

Some things happen like clockwork. We can chart the ocean tides. We can plot the temperature averages by the day. But few things are as precise, reliable, and timely as the sun rising. For as long as the earth has been around, each and every day the sun has risen. It may be hidden behind clouds, the rain might be blocking its rays, but it rises every day and sets every evening. Like clockwork.

People get used to the sun rise. They're used to a lot of things. So much so that we don't always think that it could all end someday. What if the sun didn't rise one morning? What if we had no school or work to go to? What if things we've come to expect aren't there? We naturally push these thoughts out as too stressful, not realistic, simply couldn't happen. We convince ourselves the earth has been operating just fine for a long time; no reason to think it will stop.

600 years before Jesus walked the earth the Israelites had no reason to believe any different either. But soon their world was turned upside down in captivity. Their easy going world was now slavery. Of course, 200 years later they were comfortably back in the land they were forced from. That's when Malachi speaks, God's last prophet before a long silent period. God's voice won't be heard till the time of Jesus, but that doesn't mean he hasn't given them plenty to think about. Through the mouth of Malachi God's people know and so do we that...

**The Sun of Righteousness will rise
The Day of the Lord is coming
That day will bring separation**

The first day back at school brings plenty of enthusiasm. Notebooks are clean, pencils freshly sharpened, and everything is new. But soon enough homework piles up, assignments weigh down, and the teacher is disciplining again. Things aren't so new anymore and we lose our enthusiasm. God rescued the children of Israel from captivity, slavery actually. Babylon was behind them and everything felt new. Immediately they worshiped God with new enthusiasm. They offered him sacrifices with renewed interest. But soon problems started piling up. Other nations looked more prosperous. And God had to discipline them. They lost enthusiasm for God.

Malachi came on the scene as God's appointed prophet with a message of judgment. Israel had wronged God and they would be punished for it, again. Malachi called the people to repentance, but his focus was slightly different. It was the end goal that people had lost sight of and hope for. They were living outside of God's law because they felt it didn't matter. Malachi was to remind them the end was approaching, and paint a little picture of what it would be. **"All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire, says the Lord Almighty."** A sinner foolish enough to think they can escape judgment is just plain arrogant. God's promise is judgment for the future. The Day of the Lord is coming.

I'll be honest; there have been times in my 30 years when judgment day doesn't seem that real to me. You probably think the same thing sometimes. No matter how many years we've lived the only thing that may seem closer is our end, but not the end of the world. And even if there is an end, most likely it will come after we're gone. So we've got nothing to worry about. But truthfully most days the end of the world, the Last Judgment seems like a bunch of talk. Thinking judgment won't find us is sinful arrogance. God says judgment will find us. **"Surely the day is coming."** The prophet is trying to catch our attention. Prepare for a day of extremes. Don't be arrogant. But how can we not? We've broken God's laws and then laughed in his face when we weren't struck down.

My dad's favorite time of year is being on vacation in the Northwoods of Wisconsin and going fishing in the early morning. He hits the water by 6:30 right at daybreak, right before the sun rises. He has to dress in a sweatshirt and coat. But things change once that sun pops up. Warmth flows through him. The yawns of sleepiness slide away. The darkness fades with the sun. **"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings,"** Malachi writes. The Last Judgment's other extreme comes for those who know who God really is from the Scriptures. For those who know him as the Savior God. For those who know God like this, as the Savior, they're assured a different ending.

Who is the sun of righteousness? It might be a name that sounds familiar. The popular Christmas carol *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* contains this line, "Hail the heavenly Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, ris'n with healing in his wings." That carol speaks of Jesus our newborn king. The Bible's picture of Jesus as the sun means he shines down his righteousness on us. It's not a righteousness we have by nature. But his heavenly rays shine down on us who have longed to see him. His glorious beams warm people so their sin melts away. His brightness brings healing for both physical bodies and sin sick souls. Jesus is the sun of righteousness that will rise on the Day of the Lord.

We count down to things all the time. Numbers of days till birthdays, hours till the end of the day, or reps left on a particular exercise. We count down because we know there's a specific end. One thing we can't start a countdown clock on is when the end of the world will come, even though we know its coming. It may be relatively soon or it might be years away. It's no matter for us because God makes another promise about that day. When it comes, and it will, it's going to bring a separation.

To the untrained eye it looks like everyone is headed for the same end. Death awaits us all; a burial of some sort, and finally the world will forget us. But Malachi makes it clear there's more. A separation is coming. **"Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things."** The wicked and evildoers will be trampled under the foot of those who revere the name of the Lord. That's a huge separation. But does the separation only happen on Judgment Day?

While we might see it in many different places in our lives there's no question a separation exists between the rich and you and me. We follow the rules, do what we need to in order to satisfy different requirements, and still we may not make it in life. On the other side we might see big business owners constantly breaking laws, bypassing requirements, and succeeding in unbelievable ways. Where's the fairness? Maybe I should do what they do and not care so much about the rules or my conscience. This attitude can lead us to sin in a variety of ways.

God has promised if we want change then, we have to be on the right side now. To feel the sun's rays later we need to know the Son of Righteousness now. Everyone starts out the same as sinners. Seems like there's no separation. Notice Malachi's picture of calves. During the long winter of snow and freezing temperatures calves don't go outside. They stay in their stalls, preparing for the time they can go out. Believers are being prepared now. We're sinners connecting to our source for righteousness. Others are out enjoying their life now, but that's all they'll have. The Word separates us from the wicked. God grows our faith by baptism and the Lord's Supper. When we emerge from the long winter of this sinful world we're going to be hit with the healing rays of God's Son who took our sins away. The wicked will be lying dead in a heap of ash. During the Last Judgment we'll be running, jumping, kicking, and playing. Not trampled like the wicked. That day will bring a separation.

Few things in this world are guaranteed. But Malachi announces something that is; the day of the Lord. The Last Judgment may seem far away, like it won't affect us. God promises its coming. That day will bring a permanent separation we may never see here on earth. To enjoy that day later we look for something God's already promised and fulfilled. The Sun of Righteousness, our Savior Jesus, has come and has given to us the forgiveness of our sins that brings healing. Now we wait for a new day, the last day when the Sun of Righteousness will rise.