



The Message of Elijah

(24) I Will Send Elijah

Malachi 4

Text: Malachi 4:5-6

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Riverside ARP Church
December 22, 2019

This will be the last sermon in the series on Elijah. One of the interesting things about Elijah is that there are quite a number of texts that refer to him after he was taken into heaven. Most of them are in the NT and most of them have to do with this text in Malachi 4 that we are going to look at this evening. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” No doubt this expectation has something to do with the fact that Elijah did not die, but was taken directly into heaven at the end of his life on earth. That, of course, made it possible for him to return. And clearly Malachi did expect Elijah to return. And he was not wrong, but the fulfillment of his prophecy turned out to be different from what he expected. That is not unusual when it comes to the fulfillment of prophecy. It is rather common for the fulfillment of prophecy to look different from what the literal words of the prophecy would lead you to expect.

The NT makes it clear that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of this prophecy. In Luke 1 an angel appears to Zechariah to tell him that his wife was going to have a baby in her old age and that this baby was going to be the fulfillment of this prophecy in Malachi. Luke 1:16-17 says, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” And Jesus, in Matthew 11:14, says of John the Baptist, “[H]e is Elijah who is to come.” So the prophecy that Elijah was to return before the great and dreadful day of the Lord is fulfilled by John the Baptist. The

prophecy was actually that God would send an Elijah-like figure before the great and awesome day of the LORD.

Clearly John the Baptist understood himself to be the Elijah-like figure who was to come before the great and awesome day of the LORD. His message was “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” John understood the coming kingdom to be the great and awesome day of the Lord. Think of John’s words recorded in Matthew 3:10 & 12, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” When John the Baptist preached “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” it was another way of saying, repent for the great and awesome day of the LORD is at hand.

The ministry of Elijah was a call to repentance to the covenant people of God who were worshipping idols. The prophecy of Malachi was also a call to repentance to the covenant people of God who were living in sin and not faithfully serving the Lord. By Malachi’s day, God had revealed through the prophets that there was going to be a great and awesome day of the Lord. The Lord was going to come and punish those who had forsaken him. In Malachi 3:1-2, Malachi prophesies, “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” And Malachi 4:1, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

That is what the great and dreadful day of the Lord means for the wicked. It is a day of judgment. It is a day of wrath. But it is also a day of salvation for those who repent of their sins and fear the Lord. Malachi 4:2, “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

So in Malachi there is this expectation of the great and dreadful day of the Lord and in the light of that Malachi is calling the people to

repentance. Malachi 4:4, “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”

Malachi was calling the people in his day to repentance in the light of the coming day of the Lord. But he also spoke of a day when Elijah would appear before the great and awesome day of the Lord and he would also call the people to repentance in the light of that coming day. John the Baptist is the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Now it is interesting that Malachi says that Elijah will “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of destruction.” It is interesting that when John the Baptist fulfills these words he says nothing explicitly about turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. He calls people to repentance and particularly warns them not to presume on the fact that they were the offspring of Abraham.

The announcement of the fulfillment of this prophecy in John the Baptist does include those words, but adds some others. Luke 1:17, the words of the angel, “[H]e will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

John interprets “turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” as a general call to repentance and one of the things that he does focus on is presumption – people thinking that God was pleased with them because they belonged to the Jewish nation – the covenant people of God. Matthew 3:8-9, John the Baptist: “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father....’” This is a concern in Malachi as well.

In Malachi there is a lot of religious activity going on, but God is unhappy with most of it because the people were offering lame and blind animals for their sacrifices. The priests were giving corrupt instruction so that the people were being led astray. The people were committing adultery and they were not raising godly offspring. They were not giving their tithes and so they were robbing God. A lot of

religious activity, but that religious activity was not an expression of true love and devotion and obedience and so the Lord was angry because of it rather than pleased with it.

In the light of all of this we can conclude that when Malachi says that he Elijah “will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers,” he is making a connection between the general breakdown of faithfulness and fathers not giving themselves to raise their children in the fear of the Lord and children not walking in obedience to their fathers. This prophecy seems to be saying that one of the key signs of repentance will be fathers repenting of neglecting the training of their children and children responding to the training of their fathers.

There is a relationship between what happens in the home and the godliness or lack of godliness of the covenant people of God. That is what Malachi is saying. And he is saying that when people repent because the great and awesome day of the LORD is at hand at the heart of that repentance will be fathers taking the religious instruction and nurture of their children seriously and children responding to that instruction and having their hearts turned to their fathers. This does not mean that mothers are not involved in the nurture of their children, but the Bible consistently addresses the fathers on this topic because fathers are called to take the lead in the home.

This underscores the importance of the culture in the home for the godliness of the church. Malachi’s message has largely to do with condemning covenant people who thought that God was pleased with them, while their religious activity was external and half-hearted. To translate that to our situation, he is addressing church people who are not really serious about serving the Lord or who like the Pharisees are serious but who are trusting in themselves. The type of situation being addressed is religious activity that is external and does not reflect true love for God and serious obedience to his law.

And Malachi is saying that repentance begins in the home with father’s being devoted to the godliness of their children and children responding to parental nurture by respecting and loving their fathers. This text

emphasizes the great importance of godly nurture of children for the faithfulness and genuine godliness of the church.

This does not mean that there will be no children who turn away from the Lord. Parents can take the religious nurture of their children seriously and one or more of them may reject what they have been taught. When that happens it is horribly painful. And it will be natural for parents of such children to ask where they went wrong. But every parent should be aware of short-comings and failure. We all need forgiveness and we receive it through believing in Jesus. There is mystery here. Why do some children believe, and others turn away? When children do believe and serve the Lord – it is always grace. There is not a one to one connection between bad parenting and children falling away and good parenting and children following the Lord.

But parenting does matter. And that means for those who are in the middle of raising your children, the relationship that Malachi assumes between the home and the godliness of the church is a solemn reminder to parents to take the parenting of their children very seriously. If the church is weak and lacking in godliness, it is a reflection of a lack of diligence in parenting. And Malachi is saying that in the light of the great and awesome day of the LORD, the hearts of fathers must be turned to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

And when we think of how John the Baptist fulfilled this passage, we are reminded of the fact that just belonging to the covenant people of God is not enough. It is an unspeakable blessing, but it is also a great responsibility. Remember what John said to the Pharisees, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’”

In the light of the coming day of wrath, we are called to make sure that we are repenting. We are called to “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Repentance is turning from sin. That includes sins of the heart. It is a life of taking God seriously. It is a life that produces the fruit of obedience. It is a life that is serious about loving God and keeping his commands. There is a coming day of wrath. The kingdom of heaven is at

hand. The great and awesome day of the LORD is coming. And we must live in the light of it.

Jesus preached the same message. Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus is speaking, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. **On that day** many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

The great and awesome day of the LORD is coming. And that is a serious matter. We live in the light of that coming day. Peter also speaks of this day in 2 Peter 3:7ff. He speaks of “the day of judgment and the destruction of the ungodly.” And he goes on to say, “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God....” “Lives of holiness and godliness.” That is how we must be living to be ready for the coming day of God.

What do such lives look like? The Bible is full of description of what such lives look like. Loving God and loving our neighbor. Seeking first the kingdom of God. Keeping the Lord’s Day holy. Honoring our parents. Being generous. Putting selfishness to death. Sexual purity. Seeking to please God. Fleeing idolatry. Being content. Assembling with God’s people. Loving the people of God. Serving one another. Forgiving one another. Doing good works. Speaking the truth in love. Trusting God. Believing in Jesus. In 1 Peter 4:7ff Peter writes, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded.” And he continues “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly... Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each as received a gift, use it to serve one another... in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” All this because the end of all things is at hand.

So Malachi prophesied that Elijah would come before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. The NT teaches us that this prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist. And John the Baptist taught us to prepare for the great and awesome day of the Lord by bearing good

fruit. "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." This is the biblical perspective on life. We live in the light of the coming great and awesome day of the LORD. Life is serious business. Paul speaks of people who live without taking the coming great and awesome day of the LORD seriously in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, "[T]he day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."

So that is the significance of this prophecy concerning Elijah for us. John the Baptist fulfilled this message by preaching to the covenant people of God, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

But what about the day of the Lord? What about the great and awesome day of the LORD? Malachi is prophesying that Elijah will come before the great and awesome day of the LORD. John the Baptist fulfills that prophecy by warning the people to repent because the great and awesome day of the LORD is at hand. But where is it? Where is the great and awesome day of the LORD? The LORD did come. That is the meaning of the birth of Jesus. In Jesus the LORD did come. But again, the fulfillment was not quite like the wording of the prophecy would lead you to believe. The great and awesome day of the LORD suggests a dramatic manifestation of the wrath of God punishing those who refused to keep his laws. Nothing like that happened in connection with the coming of Jesus.

Indeed Jesus was so different from what John the Baptist expected, John once sent a message to Jesus asking him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3). Jesus answered in terms of another prophecy, a prophecy of salvation. Matthew 11:4, "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.'" Jesus was referring to OT prophecies of salvation.

We have already seen the prophecies are often fulfilled in ways that look different than the literal words of the prophecy would lead you to expect. One other characteristic of the fulfillment of prophecy is that

what sounds like one event can be fulfilled in multiple events. The day of the LORD prophecies of the OT seem to be referring to one event, but what the prophets did not see is that the day of the Lord would be fulfilled by both the first and the second coming of Jesus. Jesus' first coming was about the accomplishment of salvation. His second coming will be the consummation of salvation, but it will also be the Day of Judgment and wrath against those who refused to submit to God and trust in his mercy.

So the prophecies concerning the day of the LORD have been partially fulfilled with the first coming of Jesus and they will be completely fulfilled when Jesus returns. Jesus came to bring salvation. Jesus came to pay the penalty for sin. Jesus came to save his people from their sins. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the fulfillment of a verse like Malachi 4:2, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings."

So Jesus came. God in the flesh. He called people to repentance, because the kingdom of heaven was at hand, but he offered forgiveness. He preached the gospel. The good news. His message, as Mark summarizes it was, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

So you have this large span of time between the initial fulfillment of the day of the LORD and its final fulfillment. It has been some 2000 years since Jesus preached, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Why such a long time?

Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3. There were scoffers in his day who said, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of the creation." Here is Peter's reply. 2 Peter 3:8-9, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

That is why there is such a long time between the first and second comings of Christ. The Lord does not wish that any should perish but

that all should reach repentance. That is why just before he ascended into heaven, after his work on earth was done, Jesus sent his disciples into the world with the gospel. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So when we think of the day of the Lord – it is still coming, and we are to live in the light of its coming. We are to live holy and godly lives as we await its coming. If we are trusting in Jesus and living the life he enables all his people to live, the attitude the Bible expects of us is one of waiting and watchfulness. 2 Peter 3:13, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” Paul writes to believers in 1 Thessalonians 5:6 “So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.” We are to live in the light of the coming day of the LORD. We are to live in a state of readiness which means being diligent in living the life that Jesus calls us to live. There is to be an awareness that the Lord could come at any moment and that being ready for his coming means being engaged and diligent in his service.

And certainly that includes reflecting the Lord concern that no one would perish but that all would come to repentance. That means being engaged in the great commission. It means praying that the Lord would send laborers into the harvest. It means supporting the laborers who are working in the harvest with our prayers and with our financial support. It means confessing Christ before men and living together in love as a witness to the watching world. It means using our gifts to serve the body of Christ. And as we have seen it means bringing up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

But as we think of all that we are to do and how we are to live, we must never forget – indeed always be mindful of the righteousness that is ours in Christ, if we are indeed trusting in him. The biblical message is a serious message and it certainly is demanding. But all that is demanded of us is the fruit of the gospel. We do not obey in order to earn God’s favor, but because we have it in Christ. The moment we believe, we are counted as righteous in Christ and God is looking upon us in favor. We

are children of our Father in heaven. Our sins are forgiven, and we are embraced with favor and love. Jesus came to save us from our sins. He came to give us rest and peace. In Christ God is pleased with us because he is pleased with Christ.

And it is on that foundation that we seek to be ready for the return of the Lord by living godly and obedient lives. In Matthew 11 Jesus tells us to come to him for rest. He tells us to take his yoke upon us and he says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. That is because we take his yoke upon us as those whose sins are forgiven and who no longer carry the weight of the guilt of our sins.

So let us live in the light of the coming day of the LORD. Let us live godly and holy lives. Let us be always be abounding in the work of the LORD. Let us warn the unsaved to flee the wrath to come. And let us look forward to its coming. As Paul puts it in Romans 13:11, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."