

What use is it to serve God?

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[0 : 00] If you would keep Malachi open at page 802 and let's pray together as we spend a few moments looking at it. We pray now Father that you would give us ears to hear, eyes to see, hands to receive and to give out something of what you give to us.

And we ask this for the glory of your name. Amen. Well, today we come to the Malachi miracle. Malachi 3.16. This is a brilliant 3.16. You know there are lots of good 3.16s in the Bible. John 3.16, 2 Timothy 3.16.

Well, this one's a really wonderful one and it's a great one for a confirmation service. Because it's so hopeful and helpful. If you're visiting with us, you may not know that God's people in Malachi's day, right at the end of the Old Testament, are in deep moral and spiritual trouble.

They had overthrown all the old categories. They had blurred any difference between right and wrong and there was no conviction in them. They went to church and they said the Ten Commandments and then they went home and swapped their partners.

[1 : 26] They went to church and they read the law and then they gave God the dregs. And they thought that by going to church and saying the creed, they could tickle the boxes with God.

But throughout the book of Malachi, we learn that God hates half-heartedness. If God is God, half-heartedness is a deep insult to his glory.

They'd come back from exile. They'd built the temple, but it wasn't very good. It was a little A-frame temple. They'd lost the fire of their faith.

They'd lost touch with God and the love of God. And they'd become passive-aggressive with God. They were passive, lethargic, it's boring, it's not working, and aggressive.

We blame you, God, for what's gone wrong. And then comes the miracle at 3.16. There's a small group within the larger group of Israel who hears God's word and step forward to get confirmed.

[2 : 27] I'm sorry, step forward to serve God in a new way. And we have time just to look at two things in this passage. The firstly is the miracle of Malachi. And secondly, the making of the miracle.

And we'll spend a bit more time on the second. So firstly, the miracle in Malachi. You know things are dark when it's the people of God who are doing the bulk of the complaining.

And the key to this last dispute between God and his people is that the people are not complaining to God. That's one thing. But they're complaining about God to others.

Because it's what we say about God to one another that is the proof and evidence of where our faith really is. Verse 13. Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord.

But you say, how have we spoken against you? Again, they're completely unaware. It did not occur to them that anything was wrong on their side. The problem was on God's side.

[3 : 31] God, it's you who've not come through for us. What do they mean? Well, God tells them in verses 14.15. You said it's vain to serve God. What profit is there in keeping our charge or acting like we're repenting before the Lord of hosts?

We call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only escape, but they put God to the test and escape. See, what profit is there in serving God?

Do you ever ask yourself that? Is it worth it? Is it worth it to remain pure sexually? Is it worth it to give God generously?

Is it worth it to love him when he won't keep me physically healthy? Is it worth it when I don't really have the kind of success that my friends have?

Don't I deserve better than this? I've given to the church. I've volunteered for all sorts of things.

When is it my turn? When does blessing start to come this way?

[4 : 31] It seems a bit unfair, doesn't it? I mean, what practical, pragmatic good is it? All this self-denial, self-denial and giving.

Doesn't God want me to be happy? Doesn't God want me to be healthy? I mean, it just seems unfair, doesn't it? We look at the world and it seems confusing to us.

I mean, what's wrong with taking things into my own hands? I mean, the movers and the shakers get to the top of the list without any help from God. Thank you very much. I mean, where are the Christians on the list of the top 100, 100 movers and shakers, money makers?

What is the practical benefit, the cost benefit of serving God? And I think every single one of us are tempted by this calculated and mercenary approach to God.

But when our common conversation begins to complain to others and we speak these thoughts to others in this way, it can dishonor God and it can dishearten other believers and it can discourage others from knowing God and it is destructive of community and of his glory.

[5 : 37] Malachi, the people in Malachi's day had lost touch with God because they had walked away from him. They were still going through the motions. But their hearts were a million miles from God.

And they didn't have the courage to outright reject God or outright go back and serve him. And they were living in this unhappy, grey, middle place of lack of courage.

And so their lives quickly filled with the bucket lists and what would get them ahead. Now here's a question. What's the best show on television over the last decade?

What's head and shoulders above every other TV program? It's the Antique Roadshow, right? It's a brilliant show.

You know, people come in with things they found in the attic, antiques, and they're looked at by appraisers. And the appraiser gives you a little bit of background on the pot and they purse their lips.

[6 : 40] It's a little ceramic pot. They say where it was made, something of its provenance. And they ask, how did you come to own it? And then comes the moment everyone has been waiting for. Every single one of us has been waiting for.

How much is it worth? How much can you sell it for? And I can't help but wanting that disgusting, ugly little ceramic pot to be worth a million dollars, you know.

It's a terrible show. I mean, it reduces everything to money. And that's what happens, you see.

That's what's happening in Israel. If you take away the past, if you take away the future from this little crockery pot, if you take away your past and future of life, your life and my life is just an antique roadshow.

And we're trying to calculate our financial value. And then in verse 16, the miracle breaks through. And it really is a miracle because there's been no sign yet of God's people softening to God.

[7 : 49] And a small group of people in verse 16 take God's words to heart and they begin to fear God. Not afraid of God. But they suddenly stand in awe and wonder at his majesty and power.

And it is completely against the tide of the culture round about them. And it's against the tide of their church's corporate culture. And their hearts are changed. And suddenly there's nothing in their life that outweighs the glory of God.

And the proof in verse 16 is they speak to one another. Their common conversation changes. And you look down there at verse 16.

It's just verse 16. And God takes note and he makes a book of remembrance. Not because he needs reminding. But because he wants to honour and praise his people as well.

And this is the miracle that we pray will happen to all of us continually. But the question we need to ask this passage and the question the passage addresses is, where does this miracle come from?

[8 : 55] What is the source of this change for this group within the people of God? So I move to my second point, the making of the miracle. And if we stand back from the book of Malachi for just a moment, I want to point to the top and the tail, the beginning and the end.

Because at the beginning of Malachi, God goes right back to their history. He starts his book by reminding them. It's like a megaphone, reminding them of the past.

And from verse 17 to the end of the book, he finishes by telling them about the future. He begins, you remember, by saying, I have loved you. Every step that you've walked, every thought that you've thought, even in defiance against me, I have loved you.

And sometimes when we look back, we can trace the shape of God's love in our lives. And you remember their reaction? They say, prove it. But from 317 to the end of the book, it's all about the future.

So just if you look, if you cast down your eye in verse 17, the second line, he says, in the day when, and then in chapter 4, verse 1, the day is coming, twice.

[10:11] 4, verse 3, on the day I act, verse 5, the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

Now, why is this important? Well, ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan's main strategy has been to try to maroon us or to isolate us in the present only, in the present only.

And he does that by amputating our past and our future away from us so that we will be orphans, confined just to the present. You remember he came to Eve and he put doubt on the past.

He said, did God say, come on, Eve, that's in the past. Did God really mean it? Look at the tree now. It just looks so good. And Eve said, look, the day we eat of it, we will die.

And Satan casts doubt on the future. He says, you won't die. It's not going to happen. And as soon as Eve believes his lies, she's stranded in the present.

[11:17] You see, if there is no real past and if there is no real future, future judgment, future salvation, we ought to live just for the now. It makes complete sense to treat God in a mercenary way.

If there's no real justice, if there's never going to be real justice, we might as well live for our bucket lists, live for ourselves, or at least maximize our pleasure and our happiness now and accumulate as much power and possessions as we can.

But God makes these future promises and they are future and they are invisible because real faith looks for the reward that God promises.

And so at the last of this book, God makes three promises about the future. And since they're future and since they're invisible, he gives us three very beautiful pictures. This is where I want to leave these three with you.

The first is a picture of treasure. In verse 17, they, that is he's speaking about the people who fear his name, they shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession.

[12:32] Now in those days, a king kept all his valuables and gold and silver and all sorts of things in a place that was guarded. And inside that guarded place, there was one particular box.

Not all kings did this, but many did. And inside that box, there was what's called a treasured possession. It's a unique word. It might be something priceless or it might be something completely inexpensive that means a great deal personally to that king because it was given to him by a special person.

But the thing has history and meaning and it's personally valued by the king above everything else in all his storehouse. It's a word of individual particular delight.

And part of the source of the miracle of God's people turning back to him here is the promise that when God makes up his treasured possession, we'll be part of it.

And this has been God's plan all along. Almost a thousand years ago when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai, he said, now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples for all the earth is mine.

[13:51] It's the same word. See, God is not looking for profit from us. He doesn't want to use us for his advantage.

He doesn't need our love and he doesn't need our worship. But out of his love and out of his grace, before we had even given him a second thought, we were the apple of his eye.

He wanted us as his treasured possession. That's the first promise, treasure. The second promise is of a child.

The end of verse 17, And I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. This word spare has the idea of compassion and love and it's a beautiful promise.

So, today is Father's Day and I have yet to receive any cards. And that's okay.

[15:01] I'm not bitter. But when my sons were boys, they often would make handmade cards. They would paint the front and then they would write something in the middle that was hardly legible.

And they were not great pieces of art. They're still not. I've kept them. But I love them. Because I'm not evaluating them based on their merit for neat writing. But on the fact that they come from the sons whom I love.

Just so. Everything we do for God is imperfect. Everything we do is mixed with deficient motives. I've never done anything in my life from absolutely pure motives.

You know, we've already read in the service that we should, Jesus says, love him with all your heart. And yet, at my best, I am floored in that. What God is saying here is that I receive what you do in the same way that you receive Father's Day cards from your sons.

He has compassion on our serving. We don't have to get it perfectly right. See, by ourselves, our serving is full of imperfections, but God covers it with his grace and his mercy and receives us with joy.

[16:22] This is the furthest thing from a commercial relationship. His desire is to delight in us and to treasure us. And he calls us to himself, calls us out of darkness, makes us new, gives us new desires by his Holy Spirit, and then he creates good works for us to walk in.

And as we walk in them, he covers all of them with his compassion and pardon, receiving them through Jesus Christ. Isn't that great? It's more than forgiveness. It's more than God removing our sins away from us.

As we continue to grow, he continues to delight in what we do. We've got no reason to fear that anything we do for him will not be accepted. He will spare us as a man spares a son, and we know that he will because he did not spare his only son, but gave him up for us all.

So that by faith in Jesus, God looks at the righteousness of Christ and not ours. I mean, every single one of us who are parents knows what it is to have imperfect children. Does that change your love for them?

No, God accepts us for the righteousness of his son, and he accepts our works through the righteousness of his son. The value of what we do for him doesn't depend on the dollars or other people's evaluation.

[17:48] It really doesn't. But on God's alone. I read a book this week, and this is a grand theologian who's alive today, and he talked about how he greatly enjoyed singing Christ alone at a massive convention, and he realised halfway through singing it that he was thinking about what the people around him thought of his singing.

Well, if God spares our works, it's okay. Picture two is a child, picture one is a treasure, picture three is the son.

Verses one and two of chapter four. Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evil doers 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 son of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

We sing this hymn at Christmas time, hark the herald angels sing, hail the son of righteousness, risen with healing in his wings. And it's right to sing it about Jesus' first coming and it's right also to sing it about the second coming as well.

[19:12] Because both the first coming and the second coming of the son of righteousness of Jesus Christ is received in two diametrically different ways. Some receive it and it burns with judgment and others it brings healing and joy.

It's the same Christ who comes with two different effects. It's like the burning heat of the sun can sometimes burn on a rock and crack it. But the same burning sun if it shines on a diamond creates beauty with its rays.

And for those who fear his name, the son of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. The light of the world comes and that healing means that we go out from the stall leaping like calves.

This is a wonderful picture and I commend it to us as Anglicans. Someone showed me a video recently of cows that had been locked in a shed, a stall for six months for the winter.

They hadn't seen fresh, they hadn't eaten fresh grass for a winter. They could see it through some of the slats. Have you seen this? And when they come out of the stall into the green green grass, they leap and they dance and they frisk like kittens or like bucking broncos.

[20:29] It's a wonderfully undignified picture. It's just, it's brilliant and just so with us you see.

We've been confined for a very long time, locked in by our lack of understanding and our anxieties in this life and in this world and when Christ will come again we will dance like silly cows.

see how do these promises change things? How do the promises that God gives us make the miracle? They're invisible and future and it's precisely because they are invisible and future that

they create faith in us because faith takes hold of what God promises, takes hold of God through his promises and by holding his promises we draw near to God and we grow in the confident hope of being his treasure, his children who will dance like cows.

Reframes everything. Means serving God is worth more than we can say. You know, we now live in a cow shed looking through wooden slacks at the green grass and though we furnish our stall with the best feed trough money can buy and we have the best technology a cow could wish for and we hoard our hay so that we'll never be hungry and we increasingly have the sense that we're strangers and pilgrims in this shed and we speak to one another about it seeking that true homeland, that heavenly city full of green grass and God is proud to be our God because of it. Amen.