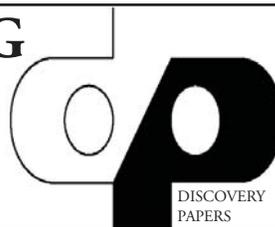


# THE GOD WHO IS COMING

*SERIES: MALACHI*



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Malachi 3:16-4:6  
4th Message  
Paul Taylor  
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Two weeks ago, we started talking about dogs. We found out who are the dog owners in our congregation. Last week we talked about cats. All you cat-lovers out there fessed up. What's interesting about dogs and cats is that it is one of those categories that tend to divide people. You are usually either a dog person or a cat person.

Last week someone reminded me of the difference between dogs and cats. A dog says, "You feed me, you take care of me, you give me a place to stay. You must be God." A cat says, "You feed me, you take care of me, you give me a place to stay. I must be God." If you like that joke, you're probably a dog person.

We like to divide people into groups; dog-lovers, cat-lovers; morning people, night people. Someone once said there are two kinds of people in the world: those who finish what they start and ...

As we finish our Advent series in Malachi today, we're going to see two different kinds of people. We'll be forced to ask which one are we.

We've seen over the past several weeks that Malachi is a book about arguments. It records six arguments between God and his people. God has been challenging his people so that we can know him better. But at the same time, we've been noticing these hints and references to a day that is coming when something different will happen. We've realized that Malachi points us forward to that day when Christ comes to help God's people know him in a new and powerful way. So we've been trying to think about preparing for Christmas along those lines. Realizing that what we celebrate in Christmas is God's response to all the issues that he complains about in Malachi.

Now as we get to the end of Malachi, we're past all the arguments and God is ready to say his final words of the Old Testament to his people. What we get in those final words is a fuller description of what has been hinted at throughout Malachi: the promise that God is coming. We worship a God who is coming.

If that sounds a bit ominous, then that's ok. What we'll see in Malachi is that this promise isn't good news to everyone. This morning we're going to see a different side of Christmas. We like to think of Christmas as a happy, exciting time of year. Isn't it cute and sweet that God came

to earth as a baby? But as we close out the book of Malachi, we're going to find out that Christmas is a dangerous holiday. To say that God is coming is a powerful thing to say. It immediately raises the question: what will he do when he gets here?

That's what we'll be looking at this morning. We'll see a God who is coming to us and we'll try to figure out what that means to us. We'll talk about how we respond to God. We'll talk about how God responds to us. And finally we'll talk about what we are supposed to do as we wait for God to arrive. What are God's final instructions to his people?

## The wicked and the righteous

We'll start by reading the end of Malachi 3. Remember where we came from in Malachi; we've just witnessed six knock-down-drag-out arguments between God and his people. The last argument ended with God being silent. His people complained about how it didn't seem worth it to follow him and you could almost hear him just let out a quiet sigh. The fight was over. Now we see how God's people respond to these arguments. There are two different responses.

Malachi 3:16-18:

**<sup>16</sup>Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.**

**<sup>17</sup>"They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. <sup>18</sup>And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.**

After all these arguments between God and his people, there is a group of people who decide to come together and respond to God. "Those who feared the Lord" got together and did something. They realized that God loves them. They realized that he was drawing them to himself. They realized that he was helping them break their addiction to themselves. So they got together to figure out what to

do. They talked with each other and God listened. He heard them.

Rachel and I are actually celebrating our twelve year wedding anniversary today. So it's an exciting day for us. Our marriage is an incredible gift to me. I would not be half the person that I am without her. We've been through some rough times in our relationship, but God has brought us to an incredible place now.

One of the areas that I've grown a bit is how to respond when Rachel confronts me with some difficult truth about who I am or the way I'm responding to a situation. My natural tendency is to get defensive. My gut instinct is always to protect myself. Words are my weapon of choice and I can use them well when I feel attacked.

But I've started to learn how to listen to my wife when she confronts me with stuff like this. I've started to be able to hear her and see some stuff about myself that I normally spend a lot of energy either concealing or ignoring. I have a long ways to go and just recently I've been learning about how to do that in other relationships as well. I think I have even further to go in other relationships, but God is patient with me. He is teaching me how to listen rather than get defensive. That's a really hard thing to learn.

That's what we see here. Some of God's people actually listen to him after this conflict. Notice that it's only some. It's not all of them. The text is careful to point out that this is a sub-group of people. They are described as "those who feared the Lord." They respond to God and the way they do so is by writing out a scroll. They record a "scroll of remembrance" in God's presence. We don't exactly know what this is. We don't hear of anything exactly like this elsewhere in the Old Testament, but the concept of remembering significant events in relationship with God is all over the Old Testament. There are songs of remembrance (Leviticus 23:24), stones of remembrance (Exodus 39:7), plaques of remembrance (Numbers 16:40), and offerings of remembrance (Numbers 5:15). It was common to find a way to remember when God did something significant and you needed to keep that in mind.

So the first question that this text asks of us is how will you respond to God? How will you respond to his challenges in Malachi? Will you listen? Will you consider what God might be asking of you? Or will you get defensive? Or think "boy that's a great sermon, I wish my children were here to hear it." How is God asking you to respond? How will you respond to God?

We start out in this passage hearing about the group of people that respond well to God. But what happens next is that the prophet points out there are two groups of

people. There are those who respond well to God and there are those who don't. We see a distinction made between the righteous and the wicked. Between those who fear God and those who don't. God says that he will make a distinction between them.

If most people like to break down the world into two groups of people, the Old Testament prophets make an art of it. The prophets describe a world that is black or white. There isn't anything in-between for them. There is no category for people with good intentions who mean well but can't ever figure out a way to live that way. There is no nuance in the world of the prophets. There are no shades of grey. There is only the righteous and the wicked.

Sometimes we like to think this way too. There are cat-lovers and there are dog-lovers. We know the world isn't quite that simple, but it's helpful at times to think in black and white. That's what the prophets do. We talk about cat people and dog people. They talk about the wicked and the righteous. I'll let you decide how to map those two categories to each other.

It's a funny thing to split the world up like that. On one level, it makes us uncomfortable because everyone has a story and it's never that simple. But another part of us longs for that simplicity. We want a God who can tell us who is righteous and who is wicked. Our world is full of nuance. Full of explanations, rationalizations, and extenuating circumstances. Who is really in the right? Who is in the wrong? Some people have the right words but you wonder if they mean them. Others lived messed up lives but seem to have good hearts beneath it all. We want a God who can sort everything out.

I think this is one of the reasons people love the show *American Idol*, and in particular, people really love one of the judges who isn't around anymore, Simon Cowell. He's the one that often has really mean things to say. Why does everyone love the guy who says mean things? Because they are often true and no one else wants to say it. We want someone who is willing to say, "you're a terrible singer" and "you've got potential." We want someone to make a distinction.

That's what God does here; two groups; the righteous and the wicked. There are those who fear God and those who don't and whenever a sharp distinction like this is made, the question that is put before you is obvious: which one are you? As soon as I say that there are dog-lovers and there are cat-lovers, in your head you figure out which one are you? As soon as Malachi says there are the righteous and there are the wicked, the implied question is "where do you fit in?"

Are you someone who responds to God? Do you get defensive when he challenges you? How about if that challenge comes through your spouse? Or your parent? Or your child? Which category do you fit in? For the prophets, there is no "Option C." You are forced to choose. Where are you?

## The Day of His Coming

So God has described this distinction that he makes between the righteous and the wicked in the first section. He has mentioned something about a day and now he goes into more detail about that day.

Malachi 4:1-3:

**<sup>1</sup>"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. <sup>2</sup>But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. <sup>3</sup>Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.**

The first part of the passage had to do with how people responded to God. Now in this second part of the passage, the question is not how will people respond to God, but how will God respond to people. Today we are talking about a God who is coming. What will happen when he comes? Specifically, what will happen to each group of people?

The passage describes three different outcomes here. Judgment, healing, and victory. These are three things that will happen when God arrives. It lines up clearly with our two categories. The wicked will be judged. Images of fire and destruction are used: "every evildoer will be stubble." The righteous, on the other hand, will be healed. They will be leaping like calves released from the stall. Because I'm a product of modern American suburbia, I've never seen calves leap from their stalls, but I'm sure they do it with enthusiasm and joy. So that's what happens to our two groups. The wicked will be judged. The righteous will be healed.

The third statement has to do with the relationship between the wicked and the righteous. Most likely, the wicked people are wicked because they've oppressed the righteous. That's usually how it works in the Old

Testament. So God says that the righteous, in addition to being healed by God, will have victory over the wicked. They will trample down the wicked. Whatever wrongs they have suffered at the hands of the wicked during this life will be reversed. They will win and they will have victory.

So when God comes, three things happen. Judgment. Healing. Victory. Can you see why I'm saying that Christmas is a dangerous holiday? We like to celebrate the fact that God came down to earth, but it isn't all good news. The God who is coming will bring very different things to different people.

Let's put this in terms we can understand. Imagine a family with a mom, a dad, and two kids: one boy and one girl. One afternoon the children are playing soccer in the backyard. Suddenly the son runs into the kitchen, tells his mom something and she responds, "Just wait until your father gets home." Without the context, that could mean a lot of different things. What does she mean by that?

Maybe the soccer ball just went through the bedroom window. His mom says, "Just wait until your father gets home." That's not a good waiting. When dad gets home, it's not going to go well for that child. Dad will bring judgment.

But maybe her son twisted his ankle. His father is a pediatrician. When he gets home, he'll wrap that ankle so that it doesn't hurt as bad. So his mom says, "Just wait until your father gets home." That's a very different kind of waiting. That kid can hardly wait for his father to arrive. He has been hurt by the world. His dad will bring healing.

Or maybe the son is fighting with his sister. He says that she tripped him on purpose. She says that he kicked her instead of the ball. So the mom says, "Just wait until your father gets home." She isn't going to deal out justice just yet. The situation will be talked about with their father and he'll make a decision. Who's in the right? Who's in the wrong? Dad will give one child victory over the other.

For God's people in Malachi, the coming of their God to earth is a complicated thing. How will he respond to them? Will he bring judgment? Will he bring healing? Will he bring victory?

In Advent, we celebrate the arrival of Jesus 2000 years ago. We also look forward to his return. But that's a dangerous thing to look forward to. What does it mean for us? "Wait until your father gets home." How will God respond to us when he gets here? The first question that our text asks of us is how will we respond to God? The second question is how will God respond to us?

The image that is used in our passage is one of fire. Fire consumes the arrogant and the evildoer; it destroys so much that not even a branch will be left. Fire destroys the wicked completely. But the passage also speaks of a huge ball of fire—what we call the sun—that doesn't destroy, but heals. Fire heals the righteous. Finally, the passage concludes with the wicked being ashes under the feet of the righteous. Fire has destroyed one, but healed and given victory to another.

I've always loved fire. I was a boy scout as a child and one of the best parts of about being a boy scout was that you got to go out in the woods and burn stuff. I'm pretty convinced that my boy scout troop was mostly a cover for organized pyromania. There is something incredible about fire.

Our passage describes one event that results in judgment and healing. That event is Christmas: the coming of Christ. Judgment and healing meet when God becomes flesh and this is the great mystery of what we believe. One act that accomplished judgment and healing; Christmas is the fire.

But the fire worked differently than we might have expected. Christ did bring judgment. This prophecy from Malachi has been fulfilled, at least in part. But the surprise of the whole thing is that he brought judgment upon himself. He was the object of judgment not the judge.

Jesus describes this in the gospel of John. Listen to John 3:17-18: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Jesus ends up not condemning the world, but being condemned for the sake of the world; one act: his death on the cross. Isaiah 53:5 says, "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." An act of judgment and an act of healing.

Christmas is a dangerous holiday because Christ comes to earth so that he may die. It's a bit odd that we celebrate Jesus' arrival to earth when we know how it all works out for him. We celebrate his arrival, even though we know that it ends in his death. We celebrate the cute baby, lying in a feeding trough while chickens and goats wander around. Do we just ignore the fact that this baby ends up a bloody young peasant, beaten beyond recognition hanging from a cross while the vultures circle the sky?

No, we don't ignore it because we know how the story ends. The death of Christ which brings judgment and healing isn't the end. The story ends with his resurrection

and with victory. What starts as judgment brings healing and eventually leads to victory. Malachi says that the righteous will trample down the wicked underneath. Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah when he is crushed for our iniquities. And then we realize that his resurrection is a statement of his victory over Satan. At the end of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul promises "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you" (Romans 16:20).

So we realize that the real enemy is not the Amorites or the Hittites or the Edomites or even the evildoers. The real enemy is Satan and he is crushed under the heel of Jesus just as it was foretold in the book of Genesis. Victory has been accomplished. Your father has come home and instead of choosing between you and your sister, he has destroyed the rivalry that gets in the way of your relationship. It's not the winning of one people group over another people group. It's the victory over the forces of evil that so permeate our world that we can't even tell who is evil and who is good.

The result is that Malachi's prophecy is fulfilled, but not in the way we might have expected. I thought that my enemy would be judged, I would be healed, and I would walk away a winner. Instead, my savior brought judgment on himself, I was deemed unworthy, but was shown mercy. Evil itself was crushed by the Messiah. Wow. Christmas is a dangerous holiday indeed.

How will God respond to us? He will forgive us. We will not be destroyed even though we are wicked. We will be healed even though we are not righteous. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:57, "He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." We have victory over sin, death, evil, and the prince of this dark world himself. That's what happens when our God arrives.

## Final Instructions

We started out by asking the question of how we will respond to God. Will we be in the category of those who fear his name or those who do not? Then we asked the question of how God, who is coming, will respond to us when he arrives. Will he bring judgment, reward, or victory? We saw that he brings them all through Jesus and our faith allows us to participate in that.

The last part of Malachi contains some final instructions. It is a powerful thing to think about what God will do when he arrives here. But the reality is that when you walk out those doors in a few minutes, things might feel a bit different. God may not seem quite as present as he does now. We know that God is coming, but we live in a world that makes that seem really far away. We live in a world

where God often seems silent.

That's what was facing the people of Jerusalem, to whom this book was written. They didn't know it, but God wouldn't speak directly through his prophets again for four hundred years. Four hundred years of God's silence. It's great to remember that our God is coming, but what do we do until he gets here? How do we wait through silence? That is what Malachi leaves with us.

Malachi 4:4-6:

**4“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.**

**5“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”**

In the last parting instructions, God mentions two people. Moses and Elijah. These are the MVP's of the Old Testament. If you're going to talk about two people before going silent for four hundred years, these are definitely the two people you'll mention: Moses and Elijah. They are the ones that show up at the transfiguration of Jesus. Many people believe these are the two witnesses referred to in the book of Revelation. Moses and Elijah summarize everything up for us.

God's people are told to remember the law of Moses. Moses is the teacher extraordinaire of the Old Testament. He brought God's Word to his people just as they were trying to figure out who they were. Moses taught them how to act, how to worship, how to love, how to do business, and how to be a family. He taught them everything. So if there is one last thing to say it is to remember the law of Moses. Do what the teacher taught you to do.

This is why you're here this morning. It's why we gather in worship every Sunday. It's why we think that the words of this book are important. This is why we call ourselves a Bible church. It's why we spend so much of our time and energy trying to figure out these words because our God is not silent. He continues to speak to us through this book. This is what we do as we wait for him to arrive. We remember his words.

Remembering is one of the main activities of God's people until he comes. Why do we spend so much time remembering? It's because we spend even more time forgetting.

There are times when Rachel will leave the house on errands and she'll ask me to complete something before she returns. "I'm headed to the store. Can you give the kids a snack while I'm gone." Something like that. Every now and then, when she is giving me those instructions, I'm not paying complete attention. Often I'm focused on something else and I tell her, "OK, I've got it" but I haven't really absorbed the information that she's given me. So then, sometime later, I'll remember that I'm supposed to do something, but I can't exactly remember what it is that I'm supposed to do. Calling her would make me a failure, so I'll just stand there and try to recreate the scene in my head. "What was I supposed to do?"

God's people don't have to try to remember what he wants them to do because he wrote it down for them. Remember the law of Moses. That's all. Just do what I told you to do. It's not really that complicated. God is about to sign off and not say anything to his people for four hundred years. So it's appropriate that one of the last things he said was that they should remember what he told them to do. That's their job.

But Moses isn't the only one mentioned here. The book ends by talking about Elijah. If Moses is the teacher extraordinaire then Elijah is the prophet extraordinaire. He tested the priests of Baal. He raised the widow's son from the dead: the first resurrection in the Bible. He hears the voice of God in the still small voice and finally, he is carried off to heaven instead of dying like most normal people. Prophets challenge people. They prepare. They turn you back when you need correction. That's what Malachi has done with this whole book, but it's what Elijah was famous for doing.

So you need to remember the law of Moses, but you also need to know that Elijah will come to help you prepare. You won't be caught totally unprepared. You will be prepared for the arrival of this God who is coming. His preparation will be a call to repentance. A call back to God. Some will hear and be reconciled to each other and ultimately to God. Some will not hear and their land will be cursed.

This is good news for us. Because even though God wrote everything down, we still have a hard time remembering. We all have a tendency to forget. I need to hear that God will prepare me. He will be at work, helping me to be ready for his arrival. It's not all up to me. That's what we've seen throughout Malachi. It's a tough book—we've been challenged with a lot, but at the heart of it, we've seen a God who reaches out in love for his people. He tells us that he loves us and he goes to great lengths to help us enter into that love. He pulls us in and he helps us break our addiction to ourselves.

God will prepare us for his arrival. This book is part of that preparation. This morning is part of that preparation. All of this helps us as we wait for the return of Christ. We see in this passage the promise that God will help to prepare his people. He will send Elijah and he will continue to work in our lives. The Holy Spirit is given to us, partially to help us remember and to help us be prepared for his arrival.

Some people allowed Elijah to prepare them, but not everyone did. The hearts of some fathers were turned to their children, but not everyone. Some people didn't allow themselves to be prepared and their land was struck with a curse. God will prepare you and he will bring people into your life. He will remind you of his words and he will act for you. Will you allow yourself to be prepared? Will you pay attention? Will you follow the trail he puts before you?

Remember his commands. Prepare for his coming. That's it. Our challenge is not to get so caught up preparing for the coming of Christmas that we forget to prepare for the coming of Christ. What are you doing to prepare for God's arrival? We started out by hearing about a people who gathered together and wrote a scroll of remembrance. They did something to respond to God. They prepared by remembering. They remembered in a very concrete way.

So I wanted to give us an opportunity to remember; to respond; to prepare for his arrival. A question of, "What can you do to prepare for God's arrival?" That's the season we are in. One week until Christmas. What can you do to prepare for God's arrival? Maybe it's something you need to remember. Maybe it's some way that you need to respond to God. Maybe it's some way that God has been trying to prepare you and you haven't been listening. Take some time now and reflect on what you can do to prepare for God's arrival.

## Conclusion

That brings us to the end of Malachi. This has been a powerful book for me to study at this time of year. A bold reminder of who God is and what it means to trust him. It's a challenging, in-your-face book, but not because God wants to tear us apart. It's exactly the opposite. God wants more. He wants a relationship.

Malachi showed us six arguments between God and his people. You don't fight with someone you don't care about. If you don't care, you walk away. The fact that God and

his people are fighting is a sign that both of them want something more. So God starts out by assuring his people that he loves them. That's the basis. Then he challenges all the things that keep us from receiving that love. Our false religiosity: pushing God away instead of relating to him authentically. Lifestyle choices that we make which fly in the face of what God wants. Our complaint that bad people get away with it. Our inability to trust God with our money. And finally our insistence that we're not getting what we deserve out of this whole life of faith.

Throughout each argument, God shows that he can be trusted. We can receive him and in the end we hear about him coming to us. That day will bring judgment, healing, and victory all wrapped up in one package. In the midst of God's silence that follows we are left with two simple commands. Remember his word. Prepare for his coming. Remember and prepare.

That's my prayer for us as Christmas arrives in a week. That in the midst of everything else going on, we may not forget, but remember and while we prepare for family, activities, presents, and celebrations, we recognize that ultimately our highest calling is to be prepared for his arrival. We worship a God who is coming. Until he gets here, remember his words and allow him to prepare you.