

Text: Malachi 3:1-7

Title: The Lord is Coming

Truth: The Messiah's coming will be preceded by a human messenger; and it will be accompanied by a massive change in the conduct of the nation of Israel.

Date/Location: Sunday June 9, 2019 at FBC

Introduction

For me, this passage immediately raised questions as to how it was or will be fulfilled. I suspect that may be the same for you. However, let us first focus on the text before trying to answer that question. Once we understand what the text is saying, on its own terms, then we can "fit" it into the larger picture of the Biblical account of history.

I. The Prophecy and Call to Repent, v. 1-7

A. Two "Messengers" Coming, v. 1.

1. There is first a question as to how many people are in this verse: 1, 2, or 3? I believe there must be more than one, because there is the one preparing the way, and then the Lord. The question then is this: is the Lord the same as the second messenger, or are both messengers the same? To answer that question, I turn an eye to the grammar and it seems to be, despite the identical "messenger" term, that these two messengers are different. The first is a way-preparing messenger. The second is a messenger of the covenant. And this messenger is one "in whom you delight" which is parallel with the Lord, "whom you seek." For these reasons, I believe there are two people referenced in this verse: a human way-preparing messenger, and a divine messenger of the covenant who is "sought" by the people. The nature of the idea of "delight" and "seeking," however, is a point that we will touch on in a second.
2. The first is a messenger like Malachi but not the same as Malachi. He is a human who is sent ahead of a great monarch who must have the way cleared before him. He was a herald,

one who cleared obstacles, who alerted the people of the soon arrival of a monarch.

3. The second messenger is the Lord himself. He also is a messenger, but one *of the covenant*.
 4. When the text says “whom you seek” and “in whom you delight,” I believe the text is speaking sarcastically. The people of Malachi did not delight in or seek the Lord at all. They didn’t seek a human messenger either. They were so far from God they asked, “Where is the God of justice?” in 2:17. They had good and evil totally backwards.
 5. They thought God was afar off. But the Lord is announcing something totally different here. He IS coming, no doubt about it. He will suddenly come to His temple. They as a people will be shocked when it occurs. Centuries of effectively keeping God on the shelf, or replacing him with idols, will all go out the window.
 6. Note that this is not a *prediction*, like “the weatherman predicts rain this afternoon.” This is a *prophecy*, and the distinction is this: in our language, a prediction is not certain of fulfillment; but a prophecy is a thing which will most certainly come to pass because God has ordained it to be so. We could call it a *divine prediction*, but not a *weather forecaster’s prediction* or a *Nostradamus prediction*.
- B. The Second Messenger as Purifier, v. 2-4. From what we know so far, things don’t seem too good. What I mean is this: the people are acting way out of line. The priests are messed up. The people are messed up. The nation is messed up. And so when Father comes back home, there is going to be trouble!
1. God’s Old Testament messenger, Malachi, asks about something: when the Lord returns, who will be able to endure and stand before Him? The understood answer to his question is this: *no* sinners will be able to stand (Psalm 1:5-6).
 2. Why? The Lord will fire off the dross and wash away the dirt (figuratively speaking). The literal meaning of this is that He will cleanse the people. And like fire is devastating and lye soap is harsh, so the Lord’s appearance will have its difficult aspect.

3. He will refine and purify the nation. That is key to understand—the Lord is not just talking about “fixing” all individuals. He may in fact purify the nation by *removing* some individuals from the nation. But not all of the Lord’s work will be destructive. All of it will serve to remove the sin from the nation and the hearts of its people.
 4. The results of this purification will touch the sons of Levi. Those who are called on the carpet in chapters 1-2 will be (corporately speaking) purified and made like excellent gold and silver. They will once again be able to offer to the Lord a righteous offering. What they were offering to God in Malachi’s day was not righteous (see prior chapters). But with a contrite heart and a right spirit within them, they would once again be able to worship God properly and God would be pleased with what they did. It would be like in earlier days/years when the temple was operating properly. This would probably include the days of David, Solomon, and other good kings like Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Uzziah (generally), Jotham, Hezekiah and Josiah. You can look them up in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles.
- C. The Second Messenger as Judge, v. 5. God is clear that God is going to judge sinners. Same story throughout the Bible. If you are a sinner who has not repented and trusted in Jesus Christ, you are going to have severe issues, i.e. eternal punishment. The Lord calls out several groups:
1. Sorcerers – those involved in the dark arts, the occult.
 2. Adulterers – those who break the 7th commandment (Exodus 20:14).
 3. Perjurers – those who break the 9th commandment (Exodus 20:16).
 4. Oppressors – against workers, widows, orphans, and foreigners. God is especially upset at people who mistreat the poor and weak, like women whose husbands have died, and fatherless children.
 5. The big issue is this: these people love what they want to do, and themselves, but they do not fear God. They have no faith.

D. The Second Messenger as Merciful Judge, v. 6. God continues answering the wrong-headed ideas of the Israelites in 2:17. They thought evil-doers were fine in the sight of God, and that God delights in such people. They questioned where the “God of justice” had gone. God informs them here that He is right where he has always been.

1. It is not God who has moved; it is the people who have moved away from God. God is unchangeable. He is always a righteous and fearful judge (v. 5, 2-3). This is the doctrine of God’s immutability. His essence and character never change. He *does* things but He never *becomes* different. He is perfectly consistent, always morally pure, never absent, ever faithful to His promises.
2. It is this idea that carries us into the last half of verse 6. The people of Israel (“sons of Jacob”) are not consumed by God’s judgment because He has remembered His covenant with Abraham and Moses and David and with the entire nation in the new Covenant.

E. The Call to Repent, v. 7. Again, it is not God who has changed.

1. From long ages past, the Israelites had departed from the ways of God. They broke His law all the time. *They* had changed from their former promises that “what He has said, we will do” (Exodus 19:8, 24:3, 24:7).
2. So God calls them to return to Him. The idea of “return” is exactly the idea of “repent.” Change your mind about your sin, turn around, and move toward the Lord God. If they do that, then God will “return” to them, meaning that He will once again pour out covenant blessings upon them. In the New Testament, the exact same idea is found in James 4:8.
3. The people respond in a very bad way. God has just finished telling them that they need to be refined; that many in their midst are in deep sin; that they do not fear God; that they had departed many times from the Law. And they say, “In what way/how shall we return?” They just didn’t get it. This is spiritual dullness on display in a big way. Let me say it again—if

you are confronted like this by God's word through one of God's people, and you don't "get it," you need to stop everything, get on your knees and pray, and get into God's word and read *until you do "get it."*

II. The Fulfillment of The Prophecy

Now that we have seen what the prophecy says on its own terms, we need to think about its fulfillment. This prophecy is ripe for appeals to "double fulfillment." That is, some will say that John the Baptist is the messenger and the first coming is a fulfillment of this; and pretty much everyone connects this passage to the Lord's second coming.

A. Turn to Malachi 4:5. God explicitly promises that He will send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. At some point in the end time before the second coming of Christ, Elijah is going to show up. Historically, Elijah appears in 1 and 2 Kings, and a couple of other places in the Chronicles. Elijah is mentioned numerous times in the gospels.

B. What About John the Baptist?

John 1:21, 25: John the Baptist himself says that he is not Elijah. I take this to be the final answer—John knows who he himself is. He is not some reincarnation of Elijah. He couldn't be, because we have his birth narrative. He was conceived by Zacharias and Elizabeth, and born six months before Jesus. The real Elijah will come down from heaven somehow, like on the Mount of Transfiguration. He will not be "born again"!

Matt 11:14 – "If you are willing to receive it, he [John the Baptist] is Elijah who is to come." The identity of John the Baptist is contingent upon the Jews receiving Jesus message of the kingdom. We know they did not. Therefore he was *not* Elijah who is to come.

In **Matt 17:3-12**, Elijah appears on the Mount of Transfiguration with the glorified Jesus. The disciples ask in verses 10-12 about Elijah's coming. Jesus responds that Elijah *is* coming first and will restore all things (as in Malachi 4:6). Jesus is saying that the

coming of Elijah is still future. That much is clear. A parallel passage is found in Mark 9:4-13.

Then, when the Lord says that Elijah came already, I believe He is speaking about that contingency above—God knew the Jews would reject the offer of king and kingdom—so he sent a prototype of Elijah, because the time was not yet fulfilled for the kingdom to begin. So God did send a messenger ahead of Jesus at His first coming, who looks an awful lot like Elijah, but he is not identical with Elijah. A great king is fit to be preceded by a messenger, whether or not the king will be accepted. In God’s wisdom, He has shown us that He will send Jesus to earth twice: once to address the sin problem and initiate the church age; and a second time to fulfill many of the Jewish-centered Old Testament prophecies. The disciples understood this to some extent, knowing that He was speaking symbolically about John the Baptist. Later on they would more fully understand, as we can, that the Lord is coming again, and *then* Elijah will show up. This is why many people believe that Elijah is one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3-12—besides the fact that Elijah did not die but was caught up directly into heaven (2 Kings 2:11), like Enoch (Gen. 5:24; Hebrews 11:5).

Luke 1:17 says explicitly that John the Baptist will go before the Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” In other words, John the Baptist is very much like Elijah—but not the very same person. We can helpfully think of it like this: Elijah is the forerunner of Messiah at His *second* coming, while John the Baptist is the forerunner of Elijah and Messiah at Jesus’ *first* coming. The reason this is so confusing is because Malachi was not clearly told about the two comings of Christ. We are, and so some things that are compressed or even absent in the Old Testament are expanded and detailed in the New Testament. Furthermore, the similarities between John the Baptist and Elijah are unmistakable. We just have to deal with it!

Other New Testament passages that mention Elijah are Matthew 16:14, 27:47-49; Mark 6:15, 8:28, 15:35-36; Luke 4:25-26, 9:8, 9:19, 9:30-33.

- C. Besides the Elijah question, the other issue we have to deal with is what Malachi says will happen when the Lord returns. The kinds of things that he explains in Mal. 3:1-5 were not fulfilled at the first coming. For example, he was not really like a refiner's fire or launderer's soap; the sons of Levi were not purified; the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem were not fixed to be pleasing to the Lord; Christ did not judge the sorcerers, etc. Malachi does not seem to give us much of a clue about the first coming of Messiah. That is clarified in other parts of the Bible.
- D. The Lord will return suddenly to the Jerusalem temple site. This will be at the end of the Tribulation (Revelation 19). He will establish a new kingdom, and will lead the rebuilding of the temple complex. He will then preside over the kingdom from Jerusalem and this new temple (Ezekiel 40-48). It will be a time of an unprecedented nature, in which the offerings of Judah will once again please the Lord, and the priesthood will do its job properly.

Conclusion

We've done some study of the passage and its fulfillment. What might you imagine is a proper application of this text to you, 2500 years after Malachi wrote? One that sticks out is this: "Behold, He is coming." The implications of the coming of Christ are enormous for how you live your life today. His coming will be accompanied by holy judgment. People who are living outside of God's will (see v. 5) shall be cut off from the blessing of God and receive the due penalty of their error.

But in wrath, God always remembers mercy (Habakkuk 3:2). God does not change and He is faithful to His promises. Therefore, if you return to the Lord through repentant faith, truly and genuinely trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you shall not be condemned in your sin. As troubling as the second coming of Christ may be, and as nerve-racking as judgment before Him seems, those in Christ will be delivered and rewarded.

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