

WHEN DOES CHRISTMAS BEGIN? IS IT WHEN SANTA CLAUS EMERGES FROM HIS NORTH POLE CASTLE AND CLIMBS INTO HIS SLEIGH ON CHRISTMAS EVE? OR IS IT WHEN HE EMERGES FROM HIS WAREHOUSE SLUMBER AND CLIMBS INTO THE STORE WINDOW ON SEPTEMBER 30TH?

IS IT THAT NIGHT WHEN ANGELS SANG AND SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FIELDS BY NIGHT, WHEN THERE WAS NO ROOM AT THE INN AND MARY WAS GREAT WITH CHILD AND STRANGE VISITORS FROM THE EAST CAME BEARING GIFTS?

OR IS IT WHEN A PRIEST NAMED ZECHARIAH SAW A VISION IN THE TEMPLE AND HIS ELDERLY WIFE ELIZABETH BORE A SON AMIDST STRANGE AND WONDERFUL PROPHECIES ABOUT HIS FUTURE AS THE ONE THAT GOES TO PREPARE THE WAY?

OR IS IT BEFORE EVEN THAT?

FROM GOD'S POINT OF VIEW, CHRISTMAS BEGAN AS STATED IN THE OPENING WORDS OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: "IN THE BEGINNING, WAS THE WORD... HE WAS IN THE BEGINNING WITH GOD, AND APART FROM HIM NOTHING CAME INTO BEING THAT HAS COME INTO BEING. IN HIM WAS LIFE, AND THE LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF MEN ..." [JOHN 1:1-4].

THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET ISAIAH WOULD LATER SAY, "UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN, UNTO US A SON IS GIVEN" [ISAIAH 9:6]. DAVID, ALSO AN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET, WOULD SAY OF THE CHRIST, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING THOU HAST NOT DESIRED... BUT A BODY THOU HAS PREPARED FOR

ME... I COME... IN THE ROLL OF THE BOOK, IT IS WRITTEN OF ME." [HEBREWS 10:5-7]

THAT'S HOW THE ETERNAL GOD BEGAN CHRISTMAS. BUT, FROM MORTAL MAN'S POINT OF VIEW, WHEN DID IT BEGIN? AT BETHLEHEM? WITH MARY? WITH ELIZABETH? OR BEFORE THAT?

TO ANSWER SUCH A QUESTION, WE LOOK TO THE EVENTS THAT LEAD UP TO THE START OF THE NEW TESTAMENT. IF THE COMING OF JESUS OPENS THE "NEW" TESTAMENT, WHAT "CLOSES" THE OLD? WHAT WERE GOD'S FINAL WORDS IN THE LAST BOOK BEFORE "MATTHEW?" WHAT WAS TO MARK THE JUMP FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW? AND HOW MUCH TIME AND LIFE ELAPSED BETWEEN GOD'S LAST WORD OF THE "OLD" AND HIS FIRST WORD OF THE "NEW"?

WE CAN'T SAY, LIKE THE CARTOON OF THE THREE WISE MEN ON CAMELS, ONE LOOKING AT HIS WATCH, WHO ADVISES THE TWO OTHERS, 'WE HAD BETTER PICK UP THE PACE, FOR IT'S ONLY TWENTY MINUTES B.C.!'!

BUT WE CAN GO TO THE START OF THE BOOK OF MATTHEW... AND THEN TURN A PAGE OR TWO BACKWARDS. THERE WE FIND A LITTLE SHORT BOOK BY THE NAME OF MALACHI. THIS MINOR PROPHET ONLY HAD SIX CHAPTERS TO GET HIS MESSAGE FROM GOD ACROSS TO THE PEOPLE AND PRIESTS OF ISRAEL. AND HE DOESN'T PULL ANY PUNCHES.

GOD IS CALLING OUT TO THE HIS OWN NATION. HE IS EXASPERATED WITH THEM, AND IT IS CLEAR HIS PATIENCE IS RUNNING OUIT. AMAZINGLY, THE

ALMIGHTY'S CRIES ARE MET IN RETURN WITH COUNTERCLAIMS AND EXASPERATION FROM AN ANNOYED AND INDIFFERENT CREATION! "I HAVE LOVED YOU VERY DEEPLY," GOD PROTESTS. "OH, REALLY? WHEN WAS THIS?" THE PEOPLE COUNTER. [MALACHI 1:2, PARAPHRASED].

THE BOOK GOES BACK AND FORTH LIKE THAT A NUMBER OF TIMES, THE EVER-PATIENT GOD BRINGING INDIGNMENT AFTER INDIGNMENT AS HE TRIES TO SHAKE HIS PEOPLE AWAKE TO WHO HE IS AND THE DANGER THEY FACED BY THEIR REBELLION AND ATTITUDE. HE, GOD; THEY, SUBJECT! AND THE PRIESTS COUNTERING CLAIM AFTER CLAIM, STATING THAT THEIR RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE SHOULD HAVE BEEN ENOUGH TO SATISFY WITHOUT COMPLAINT: "OH, YEAH? WHEN WAS THIS? HOW DID WE DO THAT?" (AND, BETWEEN THE LINES, "WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS SO UPSET WITH US?")

FINALLY, THE ALMIGHTY THUNDERS, "MY GREAT DAY IS COMING. BURNING LIKE A FURNACE. AND ALL THE ARROGANT AND EVERY EVILDOER WILL BE CHAFF, AND THE DAY THAT IS COMING WILL SET THEM ABLAZE." AND THEN, IN ONE FINAL BURST OF GRACE, "BEHOLD, I AM GOING TO SEND YOU ELIJAH THE PROPHET BEFORE THE COMING OF THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE DAY OF THE LORD. AND HE WILL RESTORE THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS TO THEIR CHILDREN... LEST I COME AND SMITE THE LAND WITH A CURSE." HE WAS REITERATING WHAT HE HAD WARNED A CHAPTER EARLIER: "BEHOLD, I AM GOING TO SEND MY MESSENGER, AND HE WILL MAKE THE WAY CLEAR BEFORE ME. AND THE LORD WHOM YOU SEEK WILL SUDDENTLY COME TO HIS TEMPLE... BUT WHO CAN ENDURE THE DAY OF HIS COMING? AND WHO CAN

STAND WHEN HE APPEARS?” TO PUT IT IN MODERN WORDS: GOD IS COMING TO HIS PEOPLE AS THE MESSIAH. AND HE IS GOING TO CLEAN UP DODGE – FULLY, COMPLETELY, TERRIBLY. AND ALL WILL KNOW IN THAT DAY THAT JEHOVAH GOD IS THE LORD.” [MALACHI]].

WITH THOSE FINAL PARTING WORDS, GOD HANGS UP THE PHONE.

...AND THEN IT IS SILENT FOR ABOUT FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS! THAT WAS A LONG TIME FOR THAT WARNING TO KEEP ITS PUNCH. WOULDN'T IT HAVE BEEN MUCH BETTER IF THE SCRIPTURE READ, “ABOUT A MONTH AND A HALF AFTER THE PROPHECY OF MALACHI, A PRIEST NAMED ZECHARIAH WAS CHOSEN TO MINISTER IN THE TEMPLE, AND AS HE WAS GOING ABOUT HIS DUTIES, HE SAW, STANDING BEFOR HIM, AN ANGEL...”

WHY DID GOD SEEM SO URGENT IN MALACHI AND THEN WAIT SO LONG TO DELIVER?

ONE CAN THINK OF SEVERAL POSSIBILITES:

- A) GOD MAY HAVE BEEN TESTING THE FAITH OF HIS TRUE BELIEVERS. “I LET YOU BE HUNGRY TO SEE WHAT WAS IN YOUR HEARTS, WHETHER YOU WOULD OBEY MY COMMANDMENTS OR NOT” [DEUT. 8:2].
- B) HE MAY HAVE BEEN DELAYING IN MERCY, THAT EVEN AS “THE DAY” APPROACHED, SOME MIGHT BE SHAKEN OUT OF THEIR ARROGANCE AND UNCONCERN AND THUS BE SPARED (PETER WOULD LATER SAY IN

HIS LETTERS, “REGARD THE PATIENCE OF THE LORD TO BE SALVATION”) [II PETER 3:15].

BUT THE FIREY DAY OF MESSIAH WAS COMING. SLOWLY, SURELY, THE HEAVENLY CLOCK TICKING THROUGH ALL THOSE SILENT YEARS. HISTORIC EVENTS AND PEOPLES AND TIMES WERE LINING UP, SO THAT “AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME,” HIS WORD WOULD COME TO PASS. [ROMANS 5:6].

AND THEN CAME THE DAY THAT ZECHARIAH ENTERED THE TEMPLE, ELIZABETH BECAME WITH CHILD, AND JOHN THE BAPTIST, THE MAN SENT “IN THE SPIRT AND POWER OF ELIJAH,” ENTERED THE SCENE.

WHEN JOHN GREW UP AND BEGAN HIS MINISTRY (TO PREPARE ISRAEL FOR THE MESSIAH), HE TOOK RIGHT UP WHERE MALACHI HAD LEFT OFF. “REPENT! PREPARE THE WAY OF LORD! THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND! REPENT!” THE PEOPLE WERE ABUZZ: COULD THIS BE THE LONG-AWAITED MESSIAH?

THEIR EXPECTATIONS AT JOHN’S APPEARANCE BROUGHT A MACHINE OF PROPHECY AND FAITH THAT HAD STOOD DORMANT FOUR HUNDRED YEARS ITS FIRST COUGHING AND SPUTTERING TO LIFE IN THE HEART OF ISRAEL.

BUT WITH THAT GLIMMER OF EXCITEMENT AND EXPECTATION CAME IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO FEARED GOD AND HIS WORD, A DREAD: WHAT ELSE OF THE PROPHECY OF MALACHI WAS ALSO “AT HAND”? JUDGEMENT, BURNING LIKE FURNACE. JOHN THUNDERED OF A MESSIAH COMING UPON ISRAEL WITH HIS WINNOWING FORK IN HAND, AND AXES BEING SET AT THE

ROOT OF THE LONG DEAD TREES OF HYPOCRISY, GREED, AND SELF-INDULGENCE THAT HIS PEOPLE AND LEADERS HAD DEVOLVED INTO. "FLEE FROM THE WRATH TO COME! REPENT!"

MULTITUDES RESPONDED, SUBMITTED, WERE BAPTIZED, PREPARED TO MEET SUCH A MESSIAH.

BUT OTHERS ASSUMED THAT HE WAS BUT A PAPER TIGER, PREACHING SCARE TACTICS FROM A GOD WHO TALKED BIG, BUT LATER PROVED TO BE NOT WORTH GETTING EXCITED ABOUT. "WHERE IS THE PROMISE OF HIS COMING?" THEY SAID, "FOR EVER SINCE THE FATHERS FELL ASLEEP, ALL CONTINUES JUST AS IT WAS FROM THE BEGINNING OF CREATION." (II PETER 3:4). THE MORE BRAZEN OF THEM PROCLAIMED, "THE LORD DOES NOT SEE," AND DISSED THE WARNINGS SO BOLDLY THAT EVEN THE PRIESTS CAME TO SAY, "SO, FROM NOW ON, BLESSED ARE THE ARROGANT. THEY TEST GOD, AND ESCAPE!" [MALACHI 2:17, 3:14-15].

SO IT WAS. GOING BACK TO THAT DAY THAT GABRIEL THE ANGEL FIRST APPEARED TO ZECHARIAH IN THE TEMPLE TO ANNOUNCE THE BIRTH OF THIS FORERUNNER JOHN THE BAPTIST, THE FAITHFUL WERE FILLED WITH EXPECTATION. THE WICKED AN ARROGANT WERE STILL WICKED. BUT THE MESSAGE OF HOPE FROM THE VERY BEGINNING HAD A DARK GRAVITY.

ZECHARIAH HAD BEEN STRUCK DUMB IN THE TEMPLE FOR APPARENTLY IRRITATING THE HEAVENLY MESSENGER.

WITH JOHN'S BIRTH CAME NEW SWEEPING PROPHECIES AS TO THE FUTURE
ROLE THE BOY WOULD PLAY. ALL WHO HEARD IT WERE AMAZED. [LUKE 1:65]

AND NOW, THE SAME ANGEL GABRIEL WAS SENT TO EARTH A SECOND TIME,
TO SOMEBODY ELSE, WITH AN EQUALLY STARTLING MESSAGE.

(READ LUKE 1:26-38).

IT IS UNDERSTATEMENT TO SAY THAT MARY WAS TROUBLED BY THE
GREETING [LUKE 1:29]. SHE WAS ELIZABETH'S RELATIVE, AFTER ALL. WHILE
THE GREAT MAJORITY OF ISRAEL WOULD NOT REALLY TAKE NOTICE OF JOHN
UNTIL HE GREW UP, MARY KNEW DETAILS OF HIS PROPHESED MIRACLE BIRTH
AND FUTURE MISSION.

AND NOW THAT SAME ANGEL WAS STANDING BEFORE ... HER. WHAT
SORT OF PROPHECIES WOULD SHE NOW HEAR PERSONALLY TO ADD TO ALL
THAT HAD GONE BEFORE IN THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS CONCERNING THE
MESSIAH?

SHE WAS NOT OUT OF PLACE TO REALIZE THE GRAVITY OF THE
SITUATION. AT LAST, THE FIREY SAVIOR WHO WOULD BE "VERY GOD OF VERY
GOD" WOULD COME ONTO THE PLAYING FIELD. THROUGH HER. THE
THUNDERING WARNINGS OF MALACHI LAY WITHIN HER WOMB. AND THIS
WORLD-CHANGER'S CHILDHOOD WOULD BE IN THE HANDS OF SHE AND HER
FIANCE JOSEPH... IF HE WOULD STILL EVEN HAVE HER!

SHE RESPONDED, "BE IT DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD." THE ANGEL DEPARTED. AND THE GREAT MACHINE OF GOD'S FULFILLED PROPHECY ROARED INTO LIFE.

AND THEN JESUS OF NAZARETH GREW UP TO BE A MAN. AN OVERNIGHT SENSATION WHEN HE STARTED HIS MINISTRY (HUMBLE BEGINNINGS NON-WITHSTANDING) ... BUT ONE WHO WAS GENTLE, MEEK AND MILD. INSTEAD OF FIRE AND WINNOWING FORKS, HE BECAME KNOWN FOR SHEPHERDING THE WEAK AND THE LOST, PREACHING HOPE TO THE POOR, SEEKING THE ONES THE PHARISEES HAD WRITTEN OFF AS UNWORTHY TO BE SOUGHT BY GOD.

HAD JOHN IN PRISION WAS TAKEN UP A BIT SHORT. HAD HE BEEN WRONG? AND ZACHARIAH? AND GABRIEL? AND MALACHI?

NO. "HEAVEN AND EARTH MAY PASS AWAY, BUT GOD'S WORD WILL NEVER PASS AWAY." JESUS HIMSELF WOULD SAY THAT NOT ONE JOT OR TITTLE OF THE LAW WOULD PASS AWAY UNTIL ALL HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED. INCLUDING MALACHI.

THE FURNACE-WEILDING MESSIAH WAS STILL COMING. BUT HE WAS NOT COMING THAT WAY YET.

SO, WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT DID THAT MEAN?

REMEMBER THE STORY PASTOR WARREN TOLD, A FEW SERMONS AGO, ABOUT THE JUDGE AND THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN A CRIME, WHO COULD NOT PAY HER SENTENCE?

HOW HE HAD LAID ASIDE HIS JUDGE'S ROBES, CAME DOWN FROM THE PLATFORM, AND PLACED PAYMENT ON THE RAIL IN FRONT OF HER? HOW HE HAD THEN BEEN ABLE TO RETURN TO THE PLATFORM, PUT ON HIS JUDGE'S ROBE, AND DECLARE THE FINE PAID, IF SHE JUST BELIEVED AND ACCEPTED WHAT HE HAD MADE POSSIBLE FOR HER?

IT IS A GREAT STORY, A GOOD WORD-PICTURE OF GOD'S SALVATION IN CHRIST JESUS.

BUT ONE THING IS MISSING.

IMAGINE A GANG OF TOUGHS, BROUGHT BEFORE A JUDGE ON SERIOUS CHARGES. IMAGINE THE JUDGE WARNING THEM, THREATENING WITH THEM, PLEADING WITH THEM TO RECONSIDER THEIR WAYS AND PREDICAMENT.

IMAGINE THEM BEING TOTALLY OBLIVIOUS TO HIS MERCY AND OF HIS AUTHORITY, IMAGINE THEM LAUGHING AT HIM, SNEERING AT HIM, INSULTING HIM TO HIS FACE, AND WALKING OUT OF THE COURTROOM.

NOW IMAGINE THE JUDGE TAKING OFF HIS ROBES, LEAVING THE BENCH. IMAGINE HIM DRESSING AS ONE OF THEM, AND GOING OUT, TRACKING THEM DOWN ONE BY ONE, SERVING THEM, TRYING TO WIN THEIR TRUST. PLEADING WITH THEM, WARNING THEM THAT THE CHARGES AGAINST THEM STILL EXIST, THAT THE TRIAL IS STILL COMING, BUT THAT THERE IS A WAY OUT, AND THAT WAY INVOLVES MEETING HIM AS FRIEND BEFORE THEY MEET HIM AS JUDGE. A WAY HE HAD DEvised IN WHICH JUSTICE WOULD STILL BE MET AND SATISFIED, BUT THAT THEY COULD BE FREED OF THE ENTIRE RAP.

IMAGINE SOME BELIEVING. TURNING TO HIM. SURRENDERING TO HIS TERMS. FINDING A NEW VISION OF HIM AS A POWERFUL FRIEND AND ALLY FROM THE HIGHEST OF PLACES. SEEING HIM BEHIND THE SCENES, WALKING ALONGSIDE THEM, EVEN AS LIFE OUTSIDE REMAINED JUST AS GRIM AND DECEPTIVE AS IT ALWAYS HAS.

IMAGINE OTHERS REJECTING THE OFFER. STILL SNEERING, STILL INSULTING, CLINGING TO THEIR OWN SUPPOSED SELF-AUTHORITY. EVEN BOOTING THEIR BENEFACTOR OUT, THE DOOR AND TELLING HIM TO GET LOST AND LEAVE THEM ALONE.

NOW IMAGINE THE FUTURE DAY COMING WHEN THE MESSIAH RETURNS TO FULFILL THE REST OF THE PROPHECIES OF HIS COMING AND PURPOSE. WHEN THOSE OUTSIDE HIS MERCY ARE SUDDENLY APPREHENDED AND HAULED BEFORE HIS COURTROOM FOR TRIAL. WHEN THE WICKED BECOME CHAFF AND LIFE AS WE KNOW IT IS BURNED AWAY.

THE JESUS OF JUSTICE, THE JESUS OF MALACHI AND JOHN THE BAPTIST, THE JESUS OF THE PROPHECIES OF RULE AND WINNOWING AND CONSUMING FIRE AND A DAY OF VENGEANCE ARE REAL. THEY WILL COME TO PASS, AS SURELY AS THE WORD OF GOD PREDICTED THEM.

BUT THE JESUS OF THE SHEPHERD'S FLOCK IS ALSO REAL. THE JESUS OF MERCY. THE JESUS OF A NEW LAW, A NEW COVENANT, THE LAW OF LOVE. THE JESUS OF THE CROSS SO THAT WE SHALL NOT FACE THE COURT AT THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGEMENT OF REVELATION.

THE JESUS THE FRIEND. THE “FRIEND WHO STICKS CLOSER THAN A
BROTHER.”

THAT IS WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT. MALACHI... AND MARY. MARY
FIRST. LET US PRAY.

OUTLINE TO FOLLOW:

OUTLINE

- A) WHEN DOES THE CHRISTMAS SEASON BEGIN?
 - a. AS THE WORLD SEES IT
 - b. AS THE CHURCH SEES IT
 - c. AS GOD SEES IT
 - d. AS WE SHOULD SEE IT
- B) THE BOOK OF MALACHI (OVERVIEW)
 - a. AN INDIFFERENT AND OFFENSIVE PEOPLE
 - b. ARGUING WITH THEIR GOD
 - c. A LAST CHANCE TO ESCAPE HIS COMING WRATH
 - d. A SIGN TO KNOW WHEN THE CONQUERING MESSIAH WOULD APPEAR
- C) FOUR-HUNDRED-YEARS OF SILENCE
 - a. FOR WHAT PURPOSE?
- D) JOHN THE BAPTIST
 - a. GABRIEL AND ZECHARIAH
 - b. A MIRACLE BABY
 - c. PROPHECIES ABOUT
 - d. HOPE AND DREAD
 - e. FULFILLMENT IN HIS MINISTRY AND MESSAGE
- E) MARY
 - a. THE SAME MESSAGE-BRINGER AS FOR JOHN
 - b. THE WEIGHT OF ALL THE PROPHECY

- c. HOPE AND DREAD: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
 - d. REASSURANCE AND PROMISE
 - e. A VERY DIFFERENT MESSIAH THAN JOHN'S
- F) WERE JOHN AND MALACHI WRONG? NO.
- a. TWO MESSIANIC MISSIONS
 - b. THE JUDGE AND THE FRIEND
 - c. TWO RESPONSES
 - d. FOR THOSE WHO IGNORE AND REJECT
- G) THE JESUS OF MARY OR THE JESUS OF MALACHI. EACH ONE'S CHOICE.