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Questioning God's Care, 2

Malachi 3:13-18

Christ's second year of ministry is known as "The Year of Popularity"! This was when massive crowds followed Him pretty much everywhere He went. He truly had become a mini celebrity, that is everywhere except in His hometown.

Mark 6:1-3, "And He went out from there, and He came into His home town; and His disciples followed Him. And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished [the word¹ speaks of a verbal attack, of striking out in fear], saying, 'Where did this man get these things, and

what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?' And they took offense at Him."

What a 180-degree difference from the reception Christ received in Galilee! In Nazareth, the city population looked upon Him in unbelief and anger by which they criticized and attacked Him. And what was the result?

Mark 6:5a, "And He could do no miracle there..."

How sad! Because of their disposition toward Christ, they set themselves up as judge over Him, the people of God in Nazareth forfeited so much blessing!

And that essentially is where God's people were in Malachi's day in their walks with God. Malachi was written at a time when God's people had grown cold toward the Lord. They had struggled for many generations in Palestine. And by the time of Malachi, they were worn out! And so, God raised up the prophet Malachi to address the predictable pitfalls which arise when our hearts grow cold toward the Lord.

Malachi 3:13a, "'Your words have been arrogant against Me,' says the LORD..."

This is just as described in Mark. As in Christ's day, God's people here had set themselves as judge over God and so were playing the role of the critic! And so, rather than sitting under God's word, they subjected God's word to their own understanding, will, and desire.

Now what made this all the more serious is that God's people did this and yet didn't even know it, "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?'" (v. 13b)! How imperative it is that we "watch over our heart with all diligence" (Proverbs 4:23)! This brought us to the accusation. ...

The Accusation, vv. 14-15.

Malachi 3:15, "So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also test God and escape."

Each of these statements comes with the implied accusation that God is unkind, unloving, and uncaring! Each involve a comparison between God's treatment of the wicked and His treatment of His people.

- The wicked?... *why they are "blessed," "built up," and their sin is "ignored"!*
- The child of God?... *it is just the opposite!... we are cursed, broken, and our minor*

sins are paid back double!

Most here know this struggle. It comes from a failure to recognize that in and through all things God has the End Game in mind, which is our presence with Him in the New Heavens and Earth. As such, life on this side of the grave is a training ground by which God forges genuine servants who will be able to glorify AND to enjoy Him for the rest of eternity!²

But, what do you do if your criticism of God runs deep, such that you find it hard to break the cycle? There is a restorative cure.

The Restorative Cure, v. 16

The first restorative cure is fellowship.

Malachi 3:16a, “Then those who feared the LORD [those who responded positively to Malachi’s message] spoke to one another...”

This gives us the medium in which those who “feared of the Lord” responded positively. And what is that medium? First, it is the medium of fellowship!

From this we saw the necessity for you and I regularly to seek out biblical fellowship. This is one of the ways the Lord has ordained for us to remain vigilant in our walks.

Hebrews 3:12-13, “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Once again, we must understand that Christianity is a team sport! NEVER are we merely to contemplate the truth of God’s word alone! Of course, it starts there, BUT it must lead you and me to fellowship with others around what we have heard and are learning. For if you read God’s Instruction Manual on man, you discover a fundamental element to man’s health and well-being is discovered.

Genesis 2:18b, “It is not good for the man to be alone...”

Did you get that? Isolation is never good for image bearers! When we are isolated, our minds can take a thought and run wild with it. Truly, we need the communion of the saints!

That brings us to the second tool by which we are enabled to remain fervent in our love for God, the knowledge of God’s acceptance.

The Knowledge of God's Acceptance of Us, v. 16b.

Malachi 3:16b, "Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance^{3,4} was written before Him for those who fear the LORD..."

The idea of a "book of remembrance" most likely is an anthropomorphism⁵ to convey the notion of election in the context of the Old Testament. This doctrine is found throughout Scripture.

Ephesians 1:4b, "...He [God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world..."

2 Timothy 1:9, "God... has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity."

Speaking of the non-elect:

1 Peter 2:8b-9, "...for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this *doom* they were also appointed. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God's* own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

Well, this doctrine is picture in a common practice in the ancient world and that was the recording of people's acts of devotion and service to a king.⁶ Notice, it was NOT everybody's acts that were recorded, BUT only a select few. Yet with these few, there was great blessing.

Remember in the story in Esther how Mordecai saved King Ahasuerus' life.

Esther 2:21-23, "In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. But the plot became known to Mordecai, and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence."

That is what we are talking about here! Now notice, years later we read that the king could not sleep and so he took to reading, using the earliest form of Audible.

Esther 6:1-3a, "During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And

it was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who were doorkeepers, that they had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And the king said, 'What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?'"

What is noteworthy is that NOT ONLY were the actions of Mordecai written in a "book of remembrance", BUT the King took notice of them! And it was this practice that is in reference when we read passages David wrote:

Psalms 56:8, "Thou hast taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Thy bottle; are they not in Thy book?"

This is incredible! Because of God's election/choice of us, because our names are recorded in His "book of remembrance", the Lord is mindful of every tear we've cried! We see it in what the sons of Korah wrote:

Psalms 87:6, "The LORD shall count when He registers the peoples [i.e., in a 'book of remembrance'. Now because of this book, God takes note that...], 'This one was born there.' [Selah]."

A "book of remembrance" in the ancient world denoted two important concepts: Divine election and so Divine recognition and care!⁷ Iain Duguid put it this way:

The importance of this heavenly record is that it demonstrates clearly that serving the Lord was certainly not useless, as the majority were saying. The Lord was attentive to what was happening on earth and would in due time act on behalf of those who were his. (Duguid, 2010, p. 236)

And herein we see the transforming grace of the gospel! Show me a Christian insecure in their walk, who walks around with the cloud of divine displeasure over their head, and I'll show you a Christian who struggles in their walk! In contrast, show me a Christian secure in Christ's choice and so His acceptance of them, and I'll show you a Christian zealous in their service of the King. We see this truth worked out in Paul's epistle to the Romans. You know the first exhortation Paul gave the Romans when he transitioned to the "Orthopraxy Section" of this epistle.

Romans 12:1a, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice..."

What was the basis of this exhortation? What is the "therefore" there for? It points us back to the previous eleven chapters which explicate "the mercies of God"! These mercies revolve around the same point of the Book of God's Remembrance in Malachi: The Unconditional Acceptance of the Sinner before God!

Romans 3:23, 24, “For all, 24 being justified..., 23 have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

This is such an important passage. God understands that as His children we are going to struggle with sin!⁸ If we understand this, with the faithful in Malachi’s day, we will have the boldness to be honest with God such that when we sin, we will NOT run from God BUT to Him!

Romans 5:8, 10, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”

If God loved us when we were His enemies such that He gave His Son as a sacrifice for our sin, how much more now that we are accepted by God is our relationship with God secure?

Romans 8:31-35, 38-39, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us [if He has Accepted us] who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? [From here Paul gives glorious promises all proclaiming the same truth: In Christ, God Accepts Us- which is the point of His Book of Remembrance!] Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It was based on this glorious acceptance of us by God that Paul said, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice...” (Romans 12:1)

That is the role that “God’s Book of Remembrance” ought to play in the lives of God’s people. It’s reference assures us of God’s eternal love, His commitment, His grace for us, and so His unconditional acceptance of us!

It was this that the faithful in Malachi’s day banked on — which gave them the security to believe that in their failure God did NOT condemn. RATHER, He cared deeply for them such that they did NOT run from Him, BUT to Him upon the conviction of sin! It was the knowledge of this Book of Remembrance which here is given as the second reason for the repentance of the faithful! That brings us to the third and final reason the

faithful responded here.

They Cultivated the Habit of Marveling at God's Person, v. 16c.

Malachi 3:16c, "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name."

What does that mean? To answer it, we need to define two words.

The first word is "esteem" (חָשַׁב [chashab]). It is a broad word which at its most fundamental level refers to the process of thinking. As such, it has six distinct uses in Scripture, one of which denotes the idea of meditation — thinking long and much on something- which is how it is used here.⁹

The second word is "name" (שֵׁם [shem]). You may know that in the Bible, the "name" of something was NOT simply a means of identification. RATHER, it was a description of "character."

Psalms 124:8, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Proverbs 18:10, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe."

Psalms 20:7, "Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God."

From these passages we conclude that the "name" of God is much more than a means of identification or an appellation of address. The Hebrew carries the idea of "character" and thus represents the essence of what a thing is. Combined, this gives us the third element which brought about the people of God's response here. God's people spent much time mulling on the Person and Work of God.

- They thought about His character.
- They sought to understand His attributes, comparing this attribute with that.
- They sought to understand what He was doing... and why He was doing it.

To "esteem God's name" speaks of an integrated theological understanding of who God is and what He has done. And again, how does this "integrated theological understanding of God" come about? Through frequent and consistent meditating on the person and work of God! Thomas Watson put it this way:

Meditation is the bellows of the affection. The reason we come away so cold from

reading the Word is because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation.
(Watson, 2019)

Well, how do we do it? What does the Bible mean by “meditation”- as in¹⁰...

Joshua 1:8a, “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night...”

Once again, describing the man we ought to pattern our lives after.

Psalms 1:1-2, “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”

There primarily are two words used in the Bible for “meditation:”

- שִׁיחַ (*siach*): the basic meaning is “rehearse,” “repeat,” or “go over a matter in one’s mind.” This contemplation may be done either silently or verbally.
- הִגָּה (*hagah*): the basic meaning is a low sound, characteristic of the moaning of a dove (Isaiah 38:14; 59:11) or the growling of a lion over its prey (Isaiah 31:4). Thus, it was used to refer to the repetitive going over of Scripture by a group on account of the low, rumbling sound that it made.

Implicit in both definitions is the concept of repetitive thought. Thus, the picture of a cow chewing its cud is an appropriate example of Biblical meditation. Thomas Watson wrote:

In meditation there must be a staying of the thoughts upon the object; a man who rides quickly through a town or village- he minds nothing. But an artist who is looking on a curious piece, views the whole portraiture of it, he observes the symmetry and proportion, he minds every shadow and color... There is as much difference between a truth remembered, and a truth meditated on, as between a cordial in a glass and a cordial drunk down. (Watson, *A Christian on the Mount: A Treatise Concerning Meditation*, 1657)

Practically speaking, that means that when it comes to God, we take His attributes, what He does, and, like a diamond, we endeavor to gaze upon Him and His deeds from a variety of angles¹¹- that is THE point of every Quiet Time or Bible study! In relation to His attributes and actions, to use the example of God’s Kindness, to meditate is to contemplate such things as:

- How does God’s kindness relate to His justice?
- How does God’s kindness relate to His sovereignty?

- How do we understand God’s kindness when it comes to the sacrifice of Christ?
- How do we understand God’s kindness when it comes to hell?

In the various and sundry circumstances of life- when I am tempted, fearful, angry, filled with worry- we contemplate such things as these:

- What does God’s kindness mean when I am frightened?
- What does God’s kindness do when I am sinning?
- How ought God’s kindness to bear upon me when I am rightly angry with another person?

This is what those who were responsive to the message of God in Malachi did when it came to God. They marveled at His Person! They spent many hours discussing, musing upon, and so enjoying the “name” of the Lord as well as His doings! And what happened? They were changed! Was it the mere fact of their meditation on the Lord? — meaning, does meditation have the power to change us? NO! It was that through their meditation, they feasted spiritually upon the Lord! Charles Bridges wrote this:

Is it asked, ‘What will most effectually turn my eyes from vanity?’ Not the seclusion of contemplative retirement. [Not meditation per se] Not the relinquishment of our lawful connection with the world (‘in the world, but not of the world’!). [It is rather] the transcendent beauty of Jesus unveiled to our eyes, and fixing our hearts.

That is the object and objective of all meditation! It is filling our mind and soul up with God!

So, what was the difference between the unfaithful in Malachi’s day and those who responded to the message God gave His people through Malachi? Those who responded were ones who

- Sought out and so participated in the fellowship of the body of Christ.
- Were convinced of God’s unconditional acceptance of them.
- Spent much time marveling at the person and work of God!

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End Note(s)

¹ ἐκπλήσσω (*ekplēssō*)

² In this regard, I appreciate the words of C. S. Lewis, "If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad." (Lewis, 1972, p. 52)

³ "Malachi's book was not written before the foundation of the world and it isn't a book that records the wicked acts of sinful individuals and God's judgments against them. It is a book for the righteous acts, deeds, and motives of God's chosen people. Scripture clearly speaks of the fact that God records everything. Kings during this time frequently recorded in books instances where people would perform favors for them with the hopes of returning the favor one day (e.g., Esther 2:21–23; 6:1–3). Malachi has this kind of book in mind." (Micah Fries, 2015, pp. Malachi 3:16-18)

⁴ "...here the picture is of the divine King surrounded by his heavenly servants instructing a scribe to record an event in the royal archives. The term *zikkārôn* from the verb *zākar*, 'remember,' occurs twenty-four times in the Hebrew Bible and refers to a reminder, either a memorial day (Exodus 12:14; Leviticus 23:24), a symbolic object (Exodus 13:9; 28:12; Joshua 4:7), or a record (Exodus 17:14), as here. Records of decisions, actions, accomplishments, and various memorable events were kept by royal officials in the ancient world. The enemies of the Jews asked that the Persian king Artaxerxes search 'the archives of your predecessors' for evidence of the Jews' past rebellions (Ezra 4:15), which he did (4:19)." (Richard A. Taylor, 2004, p. 443)

⁵ "The extent to which this is a figurative description is difficult to tell. It is at least a way of affirming that God not only knows but also remembers and acts to reward the past actions of those who fear and honor him. The fact that a heavenly record of some sort is also referred to several times elsewhere may suggest that this is more than just a metaphor (see Ps 56:8; Isa 65:6; Jer 22:30)." (Richard A. Taylor, 2004, p. 444)

⁶ "Notice that all things, not just the good or the bad, are recorded for eternity. God is even recording every time you respond in righteousness. Every time a woman respects her body and rejects intimacy with another man before marriage, God sees and honors that decision. Every time a husband refuses to engage in immoral talk at work or to be seduced into looking at pornography, God recognizes it. Every time you avert gossip, every time you bear the burden of an injustice and refuse to lash out, God sees that. Every time a family opens their home to be a Christian witness to the world, God sees that. Every time you share the gospel with a lost family member or friend, God sees that, whether or not anyone else does. If we lived with this in mind, would it change the way that we act?" (Micah Fries, 2015, pp. Malachi 3:16-18)

⁷ "H. Eising notes that the Hebrew verb *zākar*, 'remember,' 'denotes an active cognitive occupation with a person or situation.' It 'often implies an action or appears in combination with verbs of action,' and 'some passages equate God's remembering with his mercy and forgiveness.' When God 'remembers' a person, it almost always entails his action on their behalf (e.g., Genesis 8:1; 30:22; Numbers 10:9; Judges 16:28; 1 Samuel 1:19; Nehemiah 13:14; Psalms 25:7; 115:12; exceptions include Nehemiah 6:14; 13:29), although God is also said to 'remember' sin (Jeremiah 14:10; Hosea 7:2; 9:9). The point in Malachi is that God has

instructed that a record be made of the righteous speech of ‘those who feared the LORD and honored [*ḥašab*] his name.’ This memorandum will insure that on the future day described in the following verses they will be rewarded.” (Richard A. Taylor, 2004, pp. 443-444)

⁸ Thomas Watson wrote, “There is as much difference between sin in the wicked, and sin in the godly- as between poison being in a serpent, and poison being in a man. Poison in a serpent is in its natural place and is delightful- but poison in a man’s body is harmful and he uses antidotes to expel it. So sin in a wicked man is delightful, being in its natural place, but sin in a child of God is burdensome and he uses all means to expel it.” (Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture*, 2019)

⁹ (R. Laird Harris, 1999, pp. 329-330)

¹⁰ Cf. also Psalms 77:12; 119:15, 97, 148; 143:5.

¹¹ “You say, ‘I am quite unused to meditate. How shall I begin?’ Deal gently with yourself at first. Select your subject--some passage from the Word. Then fix the time you choose to give; say, five minutes at a time. Begin, and think aloud. This makes it easier, and saves the mind from distracted thoughts, the hardest task of all. The sound even of your own voice will help you; it is like speaking to a friend... But, more than all, make it a time of prayer, of communing with God. This helps the matter greatly. Take the words of Scripture, and ask Jesus what they mean. In doing this, the mind is exercised. A glow of thought attends the effort. You honor Jesus; and He will honor you, by pouring out a largeness of capacity, a quicker mind. The interchange of thought between you and Jesus goes on apace, and you are surprised to find how long the exercise has lasted.” (Mylne, 1859)