

**+ Malachi 4:1-3 + The End Is Near + 3rd Sunday in End Time: Last Judgment + 18 November 2012 +**

“The end of the world is near.” What popped into your head when I made that statement? A strange preacher on a city street corner holding a big sign? A disaster flick as aliens or zombies or a giant asteroid threatens to destroy the world as we know it? Natural disasters and manmade wars devastating different parts of the world? Various talking heads on both sides of the aisle making claims before the election? People arguing about global warming and space junk and pandemics? The claim by ancient Mayans that the world will end on December 21, 2012?

We live in a world where everyone seems to have their own idea of how the world will end, but almost no one is ready for what's really going to happen. Some figure mankind will wipe themselves out any day now so they spend vast sums of money preparing for the impending apocalypse. Others think that if we all do this or don't do that we can prevent the end from coming. Still others think it'll happen thousands or millions of years from now. Most simply live in denial that the end is coming at all or at least don't care.

That's a temptation even for believers like you and me. Two thousand years ago, Jesus said he was going to come back to judge the living and the dead. The early Christians anticipated that Jesus could return any day now. That urgency, however, has nearly disappeared among Christians today. After all, 2000 years have come and gone. Who's to say it won't be another 2000 years or longer before Jesus actually returns in glory to judge all people? For that reason, it's important for us to remember that **THE END IS NEAR**. We need to be reminded that the Last Day, which could come at any time, will be a day of terrifying judgment, yet also a day of victorious comfort.

Hollywood has made millions trying to portray the end of the world. Something threatens the world's existence and a terrifying end certainly seems near, but then a hero or group of heroes step in, avert the crisis, and save the earth. As victory celebrations ensue, there's the hope that mankind will finally get along and the earth will be a better place.

Those movies can be exciting, thrilling, even terrifying, but for all their special effects and star-studded casts, they don't hold a candle to the Bible's descriptions of what's really going to happen on the Last Day. The Old Testament prophet Malachi's account, written 400 years before Jesus, is no less terrifying. ***“For indeed, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them,” says the LORD of Hosts, ‘not leaving them root or branches.’***

The Lord isn't trying to impress his readers with this description of the Last Day. No, here he sounds a stark warning to those who would reject him, those who would deny his existence and the authority of his Word, and those who commit wickedness against his holy will. The Lord's warning that his coming judgment on the Last Day will consume those who oppose him strikes terror in every heart, even yours and mine.

Every one of us deserves to be consumed by the fiery judgment of God's holy wrath. By nature, each of us is tempted to think we could stand up in the face of God's holy judgment like some movie hero, but who are we to confront the holy God? By nature, you and I are arrogant, lazy, foolish, and reluctant to do anyone else's will except our own. By nature, you and I are wicked. Now you might wonder, “How could you say that? I'm nice to my neighbor. I work hard at my job or at school. I take care of my family and try to do a good job with raising my kids. I even come to church on Sunday mornings.” Yes, that's all well and good on the outside, but what does your heart look like on the inside? What will the holy Judge see inside you?

Will he see the guilt of past sins you don't readily share with others? Will he see selfishness, arrogance, greed, envy, lust, rage, or laziness residing there? Will he find a self-righteous Pharisee or a despairing sinner? What will the Lord of hosts see on the Last Day? If he sees each of us for who we are, he'll see wickedness, and that, my friends, is what makes the Last Day so terrifying. It will be a day of judgment when the Lord's holy condemnation will consume those who have despised his gracious Word, who have depended on themselves, who ignored the warnings of the coming end, and who will be swept away like so much stubble and chaff into the torments of hell. It won't be a place where a cartoon figure with horns, a pointy tail, and a pitchfork resides, but a very real, very hopeless place, where thirst will not be quenched, where fire will not go out, where death won't bring relief, where darkness will never end, and where separation from God's love will be eternal. That makes you realize how terrifying the end of this world will be, especially because that will be the Last Day for so many in our world.

If that picture doesn't give you nightmares or wake you up in a cold sweat, I don't know what will, because it puts our lives of sin into a whole new light. For those who trust the Lord, however, the end of the world will be a very different day. Consider what the Lord says, ***"But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall."*** Yes, the Last Day will be a day of terrifying judgment, but also a day of victorious comfort. For unbelievers, the picture of the Last Day looks dark and grim because of God's judgment, but for believers, the picture is starkly different. The Last Day will be a day of warm, glorious sunshine. All the cold, grim darkness of sin and guilt, temptation and cross and death will vanish as the ***"Sun of righteousness"*** rises on that glorious day ***"with healing in its wings"***. On that Day, Jesus will come in righteousness to bring healing to his people like the warm rays of sunshine on an early summer day. On that Day, Jesus will restore his people removing their guilt and the effects of their sins forever and clothing them in his own righteousness. Believers will stand before the holy God in judgment and enter eternal life not because they themselves shined so brightly, but because Jesus did. He lived a perfect life in our sin-darkened world. He allowed his own blood to be shed to wash away our guilt. He rose from the dead so he could call each of us from the grave on that Last Day clothed in his own righteousness as the hymnwriter once wrote, ***"Jesus, your blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress; mid flaming worlds in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head."*** (*Christian Worship* 376:1)

It will be a day of great comfort, because on that Day, Jesus will wipe away your tears of grief as he reunites you with all your loved ones in the Lord. Jesus will heal the sorrow that has hurt your heart for so long and remove the guilt that has poked and prodded and cut you over the years. Jesus will remove the effects and consequences of sin and give you a new, glorious, imperishable body like his own. Above all, you'll be with him.

It will be a day of great joy. ***"...You will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall."*** Most of us don't normally get to see calves leaping around the corral in the spring, but we get to see our kids and grandkids burst out into the yard and over to the playground when a long Syracuse winter finally thaws enough for the kids to play outside. Even as adults, when that spring finally comes around, you just have to get outside. Now take that excitement and multiply it by infinity and then you start to get an idea of the joy you'll have on the Last Day. You'll see and hug and talk to your loved ones in the Lord again. You'll finally know what it's like to be free of that wretched sinful nature that has plagued you since conception. You'll finally know what it's like to no longer have Satan knocking on the door of your mind with temptation. You'll bask in the eternal warmth of the ***"Sun of righteousness"*** and enjoy that glorious, eternal, joy-filled Day.

It will also be a day of great victory. ***"You will trample the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I am preparing", says the LORD of hosts."*** Now that might sound like a very strange, even disgusting, description of the Last Day. No, the Lord is not predicting that every unbelieving soul will be annihilated by some nuclear holocaust with only believers populating this world. Instead the point of such vivid imagery is that you will get to share and participate in the victory that Christ will demonstrate on that Last Day. No longer will you be subject to the attacks of the sinful world around you or the devil beside you or the sinful nature within you or death behind you. Instead, you will enjoy the full victory that Jesus won for you because he conquered sin, death, and the devil for you. Full and complete victory will be yours through your Lord Jesus Christ.

Now back in the late 1990s, there was a popular song that went "It's the end of the world as we know it...and I feel fine." Yes, the end is near and you and I as children of God can "feel fine" about how the great and glorious Day of the Lord will turn out for us, but that doesn't mean we sit back on our laurels as we wait for Jesus to return.

No, knowing the end is near should give each of us a sense of great urgency. We know what's coming. We know how the Last Day will either be terrifying or comforting, yet you and I have the one message that transforms the Last Day from terrifying judgment to victorious comfort for people we know and love. Share with them the bright warmth of ***"the Sun of righteousness"***. Explain to them why you have nothing to fear when the end of the world does come. Point them to the Savior, who in his grace, will make that day comforting, joyful, and victorious, even for sinners like you and me. Yes, the end of the world is near, but until that Day comes, we have urgent work to do. May God fill us with hope-filled urgency as we look forward to the great and glorious Day of Christ's return! Amen.