

How have we wearied God? (Evening Service)

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, amen. Excuse my voice, folks. So my son, Ollie, he is a very enthusiastic confessor.

What I mean is, so let's say, be my daughter. So my little boy, Ollie's two. And so let's say, be my daughter, comes into the room crying. And I'll say, Ollie, son, did you hit your sister? And he'll go, yeah. Yeah. Every time. Every time. Ollie, did you spill that milk?

Yeah. Ollie, did you burn down that warehouse? Yeah. Burn it down. I mean, it's quite delightful, really. So we're doing this series in Malachi, Old Testament, last book of the Old Testament.

And the people, and I don't know why I can't read without these things. Here we go. There we go. In Malachi's day, the people, those folks, they didn't really share my son's trait of being sort of keen confessors. In the book so far, you've heard it if you've been around with us, right?

God will confront them about something, but there's always a comeback. There's always some comeback to God. For example, God would say, why are you dishonoring me? And the people, instead of humbly confessing, they'll say, what are we talking about? What are you talking about?

[1 : 4 6] What are you talking about? Nothing. What do you mean? Explain it to us. So the whole book is structured around these confrontations. And we see it in this week's passage. Let me remind you of the first couple of verses here. You've wearied the Lord with your words, but you say, how have we wearied him? What have we done? How have we wearied him? And God explains. Here's the kind of things you're saying. You're saying this. You're saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the law.

Or by saying, where's the God of justice? So God has grown tired of their words. And instead of saying, God, forgive us, they accuse God. God, you must like evil because you don't really seem to be around that much. So what's this all about? What's going on here? So here we go.

So the people of God have returned from exile. They've built this fairly mediocre temple, and they're doing churchy stuff. But they're mostly feeling pretty ripped off by life. And they're looking at all these sort of nations around them, these nations that don't serve the one true God, these pagan nations. And they're going, well, these folks seem to be doing really well, and we're slumming it here. And we're supposed to be the good guys. We're supposed to be God's people.

Where's the justice, they're thinking? You've probably had the same thoughts. Your secular friends seem to be having a great time of life doing whatever they want, and you maintain your values in all areas of your life. And you feel a bit ripped off. Business friends making sketchy deals, coming through unscathed, wealthier than you. I mean, these are things that Christians wrestle with. These are the questions of Psalms. How long, God? How long will your people suffer?

These are great questions. God, I don't understand the evil in the world. I don't understand terrorism. There are a thousand missing or murdered indigenous women in this country. God, I don't understand this.

[3 : 53] How can you let this stuff happen? Help me to understand. Help me to help. They're good questions. They're right questions. God doesn't tire of those questions. But that's not the feel you get from this passage, though. That's not the feel you get from the questions that the people of Malachi are asking, because they're not really questions. They're accusations. They're not soul-searching.

They're accusing God, and they're saying things like this, God, you don't care about evil. In fact, you kind of like it. Looks like you sort of like it. They're calling God unfaithful. And why are they doing that? Because they're trying to justify their own coldness of heart. They're trying to justify the way they're living. So this is how they thought about God, right? They thought, okay, God, you don't care about me. We won't care about you. You let me down, God. So I'll do whatever I want.

See, what they do is they justify themselves. And the way they do that is they redefine God as this kind of distant God that doesn't care about justice, doesn't care about evil. And that way, I can sort of do what I want. I can get on with my life because I know God doesn't really care.

That's what God's people in Malachi's time were doing. They're redefining God to suit their chosen lifestyle. I'm not sure if you've been tempted in this way, to rebuild God in such a way that lets you off the hook, to question God because he doesn't fit the way you think life should work.

Sometimes in moments of great audacity, we stand above God and we talk to him as if he owes us answers.

[5 : 40] When he doesn't show up in our lives the way we want, when he doesn't perform in the world the way we expect, we question God. But really, it's just an excuse to live how we want. That's verse one.

Now, but the great beauty of this passage is despite the arrogance of these people in Malachi's day, despite the fact that they kind of drag in God's name through the mud by accusing him of all sorts of things which is wearing him, despite all that, God still answers them. He still gives them a wonderful answer. He still responds to them. And that's the rest of the passage. So how does God answer his people? It's chapter three, verse one. Well, he doesn't give them an academic answer. He doesn't give them a treatise on the nature of good and evil. It's a very personal answer. He says, I'm coming.

I'm going to get involved. And he starts by saying, I'm going to send a messenger. You see that, right? I'm going to send a messenger, he says in verse one. And all of the gospels identify that messenger as John the Baptist. In fact, Mark chapter one directly quotes Malachi here.

And then the other part of verse one there, it talks about the Lord will come to his temple. Now, again, we go to the gospels and we recognize that as Christ. So God says to Malachi and the people, he says, I'm coming. At this point, Malachi's people might have thought, oh, well, that's good. Great, great, great. You're coming. But verses two and five squash any idea that the people should be sort of high-fiving each other, like, oh, fantastic. It's all got to be sorted. Because it says in the rest of the passage, two things are going to happen when God comes. Verse two, the people will be put through refining fire. And in verse five, the second thing that will happen, there will be judgment. So refining fire and judgment. But do you notice when it talks about the judgment part, see, it's not like this. It's not like the refining fire will come and that's for God's people and the fire is going to come and like the judgment is, oh, the bad people represented by James Wagner, like the pagan nations. It's like, God's going to make me like pretty and nice and funny. You know, it's not that. Verse five says this, I will draw near you, you for judgment.

The judgment is coming to God's people. So I think it's one of the great ironies of the passage and of the Bible in general that, you know, they're really wanting God to come and sort things out. But like us, they fall into the trap of thinking, yeah, God's going to sort out evil and other people.

[8 : 29] The guy across the street doesn't mow his lawns and looks untidy or the lady up the road who yells at my children, you know. God's going to sort evil out and other people. They forget that when God sorts out evil, he tends to begin with his family first. 1 Peter 4 talks about this. It's very straightforward. It says judgment begins at the house of God. Okay, right. So where are we in the sermon? I'm getting myself confused. Let's regroup. Let's regroup for a moment. God's people are complaining, dragging God's name through the mud. Life's going pretty good for all the people around them who are doing evil, but really they're kind of just accusing God because it gives them an excuse to be sinful themselves. And they say to God, where's your justice? And God says, I'm coming. I'm coming.

But I'm coming with fire and I'm coming with wrath. So refining and judging. Those are the two things I want to talk about for a couple of minutes here. So let's start with refining. What does the passage say?

Verse 2, for he is like a refiner's fire and like full of soap, which is like a soap used to kind of bleach things, make white things whiter. Verse 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'll bring offerings and righteousness to the Lord. So back in the days, silversmiths and goldsmiths, they'd have these little smelting pots and they'd pour silver and gold in them that were impure and heat them up and it would burn off all the impurities. And they'd boil, boil, boil until I could see their face shining in the silver. That's why they knew it was really pure at that point. And that's what Christ does with us because Christianity is not just salvation. It's not a ticket to heaven.

It's the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in your life to make you more like Christ. Now, that happening, that process is talked about as boiling over like a fire. So it doesn't sound pleasant. And it's not, you know, it's refining fire, but it's still fire. But our purity and moving on can only come by this process of a refining fire because in the fire, such a great picture to use because you can't burn yourself painlessly. You can't be refined painlessly. You can't become more like Christ painlessly. And the two ways that the Bible seems to talk about this happening, this refining fire, what it looks like in our life, a couple of the ways the Bible talks about it, there's probably lots of them. I'll mention a couple of ways. These two ways, one affliction and the second self-denial. Let's talk about affliction for a moment. So we're talking about refining fire, how it happens. One of the ways is affliction. We hear about affliction in James 1. Let me read one verse two here. Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. My brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. Various, it's a great word, various. Like lots of different trials. Various, it's like the junk drawer. You have a junk drawer in your house, in the kitchen, right? We have one in our foyer, like a junk drawer and you've got like paper clips and a couple of sets of keys you have no idea what they're for and some Superman stickers and like a handgun or something. You know, so I don't know. I don't know this continent that well, but I'm assuming, right? So various trials. It's like the junk drawer. It could be anything. Financial, relational, I don't know. It could be anything. I like this other word here, testing, the testing of your faith. So these trials, they'll test your faith. Now the testing is not like God's up there scoring it going, oh, no, no, no. It's not. God knows what your faith is.

God knows where you're at with your faith. The testing is for you to find out where it's at. So this big trial comes in your life and you start to question God and what do you do?

[12 : 48] You realize, goodness, I don't know what I think about this stuff. I don't know what I think about the goodness of God given I've been given this diagnosis or had this breakup or had this huge loss. And you dig deeper into him. And if you're a tree, your roots go deeper and the trunk expands and grows. That's God strengthening you. That's God burning off the dross. That's God making you more like Christ. That's God's purifying you. I'll give you another passage on this one. Romans 5, 3 to 5. We rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who's been given to us. It's a wonderfully hopeful passage, isn't it? It tells us that God is just, God's working in the mess of your life. Whether it feels like it or not, he's working in the mess of your life. J.R. Packer says this, he goes, God seeks the fellowship of his people and will send them both joy and sorrow to detach their hands from the things of this world and attach those hands to himself.

Folks, hardship. You know, that can be God changing us. That can be God purifying us. Now at this point, I need to make like a hundred qualifications of this point, don't I? Because pain doesn't always feel like being refined. And we don't always feel like God is at work. And you don't notice, you know, massive spiritual growth. Sometimes pain just feels like sadness. It just feels like grief.

It just feels like loss. And that's all you know. All you know is blackness. It just feels awful. You know, I said there's a hundred qualifications to make, but that has to be for another sermon, I'm afraid. We need to move on. So I've talked about refining fire. It comes through hardship and self-denial, both really unpleasant, obviously. Self-denial. A couple of very quick verses. Romans 8, if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Well, 1 Corinthians 9, I pommel my body and subdue it. This is another painful way God purifies us. He asks us and it empowers us to deny ourselves. A couple of quick things to say about this. And again, a reminder, we're talking about what the refining fire might look like in your life. A couple of quick things here. First, Christianity is not calling you to some bland, stoic, medieval, ascetic life. God doesn't say, give up beauty, give up art, you know, give up nice food. It's like we are only called to deny things that rob us of eternal joy.

Secondly, the other thing I'll say is if you want to be a follower of Jesus, and that's an all-in game. Christ can't be your advisor. He can't be your philosophical dialogue partner. He must be Lord.

[15 : 52] He can only be Lord or it doesn't work. So if you say, I'm all-in with Jesus, you give up your right to self-determination. You give up the right to say, I'll do what makes me happy, even if it's just for a brief moment. You deny yourself things. You deny yourself things. And that kind of self-denial is a radical thing to do today because you think about this. One of the highest values in our culture is the right of self-assertion, the right of self-definition. So think about this today in our city.

Self-denial, what an incredible act of rebellion in this cultural moment. But it's what we're called to do. Tim Keller has some great stuff on this. He just wrote a book about Christmas. If you want to Google that, you can read more about the self-denial stuff. Okay, so we're talking about the refiner's fire. God says he's coming. I'm bringing the refiner's fire.

It's unpleasant, but we want to be under the refiner's fire. If we're not under the refiner's fire, we're under God's judgment. So the big question is how do we make sure we're part of this group, the group being refined and not the group being judged? Look at verse 2.

Who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? The answer is no one. When Christ's refining fire comes, none of us can mount a defense. None of us can say to Jesus, actually Jesus, I don't need the refining fire. I'm a pretty fabulous guy.

You know, just great. There's no defense. If you want to be in the refiner's fire and not under his judgment, the answer is in verse 5.

[17 : 44] Right at the end of verse 5, it's got this list of sins to be judged. And then it says, these are people that don't fear God. They don't take God seriously. So let's go to that passage.

So the beginning of verse 5 here, there's a list, right? People under God's judgment. And you notice they're not the pagan nations. God's talking to his own people here. He will bring judgment. This is not an exhaustive list. It's a sampler. He'll bring judgment on the sorcerers, the adulterers, the liars, those who don't pay the poor fairly. It's fairly topical at the moment, I think.

Those who ignore and oppress immigrants. Again, that's a fairly topical thing, isn't it? God will bring judgment on these people. And again, his overall assessment is this. These people don't fear God. They're supposed to be his people. These are his people and his church, and these people are doing these things, and they're doing them because they don't fear God. They're fooling around with God. These are people who are pretending to live Christian lives. They think it's okay. They turn up the church. They throw a loony in the offering pot. I'm all good. This is great. But they have no reverence, and God has no impact on how they really live. In some ways, I have far more respect for the honest pagan, the honest non-Christian. In some ways, I think they have more integrity than the lukewarm Christian. Folks, if you are part of God's family, but living that way, eventually you'll be scooped out of the refiner's fire, and you'll find yourself under God's judgment. That's the warning of the passage. So let me urge you, as we just finish up here, life's really messy. Life is really messy, and sometimes God doesn't make sense to us. And we want to shake our fist at him, and we want to say,

God, why do these things happen to good people? London, third terrorist attack in the year. Why do these good things, why do these terrible things happen to these good people? We don't understand what God is up to, and we are tempted. We can be tempted to use that as an excuse just to do our own thing. And what is God's response to this? Why do bad things happen to good people? God says, I allowed the worst thing to happen to the best person ever. That's God's response. I allowed the worst thing to happen to the best person ever. I allowed the cross to happen to Christ. And God let that happen because he cares more about justice than we do. But he loves us more than we know.

So when justice had to be meted out, he let it fall on himself for us. That's God's response to our questioning his justice, his goodness. Folks, this is a God we can trust with the messiness of this world and with the messiness of our life. Amen.