

Sermon for Sunday, December 23, 1979, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GETTING READY FOR THE SON RISE"

Malachi 4:1-6

Text: "But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. "Malachi 4:2

Before the day of Malachi, the people of Israel had been in captivity in Babylon. They had seen their nation destroyed, Jerusalem had been ravaged and the temple had been destroyed. For a long time they had languished in captivity. At last, however, some of them were permitted to return to their homeland. Permission was granted to re-establish their nation and to rebuild the temple. Excitement must have swept their ranks and they returned to Palestine with tremendous expectations. Surely, they thought, the nation was on the verge of recovering its vanished glory of those days when David had been King and Israel had been one of the powers of the world. The land would become fruitful, the rain would fall when the crops needed moisture, the population of a depleted people would increase until the land could not hold them all. Greatness would return and all nations would come to serve them.

But somehow those dreams never came true. Things had not worked out as they had thought they would. That happens to us, too, doesn't it? Reality is often quite different from dreams--and so it was for the Jews. In the first place, only a few of the Jews chose to return from Babylon. They had adjusted to life in a foreign land and a new generation had grown up which did not know Jerusalem. They had no desire to go to a place they did not really know, a place devastated by war, barren fields and hard circumstances. So, they stayed where they were.

Secondly, the area of land they were permitted to occupy was hardly larger than the ruined city of Jerusalem. What land they were given was rocky and unproductive. They had hoped to rebuild the temple, but it took all of their effort and energy just to keep body and soul together. As a result, the work on the temple languished. Even the walls of the city were not rebuilt for over 90 years. So, things didn't work out as they hoped. Often the rain did not come when it was needed and there was famine and drought. A spirit of dull depression gripped the people so that cynicism and impiety gained ground. Chapter three of Malachi reports that the people asked, "What is the good of our keeping (God's) charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord hosts?" Even the priests conducted services of worship with indifference and failed to give proper religious instruction to the people. As a consequence there was great moral failure among the people.

Yes, it was a dark, dark time for the people of God. It was a dark time economically, it was a dark time spiritually, it was a dark time morally. Yet, Malachi reminds them of the promises of God. "But for you who fear my name," he writes, "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." Yes, he said, God is going to send a sun rise and these dark times will be chased away. There is going to be a new day dawn that is going to bring healing to the world.

With the promise, the book of Malachi comes to an end and the Old Testament comes to a close. Thus, the Old Testament ends on a promise--a promise that the dark time of the Jews will end when the sun of God's righteousness rises with healing in its wings. So, for 450 years the Jews waited for the day when God would once more act. In centuries past, throughout the history of their people, God's promises had always been good. He had acted to call Abram out of Ur to be the father of a new people; he had acted to call Moses to lead the children of Israel out of bondage; he had acted at the Red Sea to deliver his people, he had acted at Jericho, and time and time again when God's people had needed deliverance, God had acted. Now they needed his help once more--God had promised to help--and they waited, and they waited, and the years, the decades, the centuries rolled by. Then we turn the last page of the Old Testament and we come to this, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham..."

After all of that time, would you think that God's people would be ready? After all those years of waiting and hoping would you think the people would be prepared? Living as they did in a dark world, wouldn't you think people would be ready for the sun rise?

One of the problems Malachi saw in his day was the way the people were conducting their business. And when the sun rise finally came, God's people were still conducting their business in such a way that there was no room for Jesus in the inn. But what about us? Are you ready for Jesus to look at your professional life? If Jesus sat beside you at your desk each day, is there anything in your business life that would need to change? But more than that, are you ready to make the changes that might be necessary? Wasn't that the question that faced Zacchaeus when Jesus came into his life? He was an important man in Jericho. As a chief tax collector, he had grown rich off of the tax burdens laid on others. But when Jesus came into his life some adjustments had to be made. He had to restore what he had taken dishonestly with interest! In addition, he had to share his wealth with those less fortunate. Or look what happened to Matthew--who was also a tax collector--when Jesus came into his life--the Bible tells us he had to give up what he was doing in order to follow Jesus. Are you ready for God's sun rise? Are you ready for Jesus to come into your business life?

Another problem in Malachi's day was the homelife of the Jews. Marriage was held in disrespect, divorce was commonplace, children were deceitful and disobedient, and the men were marrying women from among the heathen. As a result of these failures, the homes of God's people were in disarray. And isn't it a fact that when a nation's homes begin to fail, that nation is on the verge of failure? Well, are you ready for Jesus to come into your home? Are you ready for Jesus to see how parents treat children, how young people act towards their parents, how husband and wife relate to one another? Yes, are we ready for the sun rise--are we ready for God's answer to our need to come into our homes and see how we live when we are sheltered from the eyes of the world? Would you need to start family prayers and family Bible study? Would you have to change the way you speak to one another, the way you treat each other? Are we really ready for Jesus to come into our homes and see us as we are?

Another problem Malachi found in his day was the relationship of God's people as it related to their finances. As we read Malachi we discover that the people of God offered polluted food on God's altar, that they promised to sacrifice their best animals, but instead offered those that were blind or lame or blemished or sick. Malachi said to them, "if you present that sort of gift to your governor, would he be pleased or accept it from you?" And then he added, "Cursed be the cheat who... sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished..." Are you ready for God's son when it comes to your giving to the church? Are you offering tokens to God, tips to the Almighty? I am afraid many of us are. Do you know that 15% of our members give 85% of the money? And do you realize that if each of us tithed, we would have a super-abundance to do the work of God! Are you ready to let God get a view of your check stubs? How many of us are willing to let God discover that we spent more on vacation than on church? Or that our nation spends more on dog food than on world missions, more on cigarettes than on Christian education, more on movies than on evangelism, more on liquor than on Christian service, more in the beauty parlor than on human poverty? Yes, are we ready for God's Son of righteousness to rise on our giving?

Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler? He said he wanted to follow Jesus. He wanted the benefits of spiritual security and the blessings of God. But he wasn't ready for Jesus to come into his financial life. When Jesus told him that his money stood between him and God and the only way to solve the problem was to get rid of his money, the Bible says he went away sorrowful. But that's the way with Jesus--if he can't be first in our lives, he is not willing to be second. Yes, are you ready for Jesus if it means that he goes through your check stubs?

There is one other problem that Malachi found in his day--he discovered that God's people had less commitment to the temple than the pagans did to theirs. I'd like to ask us about our relationship to the church--do we have the same devotion, the same commitment, the same dedication to God's house as the abortionists do to their cause--as the anti-nuclear group does to theirs--as the environmentalists do to theirs--as the hara-christina's do to theirs? That's a probing question, isn't it? How much do we care about God's house--God's worship--are we ready for the sun rise?

It is an interesting thing about Malachi. He knew God had acted in the past and he would act again. And he knew when God acted--when God's sun rose with healing in its wings--some would be ready, but some would not. Some would have open hearts, but others would have hearts that were hard towards God. As we come to Christmas when we celebrate the coming of God's son--his son who brings healing and light to a world in darkness, are you ready for Jesus?

Back during World War II, many of us hung little red and blue flags in our windows to signify the number of boys from that home who were in the armed services. Sometimes a telegram would come saying that a son had lost his life for his country and the white star would be changed to a gold star. Every home with a gold star was a home that gave its best. During those years the story is told of a little boy and his father walking down their street one Christmas Eve. At each home they paused to count the stars in the windows of their neighbors. When they came to a vacant lot, through the gap in the homes, the black velvet of the night spread across the wide expanses. The child stood captivated by the splendor of the night and then he whispered "look, Daddy, there's a gold star in God's window tonight." Yes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son..." and there is indeed a gold star in the window of God. Like Malachi said, the sun of righteousness rose with healing in his wings. He comes to all who love him, who give their hearts to him. Are you ready for Christmas ready for the son rise? If you are not ready now--when will you be ready?