

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Malachi - The Dangers of Spiritual Blindness: No thoughts for the future (Malachi 4:1-6)

I like to be ready nice and early. I suspect my family thinks I am often too early, and then we waste time waiting around! But if I am going on a journey, for example, I don't want the hassle of having to rush and charge about because time is getting short. Having said that, I'm not always quite so prepared! Once I realised that my daughter's passport had expired and we would have to go to London to get a fast track passport renewal done, at some expense, if she was going to go on the holiday that had been booked for her!

Now it's one thing to be unprepared for a holiday; it would be much worse for me to have taken no precautions for my health, and then find out some years later that I had a condition that could have been prevented by taking some simple steps. Even more than that, it is vital to be prepared spiritually. That is what we are going to consider in this last talk on the book of Malachi in the Old Testament. The people in Malachi's day were not prepared spiritually - it seems as if most people were not taking proper thought for the future. What about us? Are we considering God's plans for the future, or are we ignorant of them? Are we preparing in the light of God's word? This is the subject of our talk today, as together we consider Malachi 4:1-6.

Let's start by reminding ourselves of the overall content of Malachi's message. Malachi starts his prophecy with, *"The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the LORD. Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?'"* Malachi 1:1-2). This abrupt beginning, with God making a statement and the people disagreeing, sets the tone for the whole book. All throughout the prophecy, we see this theme repeated. The impression we get is that the people to whom Malachi was prophesying were spiritually indifferent. Basically, they did not accept God's analysis of their spiritual condition, which He was giving to them through Malachi's words. Instead, they contradicted what God was saying, as we read in the quote taken right at the start. God stated that He had loved them (Malachi 1:2), but they replied with, *"In what way have You loved us?"* (Malachi 1:2).

To be sure, it wasn't an easy time for the people. Malachi would have been prophesying around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. What that means is that some of the Israelites had returned to their land after the Babylonian captivity, but they were not living there as free people in their own sovereign state. Instead, they were still subject to the kings of Persia, and living alongside them in their land were other nations who obstructed their reconstruction work, as we can read about in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It's not hard to see why some of people must have become very discouraged. Throughout Malachi's prophecy, we have a number of statements from God and the people question or disagree with Him. The people's response culminated in Malachi 3:13-15, where they questioned the whole point and purpose of serving the LORD: *"Your words have been harsh against Me,' says the LORD, yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?' You have said, 'It is useless to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the LORD of hosts? So now we call the proud blessed, for those who do wickedness are raised up; they even tempt God and go free.'"* Basically, what they were saying was that there was no profit in serving the Lord. In their view, the people who were behaving wickedly, and the ones who were forgetting God, seemed to be having a much better time than those who were following God's commandments.

God, however, patiently showed His people that it was worthwhile to serve Him, and that there was a time coming in the future when it would be clearly seen that it had been most worthwhile to serve Him. They needed to prepare for that future! This is what we are going to consider together today in Malachi 4:1-6.

The book of Malachi is very likely not the most familiar part of the Bible for many of us. Malachi 4 is actually only six verses long, so let's read the whole of this short chapter now to remind ourselves of the text, starting with Malachi 3:18 for context. As we go through the passage together, we will see how God explains about a time that is coming when there will be a difference between the wicked and the righteous, and that to serve Him will have been a most worthwhile thing to do! I will read Malachi 3:18-4:6 from the New King James Version.

*"Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him. 'For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the LORD of hosts, 'That will leave them neither root nor branch. But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you*

*shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,' says the LORD of hosts. 'Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.'"* (Malachi 3:18-4:6)

The first thing that we hear in these verses that I read, Malachi 3:18-4:6, is that there will be a difference between the righteous and the wicked (Malachi 3:18). On the one hand, there will be utter destruction, described in figure as a fire consuming the stubble. On the other hand, there will be happiness and joy for those who feared the LORD. The difference will be due to the Sun of righteousness rising up (Malachi 4:2). The same Sun of righteousness will, in figure, burn up the wicked like stubble, whereas He will be gladness and healing to the righteous.

In some Bible translations, such as the English Standard Version, Malachi 4:2 is expressed slightly differently to what we read in the New King James Version, and we are given a slightly different picture of the calves mentioned in that verse. Here is how the English Standard Version reads: *"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."* The figure of speech used here is that of calves leaping with joy at being let out of the stall. It's really a very happy picture!

My daughter has two small rabbits at home. They live in a nice rabbit house in our garden, and their rabbit house has a large run attached to it, so that the rabbits can go in and out of the run as they wish. In addition, I have also put a rabbit-proof fence around the lawn that the run sits on, so that I can let the rabbits out of the run most days onto the whole of the lawn, when I know the cat is safely in the house! They love getting out into the freedom of the whole lawn. It's fun to see them charge about and sometimes leap - not so long ago it looked like they were leapfrogging! They are also quite effective grass lawn mowers! That idea of freedom and joy seems to be the figure expressed in the English Standard Version for Malachi 4:2 - the calves have at last been released from the restrictions of the stall, and they are leaping for joy to be free in their pasture. They are rejoicing to be set free in their natural environment. So will we rejoice, when we are at last in a place where righteousness reigns, with the Sun of righteousness having risen with healing in His wings.

It's a totally different picture for the wicked. The day is coming, burning like an oven, which will burn them up, and they will be like ashes under the feet of the righteous (Malachi 4:3). Ashes! What a picture! That is all that will be left of so many proud schemes that left God out of the equation. Essentially, it demonstrates very graphically the ultimate futility of all that is not done for God. How sad if that was the legacy of our life! How essential to prepare for the future! Let's not be like the bulk of the people in Malachi's day, who took no thought for the future.

It's important at this stage to stress that the wonderful thing is that we do not have to strive or try to become one of the righteous. Being counted as righteous in God's sight, and entering into the blessings that He has prepared, are gifts of God which He is free to give because of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ ..."* says the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:16-18, *"... for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.' For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."* Notice that Paul said that the gospel of Christ reveals the wrath of God - just like that day burning like an oven that Malachi announces - but the gospel also reveals how, by faith, we can become righteous.

Paul continues in Romans 4:5, *"But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."* We don't work to become righteous, rather we believe on the only righteous Man who ever lived, our Lord Jesus Christ, who "died for our sins according to the Scriptures" as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, *"and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."* The Lord Jesus did all the work for us - He suffered the penalty of our sins, and His resurrection proved that His work was fully acceptable to God, and so by faith in Him, and in what He has done, we too can be counted as righteous in God's sight. Then we can look forward to the Sun of righteousness rising with healing in His wings, rather than fearing the day coming, burning like an oven.

Furthermore, if we have put our faith in Christ, and in His finished work, we can be sure of our salvation. We will have become one of His sheep, and His sheep never perish, as the Lord Jesus tells us plainly in John 10:27-28: *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."* Eternal life is given as a gift, and there is the promise that they will never perish. Nevertheless there is a sense in which our life's work, but not our eternal destiny or salvation, could leave a partial legacy of ashes. I am referring to the judgment seat of Christ, that the Apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15: *"Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test*

*each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."*

What Paul is writing about in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 is the assessment of our Christian lives. Our souls are safe, if we have trusted in the Lord Jesus - because we have His righteousness imputed to us, through the grace of God and His work on the cross. But if we have lived self-centred lives, without seeking His affairs in His strength, then our life's work may well contain much wood, hay and stubble which will not stand the test of fire. It would be sad if that was our legacy! Hence the call of Malachi to have our eye on the future. If we only live for today, we may well regret it on that day.

In the last three verses of Malachi 4, Malachi 4:4-6, the prophet reminded the people to keep the Law of Moses. As some of the commentators whose books I have read said, it may have seemed irrelevant and inconvenient to them to follow this law, now that they were back in the land only as servants to the kings of Persia. Yet, the Lord reminded them to keep it, and He promised an encouragement, in the form of *"Elijah the prophet..."*, who would *"...turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers"* (Malachi 4:5-6). We see from the Gospels in the New Testament that John the Baptist took on this role, as the forerunner before Jesus, calling the people to repentance and to prepare the way of the Lord. For instance, let's read Matthew 11:13-15: *"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

What about us? The relevance of Malachi 4:4-6 to us, it seems to me, is a call to remember the Word of God. We should remember that Malachi was the last message in the Old Testament, and for four hundred years after that there was no more revelation from God, until we reach the pages of the New Testament. At the end of the New Testament we also have a reminder to keep God's Word. In the last book of the New Testament, Revelation, in Revelation 3:14-22, the Lord Jesus speaks to the church at Laodicea, who, rather like the people of Malachi's day, had become lukewarm. We read the following in Revelation 3:19-20: *"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."* There are some similarities to Malachi's message. Malachi's message started in Malachi 1:2 with *"I have loved you", says the LORD.* Similarly, in Revelation 3:19 the Lord Jesus reminds the church at Laodicea that He loves them. And just like Malachi reminded the people of Israel to remember the Law of Moses, so in Revelation the Lord Jesus reminded His people to hear His voice, and open the door.

The Lord Jesus continues in Revelation 3:21-22: *"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* This, I believe, is the New Testament counterpart to Malachi 4:4 *"Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments."*

So, now that we have come to the end of our series on Malachi, let's recap what this book can teach us. We have seen that it begins with the people doubting God's love for them. *"Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?'"* There was a despising of God's Name, as we see in Malachi 1:6: *"A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honour? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?'"*

Furthermore, the service of God had become drudgery, as we see in Malachi 1:12-13: *"But you profane it, in that you say, 'The table of the LORD is defiled; and its fruit, its food, is contemptible.' You also say, 'Oh, what a weariness!' and you sneer at it, says the LORD of hosts. 'And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?' says the LORD."*

A key problem seemed to be that the people thought that God did not intervene in day-to-day living, and that it wasn't worth serving Him. We can see this in Malachi 2:17: *"You have wearied the LORD with your words; yet you say, 'In what way have we wearied Him?' In that you say, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them', or, 'Where is the God of justice?'"* But God would intervene. Malachi 3:1 tells us: *"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.* Furthermore, the day would come when it would be seen that it had most definitely been worthwhile serving the Lord. Malachi 3:18 states, *"Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him."*

And so we come to Malachi 4:1-6, with the warning, and encouragement, of preparing for the future. The Sun of Righteousness would arise, with healing in His wings for those who trusted in Him, and they would leap like calves freed from the stall (Malachi 4:2). The same Sun, however, would burn up the wicked like stubble. Their legacy would be just ashes.

We reminded ourselves how we can be counted as righteous, by accepting the free gift of righteousness. That is the most important part of taking thought for the future! Then we considered how, as Christians, we want our life's work to be one of *"gold, silver and precious stones"*, and not *"wood, hay and stubble"*, as the Apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. We can finish off with some of the last words of the Lord Jesus, in Revelation 22:12: *"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work."* That is a good day to look forward to, and so with that in mind, we can be the ones who do take proper thought for the future!

I hope that these talks on Malachi have been encouraging. May the Lord Himself encourage us to persevere. One verse which has often encouraged me, and with which I will close, is in Hebrews 10:35: *"Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward."*

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