

Genuine Believers Fear and Follow the Lord

Malachi 4:2

Sunday, October 15th, 2023

Scripture:

Malachi 4:2

[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.

Pray

Introduction:

When Joshua was preparing the people of Israel to go and conquer the city of Jericho, he sent two spies to go and view it. As these spies went, they came to the house of a prostitute by the name of Rahab. And when the king of Jericho heard about this, he sent men to ask for these spies. But instead of giving them to the king she hid them and told the king's men that they left and should chase after them.

Then she went up to the roof where she hid the spies and said in Joshua 2:9, 12-13, *“I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you.”*

[12] Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign [13] that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.”

Rahab, saw and understood the power and greatness of the almighty God, and that he was about to destroy her city. But instead of panicking or losing hope she chose to fear God. So, she hid the spies, committed treason against the king of Jericho, saved her family, **and was blessed by God to be the mother of Boaz and part of the lineage of Jesus.**

She was and is an example of someone who **genuinely feared and followed the Lord.**

But then there's the people of Judah in Malachi. Now, we don't know the exact date of the writing of Malachi, but most scholars believe that he was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century B.C.

This is supported by the fact that Malachi covers a range of topics that are also talked about by Nehemiah and Ezra, including: The corruption of the priests, intermarriage with foreign nations, abusing the disadvantaged, and the failure to pay the tithe.

From these topic we also begin to see that this period in the history of God's people is not a happy time. As the commentator Iain Duguid wrote **"It was an age of widespread religious disillusionment and discontentment."**

But why? Why are God's people so disillusioned and discontent?

Let's go back two books to the book of Haggai. In that book, the people had also fallen short of what God wanted for them. They were supposed to rebuild the temple but weren't doing it.

But when God challenged them through Haggai, they go to work. And they weren't doing it just because they were supposed to, they were energized and excited.

Because God didn't just tell them to rebuild the temple, but he gave them a promise. He said to his people in Haggai 2:6-9:

Fear not. [6] For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. [7] And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. [8] The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. [9] The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.'

They were thinking, "Oh man, God's going to destroy our enemies, he's going to bring prosperity to our land, and he is going to be with us and make this temple awesome."

Well...the temple was finished in roughly 516 B.C. and then...nothing.

Instead, their land was an economic and political after thought, they were still technically under the rule of the Persians, they suffered persistent opposition from their neighbors, and they were no longer ruled by the promised Davidic king.

Needless to say, the people were discouraged and frustrated.

To make this a little more real: In light of these promises, how do you think the Jewish people in Israel feel today. A people that finally, once again, became a nation/state 65 years ago and is still waiting for and believing that God will fulfill this promise of a physical and flourishing temple, are now in a battle for their very existence. **What anger, sadness, frustration, and fear they must be feeling right now.**

These are similar feelings shared by the Jews in the time of Malachi. **They felt like they had done their part for God (rebuilding the temple), but that God had not done his. They were believing and living as if God had failed.**

Do you or have you ever felt like that? Are you struggling or have you struggled to believe that God is for you? That he is working even when you can't see it?

If that's you, I want you to know that it is okay to struggle with these things. God does not condemn us for our struggles. God didn't send Malachi (whose name means "my messenger") to his people because they were struggling with those feelings.

He sent Malachi to prophecy against them because they lost their fear and awe of God. And instead chose to live a lifestyle of half-hearted worship as they disobeyed the clear commands of God.

Where Rahab look around her and chose to fear the Lord, God's people in Malachi's time chose to trust themselves and live their own way.

So this morning we are going to look at what God has to say through his messenger, Malachi, to this disgruntled and disobedient people. He has 4 main things to communicate:

- 1. Problem: God's people have a half-hearted faith**
- 2. Response: God's judgement is coming**
- 3. Promise: God still loves his people and is working for their good**
- 4. Call: Fear the Lord and follow his commands**

And all along the way I hope that you will see clearly, by the Spirit, how each of these truths apply to us today. Believing that God wants to move us from a place of doubt and/or half-heartedness in our faith to a place where we stand in awe of our triune God and give him the worship that he rightly deserves.

But first we need to start with the bad news.

1. Problem: God's people have a half-hearted faith (Malachi 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. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

So much of Malachi is set up in this format where God through the prophet says something against his people, the people question him, and God responds with the exact ways they have wronged him.

In these verses the prophet is calling God's people out for basically talking smack about God. And they respond with "What are talking about? If we are talking smack, then what did we say?"

I know we can all relate to this. We have had this dialogue before. “You were mean? No I wasn’t. What did I even do?” And the hope is that they don’t remember. **But God never forgets.**

He tells them exactly what they said....

That there’s no purpose in following God or keeping his commands. Because all they see is evil people prospering and God not doing anything about it.

This is similar to the complaint that Habakkuk made in Habakkuk 1:4:

*[4] So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.*

“God, wicked people keep doing terrible things and it feels like you are powerless to do anything.”

But there’s a difference.

Even though Habakkuk was angry and questioned God, he still came to a place, even in his frustration, where he chose to trust and wait on God. As he says in Habakkuk 2:1

*[1] I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the response of God’s people in Malachi’s day. Instead of trusting God as they dealt with their disappointment and hard circumstances, **they chose what can only be characterized as a half-hearted faith.**

On the one hand they, they loosely followed some of the commands of God, and yet on the other they chose to live their own way, because they didn’t think God would do anything.

Look at some of the charges that God brings against them:

Malachi 1:8

[8] When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts.

If you remember what God says to the priests in the law, then you know that sacrifices were to be made using unblemished animals. Which means that they couldn't be blind, lame or sick.

Unfortunately, the priests in Malachi's day didn't care. They thought it was too much work. They didn't think God's holiness was worth the trouble of doing what his law required. They were half-hearted and faithless in their worship.

And before we begin to think that this charge doesn't apply to us, remember what Peter says to us in 1 Peter 2:9:

[9] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Because of Christ, all of us as God's children have been given the status of priest, which means that Malachi 1:8 applies to us.

How is our worship of God? Are we coming into worship with hearts that are ready to give him the honor and praise that is due to his name? Do we come here with reverence and awe, or do we come here as if this is just another thing to do in a long list of obligations? When we come to God in our private devotions do we come ready to encounter the living God or do we give him a few distracted moments and call it good?

Another charge that God brings against them is in Malachi 2:10-11:

[10] Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? [11] Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.

He also adds in verse 14:

[14] But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

The people of God are being faithless to each other and are spitting on the covenant of God in their relationships.

Some men are marrying women from other nations who worship foreign Gods. And others are being unfaithful to their first wives.

As one commentator points out, **they were either abandoning or divorcing their wives for another romantic relationship, or more likely, they were leaving to marry someone from another nation so they could make a treaty and gain political advantage.**

Yet in Deuteronomy 7:3-4 God commands his people to not marry women from other nations who serve other gods. Or in his creation mandate from Genesis 2:24, God's tell his people that a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast (or cling) to his wife.

And when we look to the New Testament, we see that these commands are not only reinforced, but they are given even more weight and significance. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14:

[14] Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Believers have no business marrying or being in a relationship with someone who doesn't follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, if you are currently married to someone who isn't a believer, know that God's call on your life isn't to divorce that person. But according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 7 you are to remain faithful to them and in so doing remain faithful to God.

But then comes the heavy weight verses about marriage. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:24-25:

[24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

[25] Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,...

The New Testament call isn't just "don't leaving your spouse." It is so much bigger than that. Faithfulness to God is about wives and husbands living with each other and serving one another in such a way that it reflects the relationship that Christ has with his bride, the church.

If that is the New Testament standard, then we are forced to ask ourselves some hard questions. How are we doing at loving and serving our spouses? How are we doing husbands at being Christ to our wives? How are you doing wives at submitting to and respecting your husbands, and being the helper that God has called you to be?

And if you are not married, how are you doing at loving, serving, and being faithful to your physical and spiritual family? Which is a command of all believers.

These are important and weighty commands and questions that frankly God's people in Malachi didn't take seriously. **And because they didn't there were consequences.**

Because God's people had a half-hearted faith, God responded and told them that judgement is coming.

2. Response: God's judgement is coming (Malachi 3:5)

Malachi 3:5

[5] "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts."

I don't know about you, but one thing that bothers me so much about myself is that I can read passages like this, about judgement, and I can just shrug my shoulders and say "okay."

Because I wrongly live at times like I am saved, and it doesn't matter how I live. I can come to worship on a Sunday preach a sermon, lead worship, pray with people, and talk spiritual talk and not have it affect the way I live.

I can be cold to my wife, short with one of my kids, give less than my best to the Lord, not be convicted about it, and some how still think, "**oh yeah, Me and God are good.**"

But Malachi paints a different picture.

To the half-hearted and faithless priests God say in Malachi 2:3:

[3] Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it.

Or to those who were being unfaithful in their relationships he says in Malachi 2:12, 16:

[12] May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!

[16] "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

God is clearly not saying, "**It's all good, it doesn't matter if you follow me or how you live. You just go do you.**"

Instead, he is letting his people know that if we live a life where we are half-hearted and faithless to God, **judgment is coming.**

Now, I don't want to belabor this point, but I know it is really easy for us a reformed church and as evangelicals in general to say, "but pastor Ryan, we are saved by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ and not by works."

To which I say "yes" and "Amen."

But in quoting Ephesians 2:8-9 we only end up thinking about "how" we have been saved and not about "what we have been saved for." This is where Ephesians 2:10 comes in to tell us the reason for our salvation. It says:

[10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

If we are genuine believers in Jesus Christ, then the overflow or the response of faith should be to do the good that God has for us. To live in a way that honors God.

But if we don't, if we live like God's people in Malachi, and are faithless, then maybe we don't have a genuine faith at all. As James says, "faith without works is dead." Which means we need to be ready, because judgement is coming.

Yet, God in his goodness, despite all the sin exposing judgement that he has been bringing through Malachi, still has a message of promise and hope for us.

3. Promise: God still loves his people and is working for their good (Malachi 1:2-3)

[2] "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob [3] but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

Even though I didn't start the sermon here, this is where the book of Malachi begins. With God's declaration of love for his people. And of course, based on their circumstances they naturally respond, "How have you loved us, God?"

"Our enemies surround us, we are not prospering as a nation, and this grand vision you told us about through Haggai isn't happening. So how can you love us?"

And he tells them, "I love you because I chose you. And you know that I chose you because I chose Jacob your ancestor to be my people, instead of Esau.

Meaning that his love for his people, and his continual work among them is not dependent upon their faithfulness, but it is dependent upon his choosing to be their God and him choosing to make them his people.

And because of the sovereign love that God has for his people, he lets them know that he hasn't left them, and that he is going to do a work among them for their everlasting good as his people.

Look with me at Malachi 3:1-4:

[1] "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; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. [2] But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. [3] He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. [4] Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Right in the midst of their fear, frustration, and faithlessness God says: *"Look! I will send my messenger, and he will prepare the way for me"*.

Now, on the one hand God is calling them to heed the words of Malachi whose name means "my messenger." But more than that he is calling them to look to a future messenger which most agree is **"John the Baptist."**

And once he comes then the Lord will suddenly come into his temple. The temple which is currently empty and lifeless will once again have life as the prophecy of Haggai, which points to the future glory of the temple, is fulfilled just as God said it would be.

But the temple that God is talking about isn't a building but is the temple of his people. And the Lord that comes is none other than the person of Jesus Christ.

The God man, who took on flesh, lived the perfect life we couldn't, was and is the only faithful high priest, and willingly died on the cross to bear our sin and shame so that we could be sons and daughters of the living God.

He is the one whom the prophet is pointing to just as all of scripture points to him.

But Jesus coming isn't just a kumbaya moment where everything is good, and everyone is saved. As I said, for those who are faithless and not genuine believers, judgement is real, and it is coming.

And even though God loves us as his chosen children it doesn't mean that life is always going to be easy.

But according to Malachi, those whom he loves he will refine and purify like gold and silver.

Meaning, that he is going to turn up the heat in our life to root out the impurities of sin, selfishness, faithlessness, pride, anger, lust.

And he will do this, by the power of his Spirit, so that we will become faithful children that please our Triune God.

Right now, your marriage might be hard. Seeking God and struggling to fight the good fight of faith might be hard. Living for God in the midst of whatever your facing might be hard.

But I want to say this with as much honesty and self-application that I can, **because I need this just as much as you do.**

“The Christian life is supposed to be hard. Not joyless, night lifeless, not meaningless, in fact, it is wholly meaningful, but hard.”

Look with me at the following verses:

Hebrews 12:6

*[6] For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

God lovingly disciplines his people.

John 16:33

*[33] I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. **In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”***

Hard things will happen, but Jesus has overcome them.

James 1:12

*[12] **Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.***

God is testing us, refining us, and purifying us through the hard of this life so that we will become his faithful children, made in the image of Christ, and will receive the eternal crown of glory which God has promised to us.

So we must be people who live in light of this promise. Knowing that God loves us, that he sent Christ to the cross on our behalf, and that he is working for our good. Even as we walk through a life filled with trials, to prepare us for that day when we will see him face to face in glory, and receive everlasting life.

So then if that is the great hope and promise, then how must we respond as his people?

4. Call: Fear the Lord and follow his commands

Malachi 4:1-2

[1] “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.

Malachi reminds us once again, yes, judgment is coming. All evil, arrogance, sin, and half-hearted worship will be dealt with.

But for those, whom God loves, whom he chose, for whom Christ died, and who are refined by God in the furnace of life, the call is to fear him. To stand in awe of him and live a life of reverence and full-hearted worship and obedience.

Knowing that the reward that awaits us is the healing and freedom from sin and the crown of everlasting life.

And my question to each one of us this morning is whose will we be and who will we serve?

Will you be like Rahab who despite all the impending hardship of the fall of Jericho chose to fear and follow the Lord? Or will you live a disillusioned and disgruntled life of half-hearted faithfulness like those in Judah, not realizing that what he has in store for you, if you fear and follow him, is eternal glory?

As C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Weight of Glory*:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

Don't be half-hearted. Come to Christ, turn away from your sin, fear him, and follow his ways, knowing that, yes, this life is hard and trials will come. But all of it is entirely meaningful as God is preparing for us his own eternal holiday at the sea.

Or as the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18:

[17] For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

So again, Fear the Lord, follow his commands, and receive eternal glory knowing that today is passing, but eternity is forever. **Let's Pray.**