

You Bet Your Life

by Steve Zeisler

We live in a society that is consumed by its enthusiasm for prediction. The experts and the common people alike spend a great deal of their time and energy wondering what will happen next, prognosticating the future, surrounded by commentary about the events that are just ahead.

In terms of our economic condition, there are predictions about recovery, failure to recover, how long and steep the trend will be, etc. Some wonder about the future of Social Security, if it will continue to be viable by this evening or not. The choices we are making today about our ecology and the ramifications of decisions made for the future of the planet on which we live is another area that causes widespread concern and frequent discussion. Many are concerned about the Soviet military build-up, and what that portends for us, what our future response should be to what their choices are now for their future. Sports reports frequently dwell more on what is about to happen than on what has happened or the current facts. Spring training time is here, and everybody has hopes again that the Giants might be successful. More frequent than any of these areas, though, is the matter of predicting the weather. I have had more discussions with friends and neighbors in the last six months about the weather than I had in the last six years. Nobody comes under more vilification than the weather predictors, it seems. We count on everything from sophisticated satellites to groundhogs to help us predict the weather and what is coming up next.

Being the kind of society that longs for information about the future therefore, it is appropriate for us to study the prophets of the Old Testament. We have come to the end of our studies in the book of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets. Malachi, like his fellow prophets, rooted his understanding of the present in his convictions about the future. Because we can know the future, because we can see what will be, we can understand the reason why we are called to live as we are in the present moment. The book of Malachi is filled with that kind of insight. The opening paragraph of the book contrasts the future of the nation Edom and the nation Israel. Edom was doomed to be destroyed and pass from existence, while Israel looked forward to the day when they would magnify the name of God beyond their borders. The last paragraph of the book calls forth a witness to the "coming great and terrible day of the Lord." Malachi understands the future, therefore he is able to minister to his contemporaries.

There are two clearly identified groups of people clumped together at the end of Malachi 3, and that is where we left our study last week. Any declaration of God's Word always results in two groups of people being formed. Ultimately only two kinds of people hear the Word of God. First, there are those who finally and eventually cluster together in disbelief of what they have heard. Though the Word of God is clear in its declaration of future events. this group says, "We don't believe it. Malachi, you may say the Lord is just, that he is a merciful and righteous God and he will come again as judge, but we don't believe it." Then there is the second group that joins together, those who are said here to "fear the Lord." They draw near to one another and believe, in a character shaping way, God's word. Group "A" is described in Mal.3:13-15:

"Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?' You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?"

In Mal.3:15 is their conviction:

So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also flaunt God and escape.

This group has heard what Malachi has to say and they have concluded that he is wrong. The smart money is with those who resist God, those who take care of themselves, who provide for their own security, who realize that, though the Lord may say that he is a righteous God, he will never do anything about it anyway. They live their life taking care of Number 1, and if that means wickedness, so be it.

We need to examine ourselves in this regard. Some of us may have drawn the same conclusion. We are religious people just like they were religious people; we have some association with the things of God just as they had some association with the things of God. These people brought animals for sacrifice; even though the animals were blighted and worthless they still brought them. When under pressure these people covered the altar of God with tears, we are told, expecting him to hear their prayers. They shook their fists at God, demanding that he act as they would act if they were God. So they had religious sensibilities. Such people need to examine themselves to see if perhaps, despite those sensibilities, they are in the camp of those described in Mal.3:15, who have concluded that it is the arrogant who are best off; it is those who raise a strong arm against God, those who have decided that the assertive and the demanding are really the ones who are best off. We need to examine ourselves in this regard, too. Have we concluded that it is the arrogant who are blessed?

The second group are mentioned in Mal.3:16-18:

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name. "And they will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who served him." So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

The same circumstances of life pertained to this group as to the other. They faced the same pressures, the same fears. They were under the same hard times, yet their conclusion was radically different. Having heard the preaching of the Word of God by the prophet they "feared the Lord," we are told. That is the first thing we ought to examine about this group. They lived in a character shaping reverence for God. They did not speak angrily at him, or hurl accusations at him. They did not set themselves up on a pedestal and imagine that they were God's equal, that they could condemn, test, ridicule or flaunt God. They feared God; they revered his name.

Malachi is a short book, but it uses one particular phrase 24 times. The phrase is repeated so often that it almost fades into the background; we become so used to it we almost stop hearing it. That phrase is, "the Lord of Hosts," the Lord Sabaoth. Those words mean that Yahweh is the Lord of armies. It is a dread and powerful way of describing our Lord. He is the victorious master of a great army the angelic host arranged behind him, his servants in bright array that will sweep aside his foes. Our awesome God deserves to be treated with respect, with fear. So fear is characteristic of the second group mentioned here: "Those who feared the Lord spoke to one another."

That deserves some examination, too. Throughout the day, throughout the week, in the ordinary events of their lives, when they encountered one another these people spoke of the Lord. Just a few moments ago you in this congregation had an opportunity to speak to your neighbor. I am sure the conversations covered all kinds of subject matter, but some of you were speaking of the Lord, some were declaring the respect with which they hold him; some were honoring the name of their Lord as they introduced themselves to one another; some expressed gratitude to God for something he had done; some appreciated the life of Christ in their neighbor.

The people who love their Lord, both in ancient times and today, speak of him. Whether in a formal worship service like this, or in the ordinary course of events, at work, in the homes, those who love the Lord are willing to praise him, reach out to one another with words of encouragement about him, to hold his name up to honor. A remarkable thing is told us about those conversations; they are recorded; they are taken note of; they are never lost.

The third thing we should focus on is the last phrase of Mal.3:16, where it says, "those who fear the Lord and who esteem his name." The idea behind the word "to esteem" is to critically think about, to judge, to make a decision. I think what the prophet may be suggesting here is that these people not only spoke about the Lord in the ordinary course of their day, but they also thought about him in all the events that befell them. When they looked at current events they wondered what God was doing, what was in his heart and mind as the events of the day passed before them.

What about us? When we interact in business do we think about the Lord, about the ramifications of Christian truth for a certain business transaction? We must learn to think Christianly, in the phrase that is becoming more familiar to us; to take thoughts captive to the Lordship of Christ. Esteem for the Lord in this sense means that in every environment we think critically about the Lord and about the ramifications of his truth for the way we live.

These three things then characterized the second group of people: they feared God; they spoke about him; they thought of him. The first group heard the preaching but they decided that what Malachi said about the future was false. He was a liar and a fool, they said. They concluded the smart money was on the arrogant. The second group heard the same message, they lived in the same circumstances, and their hearts were moved in repentance. They began to revere Lord Sabaoth, to revere the God of armies. They spoke to one another about him, they thought about him, they allowed him into every area of their life and experience. In Mal.3:16-18 verses 16 through 18 we have a description of the future of these people as well.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name. "And they will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

Having identified this second group as those who fear him, those who speak about and think about him, God interjects at this point and says, "I want to tell you what is going to happen to these people. I want to tell you something about their future and their condition."

First, these God-honoring conversations in which we engage are noted down: "A book of remembrance was written before him." The book of Esther describes a practice that existed among ancient oriental emperors who recorded history, based on how it reflected on them. They had scribes keep accurate records of people they did not like, those who did them wrong, who were in opposition to them, etc. The emperor also kept a record of people who had acted responsibly, helpfully and honorably toward him. That practice actually ended up saving Mordecai's life. I think Malachi is referring to that very practice here; that is the figure he is using. He is saying that our Heavenly Sovereign keeps track of people who honor him, those who in the course of their life hold up his name in their gratitude for his glory. It may seem that these things the way you live, the righteous actions, the encouraging words, the praise you offer him cease to exist after they are done. But no, the Lord keeps track of all of it. It is indelibly recorded in heaven, where it will continue to glorify him forever. These choices we make have tremendous consequences.

The second thing God says about them is also recorded in Mal.3:17: "They will be Mine, says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare my own possession." "Mine," is the emphatic word in that verse: "Mine they are. Mine they will be." There is a strong note of God's commitment to his people.

The Lord again uses a couple of illustrations to make his point. First, he says, "They will be my special possession, my unique and wonderful personal property." Some of you have an heirloom that has been in your family for

generations. Perhaps it is a fragile and remarkable piece of art that you value above everything else. You display in your home this unique and valuable possession. In the same way, God is saying that we will be his unique and valuable possession.

During the visit of the Queen of England to California, the various cities she visited did their very best to deck themselves out and to call attention to the things they prized most. The Queen stayed at the best hotels, and ate in the finest restaurants. The royal yacht Britannia was to have sailed under the world famous Golden Gate Bridge, with bands playing and banners waving, but the weather did not cooperate. Because of the Queen's visit, California wanted to put forth everything they hold in highest regard. God says that his servants will be his unique heirloom, his valued possession which he will put on display. That is what he will call attention to.

The second thing God says in Mal.3:17 about these people, as he projects their future, is, "I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." The first figure God used was that of a unique possession, while the second figure is that of a child, "my own son." We are all familiar with the accounts that come up regularly in the news about fathers who endanger their lives by running into burning buildings to find their helpless children and rescue them; of fathers who cross war zones, bullets whizzing over their heads, to find children who were left behind. The Lord says on the day when this earth is burned up, "I will save them" as a man saves his own son from a burning house. We mean that much to God.

It is appropriate for us to think of ourselves as loved tenderly and with deep concern by our Heavenly Father. He is talking about who we are and what will happen to us, about our present and future condition. The first group, you will recall, heard of these truths and rejected them. The second group believed these words and feared the Lord Sabaoth.

In Mal.3:18 the Lord makes very clear the point that had been objected to all along throughout this book: "You will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him." It may seem for the present that the wicked escape, that the arrogant, demanding, self-centered people of the world are the most successful. You cannot now distinguish between the righteous and the wicked as to how successful they are, but you will someday; then it will be very plain. The righteous and the wicked will not be indistinguishable forever because the righteous will be made the unique possession of God and treasured as his own Son.

There was a television show once called, "You Bet Your Life." Groucho Marx was the host of this whimsical and humorous show. But the title of the program has always stuck with me, and I think that is probably the best title for what Malachi is talking about here. You bet your life, not whimsically, not ridiculously, but earnestly and eternally you are betting your life on the question of whether Malachi and prophets like him are right. If he is wrong then you ought to be arrogant, you ought to be wicked and self-centered even if you do so in a religious environment, make sure that you are invulnerable, you are secure, you have met all your needs yourself if he is wrong. But if he is right, realize what an awful mistake it would be to believe that. The righteous, the unique possession of the sons of God will be distinguished from the wicked. You are, in fact, betting your life on the camp you choose to join, either those who fear God, or those who test him and flaunt him.

In Malachi 4 the theme continues. The same point is being made, only now it is prophecy at full blast; the volume has been turned up. Malachi's voice is beginning to rise now, and the prophetic imagery becomes more powerful. "Behold!" he says. I think that is probably a polite way of saying, "Shut up! Pay attention! Observe the picture I am going to draw because you are betting your life in this choice. You are going to believe or you are not, but I want you to look clearly at what I am about to tell you. (Mal.4:1)

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." "But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the Lord of hosts.

The dominant physical figure in these verses is heat. I used to live in Arizona, and I remember how powerful the hot desert heat was. Malachi, of course, is writing in a desert region himself, under the relentless, dry heat of the desert sun. "Behold the day is coming," he says. It is yet night; dawn has not broken, but the day is coming when the awful heat of the desert sun will break the horizon and dry out everything in its path, so dry that everything will become like chaff and be set afire and burned to a cinder. Malachi did not know what modern physics knows; at how many thousands of degrees Fahrenheit the sun burns. But this is apt description of a desert sun-burning like a furnace-and that day is coming.

Interestingly enough, the word "arrogant," used in Mal.4:1 (and used earlier in chapter 3) is also related to heat. "Behold the day is coming, burning like a furnace and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff." That word comes from a Hebrew word that means "to boil"; it is figurative use of the Hebrew word that means to boil food, say, lentils, which are boiled to make soup. From that process we get the word "arrogant" here. When water is boiled, the resultant steam expands to fill the room, covering everything. It takes over, in a sense. When it has been boiled, food swells, grows in size and puffs itself up. The first time I cooked rice, I discovered, much to my consternation, how rice swells up and expands.

It is that familiar process that suggests this term to be used figuratively for arrogance. This marvelous word picture used by Malachi is saying that the awful, dry desert sun is going to take the self-heated, the puffed and swollen one and reduce him to chaff, it will suck all the swelling out so that he is dry, withered and cracked, and ready to be burned. "Behold! Look at what I am telling you. You have got to bet your life on one of these conditions, one or the other, and I want you to see what is coming, 'the day is coming, burning like a furnace.'"

In Mal.4:2 you will recognize that it is the same dawn that is coming up, the same day, and it has an utterly different implication. It still is the warm sun; it is still the heat of the sun as the daybreak comes, but listen to what he says here: "But you who fear my name (you who are in the other condition), the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall." In the last couple of weeks during those brief five-minute periods when the sun came out, how many of us have not accepted it as the healing balm that we have been waiting for all winter? "Oh, if the sun would just come up! If the warmth of the sun would dry up the swamps and give life, a sense of buoyancy and hope back to people." For those who fear the Lord when the end of history comes, when the dawn of the end of this age breaks, instead of it being a drying, withering, desert sun, it will be the warm sun of health and healing, with "healing in its wings," and we will be given back hope, buoyancy and optimism again.

The figure Malachi uses here is that of a calf, a newborn animal, frisky and full of life, that has been restricted in a stall overnight or during bad weather. When this sun comes up finally, when the day breaks, the calf is let out from its stall and it dances around, frisky and delighted at its freedom. It is the same day, it is the same sun, but in this case it brings tremendous delight, happiness and joy.

Malachi 4:3 continues the figure of speech. The "You" there probably has in mind the picture of skipping calves. "You will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the Lord of hosts." When I first read that I thought it was talking about a kind of military trampling, that somehow the righteous were being spoken of as participating in the destruction of the wicked, trampling them down as animals were occasionally used in ancient warfare to trample down soldiers. But that is

not what it means. The word "to tread" is used of the making of wine, so it is a festive term, really. I think he is saying that the ashes, the opposition, in effect, has already been destroyed. The dancing of the calves being let out from the stall are not trampling anything anymore. Arrogance has been burned to ashes; ashes already on the ground, without weight, significance or importance, so that it is almost unnoticed. Wickedness is beneath the soles of your feet; it does not even rise up to where you can see it anymore; it is of no consequence at all. This is an amazing description of the future of wickedness. Whereas the most casual, God-honoring conversations between believers are recorded in a massive book in heaven, and will never be forgotten, the most high-handed act of wickedness will be burned to ashes so that it will be stepped on and never noticed again. It is of no consequence; it carries no weight into eternity. The profit, the smart money, the effective choice, say group A, is to be arrogant and high-handed, to test God and love wickedness, but how tremendously that is challenged in Malachi's preaching. That group will be ashes beneath the soles of your feet, mixed with the dirt, and never noticed.

The last three verses of Malachi give us something to go home with. Remember that the book of Malachi tells us that by knowing the future we can deal with the present. We have been told clearly by this prophet, as we have been told clearly for years in our lives, about who the Lord is; what the future holds, that he is coming for us, that we can trust him in these things. We need to make a choice: we need to join one group or the other. We will be either the kind of people who fear his name, or the kind of people who reject him and love themselves. So again, having announced that those are our choices, Malachi calls into prophetic illustration the future as a sun coming up. The dawn is going to break, and it is either going to be the awful dry heat of a desert sun, or it is going to be the life giving longed-for warmth that brings healing with its wings. Having said these things then, he gives us a direction to go home with, something to travel on with from here. Mal.4:4-6:

Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.

Recognize that you now are in a valley between two events. The first event was the smoke, the fire and the thunder of Horeb, the cloud-covered mountain on which Moses stood, where the Holy Law was given to Israel. Remember that day when God's character was displayed so graphically in the darkness, the fire and the smoke of that mountain. Look back on the holy character of God and do not let it diminish in your thinking. Do not treat the Lord of armies as if he was anything less than what he is. Do not imagine that you can do with reduced standards and a reduced conviction about the character of God. You need to have the high and holy standards that the Law holds before us.

Then Malachi says to remember, on the other hand, the darkness, the earthquakes and terror of the "great and terrible day of the Lord" that is still future, the darkness over the mountain and the darkness of the great and terrible day. In between those events we are called to live now, remembering God's holy standard, looking forward to the day when the sun is going to come up, and, as he says here, Elijah will come before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Jesus in his first advent identified John the Baptist as Elijah. Do you remember what John's message was? It was, Repent. In the middle, between the day and the mountain, the call of God for us is repent. The ministry of the prophet is repent, to become the kind of people who now fear the Lord, who speak of him and who think about him, who have their hearts restored, he says.

If our age needs anything it is to be reminded of the love that parents ought to have for children: "He will restore the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers." An awful rift exists between generations, between parents who in their selfish material pursuits have set aside their children, and children who in their selfish material pursuits have set aside their parents. There is a horrible evidence of the unconvertedness of

this age. Such was the ministry of Elijah when he came as John the Baptist; and such it will be when Elijah comes again before the second advent. The ministry of Elijah is to call for repentance so that people will be ready, having heard the holy call of the Law on Mt. Horeb and looking forward to the day when the Lord will come.

May we be the kind of people who repent, who fear the Lord rather than test him; people for whom the coming dawn will bring healing, not ashes.

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