

The Book of Remembrance

Malachi 3:13-18

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

13 “Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ 14 You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? 15 And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.’”

16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. 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. 17 “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. 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.

- Malachi 3:13-18, ESV

What Are the Benefits of Being Religious?

The Pew Research Center has compiled survey data from around the world and have found that people who are religious and actively involved in their congregations are happier, more engaged in the civic life of their community, and tend to smoke and drink less than non-religious people or religious people who are not currently active in their local congregations. Furthermore, research has shown that Americans who regularly attend religious services live longer, on average, than those who do not. Social researchers describe this correlation by saying that religious involvement seems to pay a happiness dividend and a civic engagement dividend.

So, should we start running ads that say, “Come to church. You’ll be happier and will live longer.”? Or perhaps, “Come to church. All the civically responsible people are doing it!”?

That doesn’t seem right, does it? At least, I hope it doesn’t seem right to you. We don’t come to church or encourage others to come to church for the dividends we think it will pay, do we?

And yet, at the same time, you can hear about the Pew Research data and feel frustrated because you come to church regularly and you’re not particularly happy or perhaps you’re struggling with major health problems. We can experience this tension, sometimes, of knowing that it may seem like the lives of those who serve the Lord should be better than the lives of those who don’t, and very often they are, but not always, not in externally measurable ways seen in this life, anyway.

I. “It is Vain to Serve God!”

Our passage today in Malachi 3 finds God’s people grumbling against God again:

13 “Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ 14 You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? 15 And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.’”

The grumbling of God’s people is as clear as it is wrong-headed. They are convinced that they have tried serving God, both striving after obedience and sincerely repenting of their sin. They think they have been keeping His charge – that is, obeying His word – and have been walking as in mourning – that is, deeply and humbly repenting – before the LORD. Of course, they are mistaken in their own self-assessment of their obedience and repentance, as we have already seen in Malachi:

1. They are bringing blind and lame animals to sacrifice to the LORD, instead of the firstborn of their flocks.
2. They are mistreating their wives and marrying unbelieving foreign wives.
3. They are failing to bring the full tithe into the storehouse, robbing God by claiming what belongs to the Lord for themselves.

But still, they think they are sincerely obeying and earnestly repenting, and, from their perspective, it’s just not working. “It is in vain!” they say. This word for “vain” is a very strong one; it means empty, worthless, even deceptive and evil. In other words, they’re feeling like they’ve been tricked into doing something useless. This is the same word as in the third commandment: “*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.*” (Ex. 20:7)

What God’s people fail to see is that their complaining against God is actually an indictment against themselves. Because if they say, “It is vain to serve God,” then they are saying they have taken His name in vain. And if they think the purpose of serving God is for their own comfort and convenience in life, then they have indeed taken the LORD’s name in vain – they have, indeed, taken upon themselves the name of the LORD as His people, His worshippers, for empty and deceptive reasons, for selfish gain.

Paul addresses people like this in the church in I Timothy 6:3-10:

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, 4 he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, 5 and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. 6 But godliness with contentment is great gain, 7 for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. – I Timothy 6:3-10, ESV

Not only do these people think they should be seeing more personal gain from their worship of God, but they look around themselves and see wicked people – bold-faced unbelievers – who are prospering, even putting God to the test and escaping – in other words, openly mocking the commandments and warnings of God without any real, apparent consequences.

Asaph was struggling with this feeling in Psalm 73:

*Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
3 For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
4 For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
5 They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
6 Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
7 Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
8 They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
9 They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
10 Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
11 And they say, “How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?”
12 Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
13 All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence. (vv. 1-13, ESV)*

Now, Asaph was a God-fearing man, and yet he was struggling with the same feelings as these people here in Malachi 3 who are being charged by God with wrongdoing. So, what's the difference? The difference is in what Asaph did with his feelings, which makes all the difference in the world.

*If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.
16 But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
17 until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end.*

Asaph knew that for him to give voice to his frustrations within the covenant community would have been a betrayal of his fellow worshippers. He would have been leading them astray by speaking these kinds of frustrations out loud in a complaining manner in the assembly. And this is exactly what the people in Malachi 3 are guilty of doing, for God says, "Your words have been hard against me," which means they had been grumbling out loud to one another about the Lord.

Instead of grumbling out loud about the Lord to others, Asaph went to worship and worshipped the Lord, even in the midst of his distress. In the worship of God, he was reminded of eternal realities and of the truth of God's justice:

*I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end.
Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors! – Psalm 73:17-19, ESV*

Thus, Asaph showed that he was one who feared the Lord and who trusted in Him, even in the midst of hardship.

2. Those Who Feared the Lord

As we read on in Malachi 3:16-17, we see others in Malachi's day who were like Asaph:

16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. 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.¹⁷ "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.

These are identified as *“those who feared the Lord”* and they spoke with one another in the fear of the Lord. So, just as the other voices were echoing the courts of the Temple with *“It is vain to serve the LORD!”* these were talking together and encouraging one another in the Lord. This is spiritual conversation, and this is what we need as believers, to talk together and encourage and build each other up in the fear of the Lord.

Malachi tells us the Lord paid attention and heard them and caused a book of remembrance to be written before Him.

Now, to be clear: God is omniscient and never forgets anything. He sees all, hears all, knows all, and remembers all. But He uses a three-fold expression here to reassure His people that He does take notice of their struggles, He does hear their cries, and He does take note of their faithfulness forever.

The cultural background for this Book of Remembrance is probably the Persian court, into which we gain insight from the Book of Esther. King Ahasuerus had a book of deeds, which in Esther 6 he has read to him one night when he can't sleep. This book of deeds is what reminds him of the faithfulness of Mordecai, who had rescued him from an assassination plot involving two of his personal guards. When King Ahasuerus is reminded of Mordecai's faithful action to serve him and save him, he decides to honor Mordecai.

The author of Hebrews speaks of God taking notice of the good deeds of His people and not forgetting them: *“For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.”* (Hebrews 6:10, ESV)

God does not forget the faithful deeds of His saints, and He rewards them in the Judgment Day. But before we get to that Day, let's take note of how God further describes the people who fear Him: They are *“those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.”* Again the Third Commandment seems to be in the background of these verses – those who take the Lord's name in vain vs. those who esteem His name.

Do you fear the Lord? Do you esteem His name? Do you know that we actually used to have public blasphemy laws? That seems strange today, when even professing Christians will so quickly and readily take the Lord's name in vain and not esteem it with holy reverence. Earlier, we noted how we can take the Lord's name in vain if we think that being called by His name as His people is empty and meaningless, if we think serving Him is pointless. Yet this does not exclude the very obvious way people take the Lord's name in vain on a daily basis so flippantly, by using His name as a curse word or as a meaningless exclamation of surprise, even in its abbreviated form, *“OMG!”* – This is taking the Lord's name in vain, abusing the name of God in an irreverent and thoughtless way.

Those who fear the Lord esteem His name, which means at least refraining from blasphemy and casual disregard for the name of the Lord. It also means taking seriously and humbly that fact that we are called by His name if we have faith in Him. Do you see yourself as one who bears the name

of the Lord, and do you take it seriously and does it humble you and cause you to depend on Him in faith and walk before Him in loving obedience?

So, what exactly is the Book of Remembrance here in Malachi 3? For many years, I thought it was likely the same book as the Lamb's Book of Life from Revelation 20-21, and it may be, but whereas the Lamb's Book of Life is a list of names of those who belong to the Lord, this Book of Remembrance seems to be a recording of the faithful deeds of the righteous. Still, the book does seem to have a connection to Judgment Day, or the Day of the LORD, because that's where the focus shifts after mention is made of the book.

3. On That Great Day

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. 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. – vv. 17-18, ESV

The Day of the LORD is referred to using unusually beautiful language – “*the day when I make up my treasured possession.*” The Hebrew word translated as “treasured possession” refers to the personal treasure of the king, as opposed to the national treasure.

God regards His own beloved people who fear His name as jewels in His treasury, those who make up His personal treasure. We are precious to Him. How precious? God promises that in the Day of the Lord, He will spare His beloved as a man spares the son who serves him. This is one of the rare places in the Old Testament where God describes Himself as the personal, loving Father of those who fear Him – not just the nation of Israel as a nation, but of those within Israel who fear Him and who esteem His name.

If we trust in the Lord and belong to Him by faith, we will show the fruit of fearing Him and esteeming His name as we worship and obey Him. And we can know that we are precious to Him – that we are His treasure and His children. And we can know that we will be spared in the Day of Judgment.

Here's how Romans 5:9-10 puts it: “*Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.*” (ESV)

But for those who reject God and His ways, for those who take His name in vain and who refuse to honor Him, the Day of the Lord will not be a glorious day of realized hope. As verse 18 implies, “*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.” The clarity of what this verse means is spelled out in chapter 4, as we will see next week.

Conclusion

For us, living now, as we await that Day, we can serve the Lord with joy, not because we think we’re going to get more happiness, more wealth, or a longer life in this world, but first and foremost because He is worthy of our worship and service – because we fear Him and honor His name.

The close of Psalm 73 is helpful as we do this -

*When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
22 I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.
23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
24 You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
27 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.
28 But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.*