

The Sun of Righteousness

Malachi 4:1-6

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

- Malachi 4:1-6, ESV

Where is the God of Justice?

Sometimes we can ask a question for the wrong reasons but still be asking a pretty good question.

Pretty close to the heart of the Book of Malachi is the short section that ends chapter 2, where God’s people are complaining about the rampant injustice they see and the Lord’s seeming absence and inaction in the face of it:

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?” – Malachi 2:17

Now, obviously, the first statement God’s people make here is just wrong. They were measuring God’s favor by external measures of prosperity, assuming that everyone who is wealthy is being blessed by God because He delights in them. That’s a misguided perspective. But then they ask a really good question, even though it is wrong, because they’re asking it in cynical despair and not in faith. They were asking it about God and not pleading it before the Lord in prayer.

When we looked at this passage and others in Malachi, we saw that God’s people have often poured out their hearts to Him over this very question in different forms repeatedly, especially in the Psalms but also in other places. Here’s the prophet Jeremiah:

*“Righteous are you, O LORD,
when I complain to you;
yet I would plead my case before you.
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all who are treacherous thrive?
You plant them, and they take root;
they grow and produce fruit;*

you are near in their mouth

and far from their heart.

But you, O LORD, know me;

you see me, and test my heart toward you.

Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter,

and set them apart for the day of slaughter.” – Jeremiah 12:1-3, ESV

Living in this world, it's not hard to understand why God's people have often cried out this way.

Revelation 6 shows us that, even in the throne room of God in heaven, the souls of the righteous martyrs call out from the altar before God's throne: *“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” – Rev. 6:10-11, ESV*

In a world where men like Adolph Hitler can come to power and kill 11 million innocent people in death camps, including 6 million Jewish people, where communist regimes killed many times that number in their purges in the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia and elsewhere, justice can seem like a far-off dream. Today, somewhere between 21 and 46 million people are living in various forms of slavery, perhaps more enslaved people than at any time in the history of the world, even though slavery is illegal worldwide. What's not illegal is the vicious slaughter of the innocent unborn around the world, estimated to be over 50 million babies annually, or about 25% of all pregnancies worldwide.

Atheists point out the horrors we see in the world and they say it proves there is no God, for how could there be an all-good, all-powerful God and a world full of such evil and oppression? Of course, what they miss is that, if there is no God, the world has no evil in it at all; in fact, we'd have to conclude that there's nothing at all wrong with the world; it works exactly the way atheistic naturalism says it should: It's the survival of the fittest and a world where disaster and death are the engines of evolutionary progress.

For us as believers, who trust in the good God of the Universe as our Heavenly Father, we know the world is broken and cursed under the enormous weight of sin: prejudice, hatred, envy, greed, death, disease, persecution, oppression, loneliness and despair all have invaded God's good creation since the Fall, and we cannot simply accept them as good and normal. We ache for redemption. We long for justice. We yearn for God's good creation to be freed from its bondage, purged of its evil, and gloriously transformed from what it is now into what God intends for it to be forever.

Malachi ends his prophecy, and the Lord ends the prophecies of the Old Testament before the coming of Christ, with a strong message of hope and a warning to repent, for the certainty of the Day of Justice, the Day of the Lord, which is coming.

I. For the Arrogant and Evildoers: The Day Burning Like an Oven

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

The first verse of our passage proclaims what the Day of the Lord will bring for the enemies of God: *“all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble,”* on a day that *“is coming, burning like an oven.”*

First of all, who is Malachi talking about when he says, *“all the arrogant and all evildoers.”*? The arrogant are those who think they know better than God and think they don’t need God. They then do evil because they reject God and His ways. We may want to think this describes all the really bad people in the world, the notoriously evil ones like Hitler and Stalin and Ted Bundy or Charles Manson. Certainly, it does include people like that, but arrogance and evildoing are found in every human heart, and so this all-inclusive description really encapsulates all unregenerate unbelievers. Apart from the grace of God saving us, we are all born in sin, enemies of God, prone to evil. The testimony of Scripture on this point is abundantly clear.

All of those whose hearts have not been changed by God’s grace, and who do not lovingly trust Him and submit to His Lordship in their lives, are the arrogant and evildoers, and God says the coming Day of Judgment will be for them a day burning like an oven, and they will be as chaff. Psalm 21 uses similar imagery for the judgment of God:

*Your hand will find out all your enemies;
your right hand will find out those who hate you.
You will make them as a blazing oven
when you appear.
The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,
and fire will consume them. – vv. 8-9, ESV*

It’s important to note that judgment on the wicked is a consistent theme of the coming Day of the Lord. Nearly every time the Scripture speaks of the future hope of the believer on the Day of the Lord, it also speaks of the judgment of the wicked.

We don’t have time to look at all of the relevant passages, but here’s just a couple of examples, from 2 Thessalonians 1 and from Daniel 12 –

⁵ *This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—* ⁶ *since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,* ⁷ *and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels* ⁸ *in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those*

who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from^[b] the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thess. 1:5-10, ESV)

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Dan. 12:2-3, ESV)

The Day of the Lord is a certain and coming promise, the Great Day of Judgment, when, as Malachi 3:18 says, “you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.”

So, while this great coming day will bring terrible judgment and wrath for all the arrogant and all evildoers, for those who do trust the Lord, the day is one of overwhelming joy and triumph.

2. But for You who Fear My Name: The Sun of Righteousness with Healing

“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.”

What is the sun? If you ask Kathryn that, she might start singing an old They Might Be Giants song: “The sun is a mass of incandescent gas, a gigantic nuclear furnace.” The sun gives light and warmth and life to the world, but that same sun would also incinerate you if you got too close to it. The idea here in Malachi 4 is that the same fiery oven that consumes the wicked rises like a gentle sunrise for the believer who has been waiting for the Day of the Lord.

What is the sun of righteousness? It’s Jesus, of course, who is the shining radiance of the glory of God, according to Hebrews 1. His intense and radiant glory will be terrifying and wrathful for those who hate Him. Revelation 6:15-17 tells us what will happen on the Great Day of the Lord:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” – Rev. 6:15-17, ESV

And yet, how we long to see the coming of the Lamb! How wonderful that day will be for those who belong to Him by grace through faith. He is our long-looked-for hope as well as the unbelievers much-dreaded condemnation.

And for whom will this day be a day of healing and great joy? *“for you who fear my name”* Here, Malachi is combining the earlier phases we looked at last week, of “those who fear the LORD and esteem His name.” We either take the Lord’s name in vain or we fear His name and esteem His name; we can do this in our lives and with our lips, which is what the Third Commandment warns against – taking the Lord’s name in vain on our lips and taking His name in vain with our lives. Instead, we are to esteem and fear His name, which represents His character, on our lips and in our lives.

For those who fear God’s name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. Believers will be completely healed of all sin, sickness, fear, and shame. The language of Revelation 21:4 is beautiful in describing this healing: *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”*

I also love the language of JRR Tolkien, in the mouth of Sam-wise Gamgee, when he sees Gandalf the White, alive again: *“Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?”* It’s not a coincidence that Tolkien named that final volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Return of the King*, for when the King of kings returns, everything sad will come untrue.

Not only does the Sun of Righteousness rise with healing in its wings, but it also brings great freedom and joy to God’s people: *“You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”*

Calves who are kept in the stall are well protected and well fed, but when it is time to let them out, they leap with joy and enjoy their freedom. While we await the coming of the Lord in this life, we experience sorrow and longing, and we need to restrain our sinful desires and fight against our sinful nature. But when Jesus comes again, our sinful nature will be removed and we will be as perfectly holy and righteous as Jesus is in His human nature, and with the release from our sinful nature and the perfection of our humanity will come real freedom: We will be able to do what we want and it will be right and good and honoring to the Lord. We won’t ever sin because we won’t want to sin, and so we’ll never need to worry about restraining our desires.

Healing. Freedom. Joy. For the believer, the day that is coming is the complete satisfaction of our souls, the fulfillment of all our longings, the completion of our journey, the full and final arrival at our true and everlasting HOME!

It may strike us as odd that after such tremendous words of healing, freedom, and joy, the Lord then shares a promise of joy that comes in judging and trampling the wicked: *“And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.”*

On that day, I don't think it will strike us as odd at all. As Malachi has already prophesied, on that day, we will see more clearly than ever the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous will shine like the stars in the sky, while the arrogant and evildoers will have their polite and respectable masks removed to expose their hearts of hatred against God.

C.S. Lewis describes this exposure in beautiful language in his sermon, "The Weight of Glory":

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor.

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no *ordinary* people.

You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

3. **Two Key Men: Moses & Elijah**

And then, when we come to the end of Malachi, the last three verses are a reminder to us that we're at the end of the Old Testament, looking ahead to the first coming of Christ, and His forerunner, John the Baptist, and yet they have deep relevance for us as we wait for Christ's return, too:

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

For us, as New Testament believers, we are accustomed to talking about the first and second comings of Jesus – that He has come once for us and for our salvation, and that He is coming again for judgment. But from the Old Testament perspective, it’s all just one coming of the Messiah. And really, that’s the way we should see it, too, even though we live in the days between the first and second coming of Christ – it’s really just one coming, and we’re in the midst of it.

Jesus came when He was born and lived and died and rose again. He abides with us as His body by the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is coming again to judge the living and the dead. But it’s all really one coming, and it’s all for us and for our salvation and for the judgment of the wicked. Jesus said during His first coming, *“Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”* (John 12:31) And, in fact, every time the Gospel is preached, and every time missions advances the Gospel, the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus continues to come, bringing both salvation and judgment to the world. So, it’s all one coming, the dawning of the Light of the World, who has come, is coming, and will come, and whose coming is both judgment and salvation.

As God’s people were waiting for the coming of the Great Day, God told them to remember Moses and wait for Elijah. He’s pointing them to His written word, the Law of Moses, the Law of God, the Torah, and pointing them ahead to a coming prophetic voice. They are to heed the words of the Law of Moses, which Malachi has been unpacking for them and applying to them. Yet, as the Day of the Lord approaches, God promises to send them Elijah.

Jesus made it clear that John the Baptist was the Elijah promised to come by God. It’s clear here in Malachi 4 that the Elijah to come is the same person as the messenger who will prepare the way from 3:1, and in Matthew 11, Jesus connects both of these Malachi promises to John the Baptist:

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written,

*“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.”*

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear. - Matthew 11:7-15, ESV

And we see another fulfillment of Malachi's words on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to pray, and there Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, to testify to Him. Seeing Moses and Elijah together should have prompted the disciples to think about Malachi's prophecy and to realize that Jesus was the fulfillment of these words.

For us, as we await the consummation of the kingdom, the final stage of the unfolding of His coming, these final words have some deep significance for us, too:

To remember the Law of Moses is to look back on what Christ has done and to seek to honor Him in our lives by obedience to His word. And the words about Elijah are a call to us to continual repentance, to seek always to have our hearts turned to the Lord in repentance and faith as we long for that day. Obedience and repentance, looking back and looking ahead, waiting in faithfulness and longing with earnestness – that's what these final words call us to.

For the people in Malachi's day, the prophecy ended with the word curse, as a solemn warning that they should prepare their hearts and not reject the message to come. They did not heed these words, and God did, in fact, strike the land of Israel with a curse, when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in AD 70. They rejected the testimony of John the Baptist, the Elijah to come, and the Son of God, the Lord of the covenant.

What about you, as you hear these words this morning? Are you trusting, believing hoping, waiting, seeking to obey and repent faithfully, daily, constantly? Or are you hardening your hearts? The sun of righteousness is rising, and one day, He will arise for all the world to see. Will that day bring healing, freedom and joy to you, or will it be a day burning like a furnace?