

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

## THE MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT COMES TO RESTORE RIGHTEOUSNESS

*Advent Lesson – Malachi 3*

<sup>1</sup>Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple! The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will surely come, says the LORD of Armies.

<sup>2</sup>But who can endure the day when he comes? Who will remain standing when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire, like launderers bleach! <sup>3</sup>He will be seated like a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and like silver. They will belong to the LORD and bring him an offering in righteousness.

<sup>4</sup>Judah and Jerusalem’s offerings will be pleasing to the LORD as they were in the days of old, in years long ago.



**Public Service Announcement:** Watch out for your Christmas tree. Check the cords and water the tree. According to the National Fire Protection Association, approximately one-tenth of one percent (0.12%) of residential fires involve a Christmas tree, both real and artificial. Thirty percent of Christmas tree fires were caused by electrical failures and malfunctions. One in every 31 Christmas tree fires is deadly. There is even a video of a Christmas tree going around that shows 30 seconds of a tree burning, from spark to ceiling parts falling. If you were caught in the average tree fire, you wouldn’t be able to endure the heat.

The coming of the Christ-child is actually quite similar. True God and true man, packaged for us at Christmas, is just as intense as a tree fire. You might say, surely this can’t be true. You may not imagine Christmas as something to endure. Egg nog and hot chocolate are drinks you enjoy, not endure. Tearing open Christmas presents is something you enjoy, not endure. Being with the family you love is something to enjoy, not to endure. This isn’t a holiday of suffering one another, is it?

Bear in mind, when the Old Testament discussed the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, it could get heated. When John the Baptist prepared the way, he was preparing for something to be endured. And we know that Christ is coming again, so here is your PSA: **Get ready for the coming of the Christ-child.**

## Who Can Endure The Day Of His Coming?

1. **Are you ready for Him to come?**

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and chronologically the last prophet to speak for the Lord. It makes sense to turn to his writing 400 years before the coming of the Christ, since he seems to get the last word in. He tells the people that, **For the first coming of Jesus, a messenger would prepare the way.** “Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me.” As the prophet who gets the last word, we learn that someone would break the silence of the prophets. That someone would be this “messenger.” The word for “my messenger” in Hebrew is *mal’akhiy*, a.k.a.,

Malachi. This “messenger” of God was later identified by Jesus Himself as John the Baptist. And throughout time, the echo of the prophet Malachi would resound on the mouth of John the Baptist.

The idea behind “prepare” is clearing the highway for a king. John the Baptist did this with a baptism of repentance. In his camel’s hair and with his locust-and-honey diet, John’s sermons in the wilderness brought listeners out in droves to hear. His preaching did the hard work of leveling and straightening the pathways of their hearts. But for what King was he leveling and straightening the pathways of their hearts?

**There would not just be one messenger, but also a second.** “*Then suddenly the Lord, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple! The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will surely come, says the LORD of Armies.*” Notice the incredible features that come with this second Messenger. He is the One in whom they “delight.” He is coming “suddenly.” He is coming to “His” own temple. He was identified with the name Yahweh, the covenant-keeping and caretaking Lord of free and faithful love. The second Messenger would be none other than “the Lord”!

**The second Messenger had appeared before.** He had come without human body as the Angel of the Lord. He told Samson’s parents His name was, “Wonderful,” using the same word as “Wonderful Counselor” we heard in Isaiah 9 this past Wednesday. Yes, He had been on the scene before. He encouraged the despairing Elijah in 1 Kings 19; He put to death the Assyrians in 2 Kings 19; He defended the Israelites from Pharaoh and His army in Exodus 14; and God said this second Messenger or Angel of the Lord would lead the Israelites into the Promised Land in Exodus 23.

So the people listening to Malachi 400 years before Jesus Christ were the descendants of those who were rescued mightily out of Egypt. Their fathers and grandfathers were the remnant returned from exile, an event unheard-of in ancient history. When the temple was rebuilt, some of these people to whom Malachi was prophesying may have been children.

Yet ... **The people continued to complain.** After all the Old Testament, the covenant people were not yet sincerely ready for Him to come. God had sent Malachi to burn their complaints like a tree fast catching fire.

Is Christmas going to be a time of complaining for you? When God blesses you with family, friends, food, presents, quality time, and His promises of the return of our King, are you going to populate the season of Christmas with complaints? I know I have. It’s unbelievable how our sinful nature drags us back into wanting things just our way, and if not, we gripe and whine. We think the weather couldn’t get colder, and it does. We think our presents might not be what we hope for, and they aren’t. We think things aren’t going to go well with that relative, and they don’t. As we complain, the more we blame our circumstances, the more we are really blaming God Himself.

What we are really proving is that we have not prepared our hearts for His coming, because our hearts are still polluted with sin.

Once there was a job offer for a telegrapher’s position. One young man entered the waiting room for the job, and he realized he wasn’t the only person there. As he looked around, there was an incessant beeping noise. He listened for a moment, then walked into the office door. Presently the employer walked out of the room, thanked the others, and stated that the position had been filled. The others grumbled and asked why they didn’t get a chance. The employer said, “The whole time you were here, the telegraph was sending out the message, ‘First man who understands this message, come in and the job is yours.’ I’m afraid you just weren’t prepared to listen for this free opportunity.”

What we hear next in our text is just what our hearts need to be prepared: “*For he will be like a refiner’s fire, like launderers bleach! He will be seated like a refiner and purifier of silver.*” We need refining in the fire, so that we can repent head to soul, and remove the roadblocks of sin in our hearts.

## 2. Do you trust Him to refine you?

This question likens us to a piece of metal with impurities. It likens the coming Messenger to a fire who smelts out and sweats out our impurities. As the impure metal is removed in the heat, the tool or weapon the blacksmith is crafting becomes purer and without fault. Through this process, the metal has substance, integrity, and value. There’s a difference between fool’s gold and pure gold. So there’s a difference between sleepy souls and prepared souls.

The people of Malachi challenged God with their complaints, and **something is lacking in the person who challenges God**. That person cannot meet God face-to-face. She has no purity and holiness to stand before Him. How could complaining, unholy people possibly stand before the almighty Lord of hosts? The answer is in the Lord Himself.

The Lord seeks to crush the human heart. He seeks to squeeze from it every hope that is not God’s own. He wants to strain away our sinful nature and remove our desires to complain. The unbelieving, untrusting attitude of Malachi’s time was to be refined, leaving only a pure trust found in the ones who would turn to God. The art of recognizing sin is the beginning of salvation.

**The Lord seeks to turn human hearts away from sin**. Anyone who stands before God does so only because they have been sanctified by God Himself. Jesus, that second Messenger, lived a life of purity, like a refined metal. He knew His time on earth had to heat up in order to maintain purity for us and for always. His time in the garden squeezed sweat from Him in drops of blood. His spirit slipped from His body in death on the cross, and it was all to cleanse you and me. “*The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*” (John 1:7-8).

When we know how much we’ve complained, and when our souls despair in our sin, the Lord’s cleansing continues. He cleanses His people with His promises of love and grace. All of our giving of gifts and decking of halls and balls of holly mean nothing if our hearts are not pure. We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment, but the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, and sanctified and kept us in the true Christian faith. He has not reversed our actions of sin, but He has begun **faith** in our hearts. **Faith saves. Faith** grasps the righteousness of God and stands before Him pure and holy. “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 8:1). As the earth melts with intense heat at the second Messenger’s coming, we are secure in His love and forgiveness.

Meanwhile, **many have chosen to be dressed in their own righteousness**. They have rejected the righteousness won by Christ, that is by faith from first to last, offered freely to all. They will be gathered like chaff to be burned in the fire.

**Yet God’s desire is not in the fire, but what comes after**. The word used for “offerings” here refers to thank offerings of grain. It was not a bloody sacrifice, meant to substitute for the sinner. It was portioned off to the fire and then given to the priests. Here the sacrifice shows that, when God’s people have been sanctified and purified by His Gospel, they joyfully offer Him their thanks for being wonderful and merciful.

In the early 700s, St. Boniface was a missionary to the Germanic tribes in Hesse. At those times, Germanic peoples worshiped oak trees, mainly the largest oak trees they could find. They would sacrifice to one particular tree sometimes called Thor’s Oak, and curse and cast spells and profane

the tree. St. Boniface decided the best thing was to fell this mighty tree that the unbelievers loved so much. They cursed him as he approached their tree for the first cut. But once he notched his axe in the tree (so the legend goes), a blast came from heaven and split it apart. The towering tree tumbled and apart equally into fourths with leaves shivering. Suddenly the Germanics discovered they believed in the God of St. Boniface, the true God. So they chopped up the wood and built a Christian chapel.

By removing impurities, and by retaining what was useful for God's purpose, He grows the faithful. Can you lose the Christmas complaints? Will you be prepared? Check your cords, and water the tree. I mean: check your connection with God and soak your faith in the water of life. May we endure the distractions and sorrows that come with this time of year. *With what Jesus Christ endured for us, may His day of coming be a day of enduring faith. Amen.*