

PM Malachi 3:13-18 & 1 Peter 2:4-10 Is there any point in serving the Lord?

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[0 : 00] Prophecy of Malachi. The book of Malachi and chapter 3. This will be found on page 970 of the Pew Bible.

! Malachi chapter 3 at verse 13 to 18.!

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 is the profit of keeping his charge or in 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.

[1 : 11] 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.

Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

And could we also turn to the letter of 1 Peter chapter 2. That's on page 1220. 1220.

In the Bible. 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 4 to 10. 1 Peter chapter 3 to 10.

1 Peter chapter 3 to 10.

[2 : 56] 1 Peter chapter 4 to 10.

but now you have received mercy. May God bless to us this reading from his own holy words. You probably have seen on the church notices that the topic of tonight's sermon is a question.

Is there any point in serving the Lord? And I know that seems a very strange question to ask in a church, especially in a church which seeks to hold out God's word as the supreme authority over our lives.

But in so doing, setting this question, I want to introduce the topic by introducing you to a couple of church members, not from this church.

Felicity is a very regular churchgoer, a middle-aged lady who has been involved in many practical church activities down through the years and attends both Sunday services and the meeting for Bible study and prayer.

[4 : 43] Felicity has given a lot of time to making knitted articles to send out to folks in the mission field and she contributes to the work of the church.

She organizes a weekly ladies' coffee group and each year for Lent she gives up chocolate and gives the money to the church. Secretly, Felicity looks down on some of the younger women who aren't as involved in church as she is.

And recently she developed a chronic health condition which is very troublesome. She doesn't complain about it to others, but in her own heart she's very resentful towards God.

She feels it's unfair in view of all her church work and service that the Lord should have allowed that ailment to enter her life.

And why does he not make her better? On the other hand, in the same church there is Melissa, a young mum who is kept very busy looking after her family plus they have a lively dog who needs a lot of exercise.

[5 : 56] And because of her home and family commitments Melissa isn't able to get out to the evening service or extra things like the ladies' coffee group.

But she and her husband share getting out to the Bible study which she enjoys a lot. And their house group is spiritually minded and they get a lot out of sharing their love for and their need of Jesus through the Bible study and the prayer.

Melissa feels that her fellowship with other like-minded brothers and sisters in the study helps her to carry the burdens of everyday life.

Now of course these two people are fictitious. No doubt they're exaggerated as well in some ways. But they serve to illustrate to get some kind of knowledge about what Malachi chapter 3 is saying about the kinds of folk who belong to the people of Judah around 420 BC when the prophet of Malachi was sent with his message.

Malachi came around the same time as Nehemiah for example was seeking to build up the walls around Jerusalem. There had been a time of revival a few decades previously but many of the people had become complacent.

[7 : 27] And others needed encouragement to keep serving the Lord in challenging times. And I'd like us to look at the two groups that Malachi brings to our attention in the passage before us that we read together in chapter 3 from verse 13.

First of all there's this first group that I'd like to call the loud complainers. These were the majority group who said is there any point in serving the Lord?

That's where this question comes in. And the answer expected was no. From their point of view. They said they had gained nothing by carrying out the Lord's commandments and requirements keeping his laws.

As far as they were concerned they'd fulfilled everything that God had required. Even performing fasting and public repentance which made them look very holy trying to impress both God and man. and as a tick box exercise they considered that they had kept his laws. You'll notice what they've said there. They've said this is what God himself is bringing to them and challenging them through the prophet Malachi.

[8 : 52] He's saying to them that they've said you've said it's vain to serve God futile. What's the profit? What profit do we have from keeping his charge?

walking in mourning publicly before him and all the people and so on. It seems that they were looking for some kind of profit or measurable gain for their efforts.

When they say that what's the profit of keeping his charge they're actually using a word there which in the Hebrew means a piece of cloth which is cut from the loom.

the majority were literally saying to God you should be giving us our cut. What is our due according to as we see it we deserve because of what we've done for you.

But in fact they were adamant God owed them and why had he not repaid them in the way that they thought they should have been. But the question is had they really fulfilled and kept God's laws?

[10 : 02] The Lord is very clear and this is why he's challenging them. He's very clear that they had not. Now if you look at what's said about them what they say about themselves they had certainly done quite a lot of things which could be considered religious duties.

they'd gone to the temple sure they had but if you look back at chapter 1 verse 8 of Malachi the Lord tells us then that the sacrifices they had offered to him were defective.

Those sacrifices according to God's law had to be without blemish in order to prefigure the perfection of Jesus own sacrifice later on for our sins.

But what these folks were doing was they were looking around their flocks and say well what can we offload onto God? Well they weren't saying it that way they wouldn't ever have actually put that into words but that was what was in their hearts.

What can we give to God out of our flocks? Well that one's lame and that one's blind and this one's got a disease well you know let's just use it up by putting it through the temple sacrificial system.

[11 : 18] And that was giving to God. The worst thing of all was that when they took these animals and offerings to the priests in the temple the priests accepted them.

The priests knew that these animals were defective in these ways but that didn't seem to matter to them. Why? Because it's very clear from this prophecy Malachi and also earlier on in the scripture the book of Nehemiah it's very clear that the priests wanted to keep in with the people.

They didn't want to upset the apple cart. They didn't want to rock the boat. They'd rather keep in with the people than keep in with the Lord basically.

In addition the people were supposed to give a certain amount of money through tithing to support the Levitical priesthood and also to provide social justice for the poor.

But these tithes were not being given as laid out in the law of Moses. The Lord didn't require vast amounts from the people but what he did ask them for had not been given as far as it had been required.

[12 : 31] They were short changing the Lord. In much the same way as Ananias and Sapphira later on in the book of Acts had sold a piece of land and brought the proceeds and laid it before the Lord and purported that this was what they'd received for the land.

In other words they were basically trying to hoodwink the Lord hoping he would not notice. So there was also much injustice against widows and orphans and foreign residents among them and away back in Leviticus the law had been very clear that the foreign sojourner living among them was to be treated as equal to themselves.

in fact it was that particular teaching in Leviticus 19 which was the basis for the second great commandment you shall love your neighbour as yourself because in the context it was given it was given with regard to the foreign sojourner.

So it was very important to point out to them these injustices these deficiencies. why was it important?

Because they were congratulating themselves that what they had done was not only reasonable but it was way more that it was very sufficient to please the Lord.

[13 : 56] Why should the Lord be displeased with us? And so in summary this majority group's religion was external.

It was full of outward ceremony and show but lacking a true heart relationship with the Lord. And we also are also just remembering that much later on when the Apostle James wrote his book when he was asking the question about what true religion actually was he pointed out that it was contributing towards the widow in their need.

Something which this particular generation had not done. So in summary as I say they lacked a true heart relationship with God and that's something which we have to challenge ourselves with day by day.

Where are we before God in our heart? It really matters what's going on in the heart. When the sons of Samuel stood before Samuel sons of Jesse rather stood before Samuel the Lord was very clear that God was going to choose for him someone according to their heart and David was that one who was chosen.

So as Matthew 12 tells us out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. And so through their words we see the words recounted back to them here by God himself because they said all these words and God's only giving them back what they had given to him.

[15 : 44] We see a true picture of how they regarded the Lord. For example they said what a weariness worshipping the Lord is. Why doesn't he accept the offerings we choose to give?

Where is the God of justice? How have we robbed you? You say we've robbed you. How have we robbed you? How have we spoken against you? And what's the point in serving the Lord?

Is there any point? So the really pitiful thing actually is that this particular generation were projecting themselves onto others.

When God did not allow them to prosper they developed a blame culture to divert attention away from themselves to others because they said oh it must be it's the arrogant who are blessed now. failing to see that they were arrogant. They said it's the evildoer who is prospering. That's whom God is causing to prosper instead of seeing that they were doing evil.

[16 : 45] And they said those who challenge God are going scot-free. Well they didn't use the word scot-free but that's the meaning of what they were saying. That the evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.

from everything I've said so far it's obvious that they were the ones who were putting God to the test and thinking they could escape with that. And like many later on in scripture there are so many examples like for example the church at Sardis in the Revelation one of the churches of Asia it said of that church that they had a reputation that they were spiritually alive but in fact they were dead. Spiritually in trespasses and sins. Now I'm not saying that everyone who falls into the trap of depending on uncommitted external religion is spiritually dead but at the very least they are severely backslidden and only the Lord knows the difference between those two things.

So that is the first group what are called the loud complainers in Jerusalem at the time of Malachi but there was another group and this group I will call the faithful God fearers and they were very much a minority.

Something which becomes very clear as you look through the scriptures of the Old Testament especially at the time approaching the exile during the exile and after the exile something becomes very clear is that God is dealing with a faithful remnant that the majority of the people their hearts have gone away from him.

[18 : 37] But within the nation of Judah there was a faithful minority who did not turn their back on the Lord or criticize the Lord even when things were hard for them they never did that.

So let's see about them they were reading about them in verse 16. 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 treasure possession and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. And 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.

And clearly the Lord is drawing the distinction there between these two groups. So the first thing we read about them is they feared the Lord. Now that word fear just in English as in Hebrew it can have more than one meaning.

There can be a cringing fear whereby you're utterly terrified of someone or something. But there's also a fear which is perhaps in our language better rendered as reverence.

[19 : 58] A holy awe and reverence for someone. And that's how it's used here. These people had a true reverence for God and for his holy name. His name was so holy they would never have taken it and criticised him in the way that the other group had.

The fear of the Lord whilst unsettling for unreconciled sinners is a very positive thing for believers. We're told in Proverbs that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

And a very interesting comment which I managed to track down. I've known this comment for years but it was only yesterday I managed to track it down when I was preparing this message.

It's a comment attributed to the congregationalist theologian P.T. Forsyth. And it was this this fear of the Lord is not the fear of terror or guilt but the fear of a love that is always tremblingly alive to the possible alienation of its object.

Now that's a lot of words there and very long words at that but I'll just say that's worth repeating the fear of a love that is always tremblingly alive to the possible alienation of its object.

[21 : 22] In other words this smaller constituency was very sensitive not to offend the Lord not because they dreaded the divine anger so much as they because they loved him so much and did not want to offend him.

They felt if they offended him in the way that the other group had done then they would be it would be hurting basically hurting the Lord. And the Lord can be hurt.

The Holy Spirit can be grieved. That's something that's made very clear in God's word. And he is also delighted when people come to him and put their trust in him even when things may be difficult for them.

If they make it clear that they are trusting him to keep them in life in the path that he has set for them like the psalmist was saying the days which he ordained for me are in your book oh Lord. That sort of trust that says the path of my life is in God's hands and I would wish it nowhere else. That kind of love. So unless there is an authentic reverential fear of the Lord in our lives we can't love him truly.

[22 : 39] It certainly puts a big question mark over whether we do love him truly. I mean even Jesus as the beloved son of the father we're told in Hebrews 7 he exercised godly fear as a human being in his obedience towards God even though he was a son yet he feared.

And it was this loving fear that was absent in this other group and as Psalm 36 and Romans 3 18 tell us if someone does not have the fear of the Lord we have every reason to believe that they're not born again.

Because that relationship with him brings with it, it's part of the package as it were, it brings with it a sense of who he is and how we should respond to him.

So this is the second group, this smaller group the next question I want to ask is to say about them brother is this, they not only feared the Lord, they spoke with one another about the Lord and about his name and all that he meant to them.

This shows us the importance of Christian fellowship, getting together, yes for, we can get together for coffee and chat about what's going on in our families, that's perfectly normal as a preface to our prayers.

[24 : 08] These things are important to share so we can pray for one another and support one another in the challenges of life. So speaking with one another is important. Sharing life with others.

Sometimes I have a feeling, and I'm talking about our own church up in Peebles, that sometimes church can be the last place to actually get to know people deeply.

There have to be other opportunities of getting together to study God's word, yes, and to pray together, and also just to share, share the lives together.

As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he said, because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well.

That's what he says to the church of Thessalonica. Thessalonica. And this is where Melissa, from our introduction, was benefiting from her house group through words of encouragement, faith, and love.

[25 : 15] And it's also where Felicity would have benefited if she were willing, for example, to share with a small group her challenging medical situation for prayer, instead of keeping things to herself and thinking hard thoughts of God as well.

The church is meant to be a mutually supporting organism, whereby we support one another and we're all leaning on our head, who is Christ.

So there have to be opportunities for these things we've mentioned, the reading of God's word, the praying, the sharing of burdens, encouraging and strengthening one another. It's not what the word says to us.

And that's what these faithful God fearers in Jerusalem were doing.

By the way, just to say the older Bible translations included the word often, those who feared the Lord spoke often one to another. Now I believe they did, but it's not in the text though.

[26 : 18] It was more of an interpretation than textual rendering there. But it is true we should be speaking often one to another. It's only those with whom we share life that we can really get to know well and well enough to share our lives, what's going on in them and to hear what's going on in their life and to make it points for prayer.

Now we've considered the two groups, the loud complainers, the faithful God fearers in Jerusalem at the time of Malachi. What about the Lord's response to them?

Well to the loud complainers, the Lord shows throughout this chapter that he has heard them, as I said, he repeats back to them their very own words, so to let them know, yes I've heard you.

They weren't said in prayer of course, they were said in complaint, but he had heard them, yes, and the really amazing thing about this passage is the long suffering of God who in his patience put up with those who insulted his name and made a mockery of his worship by offering those defective animals and sacrifices.

He gets quite close to turning his back on them actually, in chapter 1 verse 10 when he says to them, oh that there was just someone among you who would just shut the doors of the temple that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain.

[27 : 48] I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. So that's the closest he got to turning his back on them and rejecting them.

But, that's not his definitive response. His response to them was this in verse 7 of chapter 1, but he said, return to me and I will return to you.

You want me to be with you, you want me to bless your lives and bless your works and bless your offerings, return to me, return to my word, return to the commitment which you know you should be expressing.

And it's interesting that the Hebrew word for return and the Hebrew word for repent is one and the same word. So if somebody has gone away, strayed from the Lord, they may say, well, where is the Lord?

If they were to ask that question, you could answer them and say, the Lord is exactly where you left him. And what you need to do is to return to him, return to the place where you parted company

with him, not him with you.

[28 : 57] So he still waited for them to return to paths of faithfulness. And to the faithful God-fearers, his response was twofold. First of all, he says, he drew near to them and listened to them.

And I find this reminiscent of what happened on the road to Emmaus when Jesus drew near and listened to the conversation of two disciples who were speaking of the things concerning him and all that had happened of course in Jerusalem and the time of the crucifixion.

And he himself joined their company, didn't he? And listened. And then he asked a question and they had a discussion and then they brought bread together. Jesus says, as we already prayed tonight, Matthew 18 says, where two or three gather together in his name, then we can be sure that he himself will be present in the very midst of them.

That fact should encourage not just our services but also small group Bible studies as well and prayer meetings to know Jesus is there, present among us, and he's listening.

So he drew near and listened. Secondly, he caused a scroll of remembrance to be written concerning them. Now this enigmatic statement is keying right into a custom relating to the official records kept by the kings of Persia.

[30 : 34] Bearing in mind, of course, Persia was the empire, the power that was in the ascendant at the time that Malachi was writing and prophesying. Nehemiah had been sent back, hadn't he, by the king of Persia?

He was the king's cupbearer, wasn't he? So the kings of Persia had a custom. They had their scribe record on a scroll faithful acts performed by certain subjects so that in due course he could reward those same subjects.

I don't know why they didn't always do it at the time but they were certainly recorded just in case it was more suitable to reward them later on. We read of such a thing happening in the book of Esther, of such recognition being given to Mordecai by King Ahasuerus.

Mordecai had prevented, intercepted an assassination attempt on King Ahasuerus and Ahasuerus had had it written down on a scroll what Mordecai had done and that was that for a while and then one night the king couldn't sleep sometime much later, couldn't sleep and he went he began reading his records as a way of trying to instead of counting sheep he would read the records and see who's done some really worthy things.

Oh there's Mordecai. Now I never actually rewarded him for that yet. So these things were recorded so that they could be rewarded and what happened was in the scroll the details in the Persian scrolls would contain the name, the loyal actions and the king's approval.

[32 : 12] In a similar way we see here that the Lord wishes to honour the faithful remnant of Jerusalem those who gathered together to remember him and his name and honour him. By recording their names and their loyal actions which seek to honour him and his name in a day when the majority have proved arrogant, unfaithful and self-serving.

it is this faithful remnant whom he calls his treasure possession and it's that word the word in Hebrew is segula.

Segula is the jewel, the most precious possession a person had was their segula, their treasure possession and that's the word that certainly is in Greek of course by the time Peter writes it down but that's exactly what Peter was referring to God's people when he wrote in chapter 2 we read it together he says you are a chosen race a royal priest a holy nation a people for his own possession it's that same word that same reference rather that is meant and it's an amazing thing to think that those who seek to honour the Lord and who love him and seek to exalt his name that he regards them as though they're a precious jewel if you've ever had anything really so precious to you that you keep it safe maybe in a safe or some very secure place which you never want to lose it and that's how God regards his people he never wants to lose us

Jesus himself when he mentioned the analogy of sheep to a shepherd he said no man shall ever pluck them out of my hand and that's the same idea that we are God's treasure possession his people are his treasure possession and he will never allow us to be lost and so why why are we God's treasure possession there's a reason Peter gave to that so that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light God wants us to know that we're his treasure possession so that that would motivate us in our service towards him as witnesses to his grace and to the gospel born again New Testament believers are the spiritual descendants of the faithful God fearers of Malachi's day and we should be encouraged to know that

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Lord is listening to our prayers and watching what we do for him and for his name not out of any great self-exaltation or seeking to make ourselves look important but out of love for what he has done for us we love him because he first loved us and as we conclude let's remind ourselves that when it comes to Christian profession what we do is not as important as why we do it Felicity our opening character was very practically minded but she didn't use her opportunities to get to know the Lord better through his word and the fellowship and support of his people Melissa on the other hand had fewer opportunities but used them wisely to learn more of Christ as did Mary of Bethany now Mary just to say about Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha they were both they both loved the Lord but the more that Martha was concerning herself with the practical things surrounding the visit of Jesus and the more she was depriving herself of the opportunities that Mary had who Mary had chosen the better part of sitting at Jesus feet and learning from him not to say at all that Martha was not a good believing woman she certainly was a saved believing woman but to carry to continue on that trajectory of making practical things and activities multiplying activities for their own sake if they do not lead us to the feet of

[36 : 42] Jesus then that can end up being a kind of religion which is cut loose from God's grace and which seeks to promote self somebody said to me recently the Lord is more interested in our sanctification than in our service now it's it's a matter of degree it doesn't mean that these things are in any way mutually exclusive or contradictory one to the other they're both important but the Lord's more interested in our sanctification than in our service may God bless to us then his word and may we may we seek to emulate that faithful minority that remnant of Malachi's day who who feared the Lord who spoke to one another about the Lord and his name and knowing that the Lord himself was listening and that he too would one day reward them for their faithfulness so amen as