

## **The Fire of God Malachi 2:17-3:7a**

### **Introduction**

Malachi (Heb., “my messenger/angel”) was a prophet to the Jews after their return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple. Malachi’s oracle contains a series of back-and-forths between God and His people in which Yahweh sets many charges particularly against the Levites, whose duty was to guard and tend the flock of Israel, teaching them God’s ordinances (e.g., Num. 1:53, Deut. 33:10). The book is chiastically structured, and at the center (2:10-16) Yahweh accuses the priests of spiritual harlotry (idolatry) and treachery (adultery) to their wives. In this next section, God says they weary Him with their words, as though desperately trying to provoke His wrath. He does not respond with a rash outburst, however. He does not change and has not forgotten His promises, and so He does not immediately consume this people that despises Him. He is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29), but He tells of One who will come to purify them.

### **Outline of the Text**

- A – Judah wearies God, questioning His justice (2:17)
  - B – Yahweh will draw near by sending His messengers (3:1)
    - C – The coming Lord will refine them so they may offer righteously (3:2-3)
    - C<sup>1</sup> – The offering will be pleasant once again (3:4)
  - B<sup>1</sup> – Yahweh will draw near in judgment against those who do not fear Him (3:5)
- A<sup>1</sup> – God does not change, but the people have abandoned His justice (3:6-7a)

### **God’s Justice (A, A<sup>1</sup>)**

The priests complain that God has forgotten His justice (2:17). Having returned from exile and rebuilt the Temple, these priests seem to have expected that God would prosper them and trample down all their enemies (e.g., Is. 41:8-13). But they look around and see the wicked doing well, ‘bad things happening to good people,’ and they accuse God of delighting in those who do evil. The irony here is thick because God has charged the priests with how they despise His name (1:6), defile the altar (1:7), lead astray His people (2:8), have committed idolatry (2:11) and adultery (2:14) and divorce (2:16). God has already told them that they are cursed because they will not take His words to heart (2:2). They do not keep God’s law and instead abuse others with it (2:9). They despise God and His ways in their heart and yet want Him to hold others to His standard. They question His justice and goodness. “They malignantly impeached God...they either charged God with injustice, or alleged that his divinity was annihilated” (Calvin). They exhibit the height of hypocrisy that harbors sin and lusts to see others punished for theirs. Yet, although the priests have been unfaithful, Yahweh does not change. Though God is wearied by their words, He is not provoked to a fiery and consuming judgment yet (3:6-7).

### **God Drawing Near (B, B<sup>1</sup>)**

They ask where He is, and He responds that He will send a Messenger to prepare the way for Him (3:1). This is John the Baptist, the great and final prophet before Jesus began His public ministry (Matt. 11:10-11). John preached a message of repentance, calling the people to turn from breaking covenant with God to prepare for the One who would come to

baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Is. 40:3, Matt. 3). The hypocritical priests demand God's attention, and if He gave the justice they asked for, they would be consumed in His wrath. Instead, He will send one to call the people to repentance. And then, He will send the Messenger of the covenant (3:1b). This is the One who will follow the first messenger that prepared the way. This is Jesus. This is the Lord of justice whom they seek. Or do they? After this Lord comes, Yahweh will draw near for judgment to be a swift witness against those who do not fear (worship) Him (3:5). The list that included here fits well with the accusations brought against the unfaithful priests, and with the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees in the first century (cf. Matt. 23). Where is the God of justice? He is patient and slow to anger, but He is a consuming fire.

### **The Refiner's Fire (C, C<sup>1</sup>)**

At the center of this passage is a description of the coming of this Lord and the effect of His coming. When He comes, who can endure it? Who can stand on his own righteousness before Him? He comes as a judge and as a refiner's fire, burning up the dross to leave the gold pure (cf. 1 Pet. 1:7). He comes like a very caustic soap that was forcefully worked into clothes to clean them (cf. Mark 9:2-3). His fiery cleansing does not destroy the sons of Levi, though. Instead, He purifies them so that they may offer righteously (v. 3). In fact, they will once again offer sacrifices that are pleasing to God (v. 4; cf. 1:10, 2:13). How is this accomplished? Paul tells us that Christ's sacrifice for us was "an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Eph. 5:2). And because of this, those who have been made alive in Christ are to imitate Him. Through the work of Jesus, we all are made into a holy priesthood offering "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). For those who are in Christ, the fire of God does not consume them, but rather refines them and makes them more fit for glory. When we abide in Christ and He in us, then we are like Daniel's three friends thrown into the fiery furnace but not consumed because God's Angel ("messenger") is with us (Dan. 3:25, 28). We are like the bush that Moses saw, where the Angel of Lord appeared to him as a fire burning in the bush, "but the bush was not consumed" (Ex. 3:2).

### **Conclusion**

The message of the Messengers that Malachi prophesied about was the message of Malachi's day, and it is still the message for you today. Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. This is certainly true for those who are not yet believers. Behold the Lamb of God. Repent and believe in the One who takes away the sins of the World, including yours. It is also the true message for you who believe. Our God is a consuming fire. If He judged you according to your own works, you could not stand before Him. And, if He has judged your sins in Christ's work on the cross, then you are consumed in Christ. You are refined by His fire. So what do you need to be refined in? What sins continue to cling to you, bind you, stumble you, pursue you? Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. This repentance and belief brings freedom and joy, freedom and joy that rest in the refining fire of Christ's love.