

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

A Final We Can Stand

This time every year I start to hear how the college students are coming back or break beginning for the teachers and I begin reflect on that painful process of finals. I'm glad I don't have to go through that anymore. It wasn't the test that was painful but the hours involved trying to figure out which test needed to be studied for first, which class needed the most work, and which one I could sluff off, then which test came second and how I can cram my mind with every tiny tidbit of information that I would need for that test only to forget it and cram for the next one. Rarely, but occasionally, there was that one person, who would study the wrong thing. They arrived unprepared, terrified, sometime sobbing, petitioning for mercy as well as more time, while they crammed a semester of study into five minutes before the final. They were completely unprepared. Honestly if they did the work during the course, if they paid attention most of the time, they didn't have anything to worry about. Most students could score very very low and not worry about failing a course. But those who didn't do their work, didn't pay attention in class, wasted their time twice as they would have to retake the course.

Malachi doesn't want any of his people or us to find ourselves unprepared before something even greater than a final - our God. He asks the hard questions. He wants us to consider the question, "*Who can endure the day of his coming?*" There is only one. This one wants us to be prepared so that on that day we are at peace with God. So he sends multiple messengers to prepare the way and then he himself comes as a messenger to the covenant, not to point us to the way but to be the way so that you can enter that final day fully prepared and at peace with God.

It's been 100 years since their return to Babylon. These people have heard the stories of greatness. They've heard their elders speak about the wars won, the riches of Solomon, even the temple and the glory of the Lord that filled it. They returned to rubble and began to rebuild but it wasn't easy. Life is difficult. Times are tough. The people are questioning God. They are in the stages of moral decline. They began to question and doubt God's love for them. The spiritual resurgence

after the return is over and indifference is the new norm. They question, *“How have you loved us? How have we despised your name? How have we polluted you?”*

Never mind that God has chosen them to be his special people, carefully preserved and protected them in exile, and brought them back to the Promised Land for them to start over. No it's not enough that God would give them heaven and eternal life with him, they want God to come and give them the earth as well. They want all the comfort of life they think they deserve and that is what they desire. Malachi takes a dig at them, *“The one in whom you desire will come.”* He will come to purify and to purge.

He will come as a messenger, a refiner, a launderer. You've cried out for justice and you will get justice. You will get the punishment you deserve because God is tired of this. While they approach God with self-pity and pride as if they are innocent. Malachi asks, *“Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?”* “I come to purge, purify, and put you on trial. If you recognized how sinful you were, you would not ask for justice!” God sent Malachi to point out their sinful self-centeredness. He pointed out their sin of giving up and getting a divorce as soon as marriage got tough. He pointed out their sins of hoarding up their wealth and refusing to give it to God, or of giving God their left-overs, crippled and diseased animals as a sacrifice. And yet they want more. Their desire was demonstrated not by love and good works but through blemished sacrifices and expecting God to give them more and more - when they are oblivious to the fact that God owes them nothing.

Do we want God to come? We may be disillusioned with this world and long for the good old days when morality wasn't in decline and things were better financially. Every night we turn on the TV and wonder, “When is God going to come and deal with these sinful people?” We may even be tempted to think like Israel, *“God isn't dealing with me fairly. God doesn't love me. How have you loved us?”* Suddenly we too realize that God has given his one and only son, his most precious treasure and yet that's not enough for us because we often want more. We expect God to give us the world as well, health, wealth, and happiness.

In worship we long for what we can get out of it rather than what we can give to God and one another. Sometimes we even say, “I just didn't get anything out of worship today.” With the same self-pitying pride, we may call on the Lord to condemn and judge because the wicked are getting away with murder. But what about our sin? Are we so certain that we are ready to stand in the presence of God? We may not divorce but have our thoughts, words, and actions been what God expects between husband and wife? Have we given thanks to God for all that he does day after day? Have we given him the firstfruits of our time, talents, and treasures - or is he receiving the leftovers, the defect, blind and lame sacrifices?

Like Israel we may think that God is only going to come and condemn those people out there. We may accuse him of acting out of line with his love for us. We may even occasionally call into

question his love for us. Malachi prepares us too. He's coming. And we foolishly think that he's coming to deal with other people out there in the ether and not us. *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.* Who can stand? No one. We are sinners too, who cannot stand the judgement on our own.

God is unwilling to give up on Israel. He is also unwilling to condone their sin. God has to deal with sin. So he sends his messenger Malachi - whose name means messenger. Malachi, my messenger, speaks of another Messenger who will prepare the way for the Messenger of the Covenant. Confused yet?

John the Baptizer was the one who prepared the way for the Lord to come to his people. He prepared hearts and lives by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John pointed out sin and called out to those who thought they had no sin, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*" John prepared the way for the messenger who would come to his temple. Malachi tells the Christmas story. God comes down to us. Emmanuel, God with us, came among us to live and die for us. Jesus came to his temple and the glory of the Lord returned to Israel. This is the messenger Malachi equates with the Lord of Hosts. This messenger was the messenger of the covenant. But this Messenger of the covenant didn't just come to deliver a message, but to carry it out. Jesus would be a Messenger who wouldn't just prepare the way, he would be the way.

This messenger came not for some glorious job as king and ruler (not to be served but to serve) over them but as a refiner and a launderer. I doubt anyone has a blast furnace in their backyard but without one it is extremely difficult to come up with enough heat to melt aluminum (which is a modern metal which melts at a relatively low temperature). Getting fire to a temperature to melt copper and bronze was significantly harder as a refiner had to man the bellows, in an era without electricity, jumping from one foot to another. It takes a tremendous amount of work just to gather sufficient fuel, start a fire, stoke a fire and keep it going until the metal reaches temperature melts, and then there is still the work of skimming the dross, refiring, and pouring. It's dirty work. It's hard work. It's hot work. The fire is untouchable - it burns up everything. But rather than stand at a distance and set this world ablaze. God came in a personal way.

He rolled up his sleeves and grabbed a bar of soap and started scrubbing. This isn't any easier than the furnace. It's not just a matter of take it to the laundromat. This is so much more personal and close to home as he takes our dirty laundry even the most intimate of apparel and he scrubs. God describes himself with the occupations of both men and women and here we see a picture of the Messiah washing families clothes in a stream to make you clean and presentable before God. Scrubbed, beaten and boiled God is still at work.

God loves us enough to prepare us to stand on the Last Day, so that we might face that day with peace, not terror. That terror, that fire fell on his son. On the cross Jesus suffered all that we

deserve, for our unjust accusations, our selfishness. He was separated from his Father for us. That fire fell on him. He died for us and then rose from the dead to live and rule eternally.

If you wonder if God loves you – you have his response, “I have loved you.” If you still question, “How have you loved us?” God’s love has been there since the beginning. He still sends messengers to point us back to Jesus. In baptism he makes us clean. In Lord’s Supper he reassures us that the fire fell on him, it won’t consume us. He still sends messengers to proclaim, “You’re forgiven, fully, freely, for Christ’s sake.”

He saves us so that we might once again fulfill the purpose for which we were created, that is to receive the gifts of God with joy and thanksgiving, to love and serve God and be a blessing to one another. We certainly respond with our offerings but our thanks for what he has done isn’t limited to offerings. They are many and varied ways from helping parents, the elderly, doing the laundry or dishes. And even greater ways than these in preparing the way for the Lord for those around you. Malachi writes of the priesthood being purified, and they need to be purified not just because they are sinful, like all people, but so they can serve all people.

Jesus leads us through the painful purging process. He not only removes our sin by his death but he also removes all impurities from our life which threaten our faith. One day we’ll thank him for that. We can now to some degree. But we will do so perfectly on the Last Day.

So are you ready? Are you prepared? Finals may just be getting started for our students, for me their mostly finished... When we stand before God on that final day and face the Malachi’s question, “Who can stand?” We can. Because we know a guy. He not only stands but he provides a way for us to stand as well.