

Malachi 4:1-6
Third Sunday in Advent
Our Savior Comes
Are You Happy with the Son-Rise that God Has Provided

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¹“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the 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 rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. ³Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty.

⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

Has it ever troubled you how few among God’s Old Testament people during the time of the prophets seemed to be waiting in faith for God’s promised Messiah? Has it ever troubled you how few among God’s people in Jesus’ day were delighted with the Messiah they received? Now, have you ever stopped to consider what a sobering warning both of those truths are to His New Testament people—to us—as we wait for our Messiah’s return?

In our first lesson this morning from Malachi, we heard the final inspired words of the Old Testament. This closing chapter of the Old Testament talks about waiting for **the great and dreadful day of the LORD**. If we’re ready for that day when it dawns, it is a great day. But if it catches us unprepared as it will for most—even for many who have called themselves Christians—the day will be fearful and dreadful. To avoid that, God has prepared a beautiful Son-rise before that day grows hot! All of which leads us to ask this question: **Are you happy with the Son-rise God has provided?**

Malachi is not a very well-known book of the Bible. Perhaps that’s because it is so sobering—almost disturbing. Malachi is writing after the time when the nation of Judah—all that was left of God’s Old Testament people—had spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon. Those years in captivity were a final and powerful wake-up call from God to an unfaithful people. You would have hoped that having watched Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians, having seen the temple burned to the ground, and having been uprooted from the Promised Land for the better part of a century, would have gotten the Israelites’ attention. You would have hoped it would have woken them to the danger of allowing their hearts to grow calloused and rebellious against their loving God.

But even a quick read of Malachi reveals that very quickly after the exile many in Judah were back to their old arrogant and evil ways. The pattern of the book is a series of statements or questions from God to His people, all of which are met with angry and unbelieving rebuttals.

“It is you O priests, who show contempt for my name. But you ask, “How have we shown contempt for your name?” You have placed defiled food on my altar. But you ask, “How have we defiled you?” (1:6-7) You have wearied the LORD with your words. “How

have we wearied him?” (2:17) **“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.” “But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ (3:8)**

And that brings us to the end of chapter 3 just before our text. It’s the last arrogant argument directed God’s way. **“You have said harsh things against me” says the LORD. “Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’ “You have 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? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evil doers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape’” (3:13-15).**

Do you hear what they’re saying! “God’s not just! What do we have to show for serving God? He seems to favor those who ignore him, while we, His people, go about suffering and persecuted. It’s useless to trust Him!”

Israel’s spiritual blindness in those words is astounding. For centuries as a nation they had lived as if they were pagans, trusting in anything and everything other than their LORD God. And now, though He had allowed them to suffer a taste of His judgment in the captivity in Babylon, He had restored them to the Promised Land. He preserved them as a nation through all that. Yet as they began again down their same stubborn paths, they have the arrogance to declare that *God* was not playing fair *with them!*

“Oh,” the LORD answers, “you think I treat the wicked and those who trust in me the same? In that, my people, you are greatly mistaken!” That’s where our text picks up. **Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evil doer 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. But 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. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty.**

What was God saying with these words? “Do you really think I am asleep in My governing of My world? Well there is a day coming—the final one—and those who remain in arrogant unbelief toward me will become like dry grass burned in a blazing furnace. This burning on the Last Day will be so complete and so eternal, it will be like a forest fire that doesn’t spare even a single branch, not even a root. No one will have to wonder if I am a God who judges!”

But there was also hope in God’s message, wasn’t there? Just as a glorious sunrise can begin a day, so there is a promise of a “sun of righteousness” that would arise with “healing in its wings.” In order to understand these verses, it is important to keep in mind what is called “prophetic perspective.” Often, when the Old Testament prophets would look ahead to the distant future of the New Testament, the events of Jesus’ first and second coming would be painted together in a single picture. Here that appears also to be the case. Before the Last Day grows hot with God’s judgment, the “sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” This is a glimpse of the promised Savior, of Jesus, that the Old Testament gives. Before the white-hot wrath of God falls on a world that does not want its Creator, God allows a beautiful and comforting sun to rise.

That s-u-n is none other than the eternal S-O-N of God. He rises into the world to become one with His creatures and to bring with Him His perfect righteousness that He lives in the place of an arrogant world full of rebellious creatures. And just as the s-u-n is often pictured with warm rays extending from it, so the S-O-N is pictured here as having rays—wings—of healing. All who look to Him in faith find healing from their rebellion that sets them at odds with their

Creator. Those who find that healing, rather than being nothing but fuel for the fire of God's judgment will be like calves that have been kept in a tightly confined stall released to run and jump and kick in glorious freedom.

So... did those to whom Malachi first spoke these words learn to put their hope in the promised "sun of righteousness" or did they continue down the path that would render them as grass for the furnace? While Old Testament inspired Scripture goes silent here, the history of Israel in these centuries before the Savior came is not an encouraging story. And the history as we know it when the New Testament begins 400 years later is not encouraging on this point either. There are precious few Simeon's and Anna's waiting eagerly for sun or righteousness to arise. Most in Israel followed in the path of arrogant unbelief, so that when the glorious sun of righteousness came, with healing in his wings, they were not happy with the Son-rise God gave them. And make no mistake about it: those who reject the sun of righteousness have nothing left to look forward to than the heat of the day of the Last Day that will consume arrogant unbelief!

What about you? What about me? Will we follow in the pattern of so many of Malachi's day, and Jesus' day, and our day, who want to be known as the people of God but who do not in repentant faith cling to the Son who rose with healing in His wings? Perhaps there is no other time than Advent and Christmas that makes this so clear, as the celebration of Jesus' birth even among Christians becomes anything but a time of repentance and faith in the Son of God! To reject God's gracious Son-rise, means nothing is left but the blistering heat of the Last Day! But God never gives up on sinners easily! And that explains the warning with which the voice of Old Testament comes to a close. Listen!

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

"Remember," the LORD was saying to His Old Testament people, "You have been set apart to belong to me! Under Moses' leadership I rescued you from Egypt. I identified you as the people from whom I would bring the Savior of the world. I gave you My decrees and laws by which you would be clearly identified as a people different from the world. By following those you would call attention that you knew the one and only saving God this world will ever know. In My love, I will yet send you another prophet before the Messiah. This prophet will speak in the spirit and power of mighty Elijah. He will seek to turn your hearts, fathers, back to your children, to share with them the glory of belonging to the saving God. And he will seek to turn your hearts back, children, to receive that instruction so that in time you would pass it on to your children. If not, what will fall on the Promised Land is nothing but a curse!"

And with those words of promise and warning God's Old Testament prophets go silent until the time of John the Baptist. How sad, that these words fell on deaf ears for so many in Judah at Malachi's time! Just as John the Baptist's words, and Jesus' words, would fall on so many deaf ears among God's people in their day. Rejecting the Son-rise God gave them, all that was left was a curse—a dreadful waiting for God's patience with a stubborn world to end in the scorching heat of the Last Day.

So, why did God have this promise and warning preserved more than 24 centuries for us to hear today? Is it because He wants us to be nothing but ash in the fires of the Last Day? Hardly! He has spoken this to us—and allowed us to see the sad history of so much of God's Old Testament people—that we might recognize the damnable danger of arrogant hearts that refuse to run from sin. And remember, in God's book, the greatest wickedness of all are not the

sins we see on the evening news. The greatest arrogance is to have seen the sunrise of His grace and to have thrown it away!

But that is why He lets us hear these somber words at the close of the Old Testament. Most of all, He wants us to recognize that our rebellious hearts need His healing so that we long for precisely what He promised and fulfilled. “Look! Do you see it?” God is saying to us. “There, rising above the horizon of this world is the sun of righteousness with just such healing in his wings! The heat of judgment has not yet fallen! Rejoice in the warmth of His healing wings!”

Those wings stretch out to every sinner. Those rays stretch to you! The LORD’s most eager desire is that you find in the Son-rise of His grace the answer to what most ails us in this life—the guilt and shame that weighs down our hearts and souls. Without Him is nothing but a fearful waiting for the day when God has promised to show Himself just. With Him, is nothing but the glorious freedom of being His holy children. With him, to use Malachi’s picture, is being like calves set free from the pen, free to romp and run and play. Then all that now troubles us, and all who trouble us, will be dust forever beneath our feet.

So many in this world, yes even many who bear the name Christian, are rushing arrogantly to the Day of the LORD that will be like an unquenchable furnace. God does not want you to be among them. Instead, before that day’s heat is felt, He calls you to find your joy and hope in His gracious morning Son-rise. Today again in His Supper, He invites you to taste the warmth of His rays. Delight, dear friends, in sun of righteousness risen for you. Rejoice, in the healing warmth of His rays!

Amen.