



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Malachi 2: 17-3: 6

“The Coming Judge”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we again turn to Thee with gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has accomplished for us. And we thank Thee for these prophecies from the Old Testament that so beautifully give us an insight into the future. We thank Thee too for the applications that are so obvious to our own lives, though we may not be the persons particularly referred to. We know that Thou art the same God yesterday, today and forever, and the principles by which Thou didst act in the past are the principles by which Thou dost act now. And we pray that as we turn to the Book of Malachi tonight that the Holy Spirit may bring home to our understanding, and then to our lives in action, the things that are found in this great section of the prophecy. We commit the time of study to Thee. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Message] Tonight our subject is "The Coming Judge" and we're turning to Malachi chapter 2 verse 17 through chapter 3 and verse 6.

Most of us, when we think of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, think of our Lord as a Savior. And if we studied much of the Bible, we also know that our Lord Jesus is a judge. And we think of his saving work as a work that has been accomplished in the past, and his work as a judge that is to be accomplished in the future. And properly, we

relate his first coming ministry to his work as Savior and his second coming ministry, particularly his coming to the earth in his advent, we relate that ministry to his work as judge.

We read, for example, in John chapter 5 in verse 22 that all judgment has been committed into the hands of the Son. That seems to be settled and grounded in the fact that the Lord Jesus is our representative redeemer. And because he is our representative, our federal head, he is not only the one who has accomplished the redemption for us, but he is also the one who will judge those who have not responded to his message.

One of the greatest of the books of the Bible that expresses our Lord's ministry as a judge is the Book of Revelation. And yet that is also the book in which he is described about thirty times, almost, as the lamb. And in fact, some think that that word which is used to describe lamb in that book, an unusual word, a diminutive originally, does have something of the force of a gentle lamb. So it's rather striking that in the ministry of judge, the terms that should be used are terms that express the gentleness and the meekness of the lamb.

Now we're going to turn to a passage in the Old Testament in which our Lord Jesus is set forth as the judge, but he is not set forth here as a lamb, but rather the opposite, for he is set forth here as a messenger of the covenant who is going to come. And, a great deal of stress rests upon the fact that he will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, tending the fire under the container in order that the dross may be removed from those who are experiencing his work of refining and judgment.

One might ask: Why is divine wrath necessary? I think probably a generation or two or three ago no one ever asked this question. They believed that it was necessary. They had no problems about it at all. But today we seem to live in a day in which the love of God is so stressed that it has swallowed up all of the passages in the Bible that express his ministry of judgment.

Why is divine wrath necessary? Well, it is necessary, first of all, because God is a just God. The Scriptures tell us that he's a just God. And if he did not act his nature, he would not really be the God of the Bible. But he will do that which is right. And if we are to have any kind of moral universe flowing out of the character of God, we must as a result of that have judgment. So because of the justice of God, because of his character we must have divine wrath.

And then also, it has served the purpose of reminding us who are creatures of our proper place in this universe. We have sinned, and we are under judgment. And the fear of judgment is a very reasonable motive for turning to the Lord. Some have even questioned whether that is true or not. But, the Bible makes it very plain that the fear of God and the fear of judgment is a very proper motive for turning to him. If there should be anyone in this audience tonight who has never experienced the salvation that is in Christ, you should fear the coming judgment because God is a holy and just God and he will be true to his nature.

Now it is marvelous, of course, to know that through Jesus Christ, in the midst of God's wrath, mercy is remembered. And so when we think of him, we should not think of him as only a God of judgment because he is a God of judgment who delights in loving kindness and mercy by virtue of the work of the redeemer who has made it possible for this just God to be merciful to those who believe in him.

The 17th verse of the 2nd chapter of Malachi is a verse which contains the question "Where is the God of justice?" And all of the rest of the Book of Malachi is the answer to that question, "Where is the God of justice?"

So let's turn now to the section that we're to look at: chapter 2, verse 17 through chapter 3, verse 6. And I want to read these verses first, then we'll come back and look at the two questions in verse 17 with which the section begins. Verse 17 of chapter 2 contains these words,

"You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him?' In that you say, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them,' (that is, in the evil) or, 'Where is the God of justice?' Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, (incidentally, that may refer back to "Where is the God of justice?") And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the Lord of hosts. 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 fullers' soap. (The fuller, the ancient fuller was the laundryman of the ancient world, the fullers' soap) And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness. (In the Hebrew text that is singular, an offering in righteousness. But perhaps this idea is correct, offerings in righteousness) Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me,' says the Lord of hosts. For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

The two questions of verse 17 are questions which evidently this disobedient people had been asking and must have been asking in an audible way. They had been saying, "How have we wearied him?" When the word came to them that the Lord is considering that their activities have wearied him, he says: They do not understand, "How have we wearied Him?" And then he replies, "In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them."

Now you can tell from this the attitude that they had. They had the attitude expressed over in Isaiah chapter 5 and verse 20. I think it would be interesting for you to turn to this verse because it's a most interesting statement by the prophet Isaiah and expresses the same kind of warning against those who do not know how to make a difference between that which is evil and that which is good.

The prophet Isaiah in chapter 5, verse 20 says, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" The moral condition of people who do not know the difference between right and wrong and rather go so far as to say that which is evil is good, or that which is good is evil, and make no distinction, these are the descriptions of the people that are set forth for us here.

Now in the light of what has preceded, this is a remarkable thing because the preceding verses of the two chapters have given us a very detailed picture of the wickedness of the children of Israel at this time. And yet, instead of looking at themselves, and noting their wickedness and disobedience to the Lord, and going before him in confession of sin and in seeking his mercy, they rather are taking the proud attitude that we are the people of Jehovah. And as we look out on the people round about us, God seems to be blessing them and he's not blessing us.

And so they began to ask the question, "Where is the God of justice?" Where is justice in the world because we are supposedly the followers of Jehovah, but he is not here in blessing for us? He, rather, is blessing others. So you can see that the Lord would be wearied with this kind of thing.

You know there is a psalm, which I think I've referred to a few weeks back, in the Old Testament which expresses this same kind of attitude. And I think this attitude is the kind of attitude that troubles all of us at one time or another. It's the 73rd Psalm which is a psalm in which the psalmist has a theme of the goodness of God to Israel. But in the discovery of the goodness of God to Israel, he had to go through quite an experience.

The opening verse of Psalm 73 is the theme, "Surely God is good is Israel, and to those who are pure in heart!" But then in the next verses, all the way down through verse 16, he speaks of the experience that he had of looking round about him and being envious of the arrogant. When he saw the prosperity of the wicked, it puzzled him. He examined them very carefully.

He said, "They're not in trouble like other men." They're not "plagued like mankind." "Pride is their necklace." In other words, pride is something that is an ornament for them, whereas of course for us, it is a terrible sin. "They mock; they wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. They set their mouth against the heavens; their tongue parades through the earth." What a beautiful expression of their rebellion against God.

And the psalmist is troubled over this because, after all, they are the covenant people and God seems to be blessing those who are not. So he finally says, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence." It's the same kind of attitude that caused the Lord to say through the prophet, "Where is the God of justice?"

And finally in verse 15 and 16, the psalmist says, "If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' Behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children. When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight Until (Now this is the important thing) Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end."

So the experience that he had was to pass through this time of perplexity and difficulty wondering why the situation was as it was. And finally, he entered into the sanctuary of God. Whether he did into the literal sanctuary of the temple or not, we don't know. Perhaps that was where he got down upon his knees before God and prayed about this matter.

And then the Lord brought to his attention the latter end of the wicked, and also, the end of the righteous. And then, as a result of this of course, he showed them that the present prosperity of the wicked is the only heaven that they will enjoy. The rest of their

life will be hell as they pass from this human existence. And the only hell that you will go through is the period of time now, and heaven is forever.

He goes on to say in verse 18, "Surely Thou didst set them in slippery places;" slippery places. That's difficult to say.

"Surely Thou didst set them in slippery places; Thou didst cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, Thou will despise their form. When my heart was embittered And I was pierced within, Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before Thee. Nevertheless I am continually with Thee; Thou hast taken hold of my right hand. With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth."

So you see, he came to an experience of the true nature of things by entering into the sanctuary.

The children of Israel in the time of Malachi were having a similar problem. But instead of going to the sanctuary, they had not done it. And so they were looking about them. They were seeing others, and seeing them blessed by the Lord. And they were saying, evidently the God that we know as Jehovah whom we serve (And incidentally, they were only serving him by form and ritual.) But the God whose ritual we observe, evidently it doesn't make any difference to him whether something is good or evil. He doesn't pay any attention to the good or to the evil because the evil are the ones who are having the good life, and we who are supposedly the good because we are the covenant people, we're suffering. So, "Where is the God of justice?"

As I say, the remainder of the Book of Malachi is the answer to that question. So these two questions, then, are important questions and particularly that last one. Now the answer comes and it's in the form of a description of the coming judgment.

Incidentally, you can see by the relationship of these verses that follow to that which has just preceded that the man who divided Malachi up into chapters should never have divided it at that point because chapter 2 verse 17 is really the occasion for the verses that follow in verse 1 through 6 of chapter 3. So really, chapter 3 should have begun with chapter 2, verse 17.

Now I know you might think, well Dr. Johnson's changing the Bible. No I'm not changing the Bible. As a matter of fact, the Bible was not changed, was not divided into chapters, so far as we know, until about twelve hundred and twenty-eight AD. Our English Bible was the result of the work of Stephen Langton. And in 1228 AD it was divided into chapters.

It was not divided into verses according to tradition until Robert Stephanus, in the 1500s: 1551, divided the chapters into verses. And incidentally, the verses were designed to be sensed sections. They were not done willy-nilly. They were done in order to effectively to have within themselves a certain sense. And he did it so tradition says, *ente equi tandum*; that is, while he was riding on a horse from Paris to Leon in France.

Now we have a little thing that we do with young children. We sit them on our lap and we say now we're going to ride the horsey. And we say, bookity, bookity, bookity, bookity, bookity, look out; there's a log, look out. There's the log; jump the log. And we throw the child up, and catch the child, and enjoy our children and grandchildren.

Now it has been said that Mr. Stephanus with his pen in his hand while he was riding the horse was marking the verses in the Bible. [Laughter] And occasionally as he was bookity, bookity, bookity, bookitying along, and he was getting ready to put his pen down at a certain point to begin a verse, but they hit a log at that point, and instead, he

hit two or three or four lines on beyond, so that one biblical interpreter has said: The first principle of Bible interpretation is to ignore the chapter and verse divisions.

Well here is a good illustration of it. We should have had chapter 3 begin with verse 17 because now is the answer to the question, "Where is the God of justice?"

Well God has an answer, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger." And he talks now about the person of judge. But in order to give the total picture, we need to notice that there are two expressions here that must be distinguished. He says,

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He (the messenger of the covenant) is coming," says the Lord of hosts."

So here we have a person who is called "My messenger" and then we have a person who is called "the messenger of the covenant." And we have reference made here to the Lord whom you seek who will suddenly come to his temple and it's the Lord of hosts who says this.

Now putting all this together, and also reading it in the light of the New Testament, it is clear that when he says, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me," that he refers here to John the Baptist.

Now back in Isaiah chapter 40 it was said that there would come a messenger before the face of the Lord, one who prepare his way. And that is cited in the New Testament in connection with John the Baptist, and Malachi has used that passage in Isaiah chapter 40. See, he was a student of the Bible. And so he used that expression. He said, "I'm going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me." So he's giving us an interpretation of Isaiah, which in turn in the New Testament is shown to refer to John the Baptist.

Well let's turn over to the New Testament. Let's turn first to Matthew chapter 11. Matthew chapter 11, and we shall look at about, as soon as I find this; it was very difficult for me to find that in Mark chapter 11, so, Matthew chapter 11 and verse 10.

"This" Now the context has to do with John the Baptist, and we read,

"This is the one about whom it was written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

So "My messenger" who is to come is a reference to John the Baptist according to our Lord's own interpretation. Incidentally, these passages occur in other parts of the gospels and, again, the apostles make that same identification. So when he says, "Behold, I will send My messenger," he's referring to John the Baptist.

By the way, the term for messenger here, with also this pronominal suffix "my", my messenger, is the Hebrew word *malaki*. And as you can see, that's the name of the author of this book, Malachi. And some have thought that the name of the book is derived from this fact, My messenger.

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, (Now that's John the Baptist) and he will clear the way before Me." How did John the Baptist clear the way before the Lord? Well, he cleared the way before the Lord by calling Israel to repentance. That was the preparation. The cry, "Repent for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand," that was designed to be a moral preparation for the coming of the king. So he says I'm sending my messenger, and he's going to clear the way before me.

And then he says, "And the Lord," a 'adown "And the Lord, whom you seek." Evidently whom you seek saying "Where is God of justice?" This Lord "whom you seek," is going to "suddenly come to his temple." Some commentators take this to refer to his

first coming and speak of the fact that when our Lord came, it was a kind of sudden coming. Israel was surprised.

Personally that does not satisfy me. I know there was a time when he came suddenly in the temple in, for example, John chapter 2. But again, I do not think that really is the force of this expression here. I think that what he is referring to is the Second Advent. In other words, he looks on to the time of the Second Advent because he is going to talk about judgment. "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple,"

Incidentally, the word for temple here is a word that speaks of the temple as a kind of palace. And you'll notice also, it is "His temple". And evidently then, this Lord who is going to come is a divine being. He will come. "And the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming." It's evident by the parallelism of these words that the messenger of the covenant is the same as the Lord who is going to come to his temple.

Who is the messenger of the covenant? Why is he called the messenger of the covenant? "My messenger" is John the Baptist. But here the "messenger of the covenant," well, he is called the "messenger of the covenant" because his whole ministry is a covenantal ministry. His whole ministry comes by virtue of the everlasting covenant to start with. And then, his ministry is the fulfillment of all the Messianic covenants. And so it is proper for him to be spoken of as the "messenger of the covenant." He is the one who will come and lay the foundation for the Abrahamic covenant in his blood thus laying the foundation for the new covenant making it possible for Israel to be redeemed. And that is why, I think, he is called the "messenger of the covenant."

"Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts." You're asking "Where is the God of justice?" Well, you're going to discover at his Second Advent that he is going to suddenly come and surprise you, and he is going to execute judgment.

Now he describes it in the following verses as he speaks about the plan of this judgment. First of all, he warns them that this is going to be a terrible day. And they need the ministry of the messenger who clears the way before him if they are to be properly prepared. "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" It's this kind of expression that is used in Revelation chapter 6 when the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus is described there. Who will be able to stand?

And the 7th chapter of that book opens, remember, with the hundred and forty-four thousand and the innumerable multitude that come out of every tribe, kindred tongue and nation who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The answer to the question is who can endure his coming, only those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, only those who have been truly redeemed. "Who can stand when He appears?"

Now he goes on to describe it. I'm inclined to think, and I say this only from a comparison with Zechariah chapter 13 and verse 9, that when he says that "He is like a refiner's fire and like a fullers' soap and He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver," that he speaks of the fact that in the last days before his coming, just before his coming, during the time of the great tribulation, he will purify Israel by means of the great judgments set forth in the Book of Revelation. And as a result of those judgments, the remnant will come out of Israel, all of whom shall or rather, when the nation as a whole shall be converted.

Back in Zechariah chapter 13 and verse 9 there is a verse that I think bears on this. The prophet there speaking about the tribulation period says, "And I will bring the third part through the fire, Refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. And they will call on My name, And I will answer them; and I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.'" So there is going to be a work of refining by which God shall refine Israel eliminating the dross of the unbelievers, and thus the nation shall be prepared for the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus in the future.

Will you also notice that this purification is a purification that begins with the sons of Levi? So, the judgment that God is going to execute begins with those who have been disobedient for we've just read of the priests' disobedience.

It seems to me, also, that it is possible that he is referring to not only to the work of salvation by which the false are separated from the true, but also, when he speaks of purification, he's speaking of the fact that he is going to bring them to the place where they really ought to be in their spiritual lives. And so I'm inclined to think that this statement that "He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness" includes not only their salvation but their sanctification.

Many Bible teachers have noticed this metaphor that the prophet uses here. And it's used elsewhere, too. The practice of ancient refining beautifully illustrates what God does in our lives. Peter tells us about how we have to pass through trials in order that through these trials that which is genuine in our faith may come to its manifestation.

And you know when the ancients, when they refined the precious metals, they put them in large pots and they put those pots over fires. And they heated the metal until finally it became molten and extremely hot. And the reason they did that was because as it became hot, the dross would rise to the top. And so they would sit, just as is described here, sit by a smelter. And then as the dross would rise to the top, they would reach out with a container and take the dross off the top. Now of course they didn't have means of knowing when something was pure as we do. But according to the information that we have, they would sit and look over that and finally after they had taken off all of the dross that came to the top, the test of whether it was finally refined and pure was if they could see their face clearly in the metal that was left. That's a very beautiful picture, you see, of the work that God does in making us like him.

So he looks through the experiences of life. He heats the container awfully hot at times, too. And as he looks into it, finally, when he sees the work of sanctification, the

work of discipline reach its perfection, then it's at that point that he turns off the fire. We have been brought into the likeness of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus. That's really what he's doing with all of us. And the reason that we are left here is not in order that we the beautiful people might be the objects of amazement by others. But we are here because he's doing something in us and through us that has reference to eternity.

So he's going to purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.

Now having said that, he goes on in the final verses to speak of the consequences of his coming. I'll just mention these because we've already alluded to them. First of all, he speaks of the reception of Israel. He said, "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and in the former years."

You see, they've been very active in the sanctuary. They've been bringing all the sacrifices and all the offerings. But they've been doing it as a kind of ritual, as a formalistic thing. But he says as a result of what is going to come in the future, they are going to bring their offerings in righteousness. So, "The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old," that is, in the Mosaic days, "and as in the former years."

"Then" and he speaks of the rejection of the unrighteous.

"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me."

It seems to me that last little expression "Do not fear me" is really the cause of all the others because at the heart of our manifestation of wickedness is unbelief.

And finally in verse 6, he gives us the reasons why he will do just this. "For I, the Lord, do not change."

Now they had said in verse 17, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord." Formerly we thought God was a God who made a distinction between good and evil. We thought that God was good and we thought that he punished evil. But evidently he's not been doing that. So, therefore, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, it makes no difference so far as the Lord is concerned.

Now he says in verse 6, I don't want you to think that. I want you to know that "I, the Lord, do not change." That which is evil for me is always evil for me. That which is good for me is always good for me. He is immutable in his nature and being. And consequently, he is always against evil. Do not ever think for one moment that he changes his attitude toward that which is evil. He will always punish the wicked. He will always send the unbelieving to an eternal separation from him.

Now also, he adds, "Therefore you, O sons of Jacob." I think it's so beautiful that he calls them sons of Jacob. Sons of Israel, well, that would be alright, but sons of Jacob, crooked perverse Jacob, "Therefore you, sons of Jacob, are not consumed." For while it is true I do not change, and I do not change toward evil, evil is always evil, at the same time I do not change with reference to my promises. And my promises are unconditional promises. Therefore you wicked, crooked sons of Jacob, you are not going to be consumed because you are within my covenant, within my divine electing grace.

So he will punish the unbelievers because he is the unchangeable God. He will also pardon his own because he is the great unchangeable God. The great principles of right and wrong never change, and his promises never change either. What a beautiful thing that is.

Now our time is just about up. I want to simply put before you as we close the fact that this is a very solemn warning addressed to people who by virtue of their own religious activities had come to the place where formalism and skepticism characterized

them. It wasn't that they were irreligious people. They were probably more religious than most of us in this room. They went about their duties. They offered the sacrifices. They had the priesthood. They observed the feasts. It was a constant religious thing for them. But it was a formal kind of thing.

And it was a skeptical kind of thing because it's obvious that they had come to the place where they didn't really believe in the reality of this. Later on in the New Testament we read about the Pharisees and Sadducees. And here are the beginnings of that that led ultimately to them, those who are the formalists and those who are the skeptics. And the message of this section is that it is possible for us to reach the place where formalism and then skepticism characterize us even in our religious activities. May God help us in all of our spiritual activity to be sure that there is a reality to it. Let's close in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of reading the word of God. We thank Thee for these great passages from the Old Testament which so beautifully illustrate some of the pitfalls that face us as the people of God. We too often go through the motions. We too often have thoughts that really are slanders against Thy character. And we pray, O God, that Thou will deliver us from these. Help us to remember that Thou art the immutable God. And help us also to remember that in wrath Thou dost remember mercy for those who are Thine own. May Thy blessing be upon the remainder of this evening in the classes of the Bible Institute. We pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.