

Malachi 3:1-4

The Rev. David W. Glade | December 6, 2015

The passage from Malachi begins with a promise: “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come!” On some future date – some unknown point – the Lord will come. This is an oft-repeated promise in Scripture. Jesus promised His own return in Luke 21:34, “Be on your guard lest the day come suddenly and catch you unaware.” Paul spoke of the Lord’s return in I Thessalonians 3, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” The suddenness of the Lord’s return: like a thief in the night, like a man returning from a journey.

The Lord’s return will be significant. The Lord’s return will be the end of this age and the beginning of a new one. The Bible describes His return with fantastic images, telling us that the sky will roll up like a scroll. In our passage, we learn that the Lord will appear like a refiner’s fire. The question we must ask when we read this passage is, are we ready? Are we prepared?

One of the reasons we don’t prepare for the future is because we are by nature short-sighted people. The future always seems distant. Several days ago, we were eating dinner and I asked my eldest daughter: “How much longer do we have until you go to college?” I guessed at my own question, thinking ten years. “No,” my wife corrected me, with tears in her eyes. “No, we only have six years left.” If I had sat down and calculated I would have come to the right answer, but my quick, unconsidered response suggested that I had put the pause button on the passage of time.

In another conversation, we were talking about our public elementary school, George Mason. Jennifer told me it is going to be renovated, but not until 2023. That’s in the distant future, I thought; we don’t need to be concerned or prepared for that, since it will have no effect on us. Again, I was corrected; I will still have children in elementary school at that age. My kids’ college years seem like a decade away. The year 2023 seems like a time with flying cars and teleportation. My own retirement seems like a lifetime away. And when I contemplate my own non-existence, when I die seems very far off. It is not. Time moves fast.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Einstein’s presentation of the Theory of Relativity. There was one mistake that Einstein made, one that he acknowledged and repented of; he believed in constant universe, one without beginning or end. His theory was disproven by Edwin Hubble of Hubble Telescope, who showed that distant galaxies were speeding away from us. Einstein rejected the cosmological constant, calling it the biggest blunder of his life.

Don’t make the same mistake Einstein made. Don’t fall into the blunder of thinking that you are constant. You are not. You and I have a beginning and an end. All things have a beginning and an end. Our earth, our sun, our galaxy, and our universe all have a beginning and an end. Time is a one-way street with a starting point and a stopping point; traffic on that street goes by fast.

The prophet Malachi begins by saying, “Behold! Wake up! One day, the Lord will return – or we will return to Him – and that day is coming quickly.” Are you prepared? The people that Malachi addressed were not ready; so when the Lord does return, He will come like a refiner’s fire, or fuller’s soap. You can probably envision a refining fire, used to clean impurities out of metal. Fuller’s soap is the soap of a launderer. As a refiner melts gold to make it pure, a fuller scrubs linens with soap to make them clean. Both are painful processes, the fire is hot and the fuller’s soap is caustic. Soap is caustic now, it burns the eyes and in concentrated form burns the skin also; this was all the more true in Malachi’s time. The ingredients that the fuller used were so toxic that he always worked outside the city walls so as to avoid close contact with others.

Malachi tells the people, “You are not ready for the Lord’s return. You are like impure gold that needs to be refined in fire, or like dirty clothes that need to be washed.” Over the course of this little book, the prophet identifies several areas of impurity, several stains that need to be washed. It is a short letter, so I want to discuss the stains that the prophet Malachi identifies:

- Stain #1: *They despised God’s name.* Malachi 1:6 – “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? Says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name.”
- Stain #2: *They abridged God’s truth.* Malachi 2:9 – “You do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction.”
- Stain #3: *They distorted marriage.* Malachi 2:11 – “For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign God.” Malachi 2:16 – “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence.”
- Stain #4: *They gave up on justice.* Malachi 2:17 – “You have wearied the Lord with your words...By saying, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’”
- Stain #5: *They robbed God.* Malachi 3:8 – “But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.”

Much could be said about each one of these stains, but I want us to see that there is a response to Malachi’s fifth accusation. The response is stated explicitly in Malachi 3:8 – “How? HOW have we robbed God?” This isn’t an apologetic response, or a belligerent one. It is a naïve response, born out of complacency and presumption.

Think of the various ways a child can respond to an accusation. The father says to the son, “You are not treating your parents well.” The son responds, “How? I do my chores, I pick up my room,” etc. To which the father replies, “You do your chores, but only after you are reminded ten times. You pick up your room by shoving everything in your closet,” etc. To each piece of evidence the child offers, the father replies “Yes, but you have done the absolute bare minimum.” The son’s response is not belligerent, but he has become complacent and presumed upon his parents.

This is Malachi’s critique of the people he is addressing. These people are not belligerent. But they are complacent and their complacency has produced a watered-down version of faith. They had a faith in God that demanded nothing. A faith that informed nothing (they just omitted the parts they didn’t like). A faith that affected nothing (they married whomever and divorced whenever they wanted). A faith that provided nothing (they had no hope that God would bring justice). A faith that cost nothing.

A faith that demands nothing, informs nothing, affects nothing, provides nothing, and costs nothing is worth nothing. That is exactly what God says through the prophet Malachi in Chapter 1:10 – “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors.” Don’t even bother. We do not want to be like the people we read about in Malachi! They were not prepared. What do we need to do to be prepared? What do we need to do to blot out these stains?

Let’s go back to that metaphor of the fuller’s soap. The fuller shows up again in Mark’s account of the transfiguration. There was a point in Jesus’ ministry when He went up on a mountainside with some of His disciples. While on the mountain, Jesus was transfigured before

them; His face shone like the sun and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, whiter than any fuller could wash them (Mark 9:3).

In Jesus, we find someone who is pure. Here is someone who has no stain. Here is One who can stand unashamed under the prophet's withering critique. Here is someone who honors God's name. Here is someone who lives completely under God's unabridged truth. Here is someone who honors marriage, who blessed marriage by His presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana. Here is someone who hopes in God; even in His darkest moments, Jesus hoped in God. From the cross He cried, "Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Here is someone who does not rob God, but gives Him all!

Here is someone who can do what you and I cannot do. We stand under the prophet's critique and say, "Yes, you are right; I have done all this and more. Yet Jesus has done for me what I cannot do for myself!" Does that mean we dodged a bullet, that we can take all these hard words and accusations from the prophet and wipe them away? No. If we do that, we will be guilty of the same presumption and complacency for which Malachi's original audience was guilty. Let's look briefly at each of the prophet's accusations against the people of Israel and consider how we can avoid hearing the same accusations.

First, they did not honor God's name. How can we honor God's name? You know something matters to you when it changes your usage of time. I honor my father and mother by making time for a weekly phone date. I make them time for them, as they do for me. We honor God's name by giving time to Him. Do we have time in our daily schedule to meet with God through prayer and scripture? Do we have time in our weekly schedule to join His people in worship? If God does not have any impact on our calendar, be careful: you may be guilty of Malachi's first accusation.

Second, they abridged God's truth. How can we avoid this? We need courage and humility. There are parts of the Bible which are contrary to our culture; traditional Christian morality is now counter-cultural. We need courage to stand for God's Word. There are parts of the Bible that are contrary to our personal preferences. We need humility to stand under God's Word.

Third, they distorted marriage. How can we avoid this? Guard your marriage! There is no marriage that is so secure that it does not need to be guarded. There is no marriage that is so damaged that it cannot be restored.

Fourth, they gave up on justice. Do we not feel the same temptation? With one terrorist attack after another, with nothing to stem the tide, can we not hear ourselves asking, "Where is the God of justice?" Don't give up! Our attitude should be like the psalmist's, who started with the question "Where is God," but ended with the hope. Psalm 10 begins with the question, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" But that same psalm ends, "Surely you behold trouble and misery, you see it and take it into your hands...Break the power of the wicked; search them out until you find none. The Lord is king for ever and ever; the ungodly will perish from the land." Don't give up on God.

Finally, they robbed God. How can we avoid the same? Let me commend to you the practice of a tithe: ten percent of your income dedicated to God. This is not an appeal for the church. Give anywhere; but give. I know that many in this congregation have made this a practice. I would bet that for those who have made a tithe a practice, all would say they have never been in want, and seldom been in need. The Bible tells us not to put God to the test. That is a good general statement, but there is one exception: finances. God calls you to put Him to the test here (Malachi 3:10).

In summary, are you ready for the Lord's return? Are you spotless white, pure gold? None of us are. Jesus is. Trust in Him. Yet, do not let faith lead to presumption. Consider these questions that Malachi has:

- 1) Have I honored God's name?
- 2) Have I abridged God's truth?
- 3) Have I distorted marriage, God's foundational institution?
- 4) Have I given up on the God of justice?
- 5) Have I robbed God?

Think over these questions this week, and remember the Lord will return. His return is certain. His return will be sudden. "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake" (Mark 13:32-37).