

A PURE PEOPLE

Malachi 3:1-7, 16-18; 4:1-2

In 1516 Sir Thomas More coined the word Utopia and it has come to mean “an idealized place or situation in which everything is good.” The origin of the word itself is from the Greek and is a combination of “ou” and “topos” which would give us ou-topos. This literally means “no where” or “no place.” It was apparently intended to be a “play on words” in that a combination of the Greek words “eu” and “topos” would give us eu-topos which would mean “good place.” The English transliteration of these two Greek words would be the same. We might conclude that a perfectly “good place” just does not exist or is “no where.”

If we did have such a “good place” it would need to have “good people” to populate it or it soon cease to be a “good place.” That is exactly the message of what happened in the Garden of Eden. That is similar to the old adage that “if you ever find the perfect church, then please don’t become a member, because that would ruin its perfection.”

The Jews in post-exile Judah in the time Malachi were past the point of thinking that those who returned from Babylon were going to restore Israel to an idealized situation that would be better than the glory days of David and Solomon. That was their “Utopia.” As is the case for many people, they needed someone to blame when the “plan” failed to be achieved. In their way of thinking the problem was with God. The purpose of God’s conversation with them as given to Malachi was to discover the truth of the responsibility of the people and to reaffirm God’s intent to have a “good place” with “pure people.”

There were six points of dispute between the Jews and God. The first was that God did not love them. God refuted that by reminding them that He had chosen them (Jacob rather than Esau) even though that choice was contrary to the normal practice of the first born being favored. The second accusation was made by God that “the problem was not that God did not love them, but that they did not honor and respect God.” In response, they questioned “How?” God’s answer was related to how they were improperly worshiping Him with less than their best but were simply going through the motions in their religion and strongly admonished or rebuked the priest for not requiring accountability.

Lack of accountability led to rampant cheating and treacherous dealings with everyone. This caused God to question them regarding “who they would not cheat?” They would even go so far as to ignore their marriage vows and disregard that covenant relationship to which God was counted as a witness. For this reason, God would not accept their rituals of worship and ignored their tears of remorse that did not include repentance. That led to the next accusation from the people that “God did not care about justice.” God’s response to that was that “justice was on its way” and it was not going to be what they had imagined it to be.

God’s Messenger – 3:1-5

¹“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 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 fullers’ soap. ³“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. ⁴“Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵“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. Malachi 3:1-5 (NASB95)

The question posed by the Jews in Malachi 2:17 was “Where is the God of justice?” When we hear such a question, the image that comes to mind is probably related to something that we would associate with retribution, maybe even anger, or something that would not be welcomed by those affected. If our understanding is correct that the first verse of chapter three is a prediction of the ministry of John the Baptist (the messenger) and Jesus Christ (who would come into the world), then we find a different picture of “the God of justice.”

What were the message and ministry of this appearing of the God of justice? He came declaring “grace and mercy and redemption for God’s people.” Did this mean that sin would not be judged? No. What it did mean was the “God of Justice” in Christ Jesus took the penalty for our sin and sins so that we might live and not die. It also meant deliverance from the burden of the letter of law and showed people the freedom that was found in the spirit of the law.

The specifics of the prophecy seem to be in the order in which the events unfolded in the First Advent of the Lord Jesus. The ministry of John the Baptist preceded the public appearing of Jesus at the start of His ministry. We know that the recurring message of John was “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Repentance is the first step in what we understand as the way we can enter into and receive salvation. We could think of repentance as clearing the way for the coming of the Messiah into our lives.

The time to which Malachi pointed in this First Advent was one in which people were anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Many were hoping that Messiah would come and deliver them from the oppression of the Romans and restore the Utopian situation that they thought existed in the time of David and Solomon. As the events unfolded, most did not see the “Kingdom” that Jesus was proclaiming as what they wanted to happen in the physical realm. Consequently, many rejected Him as the Messiah.

Malachi predicted that the Lord would come suddenly to His Temple. Commentators generally see a fulfilling of this as the time when Jesus had a confrontation with those who had “set up shop” in the temple area to sell doves or animals for sacrifice in the worship ceremonies and who would exchange money that would be used to put into the coffers in the temple since they did not use Roman coins for that. That was certainly a “sudden” appearance in that no one anticipated that Jesus would take such action as overturning the tables of the merchants and literally driving them out while declaring “It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.”

The description “messenger of the covenant” could be related to the covenant that God had given the Israelites as they came out of bondage in Egypt and the “messenger” or angel that was the protecting presence of God during this time. Another interpretation of this description could also be applied to what Christ did immediately before He was arrested. At the last supper, we find that Jesus declared a New Covenant. In Luke 22:20 we read “In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”

The people (the Jews) of Malachi’s day and even to this day, the Jews have a sense of pleasure and eager anticipation of how things will be when the Messiah would appear. Malachi made a bold statement, “He is coming.” Most of the Jews did not recognize the God of Grace and Mercy as being the God of Justice that they were looking for as would be implied from their questions as recorded in Malachi 2:17.

When we move to verse two (of chapter three) we find a question of “who can survive (endure) the day of His coming?” We can view this question is at least two ways. The tradition interpretations see this as pointing to the Second Advent of Christ in which the God of Justice

will be acting in a more traditional judicial role that we assume will be taking place in the last days. Those who did not accept what God brought to us in Christ would be subjected to a trial in which God Himself would provide the testimony against them. Obviously, no one can stand in such a situation and all those who rejected His salvation of the New Covenant would obviously be found guilty.

Let's consider a different view of this question of "Who can survive or endure the "day" of His coming?" According to Malachi, the events will be refining and cleansing. This is exactly what is to be happening to everyone who comes to Christ for salvation. This picture of a "refining fire" was used by both Paul and Peter in their letters to the Church in the first century. We also read in Ephesians 5:25-27 that Christ is preparing His bride.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water by the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

That sounds very much like the work of a "fuller" that uses soap and water to clean things.

Back to the question of "who can endure?" such a refining and cleansing would see that only those who have been born again of the Spirit of God and have died to the old nature would be able to endure. Those who do not have the Spirit of God will continue in the way of sin and rebellion and will suffer the consequences of rejecting God's gracious plan of salvation in which Christ becomes sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ.

God's Unchangeable Character – 3:6-7

⁶ "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept *them*. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. "But you say, 'How shall we return?' Malachi 3:6-7 (NASB95)

We have already mentioned the unchangeable character of God as being the God of Love, Grace, and Mercy. This is the very reason why the Jews were still in existence in the time of Malachi and even to this day. If God were not showing love, grace and mercy to humanity, then no one would be left on the planet.

The beginning of the fifth dispute (verse 7) follows the declaration of the truth that God does not change and that served to make the point that just as God does not change, apparently, the Israelites did not change either. From the earliest times of the nation, they had been a rebellious people and had not kept God's commandment nor following His principles. Even though they were God's Chosen People, they had been rebellious throughout their history. This is also the story of humanity. God's message to them was to return to Him and He would receive them since that is His character to be forgiving.

Their response to God's offer to meet them in reconciliation was what appears to be a cynical question of "How shall we return?" The implication in this question was that they did not know how to return since they had no sense of having gone away from God and His ways. There is a problem when people will not admit they have sin in their lives and deny or they may even be proud of the iniquity and perversion that characterizes them. This attitude characterizes what is happen in our nation today. People will make arguments that abortion is a good thing, that same-gender marriages and "alternate lifestyles" are expression of real freedom and that to speak out against such things (as the word of God clearly does) is "hate speech."

In the case of the Jews in 400 B.C. they were ignorant of or in denial of being thieves. This situation was addressed in the familiar passage regarding the failure to tithe as equivalent to robbing God.

After the promise of blessing for those who did not rob God, the final or sixth oracle was

introduced and that involved a problem of the Jews speaking ill of God by saying that “serving God did not matter and was vain and futile.” This accusation was coming from their own experience in which they had been erroneously thinking that they were faithful to God and had been carrying out His requirements. They were not experiencing any promised blessing and, therefore, the accusation was that “God was not fulfilling His part of the promises to bless them.” God obviously saw it from a different perspective.

God’s Record – 3:16-18

¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD gave attention and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who esteem His name. ¹⁷ “They will be Mine,” says the LORD of hosts, “on the day that I prepare *My* own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.” ¹⁸ So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him. Malachi 3:16-18 (NASB95)

Some of the people showed proper respect for the Lord and they realize that if any fault was to be found that it was with the actions and attitudes of the people. God had noted their respect for Him and was already planning how they would be blessed for their faithfulness. The bottom line was that if they would approach God as an honored Father, then God would respond by treating them as loyal sons. The distinction between the righteous and the wicked is clearly seen by God and their outcome is summarized in the first two verses of chapter four.

Hope for the Faithful – 4:1-2

¹ “For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the LORD of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.” ² “But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. Malachi 4:1-2 (NASB95)

Here we find the contrast of the destinies between those who were rebellious and rejected God and those who are faithful to Him. Those who reject Godly principles and continue to insist on following their own ideas of what is good and what is evil will find themselves in a world of their own creation. This will be a culture where people have no foundational beliefs (no roots) and those in positions of leadership will be described as “empty suits” or (chaff). The result will be that nothing of any lasting significance will be accomplished (absence of branches). Such a society will not find any ability to stand against the trials and tribulations that continue to happen in the ongoing history of mankind. They won’t last any longer than dry straw in a furnace.

On the other hand, those who respect God by faithfully following His ways and those who delight in His righteousness will find restoration and renewal that lead to exuberant joy that will be found in a “good place” among a “pure people.”