



# KIAMA ANGLICAN CHURCHES

## **Am I Prepared?**

**Sermon – Trevor Ackman**

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Malachi 4:1-6 / 2 Peter 3:9-15



It's the beginning of a new day; the sun's rays are just starting to break over the horizon. Even at this early hour temperatures hover around high 30s. Within a couple of hours, it will rise to mid-40s where it will remain all day. There is an eerie silence. It is almost as if the wildlife realises that in this harsh environment energy must be conserved. There is not a cloud in the sky or even the suggestion of a breeze which could bring the much needed rain. The plants hang limp and listless, a tinder box, virtually waiting for disaster to strike. Then the sun's rays reflect against something lying in one of the fields. Perhaps it is a piece of glass, or a rock. Soon the first telltale puff of smoke drifts aimlessly heavenward. When the flame comes it meets no resistance in the parched fields. The destruction is horrific.

Compare that with the scene a couple of kilometres down the road. A musty, old shed is surrounded by bare rock. Nothing grows in that harsh environment. Some calves are locked inside. Perhaps the farmer put them there a few days ago to protect them from the sun and has forgotten about them. When the door is opened they stagger into the sunlight on uncertain legs. The brightness hurts their eyes. But soon they are frolicking carelessly through the burnt out fields. It's great to be alive. In one case the rising of the sun brought great destruction. In another it brings freedom and joy and excitement. In the same way, the day of judgment will bring agonising despair for some and unspeakable joy to others.

I'm too young to have heard any of those good old hell fire and brimstone preachers but I gather they had real style. Not too much finesse in their message, but you certainly wouldn't doze off during the sermon. I was reading about an Irish evangelist, Billy Nicholson, who was so graphic that people reported "smelling the pungent odour of sulphur burning in their nostrils as they left the service". Turn or burn was one of his favourite

sayings. He may not have been too subtle, but at least you knew you had a choice to make.

Malachi was none too subtle in his message either. In chapter 3 the people had asked, "What's the point of serving God? Evil people seem to get away with it and are prospering. Why bother with God when he doesn't seem to care?" Malachi replies to such criticism by this graphic picture of the day of judgment.

Even though the wicked seem to be doing alright now, their good fortune won't last. The time is coming when God will say, "Enough!" When God acts, all those who don't belong to him will be destroyed. But the righteous, those who faithfully followed God and his ways, will be renewed. Malachi compares their joy to calves leaping from their stalls - it will be great to be alive. On that day everyone will realise how great God really is - although sadly, for some, that realisation will come too late to help them.

"What's the point of serving God?" On the day of judgment that question will sound almost facile. When the fireworks start, none of us will dare question God's authority. There's nothing like the final judgment to refocus your faith!

The day of judgment will be a terrible affair. Woe to those who fall under the wrath of God.

And yet, God will not take any pleasure in judging people. In the passage from 2 Peter 3:9 we read, "God is not slow about his promises, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (3:9) God takes no pleasure in judging us. Rather he seeks a relationship with each one of us. That is why he gives people so many opportunities to turn from their sin and accept his forgiveness and be saved.

The same thought appears in Malachi. Read verses 5-6; did you notice the last sentence?

*He will turn their hearts...or else he will strike the land with total destruction.*

God has no desire to curse the earth. We are his people... his creation. He designed us to enjoy fellowship with him. That's why he gave Israel so many chances – so many opportunities to repent of their evil ways and return to him – with the assurance of forgiveness.

**V 4 Remember!** When God gave his law to Moses it signified the special bond that existed between God and his people.

**Remember** how I treated you in the past. I have given you so many opportunities to repent before that terrible day of judgment.

Elijah was one of a long line of prophets God sent to encourage his people to return to him. So what was Elijah's special task? To turn the hearts of **parents** to their children. Or if you get rid of the politically correct language a better rendering is to turn the hearts of **fathers** to their **sons**. Who are the fathers in the Old Testament? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So what did the coming of Elijah achieve? He brought rebellious Israel back to the covenant that God made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, that is he brought Israel back to trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

So how can Israel renew its faith? By remembering... what God has done for them in the past. By remembering... the covenant at Horeb where God first promised, **“I will be your God and you will be my people.”** When Elijah came Israel had gone off the rails. Few acknowledged God. Rather, most chose to follow the so called ‘gods’ of the heathen countries surrounding them. Elijah had a ministry of reconciliation. The story of his conflict with the 400 prophets of Baal at Mt Carmel makes a great read (1 Kings 18). I encourage you to read it yourself.

When Elijah came the second time, Israel had once again fallen into their old habits. John the Baptist, the new Elijah, came with the same message - "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come." (Matt 3:2) The Jews were God's special people and yet they continually needed to be reminded of his love and faithfulness to them in the past.

Christians today have taken the place of Israel in the Old Testament. The Bible calls us the true descendants of Abraham. We have inherited the promises God gave to his ancient people. But sadly, we can also inherit their failings. Malachi ripped into Israel because they were in danger of losing touch with the living God. On the surface, life seemed to be going on as usual. But, as we've heard in earlier messages, it seemed they were just going through the motions. They had lost their enthusiasm... the fire in their belly... a long time ago.

I wonder what God thinks of our Christian lives today. I have no doubt some people here have a vital, growing relationship with God. They really enjoy being a Christian and they want others to know it. How well does that describe your walk with God? What priority does your relationship with God have in your life? Is it possible... we... could be accused... of going through the motions?

A couple of months ago Parish Council discussed the results of last year's Church Life Survey. It seems we are a proud evangelical church. Many responded they felt they had grown as a Christian in the last year. Church life was going really well. So then – it was quite a surprise to discover how few of us had invited a non-Christian to any church activity in the previous 12 months.

I once said in a sermon that most of my friends in Kiama come from this church. I know I said it because a friend who has recently moved from Kiama reminds me nearly every time we

speaking. As many know, we have recently bought a house and are just settling into a new neighbourhood. So far a number of neighbours have made an effort to make us feel welcome. One even came over as I was stuffing cardboard into our yellow bin (you know, all those boxes you accumulate when you move house) and brought over his own, nearly empty yellow bin – which I happily filled. I am very mindful of the opportunities God will provide for me to stand up for him if I am willing to be used by him. But I confess, doing that will probably take me out of my comfort zone.

After being a Christian for a number of years, there is a temptation to relax a bit... to begin to drift, just a bit... to let the urgency slip... to let my love for God, my compassion for non-Christians cool... just a little. Have you heard the old story about how to boil a live frog? If you place him in hot water, he will jump straight out. But if you put him in cold water and slowly heat it, he will swim around happily, until it's too late. Few people wake up one morning and suddenly decide they are no longer a Christian. It's a gradual process until, just like the stewed frog, it's too late to do anything about it. Is it possible you could slip away from God? None of us are immune from the danger – although it's unlikely any of us would admit it here.

Malachi's remedy is to remind us of God's faithfulness in the past. Look back to the covenant of Sinai as a visible reminder of God's love and commitment. As Christians in the 21st century, we also have to keep looking back, just as Malachi urged. We don't look back to Sinai but to an even more visible sign of God's faithfulness - we look back to the cross, where God demonstrated his absolute love and commitment to us. The second Elijah has already come. We live on the dawn of a new day. Nothing else has to happen before the day of judgment. What a tragedy if you or I lost the plot now! I am not talking

about losing your salvation (that is totally based on grace – God’s free gift to us) but our witness and ministry can become worthless at a time when our world desperately needs to discover the meaning and purpose that a living relationship with the living God provides.

Look back to the cross and then carry on to live the life God wants you to live. That’s not a bad way to finish our short series on Malachi. Let me conclude with one last thought. Are you surprised how relevant Malachi has been to people who live in a different age and culture? That’s because human nature doesn’t change. Neither does God’s love and compassion towards us. Amen.