

The Coming Wrath of God *in the* *Gospel of Matthew*

By Dr. Dallas Burdette
Website: freedominchrist.net
Email: dburdette22@charter.net

The subject of “last things” fills the hearts and minds of God’s people. Within the various communities of Christ, Televangelists fill the air waves with warnings about the Battle of Armageddon and the end of the physical universe. Some sincere believers even advocate the reinstitution of animal sacrifices and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. One reason for so much confusion over this subject is failure to consult the context of the various Scriptures cited for proof that Jesus is yet to come and establish His kingdom.

The Gospel of Matthew is filled with eschatology from the beginning (Chapter 3) to the end (Chapters 23-28). For example, Matthew introduces John the Baptist’s ministry with eschatological overtones, which proclamation foreshadows the destruction of Jerusalem with its Temple and with its rituals as described by Jesus in Matthew 24. Matthew gives commentary about John’s ministry as well as his encounter with the religious leaders. He reports the following:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “**A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’**” [Isaiah 40:3]. ⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁷ But when he 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?** [τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς, *tēs mellousēs orgēs*] ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:1-12)

In the earlier years of my ministry, I, too, misapplied this warning of John the Baptist about “the coming wrath” as having application to the end of the physical universe that would

occur at the so-called second coming of Christ. In spite of my sincerity, this mindset is not what John advanced. In order to understand correctly, we need to approach the Book of Malachi (433 BC) as well as the Book of Isaiah (739 BC) for the historical background for John's reaction to the religious leaders' turn out. Apparently, John did not recognize good motives with this get-together with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

For just a moment, we need to move back into time as we seek to understand John and his ministry. Seven hundred years earlier than John's appearance, Isaiah prophesied about this one who would come to prepare the way for the coming of God's Messiah. Just a little over three hundred years later than Isaiah, Malachi foretold the doom of the Old Covenant world of Judaism with its Temple and its sacrifices. This book (Malachi), too, sheds additional light on how to interpret the coming and ministry of John to Israel. Malachi paints a rather dismal picture of impending judgment upon Judah for its disobedience. Before this future destruction would come upon Judah, Malachi predicted the coming of Elijah "**before that great and dreadful day of the Lord come**" (Malachi 4:5). Malachi foretells about the coming of the Messiah this way:

"See, 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," says the LORD Almighty. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. ⁵ "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. (3:1-5)

We cannot read the Book of Malachi without cognizance of the impeachment of the nation for its sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, defrauders of wages, oppressors toward the widows and the fatherless, deprivation of justice to aliens, and lack of reverence and awe toward God (3:5). This indictment reveals the utter degradation of the nation of Israel. This forecast of total judgment descended upon the nation with the destruction of its Temple in AD 70. The next chapter (4:1) also warns of impending judgment. Once more, listen to the words of the Holy Spirit:

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. (4:1)

"The day is coming" points to an alarming crisis coming upon Judah. Apocalyptic language is utilized to describe national catastrophe—"burn like a furnace" and "will set them on fire." This description is apocalyptic. In other words, the writer uses graphic imaginative language in order to describe utter annihilation. Approximately, four hundred years earlier, Joel (835 BC) also predicted God's judgment upon apostate Israel. Joel, too, speaks of approaching

judgment coming upon the nation with utter devastation.¹ Yet, Joel foresees another verdict that is far greater than judgment—cleansing through the Atonement of Christ. In other words, he sees spiritual blessings poured out upon those who respond to the Good News of God’s way of salvation “in” and “through” Jesus. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, Joel pens the following words of blessings as well as words of judgment from God:

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. ²⁹Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. ³⁰I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ³¹The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ³²And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls. (Joel 2:28-32)

Unfortunately, many Christians read this apocalyptic language with wooden literalism. We cannot read Joel’s prophecy without being catapulted into a sense of transformation and urgency with the impending events that are forecast. Joel foretells the day that God will inflict punishment upon His rebellious people as well as the pouring out of His Spirit upon those who are receptive to the Gospel. This particular Day of Judgment is described as “the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood.” This apocalyptic language is not to be interpreted literally. Before the “the great and dreadful day of the Lord,” God will pour out His Spirit upon believers. Over eight hundred years later, Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, cites Joel’s prophecy to give biblical substance to the events transpiring before thousands on the Day of Pentecost—fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus. We should give careful attention to his words:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ **‘In the last days,** God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Acts 2:14-21)

Not only did Peter cite the apocalyptic language of Joel, but Jesus also alluded to this same language as applicable to the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, just a few days before His Crucifixion, He told His disciples:

So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. ²⁷ For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so

¹This metaphorical language about “fire” is extremely important in grasping Jesus’ prediction about the overthrow of the Old Covenant world of Judaism as reported by Mathew in Chapters 24 and 25. It is this same type of apocalyptic language that Jesus employed in His parables about the overthrow of apostate Israel.

will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather. ²⁹ Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ (Matthew 24:26-29)

“The great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Joel 2:31) is more precisely set forth in the writings of Malachi. In fact, he states emphatically that Elijah—the forerunner of the Messiah—would come before ‘that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes’ (Malachi 4:5). This Elijah is none other than John the Baptist. Jesus Himself addresses this issue concerning the Elijah that Malachi (3:1) foretold as having reference to John the Baptist.

As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you’ [Malachi 3:1]. ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than **John the Baptist**; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 11:7-15)

In spite of Jesus’ statement about John being the Elijah that Malachi foretold would come, nevertheless, the disciples still did not “hear” the implications of what He said. Sometime later, Jesus, with His disciples, started on His final trip to Jerusalem for the climax of what the prophets had foretold about His Death, His Burial, and His Resurrection. After the transfiguration on the mountain in which Moses (1526-1406 BC) and Elijah (9th century BC) talked with Him (17:1-7), Jesus made further comments about Elijah:

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” ¹⁰ The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” ¹¹ Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. (17:9-13)

These citations from the Book of Matthew enable us to determine more accurately “the great and dreadful day of the Lord” as predicted by Joel and Malachi. Just a casual reading of the Gospels as well as the Epistles will assist us in determining that this judgment was not very far off from the death of John the Baptist. The allusion of Malachi points to the destruction of the Temple with its sacrifices in AD 70. Not only did Malachi represent John the Baptist as the precursor of God’s impending judgment, but we also see Isaiah representing John as the herald of the coming Savior: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God”’ (Isaiah 40:3).

One of the great problems within the Christian community is failure to read the Scriptures in context. From the context of Malachi 4:1, we realize that his comments announce the coming of John the Baptist before Jesus' Second Coming in judgment. The "Lord" of Isaiah 40:3 is none than the One that John, one of the Twelve, writes about in his prologue to his Gospel. We should pay attention to Malachi as he writes about Christ's Second Coming in judgment against Israel:

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them." (Malachi 4:1)

This language of Malachi is not the language of the Incarnation, but rather it is the language of judgment (second coming—see Hebrews 9:28). The Book of Revelation (written before June of AD 68)² deals with the overthrow of apostate Israel, which is the climax of what Malachi had prophesied about over four hundred years earlier. John writes about this same judgment in the sixth chapter of his Apocalypse. Listen to him as he gives some information about heaven and earth in highly symbolic language as revealed in the sixth seal:

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:12-17)

Jesus revealed to John the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi—"the great day of his wrath has come." This is the same day that John the Baptist called attention to in his confrontation with the leaders of Israel—"who warned you to flee from the coming wrath" (Matthew 3:7). The language of John (Revelation 6:12-17) is an epitomized version of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25). Apocalyptic language merges heaven and earth with frightful imagery that shocks the imagination. Apocalyptic language is a way of drawing attention to impending catastrophe of a nation or nations. It is about cosmic events, which language is not intended to be taken literally. To illustrate, once more, the use of apocalyptic language, we invite each one to read Isaiah's prophecy against Babylon. Pay attention to Isaiah as he depicts God's judgment upon this wicked nation:

See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will

²For a detained analysis of the date of the Book of Revelation, view under caption: ESCHATOLOGY—freedominchrist.net.

humble the pride of the ruthless. ¹²I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. ¹³Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. (Isaiah 13:9-13)

Apocalyptic language of the heavens is employed to describe the desolation of the land of Babylon as a political power. This is the same apocalyptic language Jesus utilized in His discourse about the demise of the land of Judah with its Temple and with its ritual sacrifices (Matthew 24—25). “Heaven” and “earth” are not always employed in a literalistic sense. For instance, Isaiah addressed Judah—a rebellious nation—as heaven and earth. He writes:

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. ²Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. ³The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” ⁴Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. (Isaiah 1:1-4)

As we approach a fresh reading of the Gospel of Matthew in conjunction with the Hebrew Scriptures, we need backbone in order to reread familiar texts with new lenses.³ This study will focus on reading familiar texts in new ways. If we are to understand eschatology correctly, we need to transfer ourselves back to first-century Judaism. Without this insight, we are likely to misread Scriptures that were commonly understood within the time frame of their origin. Frequently, our cherished interpretations of the Scripture are often hand-me-down traditions that have been enshrined within our own unique Christian community for hundreds of years. Many believers remain blind to the true teachings of the Scriptures when new ways of reading the Scriptures do not conform to their inherited traditions.

The Book of Matthew unfolds God’s new agenda for His people. As stated above, the Gospel of Matthew opens with coming judgment upon the nation of Judah. In other words, Matthew reveals that there would be a great national catastrophe in which the Temple, the city of Jerusalem, and the nation of Judaism would suffer utter devastation. During the last week of Jesus’ life, He foretold the complete overthrow of apostate Israel (Matthew 24—25). Even though we encounter the negative, nevertheless, we meet the positive—a day of redemption. In spite of God’s rejection of Israel, we witness God’s mercy in bringing in new heavens and a new earth.⁴ Again, the words of Malachi set forth the negative as well as the positive. Listen to the prophet:

³It is not uncommon for devout believers to react strongly against a rereading of the text, especially if it goes against one’s long-held traditions. An example of the kind of negative reaction that individuals might exhibit is found in the **FOREWORD** of my *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Series of Specialized Studies from Psalms • Revelation • Hebrews*, Volume 2 (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2010) by Edward Fudge (I mistakenly failed to list his name at the bottom of his foreword). In spite of his unenthusiastic comments about my thoughts on the Book of Revelation, he, in my judgment, is still one of the most insightful writers during his day and one of the great promoters of unity in the twenty-first century. He was a spiritual and righteous believer. He has, since this writing, entered into his eternal glory.

⁴For a detained study of the “New Heavens and a New Earth,” see under caption ESCHATOLOGY.

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them [negative].”² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings [positive]. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. (Malachi 4:1-2)

“The sun of righteousness” is the same as “the Son of righteousness.” For those who accept His Messiahship, they will experience the blessings of the new age. Jeremiah (627 BC) also spoke of the coming One that Malachi predicted. Once more, we should pay careful attention to Jeremiah’s optimistic prediction:

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.” (Jeremiah 23:5-6)

Four hundred years intervened between the time of Malachi and John the Baptist. From the Books of Maccabees and the writings of Josephus, we witness a period of great activity. During this period, we do not read about any Divine oracle from God. Apparently, during this period, synagogues were established and the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms (writings) were disseminated. About the middle of this four hundred year period, we witness the beginning of the Pharisees as well as the Sadducees.⁵ Both groups professed to be expounders of the Holy Scriptures. The Pharisees, on the one hand, were heavily engaged in formalism, but the Sadducees, on the other hand, were skeptics.

The practice of true religion had sunk to its lowest ebb tide. At the end of the four hundred year period, God, once more, sent a prophet to prepare a way for the coming Messiah as foretold by Isaiah and Malachi. The Elijah whom Malachi prophesied would come appeared on the scene. He began his ministry by announcing the kingdom predicted by the prophets: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 3:2). The One whom John came to announce and prepare the way also began His ministry with the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (4:17).

Before we examine further the eschatological sayings in the Gospel of Matthew, I believe it would be helpful to observe two prophetic statements about the rise and fall of many in Israel. With the birth of Jesus, Luke, a co-laborer with Paul in the ministry, tells about one named Simeon who was righteous and devout. Luke relates the following informative narrative about Jesus:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the

⁵For an in-depth study of the origin of the Pharisees, see Dallas Burdette, “Political Power of the Pharisees,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts Through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 78-92.

custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:25-35)

In this pericope (unit), we see the “falling” (negative) and the “rising” (positive) aspects of Jesus’ ministry to the nation of Israel. Just a casual reading of the Book of Matthew discloses conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Following this incident, Luke immediately reports another happening that is filled with the positive accomplishment of Jesus’ coming into the world. Anna, the prophetess, speaks to Joseph and Mary about the child Jesus:

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (2:36-40)

These two events set the stage for a greater understanding of Jesus’ ministry in the nation of Judah. John the Baptist is identified as the wilderness-herald of Isaiah as well as the Elijah of Malachi. Both of these men were zealous reformers. Elijah had his Ahab (868-854 BC) and John the Baptist had his Herod (Antipas, 1 BC – AD 39).⁶ When John appeared on the scene, the Jews were looking for the prophet Elijah to reappear as well as “the prophet” that Moses foretold would come (Deuteronomy 18:15). The Jews of the first century expected the literal Elijah of Ahab’s day to appear bodily. The one whom Malachi foretold would come would be one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. Luke gives testimony concerning this fact to Zechariah (John’s father). Luke reports the following encounter with the angel’s remarks:

And he [John] will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:17)

When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, the people immediately thought of the Elijah of Malachi (Malachi 4:5) as well as the prophet spoken of by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). We are indebted to John, one of the Twelve, about questions presented to him by the

⁶Scholars generally assign 4 BC as the death of Herod the Great. Kurt Simmons points out that 4 BC does not fit the comments of Luke concerning the age of Jesus when He began His ministry (Luke 3:1). For a detailed study of the date of Christ’s birth, see Kurt Simmons, “Dating the Birth of Christ and Death of Herod the Great,” in Kurt Simmons, *Adumbrations: The Kingdom & Coming of Christ in the Book of Daniel* (Canada: Bimillennial Preterist Association, 2009), 345-366.

priests and Levites sent by the Jews concerning his (John the Baptist) identity. Listen to the apostle John as he records this interchange between John the Baptist and his questioners:

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "**I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'**" ²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:19-28)

Some read the Malachi narrative with a wooden literalness. This denial by John indicates that the prophecy about the coming of Elijah is to be interpreted in a spiritual sense. He is the one that would appear before that "dreadful day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4:5). Remember, as stated above, that Jesus dealt with misunderstanding of Malachi's Elijah (see Matthew 11:7-15 and 17:9-13). Today, the modern Jew is still looking for the Elijah to come. For one to postulate a future Elijah is to deny the Holy Spirit's intent in Malachi's prophecy as well as Jesus' explanation of Malachi's prophecy. John's mission was to prepare a people for the Lord's coming. John, one of the Apostles, gives the following comments about John the Baptist: "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe" (John 1:7).

Both Malachi and John the Baptist speak of the "second coming" of the Lord Jesus. Malachi describes "the day of his coming" (AD 70) as "a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap" (Malachi 3:2). On the other hand, John the Baptist describes "the coming wrath" as a baptism of "fire" with "his winnowing fork in his hand" (Matthew 3:11). John the Baptist came announcing the coming Christ as well as the coming judgment upon Judah. He warns both the Pharisees and the Sadducees to "flee from the coming wrath" (3:7). He issues the ultimate judgment upon the nation: "burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (3:12), which judgment took place in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. John's phraseology speaks of wrath that is not simply *future*, but wrath that is *impending*—"the coming wrath" (τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς, *tēs mellousēs orgēs*). According to John, "The ax is already at the root of the trees" (3:10).

With John's denunciation of the religious leaders, we hear words of judgment upon the existing generation, that is to say, upon the men and women to whom he brought the message of redemption "in" and "through" Jesus the Lamb of God (see John 1:32-36). John the Baptist sets the stage for Jesus' later denunciation of Judah for its rejection of Him as God's Messiah. In Jesus' Olivet Discourse, He issues this caveat (warning):

I tell you the truth, this generation [ἡ γενεά, *hē genea*] will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³⁵ Heaven and earth [the old covenant world of Judaism] will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Matthew 24:34-35)

With the imprisonment of John the Baptist, this action of Herod Antipas begins a new departure in the ministry of our Lord Jesus. Matthew begins his Gospel with both John's and Jesus' call to repentance with the announcement of the "kingdom of heaven" (3:2 and 4:17). Both announced that the kingdom of heaven has come near (ἤγγικεν, *ēngiken*, "at hand," KJV). When Jesus called His Twelve, He also instructed them to broadcast that the "kingdom of heaven is near" (10:7). Toward the close of Christ's earthly ministry, He foretold the destruction of Jerusalem with apocalyptic language (Luke 21). In this chapter, He discloses the trampling of the Holy City by the Gentiles, which period extended over a time-frame of forty-two months (21:20-31; Revelation 11:2). What catches the eye is Jesus' statement about the kingdom being near with the destruction of Jerusalem. Listen to Luke as he writes:

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. ²² For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. ²³ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. ²⁴ They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. ²⁵ "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. (Luke 21:21-31)

This statement of Jesus about the presence of the kingdom rejects the notion that the kingdom came on the Day of Pentecost. Both John the Baptist and Jesus announced what Daniel foretold in his prophecies concerning the coming of the kingdom (Daniel 2). Even though the consummation was near, nevertheless, it did not take place during Jesus' earthly ministry. **The kingdom came in its fullness about thirty-seven years after His Death.** As a result of the nation of Judah rejecting God's mercy, Jesus forewarned about God's impending judgment. For instance, Jesus rebuked unrepentant cities for their negative response. Matthew gives his introductory comments and then he gives Jesus' reaction to their dismissal of Him:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ²¹ "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you." (Matthew 11:20-24)

This eschatological "day of judgment" is developed in great detail in Matthew 24—25, which day is none other than AD 70. In spite of the miraculous in the ministry of Jesus, we still observe the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law refusing to accept what they had seen. Once

again, we see Jesus warning them about God’s impending judgment upon that “generation.” We should pay careful attention once more to Matthew as he unfolds Jesus’ castigation of the people then living:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.”³⁹ He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment (ἐν τῇ κρίσει, *en tē krisei*, “in the judgment”) with this generation (τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης, *tēs geneas tautēs*) and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.⁴³ “When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.⁴⁴ Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.” (12:38-45)

“This generation” is critical to a proper understanding of the “last days” of the old covenant world of Judaism. “The judgment” would take place in the **then** existing generation.