

When the Lord Comes Near 2) He Humbles His People

Malachi 3:1-7a • 2021-12-05 • Advent Series "When the Lord Comes Near"



Have you tried travelling north recently? For the past several weeks it has taken a little longer to get up on the Rim. As you go up past Pine, you'll see the orange road work signs. Then you begin to see a progression of signs designed to slow you down as you approach. Speed limit 45. Speed limit 35. Then it goes all the way down to 25. Soon there are orange cones appearing everywhere. A lot of travelers might see those things and still not slow down enough. So, just to make sure that everyone is paying attention there are some extra measures in place. An occupied police car is stationed at each end of the work zone. If you haven't slowed down yet by that point, they ought to cause you to tap the brakes a little more and slow down. You should always take a work site seriously, but those police are stationed there to make sure you take that to heart.

What does God do so that we take him seriously when he comes near? We dare not zoom by through life without taking his presence seriously. Today we'll continue our series looking at "When the Lord comes near." Malachi 3 speaks of a time when the Lord will suddenly come near. As we look at his prophecy we see just how "When the Lord comes near 2) he humbles his people."

As time progressed for the people of Israel God gave them many road signs. The first of those signs indicated a man would be born who would come to defeat the devil. The children of Abraham were given a special notice that the coming Savior would be born as one of their offspring. More and more signs were shared about the coming one. He was foretold to be the one who would fulfil a covenant. He was foretold to be the Holy One who would take the throne of David and rule over all the world forever. And what was the last sign before the coming of the Savior? God would send his messenger ahead. *"Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me."*

That royal messenger would serve as the sign that God's coming was imminent. He would be like the police car with lights flashing right before you enter the work area. *"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."*

God did send his messenger. His name was John. He appeared just before the Savior began his work. Consider the start of all four gospel accounts. Matthew mentions the work of John as the first thing before Jesus began his ministry. Mark makes a point to open his account talking about John as the promised messenger. Luke, of course, records the Christmas account. But he actually starts by laying out the birth of the messenger. And as we read earlier Luke includes the work of the messenger right before the start of Jesus' ministry. John jumps right to the words and work of John the Baptist who prepared people for the coming of the Lord. The Lord sent his messenger just as prophesied!

And just as prophesied the Savior suddenly came near to his people. Malachi calls the Savior, *"the Messenger of the Covenant in whom you delight."* Jesus came to fulfill the new covenant, the forgiveness of sins. He is the one that all believers delight in. He is the one that the faithful people of God sought after for centuries. And Malachi says he will come suddenly to his temple after his forerunner appears.

How would the Lord's messenger prepare his people for the Savior's sudden coming? Notice it starts with the priests and those who serve God's people as leaders! *"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! 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."* Everything begins with preparing the "sons of Levi." These were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the people. The Levites served as priests. The Levite men served as teachers of God's Word. If they were not spiritually clean and ready, how could the people they serve remain ready?

Changes in the church can sometimes happen from the bottom up. Those who lead the church are not always the most influential. However, most of the time it is the person in a position of influence and teachers who have the greatest sway. And sadly, many false teachers have caused great damage throughout the history of God's Church. If the Levites were corrupt in ancient Israel, the people often followed. Sometimes the Levites are mentioned as the last ground where any faithfulness is found. But at other times they lead the people into unfaithfulness. Those who ought to be prepared first and foremost for the coming of the Lord are those who lead his church!

The Lord talks about purifying the Levites like a purifier of gold or silver. The hammer of the law and the purifying fire of the gospel are necessary. When the Word of God is faithfully shared, hearts are cleansed. The law exposes the sins and corruption. The gospel brings healing and forgiveness to the repentant heart. Those who lead God's people today will never be ready for his coming unless they hold to sharing both law and gospel. They must preach the law to their own hearts, or they have nothing to offer God or the people they serve. They must let it pound like a hammer in the hot fire. They must let the Spirit create a burning zeal for what is right. And they must let the cool waters of the gospel come pouring on to bring life. They must share the message of the Savior who came to crush the devil. God doesn't prepare his Church by giving us preachers and teachers in the Church who can make you feel good about your impurities. He prepares his church by giving spiritual leaders who examine their own hearts and who faithfully share the law and gospel. He prepares the church as the law and gospel turn people to repentance and faith.

Malachi says, *"But who can endure the day when he comes? Who will remain standing when he appears?"* What will happen when the Lord comes near? *"I will approach you to judge you."* He won't just humble the Levites. He will bring judgment on all the sins of the people. Notice that the sins which the Lord lists here are the types of sins which people often think they can get away with. The practice of sorcery and the occult can be done in secret. Maybe Christians don't openly worship false gods, but where do they sometimes put their fear, love, and trust? How many Christians end up fearing (respecting and honoring) this world instead of their Lord? How many love the temptations of the devil instead of the Word of the Lord? How many trust their own sinful hearts instead of the truth of the Bible? Malachi mentions adultery. That is often a sin that takes place in secret. And it begins with an impure heart. He talks about a false oath. Don't we sometimes think we can lie as long as we can get away with it?

Then Malachi mentions sins against the weaker and helpless around you. Those who cheat workers out of their wages might be able to get away with it. But God sees the injustice of those who practice greed. The fatherless, the widow, the foreigner are all easier to exploit or overlook. Don't we overlook the suffering of those who are easier to overlook?

The judgment comes on "all those who do not fear me." What evidence has there been in your life recently that shows you don't fear him? I'm not talking about the time you speed too fast through a work zone on the road. I'm talking about the time you didn't slow down until you saw the police car there threatening you. Don't we sometimes like to do that with God's Word? We speed along with no thought of repentance right past all the signs.

We know better. But do we always listen? There was a reporter who recently was invited to do an interview with the pop star Adele. She is one of the world's best selling music artists. He was the only journalist from all of Australia invited to an interview with her regarding her new album. You can imagine his excitement as he hopped on a plane to London. The interview probably went well, but there was one part where it crashed. The journalist had to admit he had not listened to Adele's latest album. Granted, he was sent an early preview sent to him by email. And he failed to open it and listen during his travel time. But most would admit his small failure was a big one. Adele removed all rights to share the interview and the man went home disgraced. He had failed to listen to an album. And it was a short window of time. Hasn't our God given us his Word for ages? Isn't it right before us day after day? When he comes will you be able to claim you really listened? What ought he to do for the times we didn't pay attention? He has every right to do far more than cancel our interview! He has the right to turn against us who turned from him!

The people of Israel, --Levites, scribes, mothers, fathers, children, all of them -- had failed to listen to their Lord. *"Since the days of your fathers, you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them."* Malachi rightly must ask who will stand when the Lord comes near to judge. His people? They shouldn't according to what God says about his people. Should you be able to stand when he comes near to judge?

But there is good news for the sons of Jacob and for us all. *"Certainly I, the Lord, do not change. That is why you, sons of Jacob, have not come to an end."* God's love had not changed. His Savior would still come as a "Messenger of the covenant." He would still declare forgiveness and promises kept. Our hearts change. God's heart does not. He remains faithful to all his promises. And he promises that the door to repentance remains open for his people. And he will freely forgive all who turn from sin to him. *"Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Armies."*

God's covenant of peace is the only reason we can endure when he draws near. He doesn't change. His mercy doesn't change. That's a good thing for sinners: Israel hadn't kept his will. We have failed to keep his will. But we are not ended. The door is open for repentance and forgiveness *"turn to me and I will turn to you."*

The only way we can prepare for when the Lord comes near is to listen to the signs and make the turns which he gives us. *"Slow down."* Watch the warning of the messenger. He is parked on the side of the road and his lights are flashing. *"Slow down and pay attention."* The Lord humbles us. He directs us to come before him in repentance *"turn to me...."* He warns that we will not escape his sudden coming to judge if we think we can hide our sins or get away with them. *"Turn to me."* His call is for each of us to humble ourselves and seek his mercy.

The one we desire, the one we seek after is the "Messenger of the Covenant." He sealed and gave that covenant through his own blood. Just as prophesied at his first coming he came to the temple. He came with the message of forgiveness. He was born of a woman. But came as the holy Son of God. He wasn't just some worker on the side of the road. He is the engineer, the author of our faith and our salvation. He humbled himself to open the way to paradise. He won forgiveness through his blood. When the Lord comes near, he humbles his people. He does this so that we may turn from our sin and turn to him. Join with me as we do that now and around every corner of our lives.

Lord, forgive us, your people. There are times when we proudly turn from you and stumble in our sin. We speed through life and fail to listen to your messenger who prepares us for your coming. Forgive us for the times we arrogantly failed to stop, repent, and turn to you. We overlook the needs of others. We fail to give you the fear that is due you as Lord. Turn our hearts back to you in repentance and faith. Build in us the desire to seek your covenant promises. Help us to see that because of your unchanging love the door remains open for us to repent and to rejoice in your forgiveness. Come near to us in your mercy. Fulfill your promises that you will turn in grace to all who turn in repentance to you.