



THE DAY IS COMING

Text: Malachi 4:1-3

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As a church we call ourselves 'Hope in the Hills'. That's because we see our mission as providing hope to the hills communities. That is a hugely significant agenda we have agreed to take on. I'll tell you why by reminding you of the power of hope with a couple of stories. Some years ago, researchers performed an experiment to see the effect hope has on those undergoing hardship. Two sets of laboratory rats were placed in separate tubs of water. The researchers left one set in the water and found that within an hour they had all drowned. The other rats were periodically lifted out of the water and then returned. When that happened, the second set of rats swam for over 24 hours. Why? Not because they were given a rest, but because they suddenly had hope! Those animals somehow hoped that if they could stay afloat just a little longer, someone would reach down and rescue them. If hope holds such power for rodents, how much greater should its effect be on our lives?

Well, from *Parade* magazine comes the story of self-made millionaire Eugene Land who had been asked to speak to a class of 59 sixth-graders. What could he say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school? He wondered how he could get these predominantly black and Puerto Rican children to even look at him. Scrapping his notes, he simply said 'Stay in school and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you.' At that moment, the lives of these students changed. For the first time they had hope. Said one student, 'I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling.' Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school. All of us need hope. We need to know that one day our present difficulties and struggles will end. We need to know that our lives have a purpose, something lasting.

What we see here in our text in Malachi is the prophet bringing hope (Malachi 4:1 & 5) *"Surely the day is coming... the great and awesome day of the Lord"*. This very last message of the Old Testament, before God is silent for 400 years, is an act of grace. It is a final warning to have people realize they need to change. And if they do change, then they have hope. And that is the key message here. It's a word of encouragement and hope, a source of strength to go on and keep faithful.

The first thing we see about this day is that there will be judgment. *"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them.'* You will remember that Malachi had to deal with the people in Israel who claimed (2:17) *"All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord and he is pleased with them"*. They said in (3:15) that God allows the wicked to challenge him and get away with it. They had decided (3:14) that it was a waste of time to serve God and there was no real reason to do what God says. But now God is saying very strongly the 'arrogant' and 'evil doer' will not get away with it. The 'arrogant' are those who think they don't need God. The 'evil doers' are those who blatantly go against God's commands and steal and lie and carry out violence. We asked a few weeks ago, like the people in Malachi's day (3:17) *"Where is the God of justice?"* We noted then the terrible stuff going on in our world. Children being abused. Women beaten and killed by their partners. Terrorists suicide bombing or driving people down in the street. We wondered where is God in all that? Well, using graphic language God is saying here in this prophecy he is preparing a day that will be 'burning like a furnace'. God will hand down his justice. All those who have done evil will be like 'stubble' or chaff that will be completely burned up. It will be like a ferocious bushfire where nothing will be left, not even a 'root' or 'branch'. In other words, there will be no second chance. There will be no regrowth after the fire has gone. All that is left is 'ash' trodden under foot. God is saying, while there is life you have the last chance to repent. There is always hope for you if you come to God. But after that it's gone. The 'day of the Lord' is final. A prophecy is often seen in stages. It could be argued as we have, that the judgement for the Israelites came in 70 A.D. when the Romans burned down the temple and Jerusalem with it. It can also be said that God's final judgement was seen in Jesus on the cross when he was judged in our place. And it will be completed on this 'great

and awesome day' God is preparing. All sin is punished, either on the cross or in eternity. On that day God's justice will be displayed for all the world to see.

Now how can that day of justice bring us hope? Well I think of a young man in a previous congregation. He had been raped as a boy by his neighbour. But when the matter went to court the evidence was not strong enough to convict him. So, this young man was not only damaged by his abuse. His was full of rage at the system and the neighbour who laughed at him. His anger drove him to drugs and violence. I remember sitting with him and encouraging him to let his anger go. I urged him to leave it with God. That God would see to it that justice would one day be done. As Paul noted (Romans 12:19) *"Vengeance is mine. I will repay" says the Lord.* I wanted to give this young man hope for justice and so be released of his rage and despair. That is the message of hope for so many people. For the millions of Christians who have been persecuted, the millions who have suffered under slavery and still do. For the thousands of children abused, the millions slaughtered in genocides, God will deal with all the 'evil doers'. Justice will be done.

Now notice also that on this great and awesome day there will be more than judgement. On the other side of this same 'day of the Lord' will be a joy beyond words. It will finally be the day that those who love God have deeply longed for. (4:2&3) *"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty.*" What we see here are three wonderful things. There will be healing and rejoicing and a deep sense of victory. Think of those who were faithful to God, those we saw last time who were written in God's "book of remembrance" and were part of his "treasured possession" (his crown jewels). For them this will be a day of healing. "...the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays." Get the imagery here. I think back a number of days ago. A group of us were outside experiencing the day as cold, wet and miserable. But then the rain stopped, and the sun came out. It was such a delight to see the day brighten up, to feel the warmth of the sun on our heads. It gave a sense of feeling so much better. The 'sun of righteousness' is Jesus. And God is saying when Jesus comes back on this day he will bring healing and restoration. Not just to his people. But to the whole of creation. Think of those who have died. Think of those suffering disease and deformity, those struggling with mental illness, those broken

hearted and despairing, those struggling with their faith and spirituality. All grief and loss, all abuse and loneliness, all injustice, all of it will be gone. They will all be completely healed. Forever. Isaiah (25:8) says The Lord "*...he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth*".

It's not hard to image that when that happens on that 'great and awesome day', there will be an explosion of jubilation. A rejoicing like never seen before. "*And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall*". Malachi paints a touching picture here.] Think of the calves cooped up in their stall over the cold, dark winter. But now the sun is out and they run out into the paddock and sunshine and they jump and bounce and frolic. In other words, God's people, we, will be so happy, so released, so bursting with joy, we will romp and play like children. There will be no Dutch stoicism, or English understatement. We will be whooping and dancing and singing. We will be like the kids at recess, so happy to get out of the boredom of the class and yelling and skipping out into the playground. [POWER POINT PICTURESx2] It will be a day that will make the joy at the end of World War 2 seem tame.

VE day was an exuberant celebration of victory. So too the 'great and awesome day of the Lord' will be a day of victory. Note how Malachi puts it (:3) "*Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I act*" says the Lord Almighty". This is figurative language to describe victory in the terms the people back then understood. For them, to march in victory over their enemies was something they could hardly imagine. To have complete and total conquest over suffering and evil, forever, was to them utterly astonishing. But here God is giving great hope. God is reiterating here his promise (3:18) to make a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Remember for many of the people of Israel at the time it seemed like the wicked were prospering while God's people were suffering. And even in our own time this often seems to be the case. [POWER POINT PICTURESx3] We may well be aware that Christians suffer persecution in many places around the world. More Christians died for the faith in the 20th century than all the centuries before combined. Even in Australia we are feeling more and more isolated as churches from our communities. What God is saying in this verse is that he makes clear that one day the roles will be reversed. There is a day coming like an oven and the wicked will be like ashes under the feet of God's people. The victory will be complete and final.

What a way for Malachi to come to the last few verses of his prophecy. What a way to see the last words of the Old Testament. A very serious warning. But a warning given as a gracious act for the people to change and find great hope. It is a hope that can give all of us the motive to go on no matter our circumstances. Justice will be done. Healing and restoration will come. God's people will be the victors. Be hopeful and joyous about the coming day.

But now pause for a moment and be sober. The day we deeply look forward to will be same day, the same event, that could see the utter destruction and eternal suffering for many people we know. There are billions of people in this world today, even millions in Australia, who are facing the judgment of God because they are not putting their faith and trust in Jesus. They are presently not part of God's 'treasured possession'. There are people right here in our hills communities who can be described as the 'arrogant'. They confidently resist God, deny there is a God and have determined they can well do without him. It is not just in Malachi's day that such folk existed. You may have seen on the news the recently released figures from the Australia Bureau of Statistics. A headline feature asks the question 'Are we a nation of non-believers?' Since the last census there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people who tick the box 'no religion', now about 30%. The number who say they are Christians is about 50%. But if you trace through how many are deeply committed to the faith its down about 7%. There is a good likelihood we are a nation like Israel in Malachi's time. Either cultural Christians or just not religious.

So, when we think of those who might come out on the wrong side of the 'great and awesome day of the Lord', they are not just, so called 'heathens out there'. It could be members of this church. It could include members of your families, friends, workmates, so many of the people you hang out with. Remember Malachi was speaking to the 'church', the 'people of God' of his time. So many of them had no real relationship with God. Their worship was just a cultural thing they did. And even that they only did half-heartedly. I want you to understand the implications of this 'great and awesome day of the Lord'. Dare to feel the pain and grief in your own context. I remember sitting with a great grandmother in my first congregation. She was in tears thinking about her extended family. Half expressed faith in Jesus. But the others didn't. There she was thinking about her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, so many of them she

pictured suffering, eternally lost from God's presence. No hope ever after the day of the Lord. She felt the reality of that and was utterly grief stricken. Surely that must be our struggle as well. Surely, we are not so spiritually calloused that we spend more time thinking about renovating our house, planning a great holiday, considering retiring, than we do about sharing the gospel. If we are to be true to our church's name and mission then focusing on making disciples so others can have the hope of that great day is our most urgent task. It should be the impetus for everything we do.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- How does the 'great and awesome day of the Lord' bring hope?
- How will the 'day of the Lord' answer the question 'Where is the God of justice'?
- Describe how the 'day of the Lord' will bring healing, jubilation and victory.
- What are the implications of the 'day of the Lord' for you personally and as a church? What is most urgent and what will you do about that?