

The Joy of Grace
(grace; God's love; promises)
Malachi 4
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There hearts were breaking as they sat in my office and quietly wept.
AS they alternated between composure and tears they spilled out the pain of knowing their son was rushing headlong into a spiritual wilderness and a lifetime and maybe an eternity of separation from God.

They loved him! Yet nothing seemed to penetrate his wall of disregard for God and his fascination with sin.

Have you ever loved someone deeply?
Have you witnessed them heading for trouble and nothing you said or did seemed to dissuade them?

Have you felt the hurt in your heart when you thought of the consequences of their actions?

God loves you that deeply?
And through his messenger Malachi he calls out yet one more time - "Turn and follow me, experience my love, enjoy my presence, know my grace, be my child.

We come today to the last chapter and lesson from this last book of the Old Testament - Malachi.

For nine of the last eleven weeks as we have studied this prophet's message we have read of God's loving call to repentance.

A call, that without any difficulty, we can apply to ourselves.

Please open your Bible to Malachi 1.

To set this final message in context please review with me the primary thoughts of the Prophet through the book:

We saw in chapter 1:2-5 (note especially verse 2) that God began this message to his people with a pronounced declaration of his unconditional love for them.
He loves them deeply.

It is because of His love that he will take the time to explain the predicament they are in and his offer of mercy.

In the verses that follow from 1:6 through 3:17, God spells out the sin of His people - sin that will, if unchecked, destroy them.

In 1:6-14 God indicts them for their thoughtless worship.

In 2:1-9 He charges them with caring far more for other things in life than Him.

In 2:10-12 He says they evidence that disregard for their relationship for God by marrying people who are not committed to Him.

In 2:13-16 He further evidences their disregard for God by pointing out their covenant breaking divorces from each other.

In 2:17-3:5 God challenges their cynical unbelief when they say it is futile to serve God.

And in 3:6-12 he says another evidence of their hypocritical relationship to Him is their failure to give their offerings.

These six activities and attitudes reflect the real heart of these people - they may call themselves God's people but they are not.

The question of the people implied at the end of chapter 3 is "What difference will it make?"

In their cynicism, they ceased to believe that how they live will truly matter.

And so at the end of chapter 3, especially verse 18, God makes it clear that such disregard for God, as evidenced in their lives, will make a difference.

As earlier in chapter 3, so now in chapter 4, God places in sharp distinction the destiny of those who serve Him with those who do not.

Last week we took an excursus and looked at a panoramic view of the events of the end of life.

Today we are going to "zoom in" on one period of time out of that panorama:

As Malachi does in the 4th chapter, so we will look more closely at that day when Christ comes. READ 4:1-3

The "day" that is coming or the "day of the Lord", as it is called in verse 5, as most of you know is a reference to the coming of God to earth in a powerful and life changing way.

It is a reference to God's most dramatic invasions of time and space when everything on earth is altered.

Though there are other occasions that are called the "day of the Lord" they all look forward to one, ultimate, end-all invasion of time when the Son of God comes at the end of this age.

We refer to it as the second coming of Jesus.

It is that time to which Malachi is referring primarily in our text for today.
"Surely the day is coming!"

The point of this text is that day has both a dark and a bright side.
That "day" is both the worst of days and the best of days.

Look first at how Malachi describes that worst of days:

"That day will burn like a furnace."

We get a mental picture of intense heat from controlled fire.

The next mental picture to describe that day is one of "stubble" set on fire.
We moved from a picture of controlled intense heat to wild,
spreading fire that burns a field.

Growing up in the country, especially on a farm, allowed me
to see some things that help me identify with the agricultural
and rural metaphors of the Bible.

In the late summer, we would cut the oats or other grains
from the fields. The mowers would leave part of the grain
stalk standing in the field - about 4 - 6 inches.

The fields were dry and the temperature usually hot.

Only very occasionally but sometimes a fire would be
accidentally set to those "stubs" that "stubble" that remained
in the field.

You can easily imagine that intense, wild, wind-whipped fire
as it spread out across those fields.

It was an awesome and frightening spectacle.

The Lord almighty says that is what is going to happen in that day.

There are those who are going to be destroyed like that burning
stubble.

Throughout the Bible "fire" is used as a common metaphor for judgment and
destruction.

That judgment in the day of Christ's return is sometimes referred to as:
an unquenchable fire or the hell of fire or the lake of fire.

At other times this final judgment by God is referred to as:

the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

as the worm that never dies - reference to the body's decay.

as eternal darkness.

These are obviously all word symbols of an event and time period that is so dark
and terrible that it cannot be adequately described.

It is terrible, it is eternal and it is irrevocable.

Jesus said it lasts for eternity and when he comes and the door of opportunity is shut it is shut for good.

Who is this judgment for?

For whom is this day of the Lord such a dark and foreboding event?

God says in verse 1, it is for the "arrogant and the evildoer".

There are those who rebel against God in loud blasphemous ways.

They call themselves Christians but have no intention of following Christ. They may even brag of their eternal security as they openly disregard the commands of God.

But there are also those who rebel against God in quiet ways of hypocrisy.

They call themselves Christians and they give the overt signs of being Christians but, inside, their unbelief and self-centeredness are obvious to God.

This quiet hypocrisy is described in these chapters of Malachi.

These people mouthed worship but they did so thoughtlessly.

These people gave their offerings but they did so reluctantly and miserly.

These people married in God's name but they married contrary to God's will and they divorced at their will.

These people said they belonged to God but they gave their hearts and lives to other pursuits.

Whether it is the loud blasphemous rebel or the quiet hypocritical rebel their end is the same - eternal judgment.

But if you look at verse 2 you will see that in sharp contrast to that day of judgment is another aspect of that day.

The same day that brings the furnace heat of destruction for the rebel also brings the "sun of righteousness" for the faithful.

Though the description of judgment is necessary because it is truth, it is this description of the joy of grace that I most wanted you to see today.

This second verse is filled with bright, joyous, life-giving, happy word pictures.

In contrast to a burning furnace that day will also bring the "sun of righteousness".

Though Malachi may not have seen it clearly, this "sun of righteousness" can be none other than the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus.

When I look at the context of this passage and when I think of all the ways throughout the Old and New Testaments Jesus is referred to as light I must draw this conclusion.

David called him the fountain of light
Balaam called him the star out of Jacob
Isaiah said he is a great light and the light of the gentiles
Jeremiah called him the Lord of Righteousness.
Luke called him the rising sun
John called him the light of the world and the light of men.

Malachi in essence says what the sun is to the earth the messiah is to the hearts of His people - those who are truly His.

If you will look at verses 2 and 3 you will see there are at least three things Jesus brings when He comes again:

The first is healing.

The picture is of the sun rising and the rays of light spread out like wings in both directions.

So when Jesus comes again our bodies and our souls will be finally and completely perfected.

No longer a struggle with sin.

The hard battles with temptation, the weaknesses of our immature spiritual lives, and the too-oft repeated failings will be over.

And no longer the burden of a dying sin-afflicted body.

Our weak body in spite of a willing spirit, our often sick or diseased body will be changed.

Please look with me at Romans 8:18 and following:

When I see this description of the healing wings of the sun of righteousness

I cannot help but think of Paul's description of the resurrection of believers.

READ 8:18-23 especially vs 23

As Paul told it to the Corinthians:

The body that is buried perishable is raised imperishable.

It is buried in weakness it is raised in power.

It is buried a natural body it is raised a spiritual body.

Just as when we were describing judgment so this language has limitations when describing what those resurrected bodies will be like BUT they will be real and they will be healed of all their limitations.

The judge who comes with fire to destroy the arrogant and evildoer will come as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings for those who revere his name.

Not only does he bring healing but notice in verse 2 he also brings joy.

READ 4:2b "And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

For you city-slickers to understand this I ask if you have ever owned a puppy?

Have you ever been gone from your home and that puppy for a while and then returned?

Didn't that puppy almost turn inside out with joy at seeing you again?

His whole little body vibrates as he turns round and round in excitement.

I know what it is like to see a herd of calves that have been penned up in a barn all winter finally released into the green fields in the spring.

They will run and frolic and sometimes stand in one spot and just jump up and down.

It is unrestrained, uninhibited joy.

You can't help but smile at the sense of freedom they experience.

It is that picture Malachi paints describing the unrestrained, uninhibited joy that will be ours when the Sun of Righteousness comes again.

Oh, we have believed He is coming,
we have believed faithfulness would be worth it,
we have trusted that the end will be as He described it -
But to see it, experience it, live it - oh what joy!

But not only is there healing and joy there is also SATISFACTION:

Look at verse 3 - READ

This is not petty vengeance - a feeling of "they sure got theirs!"

No, this is a satisfaction that justice has been served.

God's Word and will have been vindicated.

God's honor has been fully revealed.

Will there be no sadness over the lost?

If there is it is overpowered by the sense of justice - We will agree with God that what has happened is right.

All that is discordant, all that is out of whack, all that is wrong will be righted, corrected, made right.

The evil that caused the millions who died at the hands of the Hitlers, Stalins, and Pol Pots of the world will be destroyed.

The wickedness of human hearts that causes adults to abuse children, children to hate their parents and people to betray each other will be forever gone.

The earth and relationships will be as we have known all along they were meant to be.

It is the ultimate of satisfaction.

And WHO IS IT that will experience this healing, joy and satisfaction?

Those who revere God's name.

It is those who give God the glory due Him.

It is those who stand in awe of the God others mock and ignore.

It is those who trust him and love him.

What a day that will be!

The Son of God will come as a burning furnace for those who do not trust God and He will also come with healing in his wings for those who do trust Him.

As we saw last week - "Will there be a distinction between those who serve God and those who do not?" Oh, yes there will be a great distinction.

But Malachi does not end his book there.

He does not simply describe the end, He offers mercy.

READ 4:5-6

Elijah was a courageous spokesman for God in his day - several hundred years earlier than Malachi.

In the writings of the prophets, Elijah became symbolic of men down through the ages who would be forerunners, special heralds of God's dramatic interventions in history - those "days of the Lord" of which I earlier spoke.

Even in the New Testament John the author of Revelation says an Elijah figure will come just before the 2nd coming of Jesus. This Elijah will announce Christ's coming.

In Luke 1 before John the Baptist's birth the angel announces that he will be the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5&6

In Matthew 11:10 Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Malachi's Elijah.

What Malachi is doing in verses 4-6 is describing not the 2nd coming of Jesus, that great and dreadful day of the Lord but he is describing the first coming of Jesus - what we call Christmas.

Before God comes in judgment he comes in mercy.

God says that before He comes in that Day of the Lord when all is over, He is coming first with a message of repentance.

Look at verse 6 it is a message of repentance that results in people's relationships being changed. Hearts are changed.

It doesn't take much of a look into our own attitudes, our own hearts and motivations for us to see that we are a sin-sick people in a sin-sick world.

It is not only the Hitlers, Stalins, and Edi Amins of the world who are sin -sick.

It is not only the millions in homes across America who are abusing each other who are sin-sick.

It is not only those whose names appear on our television screens during the nightly news who are sin-sick.
We know that we have the disease within us as well.

And where is the doctor for the human heart?

An Elijah-John the Baptist person came 2000 years ago announcing the Messiah.

The Lord Jesus Himself came and he came not to condemn (that comes next time) but to save.

The Sun of Righteousness will come not only at the end of this age but he has already come - rising with healing in his wings.

He is righteous, He alone is perfect, He alone has the ability to forgive sins and heal our souls.

He offers forgiveness, cleansing and healing - changed hearts.

Are we like Malachi's first readers - quiet hypocrites rebelling against the authority of God in our lives?

God calls us to change our minds, to repent.

To agree that we need the healing of our souls.

To seek his mercy, ask his forgiveness and accept his grace.

God's call is to us - we who call ourselves God's people.

He wants to revive us, save us, restore us to himself.

Will you respond to his mercy today?