

The Great and Terrible Day

Isaiah, in the eighth century before Christ's first coming, wrote a message of hope, "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, ..." with great promise that included the creation of new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 2:1-5; 65:17-25).

About four hundred years later, Malachi, in the last portion of Old Covenant writings, wrote of Israel's doom: "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can stand when he appears?" (Mal. 3:1-2). Coming judgment was his message but God's mercy still held the door of repentance open. He warned, "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap," "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers..."; "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them." "You are cursed with a curse for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you." "For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, 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." For sake of brevity, these lines are selected to highlight Malachi's message. The Lord would leave Israel neither root nor branch but, at the same time, he would save a righteous remnant.

Isaiah spoke of the coming of the savior in peace with all nations flowing into his kingdom while Malachi warned of his second coming in retribution and the destruction of the nation of Israel. The time period for these comings is pinpointed by both writers in the mission and message of John the Baptist.

In harmony with his portrayal of Jesus' spiritual kingdom of peace, Isaiah writes of John the Baptist, "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken'" (Isa. 40:3-5).

In contrast to this, Malachi presents John as a forerunner of the coming Judge. He would come to Israel suddenly about forty years later. His role then would be such that "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" Again, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." John is identified as the Elijah who was to come. Neither Elijah nor Christ's

“appearance” were literal. It is evident that Isaiah and Malachi referred to two different missions of Jesus in his comings.

For four hundred years this prophetic utterance of Malachi’s cast its shadow over Israel as they were at different times subjected to Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and Rome. Knowledge of the scriptures was kept alive by the synagogues. There was hope by many for a deliverer of the house of David to rule over an earthly political kingdom. A spiritual remnant looked for a spiritual kingdom.

Then the long prophetic silence was broken. “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (Matt. 3:1-3). He proclaimed the message of Isaiah, but it was followed by the emphasis of Malachi. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. .. “..he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (3:7-12).

Everything about John’s preaching revealed urgency. The impending doom was imminent. His message was not for people of all ages to look for this great and terrible day. The nearness of the kingdom called for the immediate repentance of Israel. The axe was lying in readiness at the root of the trees. The winnowing fork of judgment separating the grain from the chaff was already in the judge’s hand. This was not referring to a judgment thousands of years in the future. It was to be the judgment of the then-present Israel described in parables in Matthew’s gospel which we may review at another time.

Even though the nation of Israel was in the focus of Malachi and John the Baptist, individuals could escape the national fate by their repentance. On Pentecost, Peter repeated Joel’s apocalyptic depiction of what would happen in the last days of their nation. It was being fulfilled at that time “before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day.” (Acts 2:14-21; Joel 2:28-32). Whoever would call on the name of the Lord would be saved from that avenging of the Lord. So Peter exhorted, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” Only God could save their souls, but they could follow Jesus’ own instructions (Matt. 24:15-28; Lk. 21:20-28) and save themselves from the impending great tribulation and destruction facing their nation. Jesus said some of his listeners would live to see it

Paul addressed some who were already suffering because of the political unrest being stirred against Rome by the Jews. He assured them that the Lord was to come to avenge and bring them rest. But even though the coming of the Lord was imminent, there would be a rebellion first bringing

such trial that many Jews and disciples also would lose faith. That political rebellion by unscrupulous, power-grasping Jews would develop before Christ's coming. The man of sin was to take over the temple in Jerusalem and defy both the Roman gods and the true God (2 Thes. 1:5 - 2:1-12). Josephus' description of John Levi of Gischala and the account of his defying leadership which precipitated the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army makes him the fit candidate for "the man of sin." (You may wish to send \$1.00 to John L. Bray Ministry, Inc., P.O. Box 90129, Lakeland, FL 33804 and ask for his 48-page booklet, "The Man of Sin of 2 Thessalonians 2. It contains convincing information.)

Jesus dealt with sin in his first coming but he "...will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (Heb. 9:26-28). It was to be at the end of their age, the last days of the Jewish nation, "the great and terrible day" prophesied by Malachi.

Jesus spoke of the "great tribulation" that would come upon Jerusalem in the lifetime of some of his listeners (Matt. 24:15-31). "Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory...". At his ascension, it was revealed, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). It was a part of what Joel prophesied and what Peter said was happening on Pentecost (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21).

In speaking of the Lord bringing judgment and vengeance in Revelation, John makes definite allusion to the words of Malachi when their rulers and all would call out to the mountains, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of his wrath has come, and who can stand before it?" (Rev. 6:9-17).

Again, John recorded in Revelation (1:7), "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye shall see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him." That is an indirect quotation of Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:29-31 of things to happen in the lifetime of some of his listeners. Those who would "see" him (not literally, but perceive him through his manifestations) and mourn/wail, would be those that pierced him. This would come upon the tribes of Israel, not upon the Gentiles.

The evidence mounts that all these references are to that "great and terribly day" of the Lord's vengeance on Israel in the events surrounding AD 70. These things have all been fulfilled! The "great tribulation" has long since passed! So let's get on with life serving in the spiritual kingdom.

(Various thoughts were adapted from J. Stuart Russell's "The Parousia" published in 1878.) ~Cecil Hook, March 2001. []