

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, 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 sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. 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 a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. (ESV)

In the name of our coming Savior, Jesus Christ, dear friends,

When you want someone to pay attention to something important, what do you do? You might yell out "*Pay attention!*" You mom's might have forcefully said that a time or two. You teachers have had to say that more than once. Or maybe it's "*Look!*" when you see something spectacular and want to share it with others nearby.

There was a time when God had something spectacular to share with his people, something he wanted to alert them to and have them pay attention to—and he said something just like that. Through the mouth and pen of his messenger, Malachi, he said "*Look at this!*" or with that kind of old-school word you see in the worship folder text this morning, "*Behold!*"

What was so important that instead of just saying it, God has to make a point of first saying, "*Pay special attention to this next part!*"? Well, you can't accuse God of being overly dramatic because it had been 300 years since the last prophecy that had some of this information AND it was about the most important thing his people—and the world—could ever hear!

It's kind of interesting—the word, or name, "Malachi" means "my messenger." And Malachi relayed God's news about *another* messenger who prepared the way for another Messenger! Although we want to consider all the messengers in this Word of God before us in Malachi chapter 3, the One we want to consider most is the Messenger of the Covenant because God really wants our attention when he has his prophet say,

BEHOLD, THE MESSENGER OF GOD'S COVENANT IS COMING!

As the LORD tells us about this messenger, he speaks of:

1. Preparation **2. Purification** and **3. a Promise**

1. Preparation

In Old Testament times God was always preparing his people. From the first promise to send a Savior way back in the Garden of Eden to the last promises through his last prophet Malachi, the LORD spoke to his people in order to prepare them for the Savior he would one day send. He wanted them to know, to remember, to put their hope in his promise that their sin would be paid for. And people were saved by trusting in God's promise of a Savior to come.

At Christmas time, we often consider prophecies of Isaiah, who lived about 700 years before Jesus was born. With remarkable detail, Isaiah records the words of God which speak of the Savior's birth, his life, his sufferings and his death. What was not remarkably detailed through Isaiah, was what he

said about John the Baptist. He's the only prophet other than Malachi who foretells the coming of John. But it's a little cryptic and you and I would be hard-pressed to put it together if we didn't have the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which explain that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Isaiah's words and that even John himself knew it.

At least through Malachi, God directly says **Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And (or 'then') the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.** God's plan was to have someone prepare the people in a different way than the prophets of the past. Like those prophets, he would share God's messages for the people. But for John, it was primarily this two-part message: 1) *"Repent!"* as he pointed at the people, and 2) *"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* as he pointed at Jesus.

So God tells his people about this messenger who would prepare the way, but after Malachi shares that message, God sends no prophet again until...until John the Baptist came! So for 400 years the people waited and shared the words of Malachi with their children and grandchildren so that they would be prepared. When God says

Behold, I send my messenger... behold, he is coming, it should have made them pay attention! It should have made them look for this "preparer" who would lead the way for the Savior.

You kids (and some adults) have a hard time waiting for Christmas to get here. It seems like it takes forever till we get to open presents. Just imagine waiting for the first Christmas to happen—for Jesus to be born as the world's Savior! Imagine waiting your whole life to see God's greatest gift to the world arrive...and having that day never come. For hundreds of years the people waited—but God's faithful people waited with great hope as they prepared to see the one who would clear the way and show them the Savior, the Messenger of the Covenant.

God had made a covenant with his people; he had made a promise to them. Though they had sinned and God could not tolerate that while they lived in this world and he WOULD NOT live with them eternally in that condition, he promised he would send a Savior to pay the price for sin. God's people trusted that promise so they were always preparing for that to happen, just like you and I are always preparing to meet Jesus when he returns on the Last Day.

Like those people who died and never saw that first Christmas in Bethlehem, it could happen that we die before Jesus comes again. But like them, we are always preparing because we'll either be alive when it happens or we'll end up seeing Jesus in heaven when we die. Either way, we want to be prepared! We prepare by being reminded of what God says about forgiving our sins in Jesus and trusting in that covenant, or promise, from God for our salvation.

2. Purification

Malachi called Jesus the "Messenger of the Covenant." He would be the messenger of God's love for all people. The forgiveness of the holy God to sinful people would come through this promised Messiah. God's people have always known their sin and understood that it separated them from the LORD and gave them no chance at living with in heaven eternally. And so the promise of forgiveness in the One he would send gave them hope. They waited anxiously for him to come. This is why God

talked like he did through Malachi: **And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming.**

People were looking for the promise to be fulfilled! They were delighted, joyful, as they thought about the Messenger of the Covenant coming! **“Behold!”** God says; **“he is coming!”** The Lord of hosts, or the Lord Almighty, gave one last emotional boost to his people through Malachi—a boost that would have to last 400 years, as it turns out. But it did! People clung to that promise and it prepared them for when John the Baptist showed up at God’s determined time and prepared the way for the Messenger of the Covenant, Jesus our Savior.

But God also said this: **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 sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.**

You and I like to celebrate the day of Jesus’ coming into this world, right? We even have this special time of the Church Year—Advent, which means “coming.” We have an Advent wreath which gives us a visual reminder of our waiting for his coming. And when Christmas Eve gets here...a special service with all the children to celebrate his coming as a little baby born on that holy night in Bethlehem.

But God’s prophet shared this message: **But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?** That sounds like it’s scary, like a person...well, it means that no one can endure it, no one can stand before him!

But that’s true, isn’t it? If the holy God comes down to earth, how can a sin-corrupted person survive being face-to-face with him? Don’t let the baby in the manger fool you! Cute and cuddly on the outside? Probably. But divine, holy, perfect, almighty on the inside! That’s true *God* in that manger too!

The arrival of Jesus as a baby—one who was born holy and grew up perfect in behavior and speech and thought, all according to God’s divine ideal and expectation—definitely reveals the difference between us and him and the need our sin causes. He wouldn’t have to do this if sin didn’t have to be conquered and righteousness restored to people.

The only way to survive God coming to earth is to undergo the PURIFICATION process that he brings. It is described as a refiner’s fire. Picture someone working with molten silver over intense heat and, after the impurities are melted away, peering in to see their reflection in the purified silver pool. Isn’t that just what Jesus does? He comes to rid us of all our impurities so that by his process of redemption—life, cross, empty tomb—he can look at us and see perfection reflecting back from us because he has made it so. By his grace, we are refined and perfected.

The other brief picture given is that of a cloth being cleansed of oils and dirt with a fuller’s soap—a launderer’s soap. That too, is simple for us to understand and we’re even used to talking in terms of being washed clean in the blood of Christ.

So the result of this cleaning or refining, this purification process, is this: those who are purified **will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.** We should not get too caught up in thinking simply about offerings like we usually think of offerings, although Malachi had to preach against the pitiful offerings and sacrifices of both priests and people at the time. But he really preached against the corrupt hearts that were behind those, the lack of love for God.

So, think of this—when we are made pure and holy by Jesus, all that we do for God, give to God in service and praise and gifts and prayers are then pleasing. They are pleasing not because of the number of hours spent or amounts given or anything like that. They are pleasing because it all comes from hearts made clean, washed in the blood of Christ. This is why Jesus was born into this world—to purify us, to make us holy. God's covenant with his people was that he would send One to do this.

The people of Malachi's time—and people for hundreds of years before and after him—trusted God to send that Savior. You and I are blessed to read in the Bible, and believe by the Holy Spirit, that God did that in Jesus, which is why we celebrate Christmas as we do.

3. Promise

But because we live when we do, we celebrate how Jesus came into the world to be our Savior AND we have a faith-filled, expectant waiting as we look for Jesus to come again. That promise of his return is all over in the pages of the New Testament so there is even a lot we know about things leading up to that Day and about what will happen when he comes and even a number of things about life in heaven *after* he comes.

The people of Malachi's time got a promise of that Day too. Follow God's message here through Malachi: The Messenger of the Covenant is coming...He will purify and cleanse his people so that they will be righteous...**Then I will draw near to you for judgment.**

Christ's birth into this world was a judgment upon the world's sin and a declaration that it needed a Savior. He certainly spoke words of judgment while in this world—think of the woman at the well or any of the religious groups he spoke to. But there is here a promise of judgment to come, a judgment that comes after righteousness has been given and many have put their hope in him. That will be the day of his return.

The quiet, humble, hardly-noticed birth of Jesus is very different from his loud, visible, glorious entry into the world on the Last Day! You can read here about his swift judgment upon those whose sinful hearts rejected him and who showed it by their willful, sinful lives. But those who put their hope in the Lord, who have been eagerly waiting for him to come again—they have no reason to fear him, says the Lord almighty. It's because he comes to bring them salvation.

BEHOLD, THE MESSENGER OF GOD'S COVENANT IS COMING! That's what the messenger Malachi reported from God in order to prepare the people's hearts to receive him. John the Baptist was the messenger who prepared people to see that Jesus was that Messenger of the Covenant. We also want to prepare our hearts, not just to celebrate the Savior's coming into the world as the Christ child, but for his return, because, **BEHOLD, THE MESSENGER OF GOD'S COVENANT IS COMING** again! That is a promise just as sure as the promise of his birth. Those who listened to Malachi and to John received the blessing of God in Jesus—the same is true of us today. So pay attention and trust the Lord and watch for Jesus to come. Amen.