

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

MALACHI 3:14 to 4:3**CHRIST'S ADVENT -- BEFORE AND AFTER -- WHICH FOR YOU ?**

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? So now we call the proud blessed; for those who do wickedness are raised up! They even tempt God and go free!"

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. "They shall be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels [My special possession]. And I will spare them, as a man spares his own son who serves him, Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

"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. ----- 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 [be proud] like stall-fed calves [like calves of the stall]. 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.

Before-and-after photos are excellent advertising tools. "See this house? This is what it looked like before we worked on it. This is what it looks like afterward. Shall we install new windows and new siding on your house?" Other than the cost involved or perhaps the date of installation, it's a pretty easy choice.

Our text for today is a lot like that. We see life for people prior to Christ's advent and redeeming work, and we see life for God's people after and as a result of Christ's advent and redeeming work. Each scenario has two sides to consider—the unbelievers and the believers.

The text begins with words spoken by those who had no use for God. *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? So now we call the proud blessed; for those who do wickedness are raised up! They even tempt God and go free!* That's the voice of unbelief: "To serve God is useless and a waste of time. There is no profit in it. We prosper and do better without God." Have you ever said that? or felt that? Do you observe the ungodly and see how they have it all—or they seem to have it all—with no negative consequences? Do you ever regret your Christianity? "Look, I've gone to church faithfully all my life. I went to Sunday School. I memorized the confirmation assignments from Luther's Small Catechism. I never "lived" at the bar. I try hard not to misuse God's name. I raised my kids to know right and wrong. Yet look what I get! Diabetes makes my health poor. Family members are dying from cancer. Some have corona-you-know-what. When my kids left home, they got into trouble. My pastures aren't as productive as the neighbor's. And look how they flaunt their ways before God. What does God want from me?" Do you at times come close to joining that side? Or actually do? Do you at times deliberately put God to the test? "I'm going to do as I want, and just see what happens. God, you better take care of me, or I'm done with you." A member of a congregation I served at one time, left a complicated marriage, lived away from God, worshiped no more, and said to me rather smartly, "I must still be acceptable to God; I mean my job's going good, I haven't come down with a disease, I've had no car wreck." Ah, yes, the devil makes sin and godlessness seem so profitable. But that man was starving his soul, playing with fire, and slowly dying. He did eventually turn around.

With many anti-God witnesses in the face of those faithful to God, it's important to encourage one another in the Lord. *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.* Indeed, the Lord knows what is going on. He sees your struggles and hurts, and the heartaches you carry. He knows your sin. He has it all in His book. He does not ignore or forget. But He reaches out to help. He does not abandon you. That is why we gather together on Sunday, to be encouraged in the Lord and to encourage one another. Whether you speak to someone in particular whom you may not even know is struggling, your presence is an encouragement. You are showing them that the preaching of the Lord's merciful love, full forgiveness, and eternal salvation in Jesus is a priority for you, who are also helpless before Him. What if someone struggling comes to church and no one else is there? In Hebrews we read, *And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (10:24-25).*

The day of accounting is coming . For the Christ-believers it will be a day of rescue and glory. *“They shall be Mine,” says the Lord of hosts, “on the day that I make them My jewels [special possession] . And I will spare them, as a man spares his own son who serves him. Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.* You who trust in God’s Son Jesus will be spared—not just by luck of the draw—but in the Lord’s mercy and love. You will be the Lord’s treasured possession, not just a dirt shovel or greasy pan, but a treasure!—like a jewel!. You who are on the bottom of the heap in the unbelieving world’s standards and even in the standards of your own sinful flesh, have a better day coming! You will be more than “people” before God, but His sons and daughters! What a privilege!

How does it all happen? It all hinges upon the advent and redeeming work of His Son. Without it the wicked win, and you lose. But with Him, you win! Malachi, whose name means “My messenger,” describes the day of salvation. *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!* When Christ the Redeemer comes, who has paid the price at the cross to set His children free, it will be a day of terror for the ungodly. Their high-flying ways and days will be over. God’s judgment will come like an insatiable fire in a furnace, oven, cook stove. It will burn up the proud and self righteous like stubble. Sounds like last January’s wind fire, right? Burn them! Do you think it is an accident that this description meshes with the description of fiery hell? *That day will leave them neither root nor branch!* No prosperity, no fun, no more mocking God or His children. Like grass which grows from both the leaves and from the roots, the wicked will be scorched on both sides—twice dead. Will it be worth it to have been an unbeliever?

There is another side in our text to Christ’s arrival and advent. That of the Believers. *But to you who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings.* The concept of fire is still used, but in a positive and encouraging sense. Christ will come like the sun. The sun warms the earth, makes plants grow, aids healing and health. I remember reading about the days of the big tall sailing ships. A certain battleship reached a safe harbor in South America. Those with injuries and sickness were brought on deck to absorb the physically and psychologically healing rays of the sun. When Christ comes for the believers, He will come with outstretched wings of the sun. Life and healing! Righteousness for the unrighteous. He takes the debits off your account and credits His life for yours. The trespasses—the times you crossed the line--forgiven. Your iniquity—your inability to measure up to and equal God’s expectations on His great balance scale—is removed, without a list of duties for you to perform. Jesus in His Advent showers you with righteousness, peace, forgiveness, and happiness before the Lord!

You shall go out and grow fat [be proud] like stall-fed calves [like calves of the stall]. Malachi uses yet another picture to describe the happy circumstances of children of God at the Arrival /Advent of Christ. The Hebrew words of this verse can be understood in two different ways. 1.) Back then, as I assume is true now too, calves that were stall fed, were sleeker and thicker/fatter than those that had to range for their own food. When released they would carry themselves in better health and appearance and “pride” than the others. So it will be with the believers on the Day of Christ’s arrival. We will walk as Christ’s specially groomed children, superior to the unbelievers! 2) There is a second understanding. The Hebrew does not actually say “stall-fed” calves. It simply says “calves of the stall.” The word “proud” translated “fat” may not mean only mean visually sleek, fat, and proud; but acting “proud.” This same word was applied to a horse that very exuberantly and self-confidently was leaping and jumping. Thus the other picture is that of calves “released from the stall, leaping and jumping.” Have you seen that? What a description of life for the Believers when Christ arrives!

The same is also our Christmas joy as well. Although Christ’s ultimate return to destroy Satan and all the wicked has not yet happened, it is a done-deal. In His first advent on earth at Bethlehem, we already see what it means. We are spiritually sleek and healthy, and we leap for joy in anticipation of the freedom!

The unbelievers, once more? *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.* The unbelievers will be but ashes, useless, worthy only to be trodden underfoot. In Joshua 10 the Bible says the Israelite commanders, who conquered kings of the idol nations, made them lie down on the ground and put their feet on their necks. Total defeat. Ashes for the ash pile, or for shoveling under tires of the car when the snow is deep—as my mother used to do. Unbelievers will be “done.”

So then, Before and After: Do you want to be in the happy group of unbelievers before Christ comes, or the happy group of believers after Christ comes? There is a vast difference! Cling to your Savior in thoughts and actions all life long and indeed now before Christmas. Forget about those who celebrate only earthly joys of Christmas, who disregard the Savior’s forgiveness. You’re not missing a thing. You have a better day coming!

So be it! Amen.

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