

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, take each moment of my life this day, each deed, each circumstance, each word spoken, each feeling and thought, and make sense of it. Then, as I submit to You, given them meaning and purpose both for me and for Your Kingdom. May my life never be wasted because I have failed to allow You to rule benevolently in my soul, and may I rejoice to discover that Your will is done today, even through me. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Make it your intent to give glory to God through all you do today. Look for opportunities to use your faith.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people of other faiths** *Pray for those who are bound by traditional ancestral beliefs, and will be outcast if they accept Christ*
- *Pray for all those who are fighting in Afghanistan*
- *Give thanks to God for the fresh air, and the gift of life*

Meditation

I glory in everything You do for me, Lord Jesus Christ.

You give me courage to endure life's struggles,
To refuse to be conquered by trouble.

You give me a heart to watch out for the needy,
Despite my inclination to be selfish.

You give me strength to stand my ground in faith,
And apply what I believe to what I do.

You give me love when my heart is sorely tested;
The ability to forgive when offended:

You give me the power to rise above the ordinary;
To do what is greater, perhaps the best!

You give me real hope and a vision for the future
The coming of Your Kingdom in glory!

I glory in You, Lord Jesus, for all You do through me.

Bible passage – Malachi 3:13-18

¹³ 'You have spoken strong words against me', says the LORD. But you say, 'What have we said to each other against you?' ¹⁴ You have said, 'It means nothing to serve God. What do we gain if we keep to His requirements, or if we walk about mournfully before the LORD of hosts?' ¹⁵ So we now call the arrogant 'blessed'! Those who do evil not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.'

¹⁶ Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written in His presence listing those who revered the LORD and valued His name. ¹⁷ 'They will be mine,' says the LORD of hosts, 'my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as a man spares a son who serves him. ¹⁸ Then you will once again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, and between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him.'

Bible Study

Review

What we have just read is extraordinary. To begin with, Malachi presents us with the classic problem of unbelief, as reflected in Old Testament texts from Genesis to Job and Isaiah; people have seen others who reject God becoming successful in the world, and they question the value of following Him (3:13-16). Then, by way of complete contrast, the second paragraph contains an extraordinary prophecy about the last days and the judgement of God! Moreover, this is the first occasion that a 'book' is described in the Bible recording names that God will remember on His day of judgement; what we now call a 'book of life'. There are some texts in the Psalms and Daniel that imply the existence of such a book (Psalms 40:7, 69:28, 139:16, and Daniel 10:21, 12:1f.), but this is the only place in the Old Testament where the book is described in detail. The idea resurfaces in Philippians (4:3), and then appears strongly within Revelation (3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12-19). The very fact that many Christians today speak openly about their names being 'written in the book of life' (or the 'lamb's book of life' – see Rev. 13:8) testifies to the importance of the idea found within Malachi.

However, if we are to understand what is going on in these two paragraphs, then we must recall what happens in Malachi's prophecy throughout chapter 3. At the beginning, Malachi wrote to describe the coming of the Lord God of Hosts to bring justice to the earth, preceded by His 'messenger' (3:1,2), and this required the purification of God's people (3:3-5). In yesterday's passage we read Malachi's prophetic word about the proper response to God's coming, in which the people were encouraged to give the proper tithes and consequently give a visible testimony of their blessing to the nations (3:8-12). After this, our passage describes the sceptical response of many of God's people in Malachi's day; they complained that following God's ways led to no benefit (3:13)! Moreover, those who tested God by rebelling against Him appeared to escape His justice (3:15)!

Malachi probably observed people complaining about God in this way just as we do today and just as people have always done. However, with the perception of a true prophet, Malachi could see beyond this. He did not record just one single prophecy, but something more interesting. He described something he saw that appears to have triggered his great prophecy about the 'book'. Malachi described a group of people who 'revered the Lord' getting together, without saying directly that he was one of those people! It is highly likely that he was, because he was able to say that the Lord's presence was like a watchful eye; He 'took note and listened ...' whilst the group wrote down a list of names of likeminded people in a 'book of remembrance' (3:16).

We can easily imagine that in the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust within Jerusalem, it had become necessary for those who truly trusted the Lord to make such a commitment to each other and to God, but what happened consequently is even more remarkable. The whole event led to a prophetic vision, which Malachi's wrote down next. In this vision, the Lord spoke to confirm and verify what the group had done, and He declared that those who were listed were indeed His. They were His faithful servants, a 'special possession', moreover, He would declare them as such on 'the day when I act' (3:17). Then, at this final judgement, the difference between the 'righteous and the wicked' would become evident, and the Lord's people would be vindicated through their commitment and service.

The vision of the end and the justification of the righteous is of course an Old Testament vision, and God did not speak to Malachi about the Messiah and His unique role in this vindication (as He did to Isaiah, for example). In a very special way, Malachi's vision reveals that God is watching His servants with love, and keenly awaits the day when they will be 'spared as a man spares a son who serves him' (3:18).

Going Deeper

There has been much scholarly dispute about these verses because some of the Hebrew is not clear, and it is also unclear who is 'speaking' at various points within the text. I have attempted to make this clear through the translation, but there remain a significant number of further issues to be explored.

Notes on the text and translation

V13 *'you have spoken strong words against me, says the Lord.'* The Hebrew says 'your words were strong against me', and if we compare the words used here with how they are used elsewhere in the Old Testament, then it is clear that what is described is an arrogant harsh attitude towards God.

V13 *'what have we said to each other against You?'* You will find that most Bible versions have 'what have we spoke against You? However, the particular use of the word 'speak' suggests discussing

things, or speaking together, and so I have done what I can to convey this sense of conferring against God.

- V14** ***'walk about mournfully'** This is a difficult expression in Hebrew because the exact word is found nowhere else in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word is related to one meaning 'dark' in the sense of mourning, as found in Psalm 42:10. Similar words are also found in Jeremiah 4:28, Ezekiel 31:15, Isaiah 50:3) meaning 'mourning.*
- V15** ***'those who do evil not only prosper ...'** The Hebrew word here says that those who do evil are 'built up', hence the idea of prospering.*
- V16** ***'spoke with one another'** The Hebrew expression says 'a man and his companion' spoke, and this gives us a feel of purposeful getting together. The phrase is in fact a general one and does not mean just two people.*
- V16** ***'listing those who revered the Lord'** The Hebrew says 'about those who revered His name' However, in the context, it is clear that what was written was a list of names (see study).*
- V17** ***'my special possession on the day when I act'** It is rather uncertain what this sentence means, and it may be that it could be translated; 'for the day when I make my treasured possession' However, I have preferred the translation I have given because it makes more sense.. It is hard to work out exactly what the alternative might mean within this text.*

Going Deeper

Antagonism towards God (3:13-15)

People were speaking 'strong words' against the Lord. This phrase used in verse 13 suggests that people were angry with God. All the way through Malachi we have noted how faithful Malachi was in declaring the word of the Lord against a background of opposition and mistrust. Many of the great prophets had to speak in such circumstances. Elijah had to oppose the combined efforts of four hundred of prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18); and Amos, a southerner, had to preach strongly against the northern nation of Israel and the high priest at Bethel was not pleased to hear what he had to say (Amos 7:10-17). Malachi should be recognised as one who faced fierce opposition of probably the worst kind, which was a combination of hypocrisy and denial.

It is difficult to translate the text exactly as the Hebrew requires, but if you look at the translation notes for verse 13 above, you will begin to see that Malachi was confronting a culture in which people spoke harshly and sharply against God whilst still going through the motions of worshipping and claiming the benefits of being God's people. They spoke strongly against God to each other, but when confronted, said 'what have we said?' (3:13) Most Biblical commentaries tell us that Malachi's 'method' was to present what he had to say in a 'question and answer' format, but it is also possible that Malachi did this because he was adept at asking the right questions and also perceiving the truth behind what people said because he listened properly! Some people have that gift, and it can be unnerving. I suggest that it is quite possible for Malachi to have been motivated to prophesy by what he discovered through his own conversations with people.

Malachi had discovered the awful truth that despite everything that the people of Israel had endured in recent years, including the return from exile they had longed for, they were not happy with God, continued to sin and hid it from Him! Moreover, their complaint against God was the same complaint of earlier generations, such as those recorded in Numbers 21:5,7 (and Psalm 78:19), for example. On these occasions the people complained against God because their lives were unfavourable and moreover, those who did what they wanted appeared to fare better than those who followed the Lord's ways. Malachi summed up the devious criticism nicely; 'what do we gain if we keep His requirements' (3:14). This, of course, is the endemic sin of all humanity, especially when people tend to blame everyone else for what has gone wrong except themselves.

The gathering (3:16)

In the face of such attitudes, Malachi reports the famous gathering in verse 16. In the opening section of the Bible study I have indicated my belief that Malachi was one of the number who gathered; how could he not have been present? The whole report sounds like a personal recollection, but Malachi did not talk about himself out of deference to God and the spiritual significance of what happened. Malachi regarded himself as the messenger reporting the message, and stood back from claiming involvement in the message itself!

We can imagine a group of serious minded Israelites, perhaps including Levites who were acutely aware of the shortcomings of what was happening in Jerusalem. The Hebrew describes the gathering in this way; 'those who revered the Lord spoke, a man and his companion'. It would be tempting to suggest that the group consisted of only two, but 'a man and his companion' is a well used phrase in Hebrew for a group of people (see notes above). This indicates that whatever their background, the one thing these people had in

common was a serious desire to honour God, and God responded to this by taking note and listening (3:16). Yet again, the Old Testament presents God as far more than an idle spectator in the affairs of the world, but one who is keenly interested in what happens. When people act in faith without prompting from the Lord Himself, then God listens with special interest.

In that solemn moment, Malachi records that a list of names was written down of all those who were serious about doing what was right and being purified by God (see 3:1f.), and the records states that this was done in God's 'presence'. This phrase indicates the possibility that the writing of the book was done in the Temple, because a good Jewish person would have regarded God's presence as residing there. In addition, the implements for writing were not commonly available at that time, and it is a fair assumption that the tools to write and make a record were to be found in either a king's court (of which there was none at that time in Jerusalem) or in a Temple.

The many lists that have survived in various forms from those times (outside of Israel or the Bible) are largely lists of deeds done by people on behalf of the gods or on behalf of kings. The list mentioned here is different from all these lists, because its primary purpose was not to record things done but people 'who revered the Lord and valued His name' (3:16). This was a radical departure for the Old Testament, for we might expect that a good Jew would have felt it necessary to write down the deeds and work done that warranted inclusion in such a book; but no, the list was 'names only' and based on the attitude of the heart to follow God. Here is the answer to any who might think that this prophecy of Malachi is rather too much like 'salvation by works' (see above); this small group of people perceived the same truth that Jeremiah had seen a century previously, that God looked at the heart to see whether someone was truly His (Jer. 31:31-33).

The prophecy of the end (3:17,18)

The Lord immediately went into action to corroborate the work done on earth by these few people. The words in verse 17 are God's claim upon those who had made such a significant step; the Lord said, 'they will be mine ... my special possession.' However, the significant feature of the prophecy is that the Lord said He would make this true 'on the day when I act' (3:17). Each of the prophets of the Old Testament spoke about we call the 'day of the Lord' in different ways. The phrase 'the day of the Lord' only occurs 17 times in the Old Testament, but there are many other phrases used to describe the same event. Zechariah uses the expression 'that day' more than 20 times, for example. Malachi uses at least four different phrases; the 'day of His coming' (3:2), 'the day of the Lord' (4:5), 'the day that comes' (4:1) and also 'the day when I act' (3:17 and 4:3). It is obvious from the proximity of all these references at the end of the prophecy of Malachi, that each of these is a different way of speaking about just one event; God's arrival and His 'judgement day' (we will discover more about this and how it relates to the coming of Jesus in the next study).

Here, Malachi paints a clear picture of what we might call a 'final judgement'. Of course, with the coming of Christ, God's judgement begins but does not finish; but this was of no interest to Malachi. His prophecy was concerned to establish the fact of God's ultimate justice, and the firm belief that good would prevail and wickedness would be conquered. Earlier, we read that in the midst of difficulty, the people had lost heart and stopped believing that good would indeed prevail. But by their written declaration of faith, Malachi and his friends gave the Lord what He so much needed at that time; the commitment of faithful servants who would do His will. So God rewarded their faith in Him by holding them 'righteous' in His judgement, and in our language today, 'saved'.

Note the sequence of events in this passage. Firstly, Malachi and his friends believed and stated their faith (3:16), then they were able to be used by God in His service (3:17), so that at the final judgement, their service would demonstrate the clear difference between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' (3:18). It is important that we note this sequence, because it confirms that Malachi described acceptance by God as beginning in a statement of faith rather than good deeds. On the day of judgement, He said that God would of course expose everything people had done (as Jesus promised throughout His ministry), and right and wrong would be made clear. This is extremely close to the New Testament theology that says salvation is found through faith that leads to service and not service that leads to faith

Application

The trouble with the people who complained at the beginning of this passage was that they were not prepared to examine themselves first before they condemned God. This, of course, is the dominant sin of today, and in the West, we are surrounded by people who do just this. Christian preachers struggle to find ways to challenge people to self examination within a general culture of suspicion towards anyone who might suggest to people that they might be wrong and need to question themselves. Those who make a stand for God and for faith today are not those who have found some personal spirituality by which they can live a confident and self fulfilling life. They are people who have discovered through experience that God is

generally right and they are generally wrong, and they are consequently prepared to sign up to trust in God rather than trust in themselves, secularism, or any other form of religion or belief system.

In many parts of the world today, Christians find themselves in a minority; disliked and ignored, and sometimes persecuted because of what they believe. Malachi knew exactly what this was like and experienced much the same. His vision of a book in which the names of the faithful are recorded is a prophetic triumph, because it has given great comfort and solace to millions of believers through the ages. We may all now know that whatever the complaints and antagonism towards the one true God in whom we so passionately believe, faith is not in vain. The 'book of life' (as it says in Revelation) is recorded on earth, and we are signed in according to our own free choice, just as Malachi and his companions wrote their names in a book five hundred years before the time of Jesus. Nevertheless, these actions performed on earth have eternal consequences, and in God's final judgement the book is opened and consulted. Revelations records that God will not blot out any names from the book (Rev. 3:8), that those whose names are in it will experience suffering (Rev. 13:8), and that those whose names are written in the book will be saved (Rev. 20:12f.). This, of course, is supreme justice.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do people complain about the Lord today? What reasons do people give for leaving the church?
2. Share your recollection of instances when you have been specially blessed by God's presence when in a group talking or praying together.
3. What does it mean to you to speak of having your name written in the 'book of life'? How helpful is this idea today?

Personal comments by author

I have been greatly blessed by occasions when I have been with other Christians, and felt the Lord has been blessing what we have done. Sometimes these have been formal meetings, and on other occasions, they have been informal gatherings that have arisen on the spur of the moment. It is always a joy to know that what we are doing is indeed what the Lord wants, and have this confirmed by a prophetic word. I have often reflected that meetings and gatherings of Christians must be very boring without such inspiration and the presence of the Lord! As God's people, however, we should expect Him to be with us and thoroughly involved in what we do.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Gather together with one or two other Christians and pray about the Lord's return. Share your feelings about this and talk about what it means to you; then pray about the concerns you raise and ask the Lord to give you a true perspective on this aspect of His will.*
 - *Pray for those Christians who have never been taught about the Lord's return, and have great difficulty coming to terms with the whole idea, let alone the concept of the 'Lamb's book of life'!*
-

Final Prayer

Clean us, Heavenly Father, from the dirt and rubbish that accumulates in our lives, often without our even knowing it. Give us the grace to accept Your cleansing, so that we are ready to throw away what needs to go, especially the accumulated debris of living. May we remain true to You Lord God, in the way we live our lives: AMEN
