

SERMON 5  
JOHN 1:19-28

*THE PROMISE OF MALACHI*

*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple.*

Malachi 3:1

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.*

Malachi 4:5

God created Adam around 4000 years before Christ. And God communed with Adam in the garden. Even after Adam sinned, God graciously came calling on Adam and he spoke with him. God could have turned his back on him and never spoken to him again. But, he spoke.

And it seems that at various times God spoke directly to men in the Old Testament. Certainly, God spoke to Abraham around 2000 BC when he told Abraham to leave his country and go to a land that He would show him.

But there came a time when God desired to make a much fuller revelation of himself and of his redemptive plan for man. And he spoke to Moses and He gave Moses His Law for the nation of Israel. This Law was an expression of the awesome holiness of God and it was the highest moral code ever known to man. It was the equivalent of moral perfection. It defined what God would be like if He were a man.

And of course, fallen man found the Law to be utterly beyond doing. The nature of man was contrary to the Law. Man's heart was evil and the Law was holy. And in many ways, the Old Testament is the story of man's utter helplessness under the Law of God.

The Old Testament is sometimes described as the Law and the Prophets. Of course, Moses was the prophet who spoke the Law to Israel. God dictated the Law to Moses and Moses dictated the Law to the people. The people said they would do the Law, but they continued to break it even while Moses was speaking it. They had no ability whatsoever to keep such a holy Law. Such is the nature of man.

And then God sent other prophets to the nation of Israel throughout the Old Testament. And these prophets continually exhorted Israel to return to God and to keep the Law. But Israel had a bad habit. Rather than repent, they would kill the prophets. And the history of Israel under the Law of God is a history of rebellion and idol worship. It is a history which proves that man in his depravity will not submit to God and he despises the Law of God.

## The Promise of Malachi

When we come to the end of the Old Testament, we find the book of Malachi. Malachi was one of the very last prophets sent to Israel. Malachi was a contemporary of Ezra. However, Malachi was given the privilege of penning the last book of the Old Scriptures. And he wrote this canonical book around 425 years before Christ.

He wrote this book to those Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon. They had rebuilt the temple and they had restored the sacrifices. But very quickly their hearts had fallen away from God. They had very little respect toward God. When they brought their sacrifices to the temple, they picked out the worst of the flock. They picked out the lambs which were lame and sick and they brought those to offer to God. They were making a mockery of God.

In short, the Old Testament ended with a dark pall hanging over the nation of Israel. There was spiritual darkness in the land. There was wickedness in high places and ignorance in low places and the light of Israel had all but gone out.

And it is out of this darkness that God, through the prophet Malachi uttered this promise.

*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple.*

Malachi 3:1

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.*

Malachi 4:5

And the Old Testament closed with that great promise. God promised a messenger who would be sent to prepare the way for the Lord who would suddenly come to his temple. And furthermore, it appeared that this messenger would be Elijah.

And then the book of Malachi ends. And there are no more prophets in Israel. God stopped speaking. So, the last promise of the Old Testament was that God would send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. That was the last promise. And that promise was in the forefront of the mind of Israel.

I want you to notice the last word of the Old Testament. It is the word "curse." This is the state of things under the Law. This is the inevitable outcome for those who are under the Law. The entire Old Testament was completed with Malachi. And God says, unless I send Elijah the prophet to turn the hearts of the people, then I must smite the earth with a curse.

After the entire Old Testament period, after we have read from Genesis to Malachi, the Old Testament canon ends with an inevitable curse hanging over the earth. And unless God does something, the earth will be smitten with this curse. There are dark, dark clouds directly overhead and the lightning and thundering of God's judgment can be heard in the distance and it seems inevitable that the final curse of God will fall on mankind at any moment. But God says through Malachi,

*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple.*

Malachi 3:1

### The Preaching of John the Baptist

Now a hundred years passed and there were no more prophets speaking in Israel. And then two hundred years passed and God was still not speaking. And they wondered when Elijah would appear and when the Messiah would suddenly come to the temple. Three hundred years passed and still there was no Elijah and no Messiah. Four hundred years passed. And then, a voice was heard crying in the wilderness. And he was saying,

*Make straight the way of the Lord.*

John 1:23

And we learn from the synoptic gospels that there were two themes to John's message - repentance and baptism. He was preaching that it was not enough to perform rituals, but it was mandatory to repent and to have a change of heart. And when there was repentance, then John baptized them.

Now both of these concepts, repentance and baptism, were rather unique in Israel. Israel had grown so cold and so rigid in their religion that there was hardly anything heartfelt at all. They were worshipping their religion. They worshipped the rules and the regulations. They reveled in the doing of the law, (as best they could with depraved hearts) but their hearts were far from God.

Jesus spoke to the Pharisees on one occasion about this very thing.

*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.*

Matthew 23:23

*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.*

Matthew 23:27

Here is the problem. They had become very, very religious and yet their hearts were stony and full of hypocrisy and iniquity. This is a recipe for disaster because God is not interested in ritual. God is not interested in the outward show of religion. But he is interested in the condition of your heart.

And so, when John preached repentance for remission of sins, this flew in the face of the Judaism of the day. Their religion had become outward and cold. They simply went through the motions day after day. They supposed that when they brought their animal sacrifices that God was satisfied. They supposed that the work of the priests somehow satisfied God. They supposed that they were safe and secure because of their blood descent from Abraham. They felt they were sheltered from the wrath of God because their males were circumcised. And the condition of their heart never entered into their minds.

But then, John the Baptist appeared. And he began to scold people for their sins. He reminded them that they were sinners. And John began to address the condition of the heart.

Go back to Malachi and let's review the last promise of the Old Testament.

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers . . .*

Malachi 4:5, 6

Many have interpreted this to mean that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah and he would bring in a period of domestic tranquility. Fathers would love their children and children would love and obey their fathers. There would be peace and harmony in the homes.

As nice as that might be, that isn't the meaning of this phrase in this context. When it says, "he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers," he is talking about a return to the heartfelt religion of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is talking about a return to that old-time religion when the fathers bowed the knee and the heart to God. The children of Israel had wandered far away from the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their hearts were stony and cold and their religion was outward and ritualistic. And Malachi is saying that Elijah shall come and shall turn stony hearts back to that old religion of their fathers.

*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.*

Malachi 3:1

And then skip to verse four.



*Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years.*

Malachi 3:4

So, the first thing that characterized John's ministry was the preaching of repentance. The second thing that was unique about his ministry was baptism.

Now baptism was not completely foreign in Israel at this time. Whenever a Gentile wanted to become a Jew, some of the Jewish groups required him to be baptized. But according to D.A. Carson in his book, *The Gospel According to John*, these Gentile proselytes always baptized themselves. It was a ritual that they performed on themselves to symbolize their affiliation with Judaism.

Of course, Judaism itself had many washings and purifications that involved water. And these were all done according to the Law of God. But none of these purification ceremonies were anything like John's baptism. John's baptism was something completely new and different. It was different because John was the only one who administered the baptism. He seemed to claim sole authority in this rite of baptism. Only John and his disciples would baptize.

But it was also different in that John was baptizing Jews. This was the difference. He was not baptizing Gentiles into Judaism. Rather he was baptizing Jews as a sign of repentance. And this was formerly unheard of.

And so, there was quite a stir in Israel about this man John. He was having a spiritual effect upon the people such that they were moved in their hearts. And he was performing the rite of baptism on the people, which rite was formerly unknown in Judaism.

The Jews sent a delegation to ask him questions.

#### I. The First Question

*And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?*

Now John's ministry was so different and so effective that people around the countryside began to whisper, "Is this the Messiah?"

*And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not;*

Luke 3:15

So, the Jewish leaders from the Sanhedrin sent out their own delegation to investigate John's preaching and his baptism and to find out who he claimed to be. And so, they asked him, "*Who art thou?*"

A. He was not the Christ.

Now, it appears that they first asked him if he was the promised Messiah, because his first answer was that he was not the Christ. (1:20) This having been cleared up, they then asked him if he was Elijah. (1:21)

B. He was not Elijah

Notice that our version uses the name Elias. This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Elijah. So, they asked John if he was Elijah. I am sure they were thinking back to Malachi 4:5 where Malachi said,

*I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.*

Malachi 4:5

Now, interestingly, John said, *"I am not."*

I want you to note what Jesus said about John the Baptist.

*For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.*

Matthew 11:10

This is almost a direct quote from Malachi 3:1. So Jesus taught that John the Baptist was the messenger that would be sent ahead of the Lord to prepare the way. But look what else Jesus said about John the Baptist.

*And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.*

Matthew 17:10-13

So now, Jesus tells his disciples that Elias has come already. And he was speaking of John the Baptist.

And then we have the testimony of the angel to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist.

*But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the*

*sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*

Luke 1:13-17

So this delegation came out and they asked John if he was Elias. And John said, "I am not." By this, John certainly meant that he was not Elijah reincarnated. He was not Elijah come to earth again. John the Baptist and Elijah were two distinct human beings. And so, John correctly answered, "I am not Elijah."

But without question, he was the messenger of Malachi chapter four. He was the one who was referred to as Elias in Malachi. He was the forerunner of Christ. He was the one who was sent to prepare the way.

Sometimes it is just not given for the wicked to know the truth. The truth of God is often hidden from the eyes of the wicked. This is the reason that Jesus often spoke in parables – to hide the truth from the wicked. And perhaps this is why John said, "I am not Elias." He didn't elaborate because he knew their hearts. He answered truthfully. But he did not answer thoroughly.

The angel said that John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. That is, he would be in the line of prophets that made him one with Elijah. John's message was Elijah's message. And therefore, when John came, the spirit of Elijah also came. When Malachi prophesied, no one knew the name of John the Baptist. But they knew well the name of Elijah. And so God prophesied through Malachi that Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the Lord. This clearly spoke of John the Baptist who came in the spirit and power of Elijah.

There is another reference to Elijah in the New Testament. One day Jesus took Peter, James and John into a high mountain. And he was transfigured and they saw him in his glory. And they also saw two other figures – Moses and Elijah. Why did Moses and Elijah appear on this occasion? It is because Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Moses represents the Law. Elijah represents the prophets. And it is they who testify of Him. And so, at the transfiguration, the Law and Prophets witnessed the glory of Christ.

C. He was not that prophet.

When they heard that he was not the Christ and he was not Elijah they asked if he was "that prophet."

Most likely, they were referring to the promise that was made by Moses in Deuteronomy.

*The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.*

Peter quotes Moses in Acts 3:22, 26 and says “that prophet” was Jesus.

So, John the Baptist denied that he was Christ. He denied that he was Elijah and he denied that he was “that Prophet.”

## II. The Second Question

When John denied being Christ, Elijah or “that prophet,” then the Jews asked him by what authority he was baptizing.

*And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?*

John 1:25

This indicates that John’s practice of baptizing was something new. And the Jews wanted to know why he was performing this religious rite without approval of the Sanhedrin.

A. John answered the Jewish delegation indirectly.

Again, John was vague with this Jewish delegation.

*John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not. He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.*

You will notice that he admitted that he baptized with water, but he changed the focus immediately to Christ. He was saying, this is the guy that you should focus on. He is much more important than me.

This always was John’s perspective. “I am nothing, but He is everything.”

B. John answered the question the next day directly.

*And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.*

John 1:33

You will notice here that that John was sent by the Father. And furthermore, he was instructed to baptize. So, it was God himself who gave John instructions to baptize with water.

### The Nature of John's Baptism