

Prayer

Save us, O Lord, from being consumed by our own concerns and interests.
Direct our hearts towards a genuine concern for those who need our love;
Show us how we may best offer help, care, fellowship and friendship;
Inspire us so that we may be enthused by the work of Your Church in the world;
Lift us out of selfishness, so that we might find fulfilment in You.
Thank You, Lord God: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Hope

Pray about the coming of Christ in glory, and the hope of God's just judgement on all people and all things. Pray that this message of love and justice will inspire people to faith.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for leaders preparing for the G20 summit in London*
- *Give thanks for wherever evil is defeated*
- *Pray for those who do not know how to face life*

Meditation

Jesus, You call me ever onwards; You are my Saviour!

If I must change, may I remain strong in faith:

If I have sinned, may I repent and confess all:

If I need to put things right, may I do so with wisdom:

If I must speak, may I be a timely prophet:

If I have been silent, may I open up to others:

If I need to give testimony to You, may I do so graciously:

If I must listen, may I be attentive to all You say:

If I have been deaf, break the hardness of my heart:

If I need to wait on You, may I be patient and trusting:

If I must challenge, may I preach Your Word alone:

If I have to be courageous, may I show true humility:

If I need to stand firm, may I remain confident in You:

Jesus, You call me ever onwards, You have saved me!

Bible Study - Malachi 4:1-6

¹ 'For look! The day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all who do evil will be stubble; the day that is coming will set them ablaze,' says the LORD of hosts, 'it will leave them neither root nor branch.' ² But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness will arise and healing will be on its wings. You will be released, leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you will crush the wicked, for on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts, they will become like ashes under the soles of your feet.

⁴ Remember the Law of my servant Moses, the statutes and judgments that I gave him at Horeb to give to all Israel.

⁵ Look, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, so that I do not come and strike the land with a curse of destruction.

Review

The final words of the book of Malachi about the coming 'day of the Lord' (4:5) are as impressive as his other prophecies, and possibly more so. Malachi began his prophecies by addressing the problems of his own day, and with the heart of a prophet he perceived the deeper roots of the trouble he saw. The people and their priestly leaders had forsaken God's clear moral teaching! They questioned their relationship with God (1:2-5), their concept of right and wrong had become blurred (1:6f.), the priests had lost sight of the moral truths they taught (2:1-9) and the sacred covenant of marriage was abused for convenience (2:10-16). Consequently, Malachi prophesied that God would come in a final act of judgement to purify His people (3:1f.).

This much is easy to follow, but as Malachi began to speak about the day of God's judgement, he began to reveal more about what would happen. Clearly, the main theme lying behind everything was that evil would be defeated and good would prevail. In yesterday's passage, Malachi revealed the complaints of the ungodly (3:13-15) and set against this, he described the creation of a book of 'names' recording all whose hearts were set upon faithful commitment to God (3:16-18). This extraordinary account has strong spiritual connections with the New Testament, and indicates the abiding importance of commitment by faith in the final judgements of the Lord (3:18). Then, in our passage today, the prophecy is completed by several additional and stunning insights. Firstly, Malachi confirmed the defeat of evil (4:1), but added a wonderful picture of liberation like the dawn of a new day of righteousness (4:2) bringing healing and liberty from oppression.

Next, the last three verses present yet more fascination. After reminding God's people that the Law of God does not change, Malachi spoke again about the coming of one who would 'prepare the way' for God to come (see also 3:1f.). This time, however, he identified this messenger as Elijah (4:5)! We are wrong to think of Elijah as just one of the many great prophets of the Old Testament. He was the first prophet to arise in Israel who effectively challenged wrongdoing in the nation, wresting moral authority away from the kings and raising the prophet as the moral conscience of the nation. Malachi said that his voice would be heard again before God's judgement day! He did not explain this revelation; he simply passed on what he perceived in prophetic vision. Some suggest that these last few verses in Malachi were not a part of the original prophecy, but the evidence for this is slim. It seems entirely correct that Malachi should conclude his work by saying more about the 'forerunner'. Moreover, this prophecy has one final 'twist'. This is not easily discernable but is an essential part of the prophetic vision of Malachi and essential to our understanding of why Malachi's prophecy connects the Old Testament with the New.

In verse 6, Malachi says that the prophet will change the attitude of 'fathers and children'. This prophecy clearly refers to repentance; but Malachi then adds an extraordinary and little understood phrase; 'so that I do not come and strike the land with a curse of destruction'. This means that without repentance, God's coming to the world would have resulted in its final judgement and destruction! It seems that Malachi had some small degree of insight into the fact that the preaching of repentance by the forerunner (John the Baptist) would pave the way for God's coming in Christ to preach salvation through repentance and by faith. Indeed, the chance to repent and be saved is the key

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find many aspects to this passage fascinating, but the dawn of a new day is an intriguing prophecy (4:2). Dawn brings with it the promise of new things, it offers a fresh start at what was a problem yesterday and the opportunity to take on new challenges, and it heralds the chance to achieve new things for God. The fact that our Lord always gives us a 'fresh start' is a powerful feature of His saving grace, and whatever the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves, He is always willing to show us a way forward. A time will come, however, when the only way forward will be into His Kingdom, but we have the opportunity now to make the choice about whether we accept this!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What does repentance mean to you, and what does it mean to people today? Go back over your life and try to recall those times when you have accepted that you were wrong and have had to change. Spend time prayerfully considering this because faith without repentance may be less than it seems.*
- *Pray for those who find the relationships within their families difficult, and need the grace of God to help them deal with what happens. Pray especially for those who experience difficulties between the generations.*

Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, which are the instructions You give for the life of Your servant. Thank You Lord God; AMEN

great deal in the Old Testament about the Messiah, but little about what will happen to save the world from God's wrath. So to have this prophecy about repentance is remarkable and cannot be underestimated. It is a small but essential Old Testament clue to what God will do in the New Testament.

Application

It seems to me that there are a large number of things that we can conclude from this amazing prophecy; however, if we begin by limiting ourselves to what the text says, then we will find that our minds are quickly led on to make a wide variety of connections with the New Testament and to the faith we profess. Many of these connections are to do with the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ who followed Him; the passage also seems to say something about the event we call the 'transfiguration', when Jesus was seen with Moses and Elijah on a mountain top (Matthew 17:1f.). The picture of fire and judgement that dominates the whole passage connects with Jesus' oft repeated comments about judgement (Mark 9:43f., Matthew 25:41, Luke 3:17, 17:29 and many more), and the image of fire is used in Jesus' life as an indication of the purification of the Holy Spirit as well as judgement (Matt 3:10, Luke 3:9, Acts 2:3 etc.). In addition to all this, Malachi's picture of the 'sun of righteousness' is a compelling description of the desire of God not to simply call down judgement and end the world, but to offer an opportunity for liberation, healing and repentance.

There is an almost endless stream of connections here to follow, and all have important contributions to make to the way we perceive God's work in the world as it changed from the Old Covenant to the New. It strongly doubt that I will have mentioned in this study all of the connections you will naturally make as you read this text, and you will probably think 'why did he not write about this, or that!' It may not be right to speak of the 'application' of this text in the way that we speak of application in many other scriptural contexts. Surely, the 'application' of this text is the evidence that this prophecy has been fulfilled in the history of the life of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ. This affects us now because as Malachi prophesied, we all have a chance to repent and turn from sin, to avoid the judgement of annihilation with the stubble (4:1,2), and to be liberated (4:3).

The fact that God gave Malachi this much information about what would happen is amazing. I doubt that he understood it as we do, but he communicated faithfully what was revealed to him, and as a consequence, we are able to find within this brief passage innumerable connections between the Old Testament and the New. Many scholars are sceptical about whether we are justified in seeing very much within this prophecy, but the strength of this scepticism, mentioned in most commentaries about Malachi that I have read, is interesting in itself. Why would this be said unless people do in fact tend to read these words and find that they say a great deal? Why can we not read this passage with liberation and let the Holy Spirit lead us where He will, for then we will be able to gain a glimpse of the eternal strategies of God! This is what the passage is all about!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether justice is served by the complete destruction of evil, and what this means.
2. What does the phrase the 'sun of righteousness' mean to you, and how does this help us understand God's redemption?
3. What does scripture mean by describing the forerunner as Elijah, and why does John the Baptist say that he is not Elijah (John 1:21)?

characteristic of the world in which we now live, and because of it, the world has been saved from its final destruction by the justice of God; an event now awaiting our Lord's return. Few scholars are willing to make the connection between this last verse and the characteristics of the age of salvation in which we now stand. But we must surely accept these words for what they are; an essential insight into the heart and mind of God.

Going Deeper

There are many connections between this passage of scripture and other parts of the Bible, Old Testament or New, and as we investigate these, we will discover more about this powerful prophecy. However the arrangement of the last twelve books of the Bible was decided, it was surely by the inspiration of the Spirit that Malachi came last!

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** *'... the day that is coming will set them ablaze,' Note that the grammar of the sentence is very clear: the blaze is started by the 'day that is coming'.*
- V2** *'and healing will be on its wings' You may be used to the version 'with healing on its wings.' However, 'with' is assumed and my translation here is equally possible even though there is little difference in the meaning.*
- V4** *'that I gave him at Horeb to give to all Israel' This translation picks up the subtle nature of the Hebrew here that indicates the charge given to Moses to hand on what he had received. Many other translation have something like this '... the statutes and rules that I commanded him (Moses) at Horeb for all Israel', which seems rather clumsy.*
- V6** *'so that I do not come and strike ...' This is an awkward phrase, sometimes translated 'lest I come and strike'. The meaning of the Hebrew word for 'so that I do not', or 'lest', simply indicates some sort of aversion or changing round. The coming of Elijah changes God's mind about what He will do.*
- V6** *'curse of destruction' This word is the Hebrew 'cherem' which is the curse of being totally given over to the Lord for judgement and justice (see study). It is best known for its use in the battles for the conquest of the Promise Land in Joshua.*

Going Deeper

Sorting out the good and the evil (4:1,2)

The sorting out of evil from good is a constant theme of the Bible, and it is found in both the Old Testament and the New. The moral problem of good and evil is raised in Genesis 3, and the choice made by Eve and then Adam to accept evil illustrates the predicament of all humanity. However, it is a choice that must come to an end, and a dilemma that must finally be resolved by God's destruction of all that is evil. This will happen, of course, when God brings all things to their final conclusion at the end of time.

When Malachi speaks about the final destruction of the 'stubble' (4:1f.), he is doubtless referring to the evildoers who spoke against God and complained about justice (3:13-15). Malachi was incensed at the thought that some of God's people would attempt to maintain the outward appearance of religious observance whilst having a heart set against the God they claimed to worship. It is probable that Jesus felt the same, and this is reflected in His parable of the 'sheep and the goats', in which those who regard themselves as 'safe' in God's eyes are precisely those who receive harsh judgement because they have not understood the nature of their relationship with the living God. Their acceptability before Him is His to determine, not theirs to presume (whereas the Christian, of course, places trust in Christ, not in self).

Malachi perceived the coming judgement of God as like the action of a bush fire (4:1f.), late in the agricultural year. Only stubble would be left in the open field after the harvest, susceptible to scorching by the hot southerly winds that ravaged Israel in late season. The fruit and the harvest had gone, and at a time that could never be predicted, the heat of the day would ignite the dry stubble, setting the fields ablaze uncontrollably. This picture, surely, is different from that of the fire of the furnace described earlier (3:1f.) in which God's people would be 'purified'. God purified and saved the 'sons of Levi' (3:3) despite the apparent impossibility of surviving a furnace, so that they would be able to present offerings of true worship. So judgement by fire means one thing for those whom the Lord saves, and it means another for those who have rejected Him. This is the nature of 'final judgement'.

The 'sun of righteousness' and the 'Son of Righteousness' (4:3)

Malachi's vision for those who are not consumed by the judgement of God's wrath is a powerful description of new life, and one that is unique in the Old Testament; 'but for you who revere my name, the 'sun of righteousness will arise ...'. It is tempting for a Christian today to jump in immediately and suggest that this is Christ, the 'Son of righteousness'! However, this phrase is not a title; it is simply a picture. What Malachi saw was the sun rising to represent a new beginning; the start of a new day heralding healing and liberty. Before we consider how Christ fulfilled this prophecy, we should glory in the power of the vision as it stands.

At the conclusion of Malachi's entire prophecy, dominated by his anguish at the rejection of the Lord by His own people, Malachi was granted a vision that spoke of a totally new start under God. The word 'day' has great significance in the Old Testament, and often indicates a period of time or an age. Creation happened in six days, of course, and the Sabbath was one 'day' belonging to God. The 'day' seen here by Malachi is firstly a day of healing. The prophecy tells us that the glorious healing power of God becomes available when the Lord has judged all sin and evil and all wickedness has been removed (4:1,2). The Bible always maintains that there is a deep spiritual connection between sin and sickness (though it never says that those who are sick are generally more sinful than anyone else); and healing is therefore the logical consequence of the removal of evil. Naturally, we want to know when this becomes available to us, but at the moment, all we know is that healing is one of the first things in God's mind for His great day of judgement!

The second part of the verse describes joyous liberty, and although few of us look after cattle, it does not take too much imagination for us to relate to the picture of young steers leaping from their enclosures with all the vigour of dynamic youth! This is what the Lord God wants to give to us when, as people who are committed to Him and have written our names in the 'book of life' (see yesterday's study), we survive the judgement day and come into His glory. So God's response to our act of faith is to grant us a salvation which is like the release of all our energies and enthusiasm in the wide open spaces of the field that is God's eternal Kingdom (4:3)! The prophecy is a wonderful Old Testament contribution to our picture of eternity, to add to the restored wilderness (Isaiah 35), the banquet (Psalm 23, Luke 14:8f.), the house with many rooms (John 14:1f.), the 'new Jerusalem' (Rev 21:2) and many others.

We are left wondering when this will be and how this will all come about! The last three verses of Malachi begin to hint at this, and allow us to perceive that although the final judgement is still yet to come, Christ has given access to this liberty and deliverance, and in this sense may be called 'the Son of righteousness'. It is only a play on words in English, of course, but it is not a misinterpretation of God's Word!

The importance of the law (4:4)

In the midst of the whole vision, Malachi includes a verse that is remarkable and asks us to stand firm, and refrain from jumping ahead without realising that God's revelations have been consistent throughout history. He says 'remember the Law of my servant Moses ...'. It is important for us to accept that if we are talking about the difference between good and evil, which is a difference between life and death at the final judgement of God, then God has already revealed the true nature of morality within the Law and the Ten Commandments in particular. The Law was given on Mount Sinai, and this is sometimes called 'Horeb' (even by Moses, who used 'Sinai' and 'Horeb' interchangeably – see Deuteronomy chapter 1, for example).

It is easy for Christians to dismiss the 'Law'. When we read Paul's arguments about the importance of salvation by grace (Ephesians 2:5,8, Galatians 2:21, 5:4, Romans 6:14,15) we are tempted to believe that the law was for the Old Testament but Christ came to show us a better way of 'grace'. Unfortunately, the 'law' Paul was speaking about (by his own admission) was the Pharisaic legalism written down in the codes of the Mishnah and Talmud (rabbinical document of the centuries before Christ). At no point does the New Testament suggest that the moral codes of the Law are superseded in any way; it is simply that they are not the means of attaining salvation. This is what Jesus Himself says in Matthew 5:17, for example, and the reason for this should be obvious. Right and wrong do not change, and it is just as wrong to commit adultery and to be idolatrous today as it was when the Ten Commandments were written. Indeed, Jesus commanded His followers to 'love your neighbour', quoting Leviticus 19:18. God's 'Law' is fixed, insofar as His morality does not change.

The coming of Elijah (4:5,6)

In the last two verses of this incredible passage, Malachi gives a prophetic announcement that has never failed to intrigue and inspire. Elijah had been to Mount Horeb, of course, but under different circumstances to that of Moses (see 1 Kings 19), and met God in the inner reaches of a cave. His pioneering prophetic ministry changed Israel for ever, and together with Moses, was one of very few people in the Old Testament whose passing from this life indicates a very special place in the spiritual life of God's people; he went to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 King 2:11). The connection with fire is yet another good indicator of the purpose of this prophecy; for Moses had met God in a burning bush (Exodus 3) and Elijah left this world surrounded by fire! Malachi spoke about Moses and Elijah in his prophecy about God's final judgement, because they are essential to our picture of the consuming nature of God's final judgement.

We have already noted the incredibly important meaning of Elijah's return, and the connection with repentance and the chance of being rescued from final destruction (see above). However, the power of this prophecy has never been fully exhausted. The 'curse of destruction' which is the last word of the Old Testament, is what the people of Israel read as 'cherem', meaning the curse placed by God on everything sinful that had to be destroyed. This is the same curse of God placed on Jericho and Ai when the people of Israel invaded the Promised Land (Joshua 6-9), but we now find that this was no ancient feature of Old Testament culture (as has often been suggested). God's moral nature means that He will ultimately destroy sin, and this is the fulfilment of His 'cherem'. God does not want to destroy the world because of its sin; it is His desire to see people saved and rescued from 'cherem', but they need to be guided away from sin into righteousness! This is the role of the returning Elijah, whose job is to call people to repentance.

So it is that Malachi prophesies the final opportunity for salvation before the judgement of God brings all things to their proper end, and the opportunity to change comes through people 'turning' from sin because they are warned (4:6). This, of course is the exact starting point of the New Testament, and it is the 'age' in which we now live. There is a