

MALACHI 4:1-6

CHRISTMAS AND THE DAY OF THE LORD

“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.”¹

“Utter destruction!” I think you would agree that this is an unusual way in which to begin an Advent Message. However, these final words of the Old Testament provide the foundation for our celebration of the coming of the Son of God. Moreover, this stunning prophecy will eventuate in hope and joy.

Some translations end with the warning of a curse on the land. The text I use, the **ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION** of the Bible, translates this Hebrew term with our English words, “utter destruction.” I should think that utter destruction would qualify as a curse. This was God’s final Word to Israel for over four hundred years. “Utter destruction.” Indeed, this is a frightful way in which to conclude a prophetic message. In fact, this phrase (translating a single word in the Hebrew text) is the final word of the canon of the Old Testament.

We don’t like our literature to end in this manner. We think novels should end with the notation, “they lived happily ever after.” Likewise, we would expect that God’s great plan of creation and redemption should end on a victorious note.

Doctor James Boice writes, “The Masoretes, who have given us most of the copies of the Hebrew Old Testament we have and who added the vowel points to the Hebrew text, were so bothered by this [unhappy ending] that they repeated the next-to-the-last verse of Malachi after the last verse. Similarly, the Septuagint reverses the last two verses so the Old Testament ends, not with a curse, but with a blessing.”²

It is appropriate that the Old Covenant should end as it does, however; God had His reasons for what is said. Hidden behind these dreadful words is something which is less apparent—divine love. God did not wish to destroy His beloved people, and therefore He sought to grab their attention by concluding on a dark theme which would arrest them in their mad rush toward certain destruction. Destruction need not come, if the appalling words are taken to heart to effect a needed course correction.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² James Montgomery Boice, **The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary, Volume 2, Micah-Malachi** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1986) 260

Some people suggest that last words are important, if for no other reason than that they point to what is most important in the speaker's life. If that is so, then surely the final words of the True and Living God must bear grave significance. Consider God's last Word until the days of Christ as recorded in the New Testament.

THE DAY OF THE LORD — The message that Malachi delivered was an eschatological message. He drew aside the veil which separates the present from the future, revealing what God would yet do in the land. Few people today think of prophecy in conjunction with the Christmas Season, but the First Advent of God's Son did fulfil a great number of prophecies. Furthermore, His coming presaged yet greater prophecies which are yet unfulfilled. It is this Day of the Lord to which Malachi looks as he closes his message.

"The Day of the Lord" will be preceded by the presence of Elijah. Jesus affirmed that Elijah must come [MATTHEW 11:13, 14]. Some concepts must be made clear if we will understand this prophecy. First, the "Day of the Lord" is a term which speaks of a specific period of time. It is a concept which in the Old Testament speaks of that future period of judgement when Messiah shall purify His people, Israel.

The Day of the Lord is in particular related to Israel and not to us who are Christians. This is not to say that Christians should not be informed concerning what is coming, but it does imply that Christians need not be overly concerned that they will experience the pains which will accompany that awesome Day of Judgement.

The Day of the Lord is rooted in Old Testament prophecy. Accordingly, the Day of the Lord signifies the same as "the last tribulation," which breaks in as "great trouble" [DANIEL 12:1] for Israel ["time of distress for Jacob," JEREMIAH 30:7] and for the nations.³ Joel speaks of the Day of the Lord as a time of judgement [JOEL 3:14, 15], and also as a time of blessing [JOEL 3:18]. Therefore, the Day of the Lord speaks of something more than mere judgement. The Word of God clarifies what is meant.

"The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" [1 THESSALONIANS 5:2]. This points forward to a time when Jesus Christ will have His way, unlike the days of His flesh when He was here in humility, only to be rejected by His own people and unlike this present day when wickedness seems triumphant and truth is pilloried. The Day of the Lord will be an alarming day [2 THESSALONIANS 2:2 ff.], which will bring with it darkness, judgement and calamities, for God will arise to shake not only the earth but also the heavens [HAGGAI 2:6]. The Master will usher in His everlasting Kingdom on the Day of the Lord. That day will be a cruel day, a day marked by wrath and fierce anger [ISAIAH 13:9], a day in which neither the stars of the heavens nor the constellations will give their light [ISAIAH 13:10].

The Day of the Lord will be introduced with initial judgements, followed by disturbances in the heavenly constellations, followed in turn by unveiling of the Day of the Lord, said to be "the great and magnificent day" [ACTS 2:20]. This is that day when Christ personally comes to earth with His saints to suppress His foes, deliver His earthly people, and set up His kingdom. It is this latter aspect which is the subject of First and Second Thessalonians, that time when Christ "shines forth," accompanied by His people. These preliminary acts of judgement before His appearance are chiefly, though not exclusively, spoken of in the Old Testament. They are also spoken of in Revelation.⁴

³ see Erich Sauer, **From Eternity to Eternity** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1954) 76

⁴ cf. E. W. Rogers, **Concerning the Future** (Moody Press, Chicago, IL 1962) 82-3

Whenever we read of the Day of the Lord, we note that the sun will be darkened, the moon will refuse to shine, and the stars of heaven will fall [cf. MATTHEW 24:29]. These celestial events immediately follow the tribulation of those days, which is also true of events immediately preceding the great and magnificent day of the Lord [ACTS 2:20]. In light of these various verses, the order of events must be first, the Great Tribulation, followed by the darkening of the sun and the moon, and at last the great and magnificent day of the Lord. Christ will then clear the earth of all that offends and all those who commit iniquity and His righteous rule shall commence with that Day.

To iterate, the Day of the Lord is a comprehensive term for the entire period beginning with the Great Tribulation, continuing with the judgements of God upon this unbelieving world, the heavenly disturbances, the return of Christ to this earth, and the establishment of His Millennial Kingdom. Ultimately, the Day of the Lord will witness the final judgement of all the wicked who stand before the Great White Throne of Christ at the conclusion of the Millennial Kingdom. The Day of the Lord begins as Christ brings judgement to the earth at the conclusion of this Age of Grace. It continues until the final dissolution of all things. At last, following the Day of the Lord, eternity begins.

“The Day of the Lord” must be contrasted to “the Day of Jesus Christ” [PHILIPPIANS 1:6] or “the Day of Our Lord Jesus Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:14]. These terms present an entirely different concept, one which speaks of a date which is also yet future. This term, the “Day of Jesus Christ,” is always in relation to Christ and His bride, the redeemed saints. In that day, the saints will be removed from this wicked world, gathered together with Christ, and we who are Christ’s chosen ones will receive our promised rewards. There is but one time when this will happen, according to biblical prophecy.

Soon, Christ shall return to call out from this fallen world all who have put their faith in Him as Master and Saviour. This event is commonly referred to as the Rapture of the saints. The term *Rapture* is derived from the Latin translation of a portion of Paul’s prophetic instruction to the Thessalonian saints. In the first Thessalonian letter, Paul seeks to comfort grieving saints. Listen to the passage from which we derive the term.

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep [i.e. dead], that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep [or died]. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-17].

We who are alive will be caught up together with the saints who have preceded us. The purpose of our being caught up is so that we may meet the Lord in the air. That Greek term which is translated into English as caught up, is the Greek verb *harpagésometha*, from the root verb *harpázo*. Translated into Latin, that Greek verb become *rapio*, which in turn is transliterated into English as *rapture*.⁵

⁵ Jerry W. Batson, *Rapture* (art.), in Trent C. Butler, *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Holman, Nashville, TN 1991) 1166

There is a distinction which now exists between God's elect people and the inhabitants of this fallen world. Though making such a statement carries the risk that some will imagine that I am stating that Christians are better than those who are outside the Faith, I am making no such claim. We who are Christians have nothing of which to boast. We are forgiven, but our forgiveness is because we are recipients of divine grace and mercy. It is not our merits that make a distinction between the world and us.

A distinction exists now; and it shall be made manifest in the Day of the Lord. Before that Day, Christians shall be gathered together with the Risen, Reigning Son of God. There is pending for God's chosen time a glorious day—a day that is imminent, when Christ shall call His people out of this wicked world. The dead in Christ shall rise, and we who remain shall be changed into the likeness of the Lord Christ. Listen to Paul's revelation concerning this glorious event that shall shortly take place.

"I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

'Death is swallowed up in victory.'

'O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?'

"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" [1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-57].

The redeemed of Christ shall rejoice at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. After the Rapture, they will receive the rewards which He has promised. They shall be astonished as He reveals the full extent of His grace. Though undeserving, we shall be called by His glorious Name. Through no merit of our own, we shall receive His commendation as He reveals the glory of His work in us. This is what is promised for all who are now alive in Christ, all who are called by His holy Name and who are known to Him. It will not be so for those who have failed to receive His gracious offer of forgiveness. There is coming an awful day for those belonging to this world, for those who are identified in Scripture as "earth dwellers."

When the faithful have been removed, then begins those dreadful days of the Great Tribulation, as God pours out judgement upon judgement, unprecedented judgement upon the residents of this fallen world. Those remaining will believe a great lie concerning the disappearance of the redeemed. The Bible speaks of a united Europe under one great head, who shall ultimately be revealed to be the Antichrist. Among other acts, he shall make a treaty with wee Israel, a treaty which he shall unilaterally and arbitrarily break after three and one-half years, presaging even greater judgements.

During these days, the world will witness world-wide plague and famine and disease, unparalleled climatic changes, astonishing changes in the movements of the heavenly bodies, and cataclysmic geological phenomena such as has not been witnessed since the world began.

This is the sorrowful warning that I am compelled to pronounce. Listening today are nice people who with their own eyes shall see those awful days. I say this, not because I am their judge, but because they have refused to receive Christ as Lord; they have not confessed Him as Lord of life. Some have attempted secretly to be Christian, as though the failure of the light of life to shine through them would not be noticed. Though speaking the words of faith, they have never believed as evidenced by disobedience to Christ in first things, beginning with baptism. Should one search for an evidence of grace in their lives all that can be demonstrated is a self-centred devotion to their own interests.

Many church members and adherents of sound churches will stand without hope in that dreadful Day of the Lord. I take no joy in saying this. I speak these words with great sorrow in my heart. I have spoken the truth, not because I seek to injure such people, but because I love them with the fervent love of Christ the Lord. By His mercies, I call on the lost, as I have throughout my ministry, to be saved. The call is echoed from the heart of God, but each one must respond to the divine initiative.

VICTORY IN JESUS — The text speaks of the Day of the Lord—the awesome day when God shall judge those who have failed to receive His grace; the text also presents a message of hope in the face of certain judgement. Those who accept this message of hope will receive a glorious victory—a victory they did not earn, but rather a victory which is promised in Christ and which is provided by the Lord God Himself.

This is the victory of which Malachi spoke. “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” [MALACHI 4:1-6a].

Even while recounting Israel’s sin, God spoke of victory through His prophet. God always works in this way. He names our sin, exposing what we thought was hidden; then He speaks of His victory over sin, victory in which we can share. Exposure of sin is but the precursor to full forgiveness, for when we confront our own sinfulness, God stands ready to forgive us. Exposure leads to confession which results in forgiveness.

Though many of His ancient people in that far away day had fallen into dead formalism, there were some—a remnant—who encouraged one another in the Lord. God always has His remnant. God always has reserved some—even in the darkest hour—who long for righteousness and who seek to do that which is pleasing in His sight. To such people, God speaks a word of encouragement.

Listen once again to the opening words of the text. “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” [MALACHI 4:1-3].

As is so often the case when prophetic utterances are delivered under the Old Covenant, two separate periods—even two separate events—are compressed, brought into such close proximity to one another that they appear to be a single event. It is as though one was standing on a mountain peak viewing other, distant mountain peaks. The farthest appears to be juxtaposed onto the nearest because of the perspective.

So it is with prophecy delivered during the days of the Old Covenant. Judgement for evildoers appears truncated until it seems to include the rising of the sun of righteousness. The judgement of the arrogant and all evildoers has not yet occurred. There are plenty of the arrogant in the corridors of power throughout our nation, so we are quite certain that this judgement is yet future.

The burning that Malachi saw was not a burning that would result in purification of God's people; it is rather the burning oven which will consume the enemies of God. This is that fearsome burning which John foretold in **REVELATION 19:19-21**. "I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh."

The prophecy points forward to that awful day of judgement when sinners shall at last be cast into the lake of fire to be consumed by the fierce wrath of God. John spoke of that awful day. I ask you to listen to John's fearsome words, not so that you will be frightened, but so that each Christian will be moved with compassion and so that each outsider will turn to Christ the Lord, while there is opportunity to do so.

"I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" [**REVELATION 20:11-15**].

Compressed into this same vision is another quite different vision of hope. Malachi saw what he identified as the sun of righteousness rising with healing in its wings. The church fathers, from Justin onward, have almost universally united in their writings to teach that "the sun of righteousness" is Christ. Boice cites Martin Luther in particular, who wrote, "Under the Law there is weakness and condemnation; under the wings of Christ, under the Gospel, there is strength and salvation."⁶ Of course, these words are proper theology. Indeed, in light of Malachi's earlier promise that God would send His messenger to prepare the way before Him [**MALACHI 3:1**], it would make sense to think that he is here speaking of the First Advent of the Messiah.

⁶ Martin Luther, **Luther's Works**, vol. 18, **Lectures on the Minor Prophets, I: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi**, Hilton C. Oswald (ed.), (Concordia, St. Louis, MO, 1975) 418, cited in Boice, op. cit. 263

Carl Friedrich Keil, author of one of the most analytical and accurate commentaries on the Minor Prophets, calls this “an epexegetical genitive of apposition.” “*Ts^edâqâh* is here, what it frequently is in Isaiah (e.g. **ISAIAH 45:8; 46:13; 51:5**, etc.), righteousness in its consequences and effects, the sum and substance of salvation... As the rays of the sun spread light and warmth over the earth for the growth and maturity of the plants and living creatures, so will the sun of righteousness bring the healing of all hurts and wounds which the power of darkness has inflicted upon the righteous. Then will they go forth from the holes and caves, into which they had withdrawn during the night of suffering and where they had kept themselves concealed and skip like stalled calves (cf. **1 SAMUEL 28:24**) which are driven from the stall to the pasture... [T]hey will ... acquire power over the ungodly. They will tread down the wicked, who will then have become ashes, and lie like ashes upon the ground, having been completely destroyed by the fire of the judgement (cf. **ISAIAH 26:5, 6**).”⁷

Thus, it is apparent that the verses of the text are not a prophecy of Christ’s future work; though it should be apparent that they depend upon that work for fulfillment. Malachi’s words speak of the triumph and the vindication of the righteous as they are spared God’s wrath in that awful day when the wicked are judged. The leaping refers to all who have believed Christ the Lord, receiving His sacrifice and the forgiveness of sin. Thus, the closing words of Malachi’s prophecy are meant to make us firm in our faith and encourage us to obey God’s Word.

What does this all mean? What relationship has this message to Christmas 2010? Let me endeavour to make the connection so precise that none will misunderstand. The Advent Season is drawing to a close, the season when the entire world celebrates ... what? As Christians, during the Christmas season we remember that the Father is the faithful and righteous God who keeps His promises. From the time of the Fall of our first parents, God promised to send a deliverer—His own Son. At Christmas we remember that He did send His Son to take away our sin. At Christmas, Christians remember that God loves us, and the evidence of His love is that we are called by the Name of the Son of God and we have been forgiven all our sin. We Christians remember that God is a holy God, for His Son was born to suffer and die because of our fallen condition. Because God keeps His promises, we can look for so much more than this present world. We anticipate the reign of the King of Righteousness.

Each Christmas celebration for those who are children of the True and Living God is a reminder that we are one year nearer to the Millennial reign of Christ the Lord. We eagerly anticipate that glorious day when we shall reign with Him. Then, there shall be no more sin in the land. We look forward to a day when all wickedness shall be done. That day is not now. We live in a day when courts legislate immorality, legislatures legislate wickedness and religious leaders guide their flocks into error. We live in a day when the religious people of the land are too often indistinguishable from the wicked, a day when priests and pastors refuse to confront their parishioners in their error. We live in a day when wickedness is exalted, when good is called “evil” and evil is called “good.” But it shall not always be so, for Christmas reminds us that God sent His Son to redeem us, and He shall come again to put down all rebellion and to exalt righteousness. This is the meaning of Christmas, according to Malachi.

⁷ C. F. Keil, **The Twelve Minor Prophets**, in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, **Commentary on the Old Testament** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1965) 468, 469

If this is the meaning of Christmas for those who are now born into the Kingdom of God, what does the day mean for those who are yet outside the precincts of grace? Christmas for those who have never placed faith in the Son of God should be a day of solemn introspection. For any who are unsaved, Christmas should be a time to carefully consider the grace of God as revealed in the Son of God. It is a dreadful thing to say, but outsiders stand condemned of the most heinous sin of all—rejecting the grace of God and spurning His mercy. What will they do in the Day of Jesus Christ when the Son of God calls His people out of this wicked world and sets in motion the Day of the Lord when He will pour out His wrath on the earth?

Do you not see that this message today is a message neither of bitterness nor of gloating, but it is rather a message of compassion and concern? If you will now receive the grace of God, you will enter into His Kingdom. If you will believe the message of life which He brought in His first coming, you will be forgiven all sin and you will become a child of the Living God. If you will confess Him as Lord, He will give you life—a new dimension so radically different from anything you could imagine that you will be astonished. He now stands ready to extend to you that same grace which so many others have already received. Will you accept it from His gracious hand?

This is the message of life which we preach and which resulted from His First Advent. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners [1 TIMOTHY 1:15]. Remember that it is God “who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” [2 TIMOTHY 1:9, 10].

This is the message of life which we preach and which you must receive if this Advent will truly be transformed into a season of joyous celebration for you. The Word declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13].

This is the message of life that we declare. This is the message of hope which Jesus has brought to all mankind. This is the message which can set you free and give you an inheritance among the saints. Believe this message today. May you have a truly Merry Christmas as you discover the peace of Christ the Lord given in His salvation. Amen.