

OpenTheo

October 8th: Malachi 4 & Matthew 26:1-30

October 7, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Elijah coming before the Day of the Lord. The Last Supper.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Malachi chapter 4. For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

You shall go out, leaping like calves from the stall, and you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts. Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

The book of Malachi, and with it the book of the Twelve, ends with a prophecy announcing the coming day of the Lord. The day of the Lord has been a consistent theme of the entire collection. Although the immediate referent of the day varies, from the book of the Twelve a broader picture of what the day of the Lord entails has

emerged.

It seems fitting that it should conclude with a chapter within which the day of the Lord is front and centre. Reading such treatments of the day of the Lord, we should not presume that they refer directly to the final judgement. The reference is rather to a judgement awaited in history at the end of the age.

We live after the end of the age to which Malachi and many other of the prophets looked forward. Nevertheless, as we've seen in the book of the Twelve more generally, although there are several different immediate referents and view when the prophets speak of the coming of the day of the Lord, together they bear a more general witness to what this day of the Lord entails, one that ultimately will receive its fullest expression in the final judgement. The prophecy of chapter 4 continues the sixth dispute of the book.

The people had questioned the value of serving the Lord, as evil doers were prospering and God's justice was nowhere to be seen. The people's doubting of God was also expressed in an earlier dispute in chapter 2 verse 17. You have wearied the Lord with your words, but you say, how have we wearied him? By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them, or by asking, where is the God of justice? The Lord had responded to such unbelief with his promise of the coming of the messenger of the covenant at the beginning of the preceding chapter.

When the messenger of the covenant came, he would expose the difference between the righteous and the wicked, as we see in the final verse of chapter 3, which is also part of the sixth dispute. Then, once more, you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. However, the Lord had warned the people that, despite the fact that they thought that such justice was what they desired, they were presumptuous in thinking that they would be prepared for it when it actually came.

When the Lord came to his temple to purge it, the priesthood, and his people of wickedness, the prophet doubted that any would stand in the consuming holiness of his presence. The description of the coming day of the Lord in verse 1 underlines the devastation that it would bring upon the arrogant and the evil doers. The image of the consuming of the wicked like stubble or chaff is one that we encounter elsewhere in the prophets and the scriptures more generally.

The husks of the grain are blown away, and the bottoms of the stalks of the grain that remain in the ground, the stubble, is burnt up. John the Baptist uses a very similar image in speaking of the Christ's coming ministry in Matthew chapter 3 verse 12. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

The removal of the wicked is also described in terms of the removal of a tree, leaving

behind neither root nor branch. As in the case of removing the chaff and stubble that remains after the harvest, the image of chopping down or uprooting a tree is familiar from the prophets. At the end of the preceding chapter we heard of some people who responded well to the message of the Lord through Malachi.

The Lord had promised them in verse 17 that on the day of his coming they would be set apart as his own. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. The expectation of the righteous is here immediately contrasted with that of the wicked.

Those who fear the name of the Lord, manifesting an appropriate posture of honour, reverence and godly dread before his holiness, would know healing, joy and liberty. The advent of the Lord's righteousness is compared to the rising of the sun, an image that is frequently employed within the New Testament, where Christ is compared to the dawn and the light that has broken through the darkness, heralding a new day. The wings of the sun of righteousness might be drawing upon representations of the sun within ancient Near Eastern imagery.

We encounter similar imagery in the expression, the wings of the dawn, in Psalm 139 verse 9. In scripture the wings of the Lord, typically connected with the wings of a garment or a tent dwelling, are places of protection and security, a place where people come for refuge. We see this for instance in Psalm 36 verse 7. How precious is your steadfast love, O God, that children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. Here it is with healing that the wings of the sun of righteousness are especially connected.

Things broken, awry, diseased and wounded will be restored and made whole as the Lord's light dawns. As the sun of the Lord's righteousness rises upon them, the righteous will be like calves, loosed from the confinement of the stall, leaping with joy as they enjoy their liberty. The darkness has ended and the new day has dawned.

Part of the joy of the righteous will be in treading down the wicked. Perhaps at this point we might hear some resonance with the promise of the crushing of the head of the serpent. The wicked will be reduced to dust and ashes beneath the feet of the righteous, experiencing the full measure of the curse of death.

The two-sided character of the day of the Lord is clearly on display here. The day of the Lord is devastating for the wicked, but for the righteous it is a day of joy, liberty, life and healing. At the heart of the entire Old Covenant was the law delivered through Moses, the mediator of the covenant at Sinai, he is spoken of as Horeb, with its various commands and practices.

Several different commandments of the law have already been referenced in the Book of Malachi, including laws concerning sacrifice, tithing and the priesthood. Moses the man

stood for the covenant order that was established and communicated through him, which occurred in the Exodus and in the Lord's communication to his people at Sinai. He was the founding prophet and as the people went forward it would be all the more important to regroup themselves in that covenant reality and revelation.

Throughout the Pentateuch, one of the most prominent and pressing concerns is that the events of the Exodus are not consigned to past history, but that they remain a powerful, living and formative reality in the present, perpetuated in such things as the tabernacle and temple and their service, in meditation upon and living out of the law and in retelling of the story of their deliverance. This will be even more important when God's justice is not easy to see and people are tempted to despair or simply to abandon their faith. It will be those who remember and observe the law of Moses who will keep their bearings in spiritually disorienting times and who will endure through trial.

Perhaps of all the figures in the Old Testament, the one who was most like Moses was Elijah. Elijah was another prophet who directly opposed a king, who performed most of his ministry in the wilderness, through whom the Lord brought plagues and judgments, who met with the Lord at Mount Horeb and who passed the baton on to his successor on the banks of the Jordan. Elijah was, like Moses, a man of zeal.

He had ascended into heaven in 2 Kings 2, having prepared the way for a greater work and judgment of the Lord that would come after him. He presented people with the great ultimatum of the Lord at Mount Carmel. He paved the way for the downfall of the Amorite dynasty and the transformation of the Kingdom of Israel.

In the New Testament, this figure of the prophesied Elijah to come is connected with the figure of John the Baptist. In Matthew 11, verses 13 and 14, For all the prophets in the law prophesied and told John, And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. In Matthew 17, verses 10-13, And the disciples asked him, Then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He answered, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.

But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

In Luke 1, verses 16-17, the angels declaration to Zechariah that John will be born to him in Elizabeth and the ministry that John will perform, also identifies him as the Elijah to come. It clearly alludes back to Malachi 4, And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, And he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared. Zechariah's prophecy concerning his son John the Baptist also refers back to this passage in Malachi, also connecting it with the promise of the messenger in chapter 3, verse 1. Luke chapter 1, verses 76-79, And you,

child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, To give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.

A few centuries after he delivered his prophecies, in the appearance of an angel to a priest in the holy place in the temple in Jerusalem, Malachi's prophecy of the coming day of the Lord and the Elijah-like messenger that would go before the face of the Lord was starting to come to pass. A question to consider, can you think of other ways in which the character of John the Baptist is like the figure of Elijah? Matthew chapter 26, verses 1-30, When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

But they said, Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people. Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.

Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, What will you give me if I deliver him over to you? And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Now on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover? He said, Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, The teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me. And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, Is it I, Lord? He answered, He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me.

The Son of Man goes as it is written of him. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.

Judas, who would betray him, answered, Is it I, Rabbi? He said to him, You have said so. Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat, this is my body. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you, I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. At the beginning of Matthew chapter 26, we read that Jesus finished all of these sayings.

There is a sense of completeness and conclusion. These aren't just a random assortment of statements and stories, but a clearly defined and rounded body of teaching. We have similar expressions in chapter 7 verse 28, chapter 11 verse 1, chapter 13 verse 53, and chapter 19 verse 1. And this is the last of the great teaching discourses that make up the bulk of Matthew's gospel.

I've argued that Jesus' teaching in Matthew is a complete body of teaching. It's not just a drab bag of different sayings that are ordered in random order. Rather, it follows a pattern all the way through and it concludes with a condemnation in chapter 23, followed by the casting of a sentence in chapters 24 and 25.

Jesus once again foretells his death. The Passover is coming after two days, the third day after that, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Now he connects his death with the event of the Passover, inviting association with the Passover lamb, with the death of the firstborn, with the passing through the Red Sea, and all these other elements.

Jesus has spoken about his forthcoming death before, but hasn't connected it with the Passover in the way that he does here. The chief priests, after this, plan the plot to arrest and kill Jesus, and do so in the palace of the high priest himself. This is a plot at the very heart of the authority structure of that day.

Jesus is a genuine threat to their power and their influence. They don't want to capture and kill Jesus during the feast, but they end up doing just that later on. After this, Jesus is in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, and a woman anoints his head with perfumed oil.

This is an extravagant and a costly action, and Jesus declares that it's preparing him for his burial. It's an action that values Jesus himself, Jesus in his person, in his presence, in his body. And the disciples are indignant over the cost of the ointment, but they fail to

appreciate the value of the one to whom it is given, the value of that one more than deserving the extravagant gift that is given to him.

Jesus answers by saying that the poor will always be with them, but that he will not be. They're thinking purely in terms of cost and money and the value, but they don't see the value of the one they have with them. Now, perhaps we should think of this in relationship to the previous chapter.

Might there be a connection between Jesus' statement about his body and the fact that the poor will always be with us? Jesus in the previous chapter has spoken about the way that acts of devotion and care and concern for the poor, for the outcast, for the needy, for the homeless, for people in prison, etc. can be expressions of love for him. And the hospitality and love shown to such persons are ways of showing our devotion to him.

And this, I think, is part of what we're supposed to see. True devotion to Jesus' body will be seen in our treatment of the poor. Jesus goes to the chief priests after this and betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

There are a number of things in the Old Testament that seem to lie behind this. Exodus 21-32, with the law of the goring ox, for instance. Israel is like a goring ox, and Christ is the one who's valued like the servant who's gored by that ox.

In Psalm 22-12, Jesus is described, or the Messiah, or the one who's persecuted is described as being surrounded by bulls of Bash and wild bulls. Jesus is also the rejected shepherd of Zechariah. Zechariah 11-12-13, valued at only 30 shekels of silver.

This is a significant number. We've seen this number before in the Old Testament. Perhaps we should also connect it with the story of Judah in the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37-26-28.

In that passage we read, There would seem to be connections between Judah and Judas, even beyond the name that they share in common. We should also observe the very sharp contrast here. Jesus has been valued for so little, 30 shekels of silver, in direct and sharp contrast to the action of the woman at Bethany that values his presence at the most extravagant cost.

The immense expense of the ointment, but the cheapness of the sale of Christ. It reveals that what was really being valued was money. It was the ointment's monetary value that really mattered.

Not the poor, not Christ, but money. And here, the way that Christ is sold for such a pittance is again a revelation of where value truly lies. Throughout the book of Matthew there's a deep challenge to value systems.

And perhaps we should remember at such points that Matthew was a tax collector,

someone for whom the radical nature of Jesus' teaching about money might have particularly resonated. We can think about Jesus' teaching concerning serving mammon, or maybe his teaching in regard to the temple tax, or maybe his teaching in paying taxes to Caesar, or maybe, again, his teaching to the rich young ruler that is asked to sell what he possesses and give it to the poor. In all of these cases we're seeing something about the way that Jesus regards money and how much it differs from the way that we usually regard money.

It is literally the first of Unleavened, and Jesus sends his disciples into the city to ready the celebration of the Passover together. Maybe in thinking about the leaven and the reason for which it's brought up at this point, we should reflect upon the theme that's been in the book already of purging out the old leaven. The old leaven is going to be removed and later new leaven will be added.

Perhaps at Pentecost we're supposed to see that as adding of a new leaven. The old leaven is the sourdough that is transferred from bread to bread in succession. It's an old principle that's perpetuated.

Jesus has spoken about the leaven of the Pharisees and the scribes. They're teaching that's passed on from one generation to another. Something that represents something unhealthy at the very heart that's passed on in succession.

Jesus is going to remove that. That old leaven is going to be purged out and a new one is going to be added. While eating the meal, Jesus declares to his disciples that one of them will betray him.

And all of them wonder whether they will be the ones that will do it. In Matthew's Gospel, that association of the disciples with the actions of Judas is interesting. In the other Gospels we hear that Judas is the one that particularly protests the cost of the ointment.

And we also know that he is the one that's going to betray Christ. But in this Gospel, the other disciples are indignant with him concerning the cost of the ointment. And they're also wondering whether they will be the ones that will betray him.

That line between Judas and the other disciples is really not so sharp here. It's not very clear. Through this, Jesus' knowledge of Judas' treachery is revealed.

There's also a sense of destiny. The Son of Man goes as is written of him in the Scriptures. And I would imagine that this is primarily referring to various anticipating stories.

Stories of Hithophel, stories of Judah and his relationship with Joseph. And other stories like that, along with certain prophecies. But primarily the stories that point forward, anticipate and call for some great fulfillment.

Jesus and his disciples here are eating a Passover meal. Or at least a Passover associated meal. And it is absolutely crucial to grasp this if we're going to understand what Jesus does.

Jesus isn't just taking up physical food and drink. He's taking up elements that already bear great meaning within a meal that has considerable meaning and import. In Exodus chapter 12, the whole thrilling story of the plagues is interrupted to institute something.

The celebration of the Passover that shall continue and institute the events of that particular celebration. This is an event that looked forward to future realities. And also drew the people back to that past event and enabled them to participate in that reality.

This meal then is freighted with meaning and symbolism already. And Jesus takes up that pre-existing symbolism and relates it to himself. In this case that symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah.

It's a broken and a distributed and participated body. It's a self-communication and symbol. But it's something that already has that meaning.

It's not something that Jesus conjures up as a symbol out of thin air. Nor is it best to understand this in terms of more metaphysical categories. If we're detaching it from the importance of the story.

It has a typological, a symbolic, a figural meaning first and foremost. And that's how we'll understand how it is a self-communication of Christ. Jesus in connection with the cup speaks of the blood of a new covenant.

The Sinai covenant had the blood of its covenant. We see that in Exodus chapter 24. And in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 11 there's blood of a covenant there that will deliver people from the watery depths.

There's blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 speaks of such blood. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.

Because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. This is for the forgiveness of sins.

And the forgiveness of sins is not just individual forgiveness, having access to God. It's the forgiveness of the nation. It's the forgiveness of a nation that's been alienated from God.

God is going to restore his people, not just individual persons, but a people. And bring them in the Messiah into new relationship with himself. Wine also anticipates the

kingdom.

Christ will not drink the fruit of the vine again until he does so in the kingdom. And so this celebration anticipates that celebration. The wedding supper of the Lamb.

As we look in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 we see that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is poised between two great moments in history. It looks back. It memorialises the Lord's death.

And it does so until he comes. We're caught between those two events. The event that we memorialise in the past and the event that we anticipate in the future.

And the fact that we're memorialising his death also highlights that the meaning of the Last Supper was pointing forward to and related to and grounded upon the actual sacrifice of Christ's death. His self-communication in the elements of the supper was the self-communication of his death. A question to consider.

In what ways might the contrast between the actions of the woman of Bethany and those of Judas help us to reconsider our relationship with money?