, Dispensationalists) flip things on its head and read the New Testament in light of the Old Testament.

Turn with me to Hebrews 1:1-2. The Letter to the Hebrews is the single most important book in the Bible when it comes to seeing Jesus as the centerpiece of all of God’s revelation and works.

¹ Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. ² In these last days, He has spoken to us by [His] Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe.

What we see in this passage is the climactic revelation of God through his son. Notice the contrast between vss. 1 and 2. In times past God spoke in many times and in various ways, but “in these last days” he speaks through one and one alone, his Son.

There is no need for various forms of communication because the Son perfectly reveals the Father and his redemptive purposes. There is no need for various forms of communication because God's word through his Son is climactic, exhaustive, and complete. This does not mean that God has revealed to us everything that there is to know, but it does mean that God has perfectly and fully revealed his character, and has revealed to us everything that we need, and everything that he wants us to know. This is why we can consider the Scriptures, as we now have them, sufficient. And what you find as you go through each successive passage and chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews (which we will not be doing this morning) is that Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament.

Notice what F.F. Bruce has to say about Hebrews 1:1-2. First he states that Hebrews 1:1-2 teaches two clear stages of God's revelation in Scripture. He then says,

These two stages of divine revelation correspond to the Old and New Testaments respectively. Divine revelation is thus seen to be progressive—but the progression is not from the less true to the more true, from the less worthy to the more worthy, or from the less mature to the more mature. How could it be so when it is the one and same God who is revealed throughout... The progression is one from promise to fulfillment, as is made abundantly clear in this epistle [letter]: the men and women of faith in Old Testament days did not in their lifetime experience the fulfillment of the divine promise in which they had trusted... The earlier stage was given in a variety of ways [as explained in 1:1]... yet all the successive acts and varying modes of revelation in the ages before Christ came did not add up to the fullness of what God had to say. His word was not completely uttered until Christ came; but when Christ came, the word spoken in him was indeed God's final word. In him all the promises of God meet with the answering "Yes!" which seals their fulfillment to his people and evokes from them an answering "Amen!" The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond him.³

And why does Bruce suggest that there is no progression of revelation beyond Christ? Because, the fullness of God dwelt in Christ. Remember, Jesus told Philip that when he saw Christ he was seeing the Father. All of the promises of the Old Covenant point to Christ and ultimately find their fulfillment in Christ.

Really, the Scriptures must be read and seen as a unit (a context). The 66 books which make up the Bible are to be read as a unit. One of the things that I do recommend is that the people of God read their Bible's from cover to cover. In many ways the Bible is to be read like a mystery novel. When you read a mystery novel you get bits and pieces of clues as you start reading from page 1 to the end. But somewhere toward the end of the book, about 3/4 to 9/10 of the way through, you come to the climax of the novel. In the climax you will find that all the evidence, clues, and questions come to a head and the detective solves the mystery. When the detective solves the mystery everything that was said before makes sense. Everything that was said before the climactic solving of the mystery is now understood in light of the conclusive gathering of the facts and final

³ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 45-46.

determination. This is why most people do not like rereading mystery novels. Since they know the outcome, they know where all the clues are leading, and the tension of the mystery is lost. The mystery is no longer a mystery; because once you know the conclusion to the mystery the clues simply make sense.

This is what it is like with the Bible. The Bible is God's story (not that it is fiction), God's narrative, and it centers on how he, as an infinitely holy, just, righteous, loving, and merciful God relates with sinful human beings. When you start reading from Genesis and you get all the way through to the book of Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament), many questions nag and linger in your heart and mind. Malachi really does leave you hanging in thin air—the Israelites have failed to be God's faithful people; God has expressed his rejection of their sacrifices and prayers; there are still so many promises that are left unfilled, so many questions will be left unanswered; you are, in essence suspended in thin air with nothing but tension and unfulfilled expectations on both God's part and the Israelite's part. However, when the curtain to the sequel to God's Old Testament narrative opens you find the answer to all of your questions. You now see the fulfillment to all of the promises that God made to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Israel. And just like a mystery novel, it would be silly to not read the Old in light of the New. In the New you have God's climactic revelation, the person and work (Christ and the Cross/resurrection) to which the entire Old Testament points.

Turn with me to Romans 16:25-27. Notice how the Gospel itself is called a mystery. The HCSB translates the word as "secret," but it contains the same idea as "mystery" and refers to that which was hidden but has now been disclosed.

²⁵ Now to Him who has power to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the sacred secret kept silent for long ages, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God, to advance the obedience of faith among all nations— ²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ—to Him be the glory forever! Amen.

The Notice what John Stott has to say about this passage:

*"It is a 'mystery', that is to say, a truth or cluster of truths hidden for long ages past, but now revealed. What is included in the 'mystery' Paul does not here explain. But he does elsewhere. God's secret, hitherto concealed but now revealed, is essentially Jesus Christ himself in his fullness, and in particular Christ for and in the Gentiles, so that Gentiles now have an equal share with Israel in God's promises... And it looks forward to future glory, when God will bring all things together under one head, Christ. Thus the mystery begins, continues and ends with Christ."*⁴

And what we find is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament. The entire Old Testament points to Christ, God's climactic and fullest revelation of His character and plan of redemption/salvation. Let me lay it out for you. I want to list for

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of Romans The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 404.

you just a few of the ways that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises in a much greater way.

1. *Jesus is the fulfillment of Moses' role as the prophet. Moses was only a prophet in a limited sense, one of his primary purposes was to point to the Prophet of prophets, Jesus Christ (Deut 19:15; Matthew 5:1-2; Hebrews 1:1-2:4; 12:18-24).*
2. *Jesus is the fulfillment of David's role as King. David and the other Israelite Kings were only Kings in a limited sense, and one of their primary purposes was to point to the only true King, Jesus (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2; Acts 2; Psalm 110; Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 21:1-10).*
3. *Jesus is the fulfillment of Aaron's role as Priest. These priests did not serve as permanent fixtures, their sole purpose was to point to Christ as the only true Priest. (Psalm 110; Hebrews 6:13-10:25).*
4. *Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple itself—he is the meeting place between God and his people. The Old Testament temple and tabernacle was not an end in itself, its purpose was to point to Christ (John 1:14; 2:13-22; Hebrews 10:19-21).*
5. *Jesus is the fulfillment of the animals offered on the altar and especially of the Passover lamb. These Old Testament sacrifices were not an end in themselves, their purpose was to point to Christ (Exodus 12:21-23; Hebrews 7:26-28; 10:1-10; 1 Corinthians 5:7).*
6. *Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. Jesus is our rest (Exodus 20:8-10, Hebrews 4 and 11).*
7. *Jesus is the fulfillment of the nation of Israel. Jesus is the promised "seed" of Abraham. Jesus is God's Israel and fulfilled the Covenant that they rejected (Genesis 12:7; 17:8; Galatians 3).*

Jesus is that to which the entire Old points. We must read the old through the eyes of the new. Who is it that will be sitting on a throne being worshipped in Revelation? The Lamb of God! God's entire plan of salvation revolves around Christ—everything in the Old points to Christ, and everything in the future centers on the exaltation of Christ.

Conclusion

Although it may seem like a stretch from the context of Malachi to say that 3:1-5 (and 2:1-4 for that matter) ultimately finds its fulfillment in Christ fulfilling the Covenant that God had made with Israel and then replacing it with a newer and better one, the progressive revelation of the New Testament leads me to no other conclusion. Jesus was faithful where Israel was faithless. Jesus had no intent on keeping the Old (Mosaic) Covenant (the only covenant that was made with Israel *as nation*) around. After it all, it was a flawed covenant, and that is why Christ inaugurated a new one (Hebrews 8:7-13). The Old was faulted in so many ways: providing a weak hope, a reminder of sins, a pathetic priestly ministry, and, on top of this, it was made with a people who were primarily unconverted.

Jesus came and offered the sacrifice promised in Malachi 3:3b-4. He offered up to God what Israel could not offer, because Jesus alone is a true priest—a perfect priest, a sinless priest, an eternal, immortal priest (Hebrews 7). The fulfillment of Malachi 3:1-5 and 2:1-4 can only be found in Christ. To look elsewhere—to look to a day when Israel

as a nation (as opposed to “in Christ”), is purified misses the point of God’s relationship with Israel through the sacrificial system. The whole point of God’s relationship with Israel was to point to Christ. He is centerpiece of God’s narrative that expands from “Genesis to the maps.”⁵

Jesus is the only Priest—the only fulfillment of Malachi 2:1-4 and 3:3a-4. Do you know this Priest? Have you been covered by his own shed blood (Jesus being both the offering and offerer, the priest and the sacrifice). If not, I urge you to trust this priest as the only one who can offer an acceptable offering and sacrifice on your behalf, atoning your sins eternally. Come to Jesus as the only one able to offer to God an acceptable sacrifice on your behalf.

⁵ I must confess that I stole this catchy phrase from Dr. Mark Devine, Associate Professor of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School.