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End Time 2

Malachi 4:1-3

THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL RISE

The vacuum cleaner would need a replacement bag soon. She thought she could still finish this last task before that would be necessary. All she needed to do was run the brush attachment on the end of the hose along the corner between the wall and the ceiling. Suddenly, blinding light came pouring through every window, filling the house thickly like liquid that could be felt. A deafening rumble from above slammed into the earth causing the ground to tremble. It sounded like thunder but it held on as if toning out some vast monophonic signal. Feeling her way along the wall she made her way out of the house where the brightness seemed to clear some. She fully expected to see mushroom clouds on the horizon. Then she looked up and there it was. There He was. The skies had rolled back on either side to make way as He grew ever larger, advancing on the clouds of heaven accompanied by a

vast military of angels, some of them blasting what looked like trumpets.

She did not feel terror. She did not feel misgiving. She did not fall down to the ground. She felt sheer gladness, her heart almost bursting with it. The brilliant glory permeated her with warmth and joy and lightness. It lifted her, yes lifted her up, right up into the skies where she and countless others like her were being brought up to meet their Lord in the air.

Trying to imagine Christ's return on the Last Day can be frightening -and it should be if we willfully reject Jesus as our Savior. But for all who trust in Jesus, the Bible depicts the Last Day only as a joyful, happy event.

In Malachi, chapter four, God paints a picture of Christ's Return to encourage His people. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. After Malachi there were no more prophecies, no more direct revelations from God for 400 years until Jesus was born. The kind of preaching Malachi engaged in was called prophecy. It was a semi-poetic, picturesque way of preaching through which God warned the nations but also gave hope to believers.

This is the main picture from Malachi we will ponder today: The sun of righteousness will rise. It's kind of like that song from the musical "Annie:" The Sun Will Come out Tomorrow! It's a message of hopeful anticipation by which God was sustaining the flagging faith of a devastated people, the Israelites. There was virtually nothing left of their former glory. They were being governed by foreign nations. They began to ask the Lord, "Why does it seem the bad guys always win? Why do the wicked always get away with everything? What good does it do to stay true to the Lord? It seems we only suffer for our faith -surely we seem to be at a disadvantage to all unbelievers."

It's easy for us to feel that way today. Did you ever notice the world is not satisfied to mind its own business and leave us alone? It directs its venom at the Word of God and Christians. The unbelieving world attacks, tempts, derides, persecutes, flaunts, wows, and intimidates Christians. It sets forth its immoral agenda with an in-your-face attitude using politics, entertainment, advertising, media, peer pressure, curriculum. No matter how much you try to shelter your kids and teach them correctly it seems like a losing proposition as they are overwhelmed by the world's

influential forces. Churches that are not faithful to what God's Word teaches draw the largest, wealthiest and friendliest crowds. Surely there seems to be more evil in the world than good. It's not without reason that Christ called satan the prince of this world.

One would expect with all the wonderful promises from God, Christians would stand out as the most blessed of all. But to look at them –they look like the most silly, the most miserable, the most suspect. In addition to the trouble common to all people, believers are burdened by their own sinfulness –something that unbelievers would give no thought to or be troubled by.

But here in Malachi God lifts up our eyes to the sky where He says, "The sun of righteousness will rise!" Listen again to Malachi: *Look! The day is coming, burning like a blast furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble. The day that is coming will set them on fire, says the Lord of Armies, a day that will not leave behind a root or branch for them. You will trample the wicked. They will surely be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I take action, says the Lord of Armies.* The arrogant are the unrepentant in this world. Imagine the sun in the sky burning so hot it blasts the earth with scorching heat - leaving it not

merely barren like a desert but completely burning even roots underneath the ground. That's what will be left of this unbelieving world when Christ returns -all its pride, its ambitions, its so-called values and priorities, its assumptions, its accomplishments, its power. The second epistle of Peter says, *The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*

In addition, Jesus said that satan and his countless ranks of demons, along with every person who did not repent or trust in Jesus, will be cast into hell where the fire never goes out.

This may sound alarming. As believers we certainly do not wish harm on anyone. But the destruction of this world and the judgment of all unbelievers is part of our salvation. It is a major component of what it means for us to be saved. No longer will we have to suffer the misery of living in a world dominating us with cruelty and unbelief. We'll be rescued from this existence.

But how can we know we will escape that destruction? Malachi 4 states: *But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise, and there will be healing in its wings.* The wings of the sun are the rays of light

emanating from it. There is healing in those rays of light. Like when you go outside in the afternoon sun and it warms you and makes you smile. Christ's righteousness is healing for us. You see, on the one hand, God's righteousness, His holiness, is terrifying to the world. You can sense it whenever you hear, "Don't judge, don't judge, don't judge." When it's necessary to point out sin, the world reacts with, "That's intolerant, that's bigoted, that's hateful." Truth be told, you and I don't like to be scrutinized too closely either, do we? Our temper can flare when someone finds fault with us. In that sense, God's righteousness is scorching.

But, if, instead of fighting it, we acknowledge our sinfulness, confess it and turn to Christ's righteousness for shelter, we find healing, not judgment. By His death on the cross, Jesus has atoned for all our guilt and faults. He forgives our sin. But Jesus has also earned a holiness, a rightness, a total lifetime of goodness that He gives to us as a gift and makes ours. He gives us the credit for it.

Now, instead of scorching us, Christ's righteousness heals us. It heals our relationship with God. God is no longer at odds with us. No longer finding fault with us. No longer looking at us with disapproval. Just the

opposite. Through faith in Christ, we are rescued, welcomed and embraced by God and lifted up to become permanent citizens of His everlasting Kingdom of glory.

Even now that sun of righteousness dawns on you every time you receive the Lord's Supper. The same Christ who will come visibly on the Last Day comes to you now from heaven, but under a mask of bread and wine. He comes to shine on you with healing in His wings, with forgiveness and peace and mercy and assurance of salvation. "All is well," He says. "You are rescued! Here I am to bring it to you now so that you have it on the Last Day, as well."

Malachi adds this one extra picture: *You will go out and jump around like calves from the stall.* If you grew up on a farm you know this picture. In the spring when you can finally let the calves out of the barn, they can't believe the newfound freedom they have. They'll run and jump around. That's the kind of relief you will experience on the Last Day when Jesus returns -no longer hampered and shackled and weighed down by wrong desires and addictions and wrecked lives and guilty baggage and sorrows and worries and sicknesses; no longer oppressed by satan's malice . Set free! That's

what you'll be. Set free! That's the promise of Him who says He'll turn your mourning into dancing. Christ gives you a taste of that relief here in the Sacrament.

As you await that sun of righteousness to dawn on the Last Day, dear Christians, do not be filled with dread. Look forward to it with eagerness.