

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD , as in days gone by, as in former years. (NIV 84)

Theme: How can you Stand before the Lord?

You’ve been waiting a long time for this day to finally come. You’ve been planning for over a year. You’ve sent out all the invitations, made decorations, lined up entertainment, hired caterers. It’s your wedding day, of course. In reality for the bride it’s been more than a few months or years; she has been dreaming about this occasion for years and now it’s about all to come to fruition. A lot of thought, care, and money has been put into this occasion. So what are you going to wear? Most people wouldn’t wear shorts and a cut-off shirt to their own wedding. A bride would wear an elegant white dress, while the groom might wear a nice suit or a rented tuxedo. You’ve been waiting and waiting for this day to come, but what if something happened—what if right before the service was to begin you spilled a red drink all over you dress? What could you do about it?

The people of Israel had been waiting for a long time. In fact all of God’s children had been waiting since the day Adam and Eve fell into sin. On that day God promised them a Savior who would defeat the devil on their behalf. In the centuries that followed God gave more and more details about this promised Savior. God chose Abraham and his descendants to be the line from which this Savior would come. But Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all came and went, but still no Savior. As did Samuel, David, and Isaiah. Eventually the Northern Kingdom was lost and the Southern Kingdom was taken into exile, but still no Savior.

On occasion the Lord would give another prophecy about the Messiah, but still the people waited and waited.

We have the benefit of the full revelation from God. We have seen Christ as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Savior. But the Old Testament people didn’t have such a benefit. They believed in one who is to come. But they had no idea when he would come and how exactly he was going to fulfill God’s prophecies. They were in the dark, so to speak, just waiting for him to come.

Malachi was the last book of the Old Testament to be written. He lived about 1000 years after Moses led the people out of Egypt. It had been about 100 years since the people returned from exile. The religious and spiritual revival that followed had dimmed by now and the people were still waiting for the Messiah. And when they waited, they complained. Even though God had saved them from slavery in Egypt and brought them back from exile in Babylon, they complained that God wasn’t with them, that he wasn’t on their side. They complained that the wicked prospered while they suffered.

So God spoke to Malachi to remind his people that he was indeed with them and encourage the people that the Savior, the promised Messiah would still come. He prophecies in verse 1, **I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.** When the Savior would finally come, he wouldn’t be alone. God will send another Messenger who would prepare the way for the Savior. Here Malachi borrows wording from Isaiah 40, written several centuries before about the fore-runner of Christ. **A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.** For over 400 years after Malachi’s prophecy no more revelations of God came. The people heard no more from God or his prophets.

Until one day when a priest by the name of Zechariah was in the Holy Place in the Temple offering up prayers and burning incense at the altar of incense, and God sent the angel and told him that his wife, even in her old age, would give birth to a son who was to be named John. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would prepare the people for the coming of Christ—fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy about the forerunner of the Messiah.

And so we see in today’s gospel a grown-up John—John the Baptist, really John the Baptizer. He urged the people to repent and be

baptized for the forgiveness of sins. He was chosen by God to prepare the hearts and minds of the people for the coming of Christ.

But Malachi's prophecy wasn't just about John the Baptist. When Malachi looked into the future he saw many future events at the same time. At the time of forerunner the Messiah would also come—fulfilled of course in Jesus who was born mere months after John the Baptist. Malachi says, **Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.**

This messenger of the Lord who comes into the temple of the Lord is none other than God himself—Jesus, the promised Messiah. He is the one the people had been waiting for—the one they all desired. He is the messenger of the covenant. That is, the one who ushers in the New Covenant—the one-sided agreement that God made with us that all our sins are forgiven because of the work of Christ. Jesus is the one who brings us the forgiveness of sins. He finally came. After thousands of years, the day is finally here.

As the Old Testament people waited and waited for the Messiah to come, we wait and wait for him to come again on the Last Day. But when he does finally come, will you be able to stand before him? Not on your own. We're too sinful. While we wait, don't we often sound like the Israelites? We know how much the Lord has done for us and yet, what do we do? We whine and complain when we don't get everything that we want. When we get sick, go through hard financial times, or when people mistreat us, we begin to doubt God's love for us and we question why he isn't with us. And when we take a look at the world around us—like what happened out in California this week or Paris last month we wonder why it seems as if he is letting evil win—why doesn't he do anything about it? No, because of our sins, we can't stand up before the Lord. It's like waiting and waiting for your wedding to come and when it finally does and put on your wedding dress it has a big stain on it that you will not be able to hide. "How can I stand up there in front of everyone—in front of my husband like this? I just can't do it."

In reality, the stain on our garments is much more serious, and much more noticeable to the Lord. Our garments are stained with sin. It is imprinted on our souls. It's who we are and what we do. There is nothing we can do to hide it from the Lord or cover it up. He knows

all our thoughts and desires, every hateful word that has come out of our mouth, and the wicked things we have done that we have successfully hidden from everyone else. And every single sin that you commit is another blemish, another stain—until every thread of clothing is stained with sin—and then onto your hands and head until you are completely covered. Sure we are Christians now, but even now we are tainted in sin. Even our righteous acts are like filthy rags. You can try to ignore it, and pretend that the big stain isn't there; but you know that it is—and the Lord knows too. On your own you can't endure his coming nor can you stand up before him when he comes again. And you fall into despair because there is no hope for you to save yourself. But that is why Christ came the first time. That is why he gave up the glories and riches of heaven to come down to the earth. He came to suffer and die to remove the stain on our souls to take away the guilt of all our sins and give us the robe of his righteousness, so that we no longer have the mark of sin, but we are covered in his holiness. Malachi uses two different pictures to teach us this. The first is that of a refiner. When one finds gold or silver in the earth it's impure—it has all sorts of other particles and metals inside of it. It has to be placed in a fire, burned and melted to remove all the impurities and out comes pure 24 carat gold. That is what Jesus does for us—and even more so. 24 carat gold isn't 100% pure; but when Jesus refines us—he removes all our impurities. By the shedding of his blood on the cross and makes us pure and holy in the eyes of the Lord. John says in his first letter, **the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.**

And he is also like a launderer's soap. Let's put it in today's language. You get a stain on your shirt, what do you do? You might pre-treat it by spraying it with "Shout" and then you throw it in the washing machine. And hopefully, it comes out clean—brand new. That is what Jesus does for us. He washes away our sins through the waters of baptism. We are stained with sin but through him we are cleansed and come out clean on the other side as we are draped in his white and righteous robe. And because it's Jesus who washes away our sins, there is no chance that there will be any stain left over. Isaiah uses a similar picture in his first chapter, **Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.**

When the Lord sends afflictions, he desires to turn our hearts away from sin and human remedies. He wants to squeeze out every hope

that is not his. When we come to such despair, the Lord cleanses us with his promises of love and grace and so he refines our hearts. By the work of the Lord, we are made pure and righteous. And we now stand as acceptable before him. We aren't this way on our own—we can't stand before God with our sin-stained garments. But in Jesus, the promised Messiah, we can. We are now acceptable in his sight because of Christ.

And he doesn't just make us acceptable, but he also makes our works. All our sacrifices mean nothing if our hearts are not pure. As we said before, even our righteous acts are like filthy rags—even our good works are tainted in sin. But Christ has removed our sin. He makes our works good and pleasant to the Lord. They are now a pleasing aroma to him. Through faith in Christ we are made pure. For faith grasps the righteousness of God and stands before him pure and holy. He makes our sacrifices—our offerings pleasing and acceptable to him. The word used for pleasing in verse four, uses the picture of something sweet. The Lord turns our offerings—often stale, foul, and rotten because of our selfishness and love for the things of this world, into something sweet tasting. It is through the Lord that we are able to offer an offering up to the Lord that he looks upon with favor. Who is able to stand before the Lord and endure his second coming? You. Not because of who you are or what you do; but only because of Christ. And so, what is your reaction? You give thankfully to the Lord, for even makes our gifts to him acceptable in his sight. We thank him by our words, by our offerings, and by our actions. And this is something we do willingly and cheerfully for we were nothing but sinners wearing garments stained by sinned; but now we stand before him clean and pure. Amen.