

November 12, 2006
Last Judgment

"Leap for Joy! The Last Judgment Is Near!"

MALACHI 4:1,2

Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. ² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

Her name was Elizabeth. Elizabeth Hastings. She grew up in England. She watched as London burned from the bombs in WW2. Then she came to America, married her husband Archie, and eventually moved to Tucson where the dry climate would be favorable for the rheumatoid arthritis that crippled her frail body. She worshipped almost every Sunday, walking into church with crutches, sitting in the front row. She heard her pastor preach on these words from Malachi just read to you. As she walked out the door of church, she said with a smile on her face and twinkle in her eye, "Pastor, I am going to leap like a calf left out of the stall." She could not jump with her feet, but she was certainly jumping with joy in the blessings she had in her Lord.

A calf that is kept in the stall longs to get out into the pasture and kick up its heels. That's the picture that the prophet Malachi has before us this morning. That's the kind of joy that we will have Jesus returns in glory for the last judgment. Our Savior told us, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." If Jesus would return right now on clouds of glory with the shout of an archangel and the blast of the trumpet, you would experience a rush of adrenaline and a burst of joy unlike any moment ever experienced in your life.

Is anyone sitting here this morning looking forward to the holiday season especially seeing friends and family members you have not seen for a while? You not only have the moment of seeing the person you love, but the added bonus of looking forward to that moment. This morning we are going use these words of Malachi to help us look ahead to the last judgment. Because of Jesus and what he has done for you do not have to fear that moment. You can actually look forward to the time you will leap for joy when he returns.

See the fire that burns fiercely

For some people the thought of judgment day fills them with fear because of it will be a day of fire. Malachi tells us there will be fire on that day, but it is not a day to fear. It is a day to anticipate because we have Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness who prepared us to welcome that day. "Surely the day is coming; It will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evil doer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire."

I did some research on the Hebrew word for "furnace." The kind of furnace referred to her was the small furnace or clay pot used by ancients for making their flatbreads or tortillas. Straw and sticks were placed into the oven, the fire burned quickly, and the clay pot was

ready to bake the bread cakes that were placed on outside edges. Today we might use a pan such as this to make crepes or tortillas. The prophet Malachi says that people who are arrogant or proud, who don't want the Lord in their lives, will burn in fire similar to way sticks and stubble are consumed by the flames.

It is one thing to look into a fire pot and watch the fire heat up the pot or oven to bake the flour into bread cakes. It is quite another thing to look into this fire or any other fire and think about the fire that will come to this world when Jesus returns and the fire in hell that will be there for the arrogant and proud who want nothing to do with God's plan to rescue them. Do we really want to go there this morning? Do we want to look into this clay oven and see the flames consume the stick and stubble and think about people perishing forever? Everything inside of me says, "I don't want to think about that. I would rather think of something happy, not something sad, or even something that frightens me."

The Holy Bible that I hold in my hand contains numerous references to fire on the last day. When Jesus returns the present world in which we live will be destroyed by fire. 2 Peter 3 says, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything will be laid bare." One of the great joys waiting for us is the destruction of this present world that will take place in the twinkling of an eye when Jesus returns. That will be great joy for us, because immediately the Lord will provide us with a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness. If you love nature and appreciate beauty in this world, the best is yet to come, and you will have an eternity to enjoy all the things the Lord has prepared for you, places more beautiful than Yosemite, flowers, trees, waterfalls, a place where people live in perfect harmony with each other.

There is another part about fire that is much more difficult for us to think about this morning. I am speaking about the place of eternal torment waiting for those who reject the Lord. That is what Malachi is referring to here when he draws our attention to the people as stubble and sticks burning in a clay oven. We read in the Bible that this burning will go on forever and ever. Our Lord Jesus spoke about this when spoke of the angels casting people into everlasting punishment, "They will throw the them into a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

It was Jesus who told the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus with these words about the rich man, "In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away." Then he called out with these chilling words, "Father Abraham have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in this fire."

Why did the prophet Malachi offer this frightening picture of fire for the proud and arrogant? Read the entire book of Malachi and realize that God's people who had returned from captivity in Babylon were cutting corners with God, doing their own thing, and proudly resisting every call to repentance. The priests offered defiled food on the altar and blind and diseased animals for sacrifice. The people were robbing the Lord by not giving their offerings. They were cheating each other, committing adultery, and not caring for the widows and offerings. They were not giving their best to the Lord and they proudly defended their actions and justified what they were doing wrong.

It still happens today. People who are Christians start slipping in their faith, opening up to sin, cheating the Lord with money, not helping the needy, putting themselves first, and gradually they begin to feel good about their choices in life. They even justify what they do wrong. James 1 says, "But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full-grown give birth to death." The only way sin becomes full-grown is when people who walk with the Lord start providing a warm culture where sin grows. They nourish that culture and actually defend their right to live that way. That is what was happening at the time Malachi wrote these words, and that is an ever-present danger in all our lives.

The other day I was thinking about something that once happened to us while we were hiking in Lassen National Park that illustrates the danger of opening ourselves up to sin. It was the summer of 1998, the month of August, and the park still had large snowfields because of all the snow from the El Nino of 97 and 98. We wanted to hike to the top of Broke Off Mountain. At one point the trail crossed a steep snowfield with sharp rocks at the bottom. The option was to cross the snowfield or climb up higher and go over the top of it. I had boots with grips on them and started crossing, but even with the grips it was not safe. Then out of the corner of my high I saw my daughter start to follow me. She was only wearing running shoes. If she started slipping she would not be able to stop sliding and would certainly perish on the rocks below. It was the fear of the rocks below that led us to take a different path. It is the fear of eternal death and punishment that leads us to say no to sin and come back to the Lord before the end comes.

See the Sun of Righteousness rise with healing

The Lord is coming to judge. Now is the time to believe and trust in the plan he has to rescue you. The prophet says, "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall." Dear Christians you know the name of the Lord. You revere and respect the name of the Lord. You have come to know him as the true God who does not want to have people perish eternally. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." It does not say, "God so loved a handful of people" or "God so loved a certain class of people." It says God so loved the world. That's the God we have come to know and love and cherish. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, I gave my life for the sheep." It was Jesus who said, "I have other sheep who are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

The prophet Malachi offers us this wonderful name for Jesus our Messiah and Savior: "The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." Just as the sun was carefully designed and positioned by God to provide us with warmth and light and energy, so our God has provided through Jesus his Son the righteousness we need to be judged as holy and perfect before him on the day when the world comes to an end. The righteousness I try to produce will never measure up. It will always be insufficient. The righteousness outside of me found in Christ, the Sun of Righteousness" is the perfection I need and you need to be judged worthy on the last day. As Jesus said in John 5 our gospel for today: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Notice it does not say "will have" or "will cross over." It is past tense. That means you already know the verdict

that will be yours when you stand before the judge. You will hear these words, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you before the creation of the world."

Maybe some days you feel like a calf that has been spending the whole winter locked up in the stall. But now the sun is shining. The grass is growing. Spring is in the air. Then it happens. Someone opens the door, lets you out of the stall and the smelly old barn that has been your home all winter. You sniff the ground. You taste the fresh grass. You kick up your heels and run. You run and you run. That's the day we are all waiting for you. That's judgment day. That's when Jesus returns. Even so come Lord Jesus, come quickly.