

Great and dreadful day of the Lord

26/4/20 dkm

Read: Malachi 4, James 5

Text: Malachi 4

Psalms: 100old 67, 1, 72

The OT ends with a promise, namely, the day is coming, the great and dreadful day of the Lord. We might think of a promise as something good, something wonderful, and indeed, the day of the Lord will be wonderful for those who fear God and keep his commandments. We may not like the word 'dreadful', and may try to put it out of our minds, but it remains in the Bible, the word of the true and living God. The day of the Lord will be a dreadful day for those who do not fear God and do not keep his commandments. Yes, this is OT language, but is the language of the NT any different? The NT quotes the OT in declaring, "'Vengeance is mine' says the Lord, 'I will repay'" (Rom 12:19, Heb 10:30), and in Hebrews 12:29 we read, 'For our God is a consuming fire'. If you call yourself a NT Christian, what do you say to this NT verse? Do you think the God of the NT is different to the God of the OT?

In Malachi 3:6 the Lord says, 'I am the Lord and I do not change', while in Hebrews we read, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Heb 13:8). The true and living God does not change; his law does not change, and his judgments do not change. What must change is your heart! It must change from a heart of pride and arrogance to a heart of humility and obedience to the Lord.

The Lord revealed himself to Moses as loving, compassionate, forgiving and longsuffering, but also as a God who will judge the wicked (Exod 34:6). Jesus came into this world full of grace and truth (John 1:15), offering forgiveness of sin to those who repent. But he will judge this world in righteousness on the day he returns (Acts 17:31). God is holy and his name is holy. Jesus is holy and his name is holy. 'At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, of those on earth, and of those under the earth' (Phil 2:10). We

sometimes speak of Christ as being cosmic. Certainly his kingdom is cosmic because in the end no other kingdom will exist.

Malachi speaks in cosmic terms as he closes his brief but powerful prophecy. He speaks of a day when the current world order will be overthrown, when the proud who prosper through wickedness will be judged, and God-fearers will, in the name of the Lord, be exalted over those who oppressed them. Our three subheadings are: 'Fiery judgment', 'Remember the Law of Moses', and 'Elijah the prophet'.

1. Fiery judgment

The coming of the Lord is a prominent theme in the OT, especially in the prophets (Isa 13:6, Joel 2:11, 31, Zeph 1:14). It is a prominent theme in Malachi (3:17, 4:1, 3, and 5). They always speak of the day as coming. At Pentecost the apostle Peter quoted Joel's words about the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord, noting that Joel's prophecy about the outpouring of the Spirit was being fulfilled, and reaffirming that the day of the Lord is still coming (Acts 2:20). In his letters Peter speaks of the day of the Lord as coming like a thief in the night (2Peter 3:10, 12). The first coming of Jesus was a great day of the Lord; it was an essential milestone in God's great plan of salvation and judgment. But the prophets, and the apostles, and Jesus himself, speak of the return of Jesus in judgment as the great and awesome day of the Lord.

As Malachi closes his prophecy, and closes the OT, he warns against complacency with regard to the coming day of the Lord. The NT ends with a similar warning- or promise from Jesus: 'Behold, I am coming quickly/soon' (Rev 22:12, 20). We preach the gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but this gospel is one of judgment as well as salvation. There is nothing in the Bible to support the teaching of universalism, the idea that all will be saved in the end. There will be an end; it is called 'the great and dreadful day of the Lord'. 'Outside...are those who love and practice a lie' (Rev

22:15); lies are what Universalists, cults, and man-made religions teach. Please listen to the truth, not the lies that so many teach.

In the days of Noah God judged the earth with a flood; only righteous Noah and his family were saved. The next and final divine judgment upon the whole world will be with fire. 'The day which is coming shall burn them up' (4:1). 'For our God is a consuming fire' is not idle comment. It is only by the mercy of our longsuffering Lord that he has not consumed us before now; he has been ready since the day Adam and Eve sinned. In his righteous anger against sin, God could have justly consumed us already. But God is patient, not wanting any to perish. God has not changed, so in his justice he must and he will destroy the wicked. 'The day which is coming will burn them up' (4:1).

Malachi previously spoke of fire being a refining fire- and yes, this is also spoken of a day of his coming (3:2). God sent a refining fire among his people in the days of the exile, and at other times. But the fire referred to here in Malachi 4 refers to the wicked being consumed or burned up like stubble, with neither root nor branch remaining. 'Root and branch' is a proverbial expression for totality. It does not mean annihilation in the sense of soul or spirit being destroyed.

Gum trees usually produce new shoots after a bushfire, but last summer's bushfires were so hot that many trees will not recover. They have been destroyed root and branch. The psalmist tells us that the wicked are like chaff or stubble, although he speaks of this being blown away rather than burnt. He goes on, 'the ungodly will not stand in the judgment' (Ps 1:5). And John the Baptist, who Malachi speaks of as God's messenger, spoke of judgment as the Lord winnowing the crop and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire (Mat 3:12). Jesus spoke of the cursed as being consigned to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mat 25:41). And finally Peter, in talking about the day of the Lord, speaks of the

elements melting in the fervent heat during the fiery judgment (2Peter 3:10). How can anyone avoid this clear teaching of the Bible regarding the coming day of the Lord and what this day will bring?

King Nebuchadnezzar broke into a rage when Daniel's friends refused to worship his image. He fired up a huge furnace seven times hotter than usual and threw these three men into the furnace (Dan 3:19f). As you know, God saved these men through the fiery furnace. And God will save his servants through the fiery judgment of the day of the Lord.

In verse 2 Malachi turns from the wicked to those who fear God. God-fearers will not be consumed root and branch on the day of the Lord but shall see the 'Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings' (4:2). 'The sun of righteousness' most likely refers to Christ (see caps in NKJV). The sun gives light. Zacharias the priest speaks of 'the Dayspring from on high' (Luke 1:78), and John of the Bright and Morning Star (Rev 22:16). The sun of righteousness comes with healing in his wings (4:2). Jesus loves those who fear God and will protect them from the judgment by gathering them under his wings on the day he comes again (Mat 23:37, 24:31).

The day of the Lord will see the kingdoms of this world overturned by the kingdom of God. The 'fats cats' of this world will find themselves being trampled on by those they oppressed. Indeed, those who fear God will go out like well-fed calves to trample on the ashes of the wicked (4:3). At the time of the Fall God declared that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). Jesus won the victory over Satan through his death and resurrection. That victory will be fully revealed when Jesus returns. As the apostle Paul wrote, 'The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly' (Rom 16:20). It is the meek not the mighty who will inherit the earth (Ps 37:11, Mat 5:5).

2. Remember the Law of Moses

Moses was the great prophet of God who led the people out of bondage in Egypt, the prophet who knew the Lord face to face (Deut 34:10). Through Moses, God gave the commandments on Mt Sinai or Horeb; these are the basis of the law governing this holy nation. On the Mount of Transfiguration Moses appeared with the transfigured Jesus, and that other great OT prophet, Elijah- mentioned in the very next verse (4:6, Mat 17:3).

Why does Malachi refer to Moses and the law in the context of the coming day of the Lord here at the end of his prophecy, and indeed at the end of the OT? He urges the people to 'remember the Law of Moses' (4:4). He does not envisage this law becoming invalid. Sure, there will be a new covenant and a new dispensation (Jer 31:31) but as he said back in 3:6, the Lord 'does not change'. And if you turn over a few pages in your Bible you will hear Jesus, the promised Messiah, declaring, 'Do not think I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil' (Mat 5:17). Moses of course, represents the Law, and Elijah the prophets.

Judgment on the Day of Judgment will be based upon the law. Those condemned and thrown outside include sorcerers, sexually immoral, murderers and idolaters- in other words, those disobedient to God's holy law (Rev 22:14). We dare not dismiss the Law of Moses. Jesus affirmed the law, even as he came to open the way of salvation by grace through his sacrifice on the cross. 'The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

3. Elijah the prophet

We have already mentioned the prominence of Elijah as a prophet in Israel, and his appearance on the mountain with Jesus and Moses. Elijah prophesied during some of the darkest days in Israel. Ahab and his foreign wife, Jezebel, promoted Baal worship in Israel. Elijah called for a showdown on Mt Carmel, and when God answered his prayer with fire from heaven, Elijah destroyed the prophets of Baal and saw repentance among the people. Elijah was carried up to

heaven in a whirlwind, and Moses was buried in an unknown place by God (2Kings 2:11, Deut 34:6).

Malachi's final word, his final 'Behold', is that God 'will send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord' (4:5). The two previous 'Beholds' were about God sending his messenger to prepare the way of the Lord, and 'Behold, the day is coming' (3:1, 4:1). The day of the Lord is ultimately the second coming of Jesus and the judgment, but this term can refer to prior events or days in God's overall plan for his people. We do not conclude that this coming 'Elijah' cannot be a messenger before the first coming before Jesus. The NT makes it clear that this 'Elijah', or one like Elijah, is John the Baptist (Mat 11:14, 17: 10-13). In fact, Luke records the very words of Malachi being quoted by an angel of the Lord at the time of John's conception: 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children (4:6, Luke 1:17).

After four hundred years of silence the last OT prophet burst onto the scene in the wilderness of Judea calling upon the people to repent- yet again! Once again darkness had descended upon Israel. King Herod was ready to kill heaps of baby boys in a frantic effort to get rid of baby Jesus. A society that turns away from God turns upon the weak and vulnerable in society. A society in which children, including the unborn, are valued and cared for is a society pleasing to God. Jesus upheld the sanctity of marriage and the family, and blessed little children (Mat 19:14).

The OT ends with the word 'curse', something which the Jews find hard to accept; they prefer to end their Bible with verse 5. Our prayer, of course, is that they would read on into the NT and accept the blessings God poured out in sending his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ into this world. It remains that anyone, Jew or Gentile, who refuses to accept the grace of God that has appeared in Jesus Christ, is left listening to the words, 'Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse'.