

7. The Despair of the Backslider and the Joy of the Believer

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[0 : 00] Well friends, let's turn to Malachi chapter 3, page 802.

I'm just having an appropriate little pause while the musicians take their seats and we all have time to find the place. Now you'll soon see where I'm heading, but I want to start in a slightly oblique way, but you'll quickly understand how this ties in with what the passage is all about.

I want to start by raising the issue of what we often call political correctness. Christians, it seems to me, have an ambiguous relationship with political correctness.

The essence of political correctness, as I understand it, is that no groups within society should be excluded or disadvantaged. So political correctness is the movement or the attitude towards other people which embraces and affirms every group, and especially groups which in times past have been marginalized.

Now there are one or two groups that are still considered to be beyond the pale, such as terrorists and pedophiles and drug dealers and one or two others. But most groups are now to be included according to this modern way of looking at things.

[1 : 40] Now I say that Christians have an ambiguous relationship with all this, because some of these inclusions are ones that will warm our hearts. So for example, in our refurbished church building, we have included a fine, large, capacious lift to take people up from the ground floor to here and so on, so that wheelchairs and disabled folk can be easily accommodated.

We have a disabled toilet facility at the back as well. And we have these facilities not simply because the law requires us to have them, but also because we want to have them. We want to be able to include those with disabilities in all our activities.

Now 50 years or so ago, Kirk Sessions and ministers would simply not have seen the need to make that kind of provision. But we warmly agree, I think, today that we want to be able to include all those who are physically less able.

Just the same can be said about mental disability, if you think of the history of that and the way that it's treated in our country over the last half century or so. In times past, people who were mentally very unwell were locked away in institutions, sometimes for decades.

Well, we don't do that these days, and I think we're glad that we don't. And it may well be that our desire to include those who are physically and mentally disabled and handicapped owes its origin more to secular political correctness than it does to the teaching of the Bible.

[3 : 10] Now, it accords with the Bible's insistence that we love our neighbour, but in 21st century Britain, it may well spring from secular society's pressure. However, there is another side to political correctness which does not accord with the Bible's teaching.

And that shows itself particularly in the areas of sexual morality and what you might call the world of religions. So, in sexual morality, political correctness urges us to affirm, for example, that homosexuality is to be honoured equally with heterosexuality, that cohabitation outside marriage must be seen to be equal with marriage.

And in the world of religions, the fundamental taboo of political correctness is the idea that one religion might be seen to be better than another or truer than another.

Now, the point I'm driving at in all this talk about political correctness is this. Christians inevitably live in the secular world, and the world's values are always trying to insinuate themselves into the minds of Christians.

We breathe the atmosphere of political correctness, and unavoidably, it colours our thinking. The essence of it is to say, you must not make exclusive distinctions between one group of people and another.

[4 : 34] Now, look at the Lord's words in Malachi 3, verse 18. 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.

Now, this passage we're studying today is all about God's insistence that he will distinguish one group from another at the final reckoning on the day of judgment.

So, if we are people who have drunk deeply at the fountain of modern political correctness, we're going to find this passage pretty difficult. We might even find it offensive. We're going to see that verses 13 to 15 are all about those who speak against God, whereas verses 16 to 18 are all about those who fear the Lord and trust him and esteem him.

And the ultimate destination of the first group is condemnation, whereas the ultimate destination of the second group is salvation. And there will be an exclusive, an excluding distinction between the two.

So, political correctness may serve us well when it comes to caring for those with disabilities, but ultimately its spirit is antagonistic to the spirit of the Bible.

[5 : 49] We will never understand the Bible unless we see that it leads to this final distinction between the saved and the lost. If political correctness rules our thinking, we will never accept that there is a certain group of people who are lost, and therefore we will never understand what the Lord Jesus meant when he said that the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Now, friends, this is elementary Bible understanding. This is primary one Bible material. And yet it's also of ultimate importance. If we miss the Bible's distinction between the saved and the lost, we miss everything that the Bible is all about.

Well, let's turn to our passage now in Malachi 3. It falls into two clearly distinguished sections. First, we have verses 13 to 15, which I'm giving the title The Despair of the Backslider.

And then secondly, we have verses 16 to 18, and I'm calling that the joy or the joys of the believer. So we'll start with verses 13 to 15, The Despair of the Backslider.

Now, the situation historically here is that we're in Jerusalem. The year is about 450 BC, and you may remember that the Jews were given their release from exile from Babylon in the year 539 BC.

[7 : 13] So nearly a century earlier, they'd begun to drift back to Jerusalem. But things were not good in Jerusalem. Certainly good things had happened.

These Jews, tens of thousands of them, had been able, with the help of God and the spurring on of the Lord's prophets, to rebuild the temple. It wasn't quite the same fine temple that Solomon had built, but they'd rebuilt the temple.

They'd restored the priesthood. They'd reinstituted the regular sacrificial system. So the machinery of Jewish temple worship was once again up and running. But many of the people were infected with listlessness, with a kind of depression of spirits, because there was so much in Jerusalem that seemed to be against them.

They were no longer a proud, independent nation-state, as they had been in the glorious days of David and Solomon. They were now simply a struggling, little province in the great, sprawling Persian Empire, and they were ruled by foreign powers.

And economically, economically, life was very difficult. They were struggling. Life physically was very hard for them. We're going through a hard economic time, but it would have been much worse for them then. And, and this is the point really, they were beginning to feel that the Lord was letting them down.

[8 : 32] Just look how some of them, at least, were expressing it in verse 14. Here are their words. It is vain to serve God. Vain.

What is the profit of our keeping his charge, or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? Now, how would you characterize, how would you describe words like that? As a whinge, or a complaint?

A loss of true perspective? Well, that's not really how God describes them. Look at verse 13, because this is the Lord speaking about their words. He says, your words have been hard against me.

The authorised version translates, stout against me. So there's a sense of stubborn, fierce, anti-God resistance in their words. It's much more than just a whinge.

It's a declaration of hard opposition to God. So let's look at these words in verses 14 and 15, which God describes as hard words. Let's try and ask ourselves why he says these are hard words against him.

[9 : 35] Well, it's the opening sentence in verse 14, which really expresses the heart of their problem. What they're saying is, it is vain to serve God.

In other words, serving God is useless. I wonder if you've met Christians, I certainly have at times, Christians who've gone through a very tough and difficult time, and they have said to me, what's the point of being a Christian?

I seem to get nothing out of it. Have you ever wanted to say that? Now let's see how these Israelites expand upon their opening statement. They now say, what is the profit of keeping his charge, or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

Now that phrase, keeping his charge, probably refers to God's charge to keep up all the temple rituals, to keep them going. So for example, they had to feed the priests and the Levites, and house them, accommodate them, support them.

They had to keep the temple itself in good repair. Gutters and downspouts, for example, and a regular coat of paint. All costs money, doesn't it? They had to provide animals for sacrifice.

[10 : 43] They had to attend their worship. That was part of the charge, singing the Psalms and joining in with the prayers. So they're saying, we've been doing all these things, all the right things, but what's the point?

We're not profiting by them at all. And there's something else that we do, and that too is useless. We've put on mourning mode. We've put ourselves into penitential gear.

We've said to ourselves, God doesn't appear to be pleased with us as we keep his charge, looking after the temple. So let's be like the people of Nineveh, when Jonah went to preach to them. We'll put on sackcloth and ashes.

We'll make every day Ash Wednesday, in the hope that the Lord will respond to our self-humbling by blessing us. But that's equally useless. Look at our lives. We're still struggling.

We still haven't two brass farthings to rub together. So what is the point of religion if we don't see any material benefit from going through all its rituals? Now do you see the heart of verse 14?

[11 : 42] What they're saying in verse 14 is, righteousness is not being rewarded. Their complaint is that if God were truly the God that he ought to be, he would have noticed their religious and dutiful behavior, and he would have looked with favor upon their self-abasement, their humbling.

But no, he seems simply to have turned a blind eye to their religious observance. They're no more prosperous now than a church mouse. Therefore, they say, it's useless to be a practicing Jew.

But that's not all they're saying. Look on to verse 15. They're also saying that the ones who appear to be blessed, the ones who are prospering in life, the ones whose standard of living is rising, they are the arrogant and the evildoers, ruthless businessmen, I guess he's thinking of, who bend all the rules.

Maybe some were Jews, maybe some were Gentiles, who lived around and traded in the city. But these men who bend all the rules, they build up their wealth, they buy their luxury houses, eat their luxury foods, and they make no pretense of being practicing Jews.

And, verse 15, these rascals not only prosper, they actually, they have the brass neck to put God to the test. They behave like this, they parade around, let's put this in 21st century terms, with their fancy cars and their Rolex watches and their beautiful clothes.

[13 : 08] They break all the rules in the law of Moses, and you would expect God to come down heavily upon them like a ton of bricks. But he doesn't. They escape. They get off scot-free, which suggests that God doesn't care very much and has no intention of calling them to account.

So, as the people speak these words in verses 14 and 15, they have two complaints against God. First, they say, righteous behavior is not being rewarded, and secondly, wickedness is not being punished.

We live righteously, and it profits us nothing. And the arrogant, godless people live wickedly, and they get away with it. So, on two counts, God is not acting as he should.

He ought to reward the righteous, and he ought to make a public example of the wicked by punishing them, but he does neither. Now, it's this attitude, expressed in these words in verses 14 and 15, that makes God say to these people, your words have been hard against me.

So, God sees their attitude not as one of misunderstanding, but as one of rebellion. Their words are against him. When they accuse him of failing to reward the righteous and failing to punish the wicked, they're not speaking out of innocent ignorance, but out of hard-nosed antagonism towards him.

[14 : 35] Now, what is the real truth about these evildoers and arrogant people? Well, you only have to look down the page to chapter 4, verse 1. You'll see those two words are used again, the arrogant and evildoers.

The truth is, God says, behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble. Well, the day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

That is the real truth. In other words, if these Jews, who are speaking their hard words, if they think that I will not judge wickedness, they're quite mistaken. Nobody who arrogantly sets himself against God will escape in the end.

Of course God will judge them, but he won't necessarily do it here and now. Now, the Bible always forces us to look at the bigger historical picture.

Those who trust him and serve him, teaches the Bible, will ultimately be comforted and recompensed. Just as those who live their lives in defiance of him will finally be condemned and consumed like stubble in the fire.

[15 : 46] But this is God's final justice, to be meted out on the final day, the day of judgment. While we're in this life, we very often don't see it. The truth is that in this life, Christians very often suffer great deprivations.

Many Christians reach the end of their lives in poverty and weakness, while arrogant atheists strut about, wealthy and powerful, and applauded and seeming to get away with it.

But there will be no miscarriage of divine justice in the end. Now friends, I think this makes us ask, might there be anything of the spirit of verses 14 and 15 in our hearts?

Do we ever say, perhaps with some bitterness, I'm trying to serve the Lord, but it's all been useless. Look at my life. I've been a Christian all these years and how I struggle.

Now if we say that kind of thing, the Lord may say that our words are hard against him. They're not trusting words. They're anti-God words. They are the words of the backslider.

[16 : 55] So let's learn from this little paragraph. These words are a warning to us from the Lord. A warning not to allow this kind of thinking to invade our hearts. The fact is that Christians do struggle at times in our lives.

Sometimes there are times of very fierce and bitter affliction that we have to go through. But when those difficult times come, let's allow them to turn our hearts to the Lord.

Let's speak to him trusting words that submit to him and his sovereignty rather than hard words which are fired against him. Think of Jesus on the cross when he not only felt God forsaken but was God forsaken.

His final words were not why have you let me down but rather Father into your hands I commit my spirit. All right, well let's turn from these despairing words of the backslider to the joyful words of the believer.

And here's our second section in verses 16 to 18. Now you'll see that there's a contrast here between the words of the backsliders and the words of the believers.

[18 : 03] We've looked at those words of the backsliders in verses 14 and 15 but look now at verse 16. Then those who feared the Lord spoke. They too have words but these are not hard words of antagonism against God.

These are clearly a different type of words altogether. For the consequence of their words is, verse 16, that 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.

So although we're not told here exactly what words these believing people say to each other, they're clearly words that honour the Lord and express their high esteem of him.

These are the words of people who love him and trust him despite their financial hardships and the other difficulties of life in 5th century BC Jerusalem. So friends, for our encouragement, let me try and draw out from verses 16 to 18 four points about the believers and everything that they enjoy.

Here's the first. They speak to each other. Verse 16, Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. That is a lovely sentence, isn't it?

[19 : 24] It is so far-reaching and encouraging. They engage with each other and clearly they engage with each other in a supportive and encouraging way. Don Carson comments on this sentence by saying that although we're not told what they say to each other, clearly their words were words that stimulated and encouraged each other to faithfulness.

Encouraged each other to faithfulness. One of the great blessings of being a Christian is that you come to belong not only to the Lord but to the Lord's people and to grow as a Christian is to grow in your ability to engage with an ever-widening circle of Christian friends who are truly your brothers and sisters.

So our verse 16 I think teaches us to cultivate the arts and the joys of speaking to each other. Not just about the weather and the football results but in such a way as to strengthen each other as Christians, as servants of the Lord.

So let me suggest under this first point a few ways, good ways, for Christians to learn to speak to each other. First, let's get to know about each other's lives as much as possible.

This is part of love. I don't mean nosily prying into dark secrets but rather learning about each other's past histories, where we were born, where we were brought up, what we like to do, even what we like to eat, what our interests are.

[20 : 54] Bungee jumping, for example, rock climbing, salmon fishing in Sutherland. Have you ever met a man who enjoys salmon fishing in Sutherland? He's an interesting man. Eating sausage and chips in Blackpool.

Now, knowing this sort of thing about each other is enriching and it's a lot of fun. Christians are seriously engaged in the work of the Gospel with each other but we can have a lot of fun as we do it.

Just look around here. Just look around the room. Isn't there a lot of fun there? I think there is. It's the opposite of being lonely. Didn't poor Michael Jackson a little while ago say that he was the loneliest man in the world?

Now, to be one of the Lord's people is the best antidote to all that. So, let's learn, let's get to know about each other's lives. Second, let's talk to each other about the Lord.

Let's share with each other the things that we are discovering about him as our life goes on. we learn about his faithfulness and his mercy to us as we see it expressed over the decades of our lives.

[21 : 59] Let's share that with each other. Let's talk to each other about serving him. Let's support each other in our Christian service. Ask each other how we're getting on in this or that responsibility.

Many members of the church often ask me how the Cornhill training course is going and I find that so encouraging to be asked that question because I know that the people who ask me about my particular niche in Christian service are interested and prayerful.

None of us is a solo operator. We're all part of something much bigger. That is the Lord's Church, not simply St. George's Tron but the church all over the world. And the more we're able to discuss together our opportunities and our responsibilities the more strength we are given for our work.

We strengthen each other. It's a tangible thing. It's a lovely thing. And then thirdly, let's talk to each other about our difficulties. Sometimes we can be shy about broaching particular subjects especially when we know that an individual or a family is facing something very painful.

Do you know that feeling? You think, should I or should I not talk to him or her? I don't want to intrude. I don't want to cause pain. That's what we sometimes think. But the fact is that 19 times out of 20 when a person is in real difficulties they so much appreciate it when somebody, some fellow Christian comes alongside and talks to them because then you feel strengthened.

[23 : 23] You feel less isolated. Difficulty isolates people. So when we support one another in times of difficulty we're helping each other not to become like the people of verses 13 to 15 who start speaking hard words against the Lord.

We're helping each other not to say what is the use of being a Christian. It's vain to serve God. So let's cultivate the habits, the arts and the joys of speaking to each other.

I think the fact is that about 3% of any congregation are naturally outgoing, easy people. 97% of us are awkward and shy creatures. I'm certainly one like that.

Often we don't know how to begin a conversation. But let's do it even if we feel a bit foolish. It is the godly thing to do. And verse 16 is there to teach us that those who fear the Lord speak with each other.

So let's not deny each other the great blessing of supportive loving conversation. There's the first thing then about the believers' joys. Now secondly, the Lord remembers forever those who fear and esteem his name.

[24 : 35] There it is do you see in verse 16. So the relationship in verse 16 is not simply between believer and believer it's also between believers and the Lord whom they greatly esteem.

So it's you and me and him. Look at the words there in verse 16. 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.

Now it is most encouraging for believing people to know that our names are written in a book of remembrance. remembrance. Now why do they need to be written in a book of remembrance?

Is the Lord forgetful that he needs a book to remind him of the names of those who belong to him? Well of course not. The all-knowing God has no lapse of memory. This picture of his book of remembrance is given to us here not because God's mind is ailing but because our hearts need encouragement encouragement and the encouragement comes as we picture our names being entered in this book of remembrance God's book.

My wife asked me the other day to buy her some ink cartridges from W.H. Smith's in Socky Hall Street. You know W.H. Smith's in Socky Hall Street so I went up there to the stationery section it's quite a big shop isn't it and as I approached the stationery section looking for ink I had all my wits gathered about me.

[26 : 05] Now my wits are generally scattered to the four winds but I knew I had to gather them in W.H. Smith's if I were not to buy the wrong ink and there were two different types of ink cartridges in front of me washable and indelible so I tossed a coin no I didn't my wits told me that I had to buy the indelible ink to produce the right result and that's exactly what I did.

Now what sort of ink do we have here in verse 16? Surely eternally indelible ink. If the Lord records a name in his book of remembrance it can never be rubbed out.

Do you remember Jesus speaking to his followers that their names were being written in heaven? The apostle Paul and the apostle John both write of the book of life is the same idea God eternally remembers those who are his because they eternally belong to him.

That's a wonderful thing to think about how quickly people pass out of the memory of man. Just listen to these words from Psalm 103 As for man his days are like grass think of the grass in your gardens it's been growing rapidly the last two or three months hasn't it in the growing season what will happen to it in a month or two?

As for man his days are like grass he flourishes like a flower of the field for the wind passes over it and it is gone and its place knows it no more.

[27 : 46] Isn't that true? The place think of the people who've lived in Glasgow here we are today we don't remember them do we? One or two famous ones perhaps even our great grandparents who lived only about a century ago are almost entirely forgotten even within their own families but the Lord's book of remembrance as verse 16 tells us was written notice that phrase before him in other words it was written in his sight with his gaze resting upon it those whose names are written there are those who will live with him forever and who are they?

Well the verse tells us they are those who fear him and esteem his name nobody who fears him and esteems his name could ever say the words of verses 14 and 15 Now third the Lord declares that these people are his prized possession verse 17 they shall be mine they shall be mine says the Lord of hosts in the day when I make up my treasured possession and I will spare them spare them on the day of judgment as a man spares his son who serves him now the day mentioned there in verse 17 must be the day of judgment because this is the day as verse 18 makes clear when the Lord makes his final distinction between the righteous and the wicked but just notice the element of love and joy in verse 17 they shall be mine says the Lord of hosts now that word mine is a marital word it's a covenant word they will be my people and I will be their God those are the words that lie at the heart of the Bible covenant and they are the Lord's treasured possession on the day of judgment therefore verse 17 is telling us the Lord will gather together from the mud and debris of the end of history all those who belong to him and they will be his treasured possession now friends this is remarkable just think of the character the nature of God as we think of these things the true God is totally self-sufficient he is self-existent self-originating he depends upon nobody for his ongoing existence or happiness he has no needs as though we should be needed to satisfy him in some way he doesn't need us to feed him or to instruct him or to enrich his life he has everything and yet verse 17 tells us that he treasures those who are his so much so that on the day when civilizations finally crumble he will make up his treasured possession like a man picking jewels out of the mud after an earthquake these people belong to him eternally they shall be mine says the Lord of hosts if you're a Christian you don't ever have to fear that you don't belong you belong to him they shall be mine says the Lord now fourth and finally and it's this which ultimately undermines political correctness and the spirit of it from verse 18 the Lord will unmistakably distinguish between the righteous and the wicked and this distinction will be seen on the day of judgment in fact it's the very thing that makes the day of judgment what it is this distinction now let's notice the beginning of verse 18 because it is worded slightly strangely then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked why does the Lord say once more once more just think back over the history of the Old Testament and you'll see that there were a number of occasions during those many centuries when God publicly displayed his distinction between the righteous and the wicked think for example of the flood when God judged the wicked and distinguished between them and Noah and his family or think of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah think of the Exodus when God judged the Egyptians and their idols think of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC when God judged his own people because of their wickedness now you could name other occasions when that distinction has been publicly seen but these were significant moments when God displayed for all the world to see the distinction he was making between the righteous

and the wicked now our verse 18 implies that most of the time we really don't know who belongs to which category that's the case isn't it you walk out here on Buchanan Street on a busy shopping day and you pass hundreds and probably thousands of people but you really don't know from the shape of their noses or the colour of their shoes those who belong to the Lord and those who don't or as you read history you don't always know which famous figures were really on the Lord's side and belonged to him and those that weren't and it's true of contemporary public life as well we look at famous people today and we ask is this person truly a Christian or not often we simply don't know and there's no information available to tell us we don't always know even within our own families our nearest and dearest but the Lord knows and on the day of judgment it will be publicly and universally known then he says verse 18 once more on this final and most awesome occasion once more you shall see the distinction it will be there for everybody to see and how are the righteous characterized in verse 18 as those who serve God and how are the wicked characterized how would you define wickedness well here the wicked are characterized as those who do not serve him they're not characterized as murderers or rapists or terrorists but as those who do not serve the Lord the essence of wickedness

I think we can say is not to serve him as one of the old commentators writes in the last judgment every man's character will be perfectly uncovered every man will then appear in his true colors and his disguises will be taken off so friends are we people who serve God or are we people who serve ourselves in the end it will be known let us pray together let us pray together just and true are your judgments oh Lord how we thank you dear father that in the mess and difficulty of the world we look forward to the great day of judgment when there will be no miscarriage of justice we thank you so much for making these things clear and for reminding us that we live in a universe that is ultimately and deeply moral because you are in charge of it and we pray dear father that you will so greatly have mercy upon us though we don't deserve it that all of us who are here today might in the end when the great distinction comes and is publicly seen might belong to the righteous those who have been made righteous by your grace and goodness and whose lives are characterized by our service of you rather than by our failure to serve you please bless us we pray and help us to serve you with love and joy and deep thankfulness and we ask it in Jesus name

Amen