

The sermon

Intro

In a recent Sunday school class we discussed disappointment with God. Gerald told the story of a man named Patrick who professed faith at age 8. But when his mother died during a surgery to repair a ruptured appendix, he left the local church altogether. He was 17 when he left the church. He's now 43. And he's furious with God and the church. God didn't come through as expected, so he's done with God.

As we conclude Malachi, we encounter people who are disappointed in God. What's God's response?

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

We'll see the charge made against God. We'll see four answers. And we'll see Malachi's conclusion.

Charge: It's useless to serve God (3:13-15)

"Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD.

They've spoken against God. This is a bad thing. A big deal. Meaning we need to be cautious with our words! Disappointment needs to be expressed with reverence!

But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?'

They've spoken against God and they don't even know it. They're ignorant, blind.

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? – 3:14

Vain = useless, worthless, of no benefit.

Serve = slavery language.

They've served God by obeying and mourning over sin. Maybe going through rituals like fasting, wearing sackcloths, putting ashes on the forehead (Dan 9:3)? God I fasted, I wore a sackcloth, I put ashes on my forehead. And nothing happened.

And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

The arrogant are the prideful. They think they can disobey God's law and get away with it. So, they do evil. Yet they prosper. So following God must be useless. These are people who tried God and found him wanting. They were disappointed in God. They didn't get the results they wanted.

Application

Some people try God and find him wanting because of incorrect thinking. The person who thinks if I come to church, if I read my Bible, if I pray, my marriage will be repaired, my relationship with my kids will be fixed, my financial problems will go away, my cancer will be healed. That's if I do the right things, all my problems will go away.

So we need to be cautious in how we state the gospel.

- 1) Come to Jesus and he'll give you these things: peace, joy, purpose, success.

That's come to Jesus for what you can get out of him.

2) Come to Jesus because he has a wonderful plan for your life.

That's come to Jesus for what you can get out of him.

Don't get me wrong. I believe Jesus brings joy, peace, purpose, and spiritual prosperity to broken people. I believe God has written out our days before we existed (Ps 139:16) and has created us for specific works beforehand (Eph 2:10). But come to Jesus for personal well-being and a wonderful plan suggests devotion to Jesus will make life pain free. Not a message that calls people to repent and fear God.

3) PNS co-worker

I have regret over the way I once counseled a co-worker. I was too optimistic. Too much if you do this, you'll get the right results. The man was a professing Christian and my error was making it sound like if you do these things, your wife will come back. I should have said something like, "Here's how you can be faithful at this juncture. Here's what you can do to incline her to come back. I can't guarantee anything. Your wife may or may not come back. You can't control her. But God will be with every step of the way as you fear him and follow his word. This is how you put yourself in position for reconciliation while submitting to God's will." My error was making it sound like if we do all the right things, all will go well for us. But that's not how biblical spirituality works.

Jesus does entice us to believe with promises (forgiveness of sins, eternal life, rivers of living water, abundant life). But he also says count the cost (Luke 14:25-33).

Answer 1: There's a book of remembrance (3:16-18)

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another.

Those who feared God = a different group than those in 3:13-15. Believers. Insinuating that the previous group didn't fear God. Maybe some in the first group meditated on the matter and came to their senses?

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. – 3:16

Whatever they said, God liked it and took note. God hears when we speak well of him! He's paying attention! **To fear God is to speak well of him.**

Esteem God's name = ascribing value to God. His power, his character, his authority. Valuing all that God is for us in Christ.

"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. – 3:17

If we fear God, we'll be his personal, treasured possession at a future day. God fearers will be spared on that day, hinting that others won't be spared.

[With the father-son analogy, Malachi hints at the doctrine of adoption (Rom 8:15-17). When a person fears the LORD, when we repent and believe, we become his valued sons and daughters. We're born into this world children of Satan. We need to become, through faith, God's treasured children.]

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. – 3:18

God is countering wrong conclusions. On that future day, the distinction between the righteous (OT speak for believers) and wicked (OT speak for unbelievers) be perfectly clear. In the end, the wicked will not prosper! The difference? Believers serve God.

Biblical spirituality

Finding God wanting, concluding that following Jesus is worthless, being disappointed in God isn't biblical spirituality. So what is biblical spirituality?

1) Fearing God

Fear = OT speak for faith. All should tremble in awe of the final judgment. If you don't believe, you should tremble at what awaits you. Christian, you should tremble at the fate of the wicked. Believers fear God in the sense of trusting respect. We affirm God's authority so we affirm his commands. Trusting God, we believe his ways are always best. Even when God's ways are inconvenient and hard.

2) Esteeming God

Treasuring God above everything else. Valuing his authority. The Bible over culture. God's wisdom over man's. Wanting God's positive evaluation, not man's.

3) Serving God

Like a good slave, doing what the master commands. Doing God's will. Living for God's glory (honor) instead of our own. Living for God's pleasure instead of our own. **This is fitting given who's master in the relationship.**

Fearing God and esteeming God leads to a life that serves God. **Biblical spirituality begins with an attitude towards God.**

Disappointment with God

Disappointment with God generally happens when we misunderstand God's word. Or project things on God that hasn't said (life will be smooth if I tithe). When we don't get what we think he promised, we find God wanting, useless. We may think God wronged us.

On the other hand, biblical spirituality fears God, esteems God, and serves God. Not for what we get out of him. But because we embrace his authority, his goodness in Christ, and his wise direction of our lives. And we'll prosper spiritually: joy, peace, contentment. Yes we can't control our circumstances, but keeping God's ways we'll protect ourselves from self-inflicted consequences (see Proverbs). We'll have God's empowering grace and presence for the hard times. We'll grow in wisdom for navigating life. We'll have the local church to lean on. And in the end, we'll be spared on the day of judgment.

What is faith? Fearing God. Esteeming God. Serving God.

Answer 2: The wicked will be burned to stubble at Jesus' return (4:1)

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.

The wicked are characterized as proud and doers of evil. On that future day, they will be burned to stubble.

The oven pictures heat and burning. Stubble pictures the chaff left over in the field after harvesting grain. Elsewhere stubble is dust-like and easily blown away by the wind (Ps 83:13; Isa 40:24; 41:2; Jer 13:24). That's burned up to the point where there's barely any trace left of them.

The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

Again, fire imagery. There's nothing left of the wicked after the fire.

Answer 3: Jesus' return will bring healing and joy (4:2)

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

The day of the LORD is dread for the wicked. Delight for the righteous.

The sun of righteousness is Jesus. My proof?

- 1) Jesus returns at the day of the LORD.

See 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2:1-2.

- 2) Jesus' 1st coming was compared with light and sunrise (see Matt 4:15-16; Luke 1:76-79; John 8:12).

For example, in **Luke 1:78**, Jesus's 1st coming is described as "*the sunrise shall visit us from on high.*"

When Jesus returns, he'll bring healing. Think the groaning of the earth (Rom 8:18-23). Think the end of death (1 Cor 15:54-55). Think imperishable bodies (1 Cor 15:42).

As a result, ***You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.***

That's joy unimaginable. Like calves stuck in the stall with cabin fever, like chickens cooped up, we'll jump for joy when we're released from the curse.

Answer 4: The righteous will step on the wicked at Jesus' return (4:3)

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.

When Jesus returns, we'll trample what's left of wicked (ashes). That's us taking part in God's victory over his enemies.

Since God will act, serving the LORD isn't in vain. The wicked will be defeated. The righteous will be victorious. In the end, evildoers don't prosper.

Interpretation

How should we interpret this? Will we walk on the ashes of our loved ones who didn't fear God? Is this literal or figurative?

If literal, it happens when Jesus returns appearing in the sky. Meaning Jesus burns up all unbelievers alive on earth at his coming. And we, being raised to imperishable bodies at the same time, will walk on their ashes. If literal, it happens before the resurrection of the wicked (Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29). Before sentencing to hell. Why? Because when the wicked are assigned to hell, they're away from God's presence, excluded from the new Jerusalem, and barred from our dwelling place (Rev 21:8; 22:3, 14-15). We can't trample them in hell because we won't be in hell.

If a non-literal picture, it pictures our participation in the defeat of Jesus' enemies. On the present earth. Before eternal destinies are fixed. Because we're separated from the wicked by location at the final judgment. I go with non-literal because sometimes the picture is fire, but other times the picture is Jesus slaying the wicked with the sword (Rev 19:20-21). Both sword and fire are symbolic of Jesus' defeat of all opposition.

What is hell?

I don't believe hell is literal burning in fire forever and ever. Pictures of hell include torment by fire (Rev 14:9-11), outer darkness (Matt 25:30), gloomy darkness (Jude 13), weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 25:30).

How can a person reside in a lake of fire and at the same time live in gloomy darkness? Whatever hell exactly is, it's awful. Horrific. Crushing. Anguish. Definitely emotional. Likely physical. Unending. A place to be avoided at all costs. If the cross/crucifixion is a picture of God's wrath against sin, hell will be horrific.

How we should process the final judgment?

We should be pulled in two directions. Sadness and affirmation.

- 1) Whatever God does is good, just, right, wise.
- 2) Hell is an expression of God's stance towards sin.

Opposition to sin is a good thing!

- 3) People are individually responsible for their sin.

Hell being the proof.

- 4) There's no external constraint on God.

God chooses to punish sinners. No one's forcing God to do it.

- 5) Hell brings glory to God.

The full range of his attributes are on display (Rom 9:22-23). Hell is God wins.

- 6) God's people are saved through judgment.

Judgment means the end of persecution. This means more to Christians in North Korea and the Middle East than it does to us.

- 7) We'll delight in these things (*"leaping like calves from the stall"*).
- 8) Judgment is Malachi's answer to the charge that it's useless to serve God.
- 9) Now is the time of patience (2 Pet 3:9).
- 10) Weep and pray over lost sinners.
- 11) Love sinners by speaking the gospel while there's still time.

Conclusion: Fear the LORD and don't treat him casually (because there's a day of the LORD – 4:4-6)

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. – 4:4

Remember meaning keep God's law in your thoughts so that you obey it.

The Elijah who comes before the day of the LORD is John the Baptist. In **Matthew 17:12-13** we learn, *"I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him...Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist."*

The things Elijah would do were said of John the Baptist in **Luke 1:17**: *"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."*

John is sent so the people will fear God!

At the beginning of Malachi, the people questioned God's love. God ends the book by promising he will send the people a prophet. How does God love? By sending a prophet. And by promising victory to the believing remnant. How do we relate to God? We fear him. That's awe. That's respect. That's trust. That's submission. God sent Jesus to die for sinners. To take the punishment we deserve so that we won't suffer "eternal destruction" on the day of the LORD (2 Thess 1:9-10). To rescue us from the curse. That we might serve him in this life. And in the life to come.

The message of Malachi is...

Fear the LORD and don't treat him casually. Because there's a day of the LORD!