

Malachi Chapter Four (vv.1-6)

Dispute Six: Despising God's Service [3.13-4.6]

Fearful Revelation of Judgment [4.1-3]

The *first three* verses of Malachi 4 develop the theme of the coming day of divine judgment. It will herald the *removal* of the wicked (v.1) and *reward* of the righteous (vv.2-3). The *final three* verses conclude the prophecy in the form of a final exhortation. There must be a *remembrance* of the covenant (v.4) and awareness of a future *restoration* (vv.5-6).

Removal of the *wicked* (v.1). “Behold” suggests a statement demanding attention (cf. 3.1; 4.5). The Hebrew indicates “the day” is about to come, it is imminent, and no doubt refers to the *Day of the Lord* (cf. 3.2). This is a period of divine intervention on earth that includes the tribulation, second coming of Christ (often the emphasis) and millennial reign, hence including both *judgment* (Zephaniah 1.14-18) and *blessing* (Zephaniah 3.14-17). The Great Tribulation shall “burn as (like) an oven” (fiery furnace) and consume the “proud” and “wicked” like the burning of “stubble” (chaff), the combustible, dry straw that remains after the grain has been harvested (Isaiah 5.24). Dry stubble is of little value and easily burned. The fire could also be linked to the final great war at the coming of Christ who shall descend “in flaming fire” (2 Thessalonians 1.7-8). John uses the same imagery in Matthew 3.12. “All the proud” emphasises the attitude of the wicked as self-sufficient, living independently of God. To “do wickedly” is the *fruit* of their arrogance, practicing evil deeds (godlessness). The fire will not even leave “root (normally protected from fire being under the ground) nor branch” – a vivid picture of *total* and *complete* destruction (judgment). Thus, the entire tree is included, from top to bottom – there will be no escape, no possibility of regrowth (no root) and no trace of past growth (no branch). The experience of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego illustrates that, though a godly remnant will experience the tribulation, it will be preserved *through* the burning fire (cf. Daniel 3; Malachi 3.2-3).

Reveal the *righteous* (vv.2-3). The God-fearing remnant (cf. 3.16-17) had the present consciousness of the Lord's approval to sustain and cheer, and the coming of the Lord as their immediate hope. They did not look for any great revival or expect evil to decrease. “*These godly individuals, weak, despised, and almost unknown by the world, midst scorn and shame it may be, pursued their lowly and separated path, walking in the fear of the Lord, jealous of the name of the Lord, and waiting for the coming of the Lord*” (Hamilton Smith). The remnant of Malachi's day represents a future remnant amongst the Jewish people (Matthew 24.22). The brightness of the coming Christ will destroy the wicked but bring *light* and *life* to these righteous! The “sun of righteousness” is a figure of speech comparing the sun to the coming Messiah. The sun signals the dawning of a new day (cp. Luke 1.78) and is linked here with “righteousness”. The genitive indicates that this is not just His nature, but what He will produce throughout the whole world (Isaiah 11.3-4; 32.1, 16-17). Christ will restore righteousness, setting things straight in the world and returning them to their right order. He will display and enforce righteousness including dispelling the unparalleled spiritual darkness of a period governed by a trinity of evil. “In a world ruined by sin everything is wrong: hence if an order of things is to be established according to God, the first consideration must be what is right” (FB Hole). Therefore, the initial beams of this glorious Sun will burn like an oven, destroying the ungodly.

The Sun shall “arise” (to *shine* or *glisten*) with “healing in his wings”. The image of wings compares the rising sun to a huge bird, its rays reaching across the skies as outstretched wings (Psalm 139.9). These rays of light will provide the balm of *spiritual* and *physical* healing (health, remedy) for those who enter the kingdom (Isaiah 35.5-6; Hosea 14.4). The righteous will be ‘set free’ and ‘skip about like calves released from the stall’ (NET). When calves have been confined for a long period of time (over the winter), they skip into the glorious liberty of the field. So, the righteous, when they are liberated from the effects of the curse – will leap for joy in great celebration (cf. Romans 8.21).

In contrast to the “sun”, the final presentation of Christ in the NT is as “the bright and morning star” (Revelation 22.16). The morning star appears *before* daytime, at dawn, towards the closing of the night. It is the harbinger (herald) of the rising sun. This is how believers of the present dispensation look for Christ. No thought of judgment enters here! “*You cannot avoid seeing sunlight unless you shut your eyes, and even then may have an instinctive sense of it. But with the morning star it is not so: you must look for it when others sleep. This is the way therefore in which the Spirit of God shows us our watching for Jesus*” (William Kelly). The rising of the sun draws our attention to the **earth**; the morning star directs our gaze towards the **heavens**. Thus, the Sun of righteousness reminds us of Christ as the hope of *Israel* and the *world*. The Morning Star to Christ as the hope of the *church*.

v.3: The righteous will, at last, be in ascendancy in that day (cp. 3.15; Psalm 47.3; Micah 7.10). Today, the *wicked* crush the righteous underfoot, but roles will be reversed then. At the Second Coming, the *righteous* will conquer the wicked and “tread” them underfoot – a symbol of victory. Isaiah 63.1-6 portrays the Messiah as treading underfoot His enemies in the winepress of his wrath. But here, the righteous are seen to be *sharing* in the victory of complete subjugation. The wicked enemies of God’s people will be turned to “ashes” following the fire of divine judgment (4.1).

Future Restoration is Promised [4.4-6]

The conclusion of the prophecy presents *two* guidelines by which the people of God should live if they would be counted among the righteous. First, they must *look back*, remembering and obeying the Law given to Moses (v.4). Second, they must *look on* to the imminent coming of the Lord (vv.5-6) and be in a fit state of heart to receive Him.

Remembrance of the *covenant* (v.4). “Remember ye the law” does not merely mean to ‘call to mind’, but to *act in obedience* to it. Even though the Law had been given a thousand years earlier, the smallest details were still binding on all Israel. The passing of time had not altered the word of God! Sadly, the next 400 years would see a corruption of the Law by the Pharisees and Sadducees. Instead of *remembering* the Law, they *reinterpreted* the Law in order to avoid its clear meaning. The Law was commanded to “Moses my servant in Horeb”, an alternative designation for Mount Sinai or its surrounding region (Exodus 33.6; 1 Kings 19.8). The Law comprised “statutes” (regulations) and “judgments” (laws).

Restoration assured (vv.5-6). Again, the Hebrew expresses the imminent future, ‘Behold, I am sending’ (cf. 3.1). The individual being sent on this occasion is “Elijah the prophet”. Just as John the Baptist was sent to be Messiah’s herald at His first advent, so He will send ‘Elijah the prophet’ before His second advent, “the great and dreadful (fearful) day of the LORD”. This will likely not be Elijah himself, but a great prophetic witness in Elijah’s *official*, not *personal*, capacity. In the same way, John the Baptist was not Elijah himself (John 1.19-21) but *Elijah-like* in character and ministry (Luke 1.17). If the Jews had received the Lord Jesus as Messiah, then John would be the Elijah spoken of here (Matthew 11.14; 17.9-13). But since they refused the King, another Elijah-like prophet will be sent in the future, perhaps linked to the two witnesses of Revelation 11.1-19. Indeed, if his coming is at the beginning of the Tribulation, he could be the catalyst to turn many Jews to faith in Christ resulting in the sealing of 144,000 witnesses (Revelation 7). The Jewish people today greatly anticipate the coming of Elijah, for they rightly believe he heralds the coming of Messiah. The belief is that Elijah will come during Passover, so they prepare a place at the seder table with a large cup of wine and leave the front door open to welcome the spirit of the prophet (David Levy). The suitability of Elijah is apparent as he ministered at a time of general apostasy, standing against the growing influence of idolatry (Baal worship) in Israel. Conditions will be similar during the tribulation. **v.6:** The purpose of Elijah’s coming is to “turn hearts”. The reference to ‘fathers’ and ‘sons’ may mean that he will encourage reconciliation of conflicts within Jewish families, but more likely “he will encourage fathers and their children to return to me” (NET), thus Elijah will seek to encourage both *younger* and *older* generations to repent and return to the Lord (3.7) so providing a remnant people united in their readiness to receive Christ. Likewise, those who wait for Christ today should be living soberly and righteously in this godless age (Titus 2.12; 1 John 3.3). The test of spirituality today is obedience to the word of God and anticipation of the soon coming of Christ.

Without such repentance, the earth would be smitten with a “curse”. The indication is that God would turn the *earth* to ashes were it not for a repentant remnant. Thus, OT history ends with the potential judgment of utter (total) destruction (cf. Deuteronomy 13.12-15). This was the experience of Judah and Jerusalem in AD70, when the city was destroyed, and Judah ceased to exist as a nation. **But** this is not a curse *pronounced*, rather a curse *threatened*, “lest I come”. It is not that hope is forever past, and there can be no deliverance. Thank God the NT closes with the *removal* of the curse (Revelation 22.3) and a reference to divine *grace* (Revelation 22.21, cf. Galatians 3.13).

“And so with this solemn word the OT abruptly comes to a close. The law had been violated in every particular. On the ground of the legal covenant the people had no hope whatever. Wrath like a dark cloud was lowering over their heads. The awful curse of that broken law was all they had earned after long ages of trial. But a Redeemer had been promised; and where there was faith, in any who felt the seriousness of their condition, they looked on to the coming of the Seed of the woman who was to bruise the serpent's head, and Himself be made a curse, that all who put their trust in Him might be redeemed from the doom they had so long and fully deserved.”