

8. The Last Word of the Old Testament

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[0 : 0 0] Now you'll see from our yellow weekly bulletin that I've given this morning's sermon the title The Last Word of the Old Testament which doesn't tell you very much really about the contents clearly it is the last word of the Old Testament but I want to add a subtitle rather in the way that you might add salt and pepper or brown sauce to a meal to make it a bit more interesting So how about this?

The last word of the Old Testament which is a great revelation of the love of God Now I'm adding that subtitle to be deliberately provocative Just look at the title that's given to us here in the page of the English Standard Version It says the great day of the Lord there in heavy type Now that phrase is not of course part of the original text but the editors of the ESV have added a number of headings as they go through and often these headings are true and helpful because they help to focus on what a particular paragraph or piece is all about and certainly this passage is about the great day of the Lord It's about the first coming of Jesus but it also tells us a great deal about the nature of the final day of judgment Now I'm wanting to contend however that this passage is also a great revelation of the love of God and if I can persuade you by 12 o'clock or a few minutes afterwards that it is a great revelation of the love of God then I shall go home to my lunch happy

So friends buckle on your seatbelts and here we go Look at verse 1 At first sight it seems to be a revelation of the ferocity of God not the love of God For behold the day is coming burning like an oven when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble The day that is coming shall set them ablaze says the Lord of hosts so that it will leave them neither root nor branch Is that loving behaviour on God's part?

To act like this towards human beings that he has made himself who reflect his own image? Or look on to verse 3 And you that is you who fear the Lord's name shall tread down the wicked for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act says the Lord of hosts Is that a loving way for God's people to behave?

Or look at the last phrase of the whole thing the last phrase of verse 6 Lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction The authorised version reads Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse Now that appears to be a comprehensive threat So this word curse or destruction is the final word of the Old Testament Now is that a loving word?

[3 : 0 2] Contrast this final verse of the Old Testament with the final verse of the New Testament which reads The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all Amen So the Old Testament ends with the threat of a curse from God and the New Testament ends with the promise of grace from the Lord Jesus So I think you can see why some people have jumped on this contrast between the respective ends of the two Testaments and they've gleefully said well that proves it The God of the Old Testament is a fierce, vengeful God whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of grace and mercy So let's largely forget the Old Testament and concentrate on the New because it gives us a more enlightened view of God a view of God that is much more comforting and encouraging and more in tune with the way people think these days Now friends if you ever hear somebody say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of fierce anger and the God of the New Testament is a God of love you can be sure that you're listening to somebody who has not read the Bible carefully or pondered it for long

Let me try and unpack all this as we begin to engage with the contents of Malachi chapter 4. When you hear a passage read out like this passage has just been a few minutes ago and you know that the sermon is to be on this passage you can find yourself feeling a little bit gloomy and reaching for your emotional armour to strap it on and you can almost feel a little bit embarrassed about this kind of Bible passage because you know that the people of the world people who are not Christians very much dislike the idea of a day of judgement or the idea of a God who is prepared to condemn. I remember years ago 20 odd years ago I met a man who asked me about my work he wasn't a Christian man and I told him that I was a preacher of the Bible and he brightened up at the thought that he was speaking to a young man who was a preacher of the Bible and he said to me something like this I bet you're jolly glad in this day and age that you no longer have to preach all those sermons about fire and brimstone aren't you?

So I paused and I said well actually if the passage that the preacher is preaching about is about the judgement of God the preacher has to preach the message. There was another pause. Oh he said Oh and that was the end of that conversation. You see to this man this man of the world it seemed obvious that the modern church and modern preachers should only preach gentle sermons about the love of God. A man like that would think that fire and brimstone preaching as he would have called it might have had its place back in the dark ages of the 18th century or earlier but obviously has no place in the bright happy constructive positive smiling churches of the late 20th century. Now friends you and I are aware that many people in this day and age think like that. They think that the world has come of age it's grown up. It could only be a crude and brutal form of religion that speaks of a God who's capable of anger or of bringing the world finally to judgement.

Come, come they say haven't we grown up since those dark days. Now a lot of people think this and their view of course can begin to creep into our minds as well. So their view can begin to infect Christian people and we can begin to look at a passage like Malachi chapter 4 and think to ourselves Oh dear is this really what God is like?

Now my contention is that Malachi 4 which is all about the day of the Lord and the coming judgement of evildoers is a great revelation of the love of God. Let me use a very homely illustration. Imagine a young mother working in the kitchen cooking the evening meal and her little son aged about 3 is playing in the kitchen on the floor with his toys. Now there's the kitchen with pots bubbling on the stove. Suddenly the little boy stands up he leaves his toys and he walks towards the cooker and he looks as if he's about to put his hands on the hob and get burnt. So the mother shouts out Jamie!

[7 : 13] Get away from that cooker! Don't touch it! And his little face crumples up and he says Mommy! Don't be angry with me! You don't love me!

Now she's just spoken to him a stern word of warning. Why? Because she loves him. She knows that if he touches that hot hob he's going to be badly burnt and he'll end up in hospital. So she does everything she can in the short space of time available to her to stop him from touching the stove. If she did not warn him she would not be a loving mother. Now in the same way the Lord warns the world the world of the judgment to come because he wants to save as many as possible from that judgment. This is why the Old Testament prophets including Malachi call their contemporaries again and again to repentance. Again and again they say to the people of Israel and Judah Turn from your evil ways Turn back to the Lord for he's willing to forgive you. But if you refuse to turn to him you will only have yourselves to blame when he judges you. So the ministry of the prophets as they call people to repentance is always a ministry of mercy.

God is speaking to his people through the prophets and to other people outside Israel as well. But it's God who wants them to turn from their sin and idolatry so that he doesn't have to punish them. Now if you're discussing this with your friend, we'll imagine he's a persistent atheist. If you're discussing this with your persistent atheist friend, if he hears you saying this kind of thing, he may then put a further question. He'll say, "Alright, I can understand what you're saying, but my next question is: why does there need to be a day of judgment and condemnation in the first place? It's all very well for you to say that God is being loving by warning people of the judgment to come, but couldn't God simply solve the problem in one stroke by not having a day of judgment at all?" Now, in saying that, our atheist friend hasn't reckoned with the fact that God is both morally perfect and flawlessly just. A moral and just God must judge wickedness and condemn it.

Again, to use another homely illustration: A good head teacher in a school cannot turn a blind eye to the breaking of school rules. A good judge or justice of the peace in a law court must sentence a man who is proved to be a criminal appropriately. Justice demands that a breach of rules or of law should be punished. And if God were to turn a blind eye to rebellion against himself, he would be neither moral nor just. If there is no final reckoning, the universe is fundamentally unprincipled. Now I hope I'm beginning to persuade you that Malachi 4, like all the prophetic passages that speak of the coming judgment, is a revelation of how much God loves his people. And this is why we mustn't be embarrassed if we're Christian people about this particular strand, this big strand in the Bible's teaching, when we're talking to our friends who are not Christians. Just imagine that kind of conversation again.

Your friend says to you, "You don't really believe all this gloomy 18th century stuff about judgment, do you?" and a day of judgment. Now you could respond in a simpering apologetic kind of way like this: "Well, actually, yes, I do, really, because the Bible teaches it. Sorry, but you know the Bible says it." Now you could reply like that, but surely it's much better to reply robustly and calmly and say, "yes, of course, I believe it because the Bible teaches it." Forcefully, God tells us about the judgment to come because he is lovingly warning us not to fall foul of it, and even more importantly and wonderfully, he has sent a rescuer to save us from it. It's because he loves the world so much that he sent his son to bear our deserved punishment for us, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life, and that includes you, Patrick. So if your friends call Richard, I wouldn't call him

[11:37] Patrick, at that point you can see what I'm saying. Alright, friends, let's turn to the verses in front of us now. I've got two main points from verses 1 to 3, and then an important postscript in verses 4 to 6. So here's our first main point from verse 1: A terrible destruction will come to the godless. Verse 1 again: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. It will be a thorough destruction." Now, as we think about this verse, let's bear in mind that God is doing two things here. First, in this verse, he's telling us simply what will happen: When the final day comes, it will bring destruction to all who have resisted him.

That's the way he defines those who are evildoers and arrogant those who have said no to him But secondly he's also warning godless people here in telling them of the fearsome character of the last day he's still lovingly holding out to them the possibility that they might yet repent and turn to him So the implication is this final day will be terrible therefore turn to me now while you still can So God is not only describing a fact of future certainty he's also lovingly inviting those who have lived godlessly to repent because they still can it's the love of God as well as his hatred of godlessness that lies behind verse 1 There's an invitation there So the message of the verse is that the arrogant and all evildoers will be destroyed and their destruction will be a fierce and fearsome thing and the imagery the metaphorical language the poetic language if you like which the Lord uses here is employed so as to give us a more vivid awareness of just how dreadful this destruction will be

You see the Lord could have expressed himself in verse 1 without using these metaphors He could have said plainly the day is coming when I will destroy all who have resisted me That would convey the same truth but he heaps up this metaphorical language about fire and a burning oven and stubble and leaving neither root nor branch because he wants to show us just how fearful and dreadful the day of judgment will be He's drawing therefore on things that we've experienced and seen I guess we've all seen fires raging out of control We've perhaps been close to a burning building We've felt the fearful destructiveness of the power of fire so the Lord draws upon our experience of that because he wants to bring home to our naturally callous and desensitized hearts that he really will destroy all who have opposed him So he uses this kind of fierce imagery to sharpen the edge of the truth for us to make us feel it more keenly After all

I guess most of us don't think about the day of judgment every day of our lives We tend to spend much more time thinking about well I guess the nuts and bolts of our everyday life our shopping paying the bills the football results and the cricket results We tend to grow dull to the greatest realities of all and that's why we need these disturbing and powerful images to wake us up to reality The day is coming and before the Lord goes on to tell us in verses 2 and 3 how wonderful it will be for those who belong to him he tells us how dreadful it will be for those who have resisted him Now it's his love that lies behind this verse because the bleak truth of verse 1 will stir up Christian people to evangelism and also will act as a wake up call to all who are still resisting him So as I look around the crowds here this morning I have to ask might there be somebody here this morning who is still resisting the Lord God still keeping the Lord Jesus at arm's length

Friend the message of verse 1 is that this day is coming You know what you need to do You must turn to the Lord as your saviour lest you should have to face him as your destroyer That's the message of the verse So there's the first thing A terrible destruction awaits the ungodly Now secondly A wonderful future awaits the godly or as they're described in verse 2 those who fear the Lord's name A wonderful future awaits them Well again there's a heaping up of imagery which is as delightful here as it was terrifying in verse 1 So look at verse 2 But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings We'll come to the calves leaping in just a moment But looking at the first half of the verse there's a great contrast here in this first half of verse 2 with what we've just read in verse 1

[16:59] In verse 1 we've had destructive raging fire but in verse 2 we have the health-giving and warming sun Not fire to be feared but sunshine to be enjoyed It's a picture here of the loveliness of eternal blessing and salvation Do you know what it feels like on the first day in early spring when you begin to feel a bit of warmth in the sun in the northern hemisphere It usually comes about the first week of April occasionally the last week in March but do you know that feeling you've been wearing about 17 layers of clothes all through the winter haven't you?

And then this day comes in early April and you walk outside and you begin to take off all these layers and you stretch out your muscles and joints and you feel the power of the spring sunshine reviving you and refreshing you Now the Lord is not simply talking here about people feeling good He focuses His meaning in the word righteousness He's not really talking about the sun and the sky here He's talking to use epistle to the Romans language He's talking about the healing power of the status of being put right with God a status which can only be ours by God's gift To be given that gift whereby we who are sinners are counted as righteous in the sight of God nothing is so revitalizing or liberating That righteousness brings to use this lovely phrase healing in its wings The gospel is the ultimate power of healing Now becoming a Christian may not bring healing to our physical or mental illnesses

It may sometimes but often it doesn't But what it always will do is bring healing to our relationship with God To be given this status of righteousness in God's sight to know that all our sin and rebellion is forgiven If we know that then it means that we're at peace with God eternally whatever happens to us in this life and when our life comes to an end and we close our eyes for the final time on earth we know that we shall next open them upon the new creation And then you see the Lord adds this lovely second sentence in verse 2 You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall My father used to keep a cow We lived just outside London and we had a garden and there was a small paddock meadow attached to it In fact Dad had a succession of cows I think 8 or 10 of them over the course of about 50 years He loved to have his own milk and particularly his own cream

And my father's milking system was this You'll know the way that the dairy farmers out here milk their cattle normally morning and evening 7 in the morning 5 in the afternoon that sort of thing But Dad's milking system was to milk once a day only So he would pen up the young calf at night in the cow shed in a stall And the cow would be allowed to graze out in the meadow so that the milk would gather through the night in the cow and then she could be milked first thing in the morning So when she was milked at 7 or 8 in the morning and the milk was then safely in the bucket and then the bucket was safely in the kitchen the calf would be allowed out to run with its mother throughout the day And as the calf's stall was opened that calf would shoot out across the meadow kicking its legs up in the air like a bucking bronco It was a terrific sight I can still picture these lovely big fat healthy calves running out kicking their legs up Now that's the picture that the Lord gives us here The Lord gives us this image of the bucking calf to convey something of the joy and exhilaration that believers will experience on the great day of judgment

But there's more to it than that as well Look at verse 3 And you shall tread down the wicked for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act says the Lord of hosts I think I owe it to Don Carson the Canadian preacher and scholar for pointing out in one of his books that scripture will not easily allow us to say that God hates the sin but loves the sinner And we've often heard that said and often said it I guess God hates the sin but loves the sinner Now at one level of course that is very true God has loved us sinners so much that he sent his son to die for our rescue and salvation So of course God loves the sinner in that sense But in the Bible again and again we find God resolutely and fiercely opposing those who are hardened in sin and rebellion against him

[21 : 45] In the end God puts down all those who oppose him Do you remember how the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 25 that Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet Now you know what that means The triumphant general in those ancient days when his opposite number defeated was brought to him he would make him lie down on the ground and he would place his foot on the neck of the opposing general That's the idea of Christ finally putting all his enemies under his feet Not simply all sin under his feet but all his enemies So at an ultimate level God hates his enemies and will subdue them and triumph over them So yes God loves sinners and sends a saviour to rescue them but ultimately he sets himself implacably against those who refuse him And in Malachi chapter 4 verse 3 there is a sense in which the Lord's people too join in with the Lord and rightly triumph over the Lord's enemies

Not gloating over their downfall I think gloating would be the wrong word to use but certainly rejoicing in God's righteous and true justice as he brings all the opposition finally to an end In Malachi 4.3 the Lord's people do you see don't merely see the downfall of the Lord's enemies from a distance they actually tread upon their ashes and put them under the soles of their feet It's worth thinking about this If you want to follow it up perhaps this afternoon the best chapter I could refer you to is chapter 18 of the book of Revelation where God's angels celebrate God's triumph and victory over Rome which is codenamed Babylon whose emperors have been oppressing and persecuting the Lord's people and yet victory is finally sealed over them So a wonderful future awaits the godly It's a future which is marked by righteousness healing exuberant joy and the final defeat of God's enemies

So friends lift up your hearts If you're a weary and worn and battle-scarred Christian and I reckon some here are then do drink in verses 2 and 3 because they'll give you more of a boost than a dozen holidays in the sunshine Right, now to Malachi's final words in verses 4 to 6 which of course are the Lord's words through Malachi Why should the Lord say at the very end of the Old Testament remember the law of Moses and behold I will send you Elijah I think the reason is this Now let's think chronology history for a moment Chronologically these are the last words of Old Testament prophecy before the arrival of John the Baptist some 460 or 70 years later and the Lord himself of course knows that he is not going to raise up a prophetic voice for all of that long period of time and it is a long period in fact the time lapse between Malachi and the coming of John the Baptist is much the same time distance between Henry VIII and the present day it's a long time so if the people of Israel are to have no profit to bring them messages from God for 470 years how are they to live?

By what principles are they to keep going as the people of Israel for this long tract of time? Are they all at sea? Do they lack the voice of God to guide them? Not at all says Malachi they still have the greatest of all the prophets to guide them they have the books of Moses so he says in verse 4 remember the law of my servant Moses the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb at Sinai for all Israel and that really carries the force of for all Israel perpetually now when he says remember the law of my servant Moses he doesn't just mean call it to mind he means remember it and obey it and carry on obeying it so let's picture an Israelite in the year 300 BC or 200 BC saying alas we have no profit to bring the word of God to us Malachi would say of course we have a profit you goose you have Moses don't you?

he's the perpetual prophet the great prophet the prophet whose words apply to Israel in every generation so for this reason I think it's not quite accurate to say that there are four and a half centuries of prophetic silence between Malachi and the arrival of John the Baptist certainly there's no new prophetic voice in all of that long period but the voice of Moses is to continue to resound in Israel for those four and a half centuries God continues to speak to his people for all that long time if they will but have ears to listen I used to think and this was a wrong way of thinking I used to think that the word of God in the Old Testament was constructed like this that it was as though you had a great pie a great pie of revelation and the various prophets all added different ingredients to the great pie so Moses added various ingredients in his day back in the 15th century BC then we have David and Solomon coming along with their psalms and their proverbs adding new ingredients in the 10th century BC then along comes

[27 : 27] Isaiah in the 8th century and Jeremiah in the 7th Ezekiel in the 6th century and all the others right down to Malachi in the 5th century each of them adding new ingredients to the great pie which finally has its pastry put on top by Malachi and has popped into the oven and out it comes whole in 450 BC in its final form in other words that each prophet had his own distinctive contribution to make to the pie and all the prophets more or less carried equal weight from Moses right down to Malachi but that isn't the way to look at it the reality is that Moses is primary Moses is primary and definitive and all the later prophets and singers and wise men and preachers who contribute to the Old Testament what they are doing is restating and reinforcing Moses in their own generations so think of the Psalms they sing about the great events of the life of Moses and the Exodus and they describe the messianic king of Israel who is first described in Deuteronomy chapter 17 think of the Proverbs with all their detailed instruction about community life and marriage and faithfulness and honesty and hard work what they are doing is picking up Moses the Ten Commandments and drawing out the practical implications of the Ten Commandments in a thousand different domestic and civic settings and the prophets

Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel all of them down to and including Malachi are picking up the particular features of the law of Moses that need to be specially heeded in that prophet's own generation we have seen in studying Malachi that he has much to say about the temple sacrifices the role of the priests the sad prevalence of divorce in society at his time the importance of paying tithes now what Malachi is doing is simply expounding and re-emphasizing various aspects of the law of Moses which his own contemporaries are neglecting and need to re-learn so this is why Malachi speaks of Moses here in verse 4 he doesn't say here re-read Isaiah and Jonah and Amos because prophets like that are themselves interpreters of Moses just as Malachi is so he says go back to the source Moses is always contemporary if you have Moses you will never lack the word of the Lord even if no new prophet should appear for four and a half centuries so in verse 4 the Lord is telling the people of Judah how they are to live until he brings to pass the next great act in the cosmic plan of salvation he is laying out for them the syllabus of their lives for the next 450 years

I'm not going to be speaking to you with a fresh revelation for four and a half centuries he's saying so continue to live by the law of my servant Moses during the period of waiting you're not without my word so live by it and then finally we have yet another demonstration of the love of God in verses 5 and 6 here the Lord is saying the next great act in my plan and purpose is to bring in the great and awesome day of the Lord and that must refer here in verse 5 to the first coming of Jesus now remember in scripture this phrase the day of the Lord doesn't refer to simply one unique day it's a series of days there are many days of the Lord and in these days of the Lord God acts decisively by visiting his people normally to bring judgment and salvation now the final day the great day of judgment is of course still in the future but the first coming of Jesus too is a great and awesome day of the Lord because his first coming brings both judgment and salvation in fact it still brings judgment and salvation today as the gospel is preached and people respond to him either by coming to him in faith or by refusing him and in verse 5 the Lord is saying

I'm going to be sending you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord and this Elijah proves to be not the old Elijah returned but John the Baptist and we know this from Jesus' own words in Matthew chapter 11 where he says all the prophets and the law prophesied until John and if you are willing to accept it he is Elijah who is to come he who has ears to hear let him hear in other words friends if you are open to receive my message take it on board now what is to be the role of this new Elijah according to verse 6 it is to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers it is to unite to reunite God's people the older and younger generations of families in renewed repentance and trust that was John's ministry wasn't it

John the Baptist a call to repentance because the Lord is coming and many did repent at his preaching and he was able to point them like a signpost to the Lord Jesus who alone as the Lamb of God could take away the sin of the world by the sacrifice of himself so in this final verse of the Old Testament we have a shining prophecy of the good news which will surely come John the Baptist is on his way to get the people ready and repentant for the coming of the Lord but then we ask the question why all this provision why this forerunner of the Messiah why ascending of the Son of God too the answer is because God loves the world so much and because he longs for the salvation of many and this is all God's doing lest do you see that word lest halfway through verse 6 there it's all God's doing lest he should have to come and strike the land with a decree of utter desolation that's the alternative ruin the judgment of God the dark curtains of his anger being dropped upon a rebellious world so the Old Testament may end with words that threaten destruction but it's the love of God that lies behind them

[34 : 09] Jamie don't you touch that hot stove let us pray together how we thank you our great God for all that you have been doing over the centuries we think of the way you raised up the people of Israel Abraham and the patriarchs we think of Moses and the way that through him you gave your wonderful law to the people to be their guide and their instruction throughout those long years we think of the Elijah to come John the Baptist and then the great day when the Lord Jesus himself was revealed with his message of judgment and salvation and we pray dear Father that you will write the truth of this in our hearts and help us all of us to turn to you and to the Lord

Jesus in repentance and ongoing trust we pray too that you'll give us the confidence to believe in the coming judgment and the willingness to hold this out to others freely and fully and boldly so that they too may hear the message and turn to you in repentance so please encourage us and strengthen us in our faith and our understanding we pray and we ask it all for Jesus sake Amen