

## "A people prepared for the Lord."

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The prepared people were very few numerically, and from a social and worldly standpoint were very insignificant, yet when the Lord Jesus Christ appeared in the humiliation which characterized His first advent they were there to greet Him.

It was particularly the office of John the Baptist to make ready that prepared people (Luke 1: 17). He was the chosen instrument of the Spirit of God, and by his preaching and the baptism of repentance things were brought to a climax, and godly souls marked by repentance and faith were manifested, just as also by his baptism the Messiah Himself was made manifest to Israel. Still, the process of preparation had been going on for long. The opening chapters of Luke give us a very attractive picture of some of these godly souls who had been prepared of God at a date nearly thirty years before John's preaching. The book of Malachi gives us a glimpse at a similar generation of faithful saints some three or four hundred years previously.

The Lord Jesus evidently appeared at an hour when the world was seething with unrest and when a general expectancy of some great event swayed the hearts of men. Scripture bears witness to this feature amongst the people of Israel (see Luke 3: 15). Secular history seems to indicate a corresponding condition in the heathen world. This latter is easily explained. The devil, though not omniscient, is very farsighted and is a close observer of the Divine Word and of the hearts and ways of men. He knew when Messiah was to appear according to Daniel 9: 26, even though saints neglected the sacred writings, and remained as a result in ignorance. He consequently agitated the minds of men, raising up false prophets and false "Christs" so as effectually to becloud the issue and confuse the inquiring mind. Moreover, he too had evidently been steadily working for centuries amongst the returned remnant of the chosen people, producing among them just that attitude of mind and that moral atmosphere that made the rejection of the Messiah when He appeared an absolute certainty. Just as there had been a work progressing in preparation for Christ, so had there been a work of preparation for Barabbas.

Now history has a remarkable way of repeating itself. This is not surprising when we remember that in all ages and under all circumstances man is just man, and God Himself immutably the same. Hence men are continually doing the same things and God is continually acting towards them according to the principles of His holy and righteous government; the consequence being the repetition which is so frequently noticed. In keeping with this we find indications in the New Testament that there is a similar work of preparation in progress for the now near-approaching second advent. The same two currents are running swiftly in the course of present history. We do not for the moment pursue this side of the subject, and only mention it in order that with greater interest we may follow the course of the two totally opposed currents as they flowed before the first advent, and be better able to appreciate the light which it all sheds upon the path of the saint to-day.

Let us then first turn our thoughts to Malachi, whose prophecies were uttered more than a century after the return of a remnant of the captivity to the land of their fathers under Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra. During these many years there had gradually supervened amongst them a haughty and self-satisfied spirit. They did not now drift off into idolatry as their fathers had done, but the devil darkened their thoughts by pride so that they were content to pursue the round of outward religious observances whilst their hearts were far from God. And not only this, but when the Lord remonstrated with them through the prophet and laid their sins at their door, they simply met such remonstrance with petulant

and impertinent inquiries as to when they had ever been guilty of the sins alleged. They were utterly intolerant of criticism, and not prepared for one moment to admit that anything at all was amiss with them!

Note the following excerpts:-

"I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, Wherein hast Thou loved us?" (Mal. 1: 2).

"You, O priests, that despise My Name, and ye that say, Wherein have we despised Thy Name?" (Mal. 1: 6).

"Ye offer polluted bread upon Mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted Thee?" (Mal. 1: 7).

"And this have ye done again . . . insomuch that He regardeth not the offering any more . . . Yet ye say, Wherefore?" (Mal. 2: 13, 14).

"Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied Him?" (Mal. 2: 17).

"Return unto Me . . . saith the Lord of Hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?" (Mal. 3: 7).

"Yet ye have robbed Me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed Thee?" (Mal. 3: 8).

"Your words have been stout against Me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against Thee?" (Mal. 3: 13).

These extracts show that already the mass of the people were developing the frame of mind so strikingly described by the Lord Jesus as being like the children of the market places who say, "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented" (Matt. 11: 17). When the Lord declared His love for them, instead of rejoicing, they merely asked wherein He had loved them, inferring thereby that they did not accept His assurance, since they considered His dealings harsh and that they themselves were but victims — injured innocents, in fact. When He plainly laid their sins before them, instead of repenting they simply declined to admit that any such sins existed with them.

Moreover, in all the profanation of the things of God which marked those days, the priests were the ringleaders (Mal. 2: 1-10). Instead of leading the people to God, they "departed out of the way" themselves; they "caused many to stumble at the law," they "corrupted the covenant of Levi." Consequently no one would open the temple doors unless he made some profit by so doing, and the people were infected by the same spirit, and if they contemplated bringing an offering, they carefully looked over their flocks so as to bring to the Lord the most miserable specimen they could find! And all the while they considered themselves in the pride of their hearts as being quite above criticism, and the weight of public opinion was altogether in their favour, for, said the prophet, "Now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up." (Mal. 3: 15). Thus rolled on the current of religious iniquity that was to terminate in the cry, "Away with this Man, and release unto us Barabbas."

Another current, however, had begun to run its course, gaining its impulse from the Spirit of God. It appears to have been largely beneath the surface, and hence much less conspicuous, and to have had an appearance of but little strength, still it was there. "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another" (Mal. 3: 16). There began to be manifested a true remnant of God-fearing souls within the remnant of the nation that had returned from captivity.

Three things characterized these godly souls of Malachi's day:-

1. They "thought upon" Jehovah's Name (Mal. 3: 16). A person's "name" sets forth what he is, it expresses also his reputation. These God-fearing folk cared for Jehovah's reputation. They cared for what He was, and judged of things consequently not by the way those things affected themselves personally, but by the way they affected Jehovah's name and interests. In short, they reversed the popular order and set Jehovah's interests in the first place.

2. They "served" God (Mal. 3: 18). Their thoughts of Jehovah's Name found practical expression in service. They were not mere thinkers. This is a great point, for it is quite possible for the true saint whose mind is in the right direction to fall short of what is practical. To think without serving is nearly as bad and ineffectual as to serve without thinking.

3. They "spake often one to another" (Mal. 3: 16). Speech as well as thoughts and actions came under Divine control. The heart being full, the mouth spoke, and intercourse and fellowship together in the things of God were enjoyed. All this was pleasing and acceptable to God.

Thus far does Malachi carry us. The two currents are plainly discernible. The second current terminated in the great confession of Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

We leave Malachi and come to New Testament times, only to meet with the two currents again. The early chapters of Matthew resume the history of the first: the early chapters of Luke that of the second.

In Matthew 2 the scenes are cast largely among the grandees of the day. We move in thought amongst venerable priests and scribes of the Sanhedrim, and in the court circles of the godless Herod. What do we find? We find a state of things, which, had not Malachi's prophecy prepared us, we should have deemed well-nigh incredible. The Messiah, the long-expected Deliverer is born, and Jerusalem knows nothing of it! The months roll by and still not the faintest inkling of the great event has reached the religious or civil authorities! Presently, wise men from the East, semi-pagans in all probability, arrive in Jerusalem with the tidings, and proceed to instruct the men who were supposed to be the link between God and the people. Malachi had said, "The priest's lips should keep knowledge . . . for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (Mal. 2: 7). Here, however, the priests had no knowledge to keep. Semi-pagans got the glad tidings of great joy before them and became the instructors of priestly ignorance. So long a time had elapsed between the Nativity and the news reaching the authorities, that Herod had to fix two years as the limit in his vain attempt to ensure that the Messiah should be slain. Thus did God pour contempt on all the priestly pride which Malachi had reprovved.

And this is not all. Consider the effect of the news when it came to hand. "When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." That Herod should have been troubled is not surprising; he was an alien on the throne. But the leaders of the veritable people of God and the people themselves were troubled also. Instead of hailing His advent with great joy, they were filled with consternation. It seemed to them an intrusion, a disturbing factor in all their schemes. They were not prepared for God to thrust Himself into the midst of their concerns. The current of Satanic preparation for His coming had greatly increased in volume. If the cry of "Not this Man but Barabbas" appeared a probability in the light of Malachi's indictment, it is now a certainty, and inevitable.

We turn to the first and second chapters of Luke, and what a contrast we find ! Far from the ignoble strife of the madding crowd of Pharisaic and Sadducean religionists or the vicious courtesans of Herod and his court, were at least a few saints better known in heaven than on earth. Zacharias and Elisabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, the nameless shepherds caring for the flocks by night, were representatives of a larger number. How strongly that other current beneath the surface is flowing! Here is a people in touch with heaven! "An angel of the Lord appears to this one. Gabriel visits another.

On a third occasion the angel of the Lord with a multitude of the heavenly host comes into evidence. By a few the advent of the Messiah was known before ever He came. His approaching birth formed the theme of conversation between holy women. When the great event was an accomplished fact, hardly an hour passed before the God-fearing shepherds were apprised of the fact. They needed no wise men from the East to inform them that the King of the Jews was born.

In this people we see the three characteristics mentioned by Malachi. They thought upon Jehovah's Name, as evidenced in the inspired utterances of Mary and Zacharias. They served God and spoke often one to another, as illustrated by Anna who "served God with fastings and prayers night and day," and who, having actually seen the child Jesus in the temple, "spoke of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem." The characteristics are not only there but intensified, indeed things come to light which surpass anything mentioned in Malachi, for in Simeon the Holy Spirit was working with singular energy. Though as yet the Spirit could not indwell, yet He was *upon* him. Through the Spirit he had a *revelation*, and by the Spirit he was *guided* into the temple at the exact moment to meet the child Jesus.

As a consequence Simeon was a prophet. His words to Mary, the mother of our Lord, show that he foresaw the rejection and death of the Messiah, and they breathe a remarkable spirit of devotion and love. Here was this aged saint who had spent a long life "waiting for the consolation of Israel," and now just before his eyes must close in death he is permitted to see as an infant the One who is the fulfilment of his hopes. The actual day of Messiah's manifestation to Israel he can never hope to see. Might he not very naturally have bewailed his hard lot in having to die just as the fulfilment of his hopes was in sight? Yet as a matter of fact he simply said, "Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace." Not only did he foresee the approaching tragedy of the Cross, but his heart's love centred in the Christ of God. If the Christ is to go, he is content to go. He has no wish to live if Jesus is to die!

Behold then a people prepared for the Lord morally: it remained for John the Baptist to baptise with the baptism of repentance and thus prepare them positionally. Just as in Matthew 2 we see Malachi's picture of the people reproduced in an accentuated form, so here is Malachi's picture of the remnant in an accentuated form, and they received the Christ with great joy. Simeon stands before us as a watcher for Christ; Anna as a witness to Christ. They were ready.

It is a thrilling story. How deep the interest, whether joyous or painful, according as we look on this side or on that! Yet our situation today is no less thrilling did we but know it. It is easy, however, to discourse upon what has been, or even upon what is yet to be, and alas! so difficult to realize and correctly estimate the situation that is.

We draw near to the close of the church's history. The coming of the Lord is nigh. The rolling tide of religious iniquity that is to terminate in apostasy, yearly grows in volume. More and more bold and blasphemous become the denials and negations of men who pose as religious leaders. More and more reckless and God-forgetting become the poor men and women of the world. And the saints? What of the saints of God? Is there a corresponding movement among them?

Let us narrow down this question to ourselves individually. If we do, it will certainly send us to our knees in the presence of God. The second coming is near. The two currents of which we have spoken are again plainly visible. Ask, Which of them bears me on its bosom? Am I amongst the watchers and the witnesses? Do I stand with loins girt and ready for the Lord?