

THE DAY WHEN FAITH WILL END

Malachi 4:1 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. ²But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

Dear Friends in Christ,

"He is like a blind man describing color." Well, I hope I am not. But if someone wants to accuse me of it, you can, and I'll listen. But let me give it a try: I haven't had the experience, and I have never even been close to having the experience, but I can imagine that nothing does more to keep a prisoner of war alive than hope.

Knowing that the mightiest army on earth is committed to recovering all of its servicemen – albeit that that cannot be done at all costs at all times – but knowing the history of POWs liberated after years of imprisonment (whether in Japan or Germany or Korea or Vietnam); remembering the thousands of black POW-MIA flags flying in front of houses around this nation; knowing that our nation spends quite a bit of money and diplomatic capital in recovering even the remains of our servicemen, it has to give hope to one imprisoned in a nearly hopeless situation.

God's people, the Israelites, had been at it quite a while. It started with Abraham, then Isaac and Jacob. Four hundred years later it was Moses. Four hundred years after that it was David and Solomon. Four hundred years after that God deported the entire Israelite nation. Two hundred years later, after Jerusalem had been re-built, the prophet Malachi is on the scene. He is God's last prophet to speak before 400 years more of silence leading up to the Messiah. God's people have become weary with the centuries-long cycle of faith, failure, destruction, reform. Faith, failure, destruction, reform. Round and round it goes. Hamsters love hamster wheels, but people don't. God's people tire.

Weariness leads to cynicism. Cynicism is that state of mind where you are working hard at life just like the rest of humanity, and for some reason you look up from the sweaty toil of life and you look around at everyone else hunched over the sweaty toil of their lives and you stop, stand up straight, put your hands on your waist and laugh that derisive laugh, mocking them all. "You guys! It doesn't matter! It's useless! It doesn't really matter!" That is cynicism.

Many within Israel couldn't have cared less and threw themselves whole-heartedly into sin. But many *had* cared – or had once cared but now were tired – and they said, "*It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? Now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers prosper. Even those who challenge God escape.*" They had cared, but they had gotten wise. I wonder how many of our number are there. Do you know Christians like that? Or people who used to be Christians? That is what the better of God's people were saying in Malachi's day. If you go home and read the book of Malachi today (you can do that in about 5 minutes), you will find that cynical attitude expressed just a few sentences before our reading. The righteous were weary. The

concerned felt cheated. All felt that while they might want to do what was right, there really wasn't much point to it.

Let that be an introduction for our message today:

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God's intention has never been cynicism. His intention, his invitation has always been the opposite: hope. God's hope looks forward and says that there is a point, there is a reason, and there is a completely different reality that will unfold. The Christian hope is based on what God has told us about the future.

The ultimate future event that changes everything is foretold in today's reading. Through Malachi, God gives his tired people hope. He points them to a day even *beyond* the coming Savior when he says, ***"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire...But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings"*** (1-2).

I. The Day When Faith Will No Longer Be an Option

There will be a day of reckoning. There will come a time when things will be set right, a division between right and wrong. In the New Testament some details of Judgment Day are made more clear. Our Savior will come again, not to save but to judge. All people who have ever lived on this earth will be raised from the sleep of death and assembled before Christ. Then and there the wrongs of this life will be set right by our Savior.

Through the prophet Malachi, God spoke these words to encourage his Israelite people to not throw in the towel. Through the prophet Malachi, God wrote these words for us. Don't give up. Don't join the other team, or walk off leaving both teams. Have hope. God will come for his people.

He will, first of all, punish ***"the arrogant and every evildoer."*** The people who hear you talk about your God and Savior, and roll their eyes – we pray for them – but unless there is a change, God says they will be like dried up straw thrown on a bonfire. They will be punished eternally. When they roll their eyes at your Christian testimony, they do not roll their eyes at you but at God's messenger sent to warn them.

When they insist that the written record of God's will couldn't possibly be right or true because it is not consistent with their rational expectations of a loving God, God knows. They will be beyond disappointed in the final judgment. God does not conform himself to people. It is the other way around.

When the arrogant burn the upside down cross tattoo into their skin in conscious defiance of God, God says that such arrogant people will not find mercy on the day of judgment. God sees and knows.

God says that there will be a day of fire and punishment for all who stand in arrogant opposition to his ways. Then the day to come to faith will have passed, there will be no more chances for faith.

Now a curious thing I hear once in a while from people is an opinion that the God of the Old Testament is an angry vengeful God, while the God of the New Testament is a loving, all-embracing God. As if there were two Gods. Or maybe one God, who half-way through decided he recognized a tactical error and changed his mind. I hear this especially from people who have Christianity in their background but not much now. These people obviously don't do much with God's word. Do you know who talks about the fires of hell more than anyone else? Jesus.

- “*Weeping and gnashing of teeth*” is a proverbial English phrase for suffering in frustrated, powerless anger. Do you know who coined the phrase? Jesus did, when he talked about the divine punishment for people who rejected him.
- Did you hear our Gospel reading where Jesus said that all who do not listen to his voice in this life will one day be raised to condemnation?
- Did you know that Jesus told at least half a dozen parables that end with something like this: “*Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire’*” (Mt 25:41). Half a dozen!

Let no one think that Christ winks at sin. Let no one think that we can kind of take or leave what God says because in the end God will just sweep it under the carpet. The consistent message from Genesis to Malachi, and Matthew to Revelation is that unbelief of Jesus Christ or defiance of God’s will be punished harshly and forever. May God preserve us from that!

Over the years, some outsiders have listened to Christians speak of the blazing fires of hell and thought that it sounds like Christians find just a little too much joy in the idea of unbelievers burning in hell. Maybe, listening to me, you are thinking that very thought. May it never be!

When parents speak to their children of the misery and pain that surround drug use, no sensible parent finds joy in the sufferings of drug abusers. We weep for them! We speak of those horrors as warnings.

And so true Christians never find joy in the hell that awaits people who reject God. God does not tell us about the final judgment so that we can dance on people’s graves. Instead it is a warning to us and a reminder for us to evangelize others. The final judgment tells us that there *is* a reason to not throw in with the arrogant, the immoral, the dishonest, the people that seem to be having all the fun and prosperity. Because one day the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

II. The Day When Faith Will Be Fulfilled

So how should God’s beloved, redeemed people feel in the meanwhile? Perhaps as we watch the forces of godlessness quickly grow strong in our nation, we can lose hope, become cynical. Or perhaps, as is the custom of our day, we think of ourselves as “victims” and fall into the pitfalls of legitimized self-pity, “Poor me!” Should we think of ourselves as victims powerless before forces greater than us? Again, may it never be so! We are not victims. The world may not understand what we have, but we are not victims. We are beloved. We are favored. We shall be the victors, not victims. God will come back for us. Listen to the other half of what Malachi sees about the Final Judgment.

“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” It will be a new day for those who honor God’s name, who have faith in all he says, who look to him for salvation. On that last day, a new sun shall rise. All of the unfairness, the brutality, the dishonesty, the abuse, the false accusations, the wink and the nod, the cheating, the laughing at someone else’s expense, all of it will end under the new sun of righteousness. All that was infected by sin’s curse will be cured. All remnants of sin will disappear. And there will only be righteousness, the perfection of God’s first creation.

“And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” Maybe at your place you don’t have calves, but maybe you have cats or dogs. Or maybe you can remember little children going out on the first fine warm spring day. Watching them brings smiles to faces and joy to hearts. It is so fun to watch their excitement. But what is even more fun to watch is

what they don't have. They don't have the things that weigh you down. In the innocence and ignorance of their youth they don't have the burdens of life, the worries of a family, the regrets of past bad choices, the memories of things gone wrong. Truth be told, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 year old people can never really *"leap like calves released from the stall"* in the way that children can. But God will make you so that you will.

On that great day of judgment when Christ calls *"all who revere his name,"* all who gladly bear his name as their savior – all the things that dampen the joy you have in Christ Jesus will melt away. And you, under that sun of righteousness, will have all the burdens, worries, regrets and bad memories lifted off of you and they will never again make your heart heavy.

And in that day, faith will end. Because, you see, once you have the prize, you don't have faith. *"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."* (Heb. 11:1). Then we will hold in our hands what we had hoped for, and see with our eyes what was once invisible. On the day when Christ comes to judge the world we will receive the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:9). And that will be **THE DAY WHEN FAITH WILL END**, end in something even better than faith: a new reality; heaven. Amen.