

“The Coming of Elijah” (An Exposition of Malachi 4:5-6)¹

Introduction

This morning we are finishing up our study through the book of Malachi. Here in the closing verses of Malachi’s prophecy we see *another* prophecy of the coming of John the Baptist, even as we saw back in Malachi 3:1 that the Lord foretold that He would send *His messenger* as a *forerunner* in order to **“prepare the way”** before Him. This is much like what was prophesied back in Isaiah 40:3, where we read of ‘**a voice crying out in the wilderness**’ – **“prepare the way of the LORD.”**

In our text in Malachi 4:5-6 (which are the last words of our Old Testament!) the Lord tells His people:

“Behold, *I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 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.*”

Here *Elijah* is said to come again before the day of the Lord. We know from the New Testament that *John the Baptist* was actually the fulfillment of that prophecy. In Matthew 11:13–14 the Lord Jesus Himself said:

“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, *he is Elijah who is to come.*” (Italics added)

What is the significance of this prophecy of John the Baptist’s coming, uttered some 400 years before its fulfillment? That, Lord willing, is what we will examine this morning.

We will be looking at three (3) things: **1.)** The Coming of Elijah and *John the Baptist*, **2.)** The Coming of Elijah and *the Message of Repentance*, and **3.)** The Coming of Elijah and *the Warning of Judgment*.

The Coming of Elijah and John the Baptist

Our first point is *the connection between the coming of Elijah and John the Baptist* – that Malachi’s prophecy of the coming of Elijah was actually *fulfilled* in the coming of John the Baptist.

In John 1:21 the priests and Levites actually asked John if he was Elijah. (And John said *no*.) Some people thought *Jesus Himself* might be Elijah (Mark 8:28). But in Matthew 11:13-14 Jesus settles the matter, saying, **“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, *he is Elijah who is to come.*”**

There are not that many details of the earthly life and ministry of Christ that are found in all 4 Gospels. For instance, only Matthew and Luke contain the stories of Christ’s birth! But *all 4 Gospels* give us extended accounts of John the Baptist. That alone should be enough to convince us of his importance.

John the Baptist was such a noteworthy figure that he is even mentioned by the late 1st century Jewish historian, **Josephus**, in his work, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (book XVIII). Josephus actually even corroborates the biblical account of Herod having John executed.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

The Gospel of Mark actually begins, *not* with the birth of Christ, but with an account of the coming of John the Baptist! In Mark 1:4-8 it is written:

“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. *Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.* And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

John's wardrobe (camel's hair and a leather belt) is *very* significant. It calls to mind the prophet Elijah. 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as wearing **“a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.”** And so in a sense *John was taking on the mantle of Elijah*, even as *Elisha* had done after the Lord took Elijah up to heaven in chariots of fire.

In 2 Kings 2:8–15 we read:

“Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.” And Elisha said, “*Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.*” And he said, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.” And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, “My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” And he saw him no more.

“Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. *And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him* and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

“Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, “*The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.*” And they came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.” (Italics added)

So even in the story of Elijah's mantle being passed on to Elisha God's people were being prepared for the coming return of Elijah to not necessarily be that of Elijah himself, but someone coming *in the spirit of Elijah*.

And that is precisely what Luke points out to us in his Gospel account. Luke 1:17 explains that John came **“in the spirit and power of Elijah,”** much like Elisha had done after Elijah departed. No wonder the ministry of John the Baptist caused such a stir in all Israel!

The most important thing is that the return of Elijah was a key part of the expectation of the coming of the Messiah. As Malachi 4:5 tells us, the coming of Elijah was to take place **“before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”**

The Coming of Elijah and the Message of Repentance

The second thing for us to notice is that the coming of Elijah necessarily *involved his preaching of a message of repentance*. You could probably sum up the basic message of all of the prophets in that one simple word: *repent*.

The prophet's job was to speak the Word of God to His people. His message was basically “Thus saith the Lord.” And that message usually involved *a call to repentance* and *a warning of coming judgment* if that repentance was not forthcoming.

We have seen this very message earlier in the book of Malachi, haven't we? Back in Malachi 3:6–7 we read:

“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. *Return to me, and I will return to you,* says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’” (Italics added)

To repent is to *turn* (or to **“return”**); it is to *turn from sin and turn back to God through faith in Jesus Christ*. Paul speaks of this very thing in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, where he writes:

“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and *how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,* and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” (Italics added)

And what was the ministry and message of this coming Elijah going to be? In Malachi 4:6 we are told:

“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.” (Italics added)

What was John the Baptist's message? In Mark 1:4 we are told that John came **“proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** *He preached a message of repentance.*

And *the Lord Jesus Himself* preached repentance as well, didn't He? Later in that very same chapter (in v.14-15) we are told that Jesus was **“proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent and believe in the gospel.*”**

The *Apostles* preached repentance as well. In Acts 2:37-39 we read:

“Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,* and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

So repentance is *an essential part of the gospel message*, isn't it? But how often do we hear this message in our churches, even in Reformed churches? And yet *Westminster Confession of Faith* 15.1 says, “Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, *the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel,* as well as that of faith in Christ.” (Italics added)

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q/A 87 defines “repentance unto life” this way:

“Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with a full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”

Repentance does *not* earn us forgiveness.² We are saved only by Christ, by faith in Him and His righteousness alone. But turning to Christ necessarily involves turning from sin. He saves us *from* our sin! Thomas Watson writes,

“Repentance is a pure gospel grace. The covenant of works admitted no repentance; there it was, sin and die. Repentance came in by the gospel. Christ has purchased in his blood that repenting sinners shall be saved. The law required personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. It cursed all who could not come up to this: 'Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them' (Gal. 3:10). It does not say, he that obeys not all things, let him repent, but, let him be cursed. Thus repentance is a doctrine that has been brought to light only by the gospel.”³

Without Christ there can be no offer of repentance. Your repentance does not pay the price of your sins; only the Cross does that. Your repentance is not the righteousness that will enable you to stand before a holy God on the day of judgment; only the righteousness of Christ, imputed to you by faith, can do that.

Repentance itself does not save, but neither will you be saved without it. In Luke 13:3 the Lord Jesus says, **“unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”**

Have *you* repented of your sin and believed on Christ for salvation? Turn to Christ and live!

The Coming of Elijah and the Warning of Judgment

The last thing that we see in our text, and the final note left ringing in the ears of God's people for 400 years until the coming of John the Baptist, was *a warning of judgment that was to come* unless they repented. This judgment was related to the coming of Christ, and is spoken of as “the day of the Lord.”

Again, in v.5-6 it says,

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 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.”

The **“day of the LORD”** is described as **“the great and awesome day”** (v.5). The word “awesome” there is probably better rendered as “fearful” or **“dreadful”** (KJV). The New American Standard Bible puts it as **“the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.”** (Italics added)

² “Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* 15.3)

³ *The Doctrine of Repentance*, p.13

Now what judgment was Elijah's coming to be a herald of? Certainly he was the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of the gospel in Him. But his coming, as it was related to the coming of Christ, was also related to a looming judgment as well.

We saw that John's message was one of repentance, but it was also one of warning of coming judgment. In Matthew 3:7–10 it says,

“But when he [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! *Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.* Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’” (ESV)

What judgment was John warning of there? Certainly every warning of judgment is in some sense a warning of the final judgment on that last day when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, but in this case the primary judgment that is in view here is almost certainly that which took place on AD 70 when the Roman armies came and sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

Even in John's day '**the axe was laid at the root of the trees**' – judgment was *right around the corner*. Sadly, we know that the majority of the people of Israel - much like in Malachi's day – refused to repent, and so judgment came.

Conclusion

What does this mean for us today? We too are called to repent and turn back to God through faith in Christ. At Christ's return in glory He will judge the living and the dead on that last day.

And so Malachi's message is just as relevant for us today as it has ever been. In his book, *The Next to Last Word*, Michael Barrett writes,

“Malachi was the last of the postexilic prophets, and his last word was a threatened curse – not a happy way to end. But thankfully, his last word was not the last word; it was the next-to-last word. The last Word was coming. Christ, Gd's supreme and final Word, was on the way (see Hebrews 1).”

And Matthew Henry notes:

“That day of Christ, when he came first, was as that day will be when he comes again – though a great and joyful day to those that embrace him, yet a *great and dreadful day* to those who oppose him.”⁴

I pray that the day of Christ's return is “a great and joyful day” to you because you have embraced Christ by faith for salvation! - Amen

4 Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol.4, p.1505