### “Was Tested” Steve Finlan for The First Church, January 28, 2024

**Malachi 3:1–4**

1See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2But 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 descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Hebrews 2:14–18**

14Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God . . . 18Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Who understands this life that we live here on earth? Aside from our fellow humans, who is familiar with the radical ups and downs, the hopes and dreams, the disappointments and compromises? Does God know what this is like? We’ll return to that question later. Let’s start with the Malachi text first.

The figure in the prophetic text seems to be the Messiah. “Messenger of the covenant” would not necessarily be the Messiah, but the next line really gives it away: “who can endure the day of his coming?” (Mal 3:2), and then it says he will “purify the descendants of Levi” (3:3). So he looks like a priestly Messiah, or at least a Messiah who will straighten out the priesthood. They will be refined and purified, until they are worthy of their office. God works hard in this passage. Malachi says he actually sits down “as a refiner and purifier of silver,” purifying the Levites, refining them, “until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness” (3:3). The priests have to be perfected before they can do the right thing.

There is something similar in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, but let’s start where our quotation starts. The author talks about Christ needing to share flesh and blood with the children, “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death” (2:14). He seems to be saying that Christ couldn’t have destroyed the power of death unless he, too, died, like those who consist of flesh and blood, namely, humans.

And what is the result? That he should free those who “all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb 2:15). That, of course, means humans, not angels, and then he says exactly that. Further, he means Jews, not Gentiles (2:16). This shows that he is writing for a Jewish Christian audience, but we Gentiles nevertheless can get meaning from what he says. He shows how thoroughly Jewish he is by talking about the Jewish priesthood, and picturing Jesus as a new high priest. How interesting that he talks only about the moral and life-experience qualifications for the priesthood, saying nothing about scriptural knowledge, training, or ritual function. It is what is *inside* that holds the key.

The Messiah is qualified for his role as high priest by what he suffered. He became flesh and blood, like unto his brothers and sisters in every respect, and he was tested by what he suffered (2:14, 17–18). This fellow-suffering is seen as an essential experience for a faithful high priest. The qualifications have nothing to do with daily priestly functions, but have to do with moral character and things endured. Hebrews will go on in later chapters to picture the Messiah performing a ritual function, but I am more interested in the moral qualifications that the letter spells out here, and especially in the idea that he had to share flesh and blood, a human experience.

In other words, the Messiah had to experience a human life to the fullest. Nothing is said here about miraculous power or about heavenly voices. It is the suffering and testing of the human Jesus that is seen as providing the qualification for his priestly Messiahship. Hebrews is the only New Testament writing that pictures the Messiah as a priest. So it is an unusual and interesting text.

In the same way, Malachi is an unusual text among the prophets, resembling only two other prophets, Ezekiel and Joel, in the degree of its identification with the priesthood. The idea of a priestly Messiah occurs in only *one* New Testament work, Hebrews. It is a secondary image, therefore, as far as early Christian thought goes. But it contains that essential idea that Jesus saved us from being “held in slavery by the fear of death,” that “he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect” in order to do that (Heb 2:15, 17).

Only one human could show another human how to be fearless. No angel could do that. Only a human returning from the dead could demonstrate the reality of life after death for humans. And that’s part of how he banished fear, by appearing to believers after his Resurrection.

He also taught that a glorious and progressive afterlife awaits believers. He said “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life” (John 6:40). He prayed to the Father “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). It is this promise of an afterlife with God’s love in our hearts and continuous fellowship with Jesus himself that gives us the courage to face death. Spiritual knowledge can give us courage. The truth can set you free—in this case, the truth about everlasting life, and freedom from the fear of death.

What about the testing that we endure in this life? Hebrews writes, “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (2:18). He can help us because he can understand us. We’re being tested by life constantly, aren’t we? Sometimes we’d like to say “enough with the testing. What’s the goal? Where are we headed?” A few verses earlier it said that God was “bringing many children to glory” (2:10). The goal is that we should be transformed and taken up to the spiritual realm. The purpose is life and growth everlasting.

I don’t know if testing is an essential part of the journey. It might be. Jesus certainly knows what it is like. He is our sympathetic older brother, in that regard. He was sent to share flesh and blood, and to live through a human life all the way to the end. Only then could he say “It is finished” (John 19:30). He finished the earth life, a hard one, but one where he touched many lives and changed them, and a life that we now study to learn how to live loyally as a child of God. His whole life was a revelation.

My charge to you today is to study the life of Jesus. Study his compassion, his hostility to any kind of arrogance or superiority. Notice his emotions, how he sees rich people putting money into the treasury, then sees a poor widow putting in the last of her money, and draws the disciples’ attention to her and says she put in more than all the rest (Luke 21:1–4). Notice how he goes out of his way to serve the little people, the suffering, how he stops his preaching to minister to a group of people who tore apart the roof over his head in order to draw close to him (Mark 2:3–5). Even when performing miracles, he shows his very human feelings of pity and affection. Study his life and learn from it. Learn about God’s kindness and openness to people of other religions, to children, to crippled and sick people, to widows, and even to tax collectors, who were wealthy but were looked down upon by others.

Further, we can trust him, since he knows what life is like here. He is not some remote and lofty deity who knows nothing about human struggles. He had to struggle, too, although he never had to struggle against evil motives, as we sometimes do. Let us aspire to live faithfully and devotedly, as he did.