

God's Judgment On Holiness

4:1-3

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“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. 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. 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” (4:1-3).

How many times have you heard this comment, “I know what I ought to do, but I just don’t do it”? It is an all too common excuse! This was the response which Malachi received from those listening to his prophecy. They admitted that they were not obeying God, but they saw no pressing need to change. There cannot be a more frustrating answer than this. Malachi’s frustration level had to have been at an all-time high as he spoke the words of 4:1-6.

To counter the blasé attitude of Israel’s conscience, Malachi had discussed the great Judgment Day as he quoted the Lord of hosts (3:1-5). But the prophet’s message received a response like this, “We know about that great day, but look at those around us who never obey God. They are successful. I’m sorry, but this Judgment Day idea doesn’t work for me!” (see 3:13-15). God’s messenger refused to be stopped by that thinking. His words addressed the doubters

again. This time he again quotes the Lord of hosts and used the coming Judgment Day to stimulate holy conduct, but this time Malachi developed the point further. In this argument he observed that on the Judgment Day only holiness will be accepted by God. It is this divine judgment on holiness that underscores the urgency to live holy lives. On earth it may seem that evil goes unpunished, but such is short-sighted folly. In the end only those whose lives are marked with holiness will be saved.

This portion of Scripture is truly amazing. The description it offers of the Lord’s second coming and the judgment is marvelous.

No grander vision of the judgment exists than Malachi’s picture of “the day,” lurid on the one hand, with the fierce flame, before which the wicked are as stubble that crackles for a moment and then is grey ashes, or as a tree in a forest fire, which stands for a little while, a pillar of flame, and then falls with a crash, shaking the woods; and on the other hand, radiant with the early beams of healing sunshine, in whose sweet morning light the cattle, let out from their pent-up stalls, gambol in glee. But let us not forget while we admire the noble poetry of its form that this is God’s oracle, nor that we have each to settle for ourselves whether the day shall be for us a furnace to destroy or a sun to cheer and enlighten.¹

Consider these three verses of the closing

¹Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, vol. 6, *Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1977), 361.

chapter of the book of Malachi. In this masterful portrait we find three conclusions which God stated to Israel regarding the essentiality of holiness in their lives. These points can apply today as well.

IT IS MANDATORY (4:1)

Holiness is judged mandatory (4:1). Malachi spoke about a future event that would convince all that it does matter whether you are good or bad. Remember that Malachi's audience, Israel, was convinced that it did not matter if one was good or bad. In fact, many of them believed it was better to be among the reprobates (cf. 3:14, 15). For such, this future day would be dark and terrible.

This "day" is characterized in some negative terms. It will be "burning." Fire is a common association with the final judgment. In Daniel's vision of the judgment, he looked as "the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him" (Daniel 7:9, 10). Paul also spoke of this "burning" that would occur at "the day" (2 Thessalonians 1:7; see also 1 Corinthians 3:13; 1 Peter 1:7; 2 Peter 3:7, 10, 11).

The second negative is the "furnace." This signified an intense heat. An open fire is hot, but the oven burns hotter. Thus the heat of the "burning" will be intense. No one will want to face that kind of heat.

The third negative is found in the phrase "neither root nor branch." This phrase signifies total destruction (cf. Job 14:7-9; Amos 2:9). There will be no hope for the unholy. These will only face destruction! Isaiah said, "Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble, and dry grass collapses into the flame, so their root will become like rot and their blossom blow away as dust; for they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 5:24; cf. Revelation 20:15; Matthew 25:46).

Malachi's point was clear. Holiness is required if they were to escape "the day" of the Lord's coming! This fact could not be shrugged away with indifference!

Let us realize the urgency of this point as

well. The demand for holiness has not ceased. God still mandates holiness as the only way to escape the terrors of "the day." Second Peter 3 contains a picture of the terror of the second coming. Peter's confident expectation leaves no room for questions. After a description of the Lord's return (2 Peter 3:8-10), he asks, "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be?" He then answers, "in holy conduct and godliness" (2 Peter 3:11). Peter and Malachi agree. The only way one can be prepared for "the day" of the Lord's return is by being marked with "holiness"! (cf. Deuteronomy 13:17; 18:13; Titus 2:12; 1 Peter 1:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:7). We today must conclude that what was true for Israel in 4:1 remains true for us today. We must be holy because God judges it mandatory!

IT IS WORTHY OF REWARD (4:2)

Holiness is judged worthy of blessed reward (4:2). Malachi's contemporaries failed to consider this fact. Israel saw the arrogant being successful while the spiritual were oppressed. To Israel, God's way was not working (3:13-15). Malachi countered their skepticism with the most beautiful picture in his prophecy.

He presents the "sun of righteousness" bringing a joyful healing and freedom to those who "feared" God's name. The Lord is the "sun of righteousness" (Isaiah 60:19), and His coming would bring rich rewards for all marked with holiness (Romans 2:6). This metaphor refers to the joy which the morning's dawn brings to one who has spent a sleepless night. Many understand the helplessness of one who is physically ill and unable to sleep during the night. The dark hours pass so slowly. But when the dawn's light arises, relief and rest come. This figure speaks of bringing "healing." When the Lord returns in His glory, He will chase away the burdens of darkness that have caused His holy ones to struggle. He will bring healing to their hearts; all wounds will be healed and every injustice will be corrected. His return will eliminate the "darkness."

A second figure of speech used by Malachi presents the rewards of holiness. He speaks of "calves skipping about." This word picture is full of health, life, freedom, and happiness. By this figure Malachi says that all who have main-

tained holiness will be like carefree calves playing in the sunshine.

Note the dramatic contrast between verses 1 and 2. "The day" will come as a "furnace" to the wicked, but to the holy it will be a day of joy, freedom, and delight. Surely this contrast would inspire Malachi's listeners to live a life marked by holiness.

Again we see how practical this point is to us today. We need a strong emphasis on the blessings that result from holiness. We need constant reminders that all who live by godliness and are known for holiness will find a blessed reward. John says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:14; cf. Psalms 32:2; 73:1; 97:10; Matthew 5:6, 8; Revelation 16:15).

The reader must conclude that what was true for Israel in 4:2 remains true today. We must be holy because God judges such conduct worthy of blessed rewards!

IT IS TRIUMPHANT OVER EVIL (4:3)

Holiness is judged triumphant over evil (4:3). You can almost see Malachi pointing a finger at those who had spoken the words of 3:15. Those who are called "blessed" by the world are "cursed" in God's opinion. They are likened to "stubble" which after an intense fire is reduced to "ashes." Those whom the world has shown little respect and much oppression are considered God's triumphant followers! Those listening had to remember Malachi's statement that the ones oppressed by the world are actually "valued treasures" to God (3:17). In the end, on "the day" of the Lord's return, those marked with holiness will triumph over the evil! The wicked will be destroyed and be as "ashes"; they are thus fit only to be "treaded down." Such is the complete victory of holiness.

This third fact should not escape our attention. In "the day" of the Lord's return, unjust situations in life will be reversed, and inequities

will be rectified. Those who are esteemed as strong will discover how impotent their power is, and those who are humble will discover the omnipotence of holiness! The only reasonable choice is for all of us to live holy lives now so each will share in this triumph (Psalms 24:3-5; Revelation 17:14; 1 John 5:4, 5).

What was true in verse 3 for Israel is true today. We must be holy because God judges holiness triumphant over evil!

CONCLUSION

With these three conclusions, Malachi's argument for holy living is presented. As the paragraph closes, we see only two groups who will be present on "the day" of Christ's return. The group described in 4:1 includes the arrogant and wicked. Having rejected God's Word, they live a life opposed to holiness and obedience. This group faces certain destruction (cf. Isaiah 5:24). The second group discussed in 4:2 includes those who fear God's name. They are the "called, chosen, and faithful" in God's service (Revelation 17:14). They have lived holy lives.

If Malachi's contemporaries had been honest, they would have admitted that there is no better practice or more exalted position with which to face eternity than "holiness" (Psalms 119:1-3; Revelation 21:24-27; 22:14).

God assured Malachi that He was preparing for "the day" of His return (4:3). As Jesus talked with His disciples. He spoke of His "going to prepare a place" for all who would follow Him (John 14:2b, 3). This "preparation" involves two places, for two different groups. We have the Lord's assurance that holiness would be vindicated and the differences between good and evil would be eternally clear. Malachi did not know the specific day, but he did know that on a certain day God would come and settle matters forever. The only appropriate response to this "day" and to the "preparation" made by God is a life of holiness!

—John Kachelman

Lingering Lessons from Malachi

As the entire prophecy of Malachi is summarized, the following lessons still linger in our minds:

1. We remember the wonderful love of God (1:2-5).
2. We cannot forget the tragedy of a failed leadership (1:6—2:9).
3. We remember God's feelings about marriage (2:10-16).
4. We replay the awesome scene of future judgment (2:17—3:5).
5. We remember the sorrow of indifference toward God's law (3:6-12).
6. We cannot forget the problem of those who fail to set the proper priorities in this life (3:13—4:3).

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