

CHRISTMAS TRUTH - Making Spirits Bright - part three

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THE TWO MESSENGERS OF THE CHRISTMAS COVENANT

Malachi 3:1 - "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."

We can't imagine the anticipation in the prophet's mind as he posted this announcement. Little did he know there would be almost 400 years of divine silence. 400 years without prophet, miracle or vision. 400 hundred years before the heavens would sparkle with that divine star and the crisp night air tingle with angelic chorus.

We have the comfortable luxury of looking back, pondering the advent manger at will. The meaning of Christmas is conveniently available for examination. In Malachi's day no picture of Christmas could be called to mind. It was all hidden behind the veil of the future. No picture of Christmas could be called to mind.

And so the Old Testament Scriptures close with the promise of two distant messengers yet to come. The first would prepare the way for the second. And the long, dark silence of heaven would end. The fulfillment of all the Old Testament dreams would come to pass. Divine light would shine as never before.

And we're meant to trace the *link* between the old dispensation and the new. Malachi faithfully traces out the *roots* of God's greatest gift to the world through the Old Testament Jewish covenant. Contrary to what our Jewish friends believe, these two messengers *have both already come*. We're not *waiting* for Elijah or Messiah's entrance into history. The divine Messiah to whom Malachi pointed his prophetic finger came *"to his temple."* He arrived while there was still a temple to come to. This messiah came before the second temple was destroyed. And no *third* temple exists.

It's worth laboring just a bit more to point out that the New Testament repeatedly signals the arrival of Malachi's promised messengers. The very closing words of the Old Testament predict the arrival of Elijah the prophet just *before* the arrival of the day of the Lord - **Malachi 4:5-6 - "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. [6] And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and**

strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Jump ahead 400 years. An angel brings heavenly announcement to aging priest **Zacharias** - **Luke 1:13-17** - "But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. [14] And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, [15] for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, [17] **and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.**"

This exact repetition of words is not blind luck. The plan of God is unfolding. And the way it unfolds is the **last** person to whom attention is drawn in the Old Testament as it ends is the **first** person on whom attention is focused in the New. John is **intended** to be seen as the connection between the **Jewish roots** and the **Christian fulfillment** of God's divine redemptive revelation.

In fact, to remove all possible doubt, Jesus Himself pinpoints this same historic significance of John - **Luke 7:27** - "This is he [John] of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" Notice, this is Jesus **quoting the prophetic words of Malachi** as He describes both John's mission and His own. He's saying, ***"We're those two messengers. We're the fulfillment of the last promise in the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures! Those words don't apply to anyone else. There's no one else to look for!"***

So John **prepares** the way for Jesus. And Jesus **explains** the significance of John. Let's examine each of these promised Christmas messengers:

1) **THE ROLE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IS ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE IN THE SCRIPTURES**

At first glance, he's just another in a long line of Old Testament prophets calling Israel back to her God. But this would be to miss something totally different about John. Like no one else before or since, John was a man of **two worlds**. He didn't come on the scene proclaiming the same laws and rituals of the Old Testament purification system. Yet he didn't proclaim the

fulness of the gospel covenant.

This is what's so different about John the Baptist. He constantly points out the people's sins. He calls them to his baptism of repentance. But he **doesn't** call them back to their sacrificial system and Jewish purification rituals.

We're meant to notice this. John doesn't do what Isaiah and Jeremiah and even Malachi did. He's consistently calling for inward brokenness of heart and repentance for wickedness **without** turning his listeners back to their religious system.

This is what the our text **predicted** John would do. He left people almost **between** the two covenants. He called for broken hearts. He called for an end to religious emptiness and hypocrisy. He made the people **aware** of their desperate inward condition. In other words, he was **preparing** them for the **bringer of the new covenant**.

When we get this picture of John it explains so many of the things the Scriptures say about him:

Luke 16:16 - "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it."

Notice, the Law (not **laws**, but the whole **Law**) and the Prophets (that is **all** of the prophets) were **until** John. So we know, from the lips of Jesus, that John somehow came **after** the Law and Prophets had served their primary purpose. They both closed **before** John. That's what Jesus clearly intended to say when He said the Law and Prophets were only **until** or **up to** John the Baptist. In other words, John the Baptist isn't **included** or **lumped in** with the Law and the Prophets.

But there's more. Jesus said something else - something very strange - about John the Baptist:

Matthew 11:11 - "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

So where do these words leave us? John comes **after** the Law and the Prophets. That is, he doesn't find his place among either of these. **But** his place in the kingdom of heaven is **less than all who will enter it after he.**

What can this mean, and how can it be? And my first point this morning is John comes on the scene **exactly** where God appoints him. His place is absolutely unique and God wants it perceived that way. It is precisely this unique place of John that makes him perfectly suited to **prepare the way for the God's redeeming Messiah.**

John is **greater** than all the prophets who came **before** him, but **less** than those who will enter the kingdom **after** him. John marks the turning point - the **axis** - on which the dawning of a new era hinges.

So **first**, John is **greater** than any of his predecessors because he marks the **end** of an old covenant where people were called to adhere to the **shadows** and **figures** of a promised, coming covenant. He came on the scene and called the people to repent **in their hearts** and get ready for the Old Covenant's **fulfilling sacrifice**. He didn't send the people back to the blood of bulls and goats, as all the other prophets had done. He pointed to the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the whole world.

This is what we must remember about the uniqueness of John the Baptist. He directed the people **away** from the **partial** to the **complete** - from the **temporary** to the **permanent**.

This is the glory of John's ministry. John sees the **dawn** - just the dawn - of what all the other prophets longed for. John points to Jesus Christ and says, **"There! Look! Come! This is what we've all been waiting for!"**

So this answers half of our question. It's not hard to see how John was **greater** than any who had come before him. John has one foot in each era. The Law and the Prophets were **until** John. But John saw what the others only longed for.

What about the other question? How can Jesus say John is **less** than any who enter the kingdom of God? - **Matthew 11:11** - **"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there**

has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. *Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*"

What does this mean?

John, for all his greatness, was *less* than the least *in* the kingdom of heaven because John's knowledge of the new covenant was *partial* rather than *complete*. He saw *more* than any of the prophets who had *preceded* him, but less than those who would *enter* the kingdom *after*.

True, John saw Jesus and cried out, "***Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!***" (John 1:29). But, as far as we know, he never saw Jesus' work *beyond* His sacrifice for sins. And while that is precious beyond telling, it is *not* the whole revelation of the gospel covenant in the New Testament.

So, while John saw more than many of his predecessors that it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin, he never captured the idea of Christ's resurrection from the dead. He never relished Christ's triumph over death. He never anticipated the blessing of an ascended High Priest who would live to make heavenly intercession for His church. He saw the Lamb of God slain, but not seated at the right hand of the Father.

The light of John's new covenant hope was stunted and short-sighted. What John was blessed to see was *true*, but no where near the whole glory of the new covenant. So he saw more than all who came *before*, but no where near as much as those who came *after*.

We can see these limitations even in John's own life-time - Luke 7:18-20 - "**....And John, [19] calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" [20] And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"**"

Poor John. He's in prison. He's forced to see the partying and celebrating of the enemies of the kingdom. And the Messiah who was to come - the One John saw and announced with such faith and vigor - *that* Messiah was supposed to come with His "***winnowing fork***" in His hand. He was

supposed to burn all the rebellious rubble in the mighty heat of His wrath.

But none of that was happening. The chaff was beating the wheat. And so John sends his disciples to politely ask whether Jesus might be the wrong candidate after all.

But this is all John knows. He saw the coming sacrifice of the Lamb of God, but he had no grasp at all of a marvelous coming kingdom in which the whole redemptive plan of God for this whole fallen world would reach a completion that would be both *global* and *eternal* - that its scope would extend far beyond delivering the Jewish people from the oppression of Rome.

That's why John was less than the least of those who actually would enter the kingdom of heaven. John came merely to call all people to *repentance*. He readied sinners to look beyond anything those animal sacrifices could ever accomplish. He *prepared the way* for the Lamb of God's death on the cross.

Let's move on. Our opening text from Malachi specifically mentions *two* coming messengers:

Malachi 3:1 - "Behold, I send *my messenger* [messenger #1] and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; *and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight* [messenger #2], *behold, he is coming,* says the Lord of hosts."

This is the messenger to whom we now turn our attention:

2) **THE SECOND MESSENGER IN MALACHI'S PROPHECY IS EVERYTHING THE FIRST MESSENGER YEARNED FOR**

And the first thing I want to look at is something that could easily slip by unnoticed. There is something significant in the way Jesus changes, ever so slightly, the exact wording of Malachi's famous prophecy. Look very carefully at these two texts back to back. Try to put your finger in each one to flip back and forth:

Malachi 3:1 - "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the

covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."

Notice that in this text ***God Himself is the speaker*** - "...he is coming, ***says the Lord of Hosts.***" That title - "***the Lord of Hosts,***" is never used for anyone but Almighty God in the Old Testament Scriptures. And notice something else. This divine speaker is still the one speaking in the last sentence - "***....I will send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.***"

Now, remembering these seemingly pesky details, take a look at how Jesus quotes this same prophecy in **Matthew 11:10** - "***This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'***"

Now, Matthew makes it very clear that Jesus was referring to John the Baptist. John was the first messenger sent to "***prepare the way before you.***" But the point to take note of is that last word in that sentence - "***....prepare the way before you***" - that "***you***" is the Messiah. Only, if you will remember, that "***you***" was a "***me***" in Malachi's prophecy.

Why does any of this matter? Because if the speaker in Malachi's prophecy is the "***Lord of Hosts,***" so that the speaker and the second messenger are the same person - in other words, if the second messenger is God Almighty - "***....he [John] will prepare the way before me....says the Lord of hosts***" - and if the second messenger in the Matthew text is the one being ***spoken to*** as the Messiah, the bearer of the new covenant - "***...Behold, I send my messenger before your face [John], who will prepare your way before you***" - then the Scriptures are bearing witness that the Messiah, the second messenger, is none other than the "***Lord of Hosts***" Himself. These two texts show them to be ***interchangeable.***

The second messenger - the one who has His way prepared by John the Baptist - the one who brings the "***covenant in whom you delight***" (Malachi 3:1) - is none other than the "***Lord of hosts.***"

As if to mark his own identity, he came, quite literally, to his temple - **Malachi 3:1** - "***....And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple....***" Jesus was constantly in that physical structure, the temple. And he so clearly marked it out as "***his***" temple, just as Malachi predicted. Remember how he drove out the money changers and turned over the tables - "***My***

house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations!” Indeed, this was the rightful **Lord** of the temple.

And this second messenger - this one identified with the **“Lord of hosts”** - came in a way that surprised even the first messenger, John the Baptist. John found it hard to believe that Jesus came and left the wicked standing without immediate judgment. As I pointed out earlier, it wasn't without reason that John asked of Jesus, **“Are you sure you're the one, or should we look for another?”**

John all but missed what Malachi pointed out. Jesus came with a different **kind** of covenant. He was the messenger of the covenant **“in whom you delight”(Malachi 3:1).**

Delight, indeed. And no wonder. Consider all the prophets who had lived and died seeing nothing but the wages is sin and the hopeless grave swallowing up millions upon millions.

But this covenant would be different. It was based in God's wrath being swallowed up whole by the Lamb of God. It was based on one who would come out of the grave and triumph over death. It was anchored on One who said, **“Because I live, you shall live also!”**

And, the greatest of all delights, it came in the divine flesh of one who died for the **ungodly**. It came with terms of grace and favor for the first covenant breakers - for those who **break** God's law. And it came, not for any people born of any one race, but for all who felt their own lostness and guilt.