

To God Alone Be The Glory

Imagine you are outside. It's a clear night: no clouds, and the moon is not shining. You're out in the country where there's no city lights; so the stars really stand out. You can even see the ribbon of the milky way. I have a question for you: which stars are closer and which ones are farther away? Can you tell? I doubt it. They are too far away.

'Looking at the stars and wondering which are closer' helps us understand what it was like for the prophets to look into the darkness of the future. The Lord revealed to the prophets little points of light from the future. They understood that many events were out there in the future, but which ones were nearer and which ones were further in the future? They couldn't tell. All the prophecies together looked to them like a single canopy of stars.

Now consider today's Old Testament lesson. To Malachi his message probably looked like a canopy of stars at night. But for us with 2400 years of history to look back on since then, with careful study, and with the Holy Spirit's help, we can understand what is written here and learn something useful for our daily walk with the Lord.

At the end of Malachi chapter two, the people accuse God of being unjust. One of Malachi's tasks from the Lord is to correct them. Malachi's writing style is to speak both halves of a conversation between the Lord and the people. "*You have wearied the LORD with your words,*" the prophet

asserts. *'How have we wearied him?'* you ask. By saying, *'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD,'* or *'Where is the God of justice?'*" (2:17). People say things like this today. "If God is good, then why do children and poor people suffer, while those with something to share are allowed to get away with doing nothing to help them?" People might as well say what they mean: "God is sinning by not fixing all these problems." So you see, in this ever-changing world in which we're living, nothing has really changed. And God, who never sins or gets tired, reveals that these accusations actually weary him. "Where is God when you need him?! He ought to come down here right now and end all the social injustices and government inconsistencies, and right all the wrongs, and really clean house!" Okay then, you're going to get just what you've asked for. Malachi reveals: **THE LORD COMES TO CLEAN HOUSE.**

We Need It (1-2)] The Lord says through Malachi: *¹See, 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.* "Alright! God is coming to clean house! He's going to 'git' all them peoples who thumb their nose at him. He's gonna git the drug dealers and their cartels, the pimps, the politicians (but just the corrupt ones), the lawyers (but only the ones that keep criminals from gettin' justice), the journalists (but just the ones that push one side of the story), doctors who don't

protect babies in the womb, the conspiracy theorists, and all the people who twist God's gifts of sex and marriage into things God never intended. Sick 'em, God!"

Now how did we manage to assemble a list of sinners that long and leave ourselves off the list? Our list is a lie if it doesn't include us. We better add gluttony or the vanity that keeps us from eating too much. How about all the times we get itchy to finish church, or itchy to finish reading our Bible chapters for the day, or when we don't find even one hour out of the 168 that we get every week to watch a whole worship video without letting ourselves get distracted? We should also add 'getting angry too quick,' and the words and the sighs and the eye rolls that tear down instead of build up. If you still think you're not on this sinners' list, Malachi asks, ^{2a}*But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"* God is holy. Even one little sin is one step too far over the line for God (see Romans 3). After realizing we all need the Lord to come and clean house inside us, "the Lord coming to clean house" doesn't sound like good news anymore. *Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?* Malachi seems to have Jesus' second coming in mind here, as if Malachi was able to identify the most distant star up in the canopy of prophecy.

But all of a sudden Malachi switches timeframes, and if you're reading along too fast, you fail to notice that he's now looking at a much closer star, one that's only 400 years away from Malachi, Jesus' first coming. Malachi says about Jesus, ^{2b}*He*

will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. In other words, the Lord [**He**] **Has the Right Tools** (1-3). And that's good news for us!

It would still be bad news if a refiner's fire could burn up the rocks completely so that none of the precious metals in the rocks were left. But a refiner's fire is intended to burn off only the impurities so that pure silver and gold is left (v 3). The refiner does not want his fire so hot that it vaporizes the gold, but just hot enough to separate the precious metals from their dross. See how this works in real life? Now that the Lord has washed you clean by his first coming when he died on the cross in your place, he wants to purify you, as if you are silver and gold. When the Lord turns the heat up on you by illness or accident or combat or 'trouble with people' or 'the death of your loved one,' don't charge him with wrongdoing. Don't fret and worry that his hand might slip and spill you out of the refiner's cauldron into the fire. You are precious metal to him, and he's using his refiner's fire to make you more pure. In other words, rejoice when you have it tough. And not just in your personal life. Think of some of the challenges we are facing as a church. The Lord is refining us in the fires of these troubles, cooking the impurities out of us so that more and more of us will focus on spreading the gospel. And don't worry. If as a church, collectively, we don't make our Lord and his Word the highest priority in our life, God knows just how to turn up the heat and send us harder challenges. So when you pray, tell the Lord how much you love him because now you understand what

he's doing to you by putting you through the heat. And agree with him that he is not unjust when he lets his people suffer. He's got the right tools to clean house in us. And he's using the tools for our benefit.

His second tool is the launderer's soap. Yes, sometimes it feels that the Lord has thrown us into a big ol' Maytag, set the dials to run at full load, and poured in the Tide. Maybe he even put a little pre-treat on us where the stains are especially stubborn. Of course, in Malachi's day, they didn't have Maytags. They had stones, and they balled up the garments and scrubbed it on the stones, bent the clothing anyway they liked so that it was doing the will of the cleaners. And the soap they used was generally more caustic than we have today because they didn't always mix the right amounts of lye and animal fat. So the soap tended to burn a little. But, oh, were the garments fresh when they got done. And when God is done laundering us in Jesus' blood, look what he has: a clean new you, one who can stand in his presence! One whom he has made more holy, just as he is completely holy!

But why should we expect anything other than blessings from our God? We have a clue in the first verse of this sermon text that the Lord's coming is going to be good. He is called "*the messenger of the covenant.*" The Lord didn't even have to make a covenant with us; he was under no obligation. The world likes to assert that

God owes people something good because every once in a while they have a good intention, but the Bible teaches the opposite. What's amazing is that God chose to make a covenant with any of us. God's first covenant he made with Israel. It was a two-sided covenant. But that covenant didn't hold because the people couldn't hold up their end of the bargain. So God promised to make a new covenant, one where he would be the only one with an end to hold up—one where he would simply forgive our sins for the sake of his servant, our Messiah. And what's so cool is that the Son of God, through whom God would accomplish this new covenant, got to come to earth himself and be the messenger of the new covenant. He got to tell everyone about what he was going to do for them. No wonder Christians like Christmas so much! Christmas is when we celebrate the birth of the messenger of the covenant.

We'll be able to celebrate Christ's birth with great joy this year because **It's Great to be Clean** (1,3,4). Sometimes I wonder if I communicate the joy of living in forgiveness clearly enough or often enough. Some of you, of course, had it figured out long ago because the Holy Spirit matured you in this way. But every preacher wants to know: "How can I be useful in helping everyone grasp the joy of living in Christ's forgiveness?" Here's the challenge. Your pastors have always wanted to proclaim the good news that you are forgiven through faith in Jesus. But your pastors have known that people

feel good about forgiveness only to the degree they recognize how much they've been forgiven, how bad the sins are that they've been forgiven of. So the preacher has to preach the law, deliver the bad news. It's not fun to rough up the sinful flesh of people you love. But a sound preacher understands that when the sinful flesh is exposed and no longer brazen, when it can feel the fires of hell licking at the feet, that's when the love of God comforts. That's when we sense the depth of God's desire to bless us and bring us happiness. That's when the idea of being in God's presence seems like the awesome privilege it is. It's fun to watch the Holy Spirit use his launderer's soap on us, the blood of Christ. Right before our very eyes the stains of sin disappear, and we see ourselves the way God sees us, as his clean, precious children.

Every week I want so much for you to leave this place saying, **it's great to be clean!** because then you're more likely to go home and live like the Levites which Malachi talks about in the text: *The Lord 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* (3b-4). Malachi isn't talking about just the offerings you put into the plate or send in electronically: this is much bigger than that. He is talking about noticing all the good things God pours out into your life, and your giving thanks throughout the

day for them. He is talking about the prayers of thanks you offer the Lord all week long, before meals and afterwards, and when you lie down at the end of the day, when you rise, when you're driving down the road or sitting quietly. Your prayer-offerings are acceptable to the Lord because of Jesus.

Living in joy. That's what we're talking about when we say, **"It's great to be clean!"** The Lord wants you to be able to wake up each morning thinking, "I may not make it through today without sinning, but I sure am going to try, because I know I'm already forgiven—no matter how badly I mess up—thank you, Jesus—I'm forgiven." Although that may sound like an invitation to become lazy in our repentance, it's really an invitation to become more vigorous in our pursuit of a completely God-pleasing lifestyle.

The Lord is coming to clean house. And that's good because our heart needs a house cleaning—we get so dirty with sin. But because it's not the Last Day yet, the Lord comes to us in gentleness, and he has the right tools to get the job done. And it's a good thing because he deals with us believers according to his mercy instead of according his justice. **It's great to be clean,** Lord! Thanks for coming to clean house.