

It's Time to Return to God // Malachi 2:17-3:12

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- [0 : 0 0] from the book of Malachi chapter 2 verses 17 to chapter 3 verse 12.! You can find that on page 961 of the church Bibles.
- ! That's Malachi chapter 2 verse 17 on page 961 of the church Bibles. You have wearied the Lord with your words.
- How have we wearied him, you ask? By saying, all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord and he is pleased with them. Or, where is the God of justice?
- I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, says the Lord Almighty.
- But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.
- [1 : 0 7] He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness. And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.
- So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice.
- But do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty. I, the Lord, do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.
- Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.
- But you ask, how are we to return? Will a mere mortal rob God, yet you rob me? But you ask, how are we robbing you?
- [2 : 1 8] In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.
- Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will be not enough room to store it.
- I will prevent pests from devouring your crops and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.
- Amen. Excellent. Thanks, Robbie. It's so great to see you all here this evening. Please do keep your Bibles open at page 961.
- And let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to look at this portion of Scripture. Father, we thank you that you know and love each one of us here.
- [3 : 3 2] Thank you that you have a word for each one of us here this evening. And we pray that the Holy Spirit would speak your word very particularly into each of our hearts this evening.

For we ask in your precious Son, our Lord Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it's been a bit of a downward spiral in Malachi so far.

They have doubted God's love. They've brought roadkill sacrifices. They've tolerated corrupt ministry. They've been unfaithful in their marriages and relationships.

And now on top of all that, they're questioning God's goodness and justice and robbing him in their giving. And into that mess, that slow drift of their hearts, God speaks the central line of the book of Malachi in chapter 3, verse 7.

Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. Now that little sentence is a command.

[4 : 46] It's an invitation and it's a promise all rolled into one. It's a command to return. It's an invitation because the door has not been slammed shut. There's still time.

God still wants his people to come home to him. And it's a promise. I will return to you. No small prints.

No further hurdles to jump through. Israel has been turning back from God for generations. Yet God still says, turn back.

Come home. The relationship is still available for you to come home to. That's really what repentance is.

Returning. Turning away from a life where I sit on the throne and turning back to the God who made us, who loves us, who doesn't change, who still says, come home.

[5 : 49] It's not too late. Or maybe you're here this evening and you've been running from God for some time. Or maybe you've just been quietly drifting, perhaps even imperceptibly.

Maybe there's a particular area of your life where you've stopped listening to God and you know that you need to come back to him. You need to repent.

Well, the same invitation comes to each of us this evening to return to him. And insofar as there's anyone here tonight who's been doing the same as Israel, who's been ignoring God and his word, who's been living for myself and my will on the throne of my life, God says, stop running away.

Stop running away. Come back to me. It's not just the obvious prodigals that he's speaking to, not just those who feel very far away from God, but all of us here know the feeling of cooling off, of pushing God to the edges of our life, to pushing him to the margins of our life.

And into that, God still says, return to me and I will return to you. And in this passage that we've just read, God gives us two great reasons, two great motivations to take that invitation seriously.

[7 : 25] Two reasons why returning to him is both urgent and good. So the first reason is to return because the Lord is coming to purify and to judge.

And then secondly, we'll look at the need to return because the unchanging Lord loves to bless his people. So firstly then, return to the Lord who comes to purify and to judge.

Well, by now, if you've been following along in this series in Malachi, we know the pattern. God speaks and the people push back. So look at chapter two, verse 17.

You have wearied the Lord with your words. How have we wearied him? They ask. Well, here's how. By saying, all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord.

Or where is the God of justice? So these are the kind of questions that the people were asking a few hundred years before the birth of Jesus about God.

[8 : 29] In other words, God, if you're even out there at all, you're not doing your job. People were looking out across their cities and communities and workplaces and they were seeing wickedness prosper, seeing the world not as it should be.

And they concluded, where is God? Of course, that's not just an ancient question. It's strikingly contemporary.

It's what people still say today. Switch on the news. There's a war in Ukraine. There's dreadful fires we saw in Hong Kong. There's the Epstein scandal. Where is God?

You walk through the streets of Glasgow and there's all kinds of darkness. Under the surface. People still ask, where is the God of justice?

It's strikingly contemporary. Well, Stephen Fry once said in an interview, the atheist comic Stephen Fry once said, that if he ever met God, he'd demand, how dare you?

[9 : 39] How dare you create a world in which there's such misery that's not our fault? It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?

And Malachi says, God is weary of that kind of posture. God's not weary of genuine lament.

God's not weary of hearing his people cry out to him in pain and suffering, but weary of the kind of attitude that accuses him of injustice or not taking a second look at the human heart.

God is a little bit fed up with that, says Malachi. So what's God's response? Well, let me read the next bit.

I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking, the God that you're wondering if he even exists at all, will come to his temple.

[10 : 54] The messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, says the Lord Almighty. So the people are saying, where is God? And God says, I'm coming. You don't need to worry about that.

And in this promise, we meet two figures. The messenger who prepares the way, that's John the Baptist. He's the warm-up act and the Lord himself. And that's Jesus, God in the flesh, entering his temple.

That's what they looked forward to. And that's what we look back on 2,000 years ago and celebrate Christmas. But you know, we look around the world today and we still see a world of suffering, a world of injustice.

So what difference did Jesus' coming actually make? Now here it helps, I think, if we understand a little bit of how Old Testament prophecy sometimes works.

See, Malachi looks at the Lord's coming as one big event. But from where we stand, we see it's actually two.

[12 : 04] Now you can think about it like this. If you look at two mountain peaks head-on, they look like one big shape. But if you look at the same mountain peak, Sidon, you realize that there's a great big long valley in between them.

And Malachi is looking head-on. He's looking head-on. And from a distance, the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus appear merged.

But we live in the valley between them. The first coming, Jesus came to save and to purify his people. The second coming, Jesus will return to judge.

And traditionally, that's actually what Advent's been all about. That's what we prayed in our prayer of collect. Not just counting down to Christmas dinner and drinking mulled wine, but longing for Christ to come again and put the world right.

And that's also what we sang in the first song, Lo, he comes with clouds descending. An Advent hymn. Well, Malachi has both comings of Jesus in view at once.

[13 : 19] And now he asks the question we all need to hear. Then suddenly the Lord will come, but who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can stand when he appears? I think it reminds me a little bit of that famous courtroom scene in A Few Good Men.

Tom Cruise demands answers. I want the truth. And Colonel Jessup, Jack Nicholson's character, fires back, you can't handle the truth. Well, that's Malachi's point.

People cry, where's God? Why isn't he sorting the world out? And God says, you have no idea what you're asking for.

Because when the God of justice shows up, he doesn't begin with other people. He begins with his own house, with his own people, with the very hearts that are demanding justice.

[14 : 20] You know, the irony is that the people think that the problem is that God hasn't showed up. But the real problem will be when he does.

And they should be very careful what they wish for, because the problem of evil doesn't just lie out there. It lies much closer to home.

So what does this coming look like? Well, it's not just a cosmetic makeover, but it's a purification from within.

Now, every year growing up, I got the same thing in my Christmas stocking, a bar of imperial leather soap. It wasn't the only thing in my stocking.

It wasn't quite the days of a lump of coal and an orange or things like that, but every year I got a bar of imperial soap. And then, later on, when the stocking stopped, I started to get a four-pack, a four-pack of soap, I should add.

[15 : 22] And maybe my mum was trying to tell me something, I'm not quite sure, but I've never particularly liked imperial leather soap. I hope she's not listening.

I think what must have happened is something like this. She must have asked me at some point in my childhood, what kind of soap do I like? And I had no idea what they were called, but I think I probably tried to describe a classic British soap that's kind of orangey-colored.

I meant pears, I think. She heard imperial leather, and so for decades, that's what I got, still do. Turns out the kind of soap matters. Certainly it does in Malachi.

Malachi, launderer's soap, in verse 2, is not pH-neutral dove, it's not Johnson's baby shampoo, it's Fuller's soap, the ancient world's industrial detergent, it's a kind of highly caustic, alkaline, and abrasive kind of thing, it's kind of substance that strips grease out of wool and bleaches cloth white.

And it's a similar thing with Malachi's other image, the refiner's fire, to refine precious metal, to separate the pure gold, the real gold, from the dross. You need white hot heat to separate out the impurities.

[16 : 41] And I know that some of us can relate to those images in your own personal experiences this past, because you know that it is not always easy.

It's not always a comfortable experience. Here's a meme I saw this week, a bubble bath with a Bible verse about purification.

But some of you know only too well that following Jesus hasn't always felt like a gentle bubble bath. It felt more like an abrasive scouring, like walking through deep disappointment, long seasons of unanswered prayer, long seasons of wondering whether God is doing anything at all in a particular area of your life.

And Malachi wants you to know that those painful places are not proof that God has abandoned you. Very often they're the very places that God is most at work in your life, refining and purifying you.

The New Testament picks this up again and again. In 1 Peter chapter 1, Peter says our faith is refined by various trials.

[18 : 02] So that it comes out genuine, more precious than gold. Paul says in his letter to Titus that Jesus gave himself to redeem us and to purify for himself a people.

Purification isn't punishment. It's proof that you belong to God. The Lord who comes with the soap and the fire doesn't come to destroy you but to cleanse what sin has stained, to burn away that which spoils you, to reflect more of his beauty as you go through that process.

That's purification, what Jesus did at his first coming. But then comes verse 5, judgment. And a sample list of sins is given.

See up on the slide there, seven categories of evil, sins against God, sins against each other. It's not an exhaustive list but it's representative.

The point is Jesus will return to put right everything that is wrong with the world. There's a comprehensiveness to it. But that includes all that is wrong with us.

[19 : 20] See the second coming, the coming judgment is not simply a problem for other people, it's a problem for you and for me.

Unless that judgment has already fallen on Jesus. That's the whole point of the first Christmas.

Jesus took the fire of judgment, took the fire of God's wrath so that we could become gold in the fires of purification.

The whole point of the second Christmas is that Jesus will return to finish a job and rid the world of all the injustices, all the suffering, all that's wrong, all that's bad, all that's sad, all the darkness.

We get a glimpse in the Gospels of what that fiery justice will look like when Jesus walked into the temple and cleansed it, exposing the religious hypocrisy, overturning corruption, overturning the tables in the temple.

[20 : 32] So the question that Malachi confronts us with isn't simply where is God, he is coming. The question he confronts us with is are you ready for when he returns?

And the answer is found in God's invitation. Return to me and I will return to you. God's invitation to return to him is grounded in his character.

Look at verse 6. God is saying I am faithful.

I haven't budged an inch. I have not moved. My promises still stand. You are the ones who have changed. You are the ones who have drifted for generations ignoring my word and yet astonishingly the door is still open.

There's still a window of opportunity. Return to me and I will return to you. No conditions, no small print, just the loving heart of a father running towards his prodigal child, running towards his wayward child with open arms.

[22 : 19] But the people respond with a shrug. How are we to return? They think they're doing just fine. And so God gets concrete.

Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, how are we robbing you? In tithes and offerings. Tithing, giving 10% of whatever you'd gained in a given year, was Israel's way of acknowledging that everything they had came from God.

It was a practical way that God's people expressed their complete dependence on him, a tangible reminder that everything belongs to God. But they drifted and their wallets told the truth.

You can hear the inner dialogue, can't you? This is our hard-earned income. We'll give God whatever we want, whenever we want. 5% maybe.

2%. 10% seems like far too much. God says, that attitude is robbing me.

[23 : 34] Because you know, money is more than just money. It's always a little bit of a spiritual litmus test. It's always a bit of a kind of spiritual diagnostic of where our hearts are at.

God's basically saying to these people in Malachi's time, you're withholding, shows me your heart. You're holding back from me because you don't trust me.

And so the whole nation is under a curse because of it. let's take a moment just to think about your own heart.

Think about the state of your own heart. Do you cling to that which is really belonging to God?

Or do you trust him with your time, your gifts, your money, your energy? The principle is simple.

[24 : 39] If I believe that everything I have belongs to me, then I'll be reluctant to give it. But if I believe that everything I have, including the money in my pocket, including the money in my bank, belongs to God, then I'll be free to give from what belongs to him.

I'm free to give it away on God's behalf. We often hold back because we fear that God doesn't really have our best interests at heart.

But the opposite is true. God isn't stingy. He's not a miser. Far from it. Just look at what God promises in verse 10.

It's extraordinary. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

If only they would give back to God a fraction of what was not theirs in the first place, God would respond with everything he has. Picture a dam holding back a huge lake.

[25 : 58] Now imagine that the sluice gates slowly crank open and a torrent of water crashes down the valley. That's God's generosity overflowing, disproportionate, unstoppable, a monsoon of blessing.

For Israel, when they return to God, that blessing often showed up materially. It's tied to the harvest, tied to the land.

for us today, that's not quite how it works. If I'm looking for evidence of God's blessing in my life, I don't go out into my garden and check the status of my vegetable patch.

And if I'm honest, the Middleton garden this year would have sent mixed messages to me. The apple tree produced fruit, the plum tree didn't.

The courgettes were entirely eaten by slugs, and the rhubarb scorched by the sun. If I measured blessing by that, I'd be more than a little bit worried.

[27 : 04] But the principle, however, hasn't changed. If you return to God wholeheartedly, if you return to God, you meet a God who runs towards you with blessing.

The greatest blessing of all is not what we get from God, it's God himself. The New Testament reminds us, if you come to God and Jesus, if this evening you believe in Jesus, you are already blessed beyond all measure.

In Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. And in Christ, the curse of sin has been removed. Galatians tells us, Christ became a curse on the cross for us so that we might know God's blessing.

And in Acts, Luke gives us a very vivid picture of God's blessing in action. As a group of believers devoted to God met and gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem, praying without ceasing, returning to God.

Then on the day of Pentecost, something incredible happens. the windows of heaven are opened up, the flood gates are opened, and the Holy Spirit poured down, filling the room, filling the people there, spilling out to the nations.

[28 : 33] God's blessing, once promised now floods the world. And the harvest transforms the world today. The harvest continues today. It transforms hearts throughout the world.

tithing pointed forward to Jesus, the one who became a curse for us. It lifted the curse so that we would never face God's judgment if we're trusting in Jesus.

So as Christians, we're not commanded to tithe, but our hearts should overflow with generosity nevertheless in response to the gospel.

Some of the medieval monasteries got the idea. They thought that 10% was far too low. Instead of giving back 10%, some of them gave 90% of their income and lived simply on the rest.

In our own time, Chuck Feeney built a huge fortune as a Christian businessman, but he decided he didn't want to die rich. And quietly over decades, he gave it all away, living in a small rented apartment.

[30 : 01] And by the time he died in 2023, his wealth for \$8 billion of it had been given away. Because once you realize God owns the lake, you're not going to be panicking about pouring out a bucket of it.

Or maybe you're here and you're thinking, well, I'm not a billionaire philanthropist, I'm just a student, I don't have much to give. Well, you'd be surprised.

How much is a cup of coffee? How much is a pint of beer, a glass of wine? What if money for one or two of those things each week was given towards kingdom work?

Fifty, a hundred of us doing that. You do the maths. It multiplies, it counts. And it's not just about the amount.

It's about our trust. Jesus said, store up treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

[31 : 19] So we don't give reluctantly, we don't give out of a sense of compulsion, we don't give to earn God's favor.

We give in response to what Christ has already done for us. We give generously, knowing that God will use it to advance his kingdom for his eternal purposes.

Well, let me close with a story that brings Malachi's point right home. Randy Alcorn tells the story of visiting a missionary graveyard down a dusty alley in Cairo.

One of the headstones! read this William Whiting Borden 1887 to 1913. Borden was heir to a vast fortune, he was a graduate of Yale and Princeton, he was young, gifted and promising, he could have lived a life of real luxury.

Instead, he gave away his wealth to take the gospel to the Muslim world. He refused comfort. He refused a life of ease.

[32 : 37] And four months into the mission field, tragically, he died of meningitis, aged just 25 years old. Alcorn was struck by the epitaph at the bottom of the stone.

Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life apart from faith in Christ.

Well, next, Alcorn was taken by his hosts to the Egyptian National Museum, his rooms full of the treasures of King Tut, gold chariots, gold thrones, gold, everything, unimaginable wealth in these rooms, and the contrast hit him.

A boy king who died at 17 surrounded by gold glittering for all the world to see. And a young man buried in a humble grave, quietly buried, who gave it all away for Christ.

Only one of those men has treasure today. King Tut left it behind. Borden sent his ahead.

[33 : 54] And as another missionary famously said, he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. One day we will stand in heaven and ask ourselves, how did we steward our resources?

What did we do with our time, our money, our lives? Did we invest it in that which lasts forever? Or fritter it away in passing things?

Robbing God, we only rob ourselves. Remember the spiral we started with, doubt, drifting, wearying God with our attitudes.

Malachi's answer, return. Return to the unchanging God. Return to Jesus who will one day return himself to bring justice. return to the God who delights in blessing, who runs towards you with open arms.

Return to him. Return in faith with your life, your heart, your wallet, your time. The question isn't, where is God? The question is, will you return to him today?

[35 : 11] Because when you do, you can be sure of this, he will return to you. Let's pray. Father, we thank you and praise you for the invitation to return to you.

Thank you for the promise that you are there waiting with open arms. Thank you for the Lord Jesus for taking the curse that we deserve, that we might be blessed instead.

Thank you that you are forming a people for yourself here at St. Silas. May the Holy Spirit refine and purify us from within that we might better reflect the radiant glory of our Lord and Savior, the Lord Jesus.

And Lord God, we pray that if there are any of us here this evening who have been running away from you or drifting from you, would you draw them back into your embrace.

Lord, if there are any among us who are yet to put their trust in the Lord Jesus, would you move them to do so? Would you move them to see their need of a Savior while there's still that window of opportunity?

[36 : 28] And Lord God, would you once again open the floodgates of heaven and pour out the Holy Spirit on this land and this people in our city of Glasgow who've turned from you.

Bring home a harvest. Bring home a harvest of souls for the glory of the Lord Jesus, in whose precious name we pray. Amen. We're going to respond now to God's word we're sung, and please stand if you're able and join in that.

Over to Tito and the band.