

The Sun of Righteousness

The Names of Christ:

Malachi 3:14 – 4:6

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When I entered seventh grade, I met a feisty Irish Catholic, named Tom, who had given the Catholic sisters a fit in his parochial school. Sixth grade had been difficult for me as well. Thus, entering junior high, we ended up sharing nearly every class together with other kids who misbehaved or struggled. Tom and I formed a life-long friendship. He was constantly over at my house and vice versa. His home phone number was so close to that of a convent, that people often called his house. I don't know who in his family started it, both his parents were pranksters, but I think one time a caller asked for Sister Mary and he was handed the phone. Anyway, his family kiddingly called him Sister Mary, and when my oldest brother got wind of it, he never called him Tom. It was always Sister Mary. Even recently, when I talked about Tom, I had to use the name Sister Mary for my brother to recognize the person.

Occasionally, we have fun with names, but they are far more powerful than we think... even when we jest. I can't think of someone more loyal to the Catholic Church than my friend, Sister Mary. I can't attribute it completely to that humorous nickname, but I don't think it hurt. Names do matter. They seed destiny. Jesus used them to shape his followers. He renamed Simon to Peter. He called James & John, the sons of thunder.

Names were important to Jesus because they were important to God. An angel of God told Zechariah, the priest to name his son "John." The baby would become John the Baptist. An angel appeared to Joseph and told him to name Mary's baby "Jesus."

These names were given for two purposes: to impart self understanding and for recognition by others. Regarding the names of Christ, his names not only inform us of Jesus' self-understanding, but of how God intends us to relate to him.

The very last passage of the Old Testament, Malachi 4, prophesies the coming of the Christ. It speaks these words:

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.
(Malachi 4:2, NIV)

The Christ in this prophecy is called *the sun of righteousness*. This one verse gives us an amazing promise with three critical truths. The first truth defines who receives the promise, "*But for you who revere my name.*" Notice the word *name*? Interesting! We'll get to that in a moment. The second truth tells us what is promised: "*the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.*" The third truth tells us what it means for us: "*And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.*"

To understand this name of Christ and its impact for our lives, let's look at the entire prophecy of Malachi.

The name Malachi means *my messenger*. Some scholars think that the name was like Ben for Benjamin or Sam for Samuel. They think his Hebrew name was longer and meant *Yahweh's Messenger* or *God's messenger*. Malachi prophesied to people, scratching out a new living, after they had returned to Jerusalem from captivity in another nation. They had no residual wealth or inheritance and so struggled with poverty.

God confronted them in Malachi chapter one by saying, "You don't trust my love. You don't trust my promises." He confronted the priests for defaming the name of God by giving into the people's attitudes. The people resented the demands of worship. They gave the priest

the animals they didn't want: the runts, the lame, and the sick. In turn, the priests sacrificed them. God's messenger said, "Try giving these creatures to your governor? See if it curries favor or anger."

God longed for one priest to have the courage to lock the people out of the temple with their demeaning gifts. The people were just going through the motions of devotion. The priests were more afraid of the people than of God.

If the priests and people were self-serving in their love for God, they were also self-serving in their marital love. In Chapter two men were divorcing their wives, trading them in for younger models. These returnees were unhappy. They cried to God in prayer about their sad condition, but they paid no attention to the conditions God gave for his blessings. In chapter three, Malachi confronted the people saying that they were robbing God by not returning their tithes. The blessings that flow from God's love were held back by a heavenly floodgate. Their actions, not their words, spoke their real faith:

You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.' (Malachi 3:14-15, NIV)

The people acted as if the Israelite form of Donald Trump or President Barack Obama has more influence on their personal fortune than God. They looked more to the prosperous and the authorities than they did God. The point is that their actions sullied the reputation or name of God, making it harder for people to trust God. Names identify our help. Names offer us direction. You seek out a doctor rather than a butcher with an itch. You seek out a butcher rather than a doctor with a meat order. God's own people, however, sought out everything but God for their needs. Who would want to know and depend on their God?

If God rewards unbelief and false-trusts, then no righteousness will be imparted to his followers and no life. Consequently, God's messenger said:

But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. (Malachi 4:2, NIV)

In other words, God deals with us in a way that blesses us both inside and out, invites others, and correctly identifies him rather than obscures the truth.

Jesus is this sun of righteousness that rises on those who fear God's name. Jesus dispels the dark confusion and obscurity. He unveils the pure love of God. He unveils uncorrupted goodness. He illuminates true righteousness. He helps us see the world and warms us in righteousness. What's more, healing is in his wings.

It may be difficult to imagine a sun with wings. On the other hand, it was difficult for ancients to believe the sun flew across the sky without wings. Whatever the image, God's messenger said healing was in the movement of the sun.

Healing was an essential and central work of Jesus. Wherever he moved and was greeted with faith, there was healing. Today, wherever the Spirit of Jesus moves and is greeted by faith, there is healing. Some healing is spiritual, some emotional and some physical.

I have a plant in my office next to the window. Most of the plant stretches toward the sunlight. The portion away from the sun looks less healthy. I don't remember who moved my plant by the window, but it has completely changed its health.

Do you hold God and all of his word critical? Then the sun of righteousness has dawned for you and also healing. The sun of righteousness has brought every kind of healing imaginable.

The consequence for us is described in this phrase:

And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. (Malachi 4:2, NIV)

Have you ever seen the show *Extreme Makeover*? Isn't it fun to watch all the hugging and tears at the end? By gift alone, they are released from hopeless situations. I think they skip like a calf released from the stall. Brothers and sisters, God wants you to skip for joy. This is why Jesus came. This is God's promise to you and me.

God's extreme makeover in your health, relationships and finances don't happen without the changes that come as you hone your focus and hope on him alone. It comes as you act in faith inviting his movement.

Brothers and sisters, God's blessings don't just come to an individual here or there. His blessings also come on people. God made us so we would share blessings as a human family. I encourage you to come forward and spend some time in prayer with your brothers and sisters. Maybe you have a need. Maybe a loved one has a need. Together we have needs. Jesus will move among us, and won't it be fun to skip out of the stall? Let's not just listen. Let's act!