

PostExilicProphets 22-06-29a

Good evening, welcome to the Wednesday night Bible study at Grace and Truth Bible Church. This is the 29th day of June 2022. We're in the book of Malachi and our question which we will finally answer tonight that we've been whittling away at, chipping away at for the last two weeks is what does it mean by the phrase, I will send you Elijah.

I will send you Elijah in Malachi chapter 4 verse 5. I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. We've got a good grip on what it means for his ministry to turn or return the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers. But what does it mean to send Elijah the prophet? Is the real Elijah going to come back? Jesus said something about John the Baptist being Elijah the prophet as did Gabriel.

So is one coming enough? What is up with this? And most importantly, having figured that out, what does it mean for us? All of these things should turn a corner into a meaningful thought and application for us as we live our lives day by day. So it's intriguing to tackle and attempt to solve these mysteries, but if it doesn't change us in some way and motivate us and encourage us to live a life that is pleasing to God, we're kind of wasting our time. So that's our undertaking for tonight.

Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and our study and we'll begin. Father, it is such a blessing to spend this time together, to be encouraged by the presence and the fellowship with believers of like mind. We're grateful for the many years that you have given us together and the opportunities we've had to survey so much wonderful truth from the treasury and the storehouse of your word.

We pray tonight as we look at this closing set of verses in the Old Testament that your Holy Spirit will give us understanding and insight, not only to grasp the meaning and the purpose of these words that you delivered through the prophet Malachi to Israel, but to see how they apply to us in the time that remains to us in this life. So we ask your blessing on our fellowship and our study in Jesus name. Amen.

I will send you Elijah. It's not hard to remember the career of Elijah, starting out by declaring a drought in first Kings chapter 17, his dealings with Ahab and Jezebel, famously the Mount Carmel confrontation with the priests and prophets of Baal and the taking of the top of that mountain off at the time of sacrifice. Interesting detail there.

And a lot of times the delight is in the detail, but the prophets of Baal dance around, cut themselves, go frantic, do everything in their power all day long. They don't have any set time. Elijah drives them off and builds his altar and offers his sacrifice at the time of sacrifice.

Even in this confrontation, Elijah remembers the instructions from God on how to offer sacrifice. And he doesn't build an alternative altar so that they can dance around theirs. And God has already taken off the, the altar and the sacrifice and the water and the moat around it

and all the rest.

And they continue to dance. He gives them their full day, their full sway. And at the time of the evening sacrifice, this is when Elijah follows them.

And after his accepted sacrifice and God's manifestation of himself by fire, there is no more protestation or demonstration on the altar. And it is a metaphor for what God is doing in human history. And the patience of the saints, as we saw on Sunday, is to wait and let God's timing unfold.

The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full, or we wouldn't still be here. God allows that cup of iniquity to fill. And when it is full to the brim, whether you look at the antediluvian civilization and the days of Noah, God waited for that iniquity to mature and to flower and to manifest itself fully before he judged it.

He could have nipped it in the bud. He could have caused a plague in Sodom and Gomorrah before he ever sent the fire and brimstone that would have decimated the perverts and pagans and ne'er-do-wells in those and the other three cities. He did not.

He allows this for a reason and a purpose. And when we think about our own lives and we realize that there is hardship, there is setback, there is the inevitable coefficient of friction that prevents in my life, certainly the plan of Sam seldom goes the way I envisioned it, but God has a better plan and a better way. We don't like to plan adversity, challenge, hardship for ourselves.

Our plan is always, I'm heading on the upward way, new heights I'm gaining every day. And although I love that hymn to death, we don't always gain new heights every day. Circumstantially, sometimes we are in the valley of the shadow of death.

Sometimes we are facing incredible challenge, sadness, obstruction. And when we look around at the world, it seems as though evil is having its way. And those who deny God and who delight in darkness seem to be prevailing and to be in charge and victorious.

It is a part of the plan and purpose of God. The cup of iniquity has to fill to accomplish God's purpose in demonstration. This is a part of our inoculation against sin and evil for the eternal future.

We have to be exposed. We have to be infected to build up the antibodies that will carry us through eternity with no recurrence of rebellion, no questioning of God's wisdom and God's love and God's grace. No misunderstanding of his character and his purposes.

We have seen it. We have lived through it. We will never again be susceptible, even though we have free will.

God has sorted out those who aren't interested in his way and his truth and his life. They will be identified. They are being exposed and lighted up for what they are.

And God's judgment is going to eliminate them so that those of us who go into the eternal future have at least a minimal level of acceptance and love for God. The greater that acceptance, the more fervent that love, the more dedicated we are to understanding God's character, to advancing our entrance into his thinking and into his precepts, his plans and purposes, the closer we will dwell in the kingdom of the father to his throne and the throne of the lamb. So that is the purpose.

And that comes to light in verse six of Malachi chapter four, because hearts that do not return to the kind of heart the fathers had. If the children do not return to the kind of hearts that God made covenant promises to and bestowed covenant blessings upon, those who are willing to dwell in tents because they waited for a city whose founder and builder is God, those of the Hebrews chapter 11 kind of faith, if they do not return their hearts as a nation and as individuals to the heart of the fathers, God will smite the land in which they dwell with a curse. Is it the land or is it the earth? Yes.

Anywhere there are people with unregenerate, unrepentant hearts, the curse is going to strike. Strike, not just them, but the environment in which they dwell. This is a promise of God.

And it's interesting. There are instructions at the end of the Masoretic text. When you come to the close of this, this is considered to be one large book by the Masoretes, the 12, the 12 minor prophets of which Malachi is the close.

So there are Masoretic notes at the end of Isaiah, at the end of Jeremiah, at the end of Ezekiel, at the end of Daniel, each book has Masoretic annotations talking about how many verses are there, what's the middle verse and other checks and balances to ensure that they copied these accurately. But in the minor prophets, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, you've got those 12. There are no notes from Hosea to the end of Malachi.

Then you have your notes and they list out how many verses and what is the middle verse for each of the 12 books. But the 12 were considered a unit, but there is a Masoretic instruction at the end of this book after verse six that says, go back and read verse five again. When they read this closing section of the 12, they would never stop having read verse six.

In the Hebrew Bible, it's actually numbered differently because they only have three chapters in Malachi. Only in later editions do we have a fourth chapter. But at the end of this, they said the instruction to the reader is go back and read, behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet.

In some manuscripts, it just says that. In others, you repeat the entire verse fifth before the coming of the great dreadful day of the Lord. But a lot of times they didn't even want to talk about the great and dreadful day.

And so they would just repeat, behold, I send you Elijah the prophet. They wanted to end on a hopeful note. It is the same.

You can turn back to the book of Isaiah and go to chapter 66. And they had a similar Masoretic instruction where you're reading about the new heavens and the new earth in verse 22. I will make them, they will remain before me, says the Lord, your descendants and your name will remain.

It shall come to pass from one new moon to another, from one Sabbath to another. All flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord. And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against me for their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched.

They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. Masoretic didn't want to end on that note. So they have an instruction to the scribe that says, now go back and read verse 22 again.

For as the new heavens in there, they wanted to end on a positive note. There is a similar note at the end of lamentations and at the end of ecclesiastes because they don't like ending on a sour note. God gives them this final warning and they don't like it.

So they want to soften it. They want to go back to, to something hopeful. And it is certainly the case here in Malachi.

Well, let's ask and seek to answer the question, who is Elijah? We have two choices. Either it is the literal Elijah who is going to come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Or it is someone like John the Baptist who comes in the spirit and power at the first advent.

Gabriel told Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist that his son would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. That's Luke one 17. We saw it last time.

Uh, you saw in John where John the Baptist himself, when they was asked, are you Elijah? And he said, no. In the first chapter. Um, Jesus, however, said John the Baptist is Elijah.

If you are willing to receive it conditionally, he is Elijah in John and Matthew 17 verses 12 and 13. Jesus said, Elijah in verse 11, Jesus affirms that Elijah comes and will restore all things. More about that in a moment.

This is 17, uh, 10 and 11 of Matthew. Jesus said, Elijah comes and will restore all things comes. There is a present tense.

And there are some who interpret that as Elijah comes now and will restore in the future. It's very interesting that it's not a future tense in Greek. It doesn't say Elijah will come and will restore.

He said, Elijah comes present tense and will restore all things. But then in 12 and 13, Jesus said, and indeed Elijah has already come, but they didn't receive his testimony and they did to him, whatever they willed. And this of course is a reference back to John the Baptist.

So we understand that at least conceptually someone can be Elijah in the spiritual sense, but

not in the literal sense. John the Baptist was of course not the old Testament prophet Elijah reincarnate. Uh, he came in the spirit and in the power, just as Gabriel said he would.

So at the second coming, at the second coming, Elijah will come again. This of course, again is Matthew 17, 10 and 11. Elijah comes and will restore all things.

One thing we can say for certain, the predicted prophesied or prophetic ministry of Elijah has not been fulfilled in John the Baptist because he did not turn the hearts of the children to the fathers and he has not restored all things. What does it mean to restore all things? Most interpreters believe that this means to the extent that there are any in Israel who will turn and change and renew again, the heart that the fathers had in the nation of Israel. This Elijah ministry is going to galvanize that repentance, that change.

And while many people came out to be baptized, obviously John's John, the apostle says when Jesus came following John the Baptist, he came into his own and his own basically received him. Not as many as received him were given the authority to be called sons of God, those who believed on his name. But it was not the, there was not sufficient numbers.

There were not sufficient quantities of those individuals to characterize the nation. The bulk of the nation rejected him. So John did not restore all things.

And as he went before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, it didn't create that revival or wave of repentance that is described in terms of these hearts returning. So when is it that Elijah will come before the second advent? Is John the Baptist going to be raised to be Elijah again? We have no biblical reason to believe that. There is near universal agreement starting with the earliest church fathers.

I've got a, if you go to Barnes notes, um, which are, are repeated verbatim in my EBPC commentary on the minor prophets. Um, I have to wonder if there's a little bit of plagiarism there, but I, I don't have volume one at hand to see why, but Barnes notes on the old Testament. If you go to Malachi chapter four and look at his notes on five and six, he has two full pages of nothing but quotes of the early church fathers, all of whom believe that the fulfillment of the prophecy on the return of Elijah is the two witnesses of revelation chapter 11.

You can't find anybody who thinks that there's going to be any other Elijah. Everybody thinks that, that the spirit and power are going to be these two witnesses. I perhaps unusually agree.

I, I think this is valid, but I think the, the common understanding of who those witnesses are, uh, is, um, not my first choice. I, it well could be, I wouldn't break fellowship or refuse to talk to anybody who had an idea of who those two witnesses are, and I hope they won't break fellowship with me when they find out who I think it is, but let's accept for the lack of a better option that the coming of Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord, the great and terrible day of the Lord by universal consent is the last three and a half years of the tribulation. That's virtually indisputable.

That is the great terrible day. So whoever comes in the spirit and power of Elijah has to come before that. So pretty much everybody believes me included that the two witnesses are quote unquote Elijah.

How does that work? I thought Elijah was one guy. There are two witnesses. Well, let's go to Revelation chapter 11 and survey what it says about these two witnesses.

John, the apostle writing the book of Revelation measures, the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there in the first two verses. The prediction is that Jerusalem will be trodden under foot for 42 months. 42 months is three and a half years.

That would be the latter half, the three and a half years, 1260 days of the tribulation split right down the middle, whether you call it three and a half years, 42 months, 1260 days, however you want to call it, Jerusalem trodden under foot is that great tribulation, the time of Jacob's trouble, the last half of Daniel's 70th week. Now verse three, and I will give power to my two witnesses. Notice powers in italics.

It says, I will grant to my two witnesses. They will prophesy 1260 days clothed in sackcloth. Just for clarity, we went through this in our revelation study.

This is the first half at the point that the rapture takes place. We are gone. That which hinders is taken out of the way and the man of sin is revealed.

No sooner is he revealed than God's two witnesses appear to prophesy against him, his policies, everything that he promises, they will speak the truth while he promulgates the lie. And those who believe the lie are going to go with the beast rather than the witnesses. But there will be an alternative testimony.

Think of the two witnesses as the Fox news network of the first half of the tribulation. They have an alternate viewpoint to what the government and everyone else is, is believing in promulgating. So in sackcloth, why in sackcloth? What is the, uh, what is the meaning of sackcloth? It is a sign of mourning.

It is a, it is associated with impending judgment. Sackcloth. When the Ninevites responded to the preaching of Jonah, they clothed themselves and even their animals in sackcloth and ashes, right? It was a sign of repentance.

So the two witnesses being clothed in sackcloth, this is an indication to the people witnessing their witness that it is time for them to put on sackcloth. It is a mark of repentance. It is a mark of acknowledgement that something from God has struck, right? So they are dressed in sackcloth.

They don't come in finery. Uh, they come in drudgery and this draws attention because the first half of the tribulation period is a time of pseudo prosperity, a time of the short-term fulfillment of false promises. And so these men being literally prophets of doom, sackcloth is an emblem

of their message.

Judgment is coming. You need to repent and put on sackcloth just as we are wearing. These are the two olive trees and the two lamp stands standing before the God of all the earth.

This is a clue to their identity, which we will explore when we get to the second session. But the first comment made about them after that they are given this prophetic ministry by God and they are clothed in sackcloth is that they are olive trees and lamp stands, highly significant. It is a clue to their identity.

And by the way, not a clue that is often explored in, in what I've read. If, uh, and they stand before the God of the earth, this is the Lord of all the earth in the better texts. Uh, the God of this world is Satan.

The Lord of all the earth is God himself. And so they are standing before God. They represent God.

And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. This evidently is not literal fire. This is the pronouncement of judgment.

Uh, remember when Elisha is confronted by the young men who are angry because he cleansed the waters of Jericho and they say, go up old bald head. And he pronounces a curse on them. And they are torn not by Elisha, but by bears or by a, a she bear, right? I can't remember how many bears there were actually.

That's terrible. At any rate, bears are involved and 42 youths are mauled. We don't know if they died or not.

Um, but the pronouncement of curse comes from the lips of, of Elisha and the curse falls by other agency. So here fire proceeds from their mouth. I think this is pronouncement of curse and the fire of God, the judgment of God at their behest.

And by their identification of the target takes place. If anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner. Anyone who tries to harm them, fire proceeds from the mouth of the prophet.

They are invulnerable. Remember when he tried to come and collect Elijah and take him before the king set Elijah or Elisha, but fire came from heaven. Ken will remind me he is far well versed in that than I am, but they try to come get the prophet and fire comes from heaven.

And there are two sets of 50 with their captains that are consumed. And it's only the third set where the captain says, please don't consume us with fire. The king just wants to talk and he agrees to go.

Fire will consume anyone who tries to harm them. Now, why does this not just continue ad infinitum? God places a wall of fire around his people, Israel in the old Testament, but then he

dismantles that protection from time to time, either because of failure on the part of the nation or because he has a purpose in allowing enemies through. Maybe he is going to use a king like David or even like Saul in the early days to defeat and disable and dismantle these enemies.

These have power to shut heaven verse six. And this is the closest association with Elijah that you find. They have power to shut heaven.

There was no rain in the land except at Elijah's word. First Kings chapter 17 power to shut heaven so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy for a limited time. These witnesses have the power to shut off precipitation.

By the way, this tells you that you're in the first half and not the second half of the tribulation time, the 70th week, because during the tribulation, all kinds of catastrophic things happen to the weather and to the land. And a third of the earth is scorched and things are burning up and singeing and things in the sea are dying. And there's people wouldn't even notice if you shut up heaven in the second half of the week.

But in the first half of the week, this is the time of false prosperity, the time of pseudo paradise under the beast we often hear called the Antichrist. No rain falls in the days of their prophecy. They have power over waters to turn them to blood.

Once again, this was the first sign to the land of Egypt that God was about to deliver his people and they had better get on board or they were going to suffer nine more plagues. And God is absolutely going to deliver his people out of bondage, turn the waters to blood and to strike the earth with all plagues. You think about the other nine, this could involve lice, darkness, tumors, hail, pick your plague, all plagues as often as they desire.

God trusts these witnesses to have judgment of whom to curse, how to curse, how long to curse, whomever they desire. It doesn't say whomever God desires. They're not having a nightly conference with the throne of grace.

And God says, those Abyssinians over there, go curse them. And this individual here, he's the chancellor of the exchequer in England, curse him. No, this is at their behest.

These are trustworthy, mature believers who know when and how to harness and to direct and to take advantage of the power of God that has been allotted to them. It is a stewardship of judgment. Many times we think of stewardship as something positive.

We have resources, we have time, we have gifts, we have opportunities, and we are called upon to be good stewards of those things. These individuals are stewards of God's power for judgment, for cursing, and for destruction. And they don't carry it to excess.

The power doesn't go to their heads. They don't misuse it. They don't abuse it.

They are trusted. Evidently, they have been faithful in that which was least, and God has now

granted to them that which is much, which is his own mighty power. When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them.

And their death in this role has caused many to identify one of them as Elijah and the other one as Enoch. These are two individuals in the Bible who famously seem to have not died, but to have exited the world by another manner. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.

Back in Genesis 5, verse 24. So the primary candidates, everybody thinks that one of these prophets is Elijah. I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

So one of these men is thought to be Elijah. Who is the other one? There are two almost universal candidates, and the votes are evenly split between them. They'll have to have a runoff to see who gets to be with Elijah and do this ministry.

The first is Enoch, and the second is Moses. Obviously the prima facie, the easy to pick up off the ground evidence is shutting off the rain, that's an Elijah thing. Water turned to blood, that's a Moses thing.

Transfiguration, Elijah is on the mount with the Lord Jesus, and the other individual is Moses. So they seem to have some transferability forward from their age to the time of Christ and potentially to the future. So Enoch or Moses, which of the two is it that will accompany Elijah, or is there another option that hasn't really been explored? Well, we'll cover that in the second session, but as we go to our break here for the first session, one thing that characterizes these witnesses is the power of God.

They are able to prevail when God wants them to prevail. They are overcome at the time and in the way that God wants them to be overcome. We like the first principle, my God shall supply all your needs.

Those who wait on the Lord will mount up with wings as eagles, running not be weary, walking not faint. In this world you shall have tribulation, but be a good cheer, I've overcome the world. Satan roams the earth like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, but I have prayed for you.

Satan wants to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you. There is protection of God's people by God. We will cling to that.

We will lash ourselves to that mast all day long, but there is a consistent observation you can make Old Testament and new. There are times when God as a part of his plan and purpose allows, and if he allows it, it's because he desires it. He allows his people to be overcome.

Paul was imprisoned. Paul was stoned and left for dead. Paul was shipwrecked.

This was a part of the plan and purpose of God. Paul was eventually beheaded in Rome. Peter was crucified according to church tradition.

James was martyred before the church age had hardly gotten underway. Stephen was stoned to death. All of these men were faithful and were witnesses to God, greater witnesses in their martyrdom, perhaps even then in their life.

It is a principle of scripture that sometimes God grants us deliverance, victory, power, overcoming in circumstances. Other times we have victory and power and overcoming in what looks like a defeat, what looks like a setback, what looks like a completely bad circumstance in which we can see no good at all. If we believe the truth of scripture, if we believe in the character and the integrity and the promises of God, these seeming defeats are actually victories, and we should look at them as such.

Hardships, setbacks, challenges, ongoing grinding circumstances are given to us for good. If we love God and if we understand ourselves and live our lives as those who are called according to his purpose, all things work together for good. All things, all things work together for good.

The condition is to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. This is why Job could say after having lost everything, including his health and the support of his wife, though he slay me, yet will I trust him. Job understood this.

That's why he got the wonderful advanced test of this long conversation with his three well-meaning friends who didn't have the grasp of God, didn't have the capacity to learn more about God that Job had. And through the course of those dialogues and the words of Elihu and then the appearance of God himself in the cloud, Job comes to an even greater understanding. Job pushes through the glass ceiling of Old Testament understanding at the end of that book, and he functions as a priest for Eliphaz and Bildad.

Everyone except Elihu, Job gets to offer a sacrifice on their behalf and be an instrument of reconciling them to God, bringing them forward to a better understanding as well. And then Job is doubly blessed, the double portion of everything. Seven new sons and three new daughters and all of his worldly goods doubled.

It's a beautiful picture. This is the application for us. When you think about the coming of Elijah, these witnesses are going to be slain.

They're going to be defeated. People will literally dance on their dead bodies. It's going to be Christmas.

They're going to give gifts to each other in celebration. Everyone is going to say the last vestiges of this antiquated, outdated, mystical, ridiculous Christian belief system, that's gone. We thought they couldn't be defeated.

Fire kept coming down. They kept bringing curses. We hate those guys.

Now they've finally been defeated. Praise materialism. Hooray, science.

Be of good cheer, Jesus says. I have overcome the world. Even when we appear to be overcome, that's the time to rejoice.

God is working a special blessing and a special reward into our lives through hardship, through difficulty, through what the world would view as a defeat. They thought Jesus was over with when he got crucified. Look at what's happened.

In the last 2,000 years, crucifixion was the best thing to ever happen to the human race, but you wouldn't have thought so at the time. Even Jesus' own followers were so depressed, they could hardly crawl out from behind locked doors. They missed it.

Jesus told them ahead of time, I'm coming back. It's a temporary seeming setback. It's a victory.

That's how we need to view our difficulties as well. Let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to finally put a lid on the identity of Elijah.

We're going to understand what these two witnesses mean, what they do, and my understanding of who they are. We'll take our break.