

Jason Upchurch - Malachi 4:1-6 - Promises, Promises

We have finally arrived at the end of our study through this powerful book of Malachi. And I hope you have been encouraged in many ways.

First and foremost I hope you have been encouraged to dive into the minor prophets more often. These little books at the end of the Old Testament are packed with encouragement and conviction that we often overlook because they are sometimes difficult to navigate. So I hope you are encouraged to tackle these little books more often as you dive into the Word.

Another way we are challenged is that truly following the Lord is radical. It's hard. The Lord has laid down some hard truths in these few short pages about leadership, obedience, giving, marriage, divorce and at a simple read they can feel a little abrasive. But Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever and he still calls us to follow him with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. A call to believe in the gospel is also a call to follow Jesus as Lord. And just like sometimes you have to break out the Brillo pad to get the dishes clean, sometimes we need an abrasive to break up the muck in our life.

Finally, Malachi is a unique book because it is a transitional book in the canon of Scripture. It's the last of the Old Testament. What comes after Malachi scholars describe in two ways. First they often call it the Second Temple Period. The first Temple period was Solomon's Temple. Israel initially worshipped at the Tabernacle, but under Solomon's reign he built the first Temple to the Lord and that Temple lasted 400 years.

That Temple was destroyed when the Jews were deported to Babylon. The Temple and the city of Jerusalem were rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. That new Temple, the second Temple, is often called Zerubbabel's Temple or just the Second Temple and during that time is when the Jews came up with many traditions and customs we see in Jesus's life that we don't see in the OT. It was during this time we see the rise of the Sadducees and Pharisees and Zealots. Those people and many of the customs at the Temple came about in the deafening silence after Malachi.

And that's the second way this time after Malachi is described: the 400 Silent years. What comes after Malachi is often called the 400 silent years because the Lord said nothing to his people for 400 years. The next time God speaks publicly is through John the Baptist. That doesn't mean he wasn't at work, he was. But in terms of recorded Scripture this is the last we hear from God until Elijah - predicted in the last verse here - comes and prepares the way for Jesus. Elijah, of course, is actually John the Baptist.

And we'll look at that toward the end.

In the mean time, Malachi ends the book with a flurry of promises from God. And I think these are good promises that we need to hang on to. So I want to look at these promises and then the last promise of Elijah I want to spend a little time seeing how that is fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. So that's our plan this morning.

Big Picture: Even when we're rebuked, God's promises keep us going.

1) God will destroy his enemies. Read 1-2a

So after all we've seen in this book, which includes some very harsh rebukes, God still gives his people promises.

And promise 1 is that God will destroy his enemies. Now, we know that God will destroy his enemies. Sometimes that literally happens in this life, sometimes the most wicked people live a long time and die a peaceful death, but even then God unleashes on them the eternal torments of the fires of hell.

But this is a promise meant to encourage the people of God. This isn't a threat. This isn't a turn-or-burn kind of passage because the next promise is for blessing on those who fear him. This is a promise meant to encourage his people.

But let me ask you something? Does it make you happy that God destroys his enemies? Do you take comfort in that? Does that make you say hallelujah, amen and amen?

I think for most of us it's hard to imagine taking comfort and celebrating the destruction of the wicked. A lot of times I think Christians believe it's wrong to take joy in the destruction of wicked people. Almost like no matter how bad someone is we must genuinely want them to know and love God And there are many examples of godly people being persecuted and desiring the forgiveness of their enemies. Jesus and Stephen both come to mind.

But that's not all Scripture has to say. Scripture also has many places where we are to celebrate when the wicked are destroyed.

Prov. 11:10: When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness.

Psa. 58:10: The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance, he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.

They sang songs of David: Saul has killed his thousands, and David what? His ten thousands. You guys that sounds like a rap song.

When Janel killed Sisera, they sang a song "So may all your enemies perish, O Lord!" **Judges 5:24-31** They sang about the brutal murder of a wicked man. They rightly rejoiced.

Turn to Rev. 18:19-19:3 This is the judgment of Babylon the great. How you understand Revelation will influence who you think this is - old Rome, a new Rome, Jerusalem, secret option number 4. But whatever the case, Babylon the Great is known for her treachery and wickedness and in a moment she is utterly destroyed. Notice the reaction of the saints. **Read 19-3**

What's the response? Hallelujah. Praise God, she and all her wicked people are gone.

The Bible says it's good when the wicked perish. Good riddance. I remember being in a Sunday School class the morning Saddam Hussein was captured and shortly after executed. There were people in our Sunday School class that were sad for him. "Poor guy, he's in hell now." Say what? Poor guy? The guy who launched chemical weapons at his own people and killed almost a million humans? God has rid the world of his wickedness. And we should rejoice.

You remember Miriam's song after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea? "Sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea!" **Exo. 15:21**

Praise God he chucked my enemies into the ocean! We should get some hymns like that. "He destroyed the enemies!" Paul encourages the Thessalonians in **2 Thes 1** that they can be encouraged because God will send to hell all those who are troubling them.

That's hard for us to hear. And I think part of the reason it's hard for us to hear is that we have a misunderstanding of Christian empathy.

There's a book that came out recently by Joe Rigney called the Sin of Empathy. Which sounds off because empathy isn't usually a sin. But the basic idea is that empathy - like anger or justice or compassion - can easily be corrupted. They can become sinful and harmful.

We feed those who are lazy and refuse to work because of sinful empathy. The Bible says if you don't work you don't eat.

We refuse to hold women who get abortions accountable out of sinful empathy because we say they're victims. The Bible says they're murderers.

We coddle those who are filled with anxiety and worry because we claim they're "traumatized" or "victims." Now, bad things do happen, but the word "trauma" is thrown around these days like it's a comma in a sentence. Everyone has it and it has no meaning but it becomes a sinful excuse for not obeying when we know we should obey. And we coddle those who claim it.

Those are just a few examples of how we are tempted to excuse wickedness with sinful empathy. We can become sinfully empathetic toward those whom God is righteously angry.

Listen, if you've never prayed an imprecatory prayer, where you are asking God to destroy your enemies like David did, or if you've never encouraged people that God will send all their enemies to hell forever like Paul did, or called out hallelujah when sick, twisted evildoers have died like Solomon and the Apostle John did, then I want to challenge you that your empathy is not righteous. It's sinful.

There are times when we desire the wicked to be saved. But there are times when the wicked need to be wiped off the face of the earth and we delight because their scourge is gone.

And that's what God is getting at **back in Malachi 4**. God is promising judgment is coming on the wicked. He's promising that all the arrogant will be utterly destroyed. **Read 1**

The Day, of course, is the day of judgement. The day when Christ will return and bring all of his enemies low. For evildoers, that day is looked to as a day of burning. Here's it's a burning oven.

God's judgment of the wicked is often compared to fire.

Joel 2:1-3 says that judgement comes like blazing flames.

John the Baptist says to the unrepentant that axe is laid to the root and the trees are thrown into the fire. **Matt. 3:11-12**

This of course is a reference to hell. To burning judgment of the wicked. They're described as the arrogant and the evil doers. And their end is to be stubble.

When you drive to church after the wheat harvest the little stalks poking up in the ground are the stubble. It's utter deadness and in the past they would simply burn the stubble to make way for the next crop. And the stubble since it's so dry would be consumed rapidly.

When I was a kid in the Tri cities, we would occasionally have burn piles. And I loved throwing tumbleweeds on the burn pile because they would burn so hot and fast you could feel the heat radiate out. How they're designed with lots of air all around it would be this massive burn up and then it was just ash.

That's the picture here. The evildoers will be burned with a blazing hot fire that turns everything to ash.

That's the end of evildoers. That's their portion forever. You guys this is a good promise for us to hang on to. It's not wrong for the people of God to pray imprecatory prayers and long for the day of judgment when we are made right. We don't want it to slide into bitterness or vengeance, but God gives us these promises to comfort us in a sinful world.

2 - Joy will return. **Read 2-3**

Those who were living in Israel in Malachi's time were hard pressed. The Lord's judgment was upon them and he had rebuked them harshly. There was rampant corruption in leadership and at the Temple. And in times like those it's hard to find any encouragement. Israel seems to have had kind of a national depression going on because of how bad things are.

And God encourages them that when the Lord comes in judgement, joy will come again.

Now, let me just say, from Malachi's perspective, the Lord's coming was just one coming. They thought Messiah would come, establish his kingdom, the end.

Well, Messiah did come and establish his Kingdom, but that wasn't the end. Messiah was crucified for sins, raised the third day, ascended into heaven and will come again to judge. But we only know that on this side of the Ascension. Before Jesus they thought it was all one coming.

So there's a sense in which when Jesus came the first time there was a reckoning. There was a dividing. And there was also mercy and grace and joy. But there's a second coming as well where that reality is on full display.

So here's how this works, for those who are in Christ we have a sense of deep abiding joy now. Through faith in Jesus your sins are washed away. Through faith in Jesus you are washed white as snow. Those who don't believe in the name of the only Son of God will perish. But this is the dawn of joy.

There's coming a day when this faint joy that we have turns into total joy. You know at Christmastime we do the Christmas Eve service? And we light the candles and by the end the church is lit up and fairly bright? That's what the gospel is doing now - it's expanding and growing. But one day our little candles of joy and hope will be replaced by the sun of righteousness. **Read 2**

Listen, this is a beautiful promise that we just have to trust by faith. That for those who fear the Lord - for Christians - one day all our sorrows will be turned to joy. And not just the slight happiness we feel from time to time now. It's a giddy crazy happiness where we will go about leaping like little calves.

You ever seen little calves jump around? It's kind of silly. They're so happy and goofy and carefree. It's something little children would do. We would be embarrassed to be that carefree. But one day it will be like that.

And in that day we will bask in the sun of righteousness. We're at the end of winter and I think we all are ready for spring to come and the first 70 degree day. I love that first day where you're outside and it's not uncomfortably hot. But it is warm and the warmth just radiates through your body and you just feel a total warmth.

God says that's coming. But it's not the warmth of the sun. It's the warmth of the sun of righteousness. There's coming a day where our lives are so surrounded by the good righteousness of God it's like the spring sun shining down on us and it's just good. You can feel it and smell it and enjoy it and it gives you strength.

Whatever you're going through in life, just remember that that day is coming. One day you will wake up in glory. And all the sinful world will be gone. You'll be sipping your coffee on the front steps of the mansion Jesus has made you. The glory of God your light all around you. You feel the goodness and righteousness. And it's not a vacation that will end in a week or two. On the day you wake up in glory you will always wake up in glory.

As CS Lewis says where: you begin chapter one of the Great Story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." (The Last Battle)

See when God wants to give his people ultimate comfort he always points them to eternity.

2 Cor. 4:17: Our light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

If you think of the worst thing that's happened in your life, or the worst season. Or all of the worst things that have happened to you over all of your life. Imagine those things in a balancing scale. All the bad stuff for all your life on one side. And what that looks like is one small crystallized snowflake.

On the other side of the scale is the glory and good and righteous and joy and you will experience with Jesus in heaven forever: and that's represented by the entire Himalayan mountain range including Mt. Everest.

We're here on the snowflake side. All of the worst stuff in our lives - the loss the death the abuse the hardships the tragedies the sorrows - in the grand scheme of things is like one tiny snowflake about to dissolve. And on the other side are the incomprehensible majesty of the Himalayan mountains.

Light and momentary affliction - like a small melting snowflake - is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory - like the Himalayan mountain range of joy and pleasure and goodness.

That's what awaits the followers of Jesus one day. Keep going, keep plodding, keep hoping.

And here's an interesting tie in to the last point. **Read 3**

On that day, you will tread down your enemies. You will get the justice you want. The Lord will give you victory over the worst of the worst. He encourages you with this.

The thieves won't get away with it. The treacherous won't be let off the hook. The Lord will act, and it seems as though we will have a hand in doling out the judgment against those who attacked us. We will tread them down. We will walk on their proverbial ashes. They don't get the last word, they don't get the final say, they don't get away with it forever.

On that Day, all will be made right. We look forward to the fulfillment of the Promise of glory.

In the meantime, we see a third promise.

3 - Remember that obedience leads to blessing. Read 4

So we look forward to the day the enemies are destroyed and we are in glory, but in the meantime God calls us to faithfulness.

Here, the Lord is calling his people to remember the covenant he made with Moses. Remember the 10 commandments specifically, but really this is a call to the whole Law as well.

A lot of times when we think of the prophets we think about telling the future. We think about specific prophecies that point forward to something. But the reality is that the prophets really point back. And almost always they point to return to faithfulness to the Law of Moses.

And here's why I believe this is a promise. I think it's a veiled promise. And the promise is for blessing. Two reasons for that. First of all, if the people were obedient to the Law God would reward them with blessing. Blessings for obedience and Cursings for disobedience. So an encouragement to obedience is de facto an encouragement that God will bless them.

Here's the second reason: the word "remember." In the OT the word "remember" often signals God's grace and kindness and blessing.

Deut 5:15 God commands Israel to remember. What were they to remember? That they were slaves in Egypt and Yahweh brought them out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. They are to remember his deliverance and kindness.

Deut 8:2 Israel was to remember how God led them in the wilderness 40 years - sustaining them and protecting them to humble them.

When God says remember here it's not like your parents wagging their finger at you to remember to brush your teeth at night. It's him calling them to reflect on the grace and kindness he showed them.

Do you remember how the 10 commandments starts out? Before the law is given, before the demands are made?

All these words God spoke to them: I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

The commandments begin with grace. They begin with God's kindness. And obedience to those commands Results in blessing. I think God is calling them back to obedience because in obedience there is blessing.

And that's true with us as well. God still blesses obedience. And for Christians our motivation for obedience is the same: we obey because God brought us out of the land of sin and out of the house of slavery. He saved us and rescued us and delivered us when we had no hope. And now we follow him as our Lord and master and King.

So we remember that obedience leads to blessing.

4 - Elijah will come. Read 5-6

Elijah in the OT was really one of the most prominent of the prophets. Fiery, bold, and a little strange. **2 Kings 1:8** says Elijah wore a garment of hair with a leather belt and he lived out in the wilderness. When you think of wilderness in Israel what should come to mind is the Sahara desert. Sand and rocky ground and that's about it.

But God says Elijah will come. He is the marker for the great and awesome Day of the Lord. He is the marker for God to appear. And Elijah does this to prepare people.

Turn to Matt 3:1-12. So fast forward 400 years to about AD 30. Israel hasn't heard from God in a long, long time. But there is a Messianic fervor. People believe that Messiah must be coming soon because conditions are so bad. **Read 1-12**

So we have John. Not Elijah, but John who looks a lot like Elijah. And talks a lot like Elijah. In fact, in the gospel of John the people are asking John if he is Elijah. And he says "No, my name is John." Which adds to some confusion.

What's happening? Well, it wasn't Elijah literally who was going to come. It was someone who was a type of Elijah. **Turn to Matt 11:7-15**

Remember this is where John is in prison and about to die and he sends a message to Jesus because he's thinking "I'm not supposed to be in prison. I thought Messiah delivered us from all of this." And then Jesus does a massive amount of miracles and tells the messengers to go back to John and tell him what they saw. They leave and he says this. **Read 7-15**

People went out to see John because they knew he was special. He was different than the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees. He as a prophet - the greatest of all the prophets. And the prophet they had been waiting for: Elijah. Not the exact man, but the fulfillment of Elijah to make way for Jesus.

Look at one more. Luke 1:13-17 This is the angel talking to Zechariah - John's dad - in the Temple. Remember this? This is where John is foretold, Zechariah doesn't believe so he's made mute for a while. Notice what the angel tells him. **Read 13-17**

He goes in the spirit and power of Elijah. What's the Spirit of Elijah? It's the Holy Spirit which John had even before he was born. He was the greatest prophet with a unique dwelling of the Holy Spirit. But what was the purpose? **Read 17**

As great as John was, he was to do one thing: turn people to the Lord. Turn people to Jesus. That was his whole ministry. Get people ready to see the Lord.

Remember when people were leaving John and following Jesus? What was John's response? Was he bitter or jealous? No. He was glad because his mission was complete.

“The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is complete. He must increase, but I must what?’ Decrease.

God’s promise to send Elijah came true. And our mission is the same: point people to Jesus. He must increase, we must decrease.

Pray