

Prophecy

Malachi 4:5-6....Is there an end-time “Elijah” ministry?

In **Matthew 17:1** Jesus took three of his disciples up a high mountain where suddenly in **verse 2** he was “transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” And if that wasn’t enough to shock the socks off the disciples’ feet, “Moses and Elijah” then appear as well in **verse 3**, actually “talking with Jesus.”

It was the appearance of ELIJAH, though. that seemed to startle the disciples most in this incident, because on their way back down the mountain, they asked Jesus in **verse 10**, “Why do the teachers of the law say that **Elijah must come first?**” It seems like an odd question for them to ask, having just seen Jesus shine like the sun, but it tells us how important the appearance of Elijah was to the top officials among the Jews - and to the disciples too.

But Elijah had been dead for nearly nine hundred years already, unless the “chariot of fire and horses of fire” that had whisked “Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind” in **2 Kings 2:11** meant he’d been alive ever since in preparation for an end-time Elijah ministry as well.

But why would anyone be expecting another appearance of Elijah in the first place? Well, the last words in the Old Testament Scriptures, left ringing in the ears of the Jews four hundred years earlier, were **Malachi 4:5-6**. There weren’t any Old Testament scriptures recorded or written after Malachi, so when we get to the end of Malachi and read in **Malachi 4:5**, “See, **I will send you the prophet Elijah** before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes,” then it’s not surprising that “the teachers of the law” expected Elijah to come again in some form or other, as THE sign heralding “the day of the Lord” and the Messiah’s arrival. And this would also be the time, in **verse 6**, when “the hearts of the fathers will turn to their children, and the hearts of the children will turn to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

And no Jew would want their land cursed, so the arrival of Elijah was hugely important in preserving their nation too. In what form Elijah would come was anybody’s guess, but clearly it would be recognizably Elijah-like. It might be Elijah himself, preserved since his disappearance in the chariot of fire, or another amazing period of time like Elijah himself lived through, or it could simply mean someone coming in the same spirit and power as Elijah.

Whatever it meant, **Malachi 1:1** clearly states that this was “The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.” It was a message meant for Israel of old, but it also separates out the Jews for special treatment because “**Judah** has broken faith,” **Malachi 2:11**. No wonder, then, because of these verses in Malachi, the Jewish “teachers of the law” in Jesus’ day were on the lookout for Elijah to revive what God had chosen Israel and the Jews for.

It also tied in with Malachi 3:1 where the “word of the Lord” says: “**I will send my messenger**, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his **temple**, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.” Well, the temple was in Jerusalem, so this prophecy was clearly aimed at the Jews, but what really stood out in that verse was the Lord sending “his messenger” to prepare the way for his coming. Could that messenger be Elijah?

The end of the Old Testament, therefore, left the Jews with all these questions and wonderings about Elijah heralding the coming of the Messiah. Four hundred years would then pass after the Jews returned from Babylon, however, with no hint or sign of any Elijah or Elijah-like messenger. But the Jewish teachers of the law had never stopped talking about it: Elijah was definitely coming.

And now, right before the disciples’ eyes in **Matthew 17** was Elijah in person talking to Jesus. But Jesus then says to his disciples in **verse 9**, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” So the disciples should not go spouting off about seeing Elijah - which must have seemed strange to them, because for the last four hundred years wasn’t the Elijah “messenger” what every Jew was looking for - and what the teachers of the law were gearing everyone up for too?

So the disciples ask Jesus, “Why (if it’s not that important after all) are the teachers of the law always going on about Elijah coming first?” And Jesus replies, “To be sure, Elijah comes all right and restores all things.” In other words, the teachers of the law are right in going on about Elijah coming to restore all things, **verse 11** - “**BUT,**” **verse 12** - and here comes the shocker from Jesus - “I tell you, **Elijah has already come.**”

What? You mean the Elijah messenger so longed for in Malachi had already been, and the teachers of the law had missed it? How could that be, when they were the ones supposed to be in the know, and they’d been going on about Elijah coming again ever since Malachi’s prophecy? Well, “they simply didn’t recognize him,” was Jesus’ answer in **verse 12**, and because the leaders didn’t recognize him they “did everything to him they wished.”

And that's when it dawned on the disciples in **verse 13** that Jesus "was talking to them about **John the Baptist.**" John was the Elijah messenger.

But even John the Baptist didn't recognize who he was either. He knew in **John 1:23** that he was "the voice crying in the wilderness 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (just as predicted in Isaiah 40:3). But he hadn't tied that in with Malachi's prophecy about Elijah, because - when asked in **verse 21** if he was Elijah - John had flatly said, "No, I'm not."

Jesus, however, corrects that in **Matthew 11:7** when he "began to speak to the crowd about John." Jesus first of all ties in Malachi's prophecy about "sending **my messenger** ahead to prepare the way" (as we read back in Malachi 3:1) with John, and then he adds the same shocker we read back in Matthew 17:12, when Jesus flatly states in **Matthew 11:14**, "And if you are willing to accept it, **he (John the Baptist) is the Elijah who was to come.**"

According to Jesus, then, the Elijah predicted in Malachi 4:5 had already been fulfilled by John the Baptist. This was also made clear by an angel to John's father, Zechariah, in **Luke 1:15-17**, that "he (John) will be great in the sight of the Lord...He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him **in the spirit and power of 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."

So that's both Jesus **and** an angel now confirming that the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6 was referring to and fulfilled by John the Baptist. There was no other Elijah the Jews needed to be looking for in the future, therefore, because the Elijah in Malachi had already come and done his job in the person of John.

But why is this important for us to know? Because there are many in the Christian church today who believe we should be looking for **another** Elijah in the future. And some even say the spirit and power of Elijah are **already** at work in the church today, which means we can expect the church to be doing the same great things that the original Elijah did. Or that some day soon the church will rock our world just like Elijah rocked his world.

It doesn't actually say that in Malachi, but there are those who believe the prophecy in Malachi has a dual meaning, based on the notion that John the Baptist did not fulfill all that Malachi predicted. They believe the real fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy will be done through the church just before Jesus' second coming - and it will be big-time too.

And reading Malachi 4:5 it does seem that way, because the timing of Elijah's appearance is "before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." And isn't that referring to the time Jesus comes in power to judge the world and destroy all those that oppose him? And that surely wasn't what happened when John the Baptist came, right?

So that's one reason given for believing Malachi was also referring to a future Elijah. Another reason is Jesus' statement in **Matthew 17:11** that "Elijah comes and will restore all things." And surely "restoring all things" didn't happen in John the Baptist's day either, did it?

So now we've got all sorts of people in the Christian church believing there's going to be another appearance of Elijah to complete Malachi's prophecy. There are individuals who believe they are Elijah, organizations of prophets believing they've been given the spirit and power of Elijah, and congregations being told the church is destined to shake the world up and hand over a restored world to Jesus when he comes again.

The hope is being created, then, that the Christian church is destined yet to do a great work in the end-time, or that one's own church or organization is already doing that work. Take the Worldwide Church of God as an example: In a brethren/coworker letter on August 24, 1982, Herbert Armstrong wrote: "Jesus shall come, **SOON NOW**, to **RESTORE ALL THINGS!** He did **NOT** restore all things when he first came. John the Baptist did not restore all things. But the one who was to restore all things just before the 'day of the Lord' and preparing the way for Christ's second coming, was **YET** to come, in the future, as Jesus said." (The capital letters and exclamation marks are all Mr. Armstrong's).

And in that same letter: "Have **WE**, through this Work, **RESTORED** anything? Indeed we have! **We** have **RESTORED** the **TRUE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST** - through us **JESUS CHRIST** has already begun **RESTORING** the **KNOWLEDGE** of what had been taken away....Through us the living Christ has been preparing for his **SECOND COMING** for the **PURPOSE** of **RESTORING ALL THINGS!**"

And in his final book, *Mystery of the Ages* (1985), Mr. Armstrong wrote on page 349: "Malachi 4:5-6 pictures the Elijah to come at the very end of the Church age." And by "Elijah" Mr. Armstrong meant his own church, as stated in Lesson 53 of the 1969 Ambassador College Correspondence Course, in which he wrote: "The goal of the Philadelphia Church (the church he founded) is the ultimate salvation of all mankind!...What would happen to the earth if it weren't for God's Church and the work it (Mr. Armstrong's church) is doing today?" Answer? "Malachi 4:6...this present evil world would experience utter destruction."

What filled the minds of those in Mr. Armstrong's church, therefore, was this great hope that through the church he founded God was fulfilling the end-time ministry of Elijah in Malachi. And, what's more, quoting a sermon he did in 1983, his church was doing what "has never been done by any other Church."

Only his church, he believed, had been designated by God to "restore all things" in the end-time fulfillment of Elijah's ministry. His proof of that was a list of eighteen "restored truths" that had been revealed to him alone. It was heady stuff, and especially for a young chap like myself, because it created the idea in my head that the whole world was being saved and restored through the work **our church alone** was doing.

But there was an urgency to our church's work too, because in a telecast Herbert Armstrong did on December 1, 1981, he said "it's about time that a voice cries out and tells you about **the Day of the Lord** that is soon coming upon us. Where are we right now in the panorama of biblical prophecy? We are in the very beginning of the Great Tribulation....a time of trouble such has never happened on the face of the Earth before." And his proof of that, quoting the same telecast, was "the gospel of the kingdom of God, which had not been proclaimed for 1900 years....is being proclaimed on this program now, and when this gospel of the kingdom has been proclaimed, we are very near to the end of this world." And then, quoting **Malachi 4:5-6**, he said, "It's talking about the day of the Lord; and before that time someone will come in the power and the spirit of Elijah....I tell you, my people, we're coming to that time, and it's time for a voice to cry out, and to tell the people that we're coming into that time....the time when no flesh would be saved alive."

It was vitally important to Mr. Armstrong, therefore, to get the restored truths that he believed God had waited 1900 years to reveal to his church alone, be broadcast to the world so that people would have a chance to escape the soon coming "great and dreadful day of the Lord" predicted by Malachi.

It was based on Mr. Armstrong's conviction (also stated in that same telecast) that the "restoring of all things" and the "day of the Lord" did not happen in John the Baptist's day, so there had to be a future Elijah ministry. And even though what Mr. Armstrong predicted through his church never happened, there are people today who also believe Malachi's prophecy was about a future Elijah ministry, creating the same hope and belief that God has designated them now to be that prophetic voice of Elijah to shake this world up. And it's capturing people's imaginations again that God has a great work in mind for them, which they will complete before the Lord comes a second time.

So is it true that John the Baptist did NOT fulfill Malachi's prophecy, and therefore Malachi 4:5-6 is talking about a future Elijah who will fulfill that prophecy instead? Or did John fulfill everything in Malachi's prophecy to a tee, so there's no need for another Elijah today, or at any time in the future?

Well, rather than speculate, let's look at what scripture has to say about John and Elijah. And to start with it says John **looked like** the prophet Elijah: **Matthew 3:4** says "John was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt round his waist." And **2 Kings 1:8** says Elijah was "a man with a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist." **1 Kings 17:2-6** says Elijah spent a lot of time in the wilderness - and so did John, **Matthew 3:1**. On two points already, then, Scripture says John fulfilled the role of Elijah to a tee.

But it was in what God called each man to do, and to whom, that nails down the similarities. Both men suddenly appeared with serious messages for Israel. The first mention of Elijah in the Old Testament, for instance, starts off with a bang in **1 Kings 17:1**, when Elijah tells Ahab, king of Israel, "As the Lord God of Israel lives there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years" - three years to be precise - "except at my word."

So Elijah is actually threatening a king, because, **1 Kings 18:18**, Ahab the king of Israel had "abandoned the Lord's commands." According to **1 Kings 16:33**, Ahab had done "more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel before him." Conditions were so bad in Israel that over 800 pagan prophets now filled the land, so Elijah had king Ahab gather all 850 of them to Mount Carmel where he issued the challenge, "If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:19-21).

This is an important moment, because Malachi and Jesus point to three things that describe the ministry of Elijah: they are the "great and dreadful day of the Lord," the "restoration of all things," and "the hearts of the fathers turning to the children, etc." And it's here in 1 Kings 18 - in what happened next - that we get to see **what those three things meant**.

What happened next is this: Elijah had the prophets set up a sacrifice and call upon Baal to light it for them. Nothing happened. Elijah then set up a sacrifice and a trench round it, and soaked the sacrifice with water three times 'til the trench filled with water as well (verses 25-35). Then he prayed in **verse 37**, "Answer me, O Lord, so these people know that you are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." And God answered in **verse 38** all right, because "the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench."

And “When all the people saw this,” **verse 39**, “they fell prostrate and cried, ‘**The Lord, he is God. The Lord - he is God.**’”

So here we have the picture of what Elijah’s ministry was all about. It involved three things: a “day of the Lord,” first of all, in which God directly confronted the Israelite leadership through Elijah, the purpose of which, secondly, was to turn the hearts of those Israelites back to God, so that, thirdly, a brief time of refreshing and restoration was created in the nation of Israel.

And it was that kind of ministry that God then repeated with John the Baptist. John, like Elijah, would be “A voice of one calling” to the Israelites in Isaiah 40:3, but notice first what precedes that verse. Isaiah 40 starts off with the words, “Comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that **her hard service has been completed**, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

So this was another major turning point in Israel’s history. That entire period of punishment God had inflicted on the Jews (in particular) was coming to an end, and John the Baptist was the one chosen by God to make that clear to them. Another “day of the Lord” involving God’s direct intervention was on its way.

And how God went about that intervention through John was exactly how he’d done it through Elijah: **he confronts the nation’s religious leadership**. Elijah confronted the 850 prophets of Baal ruling over Israel, and in **Matthew 3:7-10**, when “John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?....The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’”

So just like Elijah, John fearlessly confronts the religious leadership. And note how this “day of the Lord’s” intervention through John had the same desired effect on the people as it had in Elijah’s day. Because in **Mark 1:5**, “all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem went out to John and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, **confessing their sins.**” It really caused a ripple among the leaders of the Jews too, because in **Mark 11:32**, “The chief priests, scribes, and the elders feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed.”

And a “prophet” just like Elijah too, because the hearts of those Jews turned to God, and a time of refreshing swept the land as well. So Malachi’s Elijah prophecy was fulfilled to a tee by John the Baptist - **just as Jesus said.**

But does this mean there will never be another day of the Lord, or another turning of people's hearts to God, or another time of restoration and refreshing like those in both Elijah's day and John the Baptist's?

Well, Peter's first sermon on Pentecost in **Acts 3** sheds some light on this, because in **verse 17** Peter also confronts the Jewish religious leadership when he says the Jews had "acted in ignorance, as did your leaders." He also tells the Jews in **verse 19** to "Repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

So Peter's sermon was also meant to have the same desired effects - of turning the hearts of the Jews back to God, so that "times of refreshing" could begin. This sounds exactly like the goals and purposes of Elijah's and John's ministries all over again.

Notice, however, the word "BUT" in **verse 18**, because this time something different is involved. Peter adds, "BUT this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer."

The means by which the people's hearts would turn to God creating times of refreshing from the Lord, therefore, would not come about by God's direct intervention rocking the Jewish religious leadership as he did in Elijah's and John's day. It would come about by what all the prophets had foretold about Christ's suffering.

So the desired effects of God's intervention would be the same - but not through an Elijah-type ministry. It would be done instead through the suffering of Christ, which would then be followed - as John the Baptist himself pointed out in **Matthew 3:11-12** - by Jesus "baptizing you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

So God was still deadly serious, oh yes, just as he was in Elijah's and John's ministries, but the means by which he would create this change of heart in Israel was through Christ's crucifixion and through the "fire" purifying work of the Holy Spirit.

It would be these two in combination - Christ's crucifixion and the work of the Holy Spirit - that would kickstart an ongoing process of "turning each of you from your wicked ways," **Acts 3:26**. It would start with the Jews (same verse), but very quickly extend to the Gentiles too.

And this is how God's plan for humanity would proceed. It would not be through a dramatic, short-term Elijah-like ministry to wake a nation up, but a **long term. gradual transformation of individuals** who respond in faith to what God did through his Son's death and what Jesus is now doing through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus himself described this process when he told Paul in **Acts 26:17-18**, "I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, **who are set apart by faith in me.**"

This is all about trust in Jesus turning **individuals** to God, changing individuals from the inside out, and transforming individuals into Christ's likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18).

It is not about an Elijah type ministry by the church to change or rock this world before Jesus comes again. Quite the opposite, because Jesus promised "persecution will increase" in Matthew 24, and in **Matthew 10:22** Jesus told his disciples, "All men will hate you."

And how true that has been. In 2016, for instance, over 90,000 Christians were murdered, and 500 to 600 million others were persecuted. Enduring to the end is the Christian calling, therefore, not shaking the world like Elijah. But isn't it great to know that God is directing his healing power, wisdom, and love on us **as individuals** so we can shine as lights personally in a dark world, and that's how God is preparing the way for the next coming of Jesus?

That's why **1 Peter 4:17** says, "it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God," because it's in the church now that "the day of the Lord" is happening, in which God is turning **our** hearts to him and bringing times of refreshing **to us** as he blesses us by releasing us "from our wicked ways" (Acts 3:26), and he enables us to "escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4).

Jesus is purifying the individuals who will make up his bride. And when his bride is ready that's when he'll set about the job of rocking the world on its heels.

Malachi 4:5-6 was an Elijah-like ministry preparing Israel for Jesus' first coming. But it's a bride "without spot of wrinkle" that's being prepared by the Holy Spirit for Jesus' second coming (Ephesians 5:27).