

Malachi 3:13–4:3

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 0 0] 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. What's the profit of our keeping his church or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape. Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another.

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 make up my treasured possession, I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more, you should see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him.

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. That day is coming. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

[1 : 1 5] But for you who fear my name, the son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall, and you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen. Well, good morning.

I want to give my Thanksgiving Day greetings to you and just indicate how good it is to be back. Having been away now for two Sundays, it seems like quite enough in a row.

So, and I'm thrilled to be back here. I appreciate those of you who were praying for me when I was speaking in Northern Ireland a couple weeks ago. And I'll just state that the few days of vacation with my wife on the back end were more pleasurable than ever.

So, I feel refreshed and ready for the season that's in front of us. Thank you. I think in some sense it is because life can be long and certain seasons within it difficult.

[2 : 5 3] Perhaps even because our present situation can put us out of sorts or you might find your own circumstances confusing.

It's because of those things that our minds often are filled with a host of questions that we would have for God.

In other words, our personal experience in life leads to questions we would ask him concerning life in order to make sense of it all.

Questions we have for God. Let me give you two. God, what is there to gain by keeping on with you?

Let me give you another one. God, why do wicked people prosper without any retribution coming from you?

[4 : 13] Those really are the questions that the congregation that Malachi was preaching to on this particular week were said to be asking.

Take a look at 13 through 15. The questions they had for God. He says, your words have been hard against me.

In other words, he's overheard them in conversation. And he's heard them say, it is vain to serve God.

What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

In shorthand, God, what is there to gain by keeping on with you or even by parading myself in worship by way of mourning and repentance as we look for you?

[5 : 20] Look at verse 15. The second of our two questions is implied by the statement, and now we, that is the congregation of Malachi's day, well, we know that the arrogant around us are blessed.

And evil doers not only prosper, but they put God to the test, and they escape by way of shorthand. God, why do wicked people prosper and there's no retribution from you?

Those are the two questions of the congregation on the Sunday morning Malachi came to preach this message. It's one thing to come up with the heart of the people asking the questions.

I've been wrestling with that. You know, this is now the sixth sermon Malachi preached to a congregation framed around their questions of God.

Do you really love us? They asked early on. What is it that you possibly have against us?

[6 : 44] They went on to emote, given the difficulty of their life. If you are just, then where are you among us?

And now, what profit really is there in going on with you? And why do others who could care less about you seem to have their way in the world?

And there's no retribution or fear of you. In other words, these questions that they asked and the questions that we ask can really be rooted in the condition of our heart, which may be varied, as varied as there are people here this morning.

Let me see if I can explain. You can ask these questions out of anger. What profit is there that I would even stay in the church and follow Christ?

Because my situation, I'm just angry with God. Or they might not even be a question. It might be an accusation. God, there is no profit in keeping on with you.

[7 : 58] How do you read between the lines of these questions in Malachi? In other words, the question could be that you might be asking, I have genuine interest this morning in knowing what gain there is in going on with God.

Or your situation might be such that you actually feel, I have no intention of doing anything with it, regardless of what the preacher is going to tell me.

I don't know the heart of the whole congregation that Malachi preached to. I don't know the collective heart of those who hear me now.

I don't know if you're living with God or you're lamenting before God. Certainly there's some indication in the text that some of the congregation was lamenting before God.

This word vain, it is vain to serve you. I think of Psalm 73, but as for me, my feet had almost stumbled.

[9 : 13] My steps had nearly slipped. I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

That's a lament. Ecclesiastes 8, 14, there is a vanity that takes place on the earth. There are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

I said this also is a vanity, this lament. This idea of profit. Job asks, why do the wicked live, reach an old age, and grow mighty in power?

What is the almighty that we should serve him, and what profit do we get if we pray to him? It's a lament. God seems to have disappeared from the landscape of life.

This idea of mourning. Psalm 42, 9. I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemies?

[10 : 24] See, what happened to the congregation in Malachi was simply this. It's this descent on what I could only envision to be a flagstone stairway into disloyalty.

They were disappointed with God. They had returned to the land, but they had not prospered. Disappointment.

Then step down into that soft rock of discouragement. And discouragement over time, and no change in your circumstance or theirs, put them on the feckless stair of disillusionment.

It's not long before disillusionment leads to spiritual despondency, and despondency leads to abject disbelief, and disbelief leads to disloyalty.

That's no 1970s stairway to heaven song. That's a descent into disloyalty given the questions I have for God, and you may have for God.

[11 : 43] And I don't know what stair you're on. Disappointed? Discouraged? Disillusioned?

Despondent? Wondering even perhaps this morning whether this is the last time you go into a church? Disbelief? Disloyalty?

The full range. The full range. Was in the congregation. I'm sure. As it is in our own.

Let me say this this morning then out of verses 13 to 15. You need to know. You need to know your heart. And its true condition.

The state of your heart. What is the state of your heart concerning the questions you have for God? On the scale of I'm livid or I'm lamenting.

[12 : 42] You need to know. Because there's no cure for your heart if you don't acknowledge the condition from which your questions are arising.

Questions we have for God. They're legitimate. They give way in the text to a conversation we need to have about God.

Look at verse 16. It's a very unique verse in the whole book. In fact it's the only time in the book that I can most clearly identify as distinctly unique.

In that you're not really listening to God speaking. Although these are the words of scripture therefore we are. But you understand what I'm saying.

And you're not really listening to Malachi or the people speaking. You're listening to the voice of a narrator. And it comes at the conclusion of these six serious questions of God.

[13 : 55] And all of a sudden the narrator says, Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. 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.

And that verse sits between their questions and then what's going to be God's speech again. It's the only time where you're asking yourself, What was the response of the sermon series that Malachi preached to a people who were discouraged given all the personal experiences they'd had with God?

The questions for God gave way to a conversation about God. Notice the surprise. Verse 16, Then those who feared the Lord.

In other words, some of the people in the congregation listening to him preach were actually lamenting. Their questions were questions of lament.

Like, what went wrong, God? And some of them then spoke, here's the surprise, with one another.

[15 : 15] That surprised me when I read it this week. I expect that they would speak to God. But fearing God, still having some measure of wanting to live rightly with God, even when the experiences and the circumstances of their life didn't even account for the presence of God.

They spoke with one another. I mean, that's like the writer telling you that after he finished that six-part series, they all went off to their community groups during the week, and they started talking to one another about what they had heard Malachi proclaim.

They started questioning their questions of God. Or, more importantly, revealing the heart condition from which their questions were coming.

They spoke with one another. In other words, conversation within the church put a healthy check on the individual's processing of what God was really doing.

In other words, there's an indication that you just might be reading the situation wrong. And left to yourself, well, you ever have a conversation with yourself?

[16 : 56] I do it quite often. And sometimes you can have fun with it, especially if someone that you're really mad at. Man, you could have a conversation. You're like, oh, man, that's good. I wish I had a recorder because when I finally see that person, I just like to hit play.

But there are times when you have a conversation with yourself where you actually, it's unhealthy. You begin to pull on this ball of thread, and you just go and go and go and go and go, and you move really quickly down that stairway from disappointment with God to disloyalty and to giving up on God.

That could happen. But when you begin to talk with one another, there's a check on what am I thinking about God? That's what they did.

Let me put it to you this way. Evidently, our personal experiences are such that if we lean on that to determine that which is true about God, we can actually miss the boat on God.

So our personal experiences are valid, but they need conversation lest we go home believing something about God that actually isn't true, like that he doesn't love you, or that you can be evil and get away with it forever, or that it doesn't matter whether you go on with God or give up on God.

[18 : 35] In other words, you need other people. We need one another to put our armor on one another, but also to put our arms on the shoulder of one another and go, listen, I hear you and I weep with you concerning your questions of God, given what you see going on in your life, but I want to remind you about something about God.

That's what they began to do. Now, this is really interesting when you look at what they did next. It says then in verse 16 that a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.

This is interesting. It says, I'm not quite clear what that means. It could mean that there's this heavenly book, you know, let's just call it Angel, a scribe, and God calls them over and says, wow, I'm watching what's going on in the community groups down there, and there's some people down there that are really wanting to stay on with me even though they don't understand me, and willing to keep going through even though nothing in front of them seems to be working.

Get over here and write their names down. So some angel comes over and writes their name down in a book of remembrance, and he's like, when the day comes when I fulfill all my promises, these are my children.

These are the sons that I will spare. In other words, it's what you have in the book of Revelation called the book of life. Like there's a book in heaven where everyone who confesses and believes and fears the Lord is going to be remembered on the final day.

[20 : 14] It could be a book of remembrance like that. But when you don't think about moving all the way forward to Revelation in a book of life, and you think about moving into the context of Malachi and the books of Haggai and Nehemiah, who are contemporaries, there's a fascinating thing that occurred in this very season.

You might want to turn back. I don't like to turn you away from the text very often, but Nehemiah recalls the writing of a book by the people after hearing the preaching even about tithing contextually where they weren't really following along with God.

And it recalls this writing of a book. Just take a look at Nehemiah 9. You'll read the bulk of it later in your day. But verse 38 reads, Because of all this, we make a firm covenant in writing.

On the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. And then there's a whole listing of names. They wrote a book of remembrance.

And that's when they began to confess that they'd been thinking wrongly about God and then living disloyalty, disloyalty with God.

[21 : 43] So now they actually write their names down on a document. They sign it. And then look at verses 28 and following of Nehemiah 10. Then the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who separated themselves from the people of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have a knowledge and understanding, join with the brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses, a servant of God, and to observe all the commandments.

We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land. And then he actually goes on and talks about the tithing, the obligations that they will give to God. In other words, back to our point, it's possible that the people who couldn't make sense of their experience, their disappointment, nevertheless, affix their name to a document that said, I'm all in.

I believe when I can't believe. I'm believing on the basis of what I know and have heard about God, that he can look absent, but he's not absent.

Let me see if I can illustrate it. If you're a parent with young children right now, here's what you're asking your kids. Give me your Christmas list and put your name on it. I want to know five things you want for Christmas.

Well, maybe you don't do gifts and then you'll have to talk to me after the service, but at any rate at my house, this is the way we did it. In fact, one of my kids starts saying, and here's my reach gift. You know what a reach gift is? It's a gift they knew.

[23 : 33] They had no justification for asking for, but they're going to put it on there just in case mom and dad are really generous this Christmas. So we begin to write right now, we begin to write a list and put our name on what we want.

The way they prepared for Christmas right here at the end of Malachi, they put their name on a list. But it wasn't what you want to get from God, it was what they were going to give to God.

That's what they did. I actually envisioned in my mind this week, and you know I wasn't going to do it because a picture is worth it. Imagine a full-fledged piece of white paper up here and Sharpie markers.

And those who fear the Lord, who are going to be corrected in their questions of God, decide to go on with God, and they say, I'm going to confess my sins before God in order to get ready for Christmas.

I'm going to write down a list of the things I need to do on behalf of God that I have actually fallen off of, and I'm going to walk up in the middle of the sermon, I'm just going to sign my name on it and walk across the stage and then go sit down, and at the end of the service, a whole panoply of names saying, this is the book of remembrance.

[25 : 04] Questions we have for God. Give way to a conversation you and I need to have about God. I encourage you to have it.

The church is the place for you to have a conversation on your questions. But you have to be open to discerning the condition of your heart. Well, the questions for God, a conversation about God, give way 17 through verse 3 of chapter 4, a word of encouragement and warning given to us by God.

Take a look at it. It's all framed on this literary repetition of the day. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when.

That's going to come back at 4.1. For behold, the day is coming. Further in chapter 4.1, the day that is coming.

And then the inclusio at the end of verse 3, on the day when. So they raised their questions to God.

[26 : 27] They had a conversation with one another about God. And then God said, there's a day when you will know the profit, the gain of keeping on with me.

And there's a day when you'll know that the wicked are those that I see and will bring retribution.

In other words, verse 17 to 4.3 answers the two questions they have. By way of encouragement. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.

You're wondering, should I keep trying to serve God? And God says, there's a day when you will be my treasured possession. Now he's asking you to put your eyes on a horizon you cannot see.

But his word promises you it will profit you to keep on with God. There's a day when. And then notice the middle two references to the day set out that other end of the question.

[27 : 59] There's a day coming, burning like an oven. The day that is coming that shall set them ablaze, ablaze that will leave them neither root nor branch.

In other words, he's saying, there's a day when you're going to be my possession and there's a day when the wicked are actually going to be, there's going to be retribution. And then he comes and he actually says, and the day that is for you is the same day that is for them because the day that looks like an oven is the day where the sun of righteousness comes with healing in its wings.

I mean, what a phrase. But for you who fear my name, verse two, the sun of righteousness, that is that sun which is going to scorch the evildoer is the same sun that's going to warm you to the point where you're like a calf running from the stall.

And it isn't just that you're going to be saved, it's that your hooves are going to be dancing on the ashes of those who are judged. In other words, salvation is coming and vindication.

And you know some of you need vindication. And so the salvation comes, the vindication comes, the judgment comes, all on the day. And you wonder, when is that day?

[29 : 20] When is that day? You know, these three verses fly into the pages of the New Testament by way of citation or allusion no fewer than 15 times.

And I looked them all up because I wanted to know when is this day? Is it Christmas? Is it with the first coming of Christ?

When is this day? Most of them referred by way of emphasis to the second coming of Christ. The second coming of Christ.

John the Baptist says, I baptize you with water but one who is coming who will, in a sense, judge you with this unquenchable fire. Second Peter talks about at the end of time where God is going to roll up this world like a window shade.

and on that day everything is going to be reserved for fire. Previously it had been destroyed by flood. There is another reference in the New Testament that speaks of the same thing that you and I get it now get it now this word for the congregation in Malachi's day prepared them for the first coming of Christ.

[30 : 46] Their repentance and their readiness prepared them for his coming but for you and for me this repentance and this readiness hold us until his second coming. The day.

The day that began with Christ's advent will not be secure until his return. I mean, this is the way. Think about Jesus when he walked on the scene in Luke 4 and he actually announced his ministry as fulfilling Isaiah 61 and he says, I have come in order to open the eyes of the blind and to heal these people and then he stops and sits down and guess what phrase he stopped on?

He did not read the day of the vengeance of the Lord that has come. In other words, Christ is saying, I'm beginning the day of the Lord but the final day of vengeance is yet in the future.

And that's the encouragement for you and for me from this text. I know you have your questions of God.

Talk to one another so that they can help you understand the condition of your heart from which those questions flow. And then make out your Christmas list.

[32 : 06] I mean, think about it. Write out a confession of our sins, the commitments we need to make, the one to whom we need to turn, a decision to keep on keeping on, a decision to allow justice to rest with God rather than yourself and begin to pick up that prayer of revelation, O Lord, come quickly because we need that day.

I personally want to be ready for Advent. I want my heart ready. The window is narrowing for preparation of readiness.

It's narrowing. if my heart's going to be ready, repentance is required.

Wrestling with the true condition of my heart is needed. Correction and conversation with others will keep me on the way and a belief that the day of the Lord will clarify the confusion of my circumstance, that the return of the sun will rise over the darkness of my situation, that the reward of the righteous is worth it.

Our Heavenly Father, help us be ready for the arrival of your Son as we prepare even now to very shortly sing things like rejoice, rejoice, or silent night, holy night.

[34 : 31] When we prepare to act like the wise men and get on our knee before the cradle, help us, Lord, to deal well with our questions.

Meet us in our conversations. Encourage us through your word in Christ's name.

Amen.