

DECEMBER 31

Time to celebrate!

Malachi 3-4

This generation of Jews had a very muddled history. Part of their history was miraculous privilege and the other part was tragic judgment. Yet they were still God's people, chosen to make His redemptive plan known to the world. They should have been impressed with the astounding manner in which God had bent and moved the nations to protect Israel in exile and to restore them to their land. Instead it was all so wearisome and so vague. There was this hope, but they didn't want to fully commit themselves to God. They thought a little following would work, but it only made matters worse. (This sounds like a lot of people today in the church.) This would also be a picture of the Jews before Jesus arrived. In a way, it is a picture of all of mankind. We have a vague sense we should seek God, but we want His blessing on our terms at whatever level of interest we're willing to give Him. He should just be happy with what He gets, right? Who does He think He is anyway? ☺

Malachi 3

Vs. 1-5 So God will send messengers to prepare the people.

V. 1 There are two messengers here. John the Baptist is the first and *the messenger of the covenant* was Jesus. We know what happened with John and Jesus. In fact, tomorrow you get to begin reading the Gospels.

V. 2-5 Suddenly God warns them of His coming. We saw in Amos 5:18, that a person shouldn't wish lightly for the day of the Lord. The result will be that Judah will be cleansed, but it will be through the fire. I think this is captured in Jesus telling the multitudes that if they are walking with their accuser on the way to the court, to try to settle on the way. If it goes to judgment, they will have to pay every penny. The idea for that generation and each individual was, "Now is the time. Don't wait until the day of the Lord."

Vs. 6-12 The point of this section takes a little thought. It is not that God is interested in tithing, but the lack of tithing did reveal a lack of spiritual understanding.

V. 6 Just as God has always done, He will continue to spare them because of His covenant with Abraham.

V. 7 So what do the statutes have to do with returning to God and paying the tithes? Remember in Nehemiah that Nehemiah set everything in order. The priests and the Levites were all in Jerusalem working and the people were bringing the tithes. Nehemiah left for a time and when he returned (Neh. 13:6), the Levites were scattered back to their farms. The people had stopped bringing the tithes.

I can imagine the people saying, "Hey, the times are hard. Why should I tithe to support a bunch of people sitting around doing nothing?" The thing is that God had appointed the priests and Levites to be teachers of the people. How would the people learn the statutes and the Word (and of God Himself) if the Levites weren't there? That is the point here. A spiritually perceptive person would have seen that his own spiritual welfare and the spiritual welfare of his family and nation were dependent on the ministry of the priests and Levites. And the priests and Levites were supported by the tithes. Tithing tested the hearts of the people. They failed. When the people held back, God held back and not only did the economy suffer, but so did their spiritual wellbeing.

V. 12 Israel was to have been a witness and a blessing to the nations because of God's blessing to them as they followed. In Isaiah 55 God says that they will be a blessing during the Millennium.

Vs. 13-15 I have met Christians who basically have this attitude. Yet, a little following and trust, mixed with a major portion of living your life the way you want, only brings bitter disappointment. We are not left here to have more comfort, better health and cooler toys than the unbelieving world. We are here to serve our Lord, following Him with a cross on our shoulder into the harvest. In this there is joy. Any other view is our own.

Vs. 16-18 Some people did respond and God promises to acknowledge these people on the day of resurrection. God's acknowledgement of them will add to the judgment of all those who didn't respond. It might also be that in the time of Malachi, God chose to bless those who truly repented, and did this in a visible way.

V. 18 God will make this distinction clear at Christ's coming and in all eternity. For those who love Jesus, they already understand the spiritual depth of this difference. It is all grace and nothing we have done. To know Him is itself the reward.

Malachi 4

These are God's final words in the Old Testament, then come 400 silent years. And tomorrow, for us, we read about the coming of the Savior and His herald.

V. 1 This not only sounds like the judgment at the end of the Tribulation, but John the Baptist told the leaders and people that the axe was laid to the root of the trees and that burning would accompany ignoring the message. *John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. ¹⁸So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.* (Luke 3:16-18) I always smile when I read that last sentence after John's version of the "good" news.

Vs. 2-3 This really sounds like the fighting in Jerusalem just as Jesus returns. The *sun of righteousness* only appears here and it was used by Charles Wesley in "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Since it is spelled "sun" and not "son," the meaning has to do with a coming day that will dawn on mankind. Oddly enough, there is a mention to that in Luke 1:76-79 (RSV). Zechariah the father of John the Baptist is speaking. *"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."* Jesus is that Light that dawns upon us.

V. 4 In a heart of faith the statues and rules were obeyed in faith, out of a heart of love and gratitude for God's salvation and deliverance. The first and great commandment of the Law was to love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind. That love came from one's understanding of the Lord's love in saving them out of Egypt (and now Babylon) and for fulfilling the promise to Abraham. In the same way, our service and obedience as disciples flows first from our love for Christ and our gratitude that He saved us. Growing in our love for Him and His Word has to be our first priority or everything else becomes duty.

Vs. 5-6 So, is this John the Baptist? Read what Gabriel said to Zechariah regarding John in Luke 1:16-17 (March 13). He quotes a part of verse six. Jesus said that John fulfilled this ministry. Jesus said in Matthew 17:12, *"But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased."* Still, there is enough ambiguity in what Jesus says to allow room to understand that Elijah really will come during the Tribulation and be one of those two witnesses.

These are the final words of the Old Testament. God wanted to make His point. In His love and compassion there is the warning of judgment. It would be unloving to withhold a valid warning. As disciples we can't afford to be unloving. Tomorrow we begin again in the good news. As we work in the harvest we carry the burden of knowing how important God's message truly is. It is worth it, now on earth, to forsake all else for the surpassing worth of following our Savior, knowing Him and knowing His closeness as we labor reaching the lost and making disciples. As those who have been saved to serve our Savior, we work until He calls us to rest and to witness the beginning of that coming day when life really begins as God meant it to be.

Revelation 22

Vs. 1-5 This scene is reminiscent of the Millennial Kingdom, but different. Some of this looks like a glorious memorial of salvation. *The water of life* goes through the city, not to the Dead Sea. I'll bet there is no more "Dead Sea" on the new earth. We have no idea what life will be like then, but will we need water of life? Will there be new life that will be born and then will these people be led to that water? Who knows? The leaves "were" previously for *the healing of nations*. Now they are for something else. Maybe they are just a remembrance of our salvation and healing.

V. 4 We will see His face and belong to Him, therefore the name.

V. 5 *Reign* is either a hint to other activities or a word that denotes a place of being secure. For example, after all of David's trials, he finally reigned. He came to a place of having the promise of God fulfilled.

Vs. 6-7 These are words of confirmation that this will take place, and when it begins it will happen quickly. Jesus told His disciples in Luke 12:40, "*You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*"

So what does it mean to *keep* these words? Jesus talked often about keeping His Word. I don't think it meant just obedience, but rather maintaining the mindset of what He was saying. For most Christians, obedience to Jesus means staying out of trouble or not stepping out of bounds. I think this misses Jesus' heart completely. I think what Jesus meant by "keep" is expressed in what He said to his disciples in Luke 12:35-36, "*Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning,³⁶ and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.*" I think that readiness and attitude is "keeping" his commandments. It is allowing His words to possess our hearts and our actions in this life. In that sense, following in the harvest is "keeping" His Word.

Vs. 8-9 John again is overcome. Notice again the word *keep*.

Vs. 10-11 John is supposed to publish this vision. Life will continue as it has on the earth, but another testimony has been added to what is available for men to consider and to help them make their choice.

Vs. 12-16 This is the final written personal appeal of the Savior and King to mankind.

V. 17 This is the call of *the Spirit and the Bride* (the church) to an unbelieving world to come. We are back to the beginning. Remember, this revelation was written to seven churches. The reason for the Spirit and the church calling is that the Spirit is the one who makes the appeal through those He indwells. Us! Notice again as in Revelation 21:6 and Isaiah 55, the appeal to those who are thirsty. As often as we have read references to Isaiah 55 in Revelation and in the Gospels, I think it would be a good chapter to memorize, along with Isaiah 53, of course.

Vs. 18-19 These are Jesus' words. Just as the Old Testament ends with a warning, so does the New Testament. These are solemn words. The stakes are eternal and the Savior, Judge and King has spoken. Let the earth take heed.

V. 20 This is Jesus again with John's *Amen* at the end.

V. 21 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The capstone to this earthy history of lost and tragic humanity. Darkness beyond imagination was pierced by His life, His light and His grace.

Paul, the disciple and disciple maker, said to Timothy in those dark days before he died at the hands of the Romans, working in the harvest, *You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.* (2 Tim. 2:1) The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is our strength as we follow Him in the harvest, reaching the lost and making disciples, who make disciples, who make disciples, until our Lord returns. Amen. Here is the expression of that grace that should make us strong as we follow in the harvest.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:4-10)

Psalm 150

Vs. 1-6 What a fitting end to the year and to all of our reading about the Lord's return. *Praise the Lord!*

Proverbs 31:25-31

I have to wonder why Proverbs ends with this description of a godly woman, especially when Proverbs began with a man telling his son not to be a fool. Maybe the way the Lord keeps us men from becoming fools, in addition to His Word, is by giving us good, godly wives. ☺

Again, I don't think this is super woman. I know if this was written to men, I'd read it and not feel too good about myself. I don't think that is God's intent. Verse 30 is what I would focus on. Proverbs began with the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom, and it ends with the fear of the Lord leading to a fulfilled life and service to those closest to us. Amen.
