

The Answer to Despair
Malachi 3:13-4:6

“What good does it really do to serve God?” That’s what Malachi’s readers were asking, and maybe you’ve wondered the same thing too. After all, a quick glance at the headlines gives everyone plenty of reason for discouragement, doesn’t it?

Just look around the world. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine grinds on, not only causing untold harm to the Ukrainians, but increasing the prices of food and fuel all over the world. The people of Iran are protesting against their tyrannical regime, which has begun to execute some of the rioters. And now North Korea is showing off its missile technology, threatening even the continental United States.

On the national level, the church has been pushed to the margins of the culture. Hollywood continues to pump sewage into our minds and into the minds of our children. Christ and His teachings are excluded from public schools - is it any wonder that children are shooting each other in the halls? Abortion rights have been written into the constitutions of states like California and Vermont, and even Michigan, where so many of our Dutch Reformed friends live, has followed suit. No matter how hard we Christians preach or teach, nothing seems to change.

And in spite of the fact that this congregation has been around since 1807, Port Gibson still has plenty of problems. Racial tensions bubble just beneath the surface. Drugs are available on our street corners. Gambling robs the poorest of their money, offering them false hope only to snatch it away from them again. The poor quality of our public schools makes it hard for young families to live here. And everyone knows people who drink too much, even though we never talk about it - at least not in front of them.

And then there are all those personal problems, even for us Christians. Maybe your kids are growing up and doing alarming things. Maybe your wife won't stop nagging or your husband won't listen to you. Maybe your health, or the health of someone you love is failing. And how many of us seem to confess the same sins over and over, never seeming to gain any spiritual ground? Yes, it’s easy to be lonely and scared. It’s easy even for us Christians to fall into despair.

Yes, we understand the situation of Malachi's readers all too well. They wondered, "What is the good of living the godly life? What have we gained from keeping God's law? What have we gained from mourning our sins? Life seems to go on in the same way, no matter how many sermons we hear or prayers we pray or dollars we give. What's the use of trying?"

But however easy such feelings may be to understand, they are nevertheless sinful. In fact, just as Malachi condemned God's people for bringing insufficient offerings, and for being unjust to the poor and for dealing treacherously with their wives, he insists that despair is actually a form of arrogance against God.

And that’s because, at its root, despair always stems both from a lack of faith in God and from an excess of confidence in our own abilities. For the reason we fall into despair is because we believe that if we can’t solve our problems, no one can. Despair thus forgets that nothing is impossible for God.

But what did our responsive reading this morning say? Yes, some challenges require more stamina than even young men possess. But God does not faint or grow weary. He is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Could any of our problems possibly be a match for Him?

And so we might expect Malachi to blast his despairing readers, and us, for our arrogant faithlessness. "You need to trust God to do what you cannot do for yourself. You need to have more faith. So stop worrying about all your problems and trust God more!"

I suppose we've all heard sermons like that, and it would be easy for me to preach another one. But Malachi doesn't do that, because he knows that such an approach doesn't really help. For in the face of real problems, in the face of real despair, we need more than just a command to trust God. We need a reason to trust Him.

God knows this. And this is the reason that this whole passage deals, not with our problems, but with the Problem Solver. This passage gives us a reason to trust God in the midst of our difficulties because it reminds us of Who God is. Simply put, God Himself is the reason we have hope, because God Himself is the answer to despair.

So, why should we trust in God? Because we have a God who listens. Notice that verse 16 is repetitive - God doesn't just hearken, He hears.

Now, we all know what it's like to talk with folks who aren't listening, don't we? You come into the room and speak to them, but they refuse to turn the TV off or put down their phone. You speak plainly enough, but you can only elicit the odd grunt here and there, or perhaps a "hmm." It is very clear that they are paying no attention to you.

But verse 16 assures us that, no matter what our problems may be, God is listening to us when we pray. For whenever we enter God's presence in the Sweet Hour of Prayer, whenever we cast on Him our every care, God is listening - really listening. It doesn't matter that He already knows everything we are going to say. He listens to us with rapt attention.

But why? Well, why do you listen to your kids or grandkids prattle on, even when they aren't old enough to make sense? When they turn into teenagers, why do you want to spend time with them, even when they go on and on about pop culture references you can't begin to understand? Christian, God listens to you for the same reason. God listens to you, God remembers your problems because He loves you.

In fact, as Malachi tells us, those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name belong to Him, as His own possession. Verse 16 even says that He has our names written down in a book of remembrance that stays in His presence. It is as if the God of the universe has your pictures on his phone or on His refrigerator, just waiting to show them off.

Christian, you are somebody. You belong to God. You are His special treasure. That's the reason you shouldn't ever fall into despair. That's the reason you should trust Him, no matter what your current situation may seem to be. As God told us at the very beginning of the book of Malachi, "I have loved you."

But Malachi gives us yet another reason why we should not despair, another reason why we should trust God. For the good news is that our problems will not last forever. Yes, our loving Creator may seem distant now. But He is coming. He is coming to see us.

Isn't that great news? After all, we know how wonderful it is to hear that loved ones who live far away are coming for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Yes, we might have to wait until the appointed time. And we might even dread all the preparations that have to be made. After all, whenever company is coming, even if it's family, there's lots of cooking and cleaning to do.

Just so, we may have awhile to wait until Jesus comes again. But the good news is that, when He comes, He is the One Who is going to clean house. For He is coming to gather up His jewels, taking His precious treasure, His Bride, His Church to Himself. Moreover, as Malachi assures us, He is also coming to punish the arrogant and the wicked, to bring judgment upon all who reject and resist His righteous rule.

So, yes, today we may wonder why the wicked prosper and seem to go unpunished. We may even be tempted to despair at the increasing amount of sin in the world around us. But the day of the Lord is coming, burning like an oven, when all the proud and all those who do wickedly will be burned up. Yes, Jesus is coming to cleanse His creation, not this time with water, but with fire.

Of course, His coming will not be good news for those who hate Him and who live for themselves. But for those of us who love and trust Jesus, His coming will be more wonderful than every Thanksgiving feast, every Christmas morning and every birthday party you have ever had all rolled into one.

For not only is He coming to see us. He is coming to restore the creation to the way it was before the Fall. He is coming to lift up every valley and bring down every mountain and hill. He is coming make all things new.

This truth is so staggeringly amazing that Malachi has to use poetic language to express it. "The Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in his wings." Just as the dim light of dawn gives way to the brilliance of day as the rising sun floods the earth with its wings, its rays, the perfect light of Jesus will drive out the darkness, filling the earth with His truth and justice. On that great day, there will be no place left for sin to hide.

Moreover, Malachi assures us that just as the wings of the sun spread its light to every corner of the earth, Jesus' very presence will bring healing to all the earth, making all things righteous, restoring all things to the way that God always wanted them to be. On that day, sin will no longer be able to torment us and test us. On that day, we will have no more room for despair, for we won't have to wonder whether God loves us or whether God is listening.

For God Himself will be with us. And as verse 2 says, we will rejoice in His presence in the way that bull calves run and leap, rejoicing in their strength. And instead of leaving us to forage and find food for ourselves, God Himself will feed us. What a wonderful, everlasting day that will be.

But the most wonderful truth of this passage is that we don't have to wait to enjoy so many of the blessings of the Lord's visit. For in verse 5 Malachi promises that Elijah would return to prepare the hearts of the people before the day of the Lord would come. And Jesus told us that the Elijah who prepared the way before Him was John the Baptist.

So because Elijah has already come, and because Jesus has already come, so much of what Malachi told us has already come true. The Sun of Righteousness has already risen, for Christ has already come to fulfill all of the law for us. Because the glory of the Lord has already

been revealed in Jesus, His healing rays already penetrate every corner of the Church. Christ already feeds us like stall-fed calves with the Bread of Heaven, His very self. All who trust in Him are already part of God's precious treasure – for the Lord has already given the lifeblood of His Son for us.

Now, the unbelieving world scoffs at all of this. They don't yet recognize the authority of Christ or believe in His power. But no matter what anyone else may say or do, He reigns. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. And that means that the wicked have no more power over us, at least not where it matters. In fact, all who continue in rebellion against Him, all who stand in opposition to His righteous rule are nothing more than ashes under our feet.

And so, as Malachi concludes in verse 4, if we would prepare ourselves for His coming, we must heed the words of John the Baptist, turning away from our sin and turning toward God and one another. But because Christ has already come, we have the power to do just that. For the Sun of Righteousness has arisen with healing in its wings. That means we have power over all those besetting sins, over all those worries, and even over the discouragement that comes so easily to us these days.

So does it really make sense to go on in despair? For no matter how desperate or even impossible our situation may seem to be, the truth is that our God listens to us and loves us. In Christ, God has come to us, and He is coming again, to reign forever and ever even over the most impossible problems we may face. He is the ultimate answer to despair. And He is worthy of all our adoration and praise.