

Malachi 3:13-4:6 (1984 NIV)
Serving the Returning Lord

^{3:13} “You have said harsh things against me,” says the LORD.

“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’

¹⁴ “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?’

¹⁵ But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.”

¹⁶ 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 honored his name.

¹⁷ “They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.

¹⁸ And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

^{4:1} “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.

² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

³ Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty.

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Introduction

Matt Emmons had the gold medal in sight. He was one shot away from claiming victory in the 2004 Olympic 50-metre three-position rifle event. He didn't even need a bull's eye to win. His final shot merely needed to be on target.

Normally, he would shoot a score of 8.1 which would be more than enough for a gold medal. But in what was described as “an extremely rare mistake”, Emmons fired at the wrong target. Standing in lane two, he fired at the target in lane three. He had a good shot BUT at the wrong target. His score was ... 0. Instead of a medal, Emmons ended up in eighth place.

(David Mordkoff, *American Emmons Misses Out on Gold by Firing at Wrong Target*, www.Sports.Yahoo.com, 8-22-04)

It doesn't matter how accurate you are if you are aiming at the wrong target. What are you aiming for in life? Does it surprise you that you may have hit the bull's eye, but there will be no medal for you because you have aimed at the wrong target? All your hard work in life seems to be in vain.

There are God's people who have begun well. But they experience some setbacks along the way and become disappointed with God. They then shift their aim in life—from that of glorifying and enjoying God forever to that of glorifying and enjoying themselves for all their days on earth. After all, since God has let them down in their own perception, they consider serving Him as all in vain. So, they leave Him out of their lives and begin to serve themselves in vainglory.

Today, we are looking at this final section of Malachi. It reassures us that serving God will never be in vain even if the present circumstances seem to indicate otherwise. It serves to encourage us as we press on in serving Him till the Day of the LORD (i.e. the return of Jesus Christ).

Our passage today reassures us that serving the returning Lord will never be in vain. This is so because ...

I. The returning Lord will mark us as distinct (3:13-18).

The community of God's people can be widely divided into two groups—those who complain more than they serve, and those who compliment as they serve.

We hear a group of people lodging three complaints against God in our opening verses today.

- Their first complaint against God is that they had done nothing wrong. The Lord charged them in v. 13—"You have said harsh things against me." The people deny that and challenge the Lord, "What have we said against you?"
- Their second complaint is in v. 14—"It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?"

They must have thought God could not hear what they were complaining among themselves. They were basically complaining that worshipping, tithing, and serving had no benefit for them. They were complaining because even when they had kept the Law, things didn't seem to get better for them. They were complaining, "Lord, we have been serving you but it doesn't seem to matter to you or benefit us."

This complaint still rears its ugly head in people's hearts today. Some today have stopped serving because they don't see any personal benefit. Perhaps they have been trying so hard to do the right thing but it seems futile to keep it up, their labour seems to be in vain. They become wounded and discouraged.

The Bible encourages those who are tired of or becoming joyless in their service for the Lord this way—"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

- The third complaint of this group is that they viewed God as not fair. Look at v. 15—"But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape." As they looked around they saw the proud prospering, and they didn't like it one bit. They wondered why evil people escaped trouble while those who served God ended up stuck in trouble. They're basically saying, "Since God hasn't been fair to us, let's forget Him. Since God has let us down, we will leave Him out of our lives."

I'm thankful to God that while there is one group who are always complaining, there is also another group who are always complimenting and pressing on—I

call them the faithful remnant. Even though there are those who say harsh things against God, there are others who speak of His grace and goodness.

We read of this second group in 3:16-18. Let's look first at their character as described in the beginning of verse 16—"Then those who feared the Lord ..." This group are God-fearers.

To fear the Lord is to tremble at the thought of offending Him in any way. Instead of laying some awful charges against the Almighty, they declare Him to be awesome.

The "fear of the Lord" involves not only fearing that He might hurt us in His divine discipline if we are unfaithful, but also we might grieve Him if we are unfaithful.

The conduct of the faithful remnant ("those who feared the Lord") in Malachi 3 was such that instead of levelling charges against Him, they got together to edify one other—"Then those who feared the Lord talked together ..." And what were they talking about?

I believe they were talking to testify what God had done for them. They shared. They opened up. They encouraged. They confessed. They cried. And they prayed. In short, they experienced a caring community as they talked together.

Are you involved with a group of believers who will do that for one another? When you get together with such people, you come away with a deeper reverence for God and you will be built up spiritually. If you don't have a group of godly influencers to fellowship with, I encourage you to seek and plug into such a group.

If you are always around people who have no use for God, and spend most of their time complaining about Him and others, then it's very easy to eventually become indifferent to God and critical of others. It's important that we have people who will build us up. If we try to live the Christian life all on our own, sin can deceive and harden us. We need one another.

How will we have a deeper relationship with God when we come together, complimenting as we serve to exalt God and edify others? Malachi tells us that we will discover three things that will uplift us:

1. God is a listening God (3:16). Some of us don't want God listening to what we say because we'd be embarrassed by what comes out of our mouths. But let's invite God into our conversations and spice our words with encouragement, praise and worship.
2. God remembers those who fear Him (3:16). Malachi speaks of a scroll of remembrance. It is a figure of speech taken from the culture of that day. Kings kept a register of everyone who was loyal to the throne. E.g.

in the Book of Esther, we read that when King Xerxes had a sleepless night, he called for the book of records and discovered that Mordecai had delivered him from a coup and had never been rewarded. He then made sure that Mordecai was compensated for his commitment to the king (Esther 6:1-11). The Bible tells us that the names of those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ will be remembered in the Book of Life (Rev 20:12).

Mal 3:17a clarifies that to be remembered by the Lord is to be reassured that He will claim us by saying, “They will be mine.” Indeed, the Lord claims us as His “treasured possession”. Do you know that God treasures you? You matter to Him far more than you know.

3. God spares us in His grace and mercy (3:17b). Because He is just, we deserve justice. But because He is merciful, we don’t receive what we deserve. In fact, we receive much better than we deserve—that’s called grace.

For those who are not yet Christians, I want to tell you that this God we are talking about this morning is a God who loves you. In fact, He loves you so much that He did not spare His Son Jesus Christ. He sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins. And because Jesus Christ died for our sins, you and I are now free IF we believe in Him—free from the penalty of sin (eternal separation from God) and free to live for God and with God both today and forever. We invite you to talk further with us after the service if you want to know more of this God of grace and mercy.

When we see the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, or when godliness doesn’t seem to pay or matter to God, we are tempted to take side with the first group of people in our passage today—i.e. those who complain and grumble that not only is life not fair, BUT God Himself is not fair. And when we think we cannot conquer the world with faith in God, we tend to conform to the world out of frustration with God—we shift our target in life.

But the Word of God has cautioned us that when we endeavour to live a godly life before unbelievers and the world, we will experience a certain amount of persecution, mockery, etc. As Christians we must learn to handle rejection with resilience. Because if we don’t, we can compromise and be drawn into the mould the world is trying to impose upon us.

Mal. 3:18 reassures us that honouring God rather than hurling complains against Him does matter to Him. It does make a difference because at the end of the day, He makes a “distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not”.

Which group are you in? Are you looking around and grumbling against God and missing the joy of serving Him, OR are you looking up and glorifying Him and experiencing the joy of serving Him?

The Lord Jesus Christ will return one day. And serving the returning Lord will never be in vain because He will eventually mark us as distinct—this means all that we do in His name does make a difference even if we do not see it now.

The first church I pastored was a small church of about 50 people. It was a pioneering ministry when some members of a bigger church came out to start this work. One of the pioneer members was a lady who had a strong mind of her own.

I remember the hottest thing during that era was growing churches using the cell-group church model. The “guru” of this was an American missionary named Ralph Neighbour. I attended a few of his training seminars in Singapore and found good merits in some of his ideas.

Later, my leaders and I discussed and decided to have cell groups in our church. The only opposing voice was this lady. She said, “Pastor, our church is already small. No need to have cell groups. Let’s be ourselves and don’t try to be like another church. Are you trying to split our church using cell groups as a reason?”

That was a very serious charge. So I explained, “No, I am not trying to split our church. Even though our church is small, our tendency is to isolate ourselves in our own busyness and preoccupy ourselves with our own things. I believe the cell group ministry can help us grow spiritually through mutual encouragement, support, and accountability.”

When we eventually ran cell groups in our church, the response was very encouraging except for this lady who was assigned to a group but refused to be a part of it.

Some years after I left the church, the father of this lady passed away. I was at the wake and we met again. She came to me and said, “Pastor John, thank you for coming. There is one thing I want to say to you. You were right to move us into cell groups. It does make a difference even though I could not see it then.”

She then went on to explain how she had gone through a very difficult period in her life, and how her cell group had come around to encourage and support her during this tough period.

I said to her, “I praise God that the cell group ministry has made a difference in your life even though I could not possibly see how this could be so then because you were so negative about it.”

In the same way, serving the returning Lord will never be in vain because He will eventually mark us as distinct. And that means all that we do in His name does make a difference even if we do not see it now.

Serving the returning Lord will never be in vain also because ...

II. The returning Lord will crown us as victorious (4:1-6).

Mal. 4:1 talks of the “day is coming”. For the Jews, this day refers to the coming of the Messiah whom they believe will:

- Bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people and Jerusalem (Isaiah 11:11-12; Jeremiah 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5).
- Establish Israel as the centre of all world government (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:10; 42:1).
- Rebuild the Temple and re-establish its worship (Jeremiah 33:18).
- Restore Jewish law as the law of the land (Jeremiah 33:15).

For Christians, this day refers to the 2nd coming of Jesus Christ who would call in His “sheep” (those who have believed in Him) and cast away the “goats” (those who have not believed in Him).

This day spells big trouble for the proud and the wicked—“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 ... Not a root or a branch will be left to them.”

It is a great day indeed—a great day of destruction for the proud and wicked. The “proud” here refers to people who think they do not need God, who live independently of God. They would find out that all their so-called good works will not be good enough for them to be approved by the Lord.

It will also be a great day for those who revere the Lord. Mal. 4:2 says, “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”

Indeed, it will be a great day for those who faithfully worship God and seek to keep His commandments. To them the “sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings”. The returning Lord is like the rising sun whose rays, spanning out like wings, will deliver light and life to the world.

The righteous will celebrate enthusiastically on this great day. Mal. 4:2 describes it this way—“And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” These worshippers and servants of God are like calves that have been penned up for a long time, but they will skip around joyously when they

are set free from their enclosures. In the same way, these righteous ones will leap for joy in great celebration on that great day.

The coming of the Lord will also be a great day of victory. Mal. 4:3 says, “Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things.”

Here the prophet sees the righteous sharing in that great victory. Mal. 4:3 says that the wicked will be ashes under the feet of the righteous. The picture is that of a battle already over—the enemies are not alive and fighting you, but dead and lying in ashes. At the Lord Jesus Christ’s coming again, we as His people will celebrate the victory over sin that He has already won for us on the Cross. Indeed, serving the returning Lord will never be in vain because He will eventually crown us as victorious.

God’s final words through Malachi embody a call for God’s people to obey the Law of Moses as they wait for the sending of Elijah before the day of the LORD (4:4-6). Today, it means we serve faithfully as we wait for the Lord’s return by obeying and applying the Word in all aspects of our lives.

A careful reading of Mal. 4:5-6 indicates that this prophecy has reference to “the great and dreadful day of the Lord” or to the 2nd coming of Christ (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 6:12-17). In the days leading to the return of Christ, some end-time figure in the “spirit and power of Elijah” (an Elijah-like prophet akin to John the Baptist as predicted in Luke 1:17) will come. As Mal. 4:5-6 says, “He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.”

The Bible tells us here that true revival that will take place before Jesus comes back will begin with our families. If we want to bring the Gospel of Christ to the whole world, it has to be alive in our own homes first. From there, it will branch out into our church, then into our community, and finally to the rest of the world.

Serving the returning Lord will never be in vain because He will crown us as victorious. It seems to me that whenever we speak of serving the Lord, we often think of work in the church or the mission field. But hear this—your occupation/profession/vocation in where God has placed you is your service to God.

Christians in the marketplace should not neglect the marketplace as their field of service to God because their occupations take them there regularly. If they can demonstrate there that they are overcomers in Christ rather than being overcome by their circumstances, they can greatly influence their working world towards godliness and truth—the truth that earthly losses and defeats do not decide our final destiny.

Field Marshall Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, was facing Emperor Napoleon in the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815. A defeat for the Duke would threaten the future of England. As it turned out, the English defeated the French at Waterloo.

A sailing ship signalled with coded flags the victory news to the signalman on top of Winchester Cathedral in Hampshire. He in turn signalled to another man somewhere on a hill. In this way, the news was passed on from one place to another all across England.

When the ship came in, the signalman on board signalled the first word: "Wellington". The next word was "defeated", and then a fog came down and the ship could not be seen. So the signal "Wellington defeated" went across England, and there was great gloom all over the country.

After two or three hours, the fog lifted, and the signal came again: "Wellington defeated the enemy." Then all England rejoiced.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/79416/wellington-defeated-by-milo-velebir>)

Christ has already overcome the curse of sin by His death on the Cross and defeated death by His Resurrection. At His coming again, we as His people are to rejoice in the victory over sin and death that He has already won for us.

However, when we become overly preoccupied with all the wrongs we see in this fallen world, we can be tempted to stop serving God and start doubting Him. We become overcome by circumstances and not overcomers in Christ. We allow the losses and defeats in this life to cast a fog before our eyes, and so we misread the Good News of "Christ defeated the enemy" as the sad news of "Christ defeated".

But know this—we are already winners because of the finished work of Christ. And serving the returning Lord will never be in vain because He will eventually crown us as victorious. This means we do not let earthly losses and defeats define our final standing before Him.

Conclusion

If people do not think God is ruling in fairness today, and they choose to rebel against him for that reason, they will have a sad future awakening. When the LORD comes, he will separate the righteous from the wicked. The righteous will rule with Him.

The Lord must separate the righteous from the wicked when He comes again, BUT it is His desire that the wicked will become righteous before He comes again.

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How can we speak the language of our marketplace in a way that will penetrate unbelief and plant seeds of faith in peoples' hearts?

1. Understand where they are coming from. What do they need? What are they interested in? There is no "one size fits all" approach to sharing the Gospel. The Gospels record a wide range of conversations Jesus had with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Each of them was very different in his or her way. Every one of those conversations carried by Jesus was tailored to the circumstances of the individual. Get to know people and take a genuine interest in them. Put yourself in their shoes. Learn how to read their environment and values.
2. Recognize that people often set the terms under which they will listen. They don't want answers to questions they haven't asked. Remember the last time you tried to walk through a shopping mall and you were stopped by some people wanting to shove promotional materials into your hand? You probably found their "interest" in you irritating. We need to be gentle and wise when looking for opportunities to share with people who don't think they need anything. Are they ready for what you have to share with them?
3. Communicate hope and help. Everyone needs hope and help. We share hope and help with authenticity by being "normal" and not "super-spiritual" when around people—sharing our human struggles and how Christ has helped us overcome in His grace.

The greatest rejoicing in serving the returning Lord is experienced when we join Him to seek and shepherd lost souls into His heavenly fold.

Let's seek the Lord to help us serve Him with faith and faithfulness till the day of His coming again. Amen!

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways can we be distinctly Christian and make a difference for Christ without disengaging ourselves from the world? Reflect/Discuss.
2. In what ways can our assurance of final victory in Christ help us handle our losses and defeats in this life?