

STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 11

Malachi 3:13-4:3

March 30, 2003

Review

Last Lord's Day evening we considered the text in some detail as we read it, so I needn't repeat those comments. But last time we did not consider the primary theme or burden of this sixth and last disputation. Instead, we took our time to consider the one piece of narrative found in the entire prophecy of Malachi, viz. v. 16. We spoke of the importance of a Christian's conversation. But now we need to consider the disputation as a whole.

Read 3:13-4:3

Now, in this final disputation, the complaint of the people was that God was not vindicating his people, either by rewarding the righteous or punishing the wicked. He was not enforcing his justice in the world and the proof of that was that his people weren't prospering and the wicked were. And the Lord's reply, through Malachi, was that he would most definitely vindicate his people and most definitely make a distinction between them and the wicked. That day would come and any doubts that people had about the importance of trusting the Lord and obeying him would be forever put to rest. However, many of those complaining should take warning. They assumed that they would be vindicated by God's justice. But, the Day of the Lord will not be good news to someone simply because he was an Israelite or a member of the Christian church. He must, she must be a real follower of the Lord, a person of real faith in God. As Malachi had already said in the 4th disputation, many look forward to the Day of the Lord who will find it a day of wrath for them and not a day of deliverance. Here again in Malachi, as so often in the Bible, the matter of false faith, of unwarranted presumption, of the fatal error of thinking oneself right with God when one is not, is being addressed. You remember, of course, that this was a major theme in the Lord's preaching and he delivered some of the Bible's most solemn warnings against such a false presumption.

But, still, the burden of the disputation is the certainty of God's eventual demonstration of his justice, in sparing and blessing the righteous and in punishing the wicked. For the wicked there will be fire, for the righteous the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.

Now, we could take equal amounts of time to consider the promise of vindication, deliverance, and blessing for the righteous and the promise of doom for the wicked. I thought of taking two Sundays, devoting one study to each theme. But my next evening series is going to be on biblical eschatology and it will include, in the nature of the case, studies of the last judgment and heaven and hell. So, I thought I would take up this evening just the darker side of this disputation and the promise of the Day of the Lord. But, I want to take it up to make only a single point. And that is that the language the Bible uses to describe the judgment of the wicked needs to be appreciated for what it is. Christians need to be careful to understand this language in biblical context and not to misconstrue it. That has often been done and to the discredit of the Bible's teaching.

That is our subject for this evening, but, first, two points preliminarily.

1. *First*, there is, as you may imagine, some question about when this promise of the Day of the Lord is fulfilled. Is it the second coming and the punishments of hell that are being referred to? That is, is the fulfillment of this prophecy of the Day of the Lord still future to us? As we said before, all NT references to the Day of the Lord are references to the Second Coming. Or, given the fact that this prophecy stands cheek to jowl with a prophecy of the coming of the forerunner and then the Messiah, should we look for its fulfillment in something that happened at *that* time, in particular, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70? I am inclined to say, at this point, that it doesn't make a great deal of difference. All the temporal and historical judgments depicted in the Bible and fulfilled at various times in biblical history are intimations, foreshadowings, and anticipations of the final judgment and are described in terms used of the final judgment. That is one reason why people disagree so much about such passages that prophesy judgment, as, for example, Matthew 24. It is not difficult to see how passages like that can be taken to refer to divine judgments executed in history, judgments that are now past for us; but it is not difficult to see either that they can be taken to refer to the final judgment at the end of time. The language used to describe both types of judgment is similar. It is similar in its imagery and similar in its universality. And, what can be said about the divine judgments in history, can be said about the Last Judgment, only more finally and comprehensively. Whatever might be said about the destruction of Jerusalem and the judgment of Israel in A.D. 70 may be said about the Second Coming and *vice versa*, so long as attention is paid to the difference in historical context and in scale.
2. *Second*, as we said once before, there is delay built into the fulfillment of this promise of coming salvation and judgment. Even if we should think of A.D. 70 as the fulfillment of this prophecy of judgment, that was still 500 years after Malachi uttered the prophecy in the first place. But Malachi, clearly, does not think, nor does any other biblical prophet, that you have to be near to the fulfillment of a prophecy to obtain the benefit of knowing the future. Clearly, in the Bible as here in Malachi 3 and 4, it is the *fact* of the way the future will eventually unfold not *the time* of that unfolding that makes the difference. To know that this judgment was coming was as important to those in Malachi's day as it would have been to those who lived in the generation that witnessed the destruction of A.D. 70 or as it will be to those who are alive in the world when the Lord comes again.

For the believer, it does not matter any more that ages may still run before the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to come again and judge the world than it matters that ages have past since the Lord was in the world, died on the cross, and rose again. There are no computations of years and centuries that matter when we consider the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. In every moral and spiritual sense, that history is present to us in its power and effect. And if it is so in retrospect, then why would it be any different in the prospect? Faith mounting up to view Christ on the cross loses all sense of distance and remoteness. And, in the same way, faith mounting up to see the Lord returning on the clouds, loses in a similar way all sense of distance and remoteness. After all, we wait, at least by faith, we wait only the years of our lives in this world. When we are in heaven our waiting will be of a completely different kind. None of us must wait by faith 2000 years or 3000, but only the years of our own pilgrimage. That makes it even easier for faith to cross the ages in a single leap and bring both Christ's death and his second coming near. Malachi

is exhorting us to be alive to our position before and anticipating the judgment of the Lord. That is something that does not require our knowing when it will occur or how many years hence.

Now, to our topic.

I. Now, the first thing to notice about the language used to describe divine judgment is that it is the same language found elsewhere in the Bible.

You notice that the images used to describe the divine judgment are ones that are found elsewhere in the Bible. There is the *image of fire* which we have in 4:1 and again in v. 3 where it is said that the wicked will be turned into ashes. You had this image of fire used already of the Day of the Lord in 3:2. In Rev. 21:8 we read of the “fiery lake of burning sulfur” reserved for the impenitent. In many other places fire is used as an image of divine judgment.

There is the related *image of destruction*, as we have it also in 4:1. The fire renders the wicked stubble. Stubble, as a term of agriculture as it is used here, is what you have left when everything valuable has been taken away. The wicked will be nothing but the leftovers as the field has been cut down with a scythe. And, in a mixture of metaphors, we are told that not a root or branch will be left to them. The destruction of the vines and plants will be so complete that even the roots will be torn out of the ground and burned. The image of destruction is often employed in biblical depictions of divine judgment, whether the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the promise that when a city falls under the divine wrath not one stone will be left on top of another.

Then there is the *image of separation*, as in 3:18. The Lord will distinguish between those whom he loves and those who must bear his wrath. There is this idea, common to so many depictions of divine judgment, of the Lord drawing his own to himself and casting the others away as outsiders, as those who are not his people, as those he will not treat with compassion and love. The Lord’s account of the judgment day in Matt. 25 uses this image of separation, the sheep to one side the goats to another.

Then there is the *image of reversal of fortune* in 4:3. The wicked, who generally ride in triumph over the righteous in this world, will be trampled under the feet of the righteous in the Day of God. This too is a frequently employed image of divine judgment. The prosperity of the wicked is overtaken in a moment, as in the Lord’s parable of the rich fool who was planning to build more barns to store his wealth and did not know that his life would end that very night, or the parable of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar, whose positions in this world were immediately reversed upon the death of each.

Then, finally, there is *the image of deprivation*, of loss. All the good things that will be lavished on the righteous – being treasured, shown God’s compassion, healing, *joie de vivre*, trampling enemies under feet – these are the things precisely that the wicked will not be granted and must go on without. This is the idea behind the Lord’s powerful image of the gnashing of teeth, which is an expression of the anger, frustration, self-loathing that an opportunity has been forever lost.

II. Now in the second place, the first thing to note about these images is that they are just that, images, metaphors, figures of speech.

The Bible makes liberal use of these figures. In fact, there is very little literal description of hell, just as there is very little literal description of heaven. The Bible's account of both worlds, both conditions, both places is largely figurative.

That these are figures of speech should be obvious. Human beings are not actually stubble, they are not vines or trees with roots and branches, nor will they be ashes. In the same way, it will not actually be the rising of the sun that brings healing to the elect of God. When hell is described both as a place of fire and of outer darkness, we are being given two metaphors that actually conflict with one another. Darkness and fire do not go together because fire creates light. We have the same phenomenon when heaven is described in Rev. 21 as a cube, made of pure gold but transparent as crystal. We don't know how to visualize something that is gold but transparent as crystal and we certainly don't know how to visualize a cube so composed that is 1400 miles in length, width, and height, with walls that are over 200 feet thick. The Bible is not providing us with a travel agent's brochure of heaven. It is setting out to overwhelm our imagination. And that is true whether heaven is being described or hell.

The importance of this is that when we take these metaphors too literally, we create a picture of divine judgment that is unnecessarily repellent and controversial – as when people get the impression that hell is like a huge frying pan with people suffering burns forever and ever, that hell is a kind of sadistic torture chamber. This is the image that Gary Larsen plays with and mocks in his *Far Side* panels and, obviously, he got it from somewhere. And, in the same way, we can come to think of heaven as a kind of non-human place where we sit on clouds and play harps for millions of years at a time. It is this sort of image that led Somerset Maugham to observe that heaven “is apt to be dull.”

What we are to be after, in reading this language, is to understand what is really being taught about the judgments of God. More on that later.

III. The third thing to note about these images is their generality.

Here is Malachi, and in many like passages in the Bible, no distinctions are made. Everyone falls into the same judgment, everyone experiences the same vindication. As a matter of fact, however, the Bible in many places teaches us that God's judgment, being perfect, does make distinctions. Everyone is *not* punished in the same way and everyone is *not* rewarded to the same degree.

As the Lord Jesus teaches us in Luke 12:47-48, some will be beaten with few blows and some with many. There are many factors that determine the extent of one's punishment: 1) the measure of light against which he or she sinned, 2) the enormity of the sins themselves, 3) the length of one's life of unbelief, and so forth. The Lord Jesus said, in another place, that it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon and for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than it

will be for the towns of Galilee who had the Messiah come among them, perform his miracles, and still they would not believe.

It is very important that this truth be held in mind when one reads the strong, universal, and categorical language that the Bible uses to describe divine judgment. Yes, it is terrible. It is to be avoided at all costs. But, it is real judgment. It is the application of a divine justice so perfect, so omniscient, that no one gets anything else but what he or she deserves – nothing more, nothing less.

IV. The fourth thing to note about the images is how powerfully they depict what the reality of hell will in fact be.

Listen carefully now. I do not mean for anyone to come away from this study this evening thinking that because the biblical language of judgment is figurative, and we are not to think of a real fire, we needn't worry about that judgment as much. I am not at all interested in removing your discomfort at the idea of divine wrath or the discomfort of the unbelieving world over the Christian doctrine of hell. Of course they hate that doctrine. But the question is not whether a sinner hates the idea of suffering punishment for his sins, the question is do we have any reason to believe that he will not, or that the God of love and grace has misled the world on this point? The language of fire and brimstone, of wailing and gnashing of teeth, of the worm that doesn't die, is all designed precisely to make us fear that punishment. Whatever it is, it is terrible and to be avoided at all costs. It may be perfect justice but that is no consolation for the one who falls into the hands of the living God!

And, as you see, it is all language that is derived from our experience of this world. The problem of hell is not simply a problem of the future. Hell is with us already. There is nothing in the biblical description of hell that we cannot find already in the experience of human beings in this world.

What is hell? It is living apart from God, being banished from his presence, having the door of the banquet hall shut against you. But that is the lot of vast multitudes of people in this world already. Their lives are small, hemmed in, their horizons near to them on all sides, because they do not know God, they do not know the meaning and purpose of their lives, they have no living hope of the world to come. Hell is suffering the sense of loss of things precious and necessary and how many people are there nowadays who live with that sense every day. Hell is pain, physical pain, but certainly much more mental and spiritual pain: loneliness, failure, insignificance, betrayal, an unfulfilled craving for love and significance and satisfaction. But there are many in this world, very many, who by that measure are in hell already. Even some Christians find its fires licking about their feet while they live in this world. And hell is the sense of having squandered a great opportunity, having had *life* in one's hands only to drop it. That is the gnashing of teeth. And that is the daily burden of multitudes of people in this world.

In other words, hell, as the judgment of the Holy God, is the answer given to the choices that people have made time and time again in this world, and the choices they have refused to make. It is the life that the unbeliever has chosen for himself. It is the issue of his or her own life. Hell, said George MacDonald, is where we are finally and permanently ourselves. We will finally see

who we really are, who our friends are, what our chosen way of life amounts to when no longer softened by all the influences of God's gracious presence in the world. If this world would be chaos without penal institutions where those who would ruin the lives of others are placed securely, why should it be thought that the wicked and the righteous should dwell together forever. And, if sin against God be such an evil that only the incarnation, humiliation, suffering and death of the Son of God could cover it and satisfy for it, no wonder it deserves such misery when sin is chosen and loved instead of forsaken.

Hell is where the self-important and the self-centered live together with people of their own type forever. It is not a place where pretty good folk go who simply didn't believe the right things. It is a place here people go who have all their lives defied their Maker and refused to take seriously the gift of life that He had given them. It is where they will be who crave to be the center of the universe. And being always with such people, as a such a person oneself, will make for, must make for a very unhappy, frustrating place. But all God has done is to give to the unbeliever what he has chosen for himself.

Passages like this one we read this evening from Mal. 3 and 4 are designed to make us fear the judgments of the Lord and take care that we do not fall under them. They were designed by the prophet to bring the people to repentance and faith lest the Day of the Lord catch them up in its maw and grind them into dust. That is not the best reason to believe in Jesus Christ, but it is a very good reason to believe in him and follow him. Vast multitudes of people are "at ease" in this world, unconcerned about God's judgment. They either don't believe there is any such thing, or they don't believe it will fall upon them. The Bible goes out of its way to remind us of how many people have been mistaken on that point and how deadly and how permanent that mistake is. Malachi was written to the church, not the world, and its warning about the judgments of the Lord was directed to those who saw themselves as the people of God.

As Paul put the same point, 500 years later: "let those who think they are standing, take heed lest they fall."