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Christmas: The Dawn of a New Day

Malachi 4 is a passage that is inextricably associated with the coming of Christ. It is the tail end of a pericope in which God details the blessings that awaited His people in a judgment that was coming upon the land (Malachi 3:13-4:3). Yet we are only going to look at the end of the prophecy as it describes the reason Christ came to this earth and so the meaning of Christmas.

In the course of our study on the Prophets, we have seen many prophetic tools used to communicate truth. For example, we've seen these:

- Prophetic Signs and Acts- like Jeremiah's under ware which he wore on a 350-mile

journey, buried, and months later dug up; this was to picture what the people's pride looked like to God (Jeremiah 13).

- Repetition- consider Isaiah's "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3b)! This was not stated because there are three persons in the Godhead, but for emphasis! God most certainly transcends anything and everything in creation!
- Progressive Parallelism- as in the book of Daniel which records the same history twice- first in Daniel 2-7 and the second in Daniel 8-12. By taking up the same history, truth is proclaimed primarily through contrast.

An important tool which we have seen throughout our study of the prophets comes into play in the text before us... it is called Telescoping. A telescope there are two lenses. Individually both are important and powerful, yet by themselves they are worthless when it comes to seeing distant things. But when we gaze through both of the lenses at once, we see things we could never have seen with just the one lens! So, it is in the prophetic corpus. God will announce a judgment which will have a dual fulfillment. Accordingly, for us to understand what God is doing, we have to consider both together.

The most well-known example of Telescoping is Isaiah 7:14 where we read of the virgin who would bear a son whom she would call "Immanuel." Now, we know that in the NEAR distant future from the perspective of Ahaz/Isaiah, a child would be born — a child whose coming would mark the defeat of the nations Ahaz feared. But we also know from Matthew 1:23 that CHRIST ultimately was in mind when this prophecy was given. His birth marked the demise of Satan's Kingdom!

So for God's people to appreciate the first element of this prophecy (Isaiah 7), ultimately they needed to be mindful of the second fulfillment — of the coming and so the regency of Christ, their Messiah (Matthew 1)!

In this regard, it is important we understand a peculiarity of Telescoping. From our perspective, looking at a telescope we know that there are two lenses. Accordingly, when dealing with prophetic telescoping we know to look for at least two points of fulfillment (there could be more). Yet from the perspective of those using a telescope, the image will NOT appear as two, BUT one!

And so it was with the original recipients of a telescoping prophecy. From their perspective, what is proclaimed to them will seem as one event — which no doubt is why Peter recorded the struggle that many a prophet had in understanding what God had given them by way of revelation (cf. 1 Peter 1:19-21).

All of this is important because the passage before us utilizes the prophetic tool of Telescoping. As such, it presents what we know to be distinct events in redemptive history as if they were one. Accordingly, "the day" as referenced in Malachi 4 actually refers to the whole event of Christ; from His First Advent all the way to His Second Coming. In light of this, when we think

of Christmas we must think of this “day” — from the birth of Christ all the way to His Second Coming and so the consummation of the age in which we live!

With that, notice a couple themes in this passage associated with Christmas. The first theme is that there is a day of judgment.

Malachi 4:1, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,¹ says the Lord of hosts, ‘so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.’”

The imagery here is a severe drought caused by an intensively hot sun where parched vegetation self-ignites, and dry fields become an oven! Such was the first thought that came to Malachi when he thought of the coming of the Messiah and so Christmas! It would be a Day of Judgment!

I dare say few if any here would think of this as peering into the manger. In fact, any time I have referenced this message in relation to Christmas, there are always some who don’t like it! In this regard, the observation of the late R. C. Sproul is quite apropos:

Somehow, we love to hear the story of blessedness, but we never want to hear the woe. I don’t think there has ever been a culture in the history of the world that has experienced more discontinuity at that level. Everywhere in this country you see automobiles with bumper stickers that read, ‘God Bless America.’ After 9/11, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell suggested that perhaps the events of 9/11 were God’s judgments upon America, and the outrage and the outcry of the press was so severe they had to recant their musing on that point because we believe in a God who is infinitely capable of blessing people, but is utterly incapable of cursing them. (Sproul, 2008)

And so it is when we think of Christmas! Yet you must see that when the Christ-Event was contemplated in the Old Testament, the message involved judgment! When Adam rebelled against God, this world came under a curse.

=Genesis 3:14a, 17: “And the Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field’... Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, “You shall not eat from it”; Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.’” - do you understand what this means? When the Lord blesses a land, a nation, or a people, that which brought something out of nothing- His creating and/or redeeming grace- is operative such that the effects of the curse that rest upon that land is softened. Yet without God’s blessing, the land, the nation, the peoples are given over to their sin. You all know and have heard of...

Numbers 6:24-26, “The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you

peace.”

This is what it looks like when God blesses a people. Yet consider the opposite and so what it would mean to be cursed; R.C. Sproul put it this way, “The Lord curse you and abandon you. The Lord keep you in darkness and give you judgment without grace. The Lord turn his back upon you and remove His peace from you forever.” (Sproul, 2008) Such is the world on account of the fall!

Romans 8:20, 22, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it... we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.”

And yet, that is not all. For we know that the Fall involved nothing less than the toppling of God’s Kingdom! Recall, at creation, God established His Kingdom on this earth with the intention of co-reigning over this world with Adam, Eve, and their children.

Genesis 1:28, “And God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

The world originally was a Kingdom over which God ruled with man! Yet when Adam succumbed to the temptation of the devil, the Kingdom of God fell and the world became subject to Satan and his demons. Luke speaking of the devil and the temptation of Christ wrote:

Luke 4:5-6, “And he [Satan] led Him [Christ] up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish.’”

When I have referenced this verse in the past, an objection is raised that Satan is a liar and so must be lying here. Yet think of it... Christ is God and so knows all things. Accordingly, Satan could NOT lie without Christ being in the know! And so for this to be a genuine temptation for Christ, it had to be true. Yet let’s not leave it as if it were my opinion. Listen to 1 John:

1 John 5:19, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”

At the fall, the world became the domain of Satan and so today lies in his power! As a result, we live in constant warfare (cf. Ephesians 2:2; 6:12)! In fact it won’t be until the Second Coming of Christ that God takes back the world from the devil.

Revelation 11:15, “And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.’”

When Christ returns, the reign and rule of Satan once and for all will be destroyed! Until then, this world remains in “the power of the evil one.” Yet that is only part of the story... which is where the text before us comes in! A common motif in Scripture is “The Day of the Lord” which is referred to in the passage before us, “For behold, the day is coming...” (Malachi 4:1)! Verse 5 also references this day in association with the coming of Christ! The Bible is literally FULL of allusions and references to this day. The expression is used by eight different Old Testament authors and three New Testament writers.²

What does the expression mean? The expression points to a time of wrath and judgment uniquely belonging to the Lord. It references that time when God vindicates His name by unveiling His character and so terrifying His enemies. Accordingly, just a:

- The non-believer has and continues to have their day on this earth.
- Evil and cruel men and women have and continue to have their day.
- Satan— from the fall to the first advent of Christ- had and in some way, continues to have his day on this earth.

The Day of the Lord is that time when God comes and has His Day- a day which involves judgment and the vindication of His name! That “Day” began with the coming of Christ! Now, from the perspective of the Old Testament looking ahead, the Christ-Event appeared to be as a moment in time. Again, notice the text.

Malachi 4:1, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.’”

Yet from our perspective, we know that this Day began at the first advent of Christ, continues throughout the current eschaton (which is what the signs of the time are all about), and will not be consummated until Christ returns a second time to judge Satan, his demons, the living, and the dead! Recall the instruction given at the end of the parable of the wheat and the tares, it describes the current age in which we live.

Matthew 13:30, “Allow both [the people of God’s Kingdom and those of the Kingdom of darkness] to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

And so, using the imagery of C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first advent of Christ marked the beginning of God’s day and so the beginning of the thaw of Satan’s hold over this world.

1 John 3:8b, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”

Did you get that? Christ came to do battle! He came NOT to bring peace, BUT a sword! And just to be clear, lest any confuse Christianity with Islam, the enemy and so the battle is NOT of this world.

John 18:36, "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.'"

In this regard, notice the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, speaking of the Holy Spirit:

John 16:8-11, "And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged."

Does this mean that when Christ came 2,000 years ago, Satan's Kingdom was destroyed? No! Yet Christ's first advent was the beginning of its end! And so we read Paul's exhortation to the child of God.

Romans 13:12, "The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

From all of this you must see that when we think of Christmas, we must think of the "Day of the Lord" and so judgment! It is that time when God's Kingdom once again violently broke into this world. And yet, this passage would also have us think of it as a day of gladness.

Malachi 4:2a, "But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness [which was behind the drought and fire of v. 1] will rise with healing in its wings..."

What an incredible contrast! The Day of the Lord, Christmas, represents nothing less than an "ultimate stroke of judgment" for evildoers; AND YET FOR THE CHILD OF GOD it is the glorious news of the rising of the "Sun of Righteousness"!

There is significant debate surrounding this verse and its reference to "the sun of righteousness." What does this mean?³ There is no question that the designation of "sun" has reference to glory, heat, warmth, and so life. Yet the next expression has fueled volumes of debate as it can be taken at least three ways. The "Sun of Righteousness" could denote these things:

- The Sun that *provides* righteousness (think of imputation).
- The Sun that is *characterized by* righteousness (Christ was and is without sin).
- The Sun that *promotes* righteous living (and so the doctrine of sanctification).

Each interpretation has its adherents. Yet the more I study Scripture⁴ the more I believe that in many cases the language at times is purposely broad to encompass all the nuances of an expression. For example, “For the love of Christ controls us...” (2 Corinthians 5:14a) is this referencing Christ’s love for us? Or our love for Christ? What is it that ought to control us? Answer: Both! There is no question in my mind that Paul purposely left it broad to incorporate both ideas!

In my estimation that is what we have in Malachi 4:2. Not only was and is the Christ-event a Day of Judgment, it also is a day in which a Righteous Lord rises in the hearts of man both to give them a right-standing with God as well as to instruct them unto right living⁵- that is the “healing” referenced here! And notice the result:

Malachi 4:2b, “But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.”

The picture here is of farm animals in the morning. At night they are placed in a stall which of course limits their movement (what a sober picture of what the Christian is in a fallen world).⁶ Accordingly in the morning when the sun rises and the animals are released from their stalls, what do they do in the warmth of the sunlight? They skip around enjoying the exuberance of life!

When we think of Christ, His work on the cross, the right-standing He has given us by grace, the blessings that accompany His service, the fruit of the Spirit, the future that awaits us in Him... there is an exuberance that comes upon us which we call “rejoicing”! And so while everything in this world may be against us, nevertheless welling up within us is the joy of the Lord by which we know *“It Is Well With Our Soul!”*

Taking this and the previous point together, where does that bring us?

1 John 3:8b, “...The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”

What does this mean? How would Christ do this?

Colossians. 2:15, “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities [this is speaking of Satan and his demonic host], He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”

At Christ’s first advent, the Lord literally stripped Satan of his power! The imagery here is that of a Roman Triumph where the conquered general would be paraded through the streets of Rome in chains being led by the victorious general! How and when did Christ do this?

Hebrews 2:14, “Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...”

In Christ's first advent, the Lord crushed the power that Satan had over death! Accordingly, if Christ is your savior, you need not fear death! In fact, consider what John taught the people of God as persecution became an *expected* part of life for the believer. They must never forget.

1 John 4:4b, "...greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

1 John 5:18, "We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him."

All of this means we live in this world as children of the living God fearing no man, demon, or disaster for the Lord almighty reigns! I love how Peter describes the Christian in this age:

1 Peter 1:8, "And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

Such is the glory of Christmas... it is A Day (and so a life) of Rejoicing and Joy as we "...look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18)! The text before us also describes it as a day of victory.

Malachi 4:3, "'And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing,' says the Lord of hosts."

When it comes to the Christ-Event, this clearly has reference to His Second Coming (cf. 2 Peter 3:11-12)!⁷ On THAT day, the wicked will be destroyed, we will be vindicated, and all of the threats, attacks, slander, persecution, trial, and difficulty that was suffered by the believer at the hands of wicked men and women will be as "ashes under the soles of our feet."

The idea behind this expression is not only victory, but something that has been completely relegated to irrelevance/insignificance! Think of an army of chariots. In the Biblical era in Palestine, the idea of being attacked by an army charging in chariots was enough to raise fear in the stoutest soldier's heart. Yet imagine days later following a victory in which the enemy's chariots not only were defeated, but subsequently burned (what else would you do with them as a community in Palestine?). Now to manage the soot of so large a fire the ashes would be thrown in the way to line the paths/roads.⁸ That means a week later, as you walked to the market, that army you feared would be "the ashes under the soles of your feet!" Talk about irony! A week ago, you were afraid of that which now lines the path on which you walked!

The metaphor is one of complete and total victory so much so that the threat, vibrato, and fear of the enemy is but a long and distant memory! That is what is being pictured here! Christ came NOT ONLY to destroy the work of Satan, BUT ALSO to restore this world to what it was prior to the fall! That means the day is going to come- and is fast approaching- when all in

Christ will walk upon the dust of the kingdoms of this world, their evil intentions, their folly and their threats! At that time we will enjoy the glory of Christ.

Revelation 21:4, "And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be *any* death; there shall no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

The focus of this verse is the end of the Christ-Event when the world is destroyed, death is swallowed up in victory, and we have been placed in a *renewed* world where righteousness dwells. In that day, we will walk upon the substance of a world which once- a long time before- witnessed our struggles, grief, tears, and despair.

That is what Christmas is all about... the destruction of Satan's Kingdom, the Re-establishment of Christ's Kingdom on this Earth, the salvation of His people, the Redemption of this world, and so the Dawn of a New Day in which the Sun of Righteousness will never set!

Works Cited

Sproul, R. C. (2008). *The Curse Motif of the Atonement*. Retrieved from YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS1RTBwO4Ys>

End Note(s)

¹ The image of stubble that is burned by fire is also found in Ex. 15:7; Is. 5:24; 47:14; Joel 2:5; Obad. 18; Nah. 1:10.

² Cf. Job 15:23b-25; Is. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18 [2x], 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14 [2x]; Zech. 14:1; Malachi 4:5; 1 Thes. 5:2-3; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Peter 3:10; and Revelation.

³ First off know that this expression is NOT used of Christ anywhere else in Scripture. Because of this, some have argued that this is NOT a messianic title, BUT simply a metaphor of the righteousness of God which here is said to resemble the sun. Yet the fact that this is the only occurrence of this title for Christ is not definitive by any means. Recall Christ's favorite self-designated title? It is "Son of man" taken from Daniel 7 which is the only OT use of this term for the Messiah. Accordingly, that a title is referenced only once does NOT preclude it from being Messianic. Truly, that which must determine whether or not a title is Messianic is the context which here clearly is referencing the coming of the Christ, the impact of this coming on this world, as well as His forerunner (again, look at Malachi 4:5-6)! So with the majority of commentators, I take this verse in reference to Christ. He truly is "the Sun of righteousness."

⁴ Specifically the debate surrounding whether or not a passage utilizes an objective and subjective genitive.

⁵ cf. Romans 13:11-14!

⁶ Are we not limited in our ability to serve the Lord on account of the darkness, cf. (Is. 9:2; Matthew 4:16)?

⁷ Again from the perspective of Malachi His first and second were blurred and so seen as one!

⁸ This would be just like "salt that had become tasteless" (cf. Matthew 5:13).