

# Is it futile to serve God?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 03 December 2017

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, we're going to be reading this evening again in the prophet Malachi, so that is the very last page of the Old Testament. Just before that page that Phil Copeland was telling us we should rip out of our Bibles this morning.

So just before Matthew's Gospel, and you'll find Malachi, what is it, page, is it up there? Yeah, page 802, 802 if you have one of the blue visitor's Bibles.

Otherwise, get to Matthew's Gospel and turn back one page and you'll find yourself there. And Paul's been leading us through this message from the prophet, the last of the Old Testament era, and we come this evening to this last section.

We're going to read from chapter 3, verse 13, down to the end of chapter 4. And God is speaking to his people Israel, and he says, Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord.

But you say, How have we spoken against you? You have said, It is vain to serve God. What's the profit of our keeping his charge, or walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

[ 1 : 1 1 ] And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape. Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another.

And 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. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession.

And I will spare them, as a man spares his son who serves him. Then, once more, you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

Between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him. For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers 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 you who fear my name, for you, the sun of righteousness, shall rise with healing in its wings.

[ 2 : 2 4 ] You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and the rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Good. Well, to you please turn back to Malachi chapters 3 and 4 there in your Bibles.

And we'll spend the next few minutes together looking at this chapter in a bit. Why bother serving and following the Lord at all?

[ 3 : 34 ] What do I gain from following Jesus? Is it all worth it? I'm sure that's a question that pops into your mind from time to time, is it not?

Is it all worth it? As we come to this final section in Malachi this evening, that is the question on the minds of God's people then.

And in these closing paragraphs, the prophet reaches the climax of his message. He pinpoints the problematic attitude of the people.

He declares God's response to their attitude. And he concludes with the great imperative. He outlines what returning to the Lord will really look like for God's people.

And that, of course, is the great purpose of the whole book. It is the gracious call of the loving Father to his wayward people. The call to return to him.

[ 4 : 34 ] And as they do that, he promises that he will return to them. So let's consider these verses under three points. First, then, the attitude of God's people, verses 13 to 15 there in chapter 3.

And we see the attitude is one that thinks serving God is futile today. They think, because God makes no distinction now, why bother at all?

Why bother following the Lord at all? What do I gain from following Jesus? Is it all worth it? I wonder if that's a live question for you.

Look at the world around you. Look at the folk who were in your class at school or who you studied alongside at university. Now, some of them will have had a very similar life experience to you.

They have got a solid job like you. They've had the odd promotion like you. They've been made redundant like you.

[ 5 : 44 ] They've got married like you. They've remained single like you. They've had children like you or not like you. They've endured the tough seasons in life like you.

They've mourned over the death of a loved one like you. And from appearances, there is no difference. Perhaps you look at others, and they've done better in life than you.

Sure, you own a home, but theirs is bigger. Yes, you drive the Toyota Verso, but they've got the Range Rover. Yes, you've holidayed in Northwest Wales every year, but they've holidayed in the Cheysel's.

What profit is there in serving the Lord, you might think? It doesn't make any difference to my life. Look at this other people. In fact, I'm worse off because I follow him.

Perhaps that is your attitude. It was certainly the attitude of the people in Malachi's day. But for them, it was more than just a passing thought.

[ 6 : 50 ] This was a determined and settled opinion amongst the people then. Look at what they say in verse 14. It is vain to serve the Lord.

What is the profit of our keeping his charge of walking as a morning before the Lord of hosts? What gain is there to serve the Lord, they think? More than that, they describe following him like being in mourning.

Major, major doubts about God's goodness and love for them have taken root. And this is the Lord, remember, chapter 1, verse 2, has declared his love for his people.

I have loved you, he says. But they see being his as being only a burden, a drag. It's futile to serve the Lord, they think.

Why such an attitude? Well, look at verse 15. They see the evildoers prospering. The arrogant are blessed. If those who pay no regard to the Lord seem to prosper, why should we bother?

[ 8 : 01 ] It seems to them that God makes no distinction now between the righteous and the evil. And you see, here's the problem.

God's people then were looking at their present circumstances only. They allowed what they could observe, what they could understand, to determine their attitude to the Lord and their behavior towards him.

And that's a attitude that's not unique to God's people then. It can sneak into our thinking too. Is it really worth it to serve the Lord?

If you and I look at things now only, if we go on what we can see now, then we'd probably draw the same conclusions they did. Maybe you consider all the areas that Malachi's touched on in his book.

Worship, words, faithfulness and marriage, generosity and giving. And in all those areas, you have been faithful. In all the areas covered in the book, you've been faithful.

[ 9 : 08 ] You've been committed to the church for many years. You've served sacrificially in the church creche for years. You've persevered and worked with internationals every Monday night.

You've remained faithful in your marriage, even when it's been tough. You've remained faithful in your singleness, even when it's been tough. But you've also taken the hit at work, the snide comments because of the stance you've taken on moral issues, or because of your refusal to go along with dishonest business practices.

You've not taken certain jobs because of the impact that might have on your church service. Has it all been worth it? You wonder.

Has it all been worth it? That's particularly hard if you see somebody perhaps grew up with, someone who once professed faith, but they've held lightly since to all the areas where you've held firm.

They've drifted in and out of church. They've dabbled in a few relationships with non-Christians. They never settled. They've gone from success to success in their career. Life has gone well for them. Even though they've held lightly to the Lord.

[ 10 : 21 ] Even though they've drifted away from Him. Is it all worth it, you wonder? What gain have I had from following the Lord? God seems to make no distinction between those who serve Him and those who don't.

Why keep going? Why keep going? That was the attitude of God's people then. And sometimes with us too. Well, that's their opinion.

That's their view. That's their complaint. But what about the Lord's response? What does He say? What's our second point? We see that God says, Serving me is not futile.

Because God does make a distinction now. And one day, everyone will see that distinction. So serving Him today cannot be futile.

Cannot be futile. So we're looking here from chapter 3, verse 16, through to chapter 4, verse 3. And the problem, as we've seen, is that the people then were only looking at what they could observe at the time.

[ 11 : 35 ] They looked at other people. They looked at their circumstances. They considered their own. And they concluded, it's futile. What's the point? Well, the response from the Lord through Malachi is twofold.

He says, look at the unseen and look to the future. God does make a distinction now between those who fear Him and those who don't. And God will one day make that distinction clear on that final day.

And everyone will see it. So let's consider both those perspectives. First in verse 16, look at the unseen and not only the seen.

Look at the unseen and not only the seen. Well, we see there in verse 16 that some, in Malachi's day, a remnant within Israel, they did not share that prevailing attitude of cynicism and doubt towards the Lord.

They didn't consider it futile to serve Him. Rather, they feared the Lord and honored Him. They spoke with one another. Now, we don't know the content of their words, but I think we can assume from what follows that their words were not complaints about God, but rather encouragements to faithfulness, reminding one another that the Lord loves them.

[ 13 : 00 ] Was their fear of God futile? Well, Malachi peels back the curtain for us of the seen world and we are given a glimpse into the unseen.

Look at what he says. The Lord paid attention and heard them. And a book of remembrance was written before Him of those who fear the Lord and esteemed His name.

The Lord saw. The Lord paid attention. He heard them. Their names are written into the book of remembrance. Far from serving the Lord being a waste of time, as was the general consensus in Israel at the time, in fact, the Lord saw everything.

He saw those who feared Him. He paid attention. Their names were recorded. Isn't that extraordinary? Wouldn't that have caught the attention of the people then?

God does see. God does listen. God does care. It does matter. And what great comfort for those who are faithful then to hear this.

[ 14 : 14 ] Malachi lifts the curtain on the seen world and reveals a greater reality. He reveals God's present assessment of the faithful remnant and what that means for their future.

Look at verse 17. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasure possession and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.

So it may very well look to us as we make observations on the seen world that to serve God is futile, but in reality, Malachi tells us there is an unseen world.

Make your assessment of God and of the worthiness of serving him based on that. It is far from futile to serve the Lord. Quite the opposite. In the future day that Malachi has in view, in that day, no one will be saying it is vain to serve God then.

No one will dare utter that assessment then. So those who fear the Lord here and now are noticed in the unseen realm.

[ 15 : 33 ] And as the names of the faithful remnant then were written in God's book of remembrance, their names will be joined to ours with those who fear the Lord today in the Lamb's book of life.

The Lord through the scriptures assures all who fear him today that their names are written in that book. you are his treasure possession.

That is the unseen reality that turns what we observe on its head. Look at the unseen, not only the visible.

And so if you are faithfully pressing on in the Christian life, know that God sees. He knows. He sees it.

But not only that, not only did certain people then fear God, but they spoke with one another about it. All through the book of Malachi, it's the people's bad words to each other about the Lord that have been part of the problem.

[ 16 : 39 ] And here we have a good example of good words being spoken. Encouraging words. Words to encourage faithfulness in marriage, generosity in giving, wholeheartedness in obedience.

And then and now, God's people have obligations to each other. Each of you in this room has obligations to everyone else in this room.

A grumbler will cause others to grumble. A God-fearer will cause others to fear God likewise. sacrifice. The writer to the Hebrews commands the New Testament believer in this way.

He says, and let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. And all the more as you see the day approaching.

So remind each other that it is not in vain to serve the Lord today. Are you doing that?

[ 17 : 47 ] Are you reminding each other it's not in vain? Remind each other that there is more than we can merely see and observe in this world. Remind each other that God sees.

He knows. He hears. He writes down in his book the names of all those who fear him so that on that day that will surely come he will call those who fear him and they will be his treasure possession.

So that's the first aspect. Look at the unseen not merely the seen. So let's look on then to the future day that Malachi is firmly in his sights here.

That's the second thing in these verses. Look to the future and not only the now. This is from verse 17 there of chapter 3. There is a day coming says the Lord through the prophet Malachi when distinctions will be made visible.

Look at verse 18. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him.

[ 19 : 02 ] the day when God will act is the day of the Lord. The day of his judgment. The day when God would rescue and vindicate his people.

When the wicked would be judged. When all the world would see the separation between the righteous and the wicked. That day is coming says Malachi.

Everyone is one day going to be held to account. God so live now in light of what will happen then. Look to the future not only the now is Malachi's appeal to God's people then and today.

As we saw last week the first half of chapter 3 is marked by the coming of the messenger of the covenant. and it is a coming that is marked by two stages.

First there is purification and then second judgment. Now for those in Malachi's day that day that was all future.

[ 20 : 07 ] The promised day of the Lord. But what about us? Is it all future too? Well not quite. The day that Malachi looks ahead to here we now look back on in part.

The promised messenger of the covenant has come. The Lord Jesus came and he has completed his work of purification through his earthly ministry and most significantly through his sin bearing death.

But the work is not yet complete. There is a final judgment to come. and so we wait. We wait for the second coming of the Lord that day of distinctions that Malachi looked ahead to.

We also today look ahead to it. It's not yet come. So what is that day of distinctions going to be like? Well it is a day to be feared.

Look at how it's described there from chapter 4 verse 1. For behold the day is coming burning like an oven when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.

[ 21 : 21 ] The day that is coming shall set them ablaze as the Lord of hosts so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. Now the very people labeled by God's people back in chapter 3 verse 15 as arrogance and evildoers are the very people here in chapter 4 verse 1 who will not escape God's fierce judgment on that day.

Now to the people of God then it looked very much like the arrogance and evildoers were getting away with it but Malachi reveals that that is not the case. they will not get away with it.

So there is another aspect to that coming day. Yes it will be a terrifying day for the arrogant and evildoers but for those who fear God's name verse 2 on that day the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.

You shall go out leaping like cars from the stall such a vivid picture isn't it of the joy that will belong to those who fear the Lord on that day there will be a day of bright sunlight the sun shall rise with healing in its wings there will be a day of restoration of renewal of everlasting joy of those who belong to the Lord there will be a day of liberation like calves cooped up over the winter released into the lush meadows of spring leaping for joy that is what it will be like on that day great joy for those who fear the Lord on that day but great despair for those who don't it will be a day of distinctions and the sting in the tail the real warning for the people in Malachi day is that there is a distinction made between two groups only there is no middle way no third option and that is the

Bible's testimony from beginning to end you either obey the Lord or not you either fear him or you don't you either follow him or you reject him and the Lord will distinguish between the two it's the distinction we read about in Psalm 1 for the Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish it's the distinction the Lord Jesus himself speaks of in Matthew 25 that passage I read last Sunday the distinction between the sheep on his right hand to whom he will say on that day come you who are blessed by my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the very foundations of the world but to the goats on his left he will say depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels Malachi's message to the people then is that the

[ 24 : 36 ] Lord does make a distinction between those who love and follow him today and those who don't between those who fear him and those who don't and so what is it that makes someone righteous or wicked it is not about doing enough it is not about your own goodness or moral standing no but it is about whether you submit to Jesus as Lord it is about acknowledging him as Lord over your life and serving him as such that is the difference according to the Bible that is the distinction between the righteous and the wicked what do you make of Jesus do you serve him submit to him or do you reject him ignore him and that is a distinction that

God makes now though we may not see it if you look at two people you couldn't tell but God does make a distinction now and it will be made visible on that day the day that is promised that distinction everyone will see and Malachi uses such strong language here it is strong isn't it it's a motive language not only because it's true but to shake them to action he's saying these things so that God's people then would return to the Lord so that they would repent so they'll fear the Lord and see the folly in thinking that it's futile to serve him and his message for you today for all of us is very much the same although it comes with greater power greater urgency doesn't it the day that

Malachi looked ahead to has already begun Jesus has begun his work he has brought purification how much more certain then is that day of judgment that will come he will surely come in judgment he surely will set the arrogant and evildoers ablaze but just as surely for those who fear him that coming day will be a day when the sun of righteousness shall shine they shall go out leaping like cars from the stall and so in view of that certain future you and I know that it cannot be futile to serve the Lord today can it if that is true if that is coming then it cannot be futile to serve the Lord if that is where history is going then it is absolutely worthwhile serving

God today no one who serves God today will lose them so don't allow your horizons to be limited by what you can see today look to the future as declared by the Lord through Malachi fear him return to him so that's the Lord's response to the people's attitude then let's look third and finally now to the last few verses of our passage and we see here the great imperative remember and wait because God does make a distinction live as if he does now you may read the closing few verses here of Malachi and think that's an odd way to end the book a slightly unsatisfying end to the Old Testament scriptures you may think well not at all rather these final verses from four to six are the great implication the great application of all that we've seen through the book here is

Malachi's final imperative he's basically saying because God does make a distinction you are to live as if that is true wait faithfully it really does matter how you live today so follow what I've said here to its logical conclusion two key things then for them and us first remember remember the law of my servant Moses verse four now the people have if I can steal a phrase from a colleague the people have been careless with regards to God's covenant commands because fundamentally they doubt God's covenant care we've seen that all through the book they doubt God's love his care for them and so they've been careless with regard to his covenant commands but again and again God has challenged their attitudes and called them to repent to return to him and that repentance will look like a careful remembering of the law of

[ 30 : 10 ] God's commands and to remember in this sense is not merely a calling to mind but to the action that is the logical and obvious corollary to that remembering so when my mum texted me this week to remind me about my brother's birthday she wasn't expecting me to call to mind that it was my brother's birthday but she was expecting me to do something about it at the very least pick up the phone and give him a call which I duly did and as usual he never answered left a voicemail so so remembering in this sense is not just bringing something to mind it's doing something and likewise here Malachi expects them not merely to remember God's covenant commands but to obey them that is what fearing the Lord means to fear the Lord in the chapter 3 verse 16 sense is to obey the Lord in all the areas that the people have neglected all the way through

Malachi and it is not obedience to earn God's favor no God's already demonstrated his favor again and again hasn't he to his people his covenant commands given at Horeb came after his great and mighty deliverance in Egypt but obedience is the response God calls for from his people then and today the Lord Jesus has recorded in John's gospel says whoever has my commands and obeys them he is the one who loves me and the call of Malachi is the same for us today we are to remember God's covenant commands and don't they come to us with greater intensity through the work of the Lord Jesus who came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it and so for you and I today we who live in

Christ aren't there greater demands on us to respond in faithfulness to him in all the areas we've looked at through Malachi in terms of our worship our words our wedlock our wallets in all those areas we're called to greater obedience greater faithfulness so fear the Lord serve him says Malachi how you live today really does matter God does make a distinction between those who fear him and serve him and those who don't that's the first thing he says remember remember my covenant commands but secondly verses five and six we are to wait the Lord through Malachi promises to send Elijah before that great and awesome day of the Lord that is filling these last verses of

Malachi again and again you have that word the day the day that is coming the day when distinctions will be made and Elijah will come to warn of that coming day Malachi reiterates here at the end that great day of the Lord that is coming so wait prepare yourselves for that day now as we've already seen in this book the promised forerunner to who prepares the way for the message of the covenant is John the Baptist and his was a ministry of repentance which is exactly what Malachi is saying there in verse six about turning the hearts of fathers and sons back to the Lord if you were to flick on just a few pages into Matthew chapter three we read there about John the Baptist and his work his preaching in the wilderness repent for the kingdom of God is at hand and as you read that you go on to read this but when he

John the Baptist saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism he said to them you brood of in keeping with repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father for I tell you God is able to raise up children for Abraham and now the axe is laid to the root of the trees every tree therefore does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire John's message is the same as Malachi's repent pay heed to God's covenant commands fear God obey him bear good fruit because Jesus is coming and for you and I Jesus has come we look back on the event

[ 35 : 18 ] Malachi and John the Baptist looked forward to the day long promised has begun but in his grace it's not yet complete he has withheld his judgment for a time until Jesus comes again and so for those who do not fear God today that day that day when Christ returns that will be a terrible and fearsome day it is the day when distinctions will be made clear so heed the warning of Malachi heed the warning of John the Baptist return to God return to him and for those who do fear him today that coming day will be a day of great joy he will come to set us free from the consequences of our sin forever it will be the great deliverance that we long for and that day that will make all the present sufferings and hardships all worthwhile all the things you forego in this life to serve

Christ it will all be worth it all the unseen hours of service encouraging brothers and sisters in Christ it will be worth it on that day on that coming day that is sure and certain we will surely know then that serving God today has not been in vain amen let me pray our father thank you for the great promises of your word promises which lift the hearts of a sometimes downhearted people thank you that you remind us that it is all worthwhile serving you not one moment of service will be seen then to be futile so help us

Lord today to be a people that live not by sight not by what we see but by what you've promised in your word what will surely come because Christ has already come and will surely come again so help us to live now in light of that day help us to be a faithful people for we ask it in Jesus name Amen