

# SCRIPTURE STUDIES

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"Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord..." Isaiah 1:18

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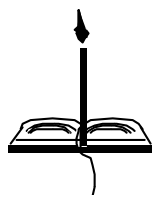
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## Old Testament Study: Malachi 4

### The Last Writings of the Old Testament Prophets

<sup>1</sup>“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. <sup>2</sup>But for you who revere My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. <sup>3</sup>Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>4</sup>“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

<sup>5</sup>“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup>He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Here we have come to the final chapter written by the final prophet of the Old Testament times. It is a chapter full of promises, both good and bad. It concludes the Old Testament writings by looking ahead to the major events of the future. It speaks of both comings of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. “We should view these final words with solemnity of heart, for chapter 4 gives us the last message of the Old Testament prophets. After this prophetic word, the heavens were silent for four centuries until the voice of John the Baptist was heard calling Israel to repentance in view of the coming of the Messiah” [Feinberg, 266].

First, the Lord, through Malachi, speaks of the Second Coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ: **“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’**” (vs. 1). At the second coming of the Lord, He will come in wrath to bring His judgment on the world. The Lord (Himself) begins the description of His second coming with the word, **“Surely”**, in order that there may be no doubt about the veracity of what He is saying. Certainly, whatever the Lord says is perfect truth. Yet, it seems that many people need an extra amount of convincing when it comes to the fact that the Lord will come in wrath to judge the

world: **“Surely the day is coming.”** “Some cannot believe what they read here; therefore, they teach that all people will, somehow, be saved. A God of love, they reason, cannot condemn anyone to an eternal punishment. But this reasoning incorrectly pits God’s love against His justice. Such universalism cannot be supported by the Scriptures. Rather, Scripture tells us, God’s prior judgments are but foretastes of what will come in the final day as the totality of God’s wrath will finally be felt” [Kaiser, 486]. To put it bluntly, “the wicked will all be ignited like dry stubble after a hot summer” [*Ibid.*].

Why is this judgment necessary? Because God is righteous and just. He has established His law. He has commanded His creatures to obey it. He has even provided a way of salvation for those who have not obeyed. So, for those who disobeyed His commandments, and who have rejected the great gift of salvation that He has offered through His Son, there will be judgment. If there was not judgment, God’s attribute of righteousness would be tainted. The absence of judgment would make God out to be a liar, and would make the many portions of God’s Word that speak of judgment untrue. Judgment is promised. Universal salvation is a lie of the devil. “Because God is unchanging in His holiness and justice, it follows that the inevitability of His judgment upon the wicked is unchanging also. The final chapter of Malachi virtually shouts for us to see this, for it begins, **‘Surely the day is coming...’** The judgment may be postponed. For the most part it has been postponed for the long years of human history—postponed but not forgotten. Delay is not elimination. Judgment will come” [Boice, 263].

Now, God is gracious in that He has warned us of this judgment. We can choose to ignore His warnings, to pretend that they are toothless warnings, or we can respond to the warnings and turn to God for forgiveness of sins. “The prospect of the day of judgment is a powerful stimulus to awaken sinners from their fatal slumber, and to stir up believers to increased diligence in the work of the Lord” [JFB, 727]. Many preachers of God’s Word avoid speaking of God’s wrath. They think that they are doing God a favor by depicting Him as a nice old man, who is forgiving of everything, who would never lift a finger to hurt anyone. But such preachers do a great disservice to their hearers, and greatly misrepresent the character of God. For God is not tolerant of any sin. God hates sin. There is but one way to escape the wrath of God, and that is to believe in and accept the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made by dying for our sins on the cross. All those who do not take advantage of this one way of salvation will see God’s wrath, possibly in this world, certainly in the one to come.

In this chapter of Malachi, there is not only bad news for the ungodly, there is good news for God’s people: **“But for you who revere My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall”** (vs. 2). “Nothing in Scripture outlines with greater demarcation the vastly different lots of the believing and unbelieving when the Lord comes to judge the earth” [Feinberg, 267]. The day of wrath, which will **“burn like a furnace”** for the ungodly, will bring **“the sun of righteousness”** for

the godly. Destruction is not the lot for the godly, but rather **“healing”**. This is the salvation that God has in store for His people in the last days, when they will go to Him in a twinkling of an eye. Then, they will be freed from the human bodies that so limit them, and **“will go out and leap like calves released from the stall”** (vs. 2).

The godly will be a part of the Lord’s armies in the last days: **“Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,”** says the **LORD Almighty**” (vs. 3). This is confirmed also in the book of Revelation. The Lord promises: **“To him who overcomes and does My will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from My Father”** (Rev. 2:26–27). And later, the Lord’s army is described: **“The armies of heaven were following Him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean”** (Rev. 19:14).

In light of His promises concerning the end-times, the Lord next gives His people an exhortation that will be valuable to them: **“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel”** (vs. 4). The best preparation for the coming of the Lord is to **“remember the law.”**

This exhortation to **“remember the law”** is also important to be given here through the prophet Malachi in light of the fact that Malachi was the last of the Old Testament prophets. There was to be a prophetic silence of 400 years after Malachi. The people needed to heed this last exhortation of Malachi because there would be no prophets to remind them to **“remember the law”** until John the Baptist came on the scene.

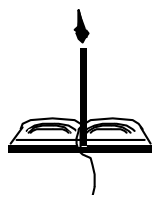
Next, the Lord speaks of the end of the prophetic drought, when He would send a prophet to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord: **“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse”** (vss. 5–6). This prophecy was to be fulfilled by a precursor to the coming of the Lord for both of His comings. Thus, it was partially fulfilled by John the Baptist, and will be ultimately completely fulfilled by another precursor, possibly Elijah himself, before the second coming of Christ. Before John the Baptist was born, an angel visited his father and spoke to him concerning John, citing this prophecy in Malachi: **“And he 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). However, John the Baptist did not completely fulfill the prophecy in Malachi. Jesus said concerning John: **“And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come”** (Matt. 11:14). Jesus came first to offer the salvation of God to the children of Israel. But the children of Israel, by and large, were not **“willing to accept”** Jesus as their Messiah. This rejection of Jesus rendered necessary a second coming of the Messiah. In Malachi, the Lord says that Elijah will come **“before that great and dreadful day**

of the LORD.” Of course, John the Baptist did not precede the **“great and dreadful day of the Lord”**, the outworking of God’s wrath, but rather, the great and *wonderful* day of the Lord, when He came to earth to bring salvation to all who believe in Him. Perhaps (if I may speculate), the phrase **“great and dreadful day of the Lord”** refers to the two comings: the first coming of the Lord was a **“great”** day, in that He brought salvation; the second coming will be a **“dreadful”** day, when He will execute the wrath of God.

Now, John the Baptist was not Elijah; rather, he came with the **“spirit and power of Elijah”** (John 1:17). It could be that in the final fulfillment of this prophecy that a man will come in the **“spirit and power of Elijah.”** However, it could also be that Elijah himself will come. Elijah was one of the very few humans who did not experience the death of his body (he was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, see II Kings 2:11). This may suggest that Elijah’s work is not finished. If indeed Elijah himself comes before the day of God’s wrath, his ministry will be much the same as it was when he first lived. “The ministry of Elijah to Israel had been one of calling apostate Israel back to the Lord whom they had forsaken. He will come again in order to avert the curse of God from Israel” [Feinberg, 269]. As the prophecy says: **“He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse”** (vs. 6).

I find it interesting that the symbol used here representing obedience to God is when **“the hearts of the fathers”** are turned **“to their children”**, and the **“hearts of the children”** are turned **“to their fathers”**. Paul does a similar thing when he sums up his catalog of the sins of man: **“They invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless”** (Rom. 1:30–31). A godly society has loving families. Conversely, morally bankrupt societies have dysfunctional families. If you can’t show love for your own family members, then you can’t love anyone, much less love God through obedience.

It is significant that the final word in the book of last Old Testament prophet is **“curse”**. For those who don’t accept the New Testament revelation as the Word of God, this is a harsh ending for the Bible. “The book of Genesis shows how the curse entered the human race, and Malachi indicates the curse still threatens” [Feinberg, 269]. “From early times attempts have been made to avoid the harsh ending of the book. Greek manuscripts placed verse 4 after verse 6, while Hebrew liturgical use led to the repetition of verse 5 after verse 6. Hebrew Bibles continue to print verse 5 a second time at the end of the chapter” [Baldwin, 251]. It would indeed be sad news for mankind if the last word in the Bible was **“curse”**. A better solution than rearranging verses to avoiding this harsh ending is to read on! Open up the book of Matthew and read the good news of the coming of Jesus. See how God has provided a way for us to escape the curse of death! In fact, to counteract the last word from the Lord (**“curse”**) to the last Old Testament prophet, Jesus begins His ministry with the word, **“Blessed”** (see Matt. 5:3).



## A Classic Study: Patience in Affliction

### A Classic Study by Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

[Here, we continue a reprint of excerpts from Richard Baxter's work entitled *Obedient Patience*. In each article, Mr. Baxter gives advice on how to be patient through a specific type of affliction.]—*Ed.*

#### Vexations, Strong Temptations of Satan, Especially to Melancholy Persons

Another case that needeth patience is: molesting, strong temptations of Satan, especially to afflicted, sad, discontented, and melancholy persons. As to alluring temptations to sinful love and pleasure, it is abhorrence, watchfulness, and fear that are more necessary than patience. But vexing temptations, which would draw men to murmuring, anger, malice, fear, hurtful grief, and such other sins, must be overcome by patience and watchfulness conjunct. Consider:

1. God did not think meet to keep innocent Adam and Eve, no nor Christ Himself, from being tempted. This life is appointed for trial and conflict, in order to a better. Not to be tempted, were not to be men on earth. There is no crown of glory, but to them that overcome; and no victory where there is no fight or strife. It is not force, but temptations, by which Satan conquereth the world, and which all must conquer that will be saved. Yea, Christ was tempted to the most odious crime, to worship the devil. But to be tempted is no sin of ours: resist and conquer, and it increaseth our acceptance with God, and (which some call our merit) our fitness for the reward. It may be an advantage to our own confirmed, rooted faith and holiness, and contribute to our greater glory in heaven.

2. Satan is a conquered enemy: Christ our Head was tempted that He might overcome him for us. And as He said, "**Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world**" (John 16:33, AV); so we may believe and rejoice, that He hath overcome the devil, that we might overcome him. "**He was tempted, that He might succour them that are tempted**" (Heb. 2:18).

3. All that are in heaven (that had the use of reason) came thither by overcoming of temptations on earth. And would you go a way different from them all?

4. The tempter cannot do what he will, but what God permitteth him, who hath promised to restrain, that he may not overpower us: "**There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man: but**

**God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (I Cor. 10:13, AV).**

5. But alas! We commonly are guilty of giving the tempter his advantage against us. We provoke God by sin to turn him loose upon us, and we give him entertainment by long parleys with him, and by thinking over all that he hath against us, and leaving our imaginations open to his access, and oft also our eyes and ears to feed them. In these cases true repentance is needful to our deliverance from temptations. Yea, and our own mistakes, corruptions, discontents, impatience, and sinful passions are the very strength of the tempter, and he findeth within us the fire which he bloweth up. In this case, the cure must be mostly wrought upon ourselves.

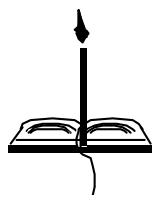
6. Strong love and resolution rejoice to conquer strong temptations; as strong men love not to be tied to the work of children and women, but would have such as exerciseth their strength. It is the joy of friendship, to undergo much for a friend: **“Love is strong as death; many waters cannot quench it, nor the floods drown it” (Song. 8:7, AV).** If you would give all the substance of your house for love, it would be utterly contemned. Jacob will serve long and patiently for love. And when Satan showeth his malice against Christ and us, strong love would do as Samson and David by the Philistines, go out against them in God’s strength, and overcome them. And though we are weak, God’s grace is sufficient for us, and His strength is manifested in our weakness.

7. Remember who the tempter is, that you may meet his temptations with hatred and abhorrence. God in mercy put an enmity against devils into our natures, as soon as the devil’s enmity had conquered man, that so we might abhor whatever we know to be from them. What if the devil appeared to you in some shape, and persuaded you to despair, or to blaspheme God, or to doubt of the life to come, or to any other sin or mischief? Would it not be a sufficient preservative to know that it is the devil that makes the motion? I do not think that the present forward servants of the devil would obey him as they do, if they saw him to be the tempter. If he brought the cup to the drunkard in a known apparition and shape, sure it would go down with terror, if at all: if he brought a harlot to the whoremonger’s bed, it would cool his lust: if he appeared and persuaded the malignant to hate, deride, and persecute men for obeying God, it would sure abate their rage. And why should it not work alike in troubling temptations, when you know they come from him (which nature and fruit of them may make you know)?

8. Let temptations move you to study their confutation. Know every snare, and the remedy: God hath furnished you in Scripture with armor against all, if you will use it.

9. Long for the blessed day when the tempter and troubler shall be cast out, and never more molest the faithful soul with any motion against God or comfort.





## New Testament Study: Matthew 13:24-43

### More Parables

<sup>24</sup>Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup>But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup>When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

<sup>27</sup>“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

<sup>28</sup>“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

<sup>29</sup>“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

<sup>31</sup>He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. <sup>32</sup>Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup>He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable. <sup>35</sup>So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

<sup>36</sup>Then He left the crowd and went into the house.

**His disciples came to Him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”**

**<sup>37</sup>He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, <sup>39</sup>and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.**

**<sup>40</sup>“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup>The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. <sup>42</sup>They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.**

Here we continue where we left off last month with the study of these parables. As I said in the last issue, I believe that the meanings of the three parables in this section are similar, and that a hint of this is given by the structure of this section. First, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds, as the NIV translates). Then, two more parables are told: the parable of the mustard seed, and the parable of the leaven (or yeast, as the NIV translates). Next, the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares is given. So, the telling of the second and third parables in this section is bracketed by the telling of the first parable and its interpretation. This implies, I believe, that the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares guides us in the interpretation of the other two parables.

The interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares is given by Jesus, and so the meaning of that parable is not in doubt. That parable depicts that the children of God coexist in this world with the wicked until the end of the age, when the Lord will separate them. Likewise, the other two parables depict the coexistence of God’s people and the wicked, even within the church.

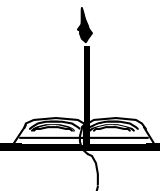
**“He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches’”** (vss. 31–32). Concerning this parable, most commentators agree that the mustard seed plant depicts the church and its phenomenal growth from very small beginnings. Some commentators stop there, and see the parable as having strictly a positive message. However, others (myself included) see the birds as a corrupting influence

that invades (as it were) the church from the outside. In the first parable of chapter 13, the parable of the sower, recall that when the sower scattered seed on the path, birds came and ate it up. According to Jesus' own interpretation of the parable, the birds depicted the evil one, who came and snatched away what was sown in the heart (see 13:4,19). So, in the parable of the mustard seed, once again, in my opinion, the birds have a negative interpretation: a corrupting influence that invades the church. We have then, according to this interpretation, a depiction of the coexistence of the righteous and the wicked, just like in the parable of the wheat and the tares. This time though, this coexistence takes place within the church. Throughout the history of the church, sadly, we have seen much evidence of such a corrupting influence. In the name of the Christian church, many evil deeds have been done, and are being done. Any student of history is well aware of this, as are those who have read the newspaper recently, and so I will not enumerate the evil deeds here.

The next parable is similar: **“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough”** (vs. 33). This parable describes yeast permeating through a large amount of dough. Some commentators interpret the yeast as being the church's influence in the world. I would interpret it in the opposite way: the yeast depicts the world's influence in the church. Yeast (or leaven) is used as a symbol many times in the Bible; nearly always it symbolizes some sort of evil. “Leaven appears in Scripture about thirty-five times, and in virtually every passage, its meaning seems to be unmistakably corruption in some form; thus, there seems no valid reason why we should take the symbol as found in this one verse and make it stand for something exactly contrary” [Thomas, 199]. Jesus Himself, elsewhere in the Book of Matthew, uses yeast as a negative symbol: **“Be careful, Jesus said, ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees’”** (Matt. 16:6).

An equally compelling reason for interpreting yeast as being a corrupting influence in this parable is that such an interpretation fits the context. Again we have a depiction of the wicked living among the righteous. Here, I believe, the dough represents the church, and the yeast represents the ungodly, internally within the church, corrupting it. “The outward, visible development of Christendom, would be permeated by a form of impurity, gradually spreading until all of it was affected” [Thomas, 201]. This parable is a variation on the previous parable. The birds (the corrupting influence) entered the tree (the church) from the outside and corrupted it. Here, the yeast corrupts from within. Again, I do not think I need to validate this interpretation by reciting the evils that have been perpetrated in the name of Christendom. Sadly, they are far too prevalent and well known.

## A Topical Study: The Frailty of Life



### The Frailty of Life, pt. 3

Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. (Job 14:1-2).

My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath." (Ps. 39:3-5)

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:14)

This is the third and final article in a series concerning the frailty of life. This article deals with the context of the last verse cited above, James 4:14.

### The Frailty of Man and the Sovereignty of God

<sup>13</sup>Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." <sup>14</sup>Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup>Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." <sup>16</sup>As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. <sup>17</sup>Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. (James 4:13-17)

In this section of verses, James speaks on the control that we have over the events of our lives. We all feel at times that we ourselves are in control. We think that our destiny is in our own hands. We proclaim (as has been cited in these pages before): "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."["Invictus", William Ernest Henley]. We think that our life is our own. It isn't. James wants to make this very clear, so he begins emphatically: **"Now listen"**.

The target audience for James' exhortation is those who have their whole future planned out and decided. They say: **"Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money"** (vs. 13). Of note is the fact that there is no room for God in any of their plans. They will travel; they will work; they will **"make money"**, but apparently accomplishing the work of God is not any part of their ambition.

James tries to bring them back to reality by informing them: **"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow"** (vs. 14). This passage in James is reminiscent of the parable that Jesus told concerning a rich landowner whose ground produced a good crop. The rich man, seeing his prosperity, planned to build bigger and better barns to store all of his goods and grain. He fantasized about the time when his big barn would be built: **"And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'"** (Luke 12:19). His fantasy was short-lived, however, for God said to him: **"You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"** (Luke 12:20). Then Jesus remarked, concerning this parable: **"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God"** (Luke 12:21). Those who live for themselves, with no thought toward God's purpose in their lives, can never be certain about their future; however, if you live for God, if your desire is to fulfill His purpose in your life, you can be assured that you will attain your goal.

We must be aware of the frailty of our lives, and how little control that we have over them, as James says: **"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"** (vs. 14). Man's life is fleeting. With all the distractions in this world, one could easily live his whole life and not achieve any worthwhile goal. So many people chase after the things of this world, as the one in James' example, whose goal is to **"go to this or that city,...carry on business and make money"**. To what end? So that they can **"eat, drink and be merry"**? What if the Lord came to you this evening and said, **"This very night your life will be demanded of you"**? Is that a terrifying thought?

It shouldn't be. If you are living for Him, you can say what James advises us to say concerning the future: **"If it is the Lord's will, we will live"** (vs. 15). Whether we acknowledge it or not, our lives are in His hands. He controls our destiny. We only continue to live because it is His will that we continue to live. Yes, in His will, He has given us the choice of how to live our lives, as long as we live that is. We can choose to seek to fulfill His purpose for our lives, or we can seek to fulfill our own pleasures. However, if we seek to fulfill our own pleasures, we must ever

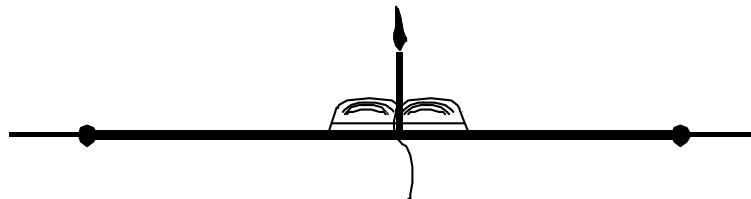
be looking over our shoulders, anxious that God too will visit us in the night demanding our lives. On the other hand, if we live for Him, we already realize that our lives are in His hands, and, indeed, we even look forward to the day when we will join Him in His kingdom.

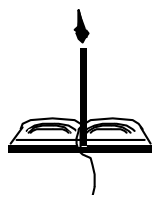
When we presumptuously plan out our future with no consideration for God's will, as James says, **"we boast and brag"**. We are, in effect, rejecting the fact that God controls our lives. We are boasting that we are sovereign over the events in our future. As James states: **"All such boasting is evil"** (vs. 16). Now, it is not the planning itself that is evil, it is the lack of consideration for God's will that is evil. Yes, we can plan to buy a new car, we can plan to take a vacation, we can plan to move to another area and start a new career, but as we are planning, we must seek the Lord's will in these matters. Again, we should say, **"If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that"** (vs. 15).

And if we seek His will, His will be revealed to us. Now, it may turn out that His will does not agree with what we planned. At this point, again we can choose to obey His will, or to continue on with our plans. If we continue on with our plans, we are rejecting God's will for us, and thus, rejecting the good that we ought to do. So, James concludes, **"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins"** (vs. 17). Since our lives are a **"mist"**, we do not have time to ignore God's will. We always say, "Oh, next year I will do this or that for the Lord." However, the reason that we don't have time to do God's work is usually because we are too busy fulfilling our own goals for our lives. In doing so, we often do not realize that we are sinning, but James states, in no uncertain terms: **"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."**

Our lives are a **"mist"** (James 4:14); they are like a **"fleeting shadow"** (Job 14:2); our days are a **"mere handbreadth"** (Psalm 39:5). It is time that we seek to do the **"good we ought to do"**; it is time that we give our lives entirely to the Lord and seek to fulfill His purpose for them. Christ is our example in this. In His short earthly life, He accomplished much, always doing **"the good he ought to do"**, the will of His Father.

So Father, put the desire in our hearts to seek to fulfill Your purpose for our lives and to always seek to do Your will. Lessen our desires for worldly pursuits and increase our desire to do that which will have eternal significance. Give us an acute awareness that You are in control of our lives, that we are alive only because it is Your Sovereign will that we remain so. May we live as Jesus did, in whose name we pray these things, Amen.





## A Study in Psalms: Psalm 54

### Psalm 54 - The Weapon of Prayer

For the director of music. With stringed instruments.  
A *maskil* of David. When the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said,  
“Is not David hiding among us?”

<sup>1</sup>Save me, O God, by Your name;  
vindicate me by Your might.

<sup>2</sup>Hear my prayer, O God;  
listen to the words of my mouth.

<sup>3</sup>Strangers are attacking me;  
ruthless men seek my life—  
men without regard for God. *Selah*

<sup>4</sup>Surely God is my help;  
the Lord is the one who sustains me.

<sup>5</sup>Let evil recoil on those who slander me;  
in Your faithfulness destroy them.

<sup>6</sup>I will sacrifice a freewill offering to You;  
I will praise Your name, O LORD, for it is good.

<sup>7</sup>For He has delivered me from all my troubles,  
and my eyes have looked  
in triumph on my foes.

As the inscription states, the occasion of this psalm is: “When the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said, ‘Is not David hiding among us?’” The “Ziphites” were the people who lived in the Desert of Ziph. Twice David hid from Saul there, and twice the Ziphites informed on him (see I Sam. 23:19; I Sam. 26:1). They informed on him in order to curry favor with King Saul. “Mighty men will find readily more friends in an evil cause, than the godly find in a good one” [Dickson, 322].

So David not only had to contend with Saul and his great army, but he

had to contend with traitorous countrymen. He turned for help to his best and truest ally; he turned to God: **“Save me, O God, by Your name; vindicate me by Your might”** (vs. 1). We can go to God for salvation of body, as well as soul. David, in this case, is seeking bodily salvation, salvation from an enemy (Saul) who is hunting him down. David is clearly in the right in his conflict with Saul, and so, he can confidently pray for **“vindication.”** “In asking for divine protection it is indispensably prerequisite we should be convinced of the goodness of our cause, as it would argue the greatest profanity in any to expect that God should patronize iniquity” [Calvin, in Plumer, 576]. “Albeit no man should rashly call God to give judgment, yet in a good cause, against a strong party, an upright man may call for and expect assistance from God” [Dickson, 323].

As his primary weapon in his conflict with Saul, David uses prayer: **“Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth”** (vs. 2). The weapon of prayer is a weapon that is never unavailable. “This has ever been the defence of saints. As long as God hath an open ear we cannot be shut up in trouble. All other weapons may be useless, but all-prayer is evermore available” [Spurgeon, 440]. David “did not lift up his hand even against the enemies of God till he had first lifted them up in humble supplication to the Lord his strength” [J. Dolben, cited in Spurgeon, 443]. In fact, if there was a good side to the affliction that David was experiencing, it was that it drove him closer to God in prayer. “Whatever makes us feel our entire dependence on God is good for us. David could not have had the blessed experience of this Psalm if Saul and his myrmidons had not sought his life” [Plumer, 576].

David describes his situation: **“Strangers are attacking me; ruthless men seek my life—men without regard for God”** (vs. 3). The Ziphites were probably **“strangers”** to David (though, of course, they knew who David was). But David knew personally Saul’s men who were **“attacking”** him. Yet, they were **“strangers”** to David in that they were acting in a way that made no sense to David, not fitting for people of God. “No strangers are more strange than they who cast off the bands of civility and nature, whereby they were bound: false countrymen, false brethren, false, friends, false alliance, are those of whom men may expect least in their need, for David findeth such men to be his greatest enemies” [Dickson, 323].

Those seeking David were **“ruthless.”** They cared nothing for right and wrong in the situation. They only cared about their standing before a king who had turned evil. They were **“men without regard for God.”** Sadly, they were concerned about what King Saul thought of them, but they had no regard for what the Lord of the Universe thought of them. They acted as if God did not see nor hear their actions.

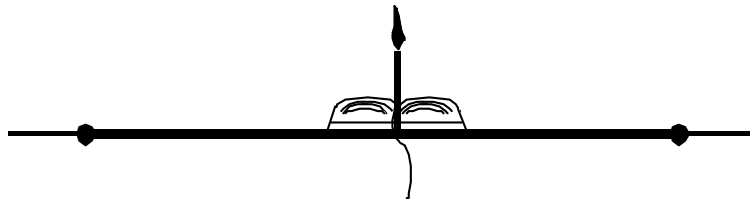
The **“Selah”** after verse 3 denotes a pause, or a musical interlude in the psalm. After this brief pause, David’s confidence has been restored,



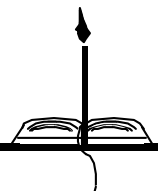
and he has faith that his prayer will be answered: **“Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me”** (vs. 4). “David was pressed down to the very mouth of the grave; and how could he recognize the gracious presence of God? He was trembling in the momentary expectation of being destroyed; and how is it possible that he can triumph in the certain hope that divine help will presently be extended to him?” [Calvin, in Plumer, 577]. “Behold the power of faith. It hopes against hope” [Plumer, 577]. “He already, with the eye of faith, sees God advancing as his ‘helper,’ though to the eye of sense nothing presented itself but destruction on every side” [JFB, 217]. “Fervent prayer hath readily a swift answer, and sometimes wonderfully swift, even before a man have ended speech, as here David findeth in experience” [Dickson, 324].

David was assured in his spirit that God would answer his prayer, because he knew that his cause was a just one. The Lord was his **“sustainer”**, because he was on the Lord’s side. “It is a great comfort to us to see God sustaining our sustainers, befriending our friends, giving skill to our advocates, and strength to our defenders. God will ever take part with those who take part with His meek and sorrowful ones” [Plumer, 577]. Confident of this, David then prayed specifically that justice would be executed upon his enemies: **“Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in Your faithfulness destroy them”** (vs. 5). “As God is a friend to the friends of his distressed children, so he is a foe to their foes; and their foes shall smart for their enmity in due time” [Dickson, 324].

David is so certain of deliverance that he vows to worship God for it: **“I will sacrifice a freewill offering to You; I will praise Your name, O Lord, for it is good. For He has delivered me from all my troubles, and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes”** (vss. 6–7). “In faith, he sees the deliverance already accomplished, and ‘praises’ God by anticipation for it” [JFB, 217]. This is faith: To praise the Lord under such circumstances. “Let us trust that if we are as friendless as this man of God, we may resort to prayer as he did, exercise the like faith, and find ourselves ere long singing the same joyous hymn of praise” [Spurgeon, 442].



## A Meditation: The Spiritual Chemist



### A Meditation Upon a Mote in the Eye by William Spurstowe (ca. 1666)

Of what a strange temper is the *eye*, which a small mote can so extremely trouble, and a wide world cannot satisfy? And what a strange vanity is the world, a single dust of which is more powerful to afflict and torment, than an entire confluence of all its pleasures can be to give ease, or to delight? For were the globe of the whole earth turned into a delicious paradise, that the eye might behold nothing but a perpetual spring of beauty, and that every sense might be continually feasted with the choicest objects that such a garden could produce; yet alas a corn of its sand, an atom of its dust put or lodged accidentally in the eye, would create such violent shootings, such keen prickings and burnings, as would soon force a man to send forth complaints that his anguish is far above his pleasure, and that he had much rather forgo the one, than undergo constantly the other. Oh, what a weak and empty bubble is all worldly happiness, which breaks and vanisheth into nothing, by the power of a small dust! And what a matchless difference is there between heavenly and earthly comforts, when a drop of the one can sweeten a briny sea of sorrow, and a world of the other cannot assuage the anguish which ariseth from a single mote! Lord therefore let not me be among the number of those that receive their good things in this life, I ask only a pittance for my passage, but not an abundance for my portion in them; yea though thou shouldst give me no bounty to make merry with, yet will I not murmur at the bounty to prodigals, if thou wilt say, "Son, all that is laid up is thine," though thou hast little or nothing of what is laid out; but I will pray, "Turn Lord mine eyes from beholding, and my heart from affecting earthly vanities, and fix all my desires upon heaven, that I may look and long for it, in which there is nothing that can offend; but everything that will delight and satisfy to Eternity."

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### Conscience

"This is the triumph that virtue hath over vice, that wheresoever she is most hated, there she is often wished for. Though they have set their heart as an adamant stone, and made their face like flint, yet grace pierceth through-out their concupiscence and they say sometime, 'The way of virtue is better.' There was never so impure and dissolute an adulterer but he hath said sometime, 'The chaste body is best.' There never was so blasphemous nor vile a swearer but sometime he hath trembled at God's majesty. There was never man so proud and ambitious but sometime he remembereth he is but earth and ashes. There was never such a usurer nor covetous wretch, but sometime he thinketh his gold and silver shall canker and the rust of it shall be a witness against him... There was

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