

THE DAY FORETOLD

CORE PASSAGE: MALACHI 3:1-6; 4:1-6

CONTEXT

The prophet Malachi ministered to the returned people of Israel around the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah (somewhere between 460 and 425 BC). Malachi's main message, made up of six disputation (arguments) from God, was directed at the spiritual apathy of the people. He warned that although God would destroy their enemies, He would also purify His people. Though the Jews weren't guilty of blatant idolatry like their ancestors, their faith had become joyless and mechanical. Through Malachi, the Lord called them to return truly to Him.

KEY CONCEPT

A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil.

As you examine Malachi 3:1-6; 4:1-6:

- Recognize that God's unchanging qualities include His faithfulness to His promises and covenants.
- Consider how the fire of purification for God's people will also bring the destruction of the wicked.



TIMELINE

SESSION STUDY: Malachi Prophesies the Coming Messiah and the Day of the Lord (Malachi 3-4)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-6)

Nehemiah Is Zealous for the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law and the People Confess Their Sin (Nehemiah 8-12)

The Intertestamental Period

Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Malachi 1:1-5
- Day 2:** Malachi 1:6-2:9
- Day 3:** Malachi 2:10-16
- Day 4:** Malachi 2:17-3:12
- Day 5:** Malachi 3:13-4:6
- Day 6:** Psalm 66



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

A DAY IS COMING WHEN GOD WILL PURIFY HIS PEOPLE

(MALACHI 3:1-6).

Underline all the future-tense verbs (actions beginning with “will”) and note who is performing the actions.

1 “See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the LORD you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in—see, he is coming,” says the LORD of Armies. **2** But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire and like launderer’s bleach. **3** He will be like a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. **4** And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD as in days of old and years gone by. **5** “I will come to you in judgment, and I will be ready to witness against sorcerers and adulterers; against those who swear falsely; against those who oppress the hired worker, the widow, and the fatherless; and against those who deny justice to the resident alien. They do not fear me,” says the LORD of Armies. **6** “Because I, the LORD, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed.”

In Malachi 2, God rebuked the Israelites and their priests for their skewed view of justice and their complacent behavior toward worship. Chapter 3 begins with the Lord’s response to them, showing them what true justice will look like. The Lord rebuked the people for bringing inappropriate sacrifices (ch. 1), but they would be able to offer acceptable sacrifices again when the Messenger purified and reoriented their hearts to obedience.

LEADER NOTE: Two messengers are referenced in Malachi 3–4, though not every translation differentiates them with a lowercase and uppercase “M.” The Hebrew root word for messenger (malak) is the same in both, but they are distinct words. The first usage is malaki (“my messenger”), while the second usage is umalak (“the messenger”). Notice that the first messenger is described as the Lord’s (“my”) messenger to prepare the way before Him (“before me”), who is “the LORD” and “the Messenger of the covenant” (v. 1).

In fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, John the Baptist would be the lowercase “messenger” who prepares the way for “the LORD,” the uppercase “Messenger,” Jesus Christ. Using metaphors of a refiner’s fire and strong launderer’s soap, the Messenger will purify the people so that they will “present offerings to the LORD in righteousness” (v. 3), not in apathy and corruption as they were doing. The “day of his coming” (v. 2) refers to the Day of the Lord, Christ’s second coming. When He returns, final purification will come for God’s people.

GOSPEL CONNECTION

Though those who trust in Jesus are in right standing with God the Father because of Christ and are being sanctified daily by the Holy Spirit, when Christ returns, He will purify us completely, finishing our sanctification process as He finally establishes His kingdom on earth.

LEADER NOTE: Based on the Hebrew sentence structure, “the Messenger of the covenant you delight in” most likely means they delight in the Messenger, not the covenant itself (the Hebrew word for “delight” means to take pleasure in, expressing a deep desire for). The Messiah had been foretold many times at this point, and the Israelites delighted in (longed for) His coming. Then why these rebukes from God? The Israelites assumed the Lord’s coming would be good news for them simply because they were the Lord’s chosen people, regardless of their sins or spiritual apathy.

How can you avoid falling into apathy toward God?

God calls His people to heart change, not just passive obedience (Ezek. 20:40; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:5), and by His Spirit, He enables that heart change. Our good intentions aren’t enough; our lives must reflect God’s character.

How often we forget the power and might of the Lord! The Israelites forgot this as well, continuing to sin even after returning from exile, recognizing the Lord’s faithfulness, and renewing their covenant with Him. Sadly, this is the human condition; despite our best intentions, we still sin.

One day, Jesus will return and bring judgment to those who did not believe in His name and did not fear Him. But those who trust in the Lord will be saved. God allowed the Israelites to continue living in the land because of His character (Ex. 34:5-6). It had nothing to do with them and everything to do with His covenant promises. In the same way, God’s new covenant promises assure us of salvation because God never changes. His love, grace, and mercy are always available to His people.

Knowing that judgment is coming, how does that inspire you to share the gospel with those who don’t know Christ?

A DAY IS COMING LIKE FIRE THAT WILL DESTROY THE WICKED (MALACHI 4:1-6).

Circle all the imagery words that symbolize something else.

1 “For look, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them,” says the LORD of Armies, “not leaving them root or branches. 2 But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall. 3 You will trample the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I am preparing,” says the LORD of Armies. 4 “Remember the instruction of Moses my servant, the statutes and ordinances I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible 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. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Malachi concluded his book with a summary of his main points. On the Day of the Lord, the faithful will be purified and saved, while the wicked will be destroyed (4:1-3). The arrogant and wicked are those who don’t trust in or fear the Lord, even among those who claim God’s name (3:16)! The Lord will remain faithful to His covenant promises, both in blessing and cursing (4:4-6).

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

CHRIST’S RETURN: God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in heaven with the Lord.

The “day” referred to here is again the day of Jesus’s second coming, although the Israelites didn’t realize that yet. On this coming day, two things will happen: A burning fire, like the one referenced in the previous passage (3:2-3), will (1) destroy the wicked, burning them to ashes, leaving no root or branches to regrow or produce fruit, and (2) purify and heal those who fear God’s name, those who trust in Jesus as Lord.

LEADER NOTE: The image of “the sun of righteousness” isn’t a play on the word “Son,” implying Christ, but is descriptive imagery that points to Christ. Light is often used in Scripture to portray righteousness, or spiritual goodness, faithfulness, and holiness (Ps. 84:11; Isa. 30:26; Hos. 6:3; John 1:4-5). “Wings” is poetic language for the sun’s rays. The rising sun of righteousness will cause the people of God great joy, “playfully jump[ing] like calves from the stall.” In Revelation 22:16, Jesus reveals Himself as “the bright morning star.” Further, in the restored heavens and earth, we will no longer need the sun because Christ’s glory will be our light (22:5).

The wicked will already be ashes when they’re trampled by God’s people. This is the Lord’s doing, not ours (Mal. 4:3). God is always the Judge, not us. By His grace, then, we will one day trample those ashes if we fear Him.

Why do you think God is justified in destroying all the arrogant and the wicked?

The people were then commanded to remember “the instruction of Moses” (v. 4), God’s law, for that would show whether they feared His name or not. And in the future, God would send “the prophet Elijah” to call them to repentance (v. 5). Ultimately this meant God would send someone, His “messenger” (3:1), in the spirit of Elijah—John the Baptist, who would warn the people and call them to repent and believe in Jesus.

LEADER NOTE: In Luke 1:11-20, the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son who would “turn many . . . to the Lord their God.” This son would go before the Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children . . . to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.” Jesus Himself confirmed that John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy from Malachi (Matt. 11:10-14; 17:10-13).

The final verse in Malachi emphasizes the restoration and revival that will take place as people turn to the Lord because of this messenger. Fathers will care for their children and children will care for their fathers, representing a lack of selfishness among humanity. But a stark warning ends the book for those who continue to live in wickedness: God will come and punish them, and curses will ensue (cf. Deut. 28:15-68).

What would a spiritual revival look like for you today?

Notes

ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, ask: “What day or dates are you looking forward to in the coming weeks or months?” As they respond, inquire about why those dates are significant to them. Then ask: “What days or dates are you not looking forward to?” Allow them to explain why.

TRANSITION: Many of us today have great things we are looking forward to, but we must never forget that a day is coming that will surpass every other day—Christ’s return! Old Testament Scripture often called this the Day of the Lord.

CONTEXT

SAY: Nehemiah and his fellow Jews rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem, and with the wall complete, the people sought to renew their relationship with God. As Ezra read the Law and the Levites explained it, the people repented of their sin and returned to worshiping the Lord. We know, however, that Malachi was a contemporary of Nehemiah and Ezra, and his message to the people showed they had grown lax in their worship of the Lord. So he gave them something to set their minds on: a warning and a hope.

RECAP

ASK: In your personal preparation this week, what stood out to you as significant or impactful?

SAY: During the week, we learned that a day is coming when God will purify His people. We read Malachi’s prophecy of John the Baptist as a forerunner of the coming Messiah, Jesus. Through Christ’s death, we are purified into right standing before God, yet we are also being sanctified until Christ’s return, when that sanctification will be complete. On that final day, God will also destroy the wicked.

TRANSITION: Malachi wrote about a time in the future called the Day of the Lord. As followers of Jesus, that is a day we can look forward to, not because of anything we have done but because of what Christ has done for us.



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Key Concept: A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

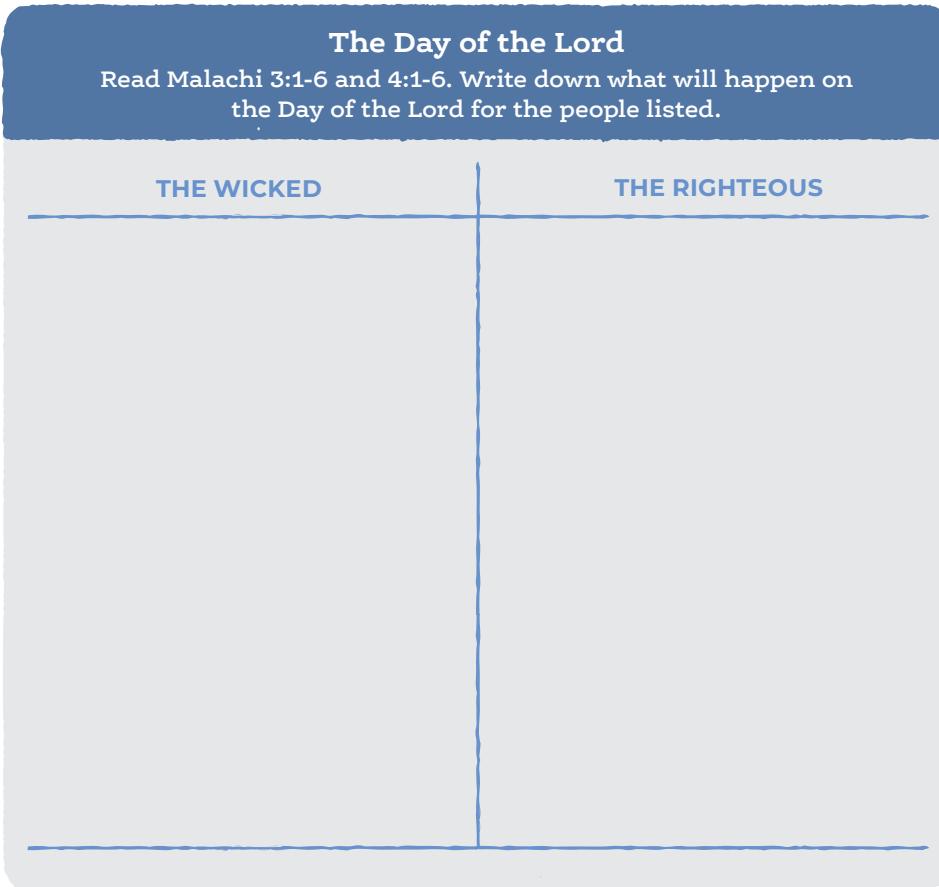
CHART: Draw attention to page 118 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG), which contains a chart titled “The Day of the Lord.” Recreate this chart on a board in the room. Use this to document the findings from the group activity as participants explore the Scripture.

The Day of the Lord

Read Malachi 3:1-6 and 4:1-6. Write down what will happen on the Day of the Lord for the people listed.

THE WICKED

THE RIGHTEOUS



READ: Enlist a volunteer to read Malachi 3:1-6.

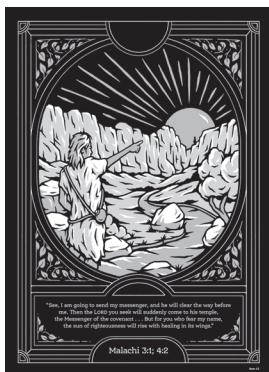
IDENTIFY: Discuss what will happen on the Day of the Lord by identifying the people involved and what will occur to them or for them. Record the group’s findings on the chart; encourage adults to record these in their PSG as well.

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read Malachi 4:1-6.

ANALYZE: Lead the group to repeat the process of identifying the descriptions of what will happen on the Day of the Lord. Record their findings on the chart.

DISCUSS: Why do you think the prophets used so much vivid imagery in their messages? How should we interpret these images in our aim to be faithful to Scripture as God’s Word?

Notes



SUMMARIZE: Many prophets in the Old Testament talked about the Day of the Lord like Malachi did, including Isaiah, Joel, Amos, Zephaniah, and others. They understood it as a time when God's faithful people would be delivered and God's enemies would be destroyed. (**Display Pack Item 13: The Sun of Righteousness.**) When Jesus, the promised Messenger of the covenant and the Messiah, came the first time, His blood and sacrifice made us believers righteous before God, so those who trust in Christ need not fear the Day of the Lord as we are already part of His family. But our hearts should be compassionate toward those who have not yet trusted in Him, pleading with them to repent and believe in Jesus before "the great and terrible day of the LORD comes" (Mal. 4:5).

DEBRIEF

How should believers today respond to Malachi 3:1-6 and 4:1-6?

SUMMARIZE

A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil. It should be a day believers look forward to and wait for in alert anticipation. In the meantime, let us be intentional about living like Christ in holiness and sharing His gospel that all may enjoy the hope we have.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 119). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: These passages in Malachi were divinely inspired by God and, in His sovereignty, preserved over two thousand years. To neglect the prophetic books and the Old Testament leaves our understanding of the New Testament lacking. It can even lead to the belief that the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament (a long-standing heresy called Marcionism). Though we may not live under the old covenant anymore, all of Scripture points to Christ as the hope, joy, and redemption for humankind and the world.

Why is it important that we study the prophets, even the passages that are difficult to understand?



HEART: The Israelites knew the Lord and His commands. Yet even after their covenant renewal, they continued to sin, not by worshiping other gods but by resenting the worship of God. The Lord warned that those who do not fear Him will be destroyed. For the Israelites, and us today, loyalty to self or earthly powers above loyalty to the entirety of God's Word says a lot about how we understand His character and how seriously we take His Word.

Key Concept: A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil.

How has loyalty to human beings clouded your worship of God and obedience to His Word?

Notes

 **HANDS:** We should find hope in the Lord's future return, but we can't rejoice in the coming destruction of the wicked without first looking at our own lives. Scripture has much to say about hypocrisy. Jesus commands us to deal with our own sins before pointing out those of others (Luke 6:42), and He was executed by the self-righteous, not by the socially "impure." It's possible to say we believe in God with our lips but to practically live as if we don't know Him.

What steps can you take this week to identify areas of sin in your life and move toward humble obedience in those areas?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 and compare it to Malachi's prophecies. How is this passage similar to or different than Malachi's message?
- If you are experiencing anxiety regarding the Day of the Lord, talk to your pastor, Bible study leader, or a friend.
- Reflect on what your friends and family members believe will happen to them when they die or when the world ends. Ask God for opportunities to share the gospel so you can offer them hope for the future.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 119 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 66:5-12 with your group, thanking God for His wonders and how He refines us, making us pure. Praise Him as you wait for His return.