

Intro: What difference does the future make? In reality, it makes a big difference. A few weeks ago, my wife and children took off on a little trip. While they were gone, it was just me (and the pets!) in the house. They left on a Tuesday, and I knew they would be returning on Thursday evening. Knowing that piece of information about the future affected my life in the present. The closer it got to Thursday evening, the more excited I got (and the more serious I got about cleaning up the dishes in the sink!).

This morning, we're going to consider the difference the future makes. There are two groups of people in churches today. There are those who play games with God, and there are those who don't. That's what we saw last week, in Malachi 3:13-18.

Malachi taught us that the first group are people who fiddle with God (13-15). In his day, such "fiddling" was evidenced by their criticisms against God (13). They said, "It's vain to serve God (14). It's pointless to obey God (14). It doesn't pay to be godly (15)." It was also evidenced by their claims about themselves (15). They asserted that all was well between them and God. But it wasn't. They were merely playing games with God.

In the second group are people who fear God (16-18). You can tell a God-fearer by looking at the evidence of what they do now (16). They reverence God, rejuvenate one another, think on God's Name and most visibly, they serve God. Secondly, it's evidenced by their view of the future (17-18). They know that God will reward the righteous and repay the wicked.

Here's the bottom line. People who play games with God will lose. Always. When, and how will they lose? That's what Malachi 4 tells us by giving us a snapshot of the future.

In the best Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi has only three chapters instead of four. There is no break between chapters 3 & 4. The reason is clear. The six verses we call "chapter four" elaborate on the truth revealed in 3:17-18. They take us ahead to "that day." What difference does the future make?

Proposition: According to Malachi 4:1-6, the future should make a difference in three areas.

- I. The future should affect our perspective (1-3).
 - A. What's coming for those who fiddle with God (1)?
 1. It will be a Day of punishment.
 2. It will be a Day of penalty.
 - B. What's coming for those who fear God (2-3)?
 1. It will be a Day of joy.
 2. It will be a Day of justice.
- II. The future should affect our present (4).
- III. The future should affect our preparation (5-6).

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

- A. God wants us to be ready.
- B. The Day is coming whether we are ready or not.
 - 1. Either we must look up.
 - 2. Or we must look out.

I. The future should affect our perspective (1-3).

Let me remind you of the perspective of the people living in Malachi's day. It was the 5th century B.C. God had already judged His people with the Babylonian exile, and a remnant was back in the land. Though the temple was rebuilt, and the sacrificial system in operation, the situation was bleak, economically as well as spiritually.

Actually, the people were disgruntled with God. Their attitude was (see 2:16), "We deserve better than this! Evil people are getting off scott-free. God isn't very just. We can't wait for the Day of the Lord!" They had a perspective problem.

To correct it, in his book Malachi clarified two misconceptions. First, he confronted the people's view of themselves (in chapters 1-3)--"You're not as righteous as you think! You blame God, but YOU are the problem. You give God your leftovers (1:8). Your ministers (priests) handle His Word flippantly (2:7). You have a casual view of marriage (2:14). You are stingy givers (3:8). You think its vain to serve God (3:14). God isn't the problem--You are!"

In chapter 4, Malachi confronts a second area. To his people he says, "Your view of the Day of the Lord is wrong." The people said they couldn't wait for that day, but Malachi warns them to rethink their eschatology. The Day of the Lord will affect those who fiddle with God in a very different way from those who fear God.

A. What's coming for those who fiddle with God (1)?

V 1 tells us, "For behold, the day cometh, that shall burn like an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch."

Back in 3:15, we learned that Malachi's people were calling the proud "happy." They thought the proud had it made in life. Here in ch 4, they learned otherwise. The "proud" are mentioned again. This time we learn the fate of the proud. They will burn like stubble.

What will the Day hold for the wicked? It will be like fire, with two dreadful results.

1. It will be a Day of punishment.

V 1 says that Day "shall burn like an oven (NIV "furnace"). What a vivid word picture! It will be a Day of fire, not an out-of-control type of fire, but a fire devoted to a purpose. It will be a Day when God will punish the wicked. V 1 reads, "The Day that cometh shall burn them up." Don't misread that statement. God is not saying the wicked will be annihilated (cease to exist), but excluded (see B.K.C.). This is related to a second horrid truth about that Day...

2. It will be a Day of penalty.

V 1 ends, "That it shall leave them neither root nor branch." Malachi presents a harvest scene. The oven is burning. The stubble, roots, and branches are gathered and thrown into the furnace. Not a branch will be left, so severe will be the destruction.

In the prophets, the Day of the Lord is constantly connected with fire (Joel 2:3, 30) or the burning anger of God (Is 13:9; Wolf, 118). The word "oven" in v 1 is sometimes used of an oven for baking, and an oven can even symbolize the presence of God (Gen 15:17).

The point is clear. The coming Day will be a Day of punishment and penalty. Intense, white-hot, sudden, quick destruction will overtake those who have played games with the holy God. John the Baptist may have had this passage in mind when he announced that Jesus would "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Wolf, 119).

What is hell like? Think about the following observation Walter Kaiser makes about the penalty facing the ungodly (105), "But the horrible fact about the fires of God is not located either in the temperature (Fahrenheit or Celsius) or the geography of Hell. We owe more to Dante, Vergil, and Milton than we do to the Bible for these exaggerations. The disagreeable of this judgment is that it is permanent and everlasting banishment 'from the presence of the Lord' (2 Thess. 1:6-9). It will be eternal existence in a place where neither God nor the influence of his Holy Spirit exists--that is impure Hell in all its fury. It is a place where everyone simultaneously does what he wishes to do. This is not freedom, but nightmarish anarchy."

Oh, my friends, may God help us to grasp the severity of these words. May they drive us to our knees before God. May they move us to stop playing games with God if we have been. May they change the way we view our loved ones who do not know Christ.

B. What's coming for those who fear God (2-3)?

For the wicked that Day will be like fire. For the righteous in Christ, that Day will be like light. It will hold two results for God-fearers.

1. It will be a Day of joy.

V 2 "BUT (strong contrast) unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings." Notice two word pictures in v 2 which depict the nature of that Day. That Day is compared to the sun (2), and to a calf just set free from its stall (3).

The letter "s" in "Sun" is capitalized in the KJV, but is not in other translations. Does the "sun" refer to God, or to the "Son," or is it referring to the Day of the Lord in general? It seems plausible that the "sun" refers to the "Son."

For one reason, in 3:1-3, Malachi revealed that when the Messiah would come, He would bring righteousness. We know that Jesus is the Light of the world, the Light of men, and the Light of the Gentiles. In Isa 60:1-2, Isaiah prophesies this about the coming Day, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the peoples, but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee."

For those who fear God, the future is very bright. The Sun of righteousness will come with healing and wholeness. How will God's people respond when He comes? Like calves (2).

Growing up we raised 4-H calves. An exciting scene on the farm happened in the spring. When the long, cold months of winter were nearly over, a warm day would hit. The sunshine made the calves, which had been in their stalls all winter, quite restless. So

we'd open the barn-door, step back, and watch. The calves scooted slowly, cautiously towards the opening. Then they burst into the light and kicked their heels high into the air. They were free from the confines of their winter home. What a day!

So it will be for God's people. The coming day will be a day of joy.

2. It will be a Day of justice.

We live in a day when the righteous take it on the chin at the hands of the wicked. But in that day, the roles will be reversed. Justice will be served. V 3 reads, "And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts."

Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the godless seem to prosper? Why do good people suffer at the hands of greedy people? Those questions will overwhelm us until we put them in the perspective of the future. A Day of justice is coming. Paul described it in Rom 16:20, "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." David wrote in Ps 58:10, "The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance; he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked." God will vindicate Himself and His people.

What difference does the future make? The first area it should affect is our perspective.

II. The future should affect our present (4).

The doctrine of eschatology deals with the future (the doctrine of end times). It's a great doctrine. But unfortunately, a lot of people miss the mark when it comes to eschatology. They love to debate how many toes the beast will have, and discuss how many judgments there will be, and argue about what event comes first on their prophetic chart. But they forget something. They forget that what we believe about the future should affect our lives in the present.

There is more to life than meets the eye. We must live this day in the light of that day.

That's Malachi's point in v 4, "Remember the law of Moses..." The future must affect our present. If God is going to judge the wicked and reward the righteous, what should we do? The answer is one word--remember! It's a command. Remember the law of Moses.

In a sense, Malachi roots his message about the future in the past. In verses 4-6, he points back to two of Israel's great spiritual leaders--Moses and Elijah. The testimonies of Moses (as representative of the "Law") and Elijah (as representative of the "Prophets") both add weight to the message of Malachi.

"Remember the law of Moses...which I commanded unto him in Horeb (another name for Mt. Sinai), for all Israel, with the statutes and ordinances." In Jesus' day, the Jews prided themselves in the Law, but in essence what they had was cold formalism and legalism. That's not what God has in mind in Malachi. Here, at the close of the Old Testament He gives His people one more chance to remember before it's too late (Wolf, 123).

You say, "What can I do NOW so I won't have to fear the Day of the Lord?" We need to remember God's law. The word "remember" appears 14 times in Deuteronomy. The Hebrew word can mean three things (T.W.O.T.): 1) Mental acts of remembering; 2)

Mental acts combined with appropriate external action; 3) Acts of reciting or repeating verbally. It's the second Malachi has in mind.

Most of us already know what God expects of us. What we need is to do it. Remember and do. Be doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:22). Some of you know the Bible says you need to be saved. You know you are a sinner, and that Christ died for your sins. You need to remember the truth and take action. Others have never been baptized, yet you know the Bible commands us to do so (Mt 28:19). You need to remember and do. Perhaps your life is out of whack in some area. What should you do? Remember God's Word, and do it.

You may ask, "What will happen if we don't remember God's law?" Someone has said (in Kaiser, 107), "If the law is not fulfilled IN the nation, it must be executed UPON the nation." That's exactly what we discover in vv 5-6 as we come to our third area. The future should affect our perspective, our present, and...

III. The future should affect our preparation (5-6).

V 5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible Day of the Lord." Knowing what will unfold in the future should motivate us to prepare in the present. Notice two important truths related to our preparation.

A. God wants us to be ready.

In fact, God announced He would send someone just prior to the coming of that great and terrible Day. Who? Elijah the prophet. Perhaps you're thinking, "Wait a minute. Wasn't Elijah a prophet in Israel in the 9th century B.C., some 500 years before Malachi's day?" Yes. "Then why did God say Elijah would come before that yet future day?" Because he would!

Remember what happened to Elijah (2 Kings 2)? God took him to heaven in a whirlwind, escorted by a chariot of fire. In a sense, his ministry did not end. That was true in two ways. First, his ministry lived on in the succession of prophets that followed him. 2 Kings 2:15 says Elijah's spirit and power were passed on to his successor, Elisha. So too, nearly 1,000 years later, John the Baptist came in the power of Elijah, so much so that an angel said of him in Lk 1:17, "And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children (note Mal 4:6)...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

God wants us to be ready. That's why He sent Malachi in the 5th century B.C., and John the Baptist before the Lord. These men were reformers in the line of Elijah. These men were forerunners for the Messiah. These men followed in the steps of Elijah, and through them, God called people to get ready for His coming. In a sense, the succession has continued throughout history--men like Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Wesley, Moody, Billy Sunday have ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah, calling people to get ready.

There's another way in which Elijah's ministry is not over. Jesus said in Mt 17:11, "Elijah truly shall come first, and restore all things." What is not clear in Malachi is that the Messiah would come TWICE, first as a suffering servant, and finally as a conquering king. Many feel that one of the two witnesses described in Rev 11:3-12 is none other than Elijah.

Why will Elijah precede the Lord's coming? Because God wants people to be ready.

B. The Day is coming whether we are ready or not.

There are only two options when it comes to preparing for the coming Day of the Lord, and they are listed in v 6. Both are indicated as the results of Elijah's ministry. The first is, "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of children to their fathers." What does that mean? What alone can bridge the generation gap? Listen parents. The best thing you can do for your children is not to give them things, but to fear God. Notice that Elijah's preaching (which is the same message to which we hold) will bring fathers and children together, to be of one mind.

It breaks my heart to see families torn by strife and bickering, to see family members who can no longer be in the same room peaceably. How can they reconcile? Only by turning to the Lord. A by-product of reconciliation with the Lord is reconciliation with one another.

The Day is coming whether we are ready or not. In that Day, God's people will experience perfect unity. But not everyone will be ready. The second result is, "Lest I come (NIV "or else I will come") and smite the earth with a curse." The word curse is often translated "ban." The Canaanite people were placed under "ban" (Dt 20:17-18), and God commanded His people to destroy them under Joshua. The Hebrew word is "herem" from which we get our English word "harem" (that which is set apart and off-limits to everyone except the owner).

The point is this. In that Day, God will take by force what belongs to Him, and what many people refused to give Him. Beloved, the future should affect our preparation. The Day is coming whether we are ready or not. What are our options? There are two.

1. *Either we must look up.*
2. *Or we must look out.*

Do you know what the Masoretes did? The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who preserved the Hebrew Bible in the Middle Ages. It bothered them that the last book of the twelve minor prophets ended on the harsh note of a curse, so they repeated v 5 after v 6. But attempting to soften the message doesn't change it's reality. The Day is coming whether we are ready or not.

Most of us don't think about the coming Day enough. We should.

Charles Wesley described it with these words ("Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending"), "Lo, He comes with clouds descending, once for favored sinners slain; thousand thousand saints attending, swell the triumphs of His train; Alleluia! Alleluia! God appears on earth to reign. Every eye shall now behold Him, robed in dreadful majesty; Those who set at naught and sold Him, pierced and nailed Him to the tree, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see. Now redemption, long expected, see in solemn pomp appear: All His saints, by men rejected, now shall meet Him in the air: Alleluia! Alleluia! See the Day of God appear."

What difference does the future make? It ought to be affecting our perspective, our present, and our preparation. Are you ready for the Day of the Lord?