

God is Good

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Preacher: John Lowrie

[0 : 00] Thank you very much, one and all, for leading our worship this morning, for Paul, to Bethan, to Cairn, to the singers, leading us in worship, and thanks for those songs. Those were good songs.

It's a while since I've sung that last one, but that's a great song. It's been good to be reminded of that again. I really love that song, thanking the Lord. So thanks to Carol as well. First class kids talk, very good. Never seen that one before. You think you've seen all the Harvest ones, but I'd never seen that one before, so that was very good. I'll need to remember that. I use that myself sometime. Very good. I thought that was first class. Harvest, Christmas, Easter, as you know, if you're used to my ministry, I don't speak for long during those special services. I always assume that there's maybe somebody coming in from outside, and they're not used to a 30, 40-minute sermon, so I'll try and do this in about 15 or 20 minutes. I want to read to you, or we can read together Malachi. Turn with me to Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. You'll find this, and as I read this, you might think, why is the pastor chosen that? What I want to do this morning is to think about principles for blessing and to challenge us that the Lord has blesses.

But maybe have we missed out on some blessing? Could he have blessed us more? Are we victims of our own folly in some way? And so, we're going to look at principles for blessing this morning. But I want to read to you from Malachi chapter 3, and we're just reading six or seven verses. We're going to read from verse 6. Malachi chapter 3, reading from verse 6. The Lord is speaking, and this is after the exiled have come out of exile, they're beginning to build or not build in this case. So, Malachi 3, 6.

I, the Lord, do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, how are we to return? Will a mere mortal rob God?

Yet you be robbing you in tithes and offerings. You are under a curse. Your whole nation will tithe into the store, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, in the floodgates of heaven, and pour out so much blessing that there will not be enough room to store it.

[2 : 34] From devouring your crops and the vines of your field will not drop their fruit before it is ripe, says the nations will call you blessed. For yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.

Let's say this briefly this morning. Father, we do thank you for your word. From our hearts, Lord, we've already contemplated this over the past year or so. And Father, we thank you for this. We pray, Lord, as we come to your word now. We pray, Lord, that it also is a challenge as well, that we might know what it means to be blessed by you. So, Father, just lead us and guide us.

I've been a pastor for numbers of years, a good number of years now, and some of those pastors have been in rural churches. Those type of churches are quite different. And you usually, not always, but you usually notice a difference at heart, because they really push out the boat with their display. And I think this is a first-class display. I couldn't remember what it looked like last year. I'm thinking, two tins of beans and a bit of spaghetti. I wasn't too sure, but this is very good. Even a scarecrow, various things, just looks very good. So, whoever's done this, if there's a team done that, well done and thanks to this. But thanks especially to an awful lot. And if you're a Christian here, or you're just, you love the Lord and you know, you know that this is only a token.

But I remember in one church, I had a reputation for not liking harvest, and mostly because I thought harvest is coming. And what happens at harvest? And in my mind at the time, you thank the Lord for the birds, the bees, and the trees. And I thought, how many times can you be fresh in thanking the Lord?

And you think of His creation. It's great when you're in a rural church and there's farmers there where that year has been a good year for them, or whether it's been difficult. And that's one of the blessings of being in a rural church. But I always struggled. Every time harvest come around, I thought, right, here we go. Lord, we thank you for the creation, for the Son, to thank Him for this. [4 : 28] But what is harvest all about? Is it really just for thanking Him for crops and so forth? I think when we limit harvest to that, we diminish what the Lord says in other ways. So, in my mind, harvest, in many ways, is like the beginning of the year or the end of it. And we thank the Lord for His goodness to us, not just in the sun and in the rain. And we need to thank Him for that.

The country suffers, or the world suffers, when wars happen and the oil is affected. How many days the seasons were not in place? We need to thank Him for this. But I remember reading an article, and I can harvest in non-rural churches. You're maybe not so rural. They're fairly rural. But yes, since most people don't make their living by farming, traditional displays are bringing food into the church as offerings of our daily bread. But they don't usually, or they, sorry, they don't visually connect with the way that God has chosen to need. A suburban child does not look at a display of potatoes and make the connection with their father's joy. And I quite like that. There's, when they look at this, they think, yeah, limited to food. But we, harvest time, it's good to thank the Lord for how the Lord has provided us, or whatever that is. The article goes on.

A contemporary, this might involve a range of objects that represent how people are engaged in work, such as a hard hat, keys, a spade, a computer, or a syringe. In one church, the whole congregation were invited to bring it up, and then they were invited to lay it at the front as a symbolic dedication of their work. Their co-workers and children were involved. They brought textbooks, pencils, unemployed people put their job seekers on the altar, a moving reminder of their lack of paid work, but also of God. Another church asked people to bring a picture of themselves and their workplaces, this opportunity to get to know and appreciate the variety of places that God has given them.

Here's an image that, if I was provision for me, as I've been God's provision for you, I thank the Lord for bringing us here a blessing. It's been hard work, but it's been a blessing.

And in material terms, I'm paid for this role, so that God meets. We do my week and three on Sunday nights here, where people share three photographs of what their week is like, and bless them and what life means for them. You might bring something. I quite like that you might bring a test, a medical test from your MRI that's proved to be non-cancerous or whatever, and you thank the Lord for that, and you bring something like that. You bring something that reminds you or is symbolic for what the Lord has done for you. I actually meant to bring, Lucille and I have a kettlebell each, you know what a kettlebell is, don't you? You do these things. They're quite good. I commend them to you. I actually was going to bring hers. Mine's too heavy to log along. Anyway, so I was going to bring hers. I forgot. But you could bring something like that that reminds you of God's strength.

[7 : 45] You might bring a compass or something how God's led you and guided you during the past year. It's worth thinking of that maybe this morning. As you've been thinking about how do we thank God, what would that representation look like if you brought something? What would that thing? I would love to know that. As much as I'm intrigued by my week in three, what does that picture mean? I'd love to say, why have you brought this thing? What does that mean to you? And you stand up and say, for the past year, this compass or whatever reminds me of God's leading or whatever. It might be something to do with the NHS. It might be something to do with God's provision and God has led and guided you.

I wonder what you would bring. This morning, I want to look at this passage very, very briefly, and I'm not going to say anything you don't know. But as I came, as this was playing in my mind this week, I was just reminded of a God who blesses us, but sometimes challenging myself as well. Did God have more blessings for me that I perhaps missed out on? We can ask ourselves that as individuals.

We can ask ourselves that as a church as well. So, I want to look at the principles for being blessed by the Lord in this passage here. Three points, very simple points. First of all, give God.

Give to God. Here's a principle for blessing in the Christian life that if we are to know the blessing of God in our life, whatever form that might take, not just in food and material things, sometimes these things are hard to, they're easy to represent. But sometimes if the Lord just forgives you so, so many times, how do you represent the times when you've fallen this past year and God has

consistently surrounded you with His arms and His love and you've known that? How do you represent that? It's probably the cross, isn't it? That's how we would represent that. But here is a principle for blessing in many ways. Put God first. Seek first the kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you. So, God tells us, Jesus tells us, that if we are to know our needs being met, that will often be as we put God first, as we put Him first in our life. In the days of Malachi, the people had forgotten this. They loved God, but they had ceased putting God first. They had put themselves first. And in the book of Haggai and Zechariah, who were contemporaries of Malachi, the three of them ministered together at the same time to the same people. And Haggai has to remind them that they had forgotten God. They were still religious, but they weren't serving or putting God first as they should have. And Malachi, right at the very start of the book, it says, this is what the Lord

Almighty says. These people say, the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built. Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. And the Lord says, give careful thought to your ways.

[10:45] You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it. Very graphic, isn't it? You were trying to bless yourself, but while you're putting your agenda first and not my agenda, you're just getting more and more frustrated. I had so much more to give you, but while you were serving yourself and not serving me, you were missing out. It was as if money you'd hold in your pocket. And he explains why. Give careful thought to your ways. Go up to the mountain, bring down timber, build a house, so I may take pleasure in it and be honored. You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why, declares the Lord?

Because of my house, which remains a ruin. Well, each of you are busy with his own house. Because of you, the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. They were robbing God. God tells them this in Malachi, the passage we read, will you—because they really didn't know. They says, how are we robbing you? And he says, well, you're not serving me as you should. Bring the tithes into the store, the whole tithe into the store. And that's a very, very important principle. Maybe you're weary in the workplace, weary just trying to make ends meet. And it might be that you're laboring, and the Lord wants to bless you more. Because in some way, Lord, I'd love to do this. I'd love to serve. I'd love to give.

I'm so busy doing this. And life is far more busy now than it ever used to be. Just try to get around to bypass at five o'clock or half eight in a midweek morning. It is hard. It really is hard. But we need to be aware that we don't withhold—and we're not just talking about money here. We're talking about time, talking about talents, that we talk about a tithing, a tenth, giving the Lord just a tenth back of what He's given us. But that can be not just in money. It can be in time. It can be in talents. And we say, well, I work eight hours a day, 40 hours, but I don't give three or four hours a week to serving the Lord and whatever that might be. It's a challenge to us. And yet, the Lord does this. I remember during the selection process of one of the churches that I was in, I asked them, does the church tithe? I asked that question because I wanted to know, first of all, were they serving the Lord in that way? But also, were they trusting the Lord? And this particular church says, well, yes, we tithe. We give eight percent. And I meant, oh, eight percent. That's an unusual number.

I've never heard eight percent. So I went, right. And I immediately knew if I came here, I would need to deal with that at some point. Eight percent. And after being here a year or two, I'd completely forgotten. The money was just coming in and out and various things would happen.

Well, the treasurer stood up and says at the meeting, just to let you know, we're going through a hard time. Money's hard. We can hardly pay the pastor's wages. We're going to have to reduce the tithe to six percent. And I went, really? Honestly? And I really stood vehemently against this. And I said, not only, you know, going down to six percent, you're actually going back up to ten percent.

[14:20] The reason you're struggling is because you're not putting the Lord first. You're looking after your own interests. And if the treasurer was here this morning, he would say to you, that was one of the best things we ever did. Once we went back up to ten, I have no idea how it happened. I can't even, it was as if a busload of new members came in and the coffers just increased.

But we never, not only did we not lack, we, our income increased in that church. We never struggled to do anything when we went up to ten percent. Those who honor me, I will honor. And that is a great promise. We were thinking of Eric Liddell not that long ago. And that is a great

principle for blessing.

Put God first. It's the advice I give to young married couples. You're setting up home, you're a wee love nest, you want that telly, you want that thing, you want that blender, blah, blah, blah. It's very tempting to go, I'll just do this and then later on I'll give. I says, resolve to give to tithe.

It doesn't have to be ten percent, but that's usually the case. Resolve to put God first, ring fence that money, and whatever you've got left, work with that. And the Lord will honor you, the Lord will bless you. He's no man's debtor. So, that is the first principle we see here.

Give to God. And who knows, if perhaps we have not given Him His due, not just in terms of money, but we have withheld time or talents, and we're too busy doing other things, and somehow we've left ministry to others, then maybe the Lord would say to us, this harvest, I could have blessed you so much more. Give your talents, give your life, give your all into my hands. Secondly, trust God.

[16:05] Secondly, trust God. One of the reasons why some people don't give God their dues is simply because we don't trust God to meet us. If we give our eight percent, whoa, scary, God, we're going to sink the whole ship. And that treasurer's opinion was, we can't survive. We need to lower it instead of raising it back to perhaps where it should have been and where it's always been. And the Lord says this to Malachi. He says, bring the whole tithe, in verse 10, into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, he says. Test me in this. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not bless you. And that is a big thing, to test the Lord, to trust the Lord. The Lord, it's quite a challenge, isn't it? Test me. Test me in this. I'll prove it. If you do this, I will honor you in this.

It's so, so important. As I was preparing this this week, I happened to read in Jeremiah 17. I love these verses. This is not just to do with financial blessing. And we're thinking of more than that to you. Maybe you've not known the peace of God for a long time, or the joy of the Lord, because you have your own agenda. And maybe when we surrender our whole life into God, it's not just money. We're not talking about, give the Lord a tenth and, boy, you'll be able to get that flashy BMW that you want. That's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about blessings, the blessings of God. Whatever form that will come for you, joy, peace, rejoicing, and so forth. But here is Jeremiah 17, verses 7 and 8. Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes. Its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

That's a great promise at harvest time. But it's not speaking of leaves growing in you. It's talking about you flourishing even in the midst of drought, even when the heat comes, whatever that might be.

It might be your back or whatever. It might be a medical thing that's just around the corner. When this comes, we can trust in the Lord, and He can still cause us to flourish. I wonder if you really believe that. It's not only giving to God, but during the difficult times or anticipating the difficult times, trusting Him. When we put Him first, we can do this. Thirdly, and with this I'll close, praise God. Praise Him. Verse 10 says, Bring the whole tithe in. Test me. See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it. I like the way God describes His generosity.

It's just this picture of you've got this wee container, and it's half full, and you want the Lord to fill it, but the Lord just overpulls. It's just, if you're ever in somebody's house, and they're coming up, and they're going to pour your coffee or something, and you're holding it, you just hope that they're a firm hand. But the Lord just pours you such a blessing. My cup overflows. And that's what the Lord's able to do. And when He does that, and it's great when it happens in a church, when we are faithful, praying, giving, serving, we come with the five loaves and two fish, and the Lord is able to use that abundantly. That is very special, very special when He does this. And as I say, it might not be in material terms, but it might be of another sort.

[19:54] It might be a deeper peace, a deeper joy, fruitfulness in ministry. You're doing the Sunday school, you're doing the youth work, and things are beginning to happen now for the first time.

People are being saved, great conversations, deeper love in the church, and these things. It's very special. Test me in this, and I will pour out so much blessing. And He does this—why does He do this?—verse 12, and with this I'll finish. Then only nations will call you blessed. He does it in such a way that the others sit up and say, look at this person. They're not stressed or anxious. God just seems to be blessing them. And they come to you, and they ask about the hope that lies within you.

He does it not just for your sake, but for others who do not know Him. And that's what we would want here, isn't it, in our own lives, family lives, and our church lives, that the Lord would bless us, such that others see this, and they give Him the praise and Him the glory, because we have a great God. So, as we see this, this is only—this is a representation of God's goodness to us. He's met our needs of material things. He's been faithful in the seasons. But as we think of harvest, He's been faithful to us in so many ways, not just represented by food, but it might be through something else, through that kettlebell, that compass, that whatever, that exam sheet, that good newsletter. It might be a friend. You might drag a member of your family up and say, I give thanks for this person, and just sit them down there for the whole of the service. God's goodness to us. He is a good God.

He loves us. But as we put Him first, and as we trust Him, as we serve Him, may the Lord bless us in the years and the months that lie ahead. Let's close by standing as we sing together our closing song. And I'm trying to think, you're the Word of God, your Father. Let's stand and we'll sing. Let's... Let's pray.