

The Great Distinction

Unity is typically seen as a good thing. We want unity in our church, not conflict. We want unity in our families, not family feuds. We want unity in our community so that we can live in peace. Politicians talk about their hopes of unifying their city, state or country. That's why it's surprising and even shocking to see our God talking about Judgment day and the separation that will take place on that day. This is the same God who says that all people are sinful, who also says that all people need a Savior, who also says that Jesus died on the cross for all people. He lumps the entire world together in a single unit, but today we see a prophecy of a very public and final distinction that he will make between those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and those who don't.

We believe that Judgment day is the end of our world as we know it. There is nothing more that needs to happen, meaning it could happen today, or it could happen in 500 years. Jesus will return, not to live or reign here on earth, but to destroy this world and judge all people and create a new heavens and new earth. The bible actually says quite a bit about Judgment Day and I think this section of scripture from Malachi can leave us particularly uncomfortable especially the first part. Verse 1 says, "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them."

This is the fate of those who do not believe. It says that there is a furnace and they will be set on fire. They will become stubble. This is not just death but eternal death. They are called stubble, which is a word that means worthless, or chaff is another way it's translated, that is, only good for the fire. That last phrase, "Not a root or branch will be left to them" is meant to show that there is no hope. Often times in the bible the word root or branch is meant to give people hope. In fact Jesus is called the "Branch from David's line" in Jeremiah (33:15). Or a "shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse" (vs. 1). God gave to the Old Testament people this hope of a Savior. And now he is saying to the unbelievers on Judgment day, since you have rejected the one hope of salvation in Jesus, you face an eternity without hope. This is a disturbing picture, because we know people who we worry may be part of those who don't believe.

And so here we have this horrific, terrible picture of Judgment Day for some, and then we have this other picture of Judgment day for believers in Jesus Christ. "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves." (vs. 2) There are two amazing pictures in this verse. Just as the sun rises and its rays cover everything so also the righteousness, or holiness, that comes from the Son (spelled Son) of God is poured out on us. And there is healing. The healing that is mentioned here is more than just physical healing. It's a total and complete healing, a spiritual healing so that our sin is gone from our lives forever. Our bodies will be transformed and perfect in every way. And since he know we have a hard time imagining what a perfect life will be like in heaven, he says, you are going to be like a calf who has been locked up for years and you will be leaping and frolicking with joy. Judgment day for a believer will be an amazing day that's difficult for us to even comprehend.

But why is there a distinction? I mean we know that the bible says that those who believe in Jesus as their Savior have eternal life and those who don't, get eternal damnation. Why such a vast difference between the two? Couldn't God make an exception? I recently heard this illustration of the days of the pioneers, when men saw that the prairie fire was coming, and knew that they couldn't outrun it, they would burn the grass in a designated area around them and they would take their stand in the burned area and be safe from the prairie fire. It didn't matter that they were surrounded by flames, since the grass had already been burned they were safe. When the Judgment of God comes like a furnace there is one spot that is safe. 2000 years ago the fires of hell were poured out on Calvary on Jesus Christ. So now we take our stand with Christ, the one place that is safe. That's what believing in Jesus means. It means that you know that he is the only safe place.

The bigger question that I want you to think about for today is what does this twofold promise of punishment and of joy on Judgment Day motivate us to do? And I believe the way you find out the answer to this is by asking the question "If you knew Judgment Day was tomorrow, what would you do?" I think there are two natural reactions that Christians have to that question. The one natural reaction is fear and worry for anyone who you might even think could be an unbeliever. I would think about all the people that I at one time thought to myself, "Someday I should talk to them about Jesus". I think I would call them right away, starting with my closest family members and friends. But the other reaction is joy and excitement. We finally get to meet our Savior. We finally get to be done with this world of sin and pain. Urgency in our work as Christians because we are up against the clock and joyful anticipation of a perfect life without sin is what this teaching of Judgment Day gives to us. And the only thing that gets in the way of urgency and joyful anticipation is forgetting this promise.

Malachi was writing to a group of believers around 400 BC. They had fallen into spiritual apathy that was slowly killing their faith. The people started living their lives without urgency and without joyful anticipation of Judgment day and he addressed it in the rest of his book. He talked about sacrifices of animals in the temple that were diseased and crippled. He talked about how their offerings to the Lord weren't generous, and even accused them of stealing from the Lord. And he had a section there on unfaithfulness to your spouse. His point is this: When you forget about Judgment Day, the horrific picture on the one hand for unbelievers, and the joyful image for believers, it affects your life and can ultimately affect your eternal life. We see this happening in our own world. Spiritual apathy is seen among Christians all over, in our country, in our community, in our church, in ourselves. When we see someone's faith falling apart because they have disconnected themselves from the church or from God's Word, do we put off those hard talks and just hope it will fix itself? Where's the urgency? Or are there times when we ourselves have a defeatist attitude and spend way too much time complaining about stuff going on in our world or in our lives? Where is the joyful anticipation of victory when we see our Lord? There will be a great divide on Judgment day between believers and unbelievers. There will be no question on that day who is who. But the world should be able to see before then that there is a difference between us and them. In the way we live our lives, spend our money, spend our time, treat our family members and neighbors, in the way we talk about our faith with others, in the optimism we have about our life because we know what is coming. At times it's like we've forgotten, the urgency of the situation and the joy that is ours because of Judgement Day.

So he says remember. "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel." (vs. 4) This isn't just talking about the 10 commandments. This is talking about all of God's Word and his promises to God's people and to the world. He puts them in front of us so that we remember. Remember how seriously God views sin. Remember how helpless you were to get out of those sins. Remember what your Savior did to take away those sins. Remember the promises of a home in heaven that will be yours when you die. Remember that you may not make it to the day of your death because Judgment day is coming. Remember that there are people all around you who don't know their Savior and how much they need the message that you have. Remember the victory and the joy that is yours that not even Satan can take from you. Malachi knew that the solution to spiritual apathy was to point them back to God's Word, his promises and the reality of a God who one day will publicly make this great distinction between those who believe and those who don't.

And when we forget God puts in front of us his word again. Because the people here would forget again. God already gave them Malachi and many prophets before him. And while Malachi was the last prophet in the Old Testament to remind god's people of their promises, there would be another prophet. One is mentioned here. It says, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." Now Elijah had already been dead for 500 years by the time Malachi wrote this. But the future prophet that is referred to as Elijah here is John the Baptist. The Lord said about John the Baptist 400 years later in the New Testament, "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:17) John the Baptist was going to preach God's Word to a people who had forgotten about these promises. And many people turned and believed in the Lord through his preaching.

God continues to put prophets in front of his people to pull them out of a spiritual apathy so that they remember the promises of God. He wants his people to have a fresh sense of urgency for our job as a church and as individual Christians, he wants us to live with an eager optimism as we think about the joy that is ours. And now the prophets that he's put in front of his people are me and you. We have God's Word. We have his promises. And the one promise left that has not been fulfilled is his promise to return.

If you knew Judgment Day were tomorrow, what would you do? How would you feel? Again, there would be two powerful reactions. There would be an urgency to talk to anyone who you even thought might be an unbeliever. So on the one hand this frantic stress and worry for the unbelievers that you know. But at the same time, an eager anticipation to meet your Savior and to go home. So, is Judgment Day coming soon? And how do I know that? Well, I don't know when exactly Judgement Day will come. But I know it will come soon. Jesus said that first of all. But even before Jesus spoke those words, Malachi speaks these words in his final Old Testament book in 400 BC. As he looked at this vision in the future of John the Baptist and the final Judgement day, he saw it kind of like a person sees a mountain range. They look like they are right next to each other from a distance but in reality they are far apart. So Malachi saw this beautiful picture of the future, including John the Baptist who we know came 400 years later. And now here we are 2000 years later waiting for Jesus final return. I don't know how soon, but we know it will be soon. Christians of the past have lived their lives assuming this final coming is almost here. It gives urgency to our job as Christians, and with a joyful anticipation of our final home. That's a healthy way to live our Christian life. May God help us to do that. Amen.