



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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Malachi 2:17-3:5

December 10, 2017
English Standard Version

“Hope for the Cynical”

The 2nd Sermon in an Advent series

“Christmas with the Minor Prophets”

Malachi 2:17-3:5

“You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied Him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”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; 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 refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.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. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear Me, says the LORD of hosts.”

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we need it. We need to be reminded of what Advent prepares us for! We need to look forward to the coming of the King. We need to not be so cynical that it eats away at our **hope**. We need to trust that Your promises are true and that what You promise, You will do. Enable us this day, to set our **hope** on Christ. And so we pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit, help us see Jesus, in His name we pray, amen.*

INTRODUCTION: “*Gold Rush*”¹

There is a show on the Discovery Channel called *Gold Rush*. I don’t know if you’ve seen this. It’s now in its eighth season. Does anybody watch this show? Wow, that’s surprising. I was totally unaware that people actually watched the show. I guess I should have known that since it’s eight seasons in. I’ve seen one episode. I don’t know why I stopped on that channel. I probably won’t keep watching it, but I was drawn to the show for a couple of reasons. The first is that the men and women there are really kind of roughneck, blue collar people, right? They look dirty when they’re clean. You know what I mean?

The other reason I like it (this will seem really random) is when they find gold, **it’s not all that impressive**. They do this special music, and then there’s this ... **dirty rock**. But everybody is **freaking out** ... “We’ve made it! We’re rich!” It’s hard to get excited about it, because, to be honest, it looks like something I could dig up in my backyard. I could just go out back, dig down, and pull something out of the ground and go, “We’ve done it!”

What’s happening in the show *Gold Rush* is they see some things that are there but are going to need to be drawn out. They’re going to need to be cleaned up. They’re going to need to be refined. They see the beauty of what’s there ... where I just see a dirty rock. They see the real value of **the gold** that is embedded in the rest of those impurities.

Now, the reason I’m using this story is because at least 12 times in the Bible, God is referred to as **a refining fire**. Our God and His relationship with us is one of refinement. As we think about the coming of Christ, as we think about the initiating love of God toward us who are sinners, as we think about God reaching down to save us, and in His saving us, transforming us and pulling out of us that faith that’s **refined as gold**. As the Apostle Peter teaches us in **1 Peter 1:6-7**, *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ so that **the tested genuineness of your faith** — *more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire* — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

And yet this **tested, genuine faith**, which the Bible says is more precious than gold, is often something we have a hard time seeing in ourselves. The Bible is clear that God sees us as incredibly valuable, which is why I ask you not to treat yourselves cheaply. God does not see you as cheap. The very blood of His Son is shed. God puts on flesh and dwells among us. The Christmas season, Advent, is about God initiating not only your ransom and rescue but purifying our lives and making us more like Christ for our joy and for His glory. God is ruthlessly about finding your joy and **hope** in Christ.

As I told you last week, the Minor Prophets chip away at our hardened hearts, reveal our lack of mercy, scrutinize our faith ... and then stretch it, make us long for better days ... and then give us **hope** for those days ... because they have been promised **by the God who speaks**. They confront us with the powerful, recurring themes of God’s love and forgiveness, our need for faith and repentance, and God’s demand that we listen to His Word, take it seriously enough to believe it, and then exercise **real hope** that what God says He will do. **Hopefully**, we’ll learn those things. We’re spending Advent looking and learning from a few of the Minor Prophets.

¹ The Introduction is adapted from the sermon “*The Refining Love of God*” by Matt Chandler, Village Church, Flower Mound, TX, 12/6/15, *Matt Chandler Sermon Archive*, [Logos Bible Software 7.11](#).

And today, we've come to the Book of Malachi. We see in Malachi that God is pleading with His people for more faith and trust in Him, forecasting the coming of Jesus, and explaining what happens when He comes.

But the people of Israel are having a really hard time doing that. They're even questioning the value of having faith at all. They've been so beaten down and disappointed by life that they've become **cynical**. And that's a disease you don't see coming until well after everyone else has diagnosed it in you. Which forces us to stop and consider the ...

BACKGROUND: The Who, What, Where, When, and Why of Cynicism ²

Cynicism is all around us. **Cynicism** promises a more sophisticated way of seeing. It promises to protect you from getting conned, being disgraced, suffering disillusionment, or losing **hope**. There's something deeply appealing about **cynicism** – especially in a world where we have to cut through so many shams and scams, phoniness and fake news, and the endless, relentless spin of the Capital. **Cynicism**, as we use the word today, has to do with seeing through and unmasking seemingly positive appearances to reveal the underlying motivations of greed, power, lust, and selfishness. It says that behind every respectable public agenda lies a hidden private agenda that is less noble and less moral. To be **cynical** is to **distrust** or **disparage** the motives of others.

Cynical insights, **cynical** perspectives, and **cynical** critiques are so much a part of modern life that we've gotten used to them. For those of you regularly on Facebook, you know that even the best of posts, or links to good, thought-provoking articles, will be met with **a barrage of cynical comments**. And **some of us** have been **the cynical commentators**. If the Apostle Paul was the "**chief of sinners**," then many of us are competing for the title "**chief of cynics**." You see, **cynicism**, at its root, is essentially **a negative judgment**. It stakes out no positive turf that it would have to defend. It can expose pride, boasting, selfishness, hypocrisy, and in our current climate, gross immorality, both real and imagined, and it can count on generating **utter disgust** in the hearts of its hearers. It's an easy way **to be emotionally cruel without being physical violent**.

I find it interesting that the first person to be tagged with the title of "**cynic**" was the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes. We don't know much about him, but we do know that the last part of his life was spent in a city that revered him, and that city was ... **Corinth**. Which should certainly illuminate our understanding when we return to **1st Corinthians** in January. Diogenes was committed to **driving out the counterfeit to make room for what was real**. He argued that wisdom was found in **unmasking others**. And he made it very clear that **cynicism** was not a school of thought, **but the voice of doubt**. And the voice of doubt was alive and well and running rampant in the time of the prophet Malachi.

Have you ever felt like the people of Malachi's time? Maybe for you it's sort of a **soft cynicism**. Life isn't going all that well. It seems that work isn't progressing like you thought it would. And it feels like the kids are always sick. Your parents are driving you nuts ... again. And let me disillusion the teens a little more ... **that's** not going to change when you get older. Your parents **will still** drive you nuts. It doesn't end when you're 30 or 40, or 50, and I'll let you know in May if it ends at 60, but I doubt it. We all suffer from the **soft cynicism** that comes from the ups and downs of daily life and routine disappointment. You feel like it's the same

² Much of the Background is adapted from [Seeing through Cynicism](#) by Dick Keyes, pages 9-24.

stupid thing over and over and over again. Life gets your **hopes** up ... only to let you down ... again.

Do you identify with that feeling? We say that we want things to be fair, but that's not really an accurate term. What we really want is for things to be **just**. And when we feel like things are **unjust**, we become **cynical**, and like the Israelites, we mumble and grumble, "*Where is the God of justice?*"

After all, we put our trust in heroes ... in athletes and coaches, in politicians and pundits, in celebrities and singers, in parents and pastors ... and one by one, they let us down ... they falter, and fail, and fall. They never quite measure up, and we dismiss it with a sigh, after all, they're only human. And without even realizing it, we make that subtle move from skepticism to **cynicism**. I mean, even this time of year, the Christmas season, holds out **hope** that life will be better. We get a ton of sappy holiday specials, which offer great kids, wise parents, kind bosses, cheerful neighbors ... and you look around and wonder ... How did I get stuck with **these people**? There's lots of words of joy and love and **hope** and cheer ... and you feel like those are just words that describe other people's lives. And I have no idea how to get them to describe my life? But we build this up to such a fever pitch that December 25th is almost an inevitable let down and we can't wait for December 26th, so everyone will go home. And the promise of Christmas leaves us unfulfilled, melancholy, and resigned to a life of **soft cynicism**.

And for you, God has brought forth the prophet Malachi. Malachi spoke to a **disillusioned, discouraged, and doubting** people whose experience didn't fit with their understanding of the glorious promises found in the earlier prophets. Their vision of the coming messianic age hadn't happened yet. Instead, they experienced **poverty, drought, and economic adversity**, and they became **disillusioned** with God and **doubted** their faith. Malachi's prophetic word confronts a people **skeptical** of God's promises, **indifferent** in their commitment to live in the light of those promises, and had become **cynical** when it came time to worship the Lord and serve Him with all their hearts. **Their love had grown cold** and when it came to talking about God, they had developed

2:17 – CYNICAL HEARTS ³

"You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied Him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

Apparently, the people have a problem. They're looking for the fulfillment of God's covenant promises ... and they don't see that happening. We're now in the time period after the exile. They've come back to Israel, back to Jerusalem, and they've been waiting for all these good things to happen. They've been given promises that God will do wondrous things when you come back from exile ... the temple will be rebuilt, the wall around Jerusalem will be rebuilt, the New Covenant will be implemented, the Davidic King will return, all their enemies will flee, **and all things will be set right**. And it will be glorious. There will be justice, and

3 The exposition of the text is heavily adapted from the sermon "Hope for the Cynical" by Dr. Sean Michael Lucas, preached when Senior Minister of First Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, MS, 12/6/15, www.fpcpca.net; And lightly adapted from the books, The One True Story: Daily Readings for Advent from Genesis to Jesus by Tim Chester, pages 141-145; Major Points from the Minor Prophets by John Blanchard, pages 264-267; and Opening Up Malachi by Dr. Roger Ellsworth, pages 62-70.

righteousness, and redemption. Except there wasn't. None of that has happened yet. And there's a sense of **deep disappointment.**

In the time of Amos, as we saw last week, the people were going through the motions because they were so well off, **they just didn't care.** But now, in the time of Malachi, the people were going through the motions, because they were so downtrodden, **they thought God just didn't care.** They still worship. They still go to the Temple, even though it seems to be a lot smaller than Solomon's Temple. They still say the prayers. But their hearts not in it. It's just not the way they thought it was going to be. They're still controlled by a foreign power. They have no king. And so they said the right words, but they didn't really believe it. They were saying the right things, probably using the Psalms, but they didn't believe that God was as good as these words said. And so God calls them on it, **verse 17 of chapter 2, "You have wearied the LORD with your words."**

Why? Because their hearts had become cynical. In fact, there were serious issues going on in their hearts. First of all, it was the evil people who were prosperous, and so they thought, God must like those guys. We're hurting, but they're doing well. For some dumb reason, He likes them, and therefore, **He doesn't like us.** Now, that's clearly **a cynical statement.** Because if you know anything about God, then you know that God is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably ... **holy.** And ... that God is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably ... **good.** And a God who is both **holy** and **good** could not delight in **evil** or **evildoers.** So why are they saying **this cynical thing?** Well, they say it because they're looking around. Promises of justice, righteousness, and redemption aren't coming true. And, in fact, they see the opposite. The day is filled with **social** injustice, **sexual** immorality, and **rampant** corruption. And the church, the temple, the priests, weren't exempt from it. Any of that sound familiar?

They were expecting the Kingdom of God. Instead, they got a world that sounds a lot like yesterday's news. A world in which justice and righteousness seem to be far away. God must not care. After all, if God cared, wouldn't He **do** something about it? And so they say, ***"Where is the God of justice?"*** I mean, **if there was justice in the world,** the wicked would get what they deserve and the righteous would be rewarded, right? **If there was justice in the world,** faith would be lifted up ... and evil would be cast down. **If there was justice in the world,** then our heroes wouldn't disappoint us, our leaders wouldn't fail us, and our families would fulfill us. And so they say, ***"Where is the God of justice?"***

And we see it every time there's a tragedy, don't we? There's some mass shooting, some traumatic event ... and everyone responds, me included, with something to the effect of "our thoughts and prayers are with them." And then comes **the cynical political backlash,** "they don't need thoughts and prayers, after all, God isn't fixing this." And so they say, ***"Where is the God of justice?"***

Now, that doesn't bother me as much as it probably should. Because, way down deep inside, I think it reveals a built-in need, a built-in desire, a built-in longing ... **for hope.** Few of these people are saying that God **can't** fix this, that God **won't** fix this, just that He **isn't** fixing this. And it's in line with this question, ***"Where is the God of justice?"*** Because, ultimately, they want the God of justice to show up. They want God, as the true hero, to enter the scene, and to bring justice and righteousness and to set all things right. And so, what does God say ... in response to that question? He says wait, and trust, and believe ... because **I will do all that I've promised.** And there is a ...

3:1 – COMING HERO

“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; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

The Lord is coming, and He will set things right. But first, He’s going to be preceded by a messenger, verse 1, *“I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.”* Literally, it says *“I send Malachi”* because in Hebrew, Malachi means *“my messenger.”* And so, in the near term, Malachi himself fulfills this. He is the last prophet in the Old Testament.

This is the last word ... until another Malachi shows up. Another messenger. With the same mission – *“and he will prepare the way before Me.”* ... John the Baptist. And as Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament, so John the Baptist would be the last Old Testament Prophet. And Jesus makes the connection between this passage and John. We find it in Matthew, Mark, and in **Luke 7:26-27**, *“What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.”*

It says, *“he will prepare the way before ME.”* The King is coming. The Lord, *whom you seek*, will come to His Temple, His dwelling, His holy place, His place of rule. And this forerunner will be *the messenger of the covenant*. And who is he preparing for? The Messiah, the Christ, the Lord Jesus. And He will bring justice. And He will bring righteousness. And He will set all things right. No more cynicism. No more skepticism. No more disappointment. And all the promises of God are yes and amen in Him. **2 Corinthians 1:19-20**, *“For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, ... was not Yes and No, but in Him it is always Yes. ²⁰For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory.”*

And we long for all that. We want that. We **hope** for all that. But we want it to come without difficulty. And that’s not quite what this text says, is it? Because the very next verse tells us that when He comes, He will be like a ...

3:2-4 – REFINER’S FIRE

“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. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.”

And so justice comes, but it comes in two ways – through refiner’s fire and through fuller’s soap. Now, fuller’s soap is like an alkaline rinse, taking out the stains. We know what refiner’s fire is. So first, fire. When the Messiah comes, it will be like a refiner’s fire, taking the gold and silver and putting it in the smelting pot, turning the heat way up, so that the gold and silver are separated from the dross. All the impurities would be consumed, and the now purified gold and silver would remain. There’s an old hymn, *“How Firm A Foundation,”* one of my favorites, and it has a stanza based on this text ...

*“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”*

And then fuller's soap. In those days, you couldn't buy soap as we know it. And this soap is more like laundry detergent. But no one sold Tide back then. So they would take some lye, and mix it into water, creating a mild bleach-like soap. And then you'd dip your clothes in the water, soak them good, and the soap would separate the dirt from the clothe. And then you would take the clothes out, hang them up, and beat them with a broom so that the dirt would fall off. You literally would beat them clean. So, what do these images mean?

Why are we warned about a refiner's fire and fuller's soap? Because when the coming hero arrives, when the King comes ... He's going to make us clean. He's going to make us pure. He's going to take our sin away. And He's going to make us ... **holy**. And part of the point here is that if you want a life of **hope** ... If you want your family to be the way it should be ... If you want your marriage to be the way it should be ... If you want your church to be the way it should be ... If you want your world to be the way it should be ... **Then you need new people**. You need people who have been **cleansed** from the inside out. You need people who've had their sins taken away and who have been **purified**.

And what would be the result of having all these new people? Well, when the hero arrives, when the King comes, when the Lord descends ... then we'll be able to worship. And we'll worship the right way. And we'll say the prayers ... with great faith. And we'll say all the right words ... and we'll really mean it. And we'll sing our praises ... with great joy. And we'll worship together, as one body, as the Temple where the Lord dwells, and we will have great love, one for another. And all of that will be an **offering of righteousness ... pleasing to the Lord**, and our **cynicism** will be replaced with **hope**.

But ... there's always a but ... the King not only deals with His new people, His cleansed people, His purified people, but He also deals with those who are **not** His people. And **against** them, He will be a ...

3:5 – CLOSE WITNESS

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear Me, says the LORD of hosts.” The hero arrives, the King comes, **and He judges**. The God of justice has arrived. And it is **justice** that He brings. And brings that justice **against** the sorcerers, who lead in false worship. **Against** the adulterers, who practice immorality. **Against** those who swear falsely, who advance themselves through fraud and deceit. **Against** those who oppress others, who take advantage of the weak – the hired worker, the widows, and the orphans. **Against** those who push the sojourner aside, who fail to maintain social justice for the immigrant and the powerless. But what's the root of it all? The God of justice comes **against** those who *“do not fear Me, says the LORD of hosts.”* He comes to cleanse and to purify. But if you aren't cleansed, if you aren't purified, then He comes in **judgment**. You either belong to Him ... or you don't. You trust Him ... or you don't. You worship and serve Him ... or you don't. He comes **for you** ... or **against you**. And in response, **you either have hope ... or you lose hope**.

CONCLUSION: Christmas Hope

Malachi spoke to the world a little over 2400 years ago. And he confronted the **cynicism** of his day, and our day. But he didn't do it by outdoing them with even greater **cynicism**, but by bringing **hope** to those who had lost **hope**.

The writer Dick Keyes, in his brilliant, though not easy, book, **Seeing Through Cynicism**, tells us that **cynics** are actually **disappointed idealists**. And that's because we're hardwired for **hope**. That we were created with **this genuine hope and longing and desire** for things to be **the way they ought to be, the way they were meant to be, the way they were created to be**.

In other words, when we say there's no justice in the world. When we say that the world is not the way it ought to be. The problem again is ultimately our own hearts. **Our cynical hearts** need to be made clean. **Our cynical hearts** need to learn how to fear God, to reverence God, to love God ... because He will change us, He will cleanse us, and He will bring us the **hope** of the coming hero, the **hope** of the coming King, the **hope** of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the **hope** of Christmas.

We still have **hope**, especially at this time of year. I mean, don't we have **hope** for our **families** to be safe, for our **kids** to do well, for our **parents** to be wise, for our **bosses** to be kind, for our **neighbors** to be cheerful, and for our **world** to make more sense today than it did yesterday? We **hope** that things would somehow be the way they ought to be. Why do we keep hoping that? We have this **hope** because something happened some 2,000 years ago. Something happened that fulfilled this prophecy of Malachi. Because the promised messenger came. And his father, an man named Zechariah, broke into praise at the news of his birth, and we read, **Luke 1:67-79**, "*And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, ⁷⁰ as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that He swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*"

John the Baptist came. John announced the coming of the King. The hero is coming. The King is coming. The Lord is coming. And John's message is very similar to Malachi's, isn't it? The true hero is coming. And He will set things right, **Luke 3:4-6**, "*As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*"

And then He came. And when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he exclaimed, **John 1:29**, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" And that's our **hope**. That we will be **cleansed**. That we will be **purified**. That we will be **saved**. It's the **hope** of Christmas. It's **hope** for you and for me. It's **hope** for the cynical. Think about that ... You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

*Our Lord and our God, thank You that You have spoken to us by Your Son. Open our eyes that we might see our **cynicism** and then see our Savior. God our Father, we bow before You and we confess to You that we often live as a people without **hope**. And though we claim the name of Jesus, our hearts turn **cynical** when things aren't turning out as we want them to. And yet, You specialize in bringing **hope** to the **cynical**. You **cleanse** our hearts and **purify** our minds. You restore our **hope**. Thank You that the King is coming! Thank You that we have a hero who won't let us down! Thank You that He comes to take away our sin! Grant that we may believe it ... and live like it ... and **hope** in it ... in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.*

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Titus 2:11-13

*“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed **hope**, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”*