

False expectations

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[0 : 0 0] Malachi chapter 3 verse 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 says the Lord of hosts but who may abide the day of his coming and who shall stand when he appeareth for he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap Now we are looking then at this book of Malachi and last time you notice we had considered the words of verse 17 at the end of chapter 2 the theme of which you may recall was the tendency to religious cynicism which occurs even in Christian circles at a time of spiritual declension and the men of Malachi's day very much in the spirit of men of our day were saying where is the God of judgment what hope is there in this wretched forlorn and ungodly situation there seems to be no prospect of improvement there seems to be no one who will lift the spiritual tone of society and give hope of revival and give hope of revival to the church and God said that they had wearied him with their skepticism and with their doubt and with their unbelief and God himself now in chapter 3 gives to his people good reason for the resuscitation of their hopes and the revival of a spirit of optimism there is nothing lifts the flagging and drooping spirits of God's people so readily as a promise from the Lord it doesn't matter how far down

God's people go it is a very little thing which will lift them up again in times of depression and that is what God gives now in chapter 3 at verse 1 behold says God in promise I will send my messenger and he shall prepare the way before me so we look then at verses 1 and 2 tonight at least we look at the gist of it though we can't look at all the details of it and I want you to see there are two messengers in verse 1 behold I will send my messenger and he shall prepare the way before me there is the first messenger and the Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come to his people to his temple even the messenger of the covenant whom ye delight in now there is the second messenger so this promise in verse 1 which counteracts the spirit of doubt and depression and cynicism in the last verse in which the people said there's no hope

God has forsaken the earth there is no chance of ever seeing revival or reformation or renaissance or true renewal we are sold to do evil there must be no possibility on the horizon of seeing good come anymore to the church not at all says God you have got it wrong behold I am sending not one messenger but two there would be 400 years between the prophecy here and its fulfillment this was not something which would happen next week or next year but the people of course in Malachi's day had no idea how soon these things would happen and they stood in the same relation to the coming of Christ in the flesh as we now stand to the coming of Christ in glory they in their day were anticipating and looking for the coming of their

Messiah Christ for the first time we as Christians now are looking for the return of Christ the second time and their situation and our situation in respect of these two comings is certainly analogous if not identical very similar I mean for one thing they had no idea how soon these words would be fulfilled and so they were kept on their toes waiting and watching so are we kept watching and praying because as a thief in the night so Christ's second coming shall be now the two messengers are very clearly revealed to us in the New Testament the first of them is John the Baptist and the second is Christ so we have a prophecy here in verse 1 of the coming of John the Baptist whose ministry would be to prepare a way for the

Lord Jesus Christ it is exactly parallel to what you have in Isaiah 40 every mountain and hill should be made low every valor shall be exalted the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places smooth and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it and it was of John the Baptist that those words were said that he would prepare the way he would make the crooked things straight that is to say he would go before the face of Christ in order to prepare the people to receive Christ when his ministry were to begin so

those are the two messengers and you notice the attitude of the people towards them the people were expecting Christ to come even the messenger of the covenant whom he delight in behold he shall come saith the

[7 : 32] Lord of hosts and the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple that is to say the people thought that they were eager for the coming of Christ in the flesh the people imagined that they were in a good state of preparedness for the appearing of Christ in this world and they therefore needed to be told by Malachi that they were deluded if they thought that they were well prepared for his coming and so in verse 2 he gives them words which run down my spine like electricity but who may abide the day of his coming and who shall stand when he appeareth for he is like a refiner's fire and he is like fuller's soap a fuller is a launderer and the soap used of course in the laundry of those days was a means of removing all the filth and therefore he is

Christ is compared to this fire and to this soap because when he did come and when he would come his effect upon the nation of Israel would be he would separate the true from the false the clean from the unclean he would remove the scum as it were from the religion of the day he would come like a plowshare and he would rip up the consciences of the nation he would plow up their fallow ground and he would reveal to the people their true condition before God now it is exactly the same with us today there are so many in churches and they take it for granted that they are looking for the kingdom of God and they would say in words similar to this that they are looking forward to the day when this world will become ideal as the kingdom of God and they are working towards that end all sorts of people who name the name of Christ are looking for the kingdom of

God in one form or another and the words of Malachi therefore are drastically true and relevant when he comes a second time who shall abide the day of his coming who shall stand when he appears how many of the thronging thousands and millions of men in the world who claim to be ready waiting and looking for the kingdom of God are truly qualified to stand and to be able to face the consequences of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ now that is terribly true of so much of the religion of this country which goes under the general name of Christianity if I may just use one single simple up to date illustration of this and proof of this I would point you to this program on the radio at two o'clock which goes by the name of Jesus or Jesus

Christ I made a point of listening to a little of these programs every day at two o'clock about Jesus the life and death of Jesus that's what it's supposed to be and you have actors reading the parts of Christ and of the disciples and I remember on the very first day I think it was of this week it was the story of John the Baptist and Jesus calling his first disciples the fishermen and this is what I heard Jesus with his Yorkshire accent was saying to the fishermen now boys the kingdom of God is like this and like that obviously drawing material from the gospels and from the parables and when he'd finished talking about the kingdom of God he said I'll tell you a bit more on Saturday come on let's go and have a drink now that's the modern

Jesus just one of the boys just one like ourselves and when he's in the garden of Gethsemane he is represented as afraid of death wholly missing the point that it was not merely death that our Lord is facing but as one of the brethren was saying in prayer or perhaps both it was death with the curse and with the sting and with the taste of hell and with the wrath of God the condign punishment due to us as a wicked world that was the cup which he was facing it was not simply death and yet you see all these wonderful elements of the gospels are leached out of it and removed all the colour is taken out of the word of God and instead of the rich significance and the teaching of scripture you're left with something which is pale almost to the point of being completely faded it's a faded watercolour gospel which they're putting across if indeed it deserves to be called a gospel at all now that is the sort of spirit which Malachi is challenging alright he says you people who claim to be ready and looking for the kingdom of God which of you will be able to stand when he appears he is like a refiner's fire he is like a launderer's soap he will cut right through you he will rub the soap into the very deepest grain of your national and churchly life he will get right to the bottom of how things truly are with you as a people he will search you and scrutinize you well this is exactly what did happen because when we turn over to the gospels

[14 : 19] Matthew Mark and the others we discover that John the Baptist and Christ had exactly this effect upon the men and women of that generation I'll come to that just in a moment but the point I want now to draw from these words is how awfully possible it is for people that have the Bible as the Jews did and as we do so to misunderstand the word of God that instead of understanding the true nature of God's kingdom we may twist it and distort it to such a point that it becomes

unrecognizable and the word of God has lost all its sharp edges and all its fine features now in the gospel passage that

I read to you you would have noticed something that Jesus said I hope when they were in the boat the disciples and Christ and crossed to the other side the disciples you remember had forgotten to take with them bread and Christ said this to them take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees and of Herod Herod perhaps was not in the reading but it is in the reading in Mark the parallel passage in Mark chapter 8 I want to suggest to you that the distortion which Malachi refers to here their failure to understand the nature of Christ and of his coming is something which we can see under three different forms in the leaven of Herod in the leaven of the Pharisees and in the leaven of the Sadducees that is to say these three different groups who were contemporary with John the Baptist and with

Christ they had got the gospel wrong they had changed the nature of true biblical religion they had the scriptures they didn't understand them and each of these three different groups represents a tendency in human nature in all generations to distort and to disfigure the truth of God in a certain way let me say a word about each of these now the particular way in which the Herodians distorted the truth of God and the expectation of the coming kingdom was this the Herodians as their name would suggest had a political attitude to the kingdom of God that is to say they expected the kingdom of God not to be something spiritual not to be something in the hearts of men their attitude to the kingdom of

God was that it was something you could mark on an atlas of the world like Zionism or certain types of nationalism in the world today and the Herodians therefore imagine that by political power and political might they could bring in God's kingdom that's how they have their name attached to the name of Herod now there is always that danger in human nature that little by little without realizing it men slip down from a spiritual understanding of God's word until they drift into a political interpretation of God's word and this has happened tremendously in the last 30 years throughout the world there is a worldwide movement amongst Christian churches today and it is called liberation theology what is liberation theology it is the attitude that we must bring in the kingdom of God by political action by engineering strikes by bringing down governments and by resorting to arms and force and by propaganda and in that way you will overthrow the established order it looks very much like the old Marxism or communism that we knew something about before and there are many interpreters who would say that liberation theology is just another name for Marxism with a Christian label on the bottle well I'll let you make your own minds up about that I won't be dogmatic now but I will say this that this is a great snare to us that we drift from the spiritual to the natural and it is something which the world council of churches and many many churches in this country are doing you see synods of churches are now far more interested in speaking to the government about its political stance and posture than about actually preaching the spiritual doctrine and theology of the word of God now this is the leaven of the

[19 : 54] Herodians and Christ warned us against it now the second type of distortion that Christ warns us against is the leaven of the Pharisees now what is this well if the leaven of the Herodians was this tendency to political methods of promoting God's kingdom the Pharisees in their distortion had this mistake they added their own traditions to the word of God now true Christianity and true religion believes that the Bible the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible is the religion which is from heaven that our duty is to understand the word of God and to practice it in worship in doctrine and in our own lives the Pharisees the Pharisees added to the word of God a whole mass of human teachings and they correspond today in our modern world with those types of Christians and Christian churches who are not content with what the Bible teaches but who insist on adding the traditions of the church and there are all manner of these in the world today human accretions human additions human thought added to the word of God ritualism especially is guilty of this it is the plague of ritual churches and of broad churches that they insist on adding something to the word of God you have to be consecrated by a bishop let us say or you have to have it in a cathedral or it has to be done according to the pattern which was laid down going right back to the middle ages the apostolic succession the continuity in tradition which we have right back to the other church all that nonsense fills the minds of many ritualists and Catholics in the world today and it is very infectious and we are all contaminated by it but says

Christ beware that is the leaven of the Pharisees adding something to the word of God Christ is enough as the saviour we do not need Christ plus human additions and human inventions and

human fabrications Christ on his own is a sufficient saviour and if you add to Christ you can only take away from Christ and that alas is what medieval Roman Catholicism did it had so many additions to Christ and so many things added to him that Christ was lost in the wilderness of other saints and the virgin and all manner of superstitions and Christ was just invisible that is the leaven again of the Pharisees now thirdly here there is the leaven of the Sadducees now what is this if the leaven of the Pharisees was to add to the word of God the leaven of the Sadducees on the other hand was to subtract from the word of

God these were the rationalists of Christ's day these were the men who did not accept the whole canon of scripture they only accepted the books of Moses they did not believe in an angel or a spirit they didn't believe in the supernatural in all the fullness of it they didn't believe in bodily resurrection we know this from the gospels as well as some other sources but particularly from the word of God we know this to be the case now the leaven of the Sadducees is also prevalent today in our Christian world and it is what we refer to as liberalism or modernism it is a spirit which does not accept the whole teaching of the word of God you would allow me those of you who heard me use the illustration before you will allow me to repeat it I understand that some years ago there was a woman who went to a certain church in England where the minister was one of these who was always reading the latest books about modern scholarship and in the course of his reading he convinced himself that passages of the Bible were not the word of God and so foolish man more than foolish criminally foolish man when he went into the pulpit and preached he would say to his congregation now you can't take this verse out of the word of God that shouldn't be there and then you can't take this passage that shouldn't be there so you remember in the story he went to the particular home where this lady was sick in bed and when he'd finished his pastoral conversation he said allow me to read to you madam from the

Bible certainly sir and she passed him her Bible and when he opened it it was full of passages cut out with scissors and large sections of the scriptures were just not there come come he said what's this you've been doing with the Bible oh it's alright sir she said every time you told me that such and such a passage ought not to be there of course out of respect for you I simply got the scissors and cut it out and that's what's left and that's what happened to large sections of Christian congregations and of course more still in the Maddena street they don't believe the word of God and that is this spirit revealed by Christ the leaven of the Sadducees now all these are distortions and I want to make the point tonight that just as Malachi said to the people of Israel when he comes he will sort out all these distortions as though

Malachi were to say I'm looking into the future friends I can see John the Baptist coming I'm looking into the future I can see Christ himself coming oh what is he saying to these Pharisees if only you could hear oh if only you could hear what he has to say to the Sadducees and to the Herodians my they're getting a trancing from Christ and from John the Baptist now he's saying who will abide the day of his coming and so it will be at the second coming of Christ the same Lord Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever he will have some very stern things to say to those men who have added to his word taken from his word or secularized his word according to the three categories of Pharisee Sadducee and Herodian that I've just mentioned to you and indeed which he himself brings before us as parties to beware of so now finally and briefly I would like to say to you this when we allow our minds to look forward from

[27 : 16] Malachi to the gospels Matthew Mark Luke and John we can see that there were certain strong points of emphasis which Christ and John made which are the hallmark of real true Christianity and it is these things which Malachi undoubtedly refers to as being like soap and like fire these illustrations of soap and fire they are merely a picture of the effect of real theology sound doctrine upon the consciences of men there is nothing so arouses us nothing so searches us as Malachi as his own holy word brought to bear and to be applied in the lives of men and I point out very briefly indeed five things five elements five emphases in the preaching of

John and of Christ which acted like fire and like salt on the men of their generation and which would act similarly on the men of our generation or any generation and of which Malachi here says who shall abide the day of his coming in the light of the fact that once he begins to preach he will sort out the wheat from the chaff he will take the pressures from the vile he will scrutinize the inward hearts of men and bring to light the hidden things of darkness now the first of these five and I shall be very brief is this both Christ and John strongly emphasize that the kingdom of God is not of this world the kingdom of God consists of real genuine believers time and again John and Christ say this for

instance you remember when John was preaching beside the river and the people came to him he said to them say not to yourselves we are children of

Abraham I say to you that God is able of these very stones to raise up children unto Abraham in other words it is not our bodily descent from some pious ancestor of the past who gives us our real Christianity and makes us God's children it is something far deeper it is the change of heart and change of character which can only be brought about by God's spirit in the lives of men and Jesus put it like this to Pontius Pilate I am a king but my kingdom is not of this world it is a spiritual kingdom the kingdom of God is within you the kingdom of God is among you the kingdom of God comes not with observation so we must ask ourselves tonight do we have this characteristic of our lives do you see friend that God's kingdom is not something you can mark on a map it's not something the political action will bring about God's kingdom consists of genuine born again believers and those who are not such are not in

God's kingdom in a true and false sense and then second an emphasis here is this that when John and Christ came they showed that repentance repentance repentance is the essence of real true godliness I don't need to emphasize this with regard to John the Baptist because it is too plain to need mention he was preaching repentance he was baptizing unto repentance John was forever saying bring forth fruits worthy of repentance and Christ the same repent for the kingdom of God is at hand this is the hallmark of real Christianity real biblical faith and religion repentance towards God and again we ask ourselves is this the spirit that we have friends we should be repenting every day we live

Tertullian of old said I was born for nothing but for repentance alone that is a right way to think when we're Christians and converted we don't stop repenting we repent all the more we'll be repenting to our dying day we must repent to the fact that we're so imperfect you and I repent to the fact that we understand God's words so little that we love one another so little that we love God so much less have we not got abundant calls for repentance repent repent repent and the church or the Christian who ceases to repent indicates he is already back slidden now a third hallmark of true religion is this both John the Baptist and Christ also stressed man's real problem is not the problem of being a nation under the power of Rome now this is what the zealots thought this is what the Herodians thought that the problem with the Jewish nation was they needed to be set free from the political power of ancient

[32 : 55] Rome the Roman empire I mean and they were fighting against the power of ancient Rome and they thought if only we can deliver ourselves from the power of ancient Rome we will be well our problems will be solved and there are people in churches today and they have a similar attitude but the teaching of Christ and of John is man's problem is not the power of this world it is not the fact that there are slums it is not the fact that black and white can't get on together in Birmingham and Liverpool and South Africa that's not the problem man's problem is not political or racial it's not that they don't speak the same language or have enough education man's problem is his sin and his ungodliness and the only hope is that man should turn to God and receive remission of sins and power to live a holy life and Christ emphasized this again and again

I don't need to mention this do I what did Nicodemus hear when he came for advice about his problem you must be born again says Christ there was absolutely no mincing of words he didn't say something about the need for more miracles he didn't say anything about the need for political emancipation he didn't say anything about social conditions you must be born again it's a spiritual change and that's something which alas we don't get to hear on these BBC programs and would to God we did and I sometimes think it would be worth going to prison in the attempt of trying to get radio broadcasts across to this country I dream dreams and I wonder is it possible to go to Holland or somewhere and set up a Christian radio station and to beam the gospel across Great Britain in the English language so that the people could hear the truth of God but they can't on the radio because it's blocked out you can talk about anything on the radio but you can't talk about the gospel you dare talk about the blood of

Christ and the need of repentance and see what the producer of programs will say to you they'll laugh you to scorn get out of here you can't tell the people of Britain these things the devil has so much under lock and key but men need to hear it and the fourth thing that John and Christ emphasized was this none of us must ever assume that we're God's children this was a tragedy of the Pharisees they took it for granted that they were already God's children and Christ came to them and he had the most unpleasant task which any preacher ever has to do and that is to tell

them that they were not God's children do you remember that eighth chapter of John if you were Abraham's children you would do the works of Abraham you are the children of the devil and his lusts you will do and that's the terrible work that the preacher who is faithful to Christ inevitably has to set before the people to tell them that they must never assume they're God's children and you know when I go around this town of air and talk to people who go to some churches not our own I'm not thinking of our own but some churches they all assume they're Christians they all assume they're going to heaven every single man woman and child of them never dawns on never crosses their mind that they might not be God's children at all and therefore we have the dreadful and difficult and almost impossible task of saying to these lovely kind decent virtuous respectable people my dear friend has it ever occurred to you you may not be God's child and you may not be going to heaven and what you really need is you must become a Christian don't assume you are a Christian you must become a Christian Christ and John did that and then fifth and last tonight John and Christ emphasized God's sovereign grace in salvation and if there's anything that hurts it's the teaching of the word of God sovereign grace that man cannot save himself how often did the Lord Jesus Christ make this point clear nowhere clearer I suspect than in John chapter 6 when there were crowds of people going to follow him and he turned to them more than once no man he said can come to me except my father draw him you talk about being my disciples you can't unless God teaches you and you remember when he went into the synagogue at

Nazareth and he expounded to them concerning Elijah and Elisha and he said there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah but none of them was Elijah sent but unto a widow woman of Sarepta and there were many lepers in Israel in the days of Elisha but none of them was healed but Naaman the Syrian when the people heard this they understood what he meant have we understood he meant to say to them these two persons Naaman and the widow of Sarepta they were heathens and yet they were the subject of God's electing love in other words Christ is saying you Jews do you realise in your own scriptures God passed by the whole generation in which they were living in Israel and he saved a heathen woman of Sarepta and he saved a heathen man in Syria and that was God's electing love and when the

[38 : 51] Jews understood the point and they did they rose up they took hold of Christ and they would have thrown him over the brow of the hill had not our Lord supernaturally delivered himself because his time was not yet come friends we need to remind ourselves it is sovereign grace that saves men we do not choose God we do not make decisions for God did you ever hear that dreadful thing which some people say we are the arms of God he can do no work except through us we are the feet of God he cannot move to do business apart from through us did you ever hear such tripe in all your life the God that made heaven and earth comes to me does he and says to me you are my hands and feet I am absolutely bound until you begin to do work for me great God is this the sort of thing God says to men who are nonsense it is condescension that God looks down upon it is mercy if he saves us he doesn't need to save anyone

I once heard a preacher say years ago in England something which is a young Christian I found very hard to understand he said God had to make the world because he needed something to love needed something to love what is wrong with the Holy Trinity Father Son and Holy Spirit did he need a puny world the size of a grain of sand in his sight when he had himself to love what nonsense you see how God is brought down from his throne and made some tiny puppet the strings of which are in the hands of men but he'll come to nothing who shall abide when he appears who shall stand before the glory of his presence my dear friends who love the truth let us take courage Christ is coming he will come he'll come in revival no doubt one day and then you'll see who will fall on their faces before him and above all he will come at his second coming in glory then those of us by grace that love him we shall not be ashamed we shall abide the day of his coming we shall shout for joy when he appears upon the clouds with power and great glory