

## Malachi 3:13-4:6

### Introduction

We often hear that it's important to have a right perspective on life.

Over recent weeks the government has been stressing the importance of looking at the big picture: not just thinking about the inconvenience of the coronavirus restrictions to our own daily lives but thinking about the country as a whole and the many difficult winter months ahead. The message is that we need a right perspective.

And we need a right perspective in other areas of life...as we make financial decisions, or think about environmental issues, or weigh up any number of choices we have to make.

And it's also true when it comes to thinking about our relationship with God.

In that too, we need a right perspective. And we see that very clearly in our passage this morning.

As this book of Malachi comes to a close, it urges us to adopt a right perspective as we think about life and the things of God.

Firstly, in the passage, we find two contrasting attitudes to God, which is our first heading: Two contrasting attitudes.

### Two contrasting attitudes

Please look down at verse 13.

**'You have spoken arrogantly against me,' says the LORD.**

**'Yet you ask, "What have we said against you?"**

**'You have said, "It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it." '**

**Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name.**

Here are two groups of people.

The first had decided that serving God was a waste of time.

They'd had enough of following his laws. And as far as they were concerned, they'd spent long enough mourning over their sin and taking it all so seriously. What was the point? What did it accomplish?

It's a question we're all likely to ask at some point if we haven't done already.

Perhaps we might say to ourselves: I've dragged myself out of bed every morning to read the Bible and pray, when I could have had an extra half hour under the covers. Rather than shrugging off my failings and making light of them, I've treated them seriously and confessed them to God. I've tried to serve God with everything I do...I've given him the best of my time and energy. But what good has it done? Life hasn't suddenly got better. Bad things still happen to me. Is it really worth it?

This first group seem to have decided the answer to that question already.

Verse 15: **"But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it."**

The way to live, they were saying, is the way the arrogant live: without any reference to God. They just live for themselves, doing whatever they please and getting away with it. They don't get their comeuppance. In fact, they prosper. The conclusion seems obvious. The arrogant have got it right: carrying on with God just isn't worth it. It's a waste of time.

That's the first attitude to God.

The second attitude is there in verse 16, it's **those who feared the LORD**.

To fear God is to show him proper respect and to trust him wholeheartedly. It's to give him the honour he deserves.

That's what had been lacking from the first group. As we've studied this book of Malachi, we've seen numerous ways in which they were failing to give God the honour he was due.

But that wasn't the end of the story...because there was another group. We hadn't heard of them until now. But they were there all along. It's those who fear the Lord.

And notice what they were doing in verse 16: they were talking with each other about him.

Those who fear God share God with one another...and that sharing is vital to the Christian life.

The Christian life is filled with joy and blessing. The apostle Peter says that it's filled with an inexpressible joy. But it's also hard. Being a Christian doesn't shelter us from the struggles of life. We go through hard times. Sometimes really hard.

And those struggles aren't all external. Neither are they all bad. As we encounter Jesus in his word he changes us on the inside. By his Spirit, he leads us into battle against sin. He

opens our eyes to see the sin in our hearts and confront it. It's good but it's hard. Sometimes it's painful. Sometimes we might feel like giving up. We need each other's help. We need to speak to each other about God, to remind each other of his character and his promises.

That's why it can be so helpful to belong to a home group or a 1-to-1 Bible reading partnership, where we have the opportunity to read God's word together and speak to each other about him. If you don't yet belong to a group like that, please think seriously about joining one. Look around and find people you can talk with about God. Seek out those who fear him.

That's what the Israelites who feared God were doing,...and, we're told, God was watching and taking note.

Verse 16 again. **Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name.**

In heaven, angelic scribes were busy writing down in a book of remembrance the names of those who esteemed him.

If you are one of those who fear God, then God has taken note of you. The world may not have done, but *he* has. The esteem in which you hold God may not mean much to the world but it means something to him.

We see what it means to him in verse 17: **'On the day when I act,' says the LORD Almighty, 'they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.'**

If you're trusting in Jesus, that's what you are to God – a treasured possession.

I wonder whether you've got one of those – something that's precious to you. Maybe it's a photo, or a letter, or a little keepsake. Children often have them: a dirty, worn out, thread-bare toy which they just can't be separated from. Should it ever be lost then it's as though the world has ended. It may not have any great value - put it on eBay and you wouldn't get a single bid for it. But to that child it's a treasured possession, and they wouldn't be without it.

You may not be valued by the world, because of your faith in Jesus, but to God you're a treasured possession. You're cherished by him. If you're tempted to give up on God, this is what you need to hear: he delights in you. And he has a wonderful future in store for you.

So, having revealed two contrasting attitudes to God, the passage now turns to two contrasting destinies - our next heading: Two contrasting destinies.

## Two contrasting destinies

Please look down at chapter 4, verse 1: **'Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,' says the LORD Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,' says the LORD Almighty.**

If we're tempted to give up on God it's this glorious future that we're forgetting.

Malachi has already warned us not to write God off too quickly. Life now may not be what we had hoped. But God isn't finished yet.

Occasionally, I do some baking with my kids. We start off with a bowl. In goes the flour, the eggs, the sugar, the butter. And we make a right mess. It doesn't look very appetising. And if you didn't know what we were doing you might turn your nose up at it. But the children don't complain because they know what's coming. It isn't finished yet. This mess is going into a baking tin, and then into the oven. And then when it comes out, there's jam and cream and icing to come.

When life isn't what we had hoped, we need to remember that God isn't finished yet. There's more to come.

One day God will bring history to a close. Malachi's looking ahead to that day. And through him, God reveals two contrasting destinies to which we are all heading.

The furnace is a picture of one possible destiny.

**'Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,' says the LORD Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them.'**

It's a picture of judgement.

We live in a moral universe in which right and wrong does matter because it matters to the God who made us. He will punish all wrongdoing and all wrongdoers.

Notice how they're described. They're the arrogant. They're the evildoers. It's those whom the Israelites so admired, whom they had called blessed, who put God to the test and appeared to get away with it...but God wasn't finished yet.

No matter how much the arrogant and the godless prosper in this life they will not escape God's judgement. They will discover that it's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the

living God. We shouldn't admire them. Rather, we should pray for them to turn to God...because there's a second possible destiny: not burning but healing.

**'But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves' or 'like calves from the stall'.**

It's a wonderful picture! When calves are shut up in doors they get restless, like all of us. We know that feeling all too well with the confinements of lockdown. But the moment they're released into a field they run and leap with the joy of being free – someone has said that they practically do cartwheels! Imagine our joy when we can return to life as normal and no longer need to worry about wearing face masks and social distancing. What a great day it will be when we can finally sing again!

It will be a wonderful day. We might well be doing cartwheels!

But even that won't compare to the joy we'll experience in the future...when we're released from the confinements of this world to enjoy a new heaven and a new earth. That's what this image of frolicking calves is a picture of.

It's a wonderful picture.

And it points to the great reversal that's coming. The arrogant and the evildoers may be on top at the present time but when the Lord finally brings history to a close, they will be trampled down.

**Verse 3. 'Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,' says the LORD Almighty.**

It's not a picture of vengeance. It's a picture of the final eradication of all evil.

And notice what will bring this about it, at the beginning of verse 2. It's the rising of the sun of righteousness.

Righteousness isn't a word that's normally used to describe the sun – it's normally used of a person. A person is righteous. Well, in fact, only one person is perfectly righteous: the Lord Jesus.

The rising of the sun of righteousness is a metaphor that points us to the return of Jesus. It's when *he* returns that this fallen world will experience the healing it so desperately needs. He is the one who will restore justice and bring salvation to his people.

But that day hasn't yet come. It still lies in the future. We're still waiting for the sun of righteousness to rise.

So then, how should we live, now, as we wait for that day to come? That's been the question of this whole book. And it's the question that it ends with in the final few verses. So we come to our final heading, which I've called: One true way to live.

### One true way to live

Please look down at verse 4: **'Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.'**

**'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.'**

First, Malachi says: Remember.

Those who feared the Lord were to remember God's Law, given through Moses, and recorded in Scripture. The Law revealed God's character and taught the Israelites how to respond to God's love. To remember the Law meant to delight in it and take it seriously.

For us, as Christians, we know that the Law wasn't God's last word. Less than 500 years after these words of Malachi, God spoke again. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, he spoke his final and authoritative word.

For us today, Jesus reveals God's character to us even more clearly than the Law. And he taught us more clearly how to respond to God's love. So now we don't look back to the Law in quite the same way. Now, we look back, first of all, to Jesus and to his words, recorded for us in the pages of scripture.

The one true way to live is with the Bible open before us; listening to Jesus, remembering all that he taught us, and taking his words seriously.

So, firstly, we're to remember. Secondly, we're to repent.

That was the point of Elijah's ministry, and that of the rest of the Old Testament prophets. The prophets called the people to repent and to return to the Lord. To repent means to stop living my way, in arrogance and pride, and to start living God's way, putting his words into practice. Elijah called people to repent.

But Elijah had already lived and died long before Malachi was on the scene: he was a great figure of the past. So Malachi's saying that, another prophet like Elijah was coming. He would call people to repent and return to the Lord. Then the whole community of God's people would walk faithfully in his ways, household by household.

Well, the prophet like Elijah has come. It was John the Baptist. The New Testament specifically identifies John the Baptist with Elijah. He pointed people to Jesus and warned them to turn from their sin and follow him.

As we read the Bible, it calls each of us to repent: to turn away from our sin daily and to follow Jesus. That's the one true way to live. It's not just to remember Jesus' words but to live by them. It's to abandon our old self-centred way of life and to live a new life, trusting in Jesus and walking faithfully in his ways.

And then we'll be ready for the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, when Jesus returns.

It will be a great day because, at last, God will set this world right and we will finally enjoy the life which God intends for us.

It will be a dreadful day because we will see what it means for the wicked to face God's judgment.

### **Conclusion**

So then, as we end, how should we live as we wait on the Lord?

Malachi's telling us to keep a right perspective. We need to keep our eyes fixed on the two contrasting destinies of humankind.

A day is coming when we will see justice being done. And we will finally live the life which God has always intended for his people...in a new creation in which sin and evil are no more. It will be a great and dreadful day.

So, Malachi says, keep a right perspective. Don't give up on God. Remember that he isn't finished yet.

And take Jesus seriously. Listen to him as you meet with him in the pages of the Bible. And cling to him as your God and King, in repentance and faith.

Let's pray.