

Malachi 3:13-4:6, 2 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to Malachi chapter 3, the last book of the Old Testament. We're finishing off Malachi today. The plan is to begin a series in Acts next Sunday, God willing.

If you want to do some prep for that, maybe read Luke's Gospel and read Acts in preparation for that. Malachi chapter 3 verse 13, to the end of the book.

Let me tell you some things that I've learnt recently. I've learnt you can waste a lot of time in traffic on the Xbridge Road, can't you? I've learnt that trying to get the E1 bus to go faster is a waste of time.

I've learnt that expecting to pass exams without doing any revision is a waste of time. I've learnt that hoping your park run time will improve without doing any training or any runs in between is a waste of time.

We waste our time, don't we, on lots of things. We waste our time in loads of things.

[1 : 24] I might say to somebody, what a waste of time. What about serving God? What about living for God?

Is that a waste of time? Look at Malachi chapter 3 verse 13. It's the final kind of dispute argument of the book. And the pattern we've seen repeated over the last few weeks.

Israel question or challenge God and God responds. And you see it for one last time in chapter 3 verse 13. Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord. But you say, how have we spoken against you?

You have said it is vain to serve God. It's a waste of time to serve God. What is the profit of keeping his charge or walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

And now we call the arrogant, blessed, evil doers not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape. And God rebukes Israel, the people of God, for the harsh things they've said.

[2 : 30] They plead innocence before God, but God replies by outlining and showing them their sin. And on this occasion, the allegation is that serving God is a waste of time.

It's futile. And those who do wrong things, those who live for themselves and for pleasure, they seem to get away with it. And so they say, what's the point? It's similar to chapter 2 verse 17, isn't it?

Where God says, you've wearied me with your words. I'm fed up of you. But you say, how have we wearied you? By saying everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and delights in them, or by asking, where is the God of justice?

It's easy to see this, isn't it, from God's perspective, how offensive it is. But we need to get inside the head of the people of God at that time. Why did they feel that way?

They may have seen the world in the same way we see the world. They saw evil people doing great harm to others and yet seemingly getting away with it.

[3 : 38] And they may well have experienced what we often experience as the people of God. They were doing the things that God had asked them to do, but it didn't feel like it was a blessed way of life.

It didn't feel like it was all it was cracked up to be. In fact, it felt hollow. It felt that God was far away. When it all boils down to it, it seems as if they felt there was no punishment for doing evil and no reward for doing good.

So what's the point? They thought that there was no distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous. And I don't know about you, but those sentiments are not always that far from my mind.

It's probably not the sort of thing that I say to my Christian friends. And we wouldn't readily admit it, but I suspect many of us here have, at one time or another, have thought this, or perhaps we've

even said it to God.

It can sometimes feel like there's no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. It can sometimes feel there's no punishment for evil, no reward for doing good. It can sometimes feel like serving God is a waste of time.

[4 : 58] And we can feel that the Christian life is not all that it's cracked up to be. We can look, can't we? And maybe you children and young people do this. You look at your friends who are from non-Christian families, and you think, well, they're having more fun than I am.

And God has us working hard and living through maybe difficult things, and sometimes we feel there's not a lot of reward to go with the sacrifice. And certainly that's how it felt for Israel. But not quite all of Israel. Can you look at verse 16? It's a beautiful verse. Those who feared the Lord. They spoke with one another. And what did the Lord do?

The Lord paid attention and heard them. And a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. There's a group of people who refused to believe that serving God was futile.

Here are those who maintained that actually serving God is not a waste of time. And as such, they shine like a beacon in the darkness of Israel's doubt. Chapter 3, verse 16 really is a standout verse in the book of Malachi.

[6 : 14] Malachi. These people serve God, and so therefore they fear God. That is, they want to honour his name. It isn't a fear like you might, a fear of the dark, or a fear of things that go bump in the night.

It's the fear of knowing the all-powerful God, and how great and how majestic he is. How awesome he is. And these people have appreciated God for who he is and what he does.

And how he deserves to be treated. And Malachi tells us that God commits himself to remembering those people favourably.

He writes their name on a scroll. It's a bit of a hint to us about what God is about to say, but at this point they stand, don't they, as a quiet minority. They resist the majority view in Israel.

And they force us to ask at this point, well who is right? Is serving God a waste of time? There are some that say yes. There are many that say no.

[7 : 25] Is there really a distinction between the righteous and the wicked? Some say yes. Others say no. And verses 13 to 16, they raise those questions.

And we're going to try and answer that question this morning. And the short answer is, there's point number one, there is a distinction. There is a distinction. Verse 17 sees God responding to the faithful group of verse 16.

And this is what he says. Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another, and the Lord paid attention and heard them. And a book of remembrance was written before him, of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.

They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts. In the day when I take up my treasured possession, my jewels, and I will spare them, these people who fear me, I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.

And God is saying that their future will be shaped by compassion. They will be part of God's treasured possession. If you remember back to the start of the book, chapter 1, verse 6 of Malachi, God's complaint against Israel was that they weren't treating him as a father or a master.

[8 : 43] But here we find people who are treating God properly. And they serve him as their master, and they are his sons. And so God says they will be spared.

The implication, of course, is that some won't be spared. Because there's a day of wrath coming. And on that day there will be those who are spared and those who are not spared.

And that is the great distinction, the dividing line. Look at verse 18 with me. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not.

And chapter 4 flushes that distinction out. Chapter 4, verse 1, For behold, behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be like stubble.

That's the future we all have to face. Those that arrogantly stand against God, instead of honouring him, will suffer punishment.

[9 : 53] God's fire will burn and leave them as stubble. The evildoers will receive justice. You can see, can't you, how directly this answers the complaints of chapter 2, verse 17, and chapter 3, verse

15.

Where is the God of justice? Well, all who do evil, all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, it seems.

And certainly the evil do us prosper. And the answer is no, no. They will be like stubble, says the Lord Almighty. The fire of God's anger will burn against them and they will be ruined.

But the future that the righteous face is different, isn't it? Look at verse 2. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings and you will go out leaping like calves from the stall.

Leaping like calves from the stall. It's bizarre imagery, isn't it? God wants you to imagine this morning a sun with wings and jumping baby cows.

[11:04] They are very stark pictures, aren't they? But the meaning is clear. Instead of the fire of God's anger that the wicked will face, the righteous will face the brilliance and the warmth of God's righteousness.

Rising like the sun. And that sun will bring healing and peace instead of anger and disaster. God will make his people whole and their righteousness will be met with a far greater righteousness of God himself.

and they will be exhilarated. There will be joy and there will be freedom. They will run and jump around the fields like baby cows.

Try to think of a similar metaphor. I've tried to think of an illustration that goes along that. Who runs around and jumps around like baby cows?

And the description reminds me of the kind of inhibited celebration of footballers after they score. Last week, Toto Scalacci.

[12:21] Do you remember him? Salvatore Scalacci in the Italian 90 when he scored? And there's these amazing images of wide, wide eyes of him running to an adoring crowd. You know what it's like, isn't it, when footballers score?

Grown men running around like school kids. Some of them pulling their shirt over their heads, screaming at the camera, kissing the corner post, diving on the ground over each other.

It's this kind of uninhibited celebration that's being described here. Or think of the runner, the sprinter in the Olympics who crosses the line first.

What does he do? Does he stop and just shake hands with everyone? No, he doesn't, does he? He skips around. He celebrates. He dances. And it's saying here that the righteous servants of God will be like a calf that's been held back and hemmed in by its stall and suddenly it's released to frolic in the field.

It's like a footballer scoring a goal in the last minute. It's like a 100 metre runner winning the Olympics. Irrepressible joy. Wild celebrations. And the order of things will be reversed.

[13:30] Because in this life the wicked often trample the righteous under their feet. But God says when his day arrives it will be different.

Justice will be the vindication of the righteous and the humiliation of the wicked. There is a day coming when the tables will turn. That's what verse 3 says isn't it? Verse 3 you shall tread down the wicked for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet and on that day I will act says the Lord of hers.

Can you again see the foolish claims of verse 14 and 15 of God's people saying it's a waste of time are being answered. God says no there is a day coming when the reward of God for the righteous will far outweigh all the sacrifice and there is a day coming when the horror of God's anger will cause the wicked to deeply regret every day of their so-called fun.

When they lived with no regard for God. But point number two when? When will this happen? When will this distinction take place?

Well according to chapter 3 verse 17 we will see it on the day when God takes up his treasured possession. Chapter 4 verse 1 refers to the same day and simply says it's coming.

[14:55] And chapter 4 verses 5 and 6 tell us what will happen before that day. Verse 5 Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children the hearts of children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

He tells you and I that Elijah will come before the day of the Lord. What does that mean? Well it's really the same pattern as chapter 3 verse 1 there we learn that the Lord would come to bring

justice but his messenger would prepare the way first.

It's the same thing here. We read Matthew chapter 11 a couple of weeks ago that tells us that the messenger this Elijah figure is none other than John the Baptist.

Let me read to you from Matthew chapter 11 Jesus says this Behold I send my messenger before your face who will prepare the way before you He's talking about John the Baptist Truly I say to you among those born of woman there is arisen no one greater than John the Baptist yet the one who's least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied it until John and if you're willing to accept it he is Elijah who is to come.

[16:29] So John the Baptist is the Elijah figure that Malachi is talking about. Jesus is really clear about that. Elijah in many ways was the most famous of all the Old Testament prophets and this is simply Malachi's way of pointing to John the Baptist as the last great prophet to come before Jesus.

He'll be the last prophet before Jesus himself comes before the Lord arrives. This final section of Malachi right at the end of the Old Testament is pointing us forward to Jesus Christ.

He's saying it's with Jesus that this day comes. And when Jesus comes he will tell us more about when that day will be. And so you go to Matthew's Gospel and Jesus tells parables doesn't he about the kingdom of heaven.

You might be familiar with this parable where Jesus says the kingdom of heaven it's like a net. A net that's let down into a lake and it catches all kind of fish.

And when it was full the fishermen pulled it up on the shore and then they sat down and they collected the good fish in baskets and they threw the bad away. Jesus says that's how it will be at the end of the age.

[17:46] The angels will come and they will separate the wicked from the righteous and they will throw them into a blazing furnace and they will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Jesus uses the same language as Malachi uses.

He speaks of the separation, the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. And he tells us when it will be. He says it will be at the end of the age. The justice that Jesus brings will ultimately come when he comes that second time to judge the world.

It began when he came to earth the first time but the promises of Malachi 3 and 4 will ultimately be fulfilled when he returns. And of course the critical question is not actually when but point number three.

The question is how? how is this distinction going to be made? How will this distinction be made between the righteous and the wicked?

We know if we're honest with ourselves, isn't everyone wicked to some degree? if you're willing to be honest this morning, you will be willing to admit that you fall short of God's perfection.

[19:07] And so who can be righteous? Well in Malachi's day the righteous were described as those who honour God's name. Listen again to how Malachi puts it in chapter 16 the second half.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another and the Lord paid attention and heard them and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and honoured his name.

Chapter 4 verse 2 But for you who fear my name the son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. The New Testament and the coming of the Lord Jesus we are told more about what it means to honour the Lord.

In that passage that Reuben read for us earlier from 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 we read about the day when Jesus will return in blazing fire just as Malachi prophesied. The day when God's justice will be handed out.

Just as Malachi said on that day it will be handed out. And the apostle Paul says that the wicked will be punished with everlasting destruction. But the crucial verses verse 8 of 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 let me read it to you.

[20:22] Chapter 8 of 2 Thessalonians 1 Paul wrote this he will that is the Lord Jesus in flaming fire inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

What that helps you and I understand is what does it mean to honour God's name it means to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The great distinction on that final day will be how each one of

us has responded to the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the critical issue because only Jesus has opened up a way for the wicked to become righteous.

For sinners like you and I to be made right with God. Only Jesus has felt the full force of God's terrifying wrath in order that you and I might not have to if we will trust in Jesus.

Only Jesus has made that breathtaking sacrifice which is actually about others receiving God's reward. That is the gospel. That Jesus was made sin for us so that in him we might be made the righteousness of God.

[21 : 52] And it is that gospel that the Bible and the Apostle Paul calls you to obey. The gospel that teaches you and I that Jesus is both saviour and Lord and to obey that gospel is not kind of really try harder.

It's not to think I've got to do my best. It is to take refuge in him as your only hope and obey him as Lord.

Which means of course there's another question isn't there to be asked and it's in lots of ways the most crucial question of all. More important than even what basis will the distinction be made. but this question. Which will you be on that day? Will you be one of the wicked or will you be one of the righteous?

Will you be one of those who have lived without the Lord Jesus Christ arrogantly thinking you don't need him? Or will you be someone who has obeyed the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?

[23 : 01] That call to repent and to trust in him? Will you be punished with everlasting destruction? Or will you be spared from it?

Because the blood of Jesus Christ saves you. Malachi would put it like this if he was preaching. He would say will you be stubble or will you be one of the leaping calves?

And the Bible's message is crystal clear. There's nothing more important for you to understand that you will be one or the other. We all this morning are one or the other.

In fact you're one or the other right now. But the great news is not just what we are today that counts. There is still time.

There is still time for you this morning if you have been ignoring Jesus as your saviour and as your Lord. There's time for you to change course. There's still opportunity for those who are heading for stubble to obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus and join with those who look forward to that uninhibited and exuberant calf-like freedom.

[24 : 18] there's still time because it is that day that ultimately counts. And what makes it so urgent is that we don't know when that day will be.

It could be tomorrow. And so first and foremost before anything else today we need to be clear how have we responded to the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

And if you're not clear how you've responded this morning make it a matter of urgency to get clear. I take it if we have understood this morning that we are the calves then we will do whatever we can won't we for others so that their future would be secure too.

We would seek to lovingly persuade others to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. You would want to say to others come and hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus. The Bible paints a very stark picture of the future.

It's one that's very unpopular isn't it? In our age but it's always been unpopular. But the Bible cuts through our cultures and through Satan's lies with a clear word about the future.

[25 : 52] And how central Jesus is. The Bible uses words like hell even if they're very very unpopular today. But what is more even those of us who believe it often live day to day like that reality is worlds away.

being and it is that which means that we sometimes fall into the trap of being living thinking like the Israelites did. You see if there never was going to be a distinction between the righteous and the wicked then all of us would agree well it's pointless serving God.

Serving God is a waste of time. But because there is a distinction to be made then serving God makes perfect sense. And we may not see that distinction all that clearly now but we have God's clear promise.

And so we trust that promise and we wait patiently and we serve God and we serve God knowing that it's not a waste of time. It's not a waste of time for you to live as a Christian today even though it's hard.

It's not a waste of time for you to call unbelievers to repent even when they seem totally disinterested. It's not a waste of time for you to diligently and persuasively lead a Sunday school class and seek to teach children the Bible or to do the Bible reading at the language class when there seems to be little fruit.

[27 : 26] It is not futile because the day is coming. The day of God's justice, the day when Jesus Christ, the judge, will issue his verdict and you may be stubble or you may be like a calf released from its stall.

Either way, how you treat God now matters. How you respond to Jesus now matters. And so we've come to the last two words of the Old Testament.

After these words there was 400 years of silence. Can you see the two words? They're curious to say the least, aren't they? God's parting shot ends with utter destruction.

there's a reminder in verse 5, verse 4 where God reminds them to obey all the laws and Moses and then there's a reminder that this prophet Elijah will come before the day of the Lord.

And Malachi says when the day comes, people will either repent of their sins and renew broken relationships or else God will come and curse them.

[28 : 50] And very cleverly, what Malachi has done in these last few verses, he's really summarised the whole of God's relationship in the Old Testament with his people.

He's reminded them of Moses and the gift of the law. He's reminded them of Elijah and all the prophets. And he's reminding us of the chilling reality of sin.

And the word really at the end of Malachi, if you've got a different version, is the word curse. And what Malachi is doing is he's taking us right back to the beginning of the Bible, to Adam and Eve and to their sin and the curse of God upon humanity because of their rebellion.

And that curse has hung over God's people ever since that time. They've not been able to shake it. And here at the end of the Old Testament, things haven't changed.

They're still under God's curse. Israel are still full of sin and the threat of God's curse still hangs over them. And it hangs over them for 400 years, from the end of Malachi to John the Baptist.

[30 : 02] But of course, the last word of the Old Testament is not the last word, is it? when Jesus stood on that mountain of transfiguration, there were two people, figures from the Old Testament, that came to talk with him, one Moses and one Elijah.

And it was the sign that was saying Jesus is the one that Moses and Elijah were looking forward to. And here is the one who can remove the curse from over Israel's head. And so the last word of the Bible is actually Revelation 22.

Will you turn there with me? Please turn there, Revelation 22. And the last word of the Bible is that there will be justice.

Heaven is a wonderful reality, but not everyone will be there. Look with me at chapter 22 in verse 14. Blessed are those who wash their robes, it's picture language, so that they may have the right to the tree of life.

Remember that from Genesis 1 and 2? And that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

[31 : 20] That's the great distinction. Those who have obeyed the gospel will be in and those who have rejected or ignored Jesus will be out. And for those that are there, it's because they will have obeyed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is what it will be like. Chapter 22 verse 1, then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

And in the middle of the street, the city, also on either side of the river, the tree of life, with its twelve kind of fruits, yielding its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Listen to the echoes of Malachi there, the healing of the nations. Because at the end of Revelation 22 there will be no more curse. And for those of us who have been spared, that is our future.

And that is God's famous last word, no curse. It's brilliant. It'll be so brilliant that all our obedience and all our labour will be utterly, utterly worth it.

[32 : 34] It will be so brilliant that it ought to transform our priorities for this week. And from now on until the day we die or Jesus comes again. It'll be so brilliant that there will be people just like us who will be so filled with excitement and delight and overwhelming happiness that they will be like calves frolicking in a field, footballers scoring a goal, athletes doing laps of victory.

Malachi says, surely the day is coming, it will burn like a furnace and all the arrogant and every evil doer will be stubble and that day is coming and it will set them on fire.
Not a root or a branch will be left of them 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.
Let's pray. Amen.