

AM Malachi 3:6-4:6 Blessing or Curse?

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading today is the end of the book of Malachi, which as we know is right at the end of the Old Testament. Malachi 3, verse 6.

! For you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.

Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, how shall we return? Will man rob God?

Yet you are robbing me. But you say, how have we robbed you in your tithes and contributions?

You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts. If I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need, I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts.

[1 : 37] Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. 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 charge, 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 the 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. And I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.

[2 : 46] Then once more you shall 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.

The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun 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.

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. 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 fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

May God bless this reading of his word to us. 2025. But how far back do you think recent history goes?

[4 : 27] Remember Harold Wilson, our pipe-smoking Huddersfield-born prime minister from the 1960s, he coined that phrase, a week is a long time in politics.

But how long is recent history? Now, my own memories of the experiences of my grandparents allow me to go back to the First World War.

Memories of Grandpa Mackay serving with the Royal Navy in the Dardanelles, and Grandpa Lamb being gassed twice, serving king and country in the Somme.

I would consider that time frame of a hundred years or so reasonably accessible recent history.

Now, consider, if you will, a similar time frame for a Jerusalem Jew of my age in Malachi's day, around 440, 430 BC.

A Jew in his 70s, let's say. He knew the story of the Northern Kingdom and its fall from God's grace and annihilation in 720 or 722 BC.

[5 : 50] And he knew of Judah's similar godless behaviour and divine punishment at the hand of the Babylonians. And he knew of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and of the three waves of exiles carried away by Nebuchadnezzar.

But all that seemed quite distant. That was old history. But then this Jew's own grandparents were actually there when Cyrus the Persian came to power and decreed the return of captives to Jerusalem.

Seventy years to the year from when the exile began. Now, only a minority of the Jews actually returned to their homeland with the return from exile.

But this particular man's grandparents would have talked of following Zerubbabel with over 42,000 other returnees to the land of their forefathers where they would rebuild the temple albeit in a stuttering, rather unenthusiastic way.

But now, years later, his grandparents have passed away. But here is Ezra the priest newly arrived from Babylon with a mission focused on teaching the Torah, the law, and rebuilding the community around the presence and worship of God, Almighty God, the Creator God, one God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the very same God who had lost patience with Judah and had delivered on his punishment by exiling them.

[7 : 47] But the problem was that when the returnees returned to Israel within that accessible recent history time frame, there was expectation that prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah would have been quickly fulfilled.

Prophecies that crowds from all nations would have flocked to the temple, Zechariah 8. They didn't. There was expectation that the nations would be shaken and promises to Zerubbabel fulfilled Haggai too.

They hadn't been shaken. The promises were still dangling. There was abundant religious cynicism instead.

A sense of entitlement prevailed that God's promises should be fulfilled according to the timescale of the Jerusalem Jews without any heed to whether their own repentance and turning back to God was true or sham.

There was a form of religion of doing things a certain way, making sacrifices. But as for following this God, well, if it's all one to you, we'll do things our own way. My opinion and what I feel is what matters.

[9 : 09] You can have some lip service to God if you want, but what has he ever done for us? This is the talk of the 21st century as well. For such a mature Jew of Malachi's day, distant history spoke then of punishment and exile, and recent history spoke of unfulfilled promises and unfulfilled expectations.

It was like a reenactment of the times of the book of Judges in those days. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. This was the society into which Malachi, which means messenger or angel, this was the kind of society into which he spoke.

So this morning, as God enables us, we're going to consider the last words in the Old Testament, but not just the last words of a book, the book of Malachi, though it's that too, but the last words of the first 39 books of God's own word for me and for you.

And at a first glance, it looks as if the Old Testament ends with a curse. And this so upset the Masoretes, the Hebrew scholars of the 6th, 10th century, who scribed early scriptures as in the Masoretic text, that they, on their own initiative, repeated the second last verse after the last verse of Malachi 4, because it seemed like a more benign way to end the book, rather than with that curse.

And similarly, in synagogue worship, this is still often done, that the second last verse is repeated after the last. But actually, they didn't need to vex themselves, because, and I hope this isn't going to upset too much your view of the world order, chronologically, Malachi is not the last book in the Old Testament.

[11 : 07] Historically, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther were likely to have been written after Malachi. And scholars, including three church scholars, I may add, have proposed that Malachi was actually written before the arrival of possibly Ezra, that was 4, 5, 8 BC.

Some would say maybe between Ezra's arrival and Nehemiah's, and that was around 4, 4, 5 BC. It's possible then that the last book of the Old Testament to be committed to parchment is in fact the book of Nehemiah.

And that finishes, not with a curse, but it finishes so warmly and beautifully with a six-word prayer from Nehemiah's heart. He was really good at those arrow prayers, wasn't he, Nehemiah?

Nehemiah 13, 31b says, Remember me with favour, my God. Or as the ESV puts it, remember me, oh my God, for good. And this echoes Psalm 106, verse 4.

Remember me, oh Lord, when you show favour to your people, help me when you save them, that I may look upon the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory with your inheritance.

[12:30] Now, we remember that prophecy means the out-speaking of God's word. it sometimes refers to future events, but often to the present.

And having said that, and whatever may have been written in Nehemiah, Malachi was certainly the last of the books of prophecy to be scribed. And the way the whole testament was arranged means that ingrained into our minds is the fact that the six verses of Malachi 4 are, as it were, the punctuation at the end of the testament.

And that punctuation was before 400 and more years of silence in regard to divine pronouncements to God's errant people before the coming of the Lord Jesus.

But these six verses might well be perceived as being not very nice. They're quite upsetting. They certainly upset the Jews of Malachi's day, but then which prophets whose words we read in Scripture did not upset the Jews of their day?

The prophets' words, all prophets, major and minor, that is, writers of long books and short books, where almighty God's spokespeople, what they wrote came from the heart of compassion of a God of absolute justice and righteousness who could not overlook sin.

[14:15] And how expressive is the King James translation here when we learn that God does not wink at our sin and ignorance. that's from Acts 17.

God's crying out to his people to repent, to genuinely repent of their ways with a monumental about turn. Sin is serious, nothing more so, and the wages of sin is death, eternal death.

The Lord Jesus himself weeping over Jerusalem summarizes the Jewish response to divine pleas for repentance with that awful comment, but you were not willing.

What a difference from sinful but penitent David in Psalm 51. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

Malachi is unusual among the prophecies because it's got a kind of question and answer session going on between God and his errant people. And if you read the whole book in one go, it's quite striking just how rude, how impudent really, Judah's questions are.

[15:35] They're so deeply in the wrong, but they don't get it, they just don't get it. They think they're in a position of moral superiority, the high ground, so that they can argue with God, they can answer God back.

And as for repentance and humility, pardon me, those seem to be non-existent. This is like deja vu, isn't it? It's the reenactment for the hundredth time of Israel's history.

This God has chosen us. We are the people. We can do what we want.

We're chosen. Nothing bad can happen to us. We are entitled. Repent. Don't be ridiculous. Repent for what? Well, the first three chapters of Malachi address questions around God's love, around disrespecting God, around blemished sacrifices offered by a disrespecting priesthood on behalf of a disrespecting people.

It's around quickie divorce, and marrying heathen spouses. It's around injustice in the law courts, around failure to tithe, around deliberately withholding God's due according to the Mosaic law.

[17:01] And the people, God's alleged people, have got very quick responses framed in a how dare you challenge us way. Here we go. How have you loved us? How have we shown contempt for your name?

How have we defiled you? How have we wearied God? How are we to return? How are we robbing you? What have we said against you? God's answers, articulated by Malachi, his messenger, are unequivocal and clear.

I'm going to read a few excerpts. I have loved you. Jacob, I have loved. Esau, I have not loved in that covenant way.

you have offered contemptible sacrifices on my altar, lame and diseased animals. I am not pleased with you and I will accept no offering from your hands.

You say, what a burden in regards to the Lord's table and sniff at it contemptuously. To the priests, you do not listen and do not resolve to honour my name.

[18 : 10] I will curse your blessings. My covenant with Levi was a covenant of life and peace and I gave them to him. This called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.

But by your teaching you have caused many to stumble. You have violated the covenant with Levi. Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god. A man who hates and divorces his wife does violence to the one he should protect says the Lord Almighty. And you say all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord and he is pleased with them. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this says the Lord Almighty and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

You are arrogant. You have said it is futile to serve God because evildoers prosper and even when they put God to the test they get away with it. Now if you have been listening to those complaints of Almighty God about Judah you must surely have been trembling because it is not this so relevant regarding our own day because the love of God is questioned the value of knowing God is questioned fearing God serving God is openly questioned from Parliament press and pulpit and just what is the quality of the sacrifices we offer to God not just money though that too but our lives how whole hearted is that offering and how about our attitude to worship our attitude to divorce our attitude to sexuality of monogamy between man and woman as God created it and described it in scripture and as the

[20 : 13] Lord Jesus ratified it and what's happening to our justice system which sways in the direction politics and so-called political correctness dictates much food for thought for us there but also in verses 31 to 46 and that should be read together really as one paragraph one thought process and should be prayed over and they provide a fitting conclusion to this question and answer session question and answer session forgive me if I digress just a wee bit for a few moments but the Lord Jesus himself told us a parable that keeps coming back to my mind and that happens as I read and reread Old Testament scripture in Luke 20 verses 9 to 18 we have the parable of the tenants who brutalised

God's messengers and eventually killed his son but there are two main points in that parable which it is good for us to read again when you go home Luke 20 9 to 18 two main points one is the attitude of Israel and sinners in general to God's goodness and love and that results in the abuse and mistreatment of God's servants in all sorts of ways I don't wish to pick on a particular person but think about what happened to Kate Forbes but the greater lesson to learn is the unplumbable depths of the love and grace in the heart of the heavenly father he was faced with rebellion and murderous intent and instead of clasping his son close he sees a fallen world and so loves that he gives his only begotten son so that whoever whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life so let's continue our meditation on

Malachi with a fresh appreciation of the love and patience and faithfulness of our God informing our thoughts and with alliterative zeal I wanted to say that for a long time something I understand preachers are meant to aspire to we can we can bring the last nine verses of this wonderful short book together under three headings remnant reckoning and renewal that takes you back to all these three points we always have to three points story I actually think that verses 16 to 18 of chapter three of Malachi are amongst the most winsome in the whole of scripture they speak to my heart every time I read them because we see that there is a remnant God always has a remnant you may feel utterly alone and bereft as Elijah did and more of him shortly but there is always a number of people who have not bowed the knee to

Baal now some of you who are aspiring seamstresses will remember a shopping chain where everything sewing from threads to fat quarters were available and if you don't know what a fat quarter is you haven't lived well you find everything seamstressy in this chain called remnant kings the chain closed in 2020 but our God is the remnant king and he's very much open for business and as a child of God you can go anywhere in the world and if you look you'll find that remnant branches everywhere and as if that wasn't enough the members of these remnants they actually talk to each other well they don't slink away they don't wave a placard with no publicity on it they don't pinch their lips and scurry off they talk to each other and what happened as a result was amazing

whatever they were talking about firstly

God himself listened now beware he always is and that's in keeping with his most holy name I am he he is he always is and among what he always is is listening even more unlike husbands I should say usually he doesn't just hear the sound but he actually listens to the message and what he hears in Malachi 3 pleases him it pleases him enough that he has a scroll written in his presence concerning those who feared him and honoured his name I wonder if they were talking about his love and faithfulness about giving their all their very lives and broken spirits as willing sacrifices to their remnant king I wonder if they were talking about justice and dealing favourably with widows and orphans and foreigners about the sanctity of marriage about giving all they have in his service and about acting justly loving mercy and walking humbly with their God

[26 : 33] I'm sure they were and there are wonderful glorious consequences from all this the remnants will be God's treasured possession now the word used there refers not to the general wealth of a sovereign that he or she would get as part of inheriting their kingdom but it's to that king's own personal wealth this remnant is a personal prized listened to heard accepted written down owned and treasured personal possession of the king of kings and lord of lords because as verse 18 tells us there's all the difference in the world or should I say all the difference in the world to come in eternity between those who serve God and those who do not serve him here on earth now because the flip side of these glorious truths about the remnant is that there are those who do not know

God the arrogant questioners the self sufficient fools those whose talk is all lies and prejudice and self seeking and blasphemous and foul there are those who do not fear God and who do not honour his name and for them there's a day of reckoning with no redeemer no intercessor no saviour but they'll look on him whom they have pierced and they will be judged by the same Jesus returning in all his glory whom they have rejected and reviled it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God and to those of us who do know Jesus as saviour and who know because God cannot lie who know that our sins have been washed away in the shed blood of the perfectly sinless Lamb of God we tremble at the very thought of that prospect which would have been ours too were it not for the perfect righteousness of Christ clothing us in our undeservedness but in his bounteous love and grace but be assured that day of reckoning is coming chapter 4 verse 1 could not be more clear surely the day is coming it will burn like a furnace all the arrogant and every evil doer will be stubble the day that's coming will set them on fire says the Lord

Almighty not a root or a branch will be left to them now in those days of Malachi just like in my granny's days up north cooking was done in a pot over an open fire usually but there was a cooking method where far greater heat was generated an oven or furnace depending on your translation such a structure was often cylindrical it was clay based it was deep and it had a fire lit inside it and the heat from the fire was absorbed into the wall of the container the fire was then removed and put under the container and the food for cooking was put inside but this whole process could be cranked up many times till the kind of heat was generated that faced Shadrach Meshach and Abednego in the fires of

Babylon that's the kind of judgment that awaits the arrogant and the evildoer God promises the punishment will not be superficial branch but total root that day of reckoning when it comes will apply to those who revere God's name too there's a reckoning coming for all of us but the difference couldn't be more stark rather than squirming and wailing in the face of this horrendous justified punishment they instead covered by the promises of God's word and covered by the blood of the lamb these folk are well nourished they are high kicking their heels for joy the joy of life redeemed life life in Jesus like calves released from a stall and like Lazarus in the parable from a place of safety in Abraham's fond embrace or as we might put it safe in the arms of

Jesus they triumph over their foes who are now ashes trampled beneath their feet remnant reckoning and renewal what a glorious day is described for us here the sun S-U-N of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays let's ponder that just for a minute every heathen nation from Egypt to Nineveh had its sun god perhaps because of this the number of times that sun S-U-N is used of God in scripture is small but when it is used the effect is as powerful as the sun itself here Malachi and in Psalm 84 verse 11 for God the Lord is a sun and shield the Lord bestows favour and honour no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly

[32 : 31] O Lord of hosts Lord of the armies of heaven blessed is the one who trusts in you and in Isaiah chapter 60 verse 2 it says the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you what a

prospect but the sun S-U-N is the sun of righteousness it's not a sun it's this sun that's very specific isn't it's not sunlight it's not sun heat it's not sun love it's not sun justice this is a unique sun it is the sun of righteousness righteousness is something we don't have ourselves and we can't buy it but we can receive it when it's given to us in God's grace because it is the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ himself which is talked about here as the prophet looks forward in faith the sun is predicted here to rise well it did he did he rose on the third day having defeated sin the devil death and the grave and how did he rise the word translated rays or beams can also be translated wings or borders so you can envisage that glorious

Christ rising as our righteousness beaming that righteousness on us as he clothes us in immortality but it's also beautiful to consider that poor unclean woman of Luke 8 with the gynecological problem that ostracised her from society for over a decade she touched the border the wing is the same word of Jesus cloak and as she did this in faith she was healed instantly the border of the garment the wing of the garment was where every devout Jew had those little intertwined threads the sit authorised in the law of Moses to remind the Jew of God's word and how he should be obedient to it and it all comes full circle doesn't it however many layers of meaning we confer in this wonderful promise the resurrection of Jesus is central to our faith it is because he rose again that we have hope and light and life and healing and acceptance and restored relationship with our father all because of what

Jesus has done on our behalf and God speaks directly to us in verse 4 he demands obedience obedience to that law his word really faithfulness and obedience to the covenant where he carries the cost and we bask in the benefits if we remain faithful and that's what the whole sorry mess of chapters 1 to 3 is in a nutshell that same law tells us about the hem of the devout Jews garment too and the unsearchable riches of God's grace in his word we close Malachi in the Old Testament with a trailer if you like a trailer for the new it was a long wait over 400 years but when John the Baptist came and fulfilled this prophecy as Jesus himself recognized he did the Jews whose hearts if anything had become harder in the intervening four centuries they refused to recognize John as the Elijah that he was and they so refused to recognize Jesus as the long awaited Messiah that he was and is that they took on their own very lips the words out of that parable we thought about come let's kill him how do we understand that last verse about hearts of parents turning to their children and children to their parents this is not so easy to understand but it seems to me this refers back to chapter two in God's economy of grace no organism is more important than the family unit one man one woman with children created in God's image in a way which he ordained family life is the backbone of stable society as

God created it and never was it more undermined than in Malachi's day except than in our own day we're left here in Malachi 4 6 as we gaze forward looking into 400 years of darkness looking for salvation and a saviour and wanting to put our own mark the Jews are their own mark on how that saviour should come and what he would be like and what he would do and what his character would be but we forget to look at God's word as verse 4 tells us it's all in here and so important is family that this is the analogy that Jesus uses for his church and the apostles use too but in practical terms it is family that underpins society and we are undermining that not just at our peril but with the assurance of almighty

[38 : 58] God that this will end not just in curse but in destruction they are his words not mine it's unspeakably solemn our present world is lost our world needs a saviour the son of righteousness who has risen with eternal healing in his wings and unlike Malachi's day we pray earnestly that this overture of mercy will be heeded and not rejected because how shall we escape if we neglect such great salvation let's pray!

Father your word is solemn we see our own sinfulness and fallenness our foolishness our deliberate sin our rebellion our impudence in speaking out we see all this in contrast to the flawless beautiful lamb of God hanging on the cross of Calvary dying for our sins heavenly father melt our hearts in worship and adoration and help us each afresh today to accept this amazing gift of love that you've bestowed may we worship you and adore you because of such great salvation and let us not let it go because we know father thank you from your word you've told us that no one can snatch us out of your hand so help us to enjoy to that assurance that nothing and no one can separate us from your love which is in
Christ Jesus bless us we pray in his name Amen