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Malachi 4:1-6

One of the more beloved quotes from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is this:

'The rumours that you have heard are true: [Sauron, the Dark Lord] has indeed arisen again and left his hold in Mirkwood and returned to his ancient fastness in the Dark Tower of Mordor...

'I wish it need not have happened in my time,' said Frodo.

'So do I' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.' (Tolkien, 2007, p. 51)

No doubt influenced by the Bible; Tolkien made two very important points:

- We live in dark times!
- What we do in dark times depends upon us.

We do live in dark times! Paul himself described the age in which we live as "darkness" and "the night."

Ephesians 6:12a, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness..."

Romans 13:11-12a, "And this *do*, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand..."

Now something that typically escapes us as Christians is that "the darkness" in which we live is NOT unique to Christians. Christian and non-Christian suffer in this estate of sin and misery. Just like Christians, non-Christians:

- Lose their job.
- Get sick.
- Go through natural disaster.
- Suffer with handicaps
- Get ill and die.

Paul speaking of trials wrote:

1 Corinthians 10:13a, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common [NOT to Christians, BUT] to man, but God is faithful..."

All go through trial and heartache, Christian and non-Christian alike! And that leads to Tolkien's second point: The key issue therefore is what we do when darkness descends upon us. Job's wife gave the advice of unbelief:

Job 2:9, "Curse God and die!"

That is blame God, criticize His care of the world, and the like. Regrettably, so many in the church choose this option! How sad, for there is a better way. That way is child-

like trust which brings with it a contentment, strength, and peace which truly “surpasses all comprehension” (Philippians 4:6-7)!

Yet in order for us to respond with trust in the midst of trial, it is important that we feed our faith. We do that in many ways; one way is by “...discerning the [way of the] righteous and the [way of the] wicked...” (Malachi 3:18) — which is the focus of Malachi 4!

Malachi 4 was written to explain the difference salvation makes when it comes to living in dark times. God has given all in Christ, provision for life and godliness. Speaking of Elijah/John the Baptist and the coming Messianic Kingdom of our Lord Malachi wrote this:

Malachi 4:6a, “And he [Elijah] will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...”

There is debate as to what is meant by this verse. There are multiple interpretations. Yet let me begin by giving you two of the more common interpretations. The first one says that this references a restoration when it comes to earthly fathers with their children. And this interpretation fits the historical background prior to Malachi as well as in his day. Ezekiel vividly portrayed the nation under the horrors of Divine judgment when he made reference to the awful conditions of an upcoming siege.

Ezekiel 5:10a, “Therefore, fathers will eat *their* sons among you, and sons will eat their fathers...”¹- talk about the dissolution of the family!

In terms of Malachi’s day, we know as a result of

- (1) marriages unequally yoked (Malachi 2:11) and
- (2) easy divorce (Malachi 2:14) that family relationships were in peril.

And so, during the siege of Jerusalem and in its aftermath, the father/child relationship was in bad shape! And such would continue to be the case amongst God’s people throughout Redemptive History and beyond. William Hendriksen observed it this way:

...[F]amily life is of the utmost importance, and this not only for the well-being, both spiritual and physical, of parents and children, but also for the true prosperity of the nation, the church, and society in general. From a spiritual point of view the generation gap is often ruinous.

To reverse this situation was one of the purposes of Malachi’s preaching during the old dispensation, and of John’s preaching at the beginning of the new dispensation. (Hendrikson, 1978, p. 73)

A second interpretation understands Malachi here NOT to be speaking of familial relationships BUT the *HISTORICAL* relationship that must exist between the faithfulness of past generations and succeeding generations. We are introduced to the concept with Isaiah speaking from the perspective of God's people during Malachi's day, Isaiah wrote:

Isaiah 63:16a, "For Thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not recognize us..."

In other words, God's people at the time of the return had strayed significantly from the promises and truths given at the time of "Abraham" and "Moses." If someone from these eras were brought forward to Malachi's day, they would NOT recognize the Jewish communities in Palestine as being Jewish... that's how compromised God's people were at the time of Malachi!

Accordingly in this view, the focus of Malachi 4:6 and the role of Elijah would be the restoration of Covenant fidelity to the Lord amongst God's people. Pieter Verhoef put it this way:

...'turning back,' is not so much the projected social order but the covenant relationship as such. When Elijah comes he will restore the covenant relationship. In this process he will turn about the hearts of the wicked posterity to the hearts of them with whom God has entered into a covenant at Horeb... The fathers are of no significance any more when the 'children' become apostate. That relationship can only be restored by way of the renewal of the covenant. (Verhoef, 1987, p. 342)

Both of these views have merit and may in fact be included as the language of Malachi 4:6 is broad enough to include both.

Yet there is another view which encompasses the previous two views and yet goes beyond the two. It comes from the commentary God gave on this verse in Luke 1 in which the stated role of Elijah referred NOT ultimately to the HORIZONTAL relationship between father/child or this generation and that, BUT the VERTICAL relationship between God and His people. Luke speaking of the role John the Baptist would play as it related to the Messianic Kingdom of Jesus, the angel who announced John's birth to Zacharias said this:

Luke 1:16-17, "And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him [Jesus] in the spirit and power of Elijah [now part and parcel of John's ministry of repentance, the horizontal would be impacted! In reconciling God to man notice the results- John would...], to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children [quoting our text], and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This brings clarity to the prophecy given in Malachi. The end and focus of the ministry of

Elijah/John the Baptist was the reconciliation of God the Father to His prodigal children!
Notice the language.

Luke 1:16, "And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God."

The language is that of conversion/salvation! That ultimately would be the objective of the ministry of Elijah/John in Malachi 4:6. Accordingly, the focus of Elijah/John's ministry ultimately was NOT the horizontal! RATHER, John's focus was on preparing the way for the reconciliation of God the Father to His children! That truly was the ultimate issue in Malachi's day and every day.

Malachi 1:6a, "'A son honors *his* father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the Lord of hosts..."

So, what would Elijah/John do? Begin the reconciliation needed on the part of God the Father with His children, such that we read this:

Malachi 4:6a, "And he [Elijah] will restore the heart of the Father to His children, and the hearts of the children to their Father..."

Iain Duguid put it this way:

So 'Elijah', the archetypal prophet, will come prior to the final Day of the Lord to preach repentance. He will turn the hearts of 'fathers to [their] sons' and 'sons to their fathers', bringing reconciliation not merely within families, but between God (as Father) and his people (as errant sons...) (Duguid, 2010, pp. 238-239)

Do you understand what this means? As children of God, we have the privilege of living in the darkness of this world with the knowledge that we are the sons and daughters of God Most High!

Galatians 4:6-7, "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."- do you understand what this means? At all times and in all places, we live in light of the acceptance, love, and care of God!

Matthew 7:9-11, "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, will he give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

Talk about security! Notice the impact that this has when it comes to facing the darkest

of all times, the loss of a loved one in Christ!

Psalm 23:4a, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me...”

Because God is our Shepherd/Father, what becomes of death? For the non-Christian, it is the worst thing that could happen to a person in this life! For after this comes judgment! Yet for the believer— notice the language — it is “the shadow of death.”

Explaining this, Donald Barnhouse related an experience he had with his young children following the funeral of their mother and his wife. On their way home from the funeral, they were driving on a two-lane highway. Yet they were shaken out of their mourning when a large semi-truck driving coming in the opposite direction passed their car so closely that the vehicle shook.

You know the sound and the feeling. One moment it is peace and calm. The next you are startled by the large sound, the shadow of the truck, and your swerving car on account of the wind-drag of the semi! After they recovered, Barnhouse asked his children, “Which would you prefer? To be hit by that truck or its shadow?” The children all replied, “To be hit by its shadow.”

In response Barnhouse said, *“That is what has hit your mother. Because of Christ, she was not struck by the fulness of death; only its shadow!”* In the words of Paul:

1 Corinthians 15:54-55, “But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’”

Because our FATHER is at peace with us, we live our lives knowing that He is for us and so “we fear no evil”!

Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

He will never abandon us and so we say, “Not my will, but Thine be done!”

This is the fifth privilege that is ours as we live in this dark world: We are reconciled to God; God is with us! That brings us to a sixth privilege we enjoy as Christians living in this dark world as seen in the caution and assurance that God give us in His word.

Malachi 4:6, “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.²”

This sounds negative, but I assure you it is positive. That being said, many in Redemptive History struggled with this final statement. As Malachi is the final Old Testament prophetic book,³ the struggle was/is with how God deigned to bring the Old Testament prophetic witness to a close, specifically here with a curse!?! In fact, in ancient times when this passage was read in the Synagogue, the Rabbis wouldn’t read the final statement.⁴ They couldn’t accept that the last/final word God gave through the prophets was כֶּרֶם (*cherem*)- which is the word for “curse”! James Montgomery Boice further observed this:

The Masoretes [who worked from around the 5th century to the 10th century AD], who have given us most of the copies of the Hebrew Old Testament we have and who added the vowel points to the Hebrew text, were so bothered by this [that the last word of the OT prophetic work is a curse] that they repeated the next-to-the-last verse of Malachi after the last verse. Similarly, the Septuagint reverses the last two verses so the Old Testament ends, not with a curse, but with a blessing. (Boice, 2006, p. 607)

Yet, as I said, God’s choice of ending this prophecy with a curse is positive. Based on the testimony of the New Testament the language is a colloquialism which serves as a sober appeal — an appeal we see throughout Scripture. For example, listen to how Paul chose to end 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 16:21-22, “The greeting is in my own hand- Paul. If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha. [which means ‘reader beware.’]”

This reflects the Old Testament practice of giving a warning to anyone who might read or listen to the word of God. While it is negatively stated here (just like in Malachi 4:6b) in reality it is a very positive appeal. Essentially it tells the reader/listener, *“Beware! What you have just read or heard is truth and therefore most certainly will come to pass just as it is written. Accordingly, heed the message... heed the warning... turn from self to God and live!”* It is what is behind the portents/the signs of the times of the New Testament.

Luke 13:1-3, “Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. [What a dark event, yet God designed it to be a sober warning...] And He answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’”

As you know, each sign of the times (wars, rumors of war, famine, sickness, disease, natural disasters, tragedies, and the like) brings with it a sober warning: *“Wake up!*

Consider God and His claim on your life and repent!” We see much the same in how Jesus frequently ended His teachings. Consider the close of the Parable on the Four Soils, Christ said this:

Mark 4:8-9, ““And other *seeds* fell into the good soil and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.’ And He was saying, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”

This is the positive counterpart to Malachi 4:6 and 1 Corinthians 16;21-22. With the expression, Christ essentially said, *“What I just said is true! The question is: ‘What difference will it have in your life?’”*

That is the idea with the closing words of Malachi! After the glorious message of grace received by those who responded positively to the message of Malachi (Malachi 3:16-18), God closed this book with a warning, *“If you don’t respond positively to the message of God’s word, it won’t go well with you! So, Christian, take warning! You have the ears to hear, so respond in faith!”*

This the sixth benefit that is ours living in a state of sin and misery! As we have ears to hear, by the Spirit’s enabling grace we ultimately WILL respond to the call of God in His word... *“we will hear”!*

That means — Pastoral Ministry 101 — when we are endeavoring to minister to a brother or sister struggling on account of the miseries of this life:

- When we are in the hospital room of a struggling Christian...
- When hear strong words against God by one in pain who claims to love the Lord...
- When a Christian brother or sister sounds more like Job 3-38 rather than Job 1-2...

Our job is NOT to “fix” the brother or sister’s theology. RATHER, it is to “weep with them” (cf. Romans 12;15)!

See, God has “given them ears to hear.” And so, in time, “they will listen”! Accordingly, our call is to trust God to work in His time by and with His word, being “confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6)!

So, in the face of a brother or sister living in Job 3-38, our call is the ministry of prayer and the ministry of presence, NOT explanation or confrontation! All that being said, for most in this room, it is fair weather. Accordingly, and once again, let us mend the sails and so prepare for the storms that most certainly will come in our lives. Let us feed our faith by meditating on and applying the truths of Malachi 4.

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End Notes

¹ cf. Leviticus 26:29; Deuteronomy 28:53; 2 Kings 6:28–29.

² “Connected with the idea of holiness the word ‘curse’ represents the taboo which set apart for destruction any person interfering with whatever had been vowed to the deity and was therefore ‘holy’, excluded from secular use (Josh. 7:11–15). The cities and population of Canaan which had belonged to other gods were also put under the curse and were to be utterly exterminated (Deuteronomy 13:12–18; 20:16f.). This harsh fate later became associated with the terror of final judgment, to be set free from which was the height of blessing (Zechariah 14:11; Revelation 22:3).” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 277)

³ He’s not the last Old Testament prophet as John the Baptist holds that distinction!

⁴ “The Jew always understood this as a message of love, and the Rabbis in the Synagogue from then until the coming of Christ, and in the days of Christ, and until this day, never end Malachi with its last verse. They conclude with the fifth verse. Reading the last: “And He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children; and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse;” they revert to the fifth: “Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” (Morgan, 1999, p. 116)