

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

The Hearts Of The Children To Their Fathers

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Malachi 3:6-4:6

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Malachi 3:6. Before we begin to read let me just provide some context. Malachi is the last of the post-exilic prophets. In terms of timeline, Haggai and Zechariah were the first of the post-exilic prophets – they ministered during the early years of the return from Babylon. Babylon was taken over by the Persians and the Jews were allowed to return and rebuild the temple. The work stalled out a bit but as we heard two weeks ago, thanks to the prophetic rebuke of Haggai, the work resumed and was completed – the temple was rebuilt, though it was not as glorious as the one that had been destroyed. But now Haggai is dead and the people have slipped back into spiritual apathy and decline.

The message of Malachi fits in very well with the ministry of Ezra; so much so that some scholars actually say that they may have been one and the same person; that “Malachi” which just means “my messenger” may have simply been the title used by Ezra when he published his prophetic oracles. That may be, we don’t know for sure, but we do know that the problems being addressed by Malachi are the same as those being addressed by Ezra the Scribe. The people were becoming sloppy and spirit-less in their worship. They were neglecting to tithe and they were

intermarrying with the pagans. Do you remember the mass divorces of Ezra 10 and the public reading of the whole Pentateuch in the rain in Nehemiah 8? Ezra was a hard case, he was not happy with the state of affairs among God's people and he brought the heat; he was a prophet of repentance whether he is to be identified with Malachi or not.

Well whoever he is, the first 2.5 chapters of Malachi hit that same ground hard. He rebukes the worship of the people as being both polluted and passionless. He rebukes the priesthood for being ignorant and aberrant. He rebukes the culture as a whole for embracing divorce and making a mockery of the covenant of marriage and he charges them with complete and utter spiritual ignorance in calling that which is evil good and that which is good evil.

The people had been complaining in those days that the Presence of the Lord had not come to them in the way that it had come upon the old Temple in clouds of glory and overwhelming manifestations and Malachi says: "The absence of the manifest presence of the Lord is a mercy! You could not withstand the day of his coming! You are not prepared! God will have to send a messenger to prepare you for his coming lest he consume you in the fire of his wrath! Whenever God does come," the prophet warns in chapter 3, "it will be to bring swift judgment upon adulterers, liars, those who exploit the poor and all those who do not fear His name."

You can trust me on that one, Malachi says, because God doesn't change. Let me begin reading to you from that point in the story, Malachi 3:6, I will read the text and by God's grace, we will divide it as we go. Hear then the Word of the Lord:

I am the LORD, I do not change...

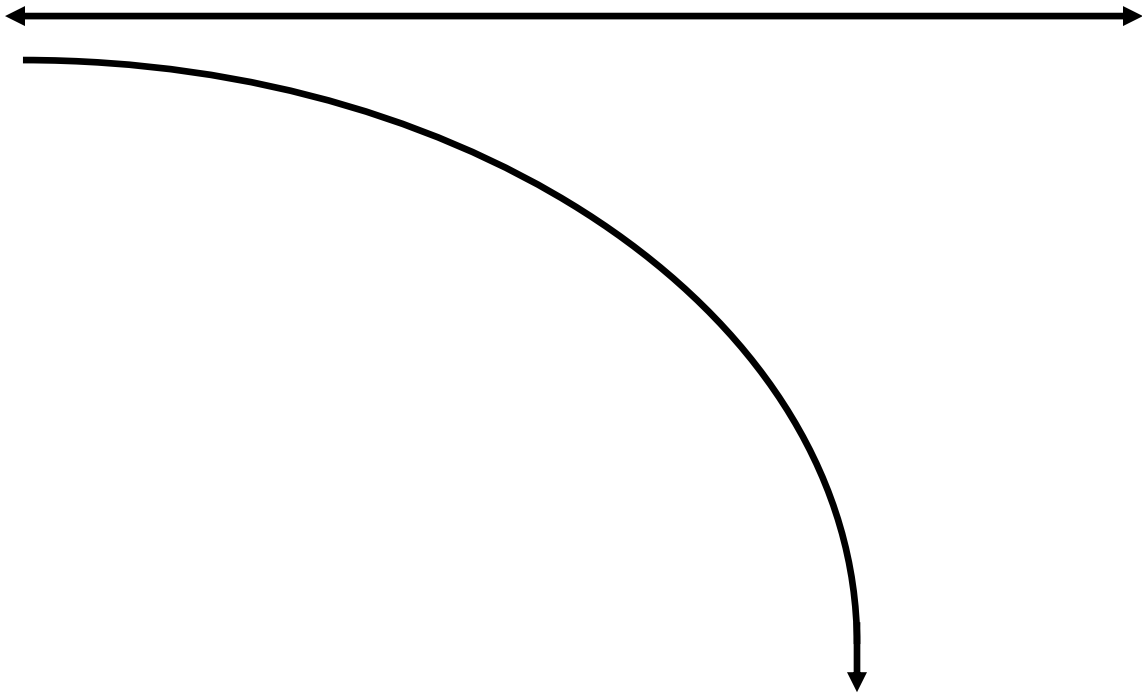
- ⁶ "For I *am* the LORD, I do not change;
Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.
⁷ Yet from the days of your fathers
You have gone away from My ordinances
And have not kept *them*. (Malachi 3:6-7. NKJV)

Now remember the people have been sliding back into cultural compromise and spiritual laxity. Their worship is routine and lacks enthusiasm and they have begun to assimilate to the surrounding culture. God hasn't shown up to blast them with wrath so they figure that maybe God is changing – maybe he is becoming more easy going, less rigid and more open minded.

Maybe God has become a Christian! He's all about grace now and not quite as concerned with "holiness" and "religious obedience". Well God shows up and he says: "I am the Lord – I am YAHWEH and I DO NOT CHANGE! Therefore you are not consumed, O Sons of Jacob." God doesn't change – whatever was true of him 100, 500, 1000, 2000 years ago is just as true of him today. God doesn't grow, he doesn't improve, he doesn't learn – He is ALWAYS PERFECT, always ALL-KNOWING and he does all things RIGHT. And, that actually explains why he hasn't killed you yet, the prophet says. It isn't that God has become a Christian, it is isn't that God has learned to relax on sin, it is that God is acting according to his constant, unchanging character. God is always JUST and MERCIFUL. His justice means that he will eventually show up and punish sin and reward righteousness, and his mercy means that he gives lots of time and provides lots of help for people to prepare for that day. That explains why you have not been consumed. God is acting according to his essential character.

That's the good news. The bad news, the prophet says, is that you are acting according to your essential character. I am ever faithful and you are ever wayward. He says in verse 7: "Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from my ordinances".

Here is what you need to understand and take away from these verses. God doesn't change and neither do we. God remains essentially faithful and humanity remains essentially unfaithful. That truth has massive implications for LIFE and for our efforts to make sense of this text. What the prophet is saying can be illustrated like this:



God stays the same – he is ever constant. We stay the same – we are ever wayward and have an inward disposition towards rebellion against God’s commandments. What that means is that in every generation of human history you can expect the same issues to arise and you can expect God’s response to those issues to be consistent with his character.

That truth must inform our understanding of religious revival on both a personal and corporate basis. Because if this is true (refer to graph) than back is always the way up. Look at verse 7b:

Return to Me, and I will return to you...

Return to Me, and I will return to you,”
Says the LORD of hosts.

If you turn around, God says, you will be closer to me because I don’t move, I haven’t changed, I stay the same. That is why the essential kingdom call has always been “repent”. The Hebrew word for “repent” used here and in countless other places in the Old Testament is *shoob* and it literally means “to turn around”, “to come back” or “to retreat”. God calls to his people who are running head long into cultural compromise and religious laxity and moral degeneracy and he says: “Retreat! Pull back! Turn around and come back, and you will find that I haven’t moved.”

This turning away from ruin and returning to God is what the Bible means when it says: “repent”; it is a call to stop, turn around and come back. Turn back because back is the way up.

All throughout the Bible, all personal and corporate revival begins with the call to repent. How did John the Baptist break the 400 year long silence between Malachi and the New Testament? What was his message?

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²and saying, “**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:1. NKJV)

How did Jesus open his preaching career?

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17. NKJV)

Repent! Stop! Turn around! Retreat! Come back! That is the starting place of all Gospel preaching, Old Testament and New because BACK IS THE WAY UP! Do you understand how offensive this is? This flies in the face of all evolutionary theory doesn't it? Evolution says forwards is the way up, evolution says the future is always brighter than the past, people are getting better, brighter, smarter and more noble. We are leaving our beastly nature in the past and we are becoming gods! The Bible says: “You are leaving the image of God in the past and you are becoming beasts! The past is brighter than the future apart from the saving grace of God!” Repent. This was the Apostle Paul's Gospel too. Do you remember Romans 1 and Paul's description of mankind's descending spiral into sin and ruin? All throughout that chapter Paul says: “God gave them over”, “God gave them up”, “their foolish minds were darkened” and you get this picture of mankind running from God and falling head long into ruin. That's how he begins his Gospel message, by saying that we are running faster and faster in every generation into sin and ruin – REPENT and believe the Gospel.

Now you need to know that the word “repent” has almost entirely dropped out of the Evangelical lexicon. Nowadays when we want to invite someone to become a Christian what do we say? “Believe”. But our grandparents used to teach that saving faith must include both belief AND repentance and that if we call people to belief without repentance we were calling them to the faith of demons. For the demons believe the truth about Jesus but they do not return to the proper worship of Almighty God. Let me read to you how your grandparents described saving faith –

how they described what was going on in a human heart at the moment of conversion – and you tell me if we haven't drifted:

saving repentance is an evangelical grace, whereby a person, being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin, does, by faith in Christ, humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrancancy, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose and endeavor, by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things. (The Baptist Confession; Chapter 15, Paragraph 3. 1689)

That's not exactly the Gospel as heard at Christian concerts and Evangelistic Events circa 2012 is it? Just believe! Accept Jesus! Open your heart to God's love and you will be saved. That isn't exactly how Malachi said it and it isn't exactly how your grandparents said it. We need to repent and we need to retreat from this cheap grace and facile decisionism that is killing the church of Jesus Christ. Once again, back is the way up.

The people in Malachi's day had some questions about this in terms of what this might look like; look at the end of verse 7:

In what way shall we return...

- “But you said,
‘In what way shall we return?’
8 “Will a man rob God?
Yet you have robbed Me!
But you say,
‘In what way have we robbed You?’
In tithes and offerings.
9 You are cursed with a curse,
For you have robbed Me,
Even this whole nation.
10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse,
That there may be food in My house,
And try Me now in this,”
Says the LORD of hosts,
“If I will not open for you the windows of heaven
And pour out for you *such* blessing
That *there will not be room enough to receive it.*
11 “And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes,
So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground,
Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field,”
Says the LORD of hosts;
12 And all nations will call you blessed,
For you will be a delightful land,”
Says the LORD of hosts.

Now if this were a much longer sermon or a sermon just on this little paragraph we might talk at length about tithing and offerings and whether this still applies in the New Testament church and that would be a fascinating sermon I'm sure but this isn't that sermon. For now what you need to understand is that giving is being used here simply as an illustration of a characteristic fruit of true repentance. They asked the question: "What would true repentance look like?" and God says: "It would look like generous giving and faithful tithing for a start." Now remember that one of the issues that Malachi and Ezra were dealing with was the fact that the whole worship of God had stalled because the people had stopped tithing. Levites had become farmers because they weren't being paid. Stop here for a second and think about that. The Bible says that in Malachi's day there were men who were called to full time service who had left that service because God's people were not tithing. Do you know that about half of the people in this church who are members tithe – which means that half don't. If everyone tithed who was supposed to tithe in this church then theoretically some of your children would be employed serving the Lord who are not at present. Some of you may have been called to full time Christian service but you will never get the chance unless God's people do what they are supposed to do. When God's people stop tithing, men and women who were called to Christian service become waitresses and salesmen. And the cause of the kingdom stalls. So it was in Malachi's day and so it has been in every day because we haven't change. We are still greedy and withholding as a species.

Sidenote: Do you know that the average Canadian gave just \$445 to a registered charity last year? That is pathetic. Do you want to get noticed as a Christian? Tithe. God takes note and so will the watching world.

Now, back to the text, I want to be sure that you understand that God is not saying that if you tithe, you are therefore converted and saved. That is not at all what is being said. This is an illustration of what a repentant person looks like. A truly repentant person, who worships God rightly and who is thankful will be a generous giver. Generous giving is so counter to our fallen nature that it will serve as proof positive of a converted heart. This by the way is no different than what Jesus said to the rich young ruler. Do you remember that story? The young man asked Jesus what he should do to be saved and Jesus said what? Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor then come and follow me. Now did he say that to suggest that giving can save us? No, he said that to show that our willingness to give would demonstrate whether we were truly saved

or not. In the Bible words are regularly counted as cheap and it is routinely assumed that true faith will show up in certain identifying works. James said it this way:

Show me your faith without £your works, and I will show you my faith by £my works. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! ²⁰But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is £dead? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? (James 2:18-21. NKJV)

James was basically telling a bunch of people who said they were Christians but who were not generous or merciful: “You say you have faith because you have orthodox beliefs – Ha! You have only the faith of demons! I will show you saving faith in my authentic works. Real faith is manifest not in fancy or bold words but rather in proving works just as Abraham showed his faith in offering Isaac upon the alter.” The Bible says: “Talk is cheap! Real faith shows up in proving works.” That is exactly what Malachi is saying. Do you want to know what repentance will look like? It will look like you showing up with your tithe next Sunday. That’s what he says. “Don’t tell me you’ve repented, bring me your tax return and then we’ll talk.” His day and our day if you can stop worshipping yourself and bring your whole tithe into God’s house we’ll know a work of grace was wrought in your heart – until then, it’s just talk.

But before the people were willing to sign up for that kind of repentance, they had an objection to raise; they were raising it in their hearts and so God puts it out in the open; look at verse 13:

It is useless to serve God...

- ¹³ “Your words have been harsh against Me,”
Says the LORD,
“Yet you say,
‘What have we spoken against You?’
¹⁴ You have said,
‘It is useless to serve God;
What profit *is it* that we have kept His ordinance,
And that we have walked as mourners
Before the LORD of hosts?
¹⁵ So now we call the proud blessed,
For those who do wickedness are raised up;
They even tempt God and go free.’”

Hearing all of this talk about repentance the people are saying in their hearts: “Worshipping God sounds expensive and demanding and after all, what do we really get out of it? Good people

suffer and evil people prosper – there doesn't seem to be any earthly value in repentance and the true worship of God.”

Now before we rebuke these folks for their bad attitudes lets at least appreciate the fact that they are not entirely wrong. It is absolutely true that in this life, in this fallen world, oftentimes there is no discernible benefit to following God. The death rate among sincere, pious, generous, tithing, serving, Bible reading Christians is exactly the same as among complete pagans. It is 100% and shows no sign of decrease. Christians get cancer at seemingly the exact same rate as non-Christians and anyone who says that real Christians don't get sick is either a liar or an idiot despite the fact that I have indeed heard that very thing in this town and from pastors. How people can believe that is beyond me – the death rate among even the supposed faith healers of the world is also 100%. Everybody gets sick and everybody dies and it does often seem like the closer you walk with Jesus the harder life gets – the harder it is to make money and the more likely you are to lose it! These people are not wrong and Malachi does not correct them, he just points them higher and further out. Look at verse 16:

A book of remembrance was written before Him...

- ¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another,
And the LORD listened and heard *them*;
So a book of remembrance was written before Him
For those who fear the LORD
And who meditate on His name.
- ¹⁷ “They shall be Mine,” says the LORD of hosts,
“On the day that I make them My jewels.[£]
And I will spare them
As a man spares his own son who serves him.”
- ¹⁸ Then you shall again discern
Between the righteous and the wicked,
Between one who serves God
And one who does not serve Him.

The prophet calls upon the saints as witnesses and he says: “It is true that in this life, the righteous suffer and the evil prosper but God sees all and remembers. He sees those that trust him and he records their names and their deeds in a book and when he comes in judgement he will come to punish the wicked precisely to their due and he will reward his faithful precisely to their due. God is just.”

The truth is that Old Testament and New, there is no certain promise of present triumph or prosperity for God's people. Even if you go to the passages that seem to promise that you will see that in the very context where those promises are given there is a warning that the sinful nature of mankind will preclude us from enjoying those promises. Remember when Moses said to the people: "If you walk in the covenant God will bless you and you will prosper in the field and in the market place and in your homes..." Prosperity Gospel preachers take those promises and they say: "Yes! God wants us to be rich and he has promised that we will be!" But even in that text God said that it wouldn't happen:

"Behold, you will rest with your fathers; and this people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land, where they go *to be* among them, and they will forsake Me¹⁷Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them (Deuteronomy 31:16-17. NKJV)

God says: "All these promises and all these blessings lie before you but you will not experience them in this life because you are ever wayward in your hearts. You will fall away and wander into ruin and so experience hardship. These blessings exist as a potential reality but will not be fully experienced until your hearts are healed."

The Bible is clear that these promises of blessing lie in the future, at the renewal of all things – after God has come in judgment to destroy all evil and to reward those who have walked by faith in his ways. All God's people will be healed one day, we will all be rich one day, we will all be blessed one day, but today is not yet that day. In the meantime, we wait and we look with eager longing for the Lord's appearing when all will be made right. It will come and the prophet closes his book by promising that very thing:

The day is coming...

- ¹ "For behold, the day is coming,
Burning like an oven,
And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble.
And the day which is coming shall burn them up,"
Says the LORD of hosts,
"That will leave them neither root nor branch.
- ² But to you who fear My name
The Sun of Righteousness shall arise
With healing in His wings;
And you shall go out

And grow fat like stall-fed calves.
3 You shall trample the wicked,
For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet
On the day that I do *this*,”
Says the LORD of hosts.

God is coming! Justice will be done! Wickedness will be punished and the just will be rewarded. You will experience healing, you shall go out in blessing and the wicked will perish from the earth. That day is coming, and because God will be the same God he has always been on that Day, the wise among you will want to prepare. And in verse 4 of chapter 4 he tells us how to prepare:

Remember the Law of Moses... I will send you Elijah the Prophet...

4 “Remember the Law of Moses, My servant,
Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel,
With the statutes and judgments.
5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.
6 And he will turn
The hearts of the fathers to the children,
And the hearts of the children to their fathers,

Remember the Law of Moses – go back and read the book! Back is the way up! Get into the Word of God and watch for the outpouring of the Spirit that prepares the way for visitation.

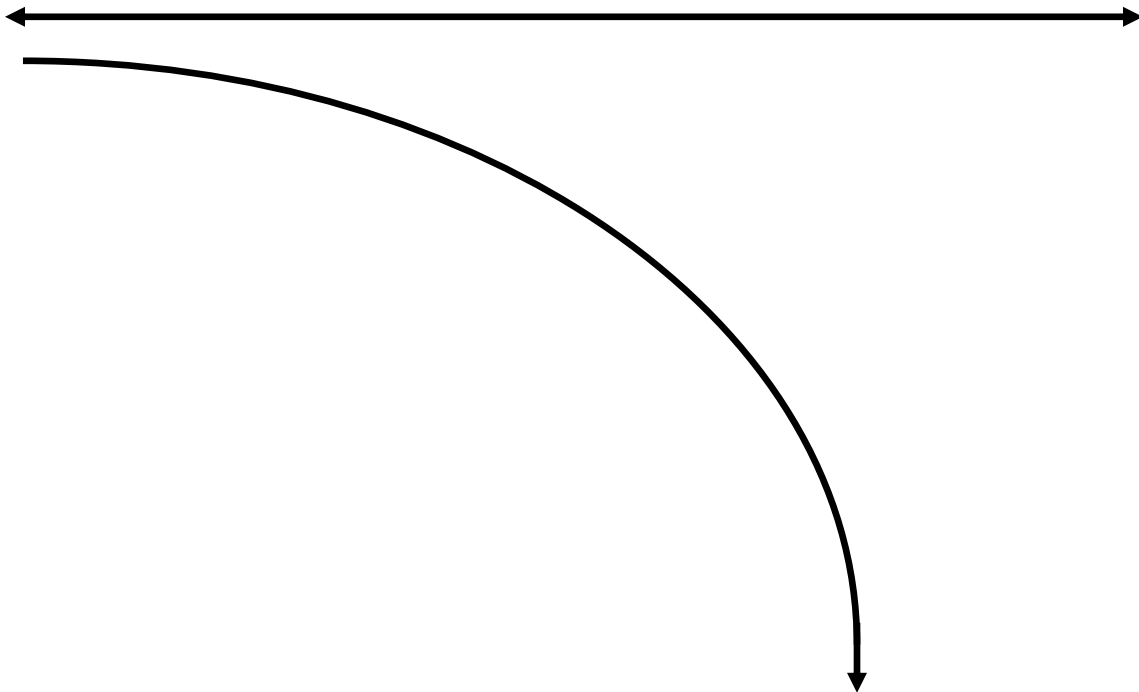
You will recognize those words about Elijah from the introduction of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke:

¹⁷He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘*to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,*’¹⁶ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:17. NKJV)

John the Baptist was not literally Elijah but he came in the spirit and power of Elijah – what we learn from this is that because God doesn’t change and because we don’t change, God delights to repeat his work among us. In the same way that God once anointed Elijah with power to instigate a revival, so he will do it again. He will send forth another prophet in the same spirit and power to instigate another return, another retreat from sin and madness to position people to respond appropriately to the visitation of God in the flesh.

This description of his ministry that he would “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers” is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that he will effect family reconciliation – but that is not at all what it means. Remember where we started.

- ⁶ “For I *am* the LORD, I do not change;
Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.
⁷ Yet from the days of your fathers
You have gone away from My ordinances
And have not kept *them*. (Malachi 3:6-7. NKJV)



To turn the hearts of children towards their fathers and fathers toward the children is just another way of saying: “I will turn you back, because back is the way up.” I will reverse the course of your natural waywardness as a Sovereign act of Grace to prepare you for my visitation:

Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse...

Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

Here is what you need to know about God my friend: Everything he does, whether blessing or cursing he does to prepare you for the day of his return. Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse means “that I not” – meaning God has been postponing his appearing in Malachi’s day because had he come, given who he is and given who they were at that time, destruction would have been the only conceivable outcome. When a holy God meets sinful man DESTRUCTION is the only conceivable result. Our God is a consuming fire! And so he says: “Return to the Word! Receive the prophets! Repent! That when I come it will be to bring you kindness and reward rather than judgment and death. That is the closing counsel of the Old Testament and it sets the stage for the opening notes of the New Testament.

All of what God did through John the Baptist and all of what God did in a far more surpassing and significant way through Jesus Christ he did ultimately to prepare men and women for the Day of his Appearing. That is the mercy of God. Delay is the mercy of God. The cross – offering forgiveness of sin – is the mercy of God. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church – that is the mercy of God turning us back to the Word and the Ways of old in advance of his visitation. That is God’s mercy but God has not changed. He is still Holy, he is still just and he still keeps his Word and his Word says that he is coming and he is coming in Judgment. Therefore: Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Back is the way up. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.