

“The Day is Coming”

Reading: Malachi 3:1-7a, 4:1-6

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We all have our ups and downs, but sometimes the worst “downs” come right after our best “ups.” You get excited about something new, and you know it’s going to be great, and at first it is. But then sometimes there’s that letdown when the novelty wears off, or when reality sets in, or when the bill comes due, or when whatever your grand new thing is ends up not actually being that grand. That’s kind of where we are in our story for this week: God’s people have spent their decades in exile and have returned to their homeland to rebuild their nation. The temple of the Lord, which was always intended to be the focal point of their national life, has been rebuilt and they’re reclaiming their identity as God’s people. They have prophets and priests guiding them again, and their borders as a Persian territory are fairly secure. It’s a new start: it’s a lot of work, but things are definitely looking up, and maybe now, finally, all those ancient promises of God will come true.

Part of our chapter of *The Story* for this week tells about how a leader named Nehemiah organized the people in the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls. If you read that part of the story you got a sense of what a big deal this was, and how much pride was involved in accomplishing it. The crumbled walls around their capital city were a constant reminder of their shame, so when Nehemiah started the rebuilding, it was indicative of more than just the physical status of their city, it was a rebuilding of their sense of pride and identity as a people. You only rebuild if you think it’s worth it, and if you think you have something worth defending. We get further indications of how significant this is from the reactions of the other nations around them; the Jews were opposed by other nations who saw their rebuilding as a threat. Who do these Jews think they are, the argument went, setting themselves up as major players in the region?

So it’s something of a high point, or at least an optimistic moment. They’ve come through the crisis and are determined to keep going. But again, you know how these things are: sometimes the worst “downs” come right after our best “ups.” We turn the page to the words of the prophet Malachi, who probably preached during this time and may have been the last of the prophets in the Old Testament, and we see that this is clearly not a new golden age. In fact, we look through the problems Malachi lists and we see that they’re falling into the same sorts of temptations that they’ve always fallen into. They haven’t quite stooped to the level they were at before God sent them into exile as punishment, but still, they’re doing enough of the same sorts of things that we have to wonder whether they really learned anything. And on top of that, Malachi seems to be addressing a general sense of disillusionment on the part of the people toward God. They’re disappointed with how this has all turned out.

What are some of the specifics that Malachi preaches to the people about? What are some of God’s priorities that He wants to see manifest among His people at this time? Malachi speaks on behalf of God almost as though God’s people were on trial; he lays out the case like a prosecuting attorney, using a question-and-answer format to outline God’s charges and the people’s response. God charges the people with a lack of faith in His love. “How have you loved us?” ask the people, which is really a sad question when you think about it. In a covenant relationship of love and blessing, like a marriage, one would hope that the love would be apparent enough not to need justification. But God points out to them that He has blessed them in ways that He has not blessed other nations.

“I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated,” He says. He’s using the language of covenant faithfulness here: when you have a faithful covenant with someone, it’s said that you “love” them; if you don’t, you “hate” them.

And later on, God says that they have wearied Him with their words, because they see evil people getting ahead and receiving gain in their lives, which doesn’t seem to square with God’s justice. And again, God says that they have spoken arrogantly against Him, because they say that they have been following God’s ways but haven’t received any of His promised blessings. So these are disillusioned people who are a little angry with God. They don’t think He’s kept up His end of the bargain, and they’re not sure they can really trust Him. They’re suffering from a lack of faith.

And then there are the problems with what the people are doing. God accuses them of withholding their gifts from Him. They had this intricate system of tithes and offerings and sacrifices that was sort of their economy with God. They maintained their relationship with God and expressed their gratitude to Him and trust in His future provision for them by giving Him offerings of money, crops, and animals. But God charges their priests with giving Him animals that aren’t good enough for anyone else to use. They’re giving God the leftovers that no one else wants, which says a lot of what they think God is worth. And the people are withholding their tithes from God, robbing God by failing to provide the resources needed for proper worship.

There are also the problems in how God’s people are treating one another. Their marriages are apparently a wreck, since Malachi blasts some of them for marrying foreigners who worship other gods and are leading them astray from the Lord. That broke a specific prohibition among God’s people at that time; in the church we might compare it to the Apostle Paul’s instruction not to be “unequally yoked” with unbelievers, because the reality is that our relationships with others can have an impact on our relationship with God. At the same time, Malachi blasts others for divorcing their spouses. There is rampant unfaithfulness in their marriages. What’s more, they’re apparently falling back into the old traps of taking advantage of the vulnerable people in their society: defrauding laborers of their wages, oppressing the widows and the fatherless, and depriving foreigners of justice.

So the people are not in good shape. They’re failing in their worship of God, they’re failing in their personal integrity, and they’re failing in their relationships and families. The point of the seventy-year exile they’ve just come out of was to refine them as God’s people. They’re rebuilding the temple and the walls of their city and they’re proclaiming God’s law again, so this should be a high point. But have they really learned anything from all of this?

This is what’s really difficult about this whole chapter of the story, both their story and ours. It’s one thing to go through hard times if you know that there’s hope on the other side of them; it’s another to suffer and have to wonder if there’s any point to it. Honestly, I can understand why God’s people would be a little disillusioned right now: during the course of our story they’ve seen undeniable miracles performed by God on their behalf, they’ve been saved countless times from certain destruction by overwhelming enemies, they’ve been given the very words of God by prophets and priests, they’ve entered into a covenant relationship written by God’s own finger, they’ve been set free from slavery, they’ve been given a home in the Promised Land, they’ve lived with the temple of the Lord in their midst, and when they rebelled against God, they were given an exile as a time of refining, and now after losing it all, they’ve gained it all back. But even after all that, even after

they've been given everything they might need to truly be God's people, they still keep falling back into those age-old sins: they aren't worshiping God wholeheartedly, and they aren't loving one another as they should.

So I think I for one would be watching as they dedicate the temple of the Lord and as they rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and listening as they read God's law aloud again and I might just think, well, what's the point? I mean, we're building these walls on the same foundation as before; what's to stop them from crumbling again? We haven't been able to stay faithful to God on this foundation so far, so what's different this time? What's to stop the same cycle of rebellion, punishment, and destruction from starting all over again? And today, we have the perspective of history to tell us that that's what did actually happen: Jerusalem was destroyed again in AD 70 by the Romans, and we know that the prophetic voices guiding the people practically ceased after Malachi. Was God really involved, and did it really matter? What sort of foundation will withstand the test of time? What does it take to bring about lasting change?

I usually make my morning coffee the night before and set my coffee maker to have it ready when I wake up; that way I can start my day with one thing already accomplished. The other night I was making coffee and I just happened to notice some of what was written on the back of the bag of coffee: "Great coffee changes everything." Did you know that coffee, apparently, is the secret to life? Of course this is just an example of the usual hyperbole used in advertising; some underpaid intern probably had to write something for the back of the bag, never expecting anyone to actually read it. But we have a habit of looking for change in all the wrong places. We build the foundations of our walls and our temples on ground that is not stable. We keep trying the same things to try to change, but we keep falling back into the same temptations. Great coffee does not change everything. Most of us are too hard to change.

So Malachi is here at this moment of history in which God's people are stuck in the same usual place with the same usual problems. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed. And when we're at that point, we can go one of two ways: despair or anticipation. We can curse God in anger or cry out to God in faith. Malachi's message is one of anticipation and faith. Try the same thing over and over again, and you'll get the same results, so God speaking through Malachi is telling us that there is something new coming. There is another foundation coming. The age of God's great and final act of salvation did not arrive with that temple or those walls, but that age is still coming. He's about to do something new, unlike anything He's done before.

Malachi speaks of a messenger of God who will arrive and change everything. The day is coming, and it will burn like a furnace. It's a day that reveals sin for what it is, and faithfulness to God for what *it* is. The Lord will come to His temple, Malachi says. After long days with no voice from the prophets, one like Elijah will come to proclaim God's word. After long days of wondering where God is present, the Lord will be present among His people again. The people who first heard Malachi's words probably didn't fully understand what Malachi was telling them about, but now we realize that the Messiah he was foretelling is Jesus, preceded by the prophet John the Baptist. We know what the foundation is to that wall that will last. We know the one who truly and forever changes everything. We know that apart from Jesus, we have no hope of anything but being trapped in that cycle of sin.

And though we live after the arrival of the Messiah, we are like Malachi's audience in that we are also waiting for the fullness and finality of God's work. The Day is still coming. God is still calling to us, and it is still up to us to respond. And so, like Malachi's audience all those years ago, let us invite God to examine us and give us His call, and let us respond in faith and repentance until the Day comes.

A litany based on Malachi

"I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"

Response: Forgive us, Lord, when we doubt your love. Help us trust you.

"A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty.

Response: Forgive us, Lord. Help us to hold nothing back in honoring you.

"Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?"

Response: Forgive us, Lord. Help us to love one another as you have loved us.

"You have wearied the LORD with your words."

Response: Forgive us, Lord. Help us to trust in your justice and patience.

"Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

Response: This is our prayer.

"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me."

Response: Forgive us, Lord. Teach us to return all your gifts to you.

"You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the LORD.

Response: Forgive us, Lord. Teach us gratitude for your many blessings.

"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. But 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."

Response: Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.



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