

Malachi 3:6-7
God's Unchanging Character: Our Hope
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Introduction

I understand that I am gaining for myself a reputation of the browbeating preacher. We have been going through the book of Malachi now for almost exactly 5 months. The constant tone of Malachi, thus far, has been warning, condemnation, and a call for repentance of sins. The tone of Malachi has been sharp and even brutal at times. As an expository preacher I believe that it is my job to preach the whole counsel of God's word. Thus, I do not skip over parts that are easier to swallow and stick with what is easy (I also do not skip over parts that are difficult to interpret and hard to understand); rather, I do my best to faithfully preach, explain, and apply what each and every verse of the particular book we are looking at says. When the constant theme of the book is warning, judgment, and exposure of sin, this will be the heartbeat of the sermon. When the constant theme of the book is love, forgiveness, freedom, and power, this will be the constant heartbeat of the sermon. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending upon your view of things) Malachi has been primarily negative up to this point.

On a positive note, though, we are beginning to hone in on God's gracious call to Israel in light of her sin. This morning we are going to be taking a look at my favorite passage in the entire book of Malachi. This passage stands, in many ways, as a pillar of hope in the midst of chaos, confusion, and utter rebellion. Like a freshwater spring in the middle of a desert, Malachi 3:6 stands strong pointing to the possibilities of forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption. What we have seen up to this point is primarily negative. Surely, we have heard God's declaration of His love for Israel in 1:2 and have seen something of His gracious and redemptive purposes in judgment in 2:4 and 3:3b-4; but we have primarily only heard bad news. We have witnessed God thoroughly beat Israel with a whip of words. We have seen Him do everything He can to convince them of their sin and thus of their need for repentance. He has sternly and forcefully warned them of the consequences of their sin and lack of concern for His name and His word. And what we find in Malachi 3:6 is a breaking of the clouds—we get a glimmer of hope.

This sermon will consist of four questions that I will pose and answer about the theology and context of Malachi 3:6, and then we will wrap things up with a bit of reflection and application.

1. What does the term "immutability" refer to when we speak of God?

First of all, let it be said that Malachi 3:6 teaches us about what theologians refer to as the "immutability" of God. The word "immutable" or "immutability" refers to God's changelessness. It means that God cannot change in regard to his character promises, and purposes.¹ Malachi 3:6 is an affirmation of this fact. We find this attribute

¹ Paul Washer suggests that the immutability of God means that "God never changes in His attributes, or counsel." He continues, "God does not grow, evolve, or improve because He is already perfect. He cannot diminish, deteriorate, or regress because He would no longer be God." Paul Washer, *The One True God* (Hannibal: Granted Ministries Press, 2004), 47.

of God spoken of quite often throughout the Scriptures. Let me just show you a few of the references. Numbers 23:19;

“God is not a man who lies or a son of man who changes his mind.”

Hebrews 13:8;

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

James 1:17;

“Every generous act and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights; with Him there is no variation or shadow cast by turning.”²

Psalms 102:25-27;

“²⁵Long ago You established the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. ²⁶They will perish, but You will endure; all of them will wear out like clothing. You will change them like a garment, and they will pass away. ²⁷But You are the same, and Your years will never end.”³

2. Is immutability a good thing?

Well, it depends on the character of the one claiming to be immutable. Imagine if Hitler were to say, “I, Hitler, do not change.” To be honest, I am thankful that I am not an immutable person. I am thankful that I can change. Why? Because I am a sinful, imperfect person. I say things often times that I wish I would not have said, react sometimes in ways that I regret. I often times do and think things that do not bring honor and glory to Christ. And the fact that I can change is exciting, because it gives me hope that through the power of the Spirit I can be conformed more and more to the image of Jesus.

Jesus, on the other hand, is perfect in all of his ways. There is no imperfection in him. You have probably heard the saying, “Once you hit rock bottom there is only one way to go, and that is up.” Jesus is on the direct opposite end of the spectrum. He can say something that none of us can say; “I am perfect. There is no flaw in me whatsoever.” Considering this truth, would it not be true that there is only one way for God to go if he

² In regard to this verse, Douglas Moo says, “James’ language is not exclusively technical, so we may suspect that he intends no more than a general reference to the constant changes observed in creation. This changeableness of creation was frequently used to highlight, by contrast, the unchanging nature of God the Creator.” Douglas Moo, *James*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 76.

³ In a study I did on Romans 1:10-14 I said, “The things that last the longest in our material existence is about as temporary to God as a shirt is to us.” He speaks of the disposable, temporal, and mutable nature of things like galaxies and mountains in the same way that we speak of the disposable, temporal, and mutable nature of things like shirts, tooth brushes, and automobiles. This is how eternal and unchanging He is. Thus, the created order is used as a way of pointing to the eternity and immutability of God.

were able to change? A God who is infinitely perfect can only go down if he were to change. Consider C.H. Spurgeon's comments in this matter.

*Now, if he is a perfect being, he cannot change. Do you not see this? Suppose I am perfect today, if it were possible for me to change, should I be perfect tomorrow after the alteration? If I changed, I must either change from a good state to a better—and then if I could get better, I could not be perfect now—or else from a better state to a worse—and if I were worse, I should not be perfect then. If I am perfect, I cannot be altered without being imperfect. If I am perfect today, I must keep the same tomorrow if I am to be perfect then. So, if God is perfect, he must be the same; for change would imply imperfection now, or imperfection then.*⁴

Immutability is only as good and hopeful as the character of the person who claims to be immutable. For God to be immutable is good because we know him to perfect and infinite in all of his ways. We know that he is infinite in his love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice.

LORD, Your faithful love [reaches] to heaven, Your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the highest mountain; Your judgments, like the deepest sea. (Psalm 36:5-6)

Thus, it is a good thing that God is immutable, because he is perfect in all of his ways.

3. Is God's immutability a good or bad thing specifically for Israel?

We really only need to look at the second half of this verse to determine the answer to this question. After all, what we find is that God's immutability is the foundation of Israel's hope. Israel has not been destroyed for one reason and one alone; because God has not changed. If God had changed, Israel would be in deep water, up the creek without a paddle, a forever rejected people.

If the second half of this verse readily gives us the answer to this question (Is God's immutability a good or bad thing for Israel), why do I believe that it is such an important question to ask? Well... what we have seen of the character of God up until this point in the book of Malachi? Without a doubt, Malachi is one of the hardest books of the Bible to go through in a systematic fashion as I have been doing because its tone is so harsh. What we see in Malachi is a God who hates sin and deals with it in drastic measures. We have seen that God doesn't take sin lightly, but promises to kill it in hot and holy wrath. Consider what we have observed thus far in the book of Malachi: God has promised to rub animal excrement in the faces of His own priests because of their sinful manner of life and worship (Mal 2:3); we have seen a God who has rejected his own people's prayers and sacrifices because of their sin (Malachi 1:9; 2:13); we have seen a God who promises to curse his own people because of their lack of concern for his glory (Malachi 2:1); we have seen a God who expressed a desire that his people stop worshipping him because of their hard hearts (Malachi 1:10); we have seen a God who

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0001.htm>

hates both sin and sinner (Malachi 2:16); we have seen a God who is committed to humiliating his own priests as they have humiliated him (Malachi 2:10). God brings a constant onslaught against Israel, warning them of soon-coming wrath.

I believe that Malachi 3:6 came as a shock to the Israelites. With the tone of the book of Malachi thus far you would have thought that God would be saying, “Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob will not get away with your sin!” or “Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob are surely condemned!” But He doesn’t say this, does He? What we have seen of God up to this point? God’s judgment, justice, holiness, and the promise of wrath. Does this passage not come as a shock in light of what has preceded it? “Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob had better hit the ground in fear!” No, rather He says, “Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed.”

This is why Malachi 3:6 is such a refreshing verse. Malachi 3:6 gives us a picture into the heart of God. What we come to realize is that although God obviously comes to Israel in anger, He ultimately comes in brokenness. Malachi 3:6 puts everything that God says to and about Israel in what precedes in a new perspective. You come to the realization that this is not a morbid God who loves to beat and whip His people; this is a God of compassion, longsuffering, patience, and grace.

The tender heart of God is Israel’s only hope. In fact, the tender, patient, and compassionate heart of God is the only reason Israel is not wiped off the map.

God comes at Israel with a stern voice of rebuke and warning, but what we ultimately see is that this God comes with a tender heart. In fact, God’s stern words of warning flow forth from a heart of compassion and love. After all, the only reason Israel hasn’t destroyed is because God has not changed.

We will get back to this in a moment. But for now we must ask another question that is vital in understanding Malachi 3:6.

4. In what way has God not changed?

I believe that Malachi has something very particular in mind when he speaks of God not changing. Remember here that God is talking to a very specific group of people who have a highly unique and long history with God. God is speaking about his specific involvement with the nation of Israel. God has not changed in his dealings with Israel. And, you know what, they haven’t changed either.

In what way has God not changed? Look at the next verse. Context! Verse 7 explains God statement in vs. 6.

⁷ *"Since the days of your fathers, you have turned from My statutes; you have not kept [them]. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of Hosts.*

There have been two trademarks in the history of God’s relationship with the nation of Israel: (1) the sinfulness, rebellion, defiance, and stiff-necked faithlessness of Israel, and (2) the compassion, mercy, faithfulness, and patience of God. Israel, since the get-go, was a rebellious, stiff-necked people, and yet God has always been faithful to protect, provide for, and restore them even at the height of their rebellion. Just even think, for instance, of the very beginning of Israel’s covenant relationship with God. God’s covenantal relationship with Israel *as a nation* began in Exodus 19. Moses went up on

Mount Sinai for forty days while he spoke with God, receiving the covenant that God had made with them. Before taking Moses up on the Mount, God gave Israel the 10 commandments. Israel had forty days without Moses while he was up on the Mount with God receiving God's covenant stipulations. What did they do with their time? They built a golden calf! Why do you think Moses threw the tablets of stone to the ground as soon as he saw their idol worshipping celebration? Because the first commandment on the tablet was, "You shall have no other god's before me." Israel broke God's covenant even before God could finish giving it to Moses. This incident really is a foreshadowing of the rest of God's covenant relationship with Israel. From this point on we do see pockets of hope and light with the Israelites. There are points in time where you begin to think that Israel is making a change for the good, but as soon as you say "Simon and Garfunkel," they are back into their idolatry.

This reality is evidenced in an even greater way in the book of Hosea. God's prophet, Hosea, was to marry an unfaithful, promiscuous woman, Gomer. His union with her was to be a living representation of God's pursuit of faithless Israel. What we find in Hosea is that Hosea loved and pursued his prostitute wife in spite of her constant faithlessness in the same way that the Lord constantly pursued Israel in spite of her constant faithlessness and rejection of Him. God's final resolution in the book of Hosea is to plea with Israel to return to Him. If they do, he promises to "freely love them" (Hosea 14:4-9).

Only a God of infinite love would continue with such an obstinate people. If Israel were the people of any other God, they would have been rejected the moment they broke God's first commandment at Mt. Sinai even before Moses had time to intercede.

God has not changed in regard to his acceptance of a broken, repentant people. In essence, therefore, Malachi 3:6-7 is God leaving open the possibility and opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation. Here is the message of Malachi 3:6-7 in a nutshell: ***"If I were not a God infinite in mercy you would have been wiped off the face of the planet a long time ago. You have done nothing but break my law, profane my name, and disregard my word, and yet my relationship with you has been characterized by faithfulness, love, longsuffering, and patience."***

I really believe that God has given us the Old Testament history of His covenantal relationship with Israel so that we might have tangible evidence of how far our God is willing to go, and how patient He is willing to be. God shows through his pursuit of faithless Israel how he suspends and postpones judgment only until all avenues of repentance have been tried. He exhausts all options before coming in judgment.

So what does Malachi have in mind when he speaks of Yahweh not changing? He is speaking of God's unchanging heart toward Israel—God has not changed in his love and his offer of forgiveness and pardon. If they return to him, he will surely return to them. If they return to Him, He will refrain from judging them. He will pardon them, no matter what they have done.

God is putting the ball in their court; reminding them that their fate is in their own hands. He is not responsible for the coming judgment. He wants them to know that if they turn from their sins and live their lives in dependence upon him and his word that he will forgive them.

Theological Conclusions and Application

This verse, almost more than any other in the Bible, convinces me that God does not get his kicks out of judgment; rather, he gets his kicks out of bestowing mercy. Think about it; what sort of God do you want? Do you want a God who is all love, without a just bone in his body? Of course not! What would heaven be like if God were not just, if he was not committed to annihilating sin and those who unrepentantly commit that sin forever? Would you really want unrepentant Hitler, Hugo Chavez, Osama Bin Laden, and Charles Manson running around with you in glory? Of course not! The beauty of heaven is that there will be no sin, and thus no unrepentant sinners. Is this not what Jesus alludes to in Matthew 6:19-20?

19 "Don't collect for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But collect for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal.

Secondly, you do not want a God who is only just. You don't want an uncaring God, an uncompassionate God who is only concerned about exacting justice with no concern for the offender. If God were only just and righteous, and lacked in the area of love and grace, we would all be in the lake fire already. What we see, however, is that God is simultaneously infinitely just and loving. In Israel's case God's patient love caused Him not to wink at sin (he remained just), but to delay wrath. And why does he delay wrath? Because He hopes that the unrighteous and unrepentant will come to Him in repentance and faith. Although He is infinitely just he wants to give the unrepentant every opportunity to repent as possible? And why? Because he does not delight in the destruction of the wicked. See Ezekiel 33:11;

Tell them: As I live"—the declaration of the Lord GOD—"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked person should turn from his way and live. Repent, repent of your evil ways! Why will you die, house of Israel?"⁵

What we see is that although it is true to say that God is a God of judgment, we must ask the question, "How does God judge?" Consider the following three things regarding the judgment of God: He judges (1) without remorse or regret; (2) He judges fully, every sin accounted for; but (3) he judges with a broken heart. Have you ever asked yourself, "Why has God postponed the second coming for such a long period of time?" After all, it has been 2000 years since His ascension. You will find people with all sorts of answers to this question. Piper suggests that the answer is found in John 24, but it seems that one of the most pertinent reasons is one of the most forgotten about. Turn with me to 2 Peter 3:8-9, 15.

8 Dear friends, don't let this one thing escape you: with the Lord one day is like 1,000 years, and 1,000 years like one day. 9 The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

⁵ You find a very similar statement being made in Ezekiel 18:23, 30-32.

The reason God tarries is because of his gracious, kind, and patient character. It is his desire that “All come to repentance.” This may not fit very well into your 5 points of Calvinism, but it is Scripture. God has compassion even on those who refuse to come to him—even on his enemies. This is why in our evangelism we must plead with people to repent reminding them that “Today is the day of salvation.” The only reason the unconverted are not destroyed is because God has not changed in regard to his gracious, merciful, kind, and patient character.

God’s first reaction against sin is never to throw a whip—crack! His first reaction is to always suspend judgment in the hope that the sinner might repent. The Gospel call is not the clamoring and shouting of an angry, blood-thirsty, frustrated God; it is the wooing of a broken hearted God who delights in sharing his mercy and grace with sinners.

This is what we find in the book of Malachi; we see a God who has put up with a hard-hearted, stiff-necked people even at the height of their rebellion. We see a God who does everything he can to suspend judgment to give the unrepentant every chance to repent as possible. His purpose in suspending judgment and amassing opportunities is not to compound judgment, as some reformers would have you to believe, rather, his purpose in suspending judgment and amassing opportunities simply flows from his gracious character—he does so in hopes that Israel will repent. Is this not what Paul suggests in Romans 2:4?

Or do you despise the riches of His kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Ultimately, just as with Israel, our only hope is the unchanging gracious, loving, merciful, patient, and kind character of God. This is the sinner’s only hope. Are you running from God; have you come to Christ as your Lord and Savior? Your only hope is the unchanging character of God. Do not despise the riches of his kindness. Understand that his unchanging character means that if you come to him in brokenness and repentance and faith, he will receive you.

Conclusion

In closing I just want to ask one question, “How would Israel have fared if God’s mercy did not cause him to suspend his judgment?” How would Israel have fared if God was a merciless judge? They would have been destroyed. But God in his grace suspended His judgment, put it off for a time, to give Israel opportunities to return to Him. In regard to Christ: In Christ God did not necessarily suspend or put off his judgment to secure for us our salvation; rather he redirected it. The majority of the Israelites in the OT are in hell right now. Although God in his grace suspended his judgment for a time to grant them opportunities for repentance, the majority of them never repented of their sins, and thus they now bear the penalty of their sin. For those who have repented and believed, on the other hand, the judgment due their sin is not merely suspended for a time—a grace period if you will—rather, their sin is put away for ever.

Instead of pointing the penalty due us for our sin at us, he pointed it at Christ. In other words, Christ died for you and I as a substitute. This is the teaching of 1 John 2:1-2.

1 My little children, I am writing you these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the righteous One. 2 He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.

This is what the word propitiation refers to: it refers to the fact that Christ is our substitute. God redirected the penalty that was due us for our sin to Christ. Christ became our substitute. Sinner, God, in his mercy, suspends his judgment, that you might receive this awesome gift of salvation offered to you through His Son. He suspends judgment in order that you might have opportunity to have his judgment redirected to His Son. Take the opportunity to believe on the Lord Jesus while you have the chance, because although God is a patient God, granting opportunities for repentance by postponing his justice, his patience will run out, and if you don't have Christ, you will remain under his judgment bearing the full penalty of your sin. Heed the call of Isaiah.

Seek the LORD while He may be found; call to Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked one abandon his way, and the sinful one his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, so He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will freely forgive. (Isaiah 55:6-7)