

# Return To A Just God

Malachi 3:1-10

SS Lesson for 08/30/2015

**Devotional Scripture:** Deut 30:1-11

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# Introduction

## Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson shows us reasons God requests that we should **Return to a Just God**. The **study's aim** is to realize that God's presence with us will help us purify our lives and seek Him. The **study's application** is to make ourselves aware of God's presence and power daily for godly living and witness.

*(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)*

### Key Verse: Mal 3:7

*Yet from the days of your fathers You have gone away from My ordinances And have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," Says the Lord of hosts. "But you said, 'In what way shall we return?'*

### Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Malachi directed the attention of the faithless and hopeless questioners (2:17) to the future. Though some have taken My messenger as the writer of this book or as an angel, it seems best to see him as a future prophet. Jesus explicitly identified this person as John the Baptist (Matt. 11:7-10). The fact that this messenger will prepare His way harmonizes with Isaiah 40:3 (cf. John 1:23). The coming of this messenger was to be the first of a twofold eschatological event. The second step would be the coming of the Lord in His day.

After the preparation by God's messenger, **suddenly the LORD... will come to His temple**. The coming of the Lord in His day is a much-discussed theme among the prophets. Zechariah said He will come to Zion and dwell there (Zech. 8:3). Ezekiel predicted the return of the glory of God to the temple (Ezek. 43:1-5). Malachi's two preceding oracles identified serious problems in the practice of temple worship, so the coming of the Lord to His temple would answer the questions about His justice (Mal. 2:17) and would have an ominous significance for the priests. The title **the messenger of the covenant** occurs only here in the Bible. This individual is not the same as "My messenger" in 3:1, for the messenger of the covenant comes *after* the earlier messenger. Most likely the messenger here should be identified with **the LORD** Himself. The word "messenger" can be translated "angel," and the Angel of the Lord, a manifestation of God Himself, had been quite active in Israel's earlier history (cf. Gen. 16:10; 22:15-18; Ex. 3:2; 33:14 with Isa. 63:9; and Judges 13:21-22). The parallel phrases, **the LORD you are seeking** and **whom you desire**, reflect the general expectation of the Lord's coming, as predicted by many other prophets. But these phrases also carry a note of sarcasm. That Israel's hope was superficial was indicated by her question (Mal. 2:17). However, though their hope was superficial, He **will come**. The day of the Lord will be a day of judgment on the whole world, a day of disaster and death (Isa. 2:12; Joel 3:11-16; Amos 5:18-21; Zech 1:14-18). Later Malachi spoke of this day as coming like fire to burn up the wicked (Mal. 4:1). So the answer to both questions, **Who can endure the day of His coming?** and **Who can stand when He appears?** is that none of the wicked will endure. The Lord's coming will **purify** Israel by purging out the wicked. Often the prophets spoke of the day of the Lord in connection with the judgment that would be poured on the nations and would effect Israel's deliverance (see comments under "Major Interpretive Problems" in the *Introduction* to Joel; and cf. Zech. 14). Malachi, however, made no mention of the other nations. He concentrated on this day as a time of judgment on Israel and especially on the Levites, her leaders and teachers. The figures of **a refiner's fire** (that burned out the dross from metal ores) and **launderer's soap** emphasize the effectiveness of God's spiritual purging of the nation (cf. Isa. 1:25; Jer. 6:29-30; Ezek. 22:17-22). The result would be a pure class of **Levites**. Refined **like gold and silver**, they **will bring offerings in righteousness... as in days gone by**. This will contrast with Israel's unacceptable offerings of which Malachi wrote (Mal. 2:12-13). Following the return of **the LORD** and the judgment of Israel, **offerings** will be sacrificed in the kingdom (cf. Isa. 56:7; 66:20-23; Jer. 33:18; Ezek. 40:38-43; 43:13-27; Zech. 14:16-21). The judgment of Israel will not be limited to Levites; it will include the whole

nation (cf. Ezek. 20:34-38). God **will come near Israel for judgment**. He will purge the nation of those who are involved in sorcery (cf. Micah 5:12), adultery, perjury, depriving workers **of their wages**, oppressing **widows** and orphans, and mistreating **aliens**—all those who **do not fear Him**. All these crimes were prohibited in the Mosaic Law. God’s removing these sinners from Israel will be His answer to the nation’s question about His justice (Mal. 2:17). But will this judgment bring about the end of Israel? Will the people be consumed by the refiner’s fire? No, for as other prophets had predicted, Malachi stated that Israel will be delivered in the day of **the LORD**. The **descendants of Jacob will not be destroyed**. This is because of God’s covenant promise. A promise is only as good as the person who makes it. God will keep His promise to the nation of Israel—it will **not change**—because His Word, like Himself, is immutable. This is the basis for Israel’s hope (cf. Deut. 4:31; Ezek. 36:22-32). Significantly the Apostle Paul gives the same reason for expecting a future for national Israel (Rom. 3:3-4; 9:6; 11:1-5, 25-29).

Malachi’s fifth oracle begins with a blanket condemnation of Israel’s disobedience to God’s **decrees** throughout her history. (This contrasts with the positive note of God’s unchanging faithfulness which concluded the preceding oracle, v. 6.) This calls to mind God’s comments about Israel’s stubbornness at Sinai (Ex. 32:7-9), which Moses repeated before the nation entered Canaan (Deut. 9:6-8, 13, 23-24; 31:27-29). Certainly the history of Israel from that day to Malachi’s substantiated the prophet’s charge. Malachi then voiced the Lord’s appeal and a promise. If Israel would **return to Him** (in faith and obedience), then He would respond and would **return to her**. This promise was based on the covenant God made with Israel (cf. Deut. 4:30-31; 30:1-10). Again Malachi placed Israel in the rhetorical role of questioning God’s charge: **How are we to return?** Only one who is aware of the path he has taken can retrace his steps. But Israel pretended to be ignorant of her waywardness. Bluntly stated, Israel was accused of being a thief. Thievery against people was bad enough, but only a fool would try to **rob God**. **Yet** this was the charge against Israel. 3:8b. The fifth oracle is parallel to the second, having two questions, “How are we to return?” (v. 7b) and **How do we rob You?** (v. 8) This literary device helped represent the general and the specific natures of the charge.

Again, the nation’s problem had to do with offerings. The second oracle (1:6-2:9) dealt with the attitude of disrespect (1:6) which led to a profaning of the offerings (1:7-14). There the *quality* of the sacrifices was in question. Here the *quantity* was the issue (cf. “the whole tithe,” 3:10). The nation, God answered, was robbing God by not bringing **tithes and offerings**. The tithe was literally a 10th of all produce and livestock which the people possessed (Lev. 27:30, 32). A tithe was to be given to the Levites who in turn were to give a tithe of the tithe to the priests (Num. 18:21-32). The Israelites were also to bring a tithe of their produce and animals and eat it with the Levites before the Lord in Jerusalem as an act of festal worship (Deut. 12:5-18; 14:22-26). Also every third year a tithe was to be stored up in the towns for Levites, strangers, widows, and orphans (Deut. 14:27-29). While the word “offerings” may refer to offerings in general, it seems to refer here (Mal. 3:8c) to those portions of the offerings (as well as those portions of the tithes) designated for the priests (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “*terûmâh*,” 2:838). If the Levites and priests would not receive the tithes and offerings, they would have to turn to other means of supporting themselves. As a result, the temple ministry would suffer. Since the temple was God’s house (v. 10), failure to support its ministry was considered equal to **robbing God Himself**. The nature of the **curse** on the **nation** can be determined from verse 11: famine due to pests (locusts) eating the vegetation, and vines without grapes (cf. Deut. 28:38-40). This promise was a reaffirmation of the obedience-blessing relationship specified in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 28:1-14). What the people were experiencing was the disobedience-curse arrangement also given in that covenant (Deut. 28:15-68). This covenant was a gracious provision for Israel. No other nation had such promises from God. Since the Word of God is sure, God’s part of the covenant arrangement would definitely be carried out. Israel could attest to this because she was experiencing certain curses in return for her disobedience to God’s Law about the tithe. The Lord then appealed to His covenant promises in challenging Israel to **bring the whole tithe into the storehouse** so there would be adequate **food** for the priests. “Storehouse” refers to a special room or rooms in the temple for keeping tithed grain (cf. 1 Kings 7:51; Neh. 10:38; 13:12). By doing this, the people would see that God would **open heaven’s floodgates and pour out... blessing** on them. These blessings would include agricultural prosperity—good **crops** not destroyed by

**pests**, and undamaged **vines** (Mal. 3:11)—and a good reputation among **all the nations** (v. 12). These blessings simply awaited their obedience. One must be careful in applying these promises to believers today. The Mosaic Covenant, with its promises of material blessings to Israel for her obedience, is no longer in force (Eph. 2:14-15; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 8:13). However, the New Testament speaks about generosity and giving. While not requiring a tithe of believers today, the New Testament does speak of God's blessing on those who give generously to the needs of the church and especially to those who labor in the Word (Acts 4:31-35; 2 Cor. 9:6-12; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:14-19).

## **Lesson Introduction and Background**

### **From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

While visiting Ely Cathedral in England, I also saw a former home of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who became the Lord Protector of the commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland. This structure, dating to the thirteenth century, had been the cathedral's "tithing house." Cromwell lived there for about a decade as he served as the agent to collect tithes from local farmers and store them in the nearby "tithing barn." This tithe was a levy of 10 percent on farmers' produce, the most practical way to receive tithes in a largely cashless society. Not only was tithing obligatory in those days, it was enforced by a quasi-governmental system. This seems very foreign to us today, yet the issue of tithing has been a source of controversy in several churches I have served. Should the church expect all members to tithe (give 10 percent)? Should the church require this? If so, how should it be enforced? Should the tithe be on gross or net income? Should all the tithe go to the local church, or does money given to other charitable organizations count as part of the tithe? So many questions! Despite the system of Cromwell's England and traditions of many churches today, there is no direct New Testament teaching that requires tithing. Paul taught the Corinthians to give willingly, generously, and cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:5-7) in proportion to what one has (1 Corinthians 16:2), but he did not specify a percentage. Any biblical doctrine of tithing is therefore based on Old Testament passages, and many Christians do not see these as binding in the church. However, Old Testament teachings about tithing are important for they reveal how God views the purposes of giving. Perhaps the most famous passage about tithing is found in the book of Malachi, the source of this week's lesson.

The name Malachi means "my messenger." It may be that this is a title rather than a personal name, for essentially the same Hebrew word occurs both in Malachi 1:1 (translated "Malachi") and 3:1 (translated "my messenger"). We have little definitive knowledge about this man or his prophetic ministry. The issues he addressed seem to parallel those of Ezra and Nehemiah, which would place Malachi in the mid-fifth century BC. For context, this dating means that the rebuilt temple had been in operation for over half a century and that most of Malachi's audience had grown up with this institution being fully functional. Malachi addressed a variety of issues, but his core complaint was that the people no longer honored or respected the Lord (see Malachi 1:6a). The worst offenders seem to have been the temple priests themselves, who were guilty of using defective animals as sacrifices (1:6b-8). Malachi told them that it would be better to shut down the temple than to operate in such a shameful manner (1:10). He prophesied terrible judgment for the priests, a curse to span generations (2:2, 3). But the future was not entirely bleak for Malachi, and he promised a renewed presence of the Lord. It is the fulfillment of that promise that is especially important for us today.

## **Major Theme Analysis**

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **The Just God Sends His Messenger (Mal 3:1-5)**

1 "Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the Lord of hosts.

2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire  
And like launderer's soap.  
3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver,  
That they may offer to the Lord An offering in righteousness.  
4 "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem Will be pleasant to the Lord, As in the days of old, As in former  
years.  
5 And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against  
perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an  
alien-- Because they do not fear Me," Says the Lord of hosts.

### **The Messenger will come (1)**

*Coming so let us rejoice (Ps 96:11-13)*

11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; 12 let the fields be  
jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; 13 they will sing before  
the Lord, for He comes, He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the  
peoples in His truth.

*Coming in all His glory (Matt 25:31)*

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in  
heavenly glory.

*Coming to glorify His people (2 Thess 1:10)*

10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have  
believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

*Coming to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29)*

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away  
the sin of the world!

*Coming to lead us to the springs of living water (Rev 7:17)*

17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living  
water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

### **The messenger will judge (2-3)**

*Judge to reward (Matt 16:27)*

27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each  
person according to what he has done.

*Judge of the nations (Matt 25:31-33)*

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in  
heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from  
another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the  
goats on his left.

*Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42)*

42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as  
judge of the living and the dead.

*Judge of men's secrets (Rom 2:16)*

16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

*Judging at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10)*

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

### **The messenger will protect (4-5)**

*Protect and strengthen (2 Thess 3:3)*

3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

*Protection from Satan (John 17:15-16)*

15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

*Protection and intercession for His people (Heb 7:25)*

25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

*Protection from things in the world (1 John 4:4)*

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

*Protection of soul (Ps 57:1)*

1 Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.

### **The Just God Responds (Mal 3:6-10)**

6 "For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

7 Yet from the days of your fathers You have gone away from My ordinances And have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," Says the Lord of hosts. "But you said, 'In what way shall we return?'

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings.

9 You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation.

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this," Says the Lord of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it.

### **God is unchanging (6-7)**

*Unchanging mind (Num 23:19)*

19 God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?

*Unchanging forever (Heb 13:8)*

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

*Unchanging in blessings (James 1:17)*

17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

*Unchanging mind (1 Sam 15:29)*

29 He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."

*Unchanging nature (Heb 6:17)*

17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

### **God can be robbed (8-9)**

*Robbed by not giving God what is His (Matt 22:21)*

21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

*Robbed by not giving God the glory (Ps 29:2)*

2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.

*Robbed by not giving God our best (Mal 1:8)*

8 When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty.

*Robbed by not giving God what has been vowed (Acts 5:1-3)*

1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

### **God blesses (10)**

*Blessings of power and strength (Ps 68:35)*

35 You are awesome, O God, in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people. Praise be to God!

*Blessings that are more precious than wealth (Prov 10:22)*

22 The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.

*Blessings in the heavenly realms (Eph 1:3)*

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

*Blessings of a new covenant through Jesus (Heb 9:15)*

15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance — now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

*Blessings of restoral (1 Peter 5:10)*

10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

*Blessings of eternal glory (2 Cor 4:17-18)*

17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.  
18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

## Conclusion and Other Thoughts

### *Commentary Thoughts from Steven Cole*

#### **God's Messiah will come suddenly, both to purify His people and to judge the wicked**

When Malachi says (3:1), "The Lord whom you seek" and "the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight," he is using irony. In effect, he is saying, "You're asking, 'Where is the God of justice? We want to see Him.' So, you're looking for Him? Let me tell you, He is coming. In fact, He is coming suddenly! But you need to ask, 'Can I endure the day of His coming? Can I stand when He appears?' Because when He comes, He is going to clean house on Israel and He is going to judge all the wicked. So if you *really* seek Him, you'd better get ready to meet Him!" You may wonder, "How can the Lord's coming be sudden when it has been announced by His messenger?" Let me answer with an illustration. Some of you recall when Mount St. Helens blew its top in 1980. Geologists knew that something was brewing. They could see the bulge on the side of the mountain and they could measure the increasingly threatening tremors. They warned the local residents to get out of there. But did they leave? Some did, but others didn't. There was one old man named Harry Truman who had lived there for decades. When the newscasters interviewed him, he said that the mountain had been there for centuries. He didn't believe that it would blow up, so he wasn't going to move. But suddenly, one morning the mountain exploded. Harry Truman and others like him who had ignored the warnings perished. Destruction came on them suddenly. You are hearing me say now, "The Lord is coming back suddenly to judge the earth. None who ignore this warning will escape!" Do you say to yourself, "Yeah, sure! I know that Jesus is coming, but He hasn't come for almost 2,000 years. There's no sense getting all worked up about it. I've got time before I need to repent." But remember, "The Lord of glory always comes as a thief in the night to those who sleep in their sins" (Schmieder, cited by C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Minor Prophets* [Eerdmans], p. 458). Malachi shows us who this coming Messiah is and what He will do, first with regard to His true people, and then with those who claim to be His people, but practice wickedness.

#### *1) God's Messiah is God in human flesh (3:1b).*

Sometimes critics say that the Bible never claims that Jesus Christ is God. That is utter nonsense! Verse 1 is about as strong a statement on the deity of Christ as anyone could write. The speaker here is "the Lord of hosts," who says that He is sending His messenger (John the Baptist) "before *Me*." Whom did John go before? Jesus! Jesus is one with Me, that is, God! He is also called here, "the messenger of the covenant." This phrase occurs only here, but it refers to Jesus, by whose blood the eternal covenant of salvation was ratified and mediated to His people (Heb. 13:20). He is called "the Lord, whom you seek," who was also identified in 2:17 as "the God of justice." The Hebrew word for "Lord" is *Adon*. When used with the article, as it is here, it always refers to God (A. R. Fausset, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, with Robert Jamieson and David Brown [Eerdmans], pp. 720-721; Walter Kaiser, *Malachi, God's Unchanging Love* [Baker], p. 81). (See Exod. 23:17; 34:23; Isa. 1:24; 3:1; 10:16, 33; Dan. 9:17). Also, the text says that the Lord will come into *His* temple. The temple belongs only to God, not to any man. Yet at the same time, this messenger who is the Lord is distinguished from the speaker, the Lord of hosts. The language is similar to Psalm 110:1, "The Lord [Yahweh] says to my Lord [Adonai], 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'" Jesus used this psalm to confound His enemies (Matt. 22:42-45). The Messiah is clearly David's son, and yet David calls Him "Lord." How can this be? This is the mystery of the

Trinity: God is one God and yet He exists eternally in three persons, each of whom is fully God and yet distinct in personhood. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are eternally God, and yet the Father can send the Son and the Son can send the Spirit. Each is a distinct Person, not just a different manifestation of God. Yet they are not three gods, but one God. In our text, the point is that the messenger of the covenant (Messiah) who comes suddenly into His temple is God.

*2) God's Messiah will purify His covenant people and judge the wicked (3:2-6).*

Note that there is a difference in God's judgment here. With some, the Lord acts as a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap. The intent of both of these treatments was to purify, not to destroy. But with others, the Lord will draw near for judgment, bear swift witness against them, and (as implied in 3:6 and stated in 4:1) consume them. The difference between the two groups is that the former is the object of God's unchanging covenant love (3:6, 1:2), whereas the latter is not. The former are Jews who truly believe in God, but need to be cleansed of their sins. The latter are Jews by birth, Jews outwardly, but they do not fear God and so they ought to fear His judgment (see Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8). As with many Old Testament prophecies, these verses blend together the two comings of Jesus Christ. He came the first time to seek and to save the lost by offering Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice of God for sinners (Heb. 10:1-18). He will come the second time to deal out retribution to those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8). All whom He saves, He purifies so that they may present to Him "offerings in righteousness," that is, the true worship of yielding our lives as living sacrifices to Him (Rom. 12:1-2). We offer to Him the sacrifice of praise and thankfulness, along with doing good and sharing (Heb. 13:15-16). The purifying process is often painful, as the analogy of fire implies. The Oriental silversmith would heat the silver until the impurities, the dross, bubbled to the surface. He would keep skimming it off until he could see his face clearly reflected in it. Even so, the Lord uses the fires of affliction to produce purity in His people, so that His image is reflected in us (Heb. 12:3-11). But with others, the purpose of the fire is not to purify, but to destroy (3:5, 6; 4:1). These people wanted God to judge Israel's pagan neighbors, but they refused to judge their own sins. God gives a representative list of sins, each of which was a breaking of His law and a cause for judgment. "Sorcerers" refers to those who use any sort of occult practices. "Adulterers," of course, refers to those who are unfaithful to their marriage vows. "Those who swear falsely" covers everything from bending the truth in our personal relationships to perjury under oath in court. "Those who oppress the wage earner, the widow, and the orphan" and "those who turn aside the alien" refer to the wealthy and powerful who take advantage of those weaker than they are. At the bottom of all of these sins is, they do not fear God. It is of utmost importance that you know for certain that you are in the group that the Lord purifies and refines, not in the group that He consumes in judgment! How can you know? First, is your trust in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross as your only hope for forgiveness of your sins? If it is, then, second, you know that God has changed your heart. You are submitting to the Lord in trials, trusting that He will work these things together for good (Rom. 8:28). You strive to be holy because you fear God (2 Cor. 7:1). You offer to the Lord sacrifices of praise that come out of the gratitude of a heart that He has cleansed. To sum up,

**Our response to God's promised Messiah should be to trust Him and obey His Word.**

God's promise to send His Messiah is His answer to those who struggle with the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. He *will* judge the wicked. The trials of the righteous are His purifying fires, designed to develop His holiness in them for His glory and their good. But, the remarkable thing about God's answer is that He did not send His Messiah in the lifetimes of the people in Malachi's day! It would be over 400 years before John the Baptist began crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord"! Meanwhile, the Jews had to endure four long centuries without a true prophet. They had to endure the oppressive rule of the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes, as well as the Roman occupation. Since Messiah's first coming, God's people have endured 20 long centuries of trials, while they watch the wicked prosper. Mockers say, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). How should we then live in this evil world? Three brief words of encouragement:

*A. Trust God by guarding your attitude when you go through trials.*

If you find yourself doubting whether God loves you or whether He really will punish the wicked, get alone in His presence. Read Psalm 73, where the author was struggling with the same issue, until he went into the sanctuary of God. There he realized, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26). Read Hebrews 12, which assures us that God’s discipline stems from His love for us as His children. His aim is that we might share His holiness and enjoy the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:10-11). Trust Him!

*B. Obey God by holding to His absolute moral standards.*

The people in Malachi’s day were saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them” (2:17). In other words, morals do not matter, because God doesn’t immediately zap the wicked; in fact, they seem to prosper. We live in a day when even the church is joining the culture in abandoning God’s moral absolutes. But our holy God does not change (3:6)! His moral standards do not shift with the winds of the times. If His Word calls something sin, then it still is sin! When someone breaks God’s moral standards and seems to be doing just fine, don’t be deceived. God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows, he will reap (Gal. 6:7-8).

*C. Obey God by developing compassion for evil people who need His grace.*

These people wanted God to zap the prosperous, wicked pagans, but Malachi adroitly shows that by pointing their finger at others, they had three fingers pointing back at themselves! The fact is, we *all* deserve God’s judgment. If He has shown us mercy, it is the epitome of self-centeredness to say, “Now that I’m saved, God, You can judge all the pagans out there!” It’s as if I had been in a shipwreck and was drowning with many others. God came along and pulled me into the lifeboat. I no sooner get in than I say, “Let’s head for shore. Why are we sitting out here in these waves? I’m cold and want to get dried off. Let’s go!”

**Conclusion**

When you see evil prevailing and you long for that “new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13), remember God’s reason for delaying judgment: “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Ask God to give you His heart of compassion for sinners, so that He can use you to reach out to them with the good news of Messiah’s first coming and the warning of His second coming. When evil prevails, don’t challenge God. Trust Him and obey His Word. In His time, His promise to send His Messiah to judge the earth will be fulfilled.

*(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-7-what-do-when-evil-prevails-malachi-217-36>)*

**Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

Not long ago, I spoke with an elderly friend who had a vexing problem. He had spent most of his life becoming rich. He had done this by sacrificial saving, careful investing, frugal living, and hard work. At the end of his life, he had far more money than he would ever use. What should he do with all his money? He was reluctant to leave it to his children, because they were all doing well themselves. I had suggestions for him, but the situation also made me ponder what plans we Christians should make for our assets. We are motivated to save for the future and often warned that we can never save too much. But it seems to me that we are missing a blessing if we do not begin to release our assets before we die. Wouldn’t I enjoy increasing my support for my favorite Christian ministry now rather than designate a substantial gift in my will? The answer to this sort of question will depend on one’s financial position, needs for retirement, etc. Perhaps, though, the teachings of Malachi may spur us to giving generously so that the floodgates of Heaven will open for blessings long before we are actually in Heaven!

***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator***

1. God's promises are sure, and Christ's coming as prophesied is proof of this (Mai. 3:1)
2. All the hopes of the wicked ultimately will be dashed by the judgment of God (vss. 2-3)
3. Worship that is pleasing to the Lord can come only from hearts that are pure (vs. 4)
4. God's unchanging character ensures justice for both the godless and the godly (vss. 5-6)
5. There is still hope for the wicked as long as repentance is available to them (vs. 7)
6. We rob ourselves of blessing when we rob God of that which He deserves (vss. 8-10)