

The Coming of the Lord

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, thank you very much, Willie, for your welcome, and it's good to be here again. I'm very glad to see that Thelma has found a parking space, because that was difficult this evening.
- But anyway, we're delighted to be here and look forward to hearing the Word of God together. Now, if you have your Bibles open at Malachi 2 and 3, we'll pray before we look at this passage.
- The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. And God our Father, as we prepare our hearts, we pray that you will open your Word to our hearts and our minds, that you will open our minds and hearts to your Word.
- And that the Lord Christ, who is the great subject of the Scripture, may come to us, not as in our ignorance we imagine him to be, but as he really is, with a word to cleanse, a word to purify, a word to change, a word to transform.
- We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. And so we come to Malachi 2.17-3.5.
- [1 : 2 5] If you drive along the road that leads you to Stirling, particularly if you drive the Kirk and Tillich or Scythe Way, you'll occasionally catch glimpses of the Kempsey Hills, a very beautiful range of hills which you'll see at various points on the road.
- And at one or two points you'll see the massive peak of Ben Lomond rising behind them, almost as if Ben Lomond was simply another one of the Kempsey Hills. Now you will know, of course, there are many, many miles of road, of moorland, of country, and of villages between the Kempsey Hills and Ben Lomond.
- But nevertheless, from a distance, they look as if you were looking at the same mountain range. And so it is as the prophets look into the future. They see the coming of the Christ.
- They see the coming of the Messiah. They see the coming of the Lord himself. What they don't see is that coming is going to be in two stages, both of which were future to them and one of which is past to us.
- And yet they weren't wrong when they saw these two comings together. We talk about the first and second comings of Christ. The New Testament tends to talk simply about the coming.
- [2 : 4 0] When Peter, for example, in his second letter speaks about the coming of Christ, he says, on the holy mountain, we had evidence of the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- And that coming is clearly the coming that's yet in the future. Because on that mountain, Jesus was revealed to them, not as they had known him in his earthly life, but as he would be when he came again in great glory and majesty.
- So when we're talking about Advent, and as the lights of Advent go on everywhere in the St. George's Square and everywhere else around the country and around the world, we are in the season of Advent.
- And I want to ask us, what does that mean in scriptural terms? When we talk about Advent, when the church says it's celebrating the season of Advent, what does it mean?

And what it means, first of all, is that we must hold these two comings together. The first coming that we look back to when the Prince of Glory landed incognito behind the enemy lines and met the serpent dragon and gave him a mortal blow.

[3 : 53] That is the coming which we call Christmas. But we also look forward to the time when he will come again. And when the early church talked about Advent, they weren't particularly thinking about food and presents and romantic nostalgia.

Now I'm not Scrooge, I'm not saying we must do away with these things or not enjoy them. What I am saying is, if these things become the centre of our Advent celebrations, then we've missed the whole point.

Rather, Advent was preparing for Christ's coming again. Advent was the time to meditate on the last things, on death, on judgment, and on the world to come.

And the great English reformer, Thomas Cranmer, put this beautifully in one of his great prayers, in the Book of Common Prayer. He talks about the time when the Saviour, who came to visit us in great humility, would come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

That's what we're looking at tonight, as we look at this oracle of Malachi, being ready for the Lord's coming. Malachi speaks at the very end of the Old Testament, the last voice before the Baptist announces on the banks of the Jordan that the Saviour has arrived.

[5 : 13] Malachi speaks at a difficult time for the people of God. The temple has been rebuilt, people have returned from exile, but there is no great spiritual life.

There are no gross heresies. People aren't worshipping the stars in heaven. People are not worshipping the fertility goddess. The temple isn't filled with idols and with statues.

It has been before the exile. Rather, there is a chilling apathy. A spiritual east wind is blowing. There is no enthusiasm for God. There is no love for His Word.

There is no attention paid to His prophets. And that's what so often happens, isn't it, in the history of the church. Sometimes the devil rages in great power.

Other times he simply creates a sense of chilling apathy. One of the great commentators of an earlier generation, George Adam Smith, commenting on Malachi, puts it this way, The great causes of God and humanity, he says, are not so often defeated by the hot assaults of the devil, but by the slow, crushing, glacier-like mass of thousands and thousands of indifferent nobodies.

[6 : 32] Very powerful stuff, but very true. A chilling blanket of apathy. People, when they hear of enthusiasm, reaching for their hosepipes. People interested in everything, except God and His coming.

So, as we prepare for Advent, what is Malachi saying to us? As we get ready to celebrate the coming of the Savior, Malachi is a man who asks questions.

The type of oracle he uses is the disputation or debate. You are saying this, well, I am saying that, or more importantly, God is saying that.

And the first question he asks is, why is he coming? That is chapter 2, verse 17. He is answering the people's questions.

You have wearied the Lord with your words. As you say, how have we wearied him? This is a sign, of course, of apathy and indifference when we become prickly and resentful when a prophet speaks and asks, why are we not opening our hearts to the Lord?

[7 : 41] Malachi says, you are deeply mired in unbelief. Malachi, in fact, says you have lost the gospel. You no longer believe in the faith that you've been given.

Look what they are saying. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord. They are turning the gospel on its head. God says it's evil, but you say it's good.

God says it is good, and you say it's evil. Is that the kind of thing we've seen so often in our own society, and indeed our own church? People attempting to say that what God has said is unholy, is holy.

That's what's happening in Malachi's time. And what they are saying is, God is not going to intervene at all. There is no point in expecting a coming. Where is the God of justice?

Not only is he not intervening, he's not going to intervene. He's not going to come. This is exactly what Peter says again in his second letter.

[8 : 43] Peter says, people are saying, where is this coming that he promised? Two thousand years have passed, and he's still not come. A leading modern theologian proves that Peter is right when he says, in the last days mockers shall come who deny his coming.

This theologian says, an event that has not happened for two thousand years is a non-event. It's not going to happen. Fulfilling Peter's prophecy, saying that he is not going to come.

You see, when we say God is not going to come, that Christ will not appear again, we're not just disbelieving part of the gospel, we are disbelieving the whole gospel.

Because if he's not going to come again, then the gospel simply falls apart. We are doomed to this endless cycle, swinging about between good and evil, between right and wrong.

So when we say, where is this coming that he promised? Where is the God of justice? Then we're basically saying we don't believe in the gospel at all. We want a God, in other words, who's like Santa Claus, who gives us presents, and makes us feel comfortable.

[9 : 56] Later on, Malachi is going to speak about robbing God. And by robbing God, he means that we are not giving to him what he has given to us. And Malachi's message is going to be that God will be God, and the world will know it.

God is God, whether the world knows it or not. God is God at the moment. But the world doesn't know it. The world doesn't believe it. So that's the first question then. The first question is, why is he coming?

And he's coming because he has promised he will come, and he's coming to confound those who say that he is not alive, that he is not active.

But the second question Malachi asks, going on to chapter 3, verses 1 to 2, is who exactly is it who is coming? Who are we to expect?

And a sense of urgency comes into the message. Behold, I send. Literally, behold, look, I am sending. It's already happening.

[11 : 04] I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. I am sending my messenger. So who is the messenger?

The messenger is, first and foremost, Malachi himself. Malachi himself. That's what the word means. Malachi means my messenger. And Malachi is saying, look, the fact that I'm preaching to you about the coming means that the coming is already in motion.

The words of the prophets. And not only Malachi, but all the other prophets who came before him. The long line of Old Testament prophets. The kind of passages that will be read in the next few weeks in churches up and down the land.

Unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father. As Isaiah said, the words of Micah, out of Bethlehem shall come the ruler of my people.

And many, many other passages right through Scripture. God is sending his messenger. And the messenger here, therefore, is first and foremost the prophet who is delivering this message.

[12 : 15] Then we learn from the New Testament that the messenger is also the figure of John the Baptist. Jesus, in Matthew chapter 11, identifies this messenger with the Baptist.

On Jordan's bank, the Baptist cry announces that the Lord is nigh. And then, the messenger after that is all those who preach that message until he comes again.

So you see what's being said here. The only way to prepare for his coming is to preach the message of the prophets, to be faithful to their message. Just as the ancient prophets proclaimed that he would come, that one day he would erupt onto the scene, just as the Baptist had the great honour of pointing to him and saying, see, he's here, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So it is that down through the ages, the only way to prepare our hearts for his coming is to listen to the word of the prophets and that word as it's mediated faithfully through those who come afterwards.

So who is coming? It is the Lord himself, the long-promised Messiah, the one who in every book of the Bible is revealed in one way or another.

[13 : 35] This is he whom seers of old time chanted off with one accord, whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word as one of the great Christmas hymns says.

Who is coming? And where is he going to? The Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple. Verse 1. Now that was fulfilled very literally if you read the early chapters of Luke.

As a baby he was taken to the temple and then the last glimpse we have of Jesus as a boy at the end of Luke 2 he's taken again to the temple.

Many times throughout his earthly ministry he goes to the temple and he preaches. Until just before his death he turns his back on the temple he pronounces its judgment and he leaves it.

With tears streaming down his cheeks he leaves the temple behind him. And when he died the great curtain of the temple that shielded the way into the holiest place which only one man the high priest was allowed to go into and only once a year that temple that curtain is torn from top to bottom and the trail is blazed into the presence of God.

[14 : 57] And when he comes again there will be no earthly temple because everything will be temple. When he comes again there will be when the new Jerusalem comes into being when the new heaven and the new earth comes into being the book of Revelation says I saw no temple in the city for the Lamb and the Lord God are in it because everywhere will be temple when he comes again.

He is coming in other words in a real and in a physical way to set up his kingdom. He is coming as fire he is like refiner's fire verse 2 and like fuller's soap.

Fire is the symbol of the presence of God the fire that blazed at the gates of Eden preventing Adam and Eve returning to the tree of life the fire that Moses encountered at the bush that burned and was not consumed.

The fire at Sinai the fire that descended on the day of Pentecost who is coming? None of them the Lord himself Jesus Christ one with God who became one of us.

The word of God is now appearing in flesh. And this interesting phrase the messenger of the covenant it's a difficult phrase because it occurs nowhere else in scripture.

[16 : 21] People differ about what it means I think what it means is that just as in the old covenant the tablets of stone which contained the law the decalogue the ten commandments were kept in the ark of the covenant which symbolized the presence of God so when the word of God written in scripture takes flesh he will be the true messenger of the covenant who is going to come the one the one God who spoke at Sinai who embodied his message in the tablets of the law that's now going to be embodied in flesh the word becomes flesh and lives among us so who is coming is no one other than God himself God made flesh veiled in flesh the Godhead see hail the incarnate deity pleased as man with man to dwell Jesus our Emmanuel that is who is going to come and the third question what's going to happen when he comes that's verses three to five he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver when he came the first time the Baptist said he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire now that's not baptizing with two elements one with the Holy Spirit and one with fire that is to say he's baptizing with the Holy Spirit who is himself fire and so often throughout Christian history people have used this metaphor to describe the transforming experience of Christ coming into their lives

John Wesley famously said that his heart was strangely warmed as he sat listening in Aldersgate to an exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans Wesley was a believer in one sense before then he was intellectually convinced and yet that experience transformed him the coming one came to him as fire his heart was strangely warmed and his tongue was set loose to proclaim the coming of the of the Savior himself and in a later generation when later Methodists felt that that the Methodism had lost its fire they prayed unto the spirit of burning to come again the spirit that inspired their founder so when he comes he will come as fire and he will come as fuller soap he will come to he will come to purify he will come to cleanse let's take first of all he will refine he will sit as a refiner and purifier now this is largely for his own people the sons of Levi particularly the priestly class

Malachi condemns the priests of his day for two things first of all they are not preaching the word of God and secondly they are offering diseased sacrifices they are falling down on the two things they were supposed to do and this is what so often happened in the Old Testament when the priests failed to teach the word of God which they often did God raised up prophets to preach that and so often it has happened in the history of the church when the official church has failed to preach the message then God has raised up others from outside it to preach that message so when he comes he is going to refine his people rather like what Jesus says in John 15 using a different metaphor the metaphor of pruning you are the branches and you will be pruned so that you will bear much fruit the idea of refining the purpose of refining is not to destroy us but to remove our impurities and make us fit to meet the Lord need hardly be said there is no reference to purgatory here that is not what is being talked about at all he is talking first of all about the experiences of living as the

Lord comes to us in our day to day lives as he comes to us in his word by his spirit he continually refines us he changes us he prunes us but the moment that we see him there will be a great transformation as John says when we see him we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is the refining process complete and he says this will be they will bring offerings of righteousness to the Lord verse 4 then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years probably they are talking about the days of Moses the days of David and the days perhaps of Hezekiah and Josiah those moments in Israel's history when the people's hearts were on fire for God that will happen again the people of Malachi's day however are not offering living sacrifices they have a consumer mentality about God what's God ever done to us looking back at the very beginning of the prophecy in chapter 1 verse 2

I have loved you says the Lord but you see how have you loved us this kind of whinging complaining spirit that sees church as a consumer activity that sees the Lord as a provider and Malachi is saying when he comes that's all going to be burned out of us that's all going to be removed so that we can worship him properly so he's coming as refiner and very often those difficult hard circumstances of our lives the ones we'd rather avoid the ones we are glad from there over these are the refiner working in us to present us holy and acceptable to himself but he's not only coming to refine he is coming to judge verse 5 then I will draw near to you for judgment I will be a swift witness it's interesting the first word that's used in this list I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers what does he mean by this

[22 : 41] Malachi is talking about those people who want to manipulate the world and want to manipulate God that's essentially what sorcery the occult is about trying to have power over our environment power over other people power over God himself in other words the idolatry and self centeredness from which all other sins flow if you read Paul's devastating indictment of fallen human nature in Romans chapter 1 you'll find exactly the same thing what is the root of all other sins it is idolatry and what is idolatry idolatry is when I am at the center of the universe when my concerns matter more than anything else no number but one no pronoun but me no job but my job no church but my church no family but my family that is idolatry that is ultimately sorcery because if you're an idolater then you're going to try and manipulate the world to suit yourself and Malachi is saying this is what is happening to the people of his day to God's people of his day oh they're not sorcerers in the sense that people were before the exile they're not setting up altars to

Baal they're not putting up totem poles of the fertility goddess and all these kind of things you read about in the pre exilic prophets but they are simply self-centered apathetic and of course what happens against the adulterers if I'm self-centered then obviously sexual behavior and relationships go bad because I'm only interested in my own gratification against those who swear falsely I'm not going to tell the truth if it's disadvantageous to me if I'm an idolater against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages the widow and the fatherless well I'm certainly not going to care for people who are different from me I'm going to exploit them against those who thrust aside the sojourner I'm simply going to live in a world where I am king but above all do not fear me says the Lord of hosts if you if you read through the scriptures particularly the prophets what happens when the prophets meet

God what happens when the Lord comes to his temple think of the great sixth chapter of Isaiah I saw the Lord seated on his throne and the thrice holy holy holy is the Lord of hosts what did Isaiah do did he clap and rejoice and say I must make a video of this and go round tell everybody of my experience he did not I am a man of unclean lips he said and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips what happens what happens when John sees the risen Lord on Patmos the risen Lord whom he had loved so dearly and to whom he had been so close when I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead and when the Lord comes to his temple when the Lord comes to his people when people's hearts are truly gripped this is what happens it is the fear of the Lord the sense of his awesome presence the sense that we are in the presence of the

Lord of heaven and earth the God who judges us there is no sense of holiness here no sense of obedience to his word that's why that's why he is going to come and that's what will happen when he comes there will be a refining when he comes again all his people will be transformed into his likeness read 1 corinthians 15 a glorious chapter about how the mortal bodies our bodies of humiliation are made like his glorious body but when he comes there will be judgment for those who reject him remember at the end of the last battle when the creatures face Aslan all of them face him with fear but some of them face him with fear and love and are welcomed into his presence others face him with fear and continued hatred and rebellion and disappear into the dark shadow on his left side the

Lord is coming to his temple so as we finish are we getting ready for advent I don't mean have we bought our Christmas cards I don't mean have we ordered the turkey I don't mean have we invited great aunt Agatha for Christmas day none of these things are wrong they may all be very good in themselves what I'm meaning is are we preparing our hearts for the coming of the one who will refine and the one who will judge and the beginning of Luke's gospel which is and because the beginning of the gospels are the next biblical voice after all after the prophetic voice falls silent show a little group of people who are who with trembling hope and fear realized she was to bear the savior of the world show people like Simeon and Anna show people like Joseph himself that good and generous man who opened his home for the mother and the child people like

[28 : 22] Elizabeth people like the shepherds and the wise men we can be like them and that's not living in cloud cuckoo land that's not being too heavenly minded because the more firmly we believe that one day Christ will return and wind up the affairs of this world and usher in a better one the more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he returns and indeed say with the end of the Old Testament even so come Lord Jesus let's pray him he sham fuck i hope they could you can but it