

Studies in Malachi #6: Preparing the Way of the LORD

Mal. 3:1 – “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.”

Mal. 4:5-6 – “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, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

The Hebrew word for “prepare” is used of the clearing away of obstacles, making a way clear. Isaiah used it much earlier, in predicting the ministry of John the Baptist. Isa. 40:3 – “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Malachi 3:1 is also speaking of John the Baptist.

In fact, when the birth of John was predicted by the angel, it was to be a fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi. Lk. 1:17 – “And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 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.”

These prophecies led many in the days of John to ask whether he really was Elijah. Jn. 1:21 – “And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not....”

Jesus himself said that John was this “messenger”, and even connected him with Elijah. Mt. 11:10-14 – “For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. ... And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.” Also in Mt. 17:11-13 – “... 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.”

So this seems confusing – the angel said John would go “*in the spirit and power*” of Elijah, and Jesus said “*if ye will receive it, this is Elias*”, and that Elias had come already (as John the Baptist), and yet John clearly said he was not Elijah (Jn. 1:21), and Jesus said Elijah really would still come and restore all things, even after John was already dead. How are these things to be understood?

John was not really Elijah, but was like him, in that he ministered “in the spirit and power of Elijah”. Jesus said he could have fulfilled the role of Elijah, if they would have received it (but they didn’t). He did however, fulfill his preparatory mission for Jesus’ ministry. Elijah on the other hand, is yet to come in person (the real Elijah, the one who went directly to heaven and never died), and will fulfill the preparatory work before Jesus’ second coming, which will be a more complete fulfillment of Mal. 4:5-6. Many people believe that Elijah may be one of the two witnesses spoken of in Rev. 11.

God never intended Jesus to pop into history at just any convenient time. It was all planned and happened at just the right time. The Jewish people were under Roman occupation and were therefore in high hopes of their Messianic deliverer, the Romans had built roads throughout the empire and gave relative protection against violence against travellers, the seas were open to travel, and the Greek language was dominant across most cultures, allowing the spread of the gospel in those early centuries. In this context, he sent the man John to be the messenger to prepare the way spiritually for the Messiah. He came preaching a baptism of repentance, and declaring that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and the Messiah soon to come. So when Jesus began his public ministry, the people were primed and ready to hear it. At the same time, the religious leaders were also primed not to receive it, because they were comfortable in their subservience to the Romans, and didn’t want anything to rock the boat.

Similarly, the world is currently being prepared for Christ’s return, and Elijah will somehow be a part of that.

Preparation for God’s Work

As God sent John to prepare the way for Christ’s ministry and the coming of the kingdom of God, and as he will send Elijah to prepare for Christ’s return, so he does a preparing work for lesser events in history. For example, the Zionist movement in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, and the Balfour Declaration at the end of World War 1 giving Britain

control of the land of “Palestine” instead of the previous Ottoman empire, laid the way for the eventual establishment of the modern state of Israel, in fulfillment of OT prophecies, and for the still future spiritual restoration of the Jews at the return of Christ.

None of the events of history just “happen” – they are the result of God’s eternal plan and providential hand. He raises up kings and kingdoms, uses them for his own purpose, and then brings them down, but never in a haphazard or capricious manner. Of course as men we only see a small bit of what is happening. We can observe and analyze history and current events, but only God sees the future and what is really happening in the direction and flow of history. A good example is the apparent theft of the 2020 presidential election. What we took as a disastrous and potentially nation-ending calamity, and the left took as a victory, God has used to bring about even greater and better changes than would have been possible if Trump had been recognized as the real winner. And even in what we now look at as positive and nation-restoring events, we do not really have a “God’s-eye” view of what is happening. We must rest in faith that God is exercising providential control in the earth, and that the ultimate end toward which things are moving is the return of Christ and his Millennial rule on this earth, followed by a new heavens and a new earth for our eternal dwelling with God.

Even in our individual lives we see that preparation is necessary, for career, marriage, ministry, parenthood, and our spiritual lives. The events of our lives, the hearing of the gospel, and the moving of the Spirit in our hearts prepared us and brought us to the point where we could and would receive Christ and eternal life. Sometimes we can look backwards and see what was happening, though we didn’t understand it at the time, but even now we can’t see the many things that were, and are, happening to bring us to salvation or other major events of life. He is the invisible God, not just in the sense of literally seeing his Person, but in our inability to see and understand very much of what he is doing in the earth.

There are two sides to preparing our hearts - our side, and God’s.

1. We are expected to prepare our hearts to seek and obey God.

2 Chr. 12:14 – Rehoboam did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord.

2 Chr. 19:3 – Jehoshaphat was commended because he had prepared his heart to seek God.

2 Chr. 20:31-33 – But even Jehoshaphat’s good rule was not totally effectual “for as yet the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers.”

2 Chr. 27:6 – Jotham became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God.

Ezra 7:10 – “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

So we need to direct our attention, desires, thinking and hearts toward God. As we do this we will be preparing for what God wants to do in and through us.

2. But we must recognize that it is really God who is preparing us, and bringing us to a willingness to seek him.

Ps. 10:17 – “LORD, thou hast heard the desire of the humble: thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear:”

Prov. 16:1 – “The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, *is* from the LORD.”

Phl. 2:13 – “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure.”

Some things we can knowingly prepare for, like occupational training, but God has many things in store for us that we can not foresee. Preparation for these is more a matter of seeking and obeying God in the present, setting our hearts and affections on him, and expecting that he will guide us over time to the fulfillment of his plan. It is not really a matter of preparing to do things, but of preparing our hearts to seek God, and we will eventually do whatever he has planned for us. Dan. 11:32 – “... but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.”

In summary, if we are faithful to prepare our hearts before God, we will find that in truth it has been God motivating and directing us. We do not know what lies ahead but it is certain that a real spiritual revival will not come if we do not care enough to prepare our hearts to be ready for it. God will move, but he does it through a ready and prepared people.

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