

The Work of Elijah

Repentance, Reformation & Restoration

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”
—***Malachi 4:5,6***

The expression, “great and dreadful day of the LORD,” is used in the Bible to describe a time when God will no longer permit the human race to continue in its selfish and sinful ways, unhindered by him. The prophets also speak of this period as the “day of the LORD’s vengeance,” and a “day of clouds and of thick darkness.” (Isa. 34:8; Joel 2:2) Jesus, quoting from Daniel 12:1, describes this as a time of “great tribulation.”—Matt.

24:21,22

A prototype of this “great and dreadful day of the LORD” came upon the nation of Israel in the destructive trouble which followed their national rejection by Jesus, their Messiah. For several hundred

years after Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, delivered his message to the Jewish people, there was no special indication that God was taking any particular notice of the people's waywardness; not until the appearance of John the Baptist, and following him, Jesus.

Through the ministry of these two servants of God, Israel was called to repentance and reformation, but the call was not heeded except by a few. (John 1:6-12) John the Baptist foretold that as a result of the failure to respond to this call to repentance and to accept their Messiah, dire calamity would come upon the nation.

Speaking particularly to the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, John said: "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire."—Matt. 3:7-11

Thus is prophetically described a "great and dreadful day of the LORD," as it was experienced by Israel in the years A.D. 70-73. It came upon the nation as a manifestation of God's displeasure over the sin and idolatry of the people from which they did not repent, even when a full and final opportunity

was given. The vengeance of God thus displayed resulted in the destruction of the nation and a scattering of the Jewish people throughout the world, which was to last for nearly two thousand years.

However, the day of trouble upon Israel pales in comparison to the greater tribulation foretold for the end of the Gospel Age—a “time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation,” which comes upon the whole world. (Dan. 12:1) In a more general way, this larger manifestation of God’s vengeance is due to the unbridled selfishness of nations, leaders—both political and religious—and society in general. These have not lived up to the righteous principles set forth in the Bible, nor have they adhered to the teachings and example of Jesus, who preached and lived by the law of love.—Matt. 22:37-40; John 13:34,35

Rather, many people and their leaders have promoted and participated in wars, revolutions, and all types of armed conflict. Most have worshiped their many idols rather than God. Indeed, for many centuries it seemed as though God was paying no attention. However, finally the time has come for him to act, to intervene in human affairs, and the result is a “time of trouble”—the “great and dreadful day of the LORD.”

Our text declares that prior to the coming of the “day of the LORD,” Elijah the prophet would be sent to attempt a work of reformation. Every devout Israelite looked for the coming of the promised Messiah, and to the divine government which the prophets foretold he would establish in the earth. Yet here, seemingly, was another important personality, a “prophet” who must also come and

accomplish a vast work of reformation prior to the “great and dreadful day of the LORD.”

There was still another personality, as the Israelites understood it, who had been promised in the writings of Moses. In Deuteronomy 18:15-18, under divine inspiration, Moses speaks of a “Prophet, ... like unto me,” who would give the people that which they desired at Horeb, which was the ending of God’s “voice” against them in order that they might live. This great one the Israelites were accustomed to speak of as “that prophet.”

Thus when John the Baptist began his ministry the Jews sent priests and Levites to question him for the purpose of learning just who he claimed to be. John denied that he was “Christ,” the Messiah. Then these messengers inquired, “Art thou Elias?”—or Elijah—having in mind the prophecy of Malachi. John’s straightforward reply to this question was, “I am not.” Then the messengers asked, “Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.”—John 1:19-21

However, as far as John the Baptist’s being the foretold Elijah was concerned, his negative answer to the priests and Levites did not entirely settle the matter. The angel who prophesied the birth of John said, “Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him [Jesus, the son of God] in the spirit and power of Elias [Greek for Elijah], to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”—Luke 1:16,17

This prophecy comes short of definitely identifying John the Baptist as the foretold Elijah. It simply

states that he would conduct his ministry in the “spirit and power” of Elijah. The Prophet Elijah had been fearless and courageous in the conduct of his work of reformation in Israel, and it was in this same spirit and power that John called the nation to repentance. In many respects John’s work was similar to Elijah’s, and certainly the courageous manner in which he conducted it was identical.

Referring to John the Baptist, Jesus said to the multitudes, “If ye will receive it, this is Elias [Elijah], which was for to come.” (Matt. 11:14) Here again we have a qualified identification of John—“If ye will receive it.” What Jesus meant was, that to those who were reached and reformed by John’s ministry, he was the promised Elijah. This indicates that the work of reformation described in Malachi’s prophecy is the key to its understanding, rather than a certain individual or individuals who might perform, or undertake to perform, that work.

We use the phrase, “undertake to perform,” advisedly, for the prophecy itself implies the possibility of initial failure, and explains what the consequences of failure would be—“lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” (Mal. 4:6) In other words, if the work of reformation described as turning the hearts of the children to the fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children, should fail, then a great curse would come upon the earth, ostensibly as a punishment to those who did not heed the message of the reformer.

We have an illustration of this in the case of John the Baptist and his ministry in Israel. Many gave heed to his call to repentance, and in doing so were blessed. However, the majority of the nation

did not. Not having heeded John's message, they were not prepared to accept Jesus as their Messiah, and were willing and ready to crucify him. In the outworking of God's plan this led to disaster for the nation. Within only forty years, and involving some of the very ones who rejected John and called for the crucifixion of Jesus, the foretold punishment fell. This was the destruction of their Temple and the city of Jerusalem, and later the Jews being scattered throughout the earth.—Luke 19:41-44; 23:20-23; Matt. 23:27,38; 24:1,2

Continued Call to Repentance

Since, as Jesus explained, John the Baptist was the foretold Elijah to those who could receive it, and not the Elijah to those who did not respond to his message, it is evident that we cannot properly look for the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy in and through a single individual. Rather, the name "Elijah" is used in the prophecy merely as symbolic of a work similar to that accomplished by the original Elijah. This was a work of reformation beckoning repentance, in which the people of Israel were called upon to return to their God, and to acknowledge his sovereignty in the nation.

Thus the foretold Elijah work would be a calling upon the people to repent, reform, and recognize that the "kingdom of heaven" was at hand. (Matt. 3:1,2) John the Baptist began such a work, but it was by no means concluded with him. Matthew 4:17 reads, "From that time [following John's ministry] Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This was the same message as had been previously delivered by John.

In Mark 6:12 we read that when the disciples of Jesus went out into the ministry they “preached that men should repent.” After the Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost, the call to repentance was still preached. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said to his audience, “Repent, and be baptized.” (Acts 2:38) In a later discourse he said, “Repent, ... and be converted.” (Acts 3:19) In his sermon on Mars’ Hill, Paul said that now the Lord “commandeth all men every where to repent.” (Acts 17:30) Explaining his ministry to King Agrippa, Paul said that he “shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.”—Acts 26:20

It is evident from these scriptures that the call to repentance continued from John the Baptist, with Jesus, the twelve apostles, as well as his followers throughout the centuries since Pentecost, all participating in it. This was the foretold Elijah work. Following his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go among all nations and preach the Gospel. (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:46-48) This clearly implies that the message of repentance and reformation was to continue through the ministry of the Lord’s faithful followers, the “little flock.” (Luke 12:32) Thus the prophecy that Elijah would come before the “great and terrible day of the LORD” has continued to be fulfilled. This has been particularly evident at the time in which we are now living, because the footstep followers of Christ have given a wide witness that the “kingdom of heaven” is at hand, and that soon its blessings will

begin to flow to “all the nations of the earth.”—
Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Acts 3:25,26; Gal. 3:8

World Not Yet Converted

In spite of this, throughout the age, and now, the world in general has not heeded the Elijah message of repentance and reformation, even as Israel did not give heed to John the Baptist. Instead, the world has continued in its generally sinful, selfish ways, unmindful of the “curse” that unbridled human selfishness would inevitably bring upon all nations. Thus, just as a curse fell upon Israel, as a result of failure to repent at the time of Jesus’ First Advent, so the present unrepentant world during the time of Christ’s Second Advent is in the throes of distress and tribulation.

The world has not yet been converted by the Gospel. Darkness still covers the earth, and “gross darkness the people.” (Isa. 60:2) However, this does not mean that the world never will be converted and that the foretold Elijah work never will be successful. God’s wisdom determined in advance that it would be necessary for mankind to pass through the “curse” of the great time of trouble in order to recognize that nothing short of the righteous rule of the coming Messianic kingdom can succeed in establishing the divine will “in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10) As we now see this principle being fulfilled, and view the foretold “curse” coming upon the world, we confidently look forward to the establishment of Messiah’s glorious kingdom. His kingdom will enlighten the world, and cause the people to say, “This is our God; we have waited for him, ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—Isa. 25:9

A Vision of the Kingdom

In the Transfiguration vision shown to Peter, James, and John, we have a further clarification and confirmation of the Elijah symbolism in the prophecies. (Matt. 17:1-13) In the last verse of the preceding chapter Jesus said, "There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." (Matt. 16:28) Then in the next verse, the first of chapter 17, we read, "After six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart." This was the Mount of Transfiguration.

When Jesus said that some standing among them would not taste death until they saw him in his kingdom, he evidently meant that they would be given a vision of the kingdom, which three of them were given just six days later. This was Peter's understanding, for in the first chapter of his second epistle he speaks of an abundant entrance into the "kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (vs. 11) Then, concerning this glorious hope, he adds a few verses later, "We have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming [Greek: presence] of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount."—II Pet. 1:16-18

It is clear that Peter, James, and John were given a vision of Christ's kingdom, and it is significant

that in this vision they should see Moses and Elijah with Jesus. (Matt. 17:3) It was the Lord's way of saying that the prophecies concerning Elijah, and "that prophet," who was to be "like unto Moses," would have their real and complete fulfillment in the Messianic kingdom. Other scriptures reveal that this is God's plan.

When Peter, who was inspired by this vision of the kingdom, preached his well-known sermon on the "times of restitution [Greek: restoration] of all things," adding that it had been spoken by the "mouth of all God's holy prophets since the world began," he cited as one of his proof texts the promise the Lord made to raise up a great prophet like Moses. (Acts 3:20-22) Thus Peter understood that the prophecy recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 would be fulfilled during the "times of restitution of all things."

On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus said that Elijah "indeed cometh, and shall restore all things." (Matt. 17:11, *Revised Version*) In this statement Jesus is referring to the ultimate accomplishment of the Elijah work during his kingdom reign and its resulting blessings to all the families of the earth.

Through John the Baptist, there was a beginning of this work, but he was rejected by the majority. Then Jesus was rejected and put to death. This work has continued throughout the present age since Pentecost, but those giving the message have likewise mostly been rejected and persecuted. Not until Christ's kingdom is established in power and glory, as so graphically portrayed in the Transfiguration vision, will the foretold Elijah work finally be accomplished. It is then that God's precepts will

be restored in the earth, and when all mankind, released from Adamic condemnation, will be awakened from the sleep of death and given an opportunity to be restored to human perfection and live forever upon the restored earth.—John 5:28,29; Rom. 5:18,19; I Cor. 15:21,22

Two Phases of the Kingdom

It was fitting from another standpoint that Moses and Elijah should be shown together with Jesus in that marvelous vision of the kingdom. Moses, as lawgiver and prophet, and Elijah, as a reformer in Israel, are fitting symbols of all the ancient faithful servants of God. All of these heroes of faith were God's representatives during the time preceding the First Advent of Christ. They upheld the principles of divine righteousness in a sinful world, suffering and dying for righteousness' sake. Yet the world was mostly not impressed by their presence and ministry.—Heb. 11:1-40

However, it will be different in the kingdom. This class of ancient and faithful servants of God will then be raised from the dead and become the human representatives of the divine Christ in the earthly phase of the kingdom. Then they will be rewarded by seeing that for which they stood become triumphant in the earth. Through the authority and power of "that prophet," Jesus, the greater than Moses, they will see the knowledge of the Lord fill the earth "as the waters cover the sea." (Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14) Then the righteous will not be persecuted. On the other hand, the "reproach of his [God's] people shall he take away,"—Isa. 25:8, *RV*

God used Elijah and his work of reformation to symbolize the call to repentance and to the acceptance of earth's new King—Christ. Thus we may properly think of Elijah as symbolizing the work of Christ, along with the faithful overcoming “little flock” throughout the Gospel Age, prior to their respective deaths. For the past two thousand years, the continuing message of repentance and reformation proclaimed to the world has not yet turned the “heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers.” The actual accomplishment of this work awaits the establishment of Christ's kingdom in power and great glory. How beautifully this is shown by Elijah's appearing with Jesus in that vision of the kingdom.

Unique in the experiences of the original Elijah, was the fact that at the close of his ministry he was lifted up from the earth. Although he did not actually go to heaven, his experience readily suggests and symbolizes the fact that the greater Elijah class, after proving their faithfulness in witnessing for the Gospel regardless of the cost, are exalted to heavenly glory in the resurrection, to participate with Jesus in the spiritual phase of his glorious kingdom.—Rom 8:16,17; II Tim. 2:11,12; Rev. 20:6

In the Transfiguration vision we have a marvelous portrayal of the earthly and spiritual phases of the Messianic kingdom, in which Jesus himself will be the supreme Head and Ruler, the “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” (Rev. 19:16) It will be through the kingdom that the Elijah work of reconciling the world to God will finally be fully and forever accomplished. With this work completed, following

the thousand year reign of the Christ, the kingdom will be turned over to the Heavenly Father, that he may be “all in all.”—Rev. 20:6-15, *RV*; I Cor. 15:25-28 ■