

Malachi 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Malachi chapter 4. 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. The book of Malachi, and with it the book of the Twelve, ends with a prophecy announcing the coming day of the Lord. The day of the Lord has been a consistent theme of the entire collection. Although the immediate referent of the day varies, from the book of the Twelve a broader picture of what the day of the Lord entails has emerged. It seems fitting that it should conclude with a chapter within which the day of the Lord is front and centre. Reading such treatments of the day of the Lord, we should not presume that they refer directly to the final judgment. The reference is rather to a judgment awaited in history at the end of the age. We live after the end of the age to which Malachi and many other of the prophets looked forward. Nevertheless, as we've seen in the book of the Twelve more generally, although there are several different immediate reference in view when the prophets speak of the coming of the day of the Lord, together they bear a more general witness to what this day of the Lord entails, one that ultimately will receive its fullest expression in the final judgment. The prophecy of chapter 4 continues the sixth dispute of the book. The people had questioned the value of serving the Lord, as evildoers were prospering and God's justice was nowhere to be seen. The people's doubting of God was also expressed in an earlier dispute in chapter 2 verse 17. 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? The Lord had responded to such unbelief with his promise of the coming of the messenger of the covenant at the beginning of the preceding chapter. When the messenger of the covenant came, he would expose the difference between the righteous and the wicked, as we see in the final verse of chapter 3, which is also part of the sixth dispute. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. However, the Lord had warned the people that, despite the fact that they thought that such justice was what they desired, they were presumptuous in thinking that they would be prepared for it when it actually came. When the Lord came to his temple to purge it, the priesthood, and his people of wickedness, the prophet doubted that any would stand in the consuming holiness of his presence.

The description of the coming day of the Lord in verse 1 underlines the devastation that it would bring upon the arrogant and the evildoers. The image of the consuming of the wicked like stubble or chaff is one that we encounter elsewhere in the prophets and the scriptures more generally.

The husks of the grain are blown away, and the bottoms of the stalks of the grain that remain in the ground, the stubble, is burnt up. John the Baptist uses a very similar image in speaking of the Christ's coming ministry in Matthew chapter 3 verse 12. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. The removal of the wicked is also described in terms of the removal of a tree, leaving behind neither root nor branch. As in the case of removing the chaff and stubble that remains after the harvest, the image of chopping down or uprooting a tree is familiar from the prophets. At the end of the preceding chapter we heard of some people who responded well to the message of the Lord through Malachi. The Lord had promised them in verse 17 that on the day of his coming they would be set apart as his own. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. The expectation of the righteous is here immediately contrasted with that of the wicked. Those who fear the name of the Lord, manifesting an appropriate posture of honour, reverence and godly dread before his holiness, would know healing, joy and liberty. The advent of the Lord's righteousness is compared to the rising of the sun, an image that is frequently employed within the New Testament, where Christ is compared to the dawn and the light that has broken through the darkness, heralding a new day.

The wings of the sun of righteousness might be drawing upon representations of the sun within ancient Near Eastern imagery. We encounter similar imagery in the expression the wings of the dawn in Psalm 139 verse 9. In scripture the wings of the Lord, typically connected with the wings of a garment or a tent dwelling, are places of protection and security, a place where people come for refuge.

We see this, for instance, in Psalm 36 verse 7. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. Here it is with healing that the wings of the sun of righteousness are especially connected. Things broken, awry, diseased and wounded will be restored and made whole as the Lord's light dawns. As the sun of the Lord's righteousness rises upon them. The righteous will be like calves, loosed from the confinement of the stall, leaping with joy as they enjoy their liberty. The darkness has ended and the new day has dawned. Part of the joy of the righteous will be in treading down the wicked. Perhaps at this point we might hear some resonance with the promise of the crushing of the head of the serpent. The wicked will be reduced to dust and ashes beneath the feet of the righteous, experiencing the full measure of the curse of death.

[6 : 09] The two-sided character of the day of the Lord is clearly on display here. The day of the Lord is devastating for the wicked, but for the righteous it is a day of joy, liberty, life and healing.

At the heart of the entire old covenant was the law delivered through Moses, the mediator of the covenant at Sinai. He has spoken of as Horeb with its various commands and practices. Several different commandments of the law have already been referenced in the book of Malachi, including laws concerning sacrifice, tithing and the priesthood. Moses the man stood for the covenant order that was established and communicated through him, which occurred in the Exodus and in the Lord's communication to his people at Sinai. He was the founding prophet and as the people went forward it would be all the more important to reground themselves in that covenant reality and revelation. Throughout the Pentateuch, one of the most prominent and pressing concerns is that the events of the Exodus are not consigned to past history, but that they remain a powerful living and formative reality in the present, perpetuated in such things as the tabernacle and temple and their service, in meditation upon and living out of the law, and in retelling of the story of their deliverance. This will be even more important when God's justice is not easy to see, and people are tempted to despair or simply to abandon their faith. It will be those who remember and observe the law of Moses who will keep their bearings in spiritually disorienting times and who will endure through trial. Perhaps of all of the figures in the Old Testament, the one who was most like Moses was Elijah. Elijah was another prophet who directly opposed a king, who performed most of his ministry in the wilderness, through whom the

Lord brought plagues and judgments, who met with the Lord at Mount Horeb, and who passed the baton unto his successor on the banks of the Jordan. Elijah was, like Moses, a man of zeal. He had ascended into heaven in 2 Kings chapter 2, having prepared the way for a greater work and judgment of the Lord that would come after him. He presented people with the great ultimatum of the Lord at Mount Carmel.

He paved the way for the downfall of the Umri dynasty and the transformation of the kingdom of Israel. In the New Testament, this figure of the prophesied Elijah to come is connected with the figure of John the Baptist. In Matthew chapter 11 verses 13 and 14, for all the prophets in the law prophesied and told John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. In Matthew chapter 17 verses 10 to 13, and the disciples asked him, then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come?

He answered, Elijah does come and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. In Luke chapter 1 verses 16 and 17, the angel's declaration to Zechariah that John will be born to him and Elizabeth and the ministry that John will perform also identifies him as the Elijah to come.

[9 : 20] It clearly alludes back to Malachi chapter 4, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. Zechariah's prophecy concerning his son John the Baptist also refers back to this passage in Malachi, also connecting it with the promise of the messenger in chapter 3 verse 1.

Luke chapter 1 verses 76 to 79. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

A few centuries after he delivered his prophecies, in the appearance of an angel to a priest in the holy place in the temple in Jerusalem, Malachi's prophecy of the coming day of the Lord and the Elijah-like messenger that would go before the face of the Lord was starting to come to pass.

A question to consider, can you think of other ways in which the character of John the Baptist is like the figure of Elijah?