

THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS SHALL RISE (For those who fear the LORD)

Malachi 3:13-4:6

Key Verse: 4:2a, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings."

Do you ever think or feel that serving the LORD is a losing battle? Ideally, we as believers should not think such thoughts. But if we are honest, we sometimes feel that our sacrifices and heartaches that come with seeking and serving the LORD don't yield much reward or benefit in this life. At least that's the way it seems. Today's passage deals with this very question and gripe of the Israelites, who questioned whether serving the LORD was really worth it.

Today, we finish the last word of the prophet Malachi before the coming of John the Baptist, 400 years later. It actually ends foretelling about this coming prophet. We will study Malachi's final message in three parts: a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the blessing of the righteous, and remember God's word. May God's word challenge and drive out any despair in our minds and hearts and encourage us with his glorious promise.

First, a distinction between the righteous and the wicked (13-18).

Do you remember the 5 complaints of God's people thus far in the book of Malachi? They said: "How have you loved us?" (1:2); How have we despised your name? (1:6); Why does the LORD not accept our offerings? (2:14); Where is the God of justice? (2:17); How have we robbed you? (3:8). Now we hear their sixth complaint (3:13-15):

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. Evil-doers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

This complaint is very similar to their earlier complaint: "Where is the God of justice?" They wondered why the wicked prosper, as if God approved of them. Here they ask, "What is the benefit of loving and serving God? Things don't look very good for us! They wondered, "Why do unbelievers have so much money and an easy life? They drive much nicer cars and live in mansion homes! And their children all go to private, college-prep schools. They take many vacations and have many rich investments. But they steal, and cheat, and lie, and fool around. God, what is going on?"

Before you judge the Israelites, ask yourself: “Do I ever envy unbelievers who never read the Bible, pray, or attend church? Should I just watch football or go golfing or hiking or to the beach instead of church?”

How did God reply to his people? Look at verses 16-18: 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. “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 one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

God says those who fear the LORD will be remembered by God. They are those who esteem the LORD’s name, and they serve the LORD, with humility and gladness. To fear the LORD does not mean to tremble and hide and run away from God, afraid of his judgment. It means to live before the all-seeing eyes of God, the all-knowing mind of God, and the all-hearing ears of God. God sees all, God hears all, God knows all, even our thoughts. God have mercy on us all. How often do we do and say and think evil, wicked things that are displeasing to God? How much we need a cleansed heart!

Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” One of the Ten Commandments is: “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). So to fear the LORD includes honoring and not misusing the LORD’s name.

Our Lord Jesus taught us to fear the LORD. He said, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Lk 12:4-5)

What is done for those who fear the LORD? They are written in a book of remembrance. The prophet Daniel wrote: “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book” (Dan 12:1b). Once Jesus sent out his disciples to do mission work. They experienced great power of healing the sick and driving out evil spirits from people, and they were excited to tell Jesus about it. Jesus told them there was something even greater to rejoice about: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that

your names are written in heaven“ (Lk 10:20). Rejoice that your names are written in heaven, in the book of life.

Apostle John, in his heavenly vision, wrote: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done...And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:12,15).

The LORD of hosts says, about those who fear his name, “They shall be mine, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.” God calls them “my treasured possession,” for they are children of God.

Look again at 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.” God will judge between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

We don't like the idea of God's judgment, since we know we are not perfect. We think that God should judge murderers and rapists. But liars and adulterers? Them too? The Bible consistently warns of God's judgment. Revelation 21:8 says, “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” The Bible says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).

Are you confident that your name is written in heaven? It is not written by your perfect record, for no one has a perfect record. You are included if you have a right fear of the LORD and put your faith in Jesus Christ, rather than in your own goodness or effort. Trust in Jesus. Love and obey him.

Second, the righteous blessed and the wicked judged (4:1-3).

God says more about the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Malachi goes on to say in 4:1-3, “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. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ 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.”

On the day of the LORD, arrogant evildoers will be set ablaze and become ashes. But for those who fear the LORD’s name, God gives a beautiful promise: “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings,” and, “you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.” When I hear leaping like calves, it reminds me of a bucking bull let out of the stall. But bucking bulls are angry. These calves here sound like they are happy, jumping around. The righteous will not be burned up. The wicked will be ashes under their feet. For the righteous who fear the LORD’s name, the sun of righteousness will shine on them and bring them healing.

Who is this blazing “sun of righteousness”? Luke 1:78 says, “because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high.” Apostle John wrote, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world” (Jn 1:9). The true light, the sun of righteousness, is Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). Get ready to learn of Jesus more deeply and appreciate who he is, for he will make great “I am” claims for the next 6 weeks in our I AM series in our church.

The sun of righteousness in view of God’s coming judgment reminds me of Jesus’ teaching: “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:41-43).

This is the answer to their question about serving the LORD. Is it worth it? Most definitely. We might not see an immediate benefit or blessing of serving God. But God promises salvation and reward for his people who love and serve him. Actually Jesus did promise blessings in this life for serving him as well. Jesus understood that there are sacrifices and losses in this life to follow and serve him. But he promised, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mk 10:29-30).

Listen again to Jesus: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (Jn 12:25-26).

Third, remember God's word (4:4-6).

Malachi concluded his message with a word about Moses and Elijah, who represent God's Law and God's Prophets. See 4:4, "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel." God gave Israel holy laws to live by as God's holy people. These laws set them apart from all other people. Malachi rebuked his people for breaking God's laws involving offerings, holy marriage, and tithing. God told them that they must remember his holy laws that they were to live by. These laws direct us to the holy God. These laws are holy, righteous, and good (Ro 7:12). These laws also lead us to know that we need a Savior to deliver us from the consequences of breaking God's laws (Gal 3:24). This Savior is Jesus Christ our Lord. We too must listen and remember God's word. God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps 119:105).

Malachi concludes with the promise of a coming prophet: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ 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."

The New Testament explains that this coming prophet was John the Baptist, who came in the spirit of Elijah the prophet, and who broke the 400 years of silence after the prophet Malachi. So there is a direct connection between Malachi and the New Testament, which begins with the birth and preaching of John the Baptist. John's birth was prophesied by the angel Gabriel, who said concerning John: "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Lk 1:16-17).

God will judge between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. Those who fear God are his treasured possession, written in his book of remembrance. The sun of righteousness will rise with healing for those who revere the LORD and hold to his word. May we live with a right fear and love of the LORD by putting our trust in Jesus Christ.