

Malachi: The Refiner's Fire

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Background

The name **Malachi** means “**My Messenger**” and he is the last prophet in the Book of the Twelve. By the end of this sermon, we will have gone through the entire Hebrew Bible together!

Our Christian faith teaches that John the Baptist, centuries after Malachi, ultimately fulfilled this Messenger role we're going to hear about—so Malachi is a nice tie in as we segue from the First Covenant (Old Testament) to the Second Covenant (New Testament). John the Baptist prepared the way for the long-awaited Messiah.

The book of Malachi is uniquely arranged around six Q & A sessions with God and his people.

The last two weeks, we saw how the prophets Haggai and Zechariah successfully inspired Israel to rebuild the temple and reinstitute sacrifices after nearly twenty years of an unfinished House of the Lord building project. Malachi's mission is to take the baton from these prophets and help God's people keep their faith real after their initial successes.

First generation believers are often passionate in their faith. The challenge for second generation believers is to own their own faith--keeping it authentic and fresh, not just an ill-fitting hand me down.

In Malachi we read that a polar vortex hit Israel's faith. The divine romance had grown cold. The people were giving God the cold shoulder.

- Israel was still subject to Persian rule.
- Locusts and drought ruined the crops.
- Families were crumbling.
- Religious services had become tedious and dull.
(You all of course know nothing about that sensation!)

...

Let's hear now how God used the prophetic voice of Malachi to blow the smoldering hopes and dreams of God's people into a burning flame once again.

Scripture: Malachi 3:1-8 (NRSV)

"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. 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; 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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

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.

For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. 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."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Malachi: The Refiner's Fire

- What do we always tell little ones to do before sitting at the dinner table? Wash your hands.
- What do the public restroom signs say employees must always do before leaving? Wash your hands.

There's good reason for it. In fact, let's speak to the hand about it—Henry the Hand!

However, Henry forgot to wash his hand and so he brought some other friends with him that he'd like to introduce you to:

- Haemophilus—He can cause pinkeye
- Streptococci—She'd be delighted to give you a sore throat
- Staphylococcus (not Snufflupogus) He'd love to give you a big zit or a boil
- And don't forget Shigella—she'll give you the runs

Just as there's bacteria that can make us physically ill or inconvenience us, Malachi reminds us there's spiritual bacteria all around.

But with God, cleanliness is next to godliness. God's heavenly soap can wash our spiritual shigella stains white as snow. In fact, God loves us so much, he not only washes us clean, he also purifies us and refines us.

A silversmith showed a new apprentice the basics of the art of refining silver. He talked as he held a piece of silver to the fire and heated it up.

"In refining silver, you've got to hold the silver right in the middle of the fire where the flames are the hottest so it can burn away all the impurities."

The understudy asked, "can you walk away while the silver's being refined, or do you have to stay with it the whole time?"

"You've got to be there the whole time. In fact you've also got to keep your eyes on the silver the entire time it's in the fire. If you leave it in too long—the metal can be destroyed."

"So when do you know the silver's fully refined?"

The artisan responded,

"I know it's fully refined when I can see my image in it."

Jesus is our Master Artisan and we're his precious metal that he refines. And he's always by our side. The Refiner's Fire doesn't destroy like a forest fire or entirely consume like an incinerator.

Jesus is in the refinery business—he baptizes us with fire and the Holy Spirit. The book of Hebrews tells us that our God is a consuming fire ([Hebrews 12:29](#)). And God uses the fiery trials and tribulations that inevitably come our way to cleanse us and purify us of selfishness, fear, and apathy.

God longs to see the image of Christ in us more clearly so that we might reflect God's glory more.

Even though it's so good for us, there's something inside us that wants to avoid a good scrubbing or evade the fiery trials of the refining process. In the long-term, we pay a price for neglecting God's divine upkeep and upgrades.

Spiritual [ennui](#) and apathy creep in. We become half-hearted and then we lose heart and become dis-heartened. Gradually our faith gets musty, crusty, and corroded.

Enter Malachi. We need Malachi when things are . . . well . . . [meeeeh](#).

Much of life is about the mundane. As one chipper person noted, "the days drag on and the years fly by." So one of the great challenges we human beings have is to find meaning and mission as we trudge our way through regular life.

Malachi helps us have a theology of the humdrum when we're feeling ho hum about life. Malachi's the guy you call when you feel like your faith is about as interesting or productive as twiddling your thumbs or filing your nails.

- Prepare ye the way of the Lord!
- God, I've lost my way. Whack away at the overgrowth!
- Make a way—a way for the way, the truth, and the life, O God!

We all need to allow the Spirit to repair our spiritual potholes. Straighten out our crooked paths. Remove the obstacles and roadblocks.

The good news is God forges a new spiritual path for us that's going to get us places. We can even enjoy the ride. Here are the directions for our spiritual scenic route:

- Show honor and respect to God. Revere and stand in awe of our holy God.
- Respect God by giving your best to God.

We read in Malachi that the people of Israel were giving God not their best or even their second-best—but their eighth-best. They were still nominally religious, but their sacrifices to God were sheep that were lame, maim, sick, stolen, or standing on their last hoof. Priest and people held back—and kept their best for themselves. Malachi doesn't mince words: they were robbing God.

We can do the same thing—giving God not our first-fruits, but our second, third, and tenth best. Or nothing. Malachi challenges us—“bring the full tithe into the storehouse. Put me to the test—see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

Step out in faith. Be generous. Give to God and others—don't hold back. Your faith will become more real because you've got more on the line. Malachi prods us further--pay attention. Lay it to heart. Take heed to yourself. Keep to God's ways. Walk with integrity. Return to God. Turn your hearts towards one another. Be fully devoted. You belong to God—body and soul.

When we really trust God and walk in his ways, we see that his covenant with us is a covenant of life and peace. Malachi reminds us—God is faithful. And he challenges us to be faithful. This is what God's covenant with us is all about—relational faithfulness.

Be faithful in marriage. Don't stray from the vows you made at the altar to your spouse and your God. Faithfully raise up a new generation that seeks the Lord. We have a calling and a responsibility—as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, mentors, father-figures, mother-figures, and teachers.

This doesn't happen by accident or by osmosis. We've got to pray for the children entrusted to our care. Engage with them about faith and life. Listen to them. Model the faith to them. Read Bible stories together. Serve others with them. Shield them from a lot of garbage that's out there. Challenge and inspire them to be involved in church. Be faithful in your speech. Faithful in your actions. Be faithful and honest in the workplace, employees. Employers—don't mistreat your employees. Be faithful towards the vulnerable.

Like all the other prophets, Malachi reminds us to be tender-hearted toward three groups of people: orphans, widows, and foreigners.

The truth is, it's not easy or natural to be faithful or loyal. We don't always keep faith. We need God's purifying and persevering power to carry on. Faith climbs onto Christ's broad and sturdy shoulders—trusting in God and not ourselves.

Malachi asks us, "Are you all in? Will you really trust God with everything?" Your comforts, your resources, your money, your relationships, your time, your very life? Faith is putting yourself out there. Not 50%, but 100%, 24-7-365.

Malachi concludes the prophets and the Hebrew Scriptures with this beautiful promise:

"For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."
([Malachi 4:2](#))

May the Messiah, the Son of Righteousness shine on you.

May he warm your heart and make you strong in your broken places.

May he purify you and make you, not only good as silver, but good as gold.

May he empower you to be the man, to be the woman, to be a perfectly imperfect person who has a heart for the Lord, for your family, for the church, for those in need, for the world.

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.