

The Day of the Lord and the Preemptive Strike of the Cross

Introduction

The Genesis of this Sermon

- A. At this point in my ministry, Saturday nights are hit or miss for me. They can be nights of great expectation and excitement concerning what I get to bring into the pulpit the next morning. But often they are the dark night of my soul, so to speak ;) It's usually about 9 PM on Saturday night that I realize I'll never be able to fit into my sermon all that I had hoped to at the beginning of my preparation and planning. It's the time where I start cutting and cringing—this point has to go; this illustration has to go; this application has to go. It's painful. I'm working on it.
1. One of the things I had to cut last week was so painful for me that the only way I was willing to do it was if I allowed myself to bring that material into another sermon this week. So that's the genesis of this sermon. I'm not seeing it as officially a part of the Luke series, though it is related since it was in the process of preaching through Luke that these insights came.

The Text

- A. I'm going to take my point of departure from a text we looked at last week, [Mal 4:5-6](#), but we're going to go in a different direction with it.
- “⁵ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” ([Mal 4:5–6](#)).
- B. Now, I have a specific agenda as we approach this text. I do believe we will revisit Malachi many times in the coming weeks as it seems to serve as background for quite a bit of material in the opening chapters of Luke—particularly, as would be expected, for John the Baptist's life and ministry. So this morning I'm not going to try to answer every question or bark up every tree in Malachi. I have one particular line I'm following and I want to be disciplined to stay there. I'm setting my sights this morning on this “[great and awesome day of the Lord](#).”

(1) The Day of the Lord

What Is the Day of the Lord?

A. Before we can do anything with this Day of the Lord, we must get a sense, at least, of what it is. If I could begin with a more general definition, we will then move in towards how this Day is particularly described for us in our text.

1. General—The Day of the Lord is a concept not unique to Malachi at all. It is a concept woven throughout the OT (especially in the Prophets) with various layers of meaning attached to it.

a. In its basic sense, it represents a day of God’s intervention whereby the wicked are judged and the righteous are redeemed, and, above all, God’s holy name is vindicated.

i. Sometimes the term is used to refer to certain historical intrusions of divine action, but all of these foreshadow and anticipate what is meant by this Day in its ultimate sense: the final Day that will come at the end of the ages where all that’s wrong will be irreversibly done away with and all that’s right will be irreversibly ushered in.

b. This trajectory of understanding and usage pushes the NT authors to speak of the Day of the Lord almost exclusively in this ultimate sense. Listen to how Peter describes it: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 Pet 3:10). It is the last day of the original heavens and earth and the first and everlasting day of the new heavens and earth.

i. If you’re united to Christ in this room, it is the quintessential day of your redemption. If you’re not united to Christ in this room, it is the quintessential day of your doom.

2. Particular—Now, what does our text particularly tell us about this Day of the Lord?

a. It will be “great and awesome.” Especially important here, since it may be a bit disguised in the translation, is this modifier: “awesome.”

i. The way we use it today confuses the Hebrew that lay beneath it. We use awesome often to describe something we enjoy: an awesome movie, an awesome game, and awesome set of waves, etc. I don’t think that’s the sense here.

ii. In the Hebrew the word is a form of the verb meaning “to fear.” Which is why, when I did a translation comparison, the most common translations were either “the great and dreadful day of the Lord” or “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” It’s a word that reminds us that YHWH is far greater than anything we can imagine, and whether he comes for us in judgment or redemption on that

day, we will find ourselves on our faces before Him. It will be “great and awesome.”

- b. It involves His coming and decisive action: “lest I come and strike...” The day of the Lord comes when the Lord Himself comes.
 - c. It brings with it an ominous threat: “strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”
 - i. Now, again, to understand this, it is helpful to make a note regarding the Hebrew underneath. For what has been translated here as “with a decree of utter destruction” is the same word used to describe what Israel was to do with the cities and people of Canaan as they were moving in under Joshua to claim it for YHWH. They were to devote everything and everyone to destruction: “¹⁶ But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes,¹⁷ but you shall devote them to complete destruction... (Deut 20:16–17a).
 - ii. So there is this threat hanging over Israel that when this Day of the Lord comes He might treat them like He once treated the Canaanites. Where they were once the holy nation replacing the unholy, now they have become the unholy and God just might put an end to them once and for all.
 - d. That is, unless they “turn.” That is the last piece we are given in our text regarding this Day. There’s an Elijah figure, who we now know (Luk 1:17) is John the Baptist, that God will send before this day entrusted with the mission of turning God’s people back to Him before it’s too late.
- B. All of this simply works out in the details what we noted in our broader definition: this Day of the Lord will be a day when God comes in judgment for the wicked, redemption for the righteous, and vindication for His holy name.

The Blindness of Israel

- A. At this point we must remember the context of Malachi that we mentioned last week. Malachi is the last prophet of the OT and hence it is the last book in our OT. Israel has already been exiled out of the Promised Land and brought mercifully back into the land. The temple and city walls have been rebuilt, and yet, in spite of all this, the hearts of the people are just as far from the Lord as they’ve ever been. Malachi finds himself dealing with the same stuff that sent Israel into exile in the first place, and hence at the end of his book it’s the threat of being struck and destroyed that’s left hanging in the air.
- B. Perhaps the most potent expression of Israel’s depravity is seen in the way they understood this Day of the Lord. Contrary to what we might expect, they did not dread this day, they longed for it! They were so convinced of their own righteousness that they thought the Day

of the Lord would mean redemption for them and judgment for all of their enemies. They hadn't the slightest sense that they, in their rebellion and sin, had in fact become God's enemies.

1. We see them longing for this day in 3:1: "Where is the God of Justice?" they ask. The return from exile, the rebuilding of the city and temple, it's not all He said it would be, it's not all we deserve it to be. Give us justice!
 - a. God's answer here parallels what we just looked at in 4:5-6: "¹ Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? (Mal 3:1-2a). You want justice? I'll bring you the justice you seek, but you will come out on the wrong side of it!
 - i. The postexilic Israelites are still in need of learning what the pre-exilic Israelites didn't get. The warning from Malachi is just a resounding of the warning from Amos some three centuries earlier: "¹⁸ Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light, ¹⁹ as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. ²⁰ Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20).

(1) Israel thought God would come to save them from the surrounding nations, instead God comes and gives them over to the surrounding nations in the exile! And this yet coming day in Malachi, is shaping up to look like that.

The Blindness of Us All

- A. We have to look at ourselves here for a moment, don't we? Self-deception is a real threat to our peace and security in God. We have all these subtle tactics for convincing ourselves we are right in and of ourselves, that we are good people, that God, because He knows what's up, is on our side. We keep the self-righteous propaganda going and we bring others into it. We tell ourselves we're right and we surround ourselves with others who will tell us the same thing: "Tell me what I want to hear!"
- B. Meanwhile, because Jesus truly loves us, He comes and tells us what we desperately need to hear:
 1. "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (Joh 9:41). If you think you see just fine, you're blind. If you're starting to realize you've been blind, you're starting to see. So long as you think you are right in yourself before God you are wrong, dead wrong!

2. He's concerned for us. He wants the day to go well for us. So the gospels are full of these warnings about self-deception. Perhaps the most sobering is found at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is talking about Judgment Day, the ultimate Day of the Lord, and there are some who even then will be self-deceived: " ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Mat 7:22–23).
 - a. It doesn't get any more bone-chilling than that. I don't want to hear those words. I don't want you to hear those words. O God open our eyes...to our blindness!

(2) The Preemptive Strike of the Cross

What's God Going to Do?!

- A. So what's God going to do? The Day of the Lord is coming with judgment for the wicked and redemption for the righteous, but as Paul would later say: " ^{10b} None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom 3:10b–12). Not in Israel, not in any nation, not in any seat in this room. The day of the Lord will not go well for anyone. If God were to come in judgment at this point, no one would make it out alive. The house of heaven would be empty. In its halls you could hear a pin drop. What's God going to do?!
 1. Now we know from our text and from what we looked at last week that God will send John and John will go before Jesus and Jesus will finally and fully turn God's children back to Him, reconciling us to God. And we shall head toward that same glorious pinnacle here this morning, only from a different angle, traveling up by a different trail.

Following Another Trail Up

- A. This morning it's this "Day of the Lord" that is serving as our trailhead. I want to follow that with you. And here's where things start to get especially interesting.
 1. We've already mentioned that the Day of the Lord is spoken of all over the OT prophets, but there is only one other prophet who gives the Day these same qualifications "great and awesome"—Joel. It would seem that Malachi is riffing on Joel's understanding of this Day. Both are speaking of the final, end-time cataclysm, but using different language to do it.
 - a. For Malachi it's God striking and destroying.
 - b. For Joel, it's God tearing the very fabric of creation, as it were. This day is given cosmic parameters: " ³⁰ And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be

turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls” (Joel 2:30–32).

- i. Here we have the same basic outline that we were given in Malachi. The Day of the Lord is going to be great and terrible. If it is going to go well for you—if you’re going to be saved, if you’re going to escape—you have to be turned back to the Lord in some way.
2. Now, we could draw a direct line, at this point, immediately from these vv. to [Rev 6](#) where the Day of Lord finally arrives for the world and is described for us in the language of Joel, but there is something that takes place between Malachi and Joel’s prophetic oracles and Rev 6 that changes everything.

The Preemptive Strike of the Cross

- A. Now we’re coming to what I have been so jealous to share with you. We are given indication in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Christ that this Day which still looms out on the horizon for us, was brought in early for Christ. It’s as if God, aware that no one could stand before Him if He were to come in judgment, unwilling to condemn us, delayed the great and awesome Day of the Lord for us, by bringing it in early for His Son!
 1. Here is where the title of this message starts to make sense: “The Day of the Lord and the Preemptive Strike of the Cross.”
 - a. What is a preemptive strike? It’s what you do in war. It’s what you do with your enemies. You strike them before they can strike you. You get them before they’re ready. You knock them off balance. And then you make an end of them.
 - b. But here is the most amazing thing about the preemptive strike of the cross. It is not a strike of wrath but a strike of grace. It is not a strike against God’s enemies, but a strike against God’s son, for the sake of His enemies: “⁸ God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...¹⁰ while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son... (Rom 5:8, 10a). The preemptive strike of the cross knocks God’s enemies off balance, it is true, but it does not knock us down to destruction but rather to our knees in wonder at what He has done!
 - i. The Son of Man was interposed at the overlap of the ages to undergo the end on our behalf. The last day judgment intruded into human history in 33 AD at Calvary’s hill. The wrath of God stored up against man’s sin for the Last Day, was preemptively poured out upon His Son. The Great White Throne Judgment of [Rev 20](#) comes for Christ in [Mat 27](#). Here is the preemptive strike of the cross!

- B. I want you to see the crucifixion as intrusion—the intrusion of the “great and awesome Day of the Lord” into history in advance of its final expression on the last day. I think that’s the meaning of the cosmic chaos that surrounds the cross as described for us in Mat 27:45-46, 50-53:
1. “⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.” From the sixth hour to the ninth hour (time of the evening sacrifice)...darkness. “The sun shall be turned to darkness.” The lights of the universe just go out. The darkness of the Day of the Lord is descending upon the Christ.
 2. And as the moon would also be turned to blood, so Christ, who John describes as “the light shin[ing] in the darkness” (Joh 1:5), turns red with blood.
 - a. And this light, momentarily, goes out: “⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ...⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit” (vv. 46, 50). And then we read that “the earth shook, and the rocks were split” (51b).
 - i. All these heavenly ruptures and geographic upheavals are mere parables for what is happening in the Son of Man himself as He is experiencing the last day judgment for our sin. He is here, in the words of Malachi, being struck by the rod of God’s wrath. He is being devoted to destruction. As Isaiah spoke of Him: “He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people” (53:8).
 3. But we’re not left here in darkness and blood. As we keep reading, we come to this strange scene at the end: “⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised,⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many (vv. 52-53).
 - a. What is that?! There’s not just destruction going on here. This destruction, this shaking of the earth is actually tearing curtains (v. 51a) and opening up tombs, making way for new life! There is more of the Day of the Lord intruding at this point than just judgment—redemption starts intruding as well! End-time judgment, but now end-time resurrection and life. It’s as if God can’t contain what He’s doing here. Life is just erupting around the cross. People start resurrecting, even before the great resurrection that is coming at the end of the age.
 - b. And the critical piece in all of this is that little prepositional phrase in v. 53: “after His resurrection.” Even at Christ’s crucifixion, Matthew can’t help but bring our attention to where it’s all going. Just as Jesus suffered the judgment of the Day of the Lord, so too, because of His innocence and the sufficiency of His sacrifice, He is redeemed, saved from His enemies, raised from the dead never to die again.

- i. And He does all of this on our behalf! His crucifixion death is ours. His resurrection life is ours. We have passed with Him through the final judgment and into eternal life: “^{26b} He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:26b–28).

(1) God’s judgment on sin has been fully and finally dealt with. All that’s left is the full consummation of our redemption and reunion!

Who Can Stand?!

- A. In Rev 6, the language of Joel is again utilized to describe the judgment that’s still approaching for the world. Christ was put forward as the preemptive strike of God’s grace, but the strike of His wrath is still a looming threat for those who reject Him: “¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev 6:12–17).
 - 1. Who can stand? (a question that echoes both Mal 3:2 and Joel 2:11). Their implied answer is no one. And they are right. No one could stand before God on their own account.
 - a. But they had missed one critical detail. The wrath of the Lord is now the “wrath of the Lamb.” God had provided a wrath-bearing substitute in Christ and the cross. The darkness, the blood, the rocks had all already descended upon Him. And the offer of grace was extended. But these kings and great ones and rich and powerful (and maybe even some of us in this room) rejected it. Therefore, they cry out: “Who can stand?!”
- B. But if you keep reading, the answer to their question is given, and it’s amazing! “⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev 7:9–10).

Conclusion

- A. Let me conclude with this: If the day of the Lord is to be understood as this coming cosmic upheaval and whirlwind of fury, its as if the first thunderbolt from that approaching lightning storm strikes 33 AD, Golgotha, Jesus Christ. That thunderbolt is a part of the end-time storm, it is a part of the great and awesome day of the Lord, but it comes first for Christ! And the world now rests under the ominous shadow of that same black cloud. No one knows when the next bolt is going to strike and the Last Day descend. It will come like a thief in the night for many. But, while this fallen world rests under that cloud, those who have come to Christ have entered with Him into a brand new day! For as He rose from the dead, on the first day of the week, the clouds of God's judgment and wrath broke and the sun of God's affection now shines in full force, not just upon Him but upon all who are united to Him by His Spirit through faith. All aspects of the Day of the Lord converge at the cross of Christ. For there final judgment befell Him for our sin; and there redemption was given to Him in His resurrection as the firstfruits from the dead; and there the Father's name was preeminently vindicated, for it is only by means of the cross that God can be both "just and the justifier of the [ungodly] one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26 [; 4:5]). Because of the cross, heaven will not be empty or silent—it will be full of people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev 5:9); and its halls will resound with the chorus of our praise, all in adoration of the Lamb!
1. Will that Day go well for you? The answer has everything to do with what you make of this Lamb. If you receive Him by faith, you will move with Him through judgment into eternal life today. The verdict over your life: "Not guilty! Righteous!" But if you reject Him, we just read it, you will not be able to stand.
 - a. O bless the Lord for the preemptive strike of the cross!