

Malachi 4:1
A Day of Fire
Jimmy Snowden

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Introduction

Last week we focused on Malachi 3:18. I stated that 3:18 stands simultaneously as a conclusion to what preceded (3:16-17) and as an introduction to what follows (4:1-2). 3:18 states that the difference between the righteous and the wicked will become evident. In 4:1-3 the Lord discloses exactly how He will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. As was stated last week, the distinction between them has everything to do with how God will deal with them at the second coming. Thus, the way to read 4:1-3 is to focus on the distinction between the righteous and the wicked in regard to how God is going to deal with them at the second coming. In other words, we are to read 4:1, which is where God discusses how He will deal with the wicked on the Day of Judgment, and then contrast it with 4:2-3, which is where God discusses how He will deal with the righteous on the Day of Judgment. When you read it this way, the great difference between the righteous and the wicked becomes evident.

This morning we are just going to be considering 4:1. We will be discussing how God will deal with the wicked on the day that He has prepared, the Day of Judgment. The contrast will become sufficiently evident next week as we look at how God will deal with the righteous on the Day of Judgment.

4:1: The Destruction of the Wicked

How will God deal with the wicked when He comes back to judge the nations? Well, Malachi says;

“For indeed, the day is coming, burning like a furnace.”

The word ‘furnace’ or ‘oven’ (*tannur*) is most likely a reference to an oven used to make bread. The fire in this sort of an oven was so hot that it made pita bread generally in less than a minute. The emphasis of this imagery is bound up in its association with fire. As with any furnace or wood burning stove or oven, it is only a threat when a fire is crackling within. When you parents tell your kids to not touch the wood stove, you do not do so because there is something inherently harmful about the make up of woodstoves; rather, you tell them to not touch the wood stove precisely because of the fire that rages within. The imagery of a burning furnace has everything to do with the element of fire.

This is evidenced even further when we read on in the verse. He says,

“All the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble”

The word for ‘stubble’ literally refers to chaff. Wheat was one of the most grown and harvested crops in Palestine. At harvest time the farmer would gather the wheat and then separate the useful part of the crop, the heads of grain, from the useless part of the crop. The chaff is a reference to the useless part of the crop—it literally couldn’t be used for anything. It is like the stem of an apple or the husk of an ear of corn. But what the

farmers would do with this useless part of the wheat crop is what is most principally important in the context of this passage. What the farmer would do after separating the wheat from the chaff was he would scoop up the chaff and throw it on a fire. The interesting thing about chaff, though, is that it is incredibly flammable. And that is why Malachi describes the wicked as chaff (or stubble). Sometimes when the Scriptures speak of the wicked as chaff it is reference to the fact that they are useless, but here the emphasis is on its flammability. It is God's way of saying that the wicked will be burned up in an inferno by the fierce fury of God's wrath. It is actually quite amazing; when chaff is thrown on a normal wood fire, the fire roars almost out of control, completely engulfing the chaff. Think of the difference between a fire fueled by large chunks of wood and a fire fueled by bucketfuls of dry leaves. Surely, a fire made out of wood burns hot, but it also burns slow. However, as soon as someone comes by and throws a bone dry Christmas tree on the fire the flames shoot up 20 feet in the air, everyone steps back, turning their heads to protect their faces from the blast of heat. Chaff is much like dry leaves and a dry Christmas tree; it is known for burning fast and hot. The reference to the wicked being stubble is a reference to their flammability: they will be consumed by the fierce fiery of God's wrath.

Malachi then goes on to say,

“The coming day will consume them,” says the Lord of Hosts, ‘not leaving them root or branches.’”

This can also be read, “will set them ablaze” (NASB) or “shall burn them up” (NKJV). He then draws attention to the extent of their destruction. He says that the Lord will “not leave them root or branches.” This is quite significant. When I grew up in Iowa I remember working for an old farmer named Howard who had me dig all of the thistles out of his cow pasture. Thistle bushes are nasty and are a royal pain in the neck. The only way to get rid of a thistle is by getting a spade and digging the entire plant out of the ground. I was told by Howard, “Jimmy, if you don't get every piece of the root of the thistle, it will grow back within days.” For this fire to destroy both root and branches is way of referring to a complete and non-reversible destruction. There will be no hope for regrowth or bouncing back. God's judgment on the wicked will leave them completely destitute, without hope of recovery. It will be a complete and utterly radical destruction.

This is how God will deal with the wicked on the Day of Judgment. Now the purpose of this passage is to contrast the way that God will deal with the wicked on the Day of Judgment with how He is going to deal with the righteous. However, we will discuss how God is going to deal with the righteous on the Day of Judgment next week. This week, I want to take a bit of a purposeful excursion to discuss how the word of God uses the imagery of fire to communicate the nature of God's judgment against sin and sinners.

God's Judgment as Fire

I want to take you to just a few passages to prove how often the biblical authors speak of the judgment of God with the imagery of fire. My reason for doing so is simply because this is the common element of Malachi 4:1. How is God going to deal with the wicked on the day of judgment? He is going to be a consuming fire, completely engulfing

them with His judgment as a fire consumes stubble. Observe the following passages of Scripture. This is just a handful of the many passages which speak of the judgment of God being like fire.

23 Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that He made with you, and make an idol for yourselves in the shape of anything He has forbidden you. 24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. (Deut 4:23-24)

1 The LORD reigns! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coasts and islands be glad. 2 Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. 3 Fire goes before Him and burns up His foes on every side. 4 His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. 5 The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD—at the presence of the Lord of all the earth. (Psalm 97:1-5)

The mountains quake before Him and the hills melt; the earth trembles at His presence—the world and all who live in it. 6 Who can withstand His indignation? Who can endure His burning anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, even rocks are shattered before Him. (Nahum 1:5-6)

10 "Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees! Therefore every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the One who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to take off His sandals. He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff He will burn up with fire that never goes out." (Matthew 3:10-12)

This will take place] at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with His powerful angels, 8 taking vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 These will pay the penalty of everlasting destruction, away from the Lord's presence and from His glorious strength... (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

9 They came up over the surface of the earth and surrounded the encampment of the saints, the beloved city. Then fire came down from heaven and consumed them. 10 The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

11 Then I saw a great white throne and One seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from His presence, and no place was found for them. 12 I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

13 Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. 14 Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And anyone not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:9-15)

8 But the cowards, unbelievers, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." (Revelation 21:8)

Why Fire?¹

As far as I have found in my own study of the word of God, fire is the most common imagery in the Scriptures used to describe the judgment of God. Why do you suppose this is the case? Because fire is universally known as the most destructive reality in the natural world—it is known to be an agent of destruction. A house can be completely submerged in water, an earthquake can cause a house to completely cave in on itself, wind can blow a house to smithereens, and yet the essential elements of the house will still be in existence. Fire, on the other hand, brings a complete and unalterable destruction, reducing whatever it consumes to nothing but ashes. Also, think of the wild fires of California; once a fire gets going, it feeds itself. The bigger it gets the more it consumes, the more it consumes the bigger it gets. It grows and grows, feeding itself, destroying everything in its path. This is why God most frequently uses the imagery of fire to communicate His judgment; it is simply the closest thing in our experience to communicate the radical destructive nature of the judgment of God.

The Doctrine of Accommodation

In the 1500's John Calvin coined a doctrine called the *Doctrine of Accommodation*. All this doctrine refers to is the fact that God speaks to us about Himself, His ways, and His will in ways that we can understand. When God speaks about Himself, He has the task of communicating realities that we have no categories for—so he *accommodates* us by communicating these realities to us by using imagery from our realm that most closely parallels the transcendent reality. So when you see God chucking Satan and those who have not received Jesus into a lake of fire in the book of Revelation, you are not to try and draw a picture of a lake of fire in your head and say, "Ohh... that's what hell will be like." No! You are to understand that Hell will be incalculably worse than what we would imagine a lake of fire to be. And I really think that what John is getting at when he speaks of a *lake* of fire, is that hell will not simply be the judgment of God poured out on the wicked; no, hell is the place where the wicked will be completely submerged in the fierce fiery of God's righteous anger and judgment against sin—it will hit them from every direction. Take whatever picture you have in your head when you imagine a lake of fire, multiply the raging severity and radical destruction of the picture in your head by about 10,000, and you will still not even be close to scratching the surface of the severity of the lake of fire.

¹ Wrath means "strong, stern, or fierce anger;" or "vengeance or punishment as the consequence of anger." I got this from www.dictionary.com. I would add that when we speak of the wrath of God we are speaking of his just anger and indignation.

How many of you who are here this morning have been to the Grand Canyon? How many of you haven't? Now, speaking to those who have been to the Grand Canyon; imagine if I were to give you the task of explaining to those who haven't been to the Grand Canyon the grandeur, bigness, and glory of it. How would you go about explaining to those who haven't been to the Grand Canyon the magnitude and grandeur of it? This is how you would begin: you would start by comparing your experience of the Grand Canyon to something that your audience has experienced—you would *accommodate* them. You might start by saying; “Imagine standing on top of the highest mountain in New Hampshire—well... it is nothing like a NH mountain—but imagine standing on top of the highest mountain in NH.” You see, you will start by using the closest thing to the Grand Canyon that your audience has experienced. You cannot simply explain the Grand Canyon, you can only compare it to other things that they have experienced, and then end by saying, “Yes, it is sort of like the highest straight faced cliff in the White Mountains, but it is so different.”

How will you communicate the Grand Canyon to those who never been there? Imperfectly! That's how. Your audience will leave with a faint understanding of it, but their understanding of it will not even be close. I mean, I had seen picture after picture of the Grand Canyon before visiting it, I took a virtual tour of the Grand Canyon in a 19 story tall Imax theatre, and neither the pictures nor the Imax film were not even close to paralleling the real deal. Some things are simply too big, majestic, and breath-taking to be explained or drawn; the reality can only be known through experience.

D.A. Carson in a sermon he preached on the book of Revelation explained the task of John in writing the book of Revelation. He talked about how John was given the task of explaining to his audience the throne room of God, something that went so far and above their experience. He likened John's task to that of explaining electricity to a pre-stoneage tribesman. How would you explain what electricity is and how it works to someone who knows nothing of technology at all?

John was forced to explain to them the heavenly reality by giving us an imperfect picture. He has to—we simply do not have the categories to even begin to understand the grandeur of it. The picture He gives is not sufficient to relay to us the essential experience of the wrath of God; rather the picture of the Lake of fire simply gives us the closest parallel. The biblical authors gave us this imagery expecting us to understand this fact. The pictures of God's judgment in the Scriptures, therefore, give us a “top of the highest crest of the tip of the iceberg” picture of what is going to happen. We simply do not have the proper categories to understand the magnitude of what is coming. And since the reality of the fierce and consuming nature of God's judgment so far transcends anything that we have ever experienced in this realm, He communicates to us the reality of his judgment by comparing it to the most paralleled reality in our experience.

And the lake of fire communicates the idea that Satan, his minions, and the unrepentant are completely submerged in the unquenchable wrath of God. We are not suppose come away equating the wrath of God with fire. It is not that God's judgment is equal to fire; it is that fire is the closest parallel in our experience to understanding the judgment of God. In other words, God does not rain fire on the heads of those who reject Him; it is that He rains His judgment on the heads of those who reject Him, and the closest parallel we have to God's judgment is fire. Thus, God accommodates us by speaking our language, communicating realities about Himself that go so far above and

beyond anything that we have ever experienced by drawing parallels with things in our experience that most closely parallel the transcendent heavenly realities.

Imagine the most terrifying experience known to mankind and multiply it by a million and you have not even begun to scratch the surface of the terror of God's wrath; imagine the most fierce raging and roaring fire you could ever imagine, multiply it by a million and you will not have even begun to scratch the surface of the radically consuming nature of the wrath of God.

Am I Exciting Fear??

You better bet your bottom dollar that I am exciting fear in the heart of the unbeliever. My prayer is that you will become so full of fear that you will run to Jesus clinging to Him and what He has done for you on Calvary. So often in our evangelism we downplay the wrath of God because we don't want to be the bearer's of bad news. But we must share the bad news, because apart from a knowledge of the bad news there is no good news. The good news is that you can be saved from the bad news. The good news is that God has prolonged the Day of Judgment out of a desire to see all men come to repentance.

I want to list three reasons why I unashamedly preach the wrath of God without reserve: 1. I want to excite fear because I want those of you who don't know Christ to see the reality of your need for Him. I want you to have reason to cling to Him. 2. And for the believer I want to excite fear so that you might have a greater understanding of what you have been saved from, and 3. so that you might be motivated to evangelize out of compassion for the lost, knowing that apart from Christ, they will be under this radical, consuming judgment of God.

Conclusion

What is the point of all of this? If you are not a believer, you have reason to be terrifyingly afraid of God. If you have not received Jesus as your sole Savior and Lord, you are destined for this fierce judgment of God.

And many wonder why God has waited so long to come back. We have already discussed this a few months back, but the answer is clearly given in 2 Peter 3:8-9;

Dear friends, don't let this one thing escape you: with the Lord one day is like 1,000 years, and 1,000 years like one day. The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

Do not be mistaken, if you reject His Son, God will judge you thoroughly with his fierce fiery, but, in His patience, He has given you a chance to escape His fiery wrath by repenting of your sins and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, clinging to Him as your only hope. Do not delay, do not wait. Come to Christ. You never know when your time will come. Do you know that you know that you know that when you die you will be spared the wrath of God? If not, please seek me out, or at least someone. He is so mighty to save. Come to Him, find shelter under His wings. He will not cast you away if you come to Him in faith and repentance.