

## For the Victory of God

Malachi 3:13 – 4:6

In 1994, many television specials were aired covering the 50th anniversary of the Allied invasion of Normandy. This historic World War II battle began the liberation of Europe from the Nazis. One program featured interviews with two aging veterans. The first was a marine at Omaha Beach. He recalled the unspeakable carnage all around him and recalled thinking to himself, “We’re going to lose!” The next interview was with a U.S. Army Air Corps reconnaissance pilot who had flown over the whole battle area. He glimpsed the same carnage on the beach, but he also witnessed the advance of the marines, the penetration by the paratroopers, and the effectiveness of the aerial bombardment. He recalled thinking to himself, “We’re going to win!”

Sometimes, defeat seems imminent, not because we are a negative people, but simply because we cannot see everything that is going on at one time. That is why God calls us to live by faith. His promises to us reflect unseen realities that are just as true as the realities we do see. In Malachi, the nation was trying to come to grips with agricultural and spiritual blight upon their land. They were God’s covenant people, but sometimes, it seemed as if their pagan neighbors were better off than they were. Two schools of response to the situation appear in our text. Those whose faith in God was fickle could not see their many reasons to praise God through their problems. But, the truly faithful of the land chose to trust God in spite of appearances.

### I. The Ramblings of the Fickle (3:13–15)

<sup>13</sup>“You have said harsh things against me,” says the LORD.

“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’”

<sup>14</sup>“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?’ <sup>15</sup>But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.’”

#### A. Some Were Speaking Harshly against God

When things are not going as we think they should, it is human nature to ask, “Why?” To a limited extent, God allows us to question His fairness, but His patience wears thin when the creature becomes too certain and too cynical in his conclusions. Some of these Jews were matter-of-factly declaring that there was no practical benefit to serving God. To embrace the posture of a mourner who lamented personal sin and the national condition accomplished nothing. In fact, those outside of the covenant seemed better off than those who were a part of it.

That was a little too much certainty for God to tolerate. Essentially, His own people were challenging His credentials as Moral Governor of the universe. God did not answer their challenges. He does not owe men such answers. There is enough of His goodness on record for any man to trust Him. These Jews were just like their ancestors in the days of Moses. Even after escaping Egyptian slavery through a series of remarkable miracles including walking through the Red Sea, they still dared to question whether they were better off now than they had been as well-fed slaves in that foreign land. God’s goodness was not in question. Their faith and character was.

## **B. What Drives Such Fickle Complaints?**

Pastor John Beukema tells of a couple claiming to be destitute that appeared at his church. They said they just wanted some food, so he took them to the local *7-Eleven*. While they waited outside, he bought them each a sandwich, chips, and a Coke. After they ravenously attacked the food, the man took a big gulp of his drink and made a face. “What is this? Diet?” It was a similarly thankless spirit that gives rise to the complaints against God in *Małachi*.

Had the Jews been serving God only for the payoff? There were promises attached to Israel’s keeping its covenant with God. *YAHWEH* gave His Law to His people through Moses. If they would obey the Law, He would increase their wealth, bless their harvests and protect them from their enemies. But, there must be a dimension to any man’s walk with God that is rooted in more than just a desire to receive. Do we do right because it profits us, or do we do right because we love what is right? Service to God is tainted if it is only about reward, for that is self-centered.

Self is at the root of our struggles to trust God. We struggle with faith because we tend to trust ourselves more than we trust Him. We struggle with contentment because self likes ease and recognition. Our perception of the uncaring and unfairness of God is a mere projection of our own uncaring and unfairness. In other words, in that infinite number of areas where we are clearly better off than the truly needy, are we still so concerned about equity? Or, is God’s fairness just a concern for when we feel we are getting the short end of a stick rather than the long end?

## **II. The Roster of the Faithful (3:16–18)**

### **A. Elsewhere, a Different Conversation Was Taking Place verse 16a**

<sup>16</sup>Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard ...

We are not even told what this other group talked about, but we can be certain that these conversations did not include that same belly-aching about cosmic injustice. I suspect that they had many of the same questions as their fickle counterparts, but, surely they resolved their doubts differently. A godly community admits, “We don’t always understand why our lives are filled with struggles, trials and heartaches, but we trust that the promises of God are greater than our questions and doubts.” All we know of these conversations is that their “talk” evidenced the fear of the LORD.

The New Testament has much to say about proper Christian conversation. Perhaps, we are not far-fetched to suppose that the faithful in Jerusalem were counting their blessings rather than harping on their disappointments. Perhaps, some voices in this community were encouraging others by saying, “Trust God!” rather than discouraging one another by saying, “It’s all hopeless.”

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. – *Ephesians 4:29*

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. – *Philippians 4:8*

... And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. – *1 Thessalonians 5:14*

Though the details are veiled, it is far-fetched to suppose that this ancient community in Malachi's day reflected what God desires His church to sound like? It is mindlessly easy to fall into the rhetoric of doom and gloom, but the church must be a community marked by praise, high aspirations, encouragement, testimony, prayer and the call to be more than we can be without God. Especially, a church is a place where believers remind other believers that God's promises are greater than the circumstances that would steal our joy and our peace.

### **B. God Listens to and Records the Words of the Faithful verse 16b**

... A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

It is tempting to think that our lives make little difference, but God remembers our faithful moments. Here, He is depicted as a keeper of records in "a scroll of remembrance," not of our sins which He has forgiven, but of those moments when we aspire to holiness, when we pray for others and when we give ourselves to the work of God's kingdom. Is this not reminiscent of the New Testament's numerous references to a "book of life" where our names are recorded in heaven?

Is a passion for God's ways really just wasted energy? The answer is a resounding, "No!" Many in this age of the church are comfortable, complacent, selfish and unrepentant. It is easy to follow that crowd. Know that God takes great delight in those who persist in praying for their church, in serving the kingdom and in weeping over the sins of God's people. This series has been called "*A Passion for God*," so ask God to restore the flame. God keeps a record of those who love Him with all of their heart, all of their soul, all of their mind and all of their strength.

### **C. The Rewards of Perseverance are Renewed verses 17, 18**

<sup>17</sup>"They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. <sup>18</sup>And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

A day will come when the distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be evident. The righteous will be God's "treasured possession." The wicked will be on their own. The righteous will be spared. The wicked will face the wrath of a holy God. God's justice will be obvious then.

The blessings of the here and now are not the final word on God's favor. In 2 Timothy 4:10, we meet one Demas. He had been a companion of Paul, but because he loved the world, he had deserted the mission for greener pastures in Thessalonica. On the surface, living for God did not seem to be as profitable as living for self. But, because of the power of Christ to sustain him, Paul challenged that which seemed so obvious on the surface. From a prison cell, even as he sensed that the end of his life was drawing near, Paul held tightly to his passion for Christ:

... <sup>12</sup>That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. – 2 Timothy 1:12

A day is coming when the rewards of faithfulness to God and the consequences of indifference to God will be made evident. Malachi closes by reminding his readers to live in anticipation of that one definitive future moment when God will establish all things just as they should be.

## **III. The Day of the Lord (4:1-6)**

## **A. It Will Be a Day of Judgment for the Wicked verse 1**

<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 ...

Everything and everyone in this creation that does not render praise to God will be destroyed by fire. Modern sensitivities are offended, but these images teach believers what is and what is not all important. “All the arrogant and every evildoer” are likened to “stubble,” the waste product of a crop of grain. Stubble was an image of nothingness. It would burn up in seconds. The idea that not “a root or a branch” will remain speaks to the thoroughness of the verdict.

The lesson should be obvious. All the treasures and material measures of this world that can cause us to miscalculate the rewards of trusting God will mean nothing on the Day of the Lord. Material comfort for the believer is not a measure of cosmic fairness. All believers, rich and poor, are advised:

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. – Matthew 6:19, 20

## **B. It Will Be a Day of Rejoicing for the Righteous verse 2**

... <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 ...

When the “sun of righteousness” rises, those who yearn for God will be filled with joy and light as all falsehood will be dispelled. They will rise and thrive just as a flower responds to the light of the morning sun. It will be the dawning of a new day for God’s people. Some of the church fathers, a designation given to certain scholars from the first three centuries of the church, saw in this phrase “sun of righteousness” a picture of Jesus Himself. In some Bible translations, the word “Sun” is capitalized, suggesting that the phrase is a name for Jesus. No New Testament text specifically connects Jesus to this verse, so other translators do not capitalize it. Still, that in no way detracts from the fact that it is Jesus Himself Who brings judgment and healing to the world.

While judgment will come to the wicked, glorious freedom will come to the redeemed. Malachi pictures a calf penned up in its stall being released to playfully leap and frolic. Maybe you should picture a fourth-grader penned up in a school room for nine months finally being turned out on the last day before summer vacation. We will enjoy freedom, gladness and release.

## **C. It Will Be a Day of Vindication verse 3**

... <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.

The Bible says that God finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked, so it may seem strange that such a celebratory tone is applied to our marching over the ashes of the wicked. But, the image does remind us that God will win. The life He called us to embrace will be rewarded. The joy depicted is probably not joy over of an eternity lost for those who did not honor God. Rather, it is the joy of a vindicated God; a God Who brings His words and His promises to pass. It is also the joy of a new day and age when sin and everything that entices man to sin will be defeated.

#### **D. Live Now in Anticipation of that Day! verses 4-6**

<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."

Malachi closes with a reminder to the people to obey the Law that YAHWEH had given to them through Moses. Malachi's first oracle reminded them that even though Jacob was the younger brother, God chose to love him and his offspring rather than the offspring of Esau. God blessed, protected, disciplined and restored them. Now, they must live like a covenant people in obedience to a Father Who had uniquely called them out from all the nations of the world.

Malachi reminds his audience of another "Elijah." This Elijah, according to Jesus Himself, was John the Baptist. The reuniting of fathers and children Malachi describes refers to the response of the nation to John's call to repentance, followed by Jesus' redeeming work. The blood of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob pulsed through the veins of the Jews, but they were estranged from the faith of the patriarchs. It is a faith like Abraham's and not a physical lineage to that patriarch that unites us to God.

Only repentance could restore an Israelite by birth to the status of an Israelite by faith. There would either be a turning of the nation to faith, or a curse upon the land. As a nation, Israel never embraced Christ when He came, and the curse was levied in the form of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D 70 at the hands of Rome. Essentially, that sealed the fate of Old Covenant worship.

I don't know if any of us are physical descendants of Abraham, but, by faith, we have been grafted into the true Israel of God. It is still our calling to live as God's people, seeking God's kingdom by living faithful and obedient lives. We too may struggle with those fairness questions that arise when sinners appear to enjoy the good life while many believers struggle. We too may struggle with the apparent slowness of God to conspicuously reward His faithful ones before the eyes of the whole creation. We may have to endure the scorn of those who mock our faith and ridicule our pursuit of purity. Nevertheless, the day of the Lord is drawing nearer every day:

<sup>8</sup>But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. <sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

<sup>10</sup>But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

<sup>11</sup>Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives <sup>12</sup>as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. – 2 Peter 3:8-12a

After a Sunday School lesson about the Second Coming, a little girl quizzed her mother. "Mommy, do you believe Jesus will come back?"

"Yes."

"Could he come this week?"

"Yes."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"In a few minutes?"

"Yes, dear."

"Mommy, would you comb my hair?"

May the Lord find each of us living as if we similarly trust and anticipate the Day of His return.