

Malachi Then and Now  
God's Unchanging Love  
v. Preparing for the Great Day (Mal 2:17-3:5)

Malachi doesn't pull his punches. He tells the people of his day, "You have wearied the Lord with your words". Their warped concept of justice sees them accuse God of inconsistency at best, deceit at worst. Because they doubt the love of God, the Israelites resort to keeping up religious appearances, devoid of reality, simply going through the motions. They place God in the dock and ironically blame him for their present state of despair and futility. They refuse to accept responsibility and simply desire to save face, not unlike the role players involved in the explosion at Chernobyl nuclear power station in northern Ukraine in April 1986. It was the height of the cold war and the Soviets were determined to preserve their perceived scientific superiority over the West. However, cutting costs and high-handed authority led to the disaster that affected multiple thousands of innocent people. The recent docu-drama 'Chernobyl' depicts a brave Russian nuclear scientist hold the state accountable with his chilling words "Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later that debt is paid".

The desire to save face and evade responsibility was not just the preserve of the Soviet Central Committee in 1986. It was true of Malachi's day and it is true of our own. Indeed, it is as old of human history itself as the events of Genesis 3 so graphically illustrate. Confronted with their sin, Eve blamed the serpent, whilst Adam by implication blamed God. Like the people in Malachi's day Adam argued that it was God's fault, not the result of his own sin. As Martin Luther stated, Adam in effect said "You Lord have sinned!".

So, when the people demand justice, Malachi responds, what justice do you want, God's or your own. Perhaps you recall the film 'A Few Good Men', Tom Cruise plays the role of a Navy lawyer cross examining Marine Corp Colonel played by Jack Nicholson. Cruise wants Nicholson to admit that a Marine recruit died during initiation that went wrong. At the end of a lengthy and emotive interaction Cruise shouts at Nicholson. "I want the truth!", to which Nicholson explodes back "You can't handle the truth!"

This is our problem too. Like the Israelites of Malachi's day, we want justice but on our terms. But in truth, we ourselves cannot possibly handle the full implications of God's justice. So, Malachi responds, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiners fire or a launderer's soap" (v2). Trial by fire and trial by water seem polar opposites. However, they test everything, no matter what it is. A refiner's fire separates worthless dross from the molten precious metal like silver or gold. Whilst launderer's soap, harsh alkaline lye removes stubborn dirt and stains. We have "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa 53:6). Original sin is not some abstract idea confined to theological text books. It is the deep-seated reality that shapes and marks our lives and explains the state of the world today.

However, God does not leave us to wallow in our sin. Just as he sent the prophets in the Old Testament culminating in John the Baptist (v1), "the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple". At the outset of his ministry Jesus was baptised. Sinless in himself he identifies with the sin of his people and is washed as it were with launderer's soap. (Lk 3:21,22) And at the end of his ministry he undergoes a baptism of fire through crucifixion (Lk 12:49,50). Whatever God visits upon humanity he firsts visits upon himself. At the cross his perfect justice is satisfied and his perfect love demonstrated.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he read from Isaiah 61:1,2 in the synagogue at Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the lords favour" (Lk 4:18,19), whereupon he said "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). But notice he omitted v2 of Isaiah 61 viz "... and the day of vengeance of our God". This is truly amazing. Before God visits judgement he offers grace. He offers the gift of repentance and forgiveness of sins. As the angel said to Mary "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). There is only one answer to the problem of evil and justice, and it is found in Jesus. Whenever we celebrate the Lord's supper, we see God's answer: Jesus bruised for our transgressions, his blood poured out, so that "our sins red as scarlet might be white as snow". The wrath of God that we deserve was poured out fully on Jesus and "by his stripes we are healed". As the hymn rightly puts it "Hallelujah! What a Saviour!"

Alan Cameron  
Trinity, Lynnwood  
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