

Malachi: Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy

Apathy Towards the Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:1-6)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 30, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This morning I get the privilege of concluding our series in the book of Malachi. I get to try to wrap it up and bring all the various themes together. Now we titled the series “Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy” because that seems to be the overarching issue that the people of God were dealing with in Malachi’s day.
 - They had returned from the Babylonian exile, resettled Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple – and now they’ve been waiting. Waiting for God’s glory cloud to return, to fill the new temple, to confirm his presence among them and his favor for them. But so far nothing. No glory cloud. No visible presence. No blessing or prosperity.
 - So, in time, they grew disillusioned. What’s the point of sacrificing to God? What’s the point of keeping our covenants either to God or to our spouses? What’s the point of giving a tithe? *"It is vain to serve God."* (3:14) It’s pointless. That’s what you start thinking when you’re spiritually apathetic.

- ❖ **Now what the Israelites wanted was for the day of the Lord to arrive.** The day of his return – for his visible presence to be among them as they heard it was for their forefathers. They were thinking, “I know I’m spiritually apathetic right now. But what would help is if God showed up. If he could just come and make his presence felt, then I would get out of this funk and be more spiritually devoted to him.”
 - How many of us have thought something similar? That we’d get out of our funk, our spiritual apathy, if only God would appear and make his presence felt. **We long for his day of visitation – for the day of the Lord. But do we know what we’re asking for?** Are we actually ready for that day to arrive?

- ❖ I don’t think the Israelites in Malachi’s day knew what they were asking for. **They thought the day of the Lord would be a bright day of deliverance. But instead, for many, Malachi warns that it will be a dark day of judgment.** In the book of Amos, another minor prophet, he makes a very similar point when he says in **Amos 5:18-19**, *“¹⁸Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, ¹⁹as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.”*
 - Picture it. There will be people who anticipate the day of the Lord as a day of deliverance. They see themselves as being chased right now by a hungry lion. So they’re hoping on that final day to be delivered. Only to be confronted by a savage bear. Or maybe they’ve made it safely into the house, shut the door, and bolted it behind them. The lion can’t reach them, but when they lean their hand against the wall to catch their breath, they’re suddenly bitten by a venomous serpent.

- ❖ **Those are evocative ways of describing the utter surprise that many will experience when the day of the Lord does not turn out the way they expect.** Now yes, for some, the day of the his visitation will be day of rejoicing. It will be a sweet day of deliverance. But the prophets make clear that, for others, the same day, the same event, will be experienced differently. It’ll be a day of judgment and destruction. Same day. Two different experiences.

- ❖ Friends, I don't want any of you to be surprised on that day – by what that day will be like for you. My burden as a preacher is to declare to you the whole counsel of God. **I want to be comprehensive enough and clear enough in my preaching that no one listening can say they didn't know there was a Day of the Lord coming.** And no one listening can say they didn't know that that day can be experienced in two starkly different ways. And no one listening can say they didn't know how to face that fateful day – not as a consuming fire – but as a rising sun with the warmth of its light beaming on your face.
 - So come with me this morning into our text to examine this biblical idea of a day of the Lord. First, we'll see how it will be a day reserved for fiery judgment. Second, that same day will be a day marked by joyful healing. And third, it'll be a day anticipated by remembrance and repentance.

A Day Reserved for Fiery Judgment

- ❖ Let's begin by considering how the day of the Lord will be a day reserved for fiery judgment. That's made clear in v1. Listen to it, *“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.”*
 - Now let's recall the context. **This warning is issued for all the arrogant, for all evildoers.** All the wicked, as we're told a verse earlier in chapter 3:18, who refuse to serve the Lord. One day, Malachi says, we shall see *“the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.”* The NT describes this distinction at the final judgment as a distinction between wheat and weeds (Mt 13:24-30) or between sheep and goats (Mt 25:31-46).
 - That just reinforces the point we've been making – **that on the day of the LORD there will be two outcomes.** All of humanity will be divided into two groups. Those who welcome the visitation of the Lord as a day of sweet deliverance. And those who discover that day to be a day of fiery judgment.
- ❖ This judgment will burn hot like an oven. And the fuel for that fire, the stubble, will be the arrogant and evildoers. **And notice how this judgment will be total and final.** If the wicked were a tree, and God's judgment were a forest fire – neither root nor branch will be spared. The entire tree will be consumed. So there's no hope of regrowth. There are no second chances. The fiery judgment that takes place on the day of the Lord will be final.
- ❖ Now it might not shock you to hear an OT prophet speak this way – of fire and brimstone. **But you'll probably be surprised to learn that the one biblical character who had the most to say about hell was Jesus himself.** In fact, he talked more about hell than he did about heaven. And when he talked about hell, he didn't shy away from fire and brimstone.
 - He described it as a place of eternal torment (Lk 16:23), of unquenchable fire (Mk 9:43), where the worm does not die (Mk 9:48), where people will weep and gnash their teeth (Mt 13:42). He calls hell a place of “outer darkness” (Mt 25:30), comparing it to “Gehenna” (Mt 10:28) – a trash pit outside the walls of Jerusalem where rubbish was dumped and burned. Hence, the imagery of fiery judgment.

- ❖ **Now the other key source of information on the nature of hell would be the book of Revelation.** It's quite fitting that the last book of the OT ends by warning us of the day of the Lord, and the last book of the NT ends by giving us a glimpse of what takes place on that fateful day. In **Revelation 20**, we're given a picture of a great white throne with the Lord sitting on it. And all the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. Before open books that have recorded everything we've ever done in life. *"And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done."* (20:12) Those are **the books of deeds**, and each of us has one being written for us ever since the day we were born.
 - But we're also told that another book was opened – **the book of life**. That sounds similar to *"the book of remembrance"* that we read about last week in Malachi 3:16, which contains the names of those who fear the Lord and esteem his name.

- ❖ **So if your name is written in the book of life (remembrance), then it means you're one of the redeemed.** Your name is written with the blood of Christ. For he is your Redeemer. By faith, you are one with Christ. His life is counted as your life and his death as your death.
 - So if your name is in the book of life, then at the final judgment, you will be judged *not* by what's written in your book of deeds. *Not* by what *you* have done but by what *Christ* has done. By what he was mercifully done on your behalf through his life, death, and resurrection. That's how you're saved. That's why you go to heaven.

- ❖ But **Revelation 20:15** goes on to warn that, *"if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."* If, in the entirety of your life, you never repent of your sins and turn to Christ as your Redeemer – **if you approach the great white throne, looking to be judged according to what you have done instead of what Christ has done – then your name won't be found in the book of life.** Your book of deeds will be opened, and every page will condemn you. For even your righteous deeds are as filthy rags before a Holy God (Isa 64:6). And to your everlasting shame and sorrow, you will be thrown into the lake of fire. Cast into an eternal hell.

- ❖ Friends, I take no pleasure in issuing this warning. No pastor ought to enjoy talking about hell. Yet no pastor who loves his sheep – and those whom he's inviting into God's sheepfold – is going to avoid the subject out of courtesy. I hope you see that it's love compelling me.
 - Because it's love that compelled God to even establish a day of the LORD where there will be a final reckoning. **In fact, if God is love then there must, by necessity, be a hell.** If you don't put a final end to all the evil, all the violence, all the injustice in the world – when you have it in your power – then you are anything but loving.

- ❖ We're mistaken to assume that love and judgment are polar opposites. **The opposite of love is not judgment. The opposite of love is indifference.** The loving parent will punish a wayward child. It's the indifferent parent who turns a blind eye. The judge who loves the law will uphold justice and punish wrongdoers. It's the judge who is indifferent to the law who treats hardened criminals with leniency.

- ❖ **In the same way, it's the God of love – who loves righteousness and hates wickedness – who has established a fixed day when everything wrong will be made right.** When everything sad will come untrue. It will be a final reckoning. A day of fiery judgment. Not one trace of evil will remain on this earth. Justice will be served.
 - **In light of this coming day, I urge those of you who have not yet repented of your sins and turned to Christ as your Redeemer – believe on him and be saved.** Don't try to stand before the throne resting on what you have done. Receive his grace and rest on what Christ has done. Hide in him to escape the fiery judgment bearing down on you and on your sins.

A Day Marked by Joyful Healing

- ❖ Now let's shift gears and consider the day of the Lord from the perspective of those who have repented and believed. Who are trusting in the finished work of Christ. Whose names *are* written in the book of life. For those who fear God's name, that day will be a day marked by joyful healing. Let me read v2, "*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.*"
- ❖ **For those who fear God, the day of the Lord will not be like a consuming fire but more like a shining sun.** What will be experienced as an unquenchable fire for one set of people will be experienced by another set as the refreshing warmth of the sun.
 - Recall how back in chapter 3, the day of God's coming is associated with fire, but in that case, it was the refiner's fire. It was intended to purify God's people. **That just reminds us how fire can be used in more than one way. It can be used to torment and destroy, but it can also be used to purify and heal.**
- ❖ When it says in v2 that the sun "*shall rise with healing in its wings*", that "healing" can best be understood in terms of refining. **On the day of the Lord, we'll be healed in the sense of purified and refined into an unblemished and glorified state of being.** Apostle Paul builds on this idea in **1 Corinthians 3:12-15**.
 - There he says that Jesus Christ is the foundation for the church in Corinth and the foundation for the life of every believer. Church planters and evangelists like Paul help lay that foundation through their respective ministries. **Then we as individual Christians are responsible to build on that foundation with the bricks of love and good deeds produced by faith and obedience.**
 - Now listen closely, "¹²*Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—* ¹³*each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*"

- ❖ That, brothers and sisters, will be our experience on the day of the Lord. **We will all go through the fire – not a consuming fire of final judgment – but the refiner’s fire of final sanctification.** On that day, we’ll be completely healed from the sickness of sin. All traces of sin and sin’s corrupting effects in our body, mind, and soul will be burned away. All the wood, hay, and straw of life that we’ve been wasting our time on will go up in flames.
 - And the gold, silver, and precious stones of life – those deeds of love and mercy, those meaningful relationships with fellow Christians, those acts of faith and obedience that contributed to kingdom work and human flourishing – those things will remain as a testament to God’s glory and a source of our joy in heaven.

- ❖ **And yes, there will be joy for us – for eternity in heaven – but even also on that terrible day of the Lord.** Look at the end of v2, “*You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³And 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.*”
 - Like leaping calves, we will overflow with joy on that day. But in our leaping, our feet will, at the same time, tread down the wicked. In other words, what we will experience as joyful healing will be experienced as a fiery judgment for the wicked.

- ❖ Now that juxtaposition of the Christian's joy in the same moment as the wicked's judgment has long perplexed the faithful. **How will I be able to rejoice knowing that people I care about will be judged by fire on that very same day?** How can heaven be a place of eternal joy for me if I know that some of my loved ones will be experiencing eternal torment?

- ❖ Last summer, I read a sermon by **Jonathan Edwards** with a number of you in our Edwards book club. It was called *The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous*. It's based on **Revelation 18:20** where the saints are called to rejoice over the judgment of Babylon, which represents the unbelieving world in opposition to God. It says, “*Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!*”
 - Edwards goes on to argue that this rejoicing of ours on the day of the Lord won't be out of a spirit of vengeance or a place of pride. **But rather it'll be a rejoicing in seeing justice executed, and in seeing the love and tenderness of God towards us, manifested in his severity towards those under judgment.** Knowing that we deserve the same judgment and would be in their shoes but for the grace of God.

- ❖ **In *The Great Divorce*, CS Lewis argues that the happiness of heaven won't be held hostage by the suffering of hell.** In one chapter, a woman in heaven has an encounter with her husband who has been in hell. Now the narrator notes that the woman seems somewhat aloof and unsympathetic to her husband, who is clearly in pain. He's still nursing some wound that she caused him in their previous life together. **But the heavenly tour guide explains that the wounded egos of those in hell can never override the joys of heaven.** If the saints in heaven can never be truly happy because of the fate of those who rejected the Source of true happiness while in this life – **then hell would have veto power over heaven.** But that can't be – that doesn't fit the Bible's portrait of heaven and our happiness there.

- ❖ And even before we get to heaven, just think of how much joy and peace we can experience now *because* we believe that our sovereign good God will not allow a single injustice in this world to go unpunished. **If there was no final judgment, then I can see myself becoming a bitter person.** What if someone was to deeply hurt me, and what if this person never acknowledges the offense or tries to make amends?
 - If I have no belief in a final reckoning, then I have to accept the possibility that this person's offense against me might go forever unaddressed. If that is truly my worldview, then I wouldn't be surprised if I ended up a vengeful or bitter person.
- ❖ But if I believe the Lord to be a holy and just God who will never allow a single sin to go unpunished, then I can leave justice in his hands. **I can let go of my bitterness and my desire for revenge, knowing that every offense ever perpetrated will be punished in one of two ways.** Either on the cross in the death of Christ OR on the day of the Lord in a fiery judgment. And personally, I know the cross is my only hope. The cross of Christ is the only reason I can look forward to the day of the Lord as a day of deliverance.

A Day Anticipated by Remembrance and Repentance

- ❖ Friends, I want you to also have the confidence to face that fateful day as a day of deliverance. To that end, let's consider our third point about how this day of the Lord will be a day anticipated by remembrance and repentance. **I'm going to argue that you prepare for the day of the Lord by listening to the Law and the Prophets, and their general message is to remember God's law and to repent for your failure to keep it.** This is how Malachi concludes his prophecy.
 - Look with me at v4, *“⁴Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And 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 mention of these two biblical characters, Moses and Elijah, is quite intentional. **In the Bible, Moses represents God's law, having served as its mediator.** God's people received the Law through him. **And in the Bible, Elijah epitomizes the ministry of the prophets.** Those who served as God's spokesmen, speaking his Words to his people. And their message primarily centered on repentance. They called God's wayward people back to the Lord.
 - It's unfortunate that we often think of prophets as bearers of bad news – prophesying doom and destruction. When, in fact, the burden of their message was repentance – for God's people to return their hearts to the Lord. The bad news was intended to serve as a warning, exposing their spiritual condition and leading them to repentance.
- ❖ So Malachi ends with a reminder of Moses and how the people have been apathetic towards keeping the Law. And it also ends with a prediction that Elijah the prophet will come, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. Elijah will preach repentance (as he did in 1 Kings) and help turn people's hearts back to one another, starting within each family.

- ❖ Now because of this passage and because, in Scripture, Elijah is not recorded as having died – but rather it says he was taken up to heaven by a chariot of fire (2 Kg 2:11) – **that’s why many Jews, at the time of the NT, believed that Elijah himself would return and precede the coming of the Messiah.** That he would function as that messenger referenced in Malachi 3:1 – who would prepare the way of the LORD.
 - But if we keep reading, after Malachi 4 on into the NT, in **Matthew 11:14** Jesus explains that **John the Baptist is the “Elijah who is to come.”** How is that possible? Was he a reincarnation of Elijah? No, it simply means he came in the spirit of Elijah. In **Luke 1:16-17**, the angel Gabriel explains to John the Baptist’s father – telling him, even before his son was conceived, that, *“¹⁶he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷and 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.”*

- ❖ Now when John was born, his father was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied in **Luke 1:76-79** that his son *“will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* That sunrise imagery is a clear reference to our text. John’s message will be a message of joyful healing – of the tender mercies of God and the forgiveness of our sins.
 - **But at the same time, his message, like Elijah’s, was a message of repentance. He baptized Jews who recognized their apathy with a baptism of repentance.** And he warned them to prepare for the Lord's coming – to make your hearts ready for the arrival of the Lord’s Anointed, his Messiah, the Christ. Because when the Christ comes, John warns, *“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* (Lk 3:17) **So like Malachi, John the Baptist’s message was a juxtaposition of both deliverance and judgment.** Joyful healing and fiery judgment.

- ❖ Now think about how all of this fits together: Malachi’s message is that you prepare for the day of the Lord by listening to Moses and Elijah – by listening to the Law and the Prophets. **Well, when John arrived in the spirit of Elijah, he built on that message – saying you prepare for that day by listening to the Christ who comes after him, whose sandals he is unworthy to untie.**
 - There is a scene later in Luke’s Gospel, in chapter 9, where Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. *“²⁹And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”* (9:29-31)

- ❖ Peter is baffled by what he's seeing and starts speaking without thinking, talking about making three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus, and we'll have a jolly good time camping out on this mountain top.
 - When suddenly a cloud overshadows them. And while Peter is in mid-sentence, "*a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!'*" (9:35) **That's the message of the Law and the Prophets – listen to the Son of God. He'll tell you how to prepare for that great and awesome day of the Lord.**

- ❖ If you ever wondered why it was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, now it makes sense. Because they represent the Law and the Prophets, which was a common phrase to sum up the entire OT. **That's the point: The entire Old Testament, including the book of Malachi, points to Jesus and his departure – to his death and resurrection.**
 - As I've been trying to make clear and certain in this entire sermon – **the only way to prepare for the day of the Lord and to experience it joyfully as a day of healing and deliverance is to listen to Jesus when he tells us to believe in him** (Jn 14:1). To trust in his death and resurrection as your only hope in life and death.
 - If you're not certain what that day is going to be like for you, then the good news is that the full assurance of faith – the certain belief that you will be delivered – can be yours if you repent and believe. Salvation is yours if you would put your hope in Jesus today.