

Until There Is No More Need

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in an eight-part series

February 26, 2017

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Malachi 3:10 (CEB)

¹⁰Bring the whole tenth-part to the storage house so there might be food in my house. Please test me in this, says the LORD of heavenly forces. See whether I do not open all the windows of the heavens for you and empty out a blessing until there is enough.

Mark 1:14–15 (CEB)

¹⁴After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, ¹⁵saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

Revelation 21:1–5 (CEB)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. ⁵Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

No more need . . . not just a dream, but a vision . . . God's vision.

God promised Abraham that through him all the families would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). But if we take that simple promise and ponder its implications, we are left wondering what such blessings would look like, sound like, feel like. What does God really have in store for us and for all of his creation?

Last week, we got a glimpse of what God has in store for us when we learned that the early Christians reshaped their world. At a time when no one took responsibility for the sick and dying outside their own family, the Christians stepped up and took care of everyone, whether pagan or believer, rich or poor, slave or free. The mighty Roman Empire had never seen such a thing. The Christians' willingness to care for strangers changed those who encountered them. For these Jesus-folk, such caring was no more than the outgrowth of what they had been taught by their Master – they were to love all, even their enemies. So, here in the midst of ancient plagues, we get a glimpse of the blessing promised to Abraham.

When these early Christians cared for the sick and dying, it was a glimpse into God's future, the realization of God's vision and his promise to Abraham. But it was more than a glimpse; it had real and concrete implications for the future. The Good News that Jesus announced (see the Mark passage above) was true and it changed the world forever. The early Christians were building for God's kingdom and helping to make the truth of God's kingdom evident to all. In his commentary on Revelation, N. T. Wright speaks to this:

The picture we are gazing at in these chapters [Revelation 21 & 22] is certainly a vision of the ultimate future. Yet, as we have seen from the letters at the start of the book, there are signs that this reality keeps peeping through even in the present world of death and tears, of cowards and liars. Just as nothing we do in the present is *merely* relevant to the present, but can carry implications into God's future, so nothing in the vision of the future is *merely* future. Because the central reality of God's future is Jesus himself, and because Jesus is not merely a future reality but the one who lived and died and rose again and even now reigns in glory and holds

the seven stars in his hand, the reality of the new city, though still a matter of hope, is something to be glimpsed in the present, especially in the ways sketched throughout this book: worship and witness. The new city is not just a dream, a comforting future fantasy. Those who follow the lamb already belong in that city, and already have the right to walk its streets. God might have abandoned his creation in disgust because of Babylon's wickedness, just as he might have abandoned the Israelites in the wilderness because of the golden calf. But out of sheer mercy he will come to dwell with his people, and that mercy will flow out to flood the whole world.¹

Thus, the good works we do are not merely acts of compassion or kindness; they are making the reality of God's future visible today, i.e., enabling us to see God's vision fulfilled today. That is why it is a mistake to read a passage like today's from Malachi as some sort of tit-for-tat bargain between God and his people. Pay the tithe and I'll reward you with lots of blessings. Send in your money and you'll get that promotion or new job. Elizabeth Achtemeier makes the point well in her reflections on the Malachi passage. Note especially what she has to say in the second paragraph.

There is a true story of a man in Dade County, Florida, who sued his church for the return of the money which he had contributed to it. "I delivered \$800 of my savings to the ... Church," said the man in his court suit, "in response to the pastor's promise that blessings, benefits and rewards would come to the person who did tithe 10 per cent of his wealth. I did not and have not received these benefits." That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to "bring the full tithe" (v. 10). Motivating and accompanying all true gifts to God is the pouring out of our life, our love, our all. And when we so present ourselves, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, it is surely true that heaven's richest bounties are heaped upon us. "Heaven's windows ... swing upon love's hinges" (Morgan, p. 77). We find ourselves given graces anew every morning, too numerous to count—the glories of a good creation; joy in daily work; patience, kindness, self-control in the fellowship we have with one another; release from guilt and anxiety and dread of death; and above all, peace with God, who winds us round and round with mercy, as if with air. The Kingdom's goal—the glory of God—becomes our chief occupation, and we find all these other things added to us as well. As G. Campbell Morgan once preached, "When men come and say, 'Here we are, our interests, ourselves, our business—everything,' then the windows of heaven are never shut—never" (p. 78)! On that promise, Judah is here asked to found her love, her trust, her life.

Lying behind it all, further, is the purpose of God—to establish his reign over all human hearts. The promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 echoes through Malachi 3:12—the promise to bring blessing on all the families of the earth through Israel, God's chosen people. Judah is loved because God loves all peoples and wishes to open the windows of heaven's blessings for them also. But God can use his elected folk for that purpose only if they love and trust him and let him have his way with their life (cf. Exod. 19:5–6). Thus, that for which the Father pleads in this passage is his purpose of love for the earth, and he calls Judah to be the instrument of that loving purpose. So too does he call the new Israel, the church. "Give me ... a hundred men who love God with all their hearts, and fear nothing but sin," wrote John Wesley, "and I will move the world" (quoted in Morgan, p. 80). Give God a church that loves and trusts him, and all nations will be brought to praise his holy name in fulfillment of Malachi's vision of the Kingdom that is coming (1:11, 14).²

¹ Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 195–196). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster

² Achtemeier, E. R. (1986). *Nahum–Malachi* (pp. 189–190). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

“Lying behind it all . . . is the purpose of God.” That about sums it up. So the question, then, is what is our part? What are we to do? Since God has ushered in his kingdom and will bring it to all its fullness one day, how then should we live?

We, the people of St. Andrew, sum up our part in four verbs: we worship, we connect, we serve, and we give. We strive to proclaim the Good News in all that we say and do. As we say on our website: “At St. Andrew, we are your neighbors, your friends, and your co-workers—gathering together to experience Christ. We are a church that welcomes the skeptic, works to strengthen the family, and is committed to being externally focused and evangelistic. At St. Andrew we exist to impact the world through service and witness—with the love of Christ.

So we are embarking on an ambitious master plan for our campus that will enable us to meet the needs of those who come. We’ve built and are operating a medical clinic in the mountains of Costa Rica. Spark Tank spurred us to new and creative ways of serving others. Our long established and much needed local missions too are thriving. This weekend we are introducing a new identity for these missions:

The Storehouse is an organization focused on providing hope to the community of Collin County by feeding those in need through Seven Loaves Food Pantry, by supplying clothing for their families through Joseph’s Coat, and by providing relationship-based, in depth mentoring for women who desire to transform their lives and the lives of their family through Project Hope.

With an estimated 130,000 people in Collin County at or below the poverty level, more than half of which are children, the need in our own local community is significant. The Storehouse is a three-strand process that gives people in crisis the best chance for short-term assistance and long-term transformation.

Jesus’ announcement in the opening verses of Mark was a proclamation of the arrival of God’s kingdom, a kingdom built upon a foundation of sacrificial love. Of course, the kingdom’s arrival seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. In light of suffering and hatred, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom? How could Paul speak of Jesus’ victory on the cross (Colossians 2:15)? How can we be confident our work is not in vain? Because Jesus was raised. It is as simple as that. So, yes, God’s plan to transform, renew, and restore all of creation is to be worked out *through* us. And he has sent his Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us, so that we will not insist upon turning inward to our own needs, but will turn outward in compassion and caring. May we always be ready . . . until there is no more need.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. A vision of the future is built upon imagination; we imagine what things could be like. Even with our comprehension of God’s vision for us and our world, it takes imagination. Affirming Jesus’ resurrection takes imagination, an ability to grasp there is more to reality than what we experience in our daily lives. And grasping the reality of Jesus’ second coming takes more imagination yet. Revelation 21 & 22 are largely imaginative mosaics of God’s kingdom built on bits from Israel’s prophets. So . . . imagine away! Spend some time imagining that you live in a world in which everyone simply loves God and neighbor without fail. A world with no death, no grieving. A world in which you are always and joyfully aware of God’s presence. Such a vision is built upon the very best moments in our present world. Imagine away!!
2. But Jesus hasn’t yet returned. The arrival of the new heavens and new earth still lie ahead. In the meantime, we are to build *for* God’s kingdom. We can’t bring about the consummation of the kingdom, that is God’s work, but we can do much to make God’s kingdom evident to others. So we feed and clothe and heal. We are kind and compassionate. We are eager to tell the good news of God’s rescue to all

who would listen. What is your part in this? How are you building *for* the kingdom of God? What of your work will last more than a season or a year or a decade?

3. Since this is the last week in this series, discuss the ways in which building out the master plan for our campus will enable us to build for God's kingdom, to further our ministries, and to proclaim the Good News about Jesus. How can we make sure that the plan and all our work are congruent with God's vision for us and all of humanity?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Joshua 24:14-28 The renewal of the covenant and the people's promise to serve God

Tuesday, Malachi 3:10-18 The extended passage for this week

Wednesday, Matthew 20:20-28 Service as greatness

Thursday, Acts 6:1-7 The Christians organize themselves to meet the needs of all.

Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul appeals for unity and the use of our God-given gifts in the body of Christ.

Saturday, Habbakuk 2:1-4 Awaiting God's vision

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our new series starting Feb 26 -- *JesusCare: The early Christians and health care*