

## Questioning God's Word

### A Study of Malachi 3:13-4:6

Characteristic of Completeness: Bible Study

Big Idea: Obedience in relationship with God is worth it, but religiosity isn't.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 56:8; Song of Solomon 6:3; Isaiah 49:15-16; Matthew 6:33; 10:29-31; Mark 12:28-30; John 14:21; 1 Corinthians 15:58

Introduction:

- A. Ever feel like following God is just not worth it? Ever feel like obeying God's Word isn't really going to pay off?

Let me approach from a different angle. Do you always follow God? Do you always obey His Word? I know I always do. Except in the areas of truthfulness and hypocrisy. ☺ Of course, no one follows God and obeys Him all the time.

Okay then, why don't we? I think we're rational people. We have reasons for doing the things we do. As I look at myself, when I don't follow or obey God, it's almost always because I don't think it'll be worth it. I have a crisis of faith, and in that moment, I don't feel like obeying God is really going to pay off. I know from the Bible that God says in effect, "Follow Me and I'll take care of you because I love you." But to be honest, sometimes I question His word and I just don't believe Him. What other explanation is there for my wandering?

- B. Some of the ancient Israelites had the same problem we do. It's recorded for us in Malachi 3:13-4:6. There was an acute case that helps us understand ► the pathology and prescription for thinking that following God is not worth it. First, we're going to consider the pathology, the nature and source of the problem. Then, we'll consider the prescription, ► including what to think and what to do about it.
- I. In Malachi 3:13-15, we are provided with insight into ► the pathology of the problem.

- A. In ► Malachi 3:13, it says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:13 "Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. . . ."

Here, God is addressing the Israelites through the prophet Malachi. God's charge is that the Israelites have been saying ► "hard" things against Him. The Hebrew word

for “hard” indicates insolent, disrespectful words were spoken against God<sup>1</sup>—words that even reflect a hardened perversity.<sup>2</sup>

- B. As we have seen previously in our study through the book of Malachi, the Israelites respond to the charge with feigned ignorance. Verse ► 13 says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:13 “. . . But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’”

- C. Then, God gets specific in ► Verse 14:

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:14 “You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. . . .’”  
The idea is that it is empty or worthless to serve God.<sup>3</sup>

- D. This is followed by ► a rhetorical question from the Israelites:

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:14 “‘What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts?’”

1. The clear implication is that the Israelites find no profit, no advantage, no payoff in keeping God’s ► charge or doing what He says. The idea of keeping a charge involves the fulfillment of an obligation.<sup>4</sup>
2. Neither do they find profit in ► “walking as in mourning.” This phrase is rather cryptic and deserves some explanation.

You may recall from our previous studies that the historical context has the Israelites returned from Babylonian exile. And they are experiencing hardship primarily because they aren’t keeping the Mosaic Law. Their hearts have wandered from God, their behavior shows it, and God is disciplining them.

The “walking as in mourning” probably refers to the ancient custom of going about with blackened or dirty faces and wearing dark clothing as an outward symbol of piety in being sorry for their sin.<sup>5</sup> The implication is that, in the midst of their hardship, the Israelites tried this and their circumstances did not improve. It didn’t work. And the reason it didn’t work is that it was

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. “חזק,” (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1994-2000), hereinafter referred to as HALOT.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v., “חזק,” (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), hereinafter referred to as BDB.

<sup>3</sup> Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “שוא,” (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), hereinafter referred to as TWOT.

<sup>4</sup> HALOT, s.v. “בִּשְׂמֵרָתִי.”

<sup>5</sup> Carl F. Keil, *Malachi, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 10, second of two volumes in one, translated by James Martin, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1975), 465.

merely an outward show; their hearts were not truly repentant.<sup>6</sup> They thought that God would be appeased by an outward show of dark faces and dark clothes. But God saw right through it to their dark hearts.

A modern corollary would be saying I'm sorry, when in fact, the only thing I'm really sorry about is getting caught and suffering the consequences; my heart hasn't changed a bit.

- E. The voice of the Israelites continues in ► Verse 15, where they say:

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:15 “And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”

The idea is that the Israelites think the arrogant and the evildoers are better off than those who follow God. The word ► “arrogant” describes those who are haughty, insolent scorners,<sup>7</sup> those who go their own way and do not serve God. They put God to the test, and God lets them off the hook. So it seems to some of the Israelites. As part of the Mosaic Covenant, God had promised: Obey Me and I will bless you. The Israelites are now thinking God had reneged.

- F. At this point, ► it is reasonable to wonder how the Israelites came around to this way of thinking. Had they wholeheartedly followed and obeyed God and truly found it to be futile? Did God really fail to hold up His end of the bargain with them?

I have already hinted in my explanation of their show of pious mourning that these people have no case against God. And our studies through Malachi confirm it. They seem to be engaged in a half-hearted religiosity. They offer sacrifices to God, but they are tainted. They go to worship services, but then abuse their wives. They cry for justice, but it really means “just us.” They offer contributions to God, but not their best.

They seem to be treating God like a cosmic vending machine. They put in their religious tokens and expect good times to roll out. Well, the good times didn't roll out. So now the Israelites are kicking the machine, grumbling among themselves, “Don't bother putting your religious tokens into this thing; it doesn't work.”

In reality, what didn't work was their superficial religiosity. Religiosity didn't work then, and it doesn't work now. God is not impressed or appeased with our religious show. It seems that the Israelites had forgotten the most important command of the Mosaic Law. Over in the New Testament, a scholar in Judaism asks Jesus, as recorded in ► Mark 12:28:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi, The Anchor Bible*, eds. William F. Albright and David N. Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 358.

<sup>7</sup> BDB, s.v. “אָרְוֹגָה.”

<sup>ESV</sup> Mark 12:28 . . . “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

Jesus responds by quoting, ► Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

<sup>ESV</sup> Mark 12:30 “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

The irony is the half-hearted Israelites were half right. When following God is viewed as nothing more than a heartless, outward show, then it is indeed worthless. But following God is much more.

II. And that brings us now ► to God’s answer or prescription for the Israelites’ wrong way of thinking.

A. First, God gives them some things ► to think about, two big things in particular.

1. The very first thing God does through Malachi is provide a corrective for the thinking that following God is about religiosity. Following God is about a relationship, not religiosity. This is shown through the example of some Israelites who were not running with the disrespectful, insolent group—some who were not saying hard things against God. A righteous remnant remained.

a. Verse ► 16 says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. 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.

I want you to notice some things in this verse that point to a relational exchange between these people and God. God is not just a deity to be placated or a deity to be used like a Day-Timer<sup>®</sup> to make your life go smoother. He is a Person—a Person who wants a relationship. And the joy of the relationship is a primary reason why following God is worth it.

(1) The term, ► “Lord,” is a translation of the Hebrew name, *Yahweh*. Of all the terms for God in the Bible, this one is unique because it is the personal name of God given for His people to use.<sup>8</sup> His name appears to be built off the Hebrew verb, “to be.”<sup>9</sup> The basic meaning of the name is “one who

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 3:13-15.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald B. Allen, quoted by W. Robert Cook, *Theology Proper: Student’s Course Workbook*, (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1983), 15.

is for His people.”<sup>10</sup> And so, even God’s name speaks of His desire to have a relationship with His people. (By the way, many English translations let us know when the name *Yahweh* is being used by translating it with all capitals, “LORD.”)

(2) And there’s more evidence of relationship. These Israelites ► “feared the LORD.” That is they had a reverential awe toward God.<sup>11</sup> They had respect in response to God revealing something about Himself through His acts and words. And it is interesting that the Hebrew term for fear is so closely associated with righteous behavior and true worship that, in some cases, it is synonymous.<sup>12</sup> Reverential awe spills over and expresses itself in righteous behavior and worship.

(3) These people also ► “esteemed his name.”

(a) In the Bible, a person’s name normally stands for the sum total of that which comes to mind about the person: his character, his works, his position, his authority, his attributes, his mission.<sup>13</sup> In a word, a person’s name is his reputation.

Today, when we say, “That boy is going to make a name for himself” we’re using the term, “name” in much the same way. It’s what a person stands for, or what he is known for, or what he has accomplished, or that which defines him.

(b) To esteem means to hold in high regard or to highly value someone.<sup>14</sup> To esteem God’s name, then, is to highly value Him as a Person for who He is.

This is in stark relational contrast to the wayward Israelites who seem to value their heavenly Father only for His ability to fund the lifestyle to which they would like to become accustomed.

(4) And notice what the Lord does in relationship with His people. He ► pays attention to them; He hears them. Note

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> TWOT, s.v. “יָרָא.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “name.”

<sup>14</sup> HALOT and BDB, s.v. “הָשִׁיב.”

that God is attentive not just when His people call out to Him directly, but He is also attentive to every aspect of their lives, even to their conversations with one another. In this verse, it appears that God was attentive even when they ► “spoke with one another.” This is not a distant deity.

Other Scriptures confirms this. For example, ► Psalm 56:8 portrays God as compassionately attentive to every form of personal suffering. It says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Psalm 56:8 You have kept count of my tossings;  
put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your  
book?

Yes, they are! And Jesus says in ► Matthew 10:29-31:

<sup>ESV</sup> Matthew 10:29 Are not two sparrows sold for a  
penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground  
apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of  
your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not,  
therefore; you are of more value than many  
sparrows.

So, in God we have a Person who is interested in and knows everything about us. And yet, He still loves us and wants to have a relationship.

- (5) And God remembers every good deed, every sacrifice, every effort made to follow Him and represent Him well. He has a ► book of remembrance written before Him, and I take it that this will be the basis for commendation and reward when He returns.

In ► Isaiah 49:15, God reminds us:

<sup>ESV</sup> Isaiah 49:15 “Can a woman forget her nursing  
child, that she should have no compassion on the  
son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will  
not forget you. <sup>16</sup> Behold, I have engraved you on the  
palms of my hands . . .”

In ► 1 Corinthians 15:58, the Apostle Paul also reminds us:

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved  
brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always

abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

God will remember.

- b. In ► Verse 17 of our text, God speaks directly, continuing the relational theme:

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:17 “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.”

- (1) Here, the Lord claims His people as His own. He describes them as ► “mine.” The ownership is relational. It’s not like owning a piece of furniture. It’s the kind of owning between a wife and husband expressed in ► Song of Solomon 6:3:

<sup>ESV</sup> Song of Solomon 6:3 I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine . . .

- (2) And God’s people ► are “treasured” by Him. They are highly valued.<sup>15</sup> So we have esteem and respect and value going both ways. It’s a relationship.
- (3) And God ► “spares” His people. The English word, “spare” can sound rather cold and detached. But, the Hebrew word is loaded with emotion. It could be translated “have compassion on” or “have mercy on.”<sup>16</sup> Another form of the same word describes an object of deep love.<sup>17</sup>

And it’s not like a soldier who spares his enemy; it’s like a Father who spares ► His own “son.”

- c. So, in sum, God’s first response to the Israelites who question His word and the value of following Him is to highlight what they’re missing. They’re missing out on a living, breathing, satisfying relationship with God. Following God is worth it because of the relationship with Him it affords. And obedience is vital to that relationship.

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<sup>15</sup> BDB, s.v. “סָנְאָה.”

<sup>16</sup> TWOT, s.v. “חָמַל.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

That ► brings us to the big idea of my message. Here ► it is: Obedience in relationship with God is worth it; religiosity isn't. Religiosity stripped of a relationship with God is a vain, worthless, waste of time. Going through the religious motions, focusing only on the rules and not the relationship is less than worthless; it's disrespectful. And it produces either rebellion on the one hand, or legalism on the other. Obedience *in relationship* with God is worth it; religiosity isn't.

2. But God has not finished answering the confused and complaining Israelites. He provides something else to think about, another motivation for following Him. Not only should they follow for the relationship it affords, they should also follow because there will be a sobering day of reckoning.

In the Bible, the day of the Lord often refers to a future day when He will return to triumph over evil and judge all who oppose Him. It will be a day of rejoicing and blessing for the righteous; it will be a day of darkness for the wicked.<sup>18</sup>

He explains this beginning in ► Verse 18:

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 3:18 “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. ► 4:1 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. 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.”

On judgment day, it pays to be serving on God's side.

- a. Notice the benefits.
  - (1) In Verse 2, there ► will be healing, the experience complete wellbeing and wholeness.
  - (2) Later in Verse 2, there ► will be freedom from that which oppresses us—a freedom like the leaping of calves from the stall.

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<sup>18</sup> *Nelson Study Bible*, “Word Focus: Day,” 1563.

(3) And in Verse 3, there ► will be victory over evil and the wicked.

- b. It's as if God is drawing up a ledger. The left column is headed, "Reject Me." The right column is headed, "Follow Me." Then He lists the ultimate consequences of each decision. Reject Me and burn. Or follow Me and experience healing, freedom, and victory.

It's as if God is saying to the Israelites: "Still think it's not worth it to follow Me?"

- c. Perhaps some Israelites were thinking, "How do we know these things are really going to happen in the future?" God seems to address this question, at least in part, in ► Malachi 4:5-6, where He says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 4:5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

The Israelites knew about a guy named Elijah, the great prophet who had come some four hundred years earlier. God says He's going to send an Elijah again in the future, some time before the great day of reckoning when the Messiah comes. The coming of Elijah will be confirmation.

Over four hundred years later, we know from Matthew 17, beginning in Verse 10, the Jews remembered that Elijah must come before the Messiah, and Jesus explains that John the Baptist was the forerunner who came in the spirit and power of Elijah.<sup>19</sup>

- d. By the way, don't read into our text the idea that you have to do good works in order to earn your way to heaven. It's not there. Elsewhere in the Bible it is crystal clear we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The basic point of these verses is simply this: If you do not follow God, there will be negative consequences; if you do follow God, there will be positive consequences, both in this life and the life to come.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Luke 1:13-17.

3. In ► sum, God has given the Israelites and us two things to think about. First, it's worth it to follow God because of the relationship with Him it affords. Second, it's worth it because of the judgment that's coming.

B. Therefore, in light of the relational and judgment-day benefits of following the Lord, He now gives ► something to do. God issues this command in ► Malachi 4:4:

<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 4:4 “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”

The command to ► “remember” is more than just a mental process of being reminded of something. Action is also implied.<sup>20</sup> God is calling His people to remember and obey His commands. That's an integral part of following Him.

At this point, you might be wondering, “Bob, I think I remember you saying that the ‘statutes and rules’ of the Mosaic Law no longer apply; they have been superseded by Christ. That's why we don't do the animal sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament. I think I get that. So how does this apply to us?”

Good question.

1. Whenever there is a command or idea or principle given in the Old Testament, it is wise to look for a corroborating principle in the New Testament. Does the New Testament call us to follow the Mosaic Law specifically? No. More generally, does the New Testament call us to obey God? Yes. And obedience is still vital in our relationship with God. And this still fits our big idea: Obedience in relationship with God is worth it, but religiosity isn't.

Over in the New Testament, in ► John 14:21, Jesus says,

<sup>ESV</sup> John 14:21 “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

Notice several things about what Jesus is saying.

(a) First, Jesus ► gives commands. The New Testament is full of them. They come directly from Jesus and indirectly through some of His disciples. So it's not like God was into rules in the Old Testament and now there are no rules.

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<sup>20</sup> TWOT, s.v. “זָכַר.”

In fact, sometimes Jesus takes an Old Testament moral principle and actually raises the bar. Addressing a crowd in Matthew 5:27, He says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Matthew 5:27 ¶ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’”

To which the people probably responded, “Yup. One of the Ten Commandments. We’re trackin’.” Then Jesus says,

<sup>ESV</sup> Matthew 5:28 “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

To which the men probably responded, “Say what?”

- (b) The second thing I want to point out in John 14:21 is ► loving and obeying are inseparable. The one who loves the Lord is the one who obeys Him. Obedience in relationship with God is vital.
  - (c) Third, notice the ► Lord manifests Himself to those who obey. God reveals Himself more and more to those who keep His commands. Want to experience more and more of God? Follow Him. Do what He says.
  - (d) Fourth, ► notice the one who “keeps” His commandments first “has” them. That’s just another way of saying you can’t obey a command you’ve never heard or read. You can’t apply what you don’t know.
2. Which leads us to our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ. It’s ► Bible Study. I know Bible study may not sound all that relational, and many people think of Bible study as merely the acquisition of knowledge. But that’s not what I’m talking about. Bible study involves reading the Bible like a love letter from God, looking for things to apply to your life in relationship with God.

Take the relationship out of Bible study and it can become religiosity—a religiosity that tends to produce disenchanted Israelites or self-righteous Pharisees.

That’s why we emphasize application around here. That’s why in Life Groups we ask things like, “What does God seem to be doing in your life as you try to apply what He says?”

3. Studying the Bible in pursuit of a relationship is a balance that requires constant attention.

For predominately left-brained, analytical, logical people like me, there is a tendency to drift into a purely intellectual mode. We can easily find ourselves gathering lots of biblical information and putting it into our theological system, but not consistently applying it, not really listening to what God has to say to us personally through His Word. In relational terms, it's a little like being more interested in the literary quality of love letters than in the Person who sent them.

For predominately right-brained folks, there is a tendency to drift away from studying altogether, relying more on prayer and feelings and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They miss out on application too because the written word is a primary way God has chosen to communicate. In relational terms, it's a little like not bothering to read love letters.

Neither extreme, left or right, is healthy. Both limit the relationship. And it's the relationship God is after. Maybe that's why the Bible says we are to love God with all of our mind, not just the left or the right.

4. How would you characterize your relationship with God right now? Anything need to change? Are you pursuing a relationship through Bible study, knowing that obedience in relationship with God is worth it?

Let me share with you how this can work. A woman in our Life Group started coming to Moon Valley last summer. She happens to be an Associate Professor of Philosophy at ASU. She has since come to believe in Jesus for eternal life.

She's been studying the Bible, which is very new to her, and trying to apply it to her life. She emailed me just last week to tell me how it's going. She gave me permission to share some of her email with you. As I read it, I want you to pay particular attention to the theme of Bible study in relationship with God, and the life change that can bring. She ► says,

*. . . people keep telling me that I've changed. Thank God!!!!  
I don't miss my other self. . . .*

*► I don't know quite how to explain this, but instead of the petulant little attitude I had before, I'm kinda happy, happy*

*to read the Bible, happy to listen to you and read your sermon and study with Leslie [she's another woman in our Life Group], ► happy to apply what I'm learning to my head talk that used to lead me down, and happy that I'm seeing some of this (well a lot actually) in my life. ► I'm also startled or surprised once in awhile at things that are revealed, but not frightened, or angry, or anything like that. ► I'm full of hope, I'm feeling quite free, free from crappy bondage that had me before, free from fear of failure and what others think and what others might do because I feel like God has my back and is enjoying our relationship. ► I feel like I never really have before, like I have a healthy parent who lays it all out that it's mine to decide, but every right decision brings us closer and in more joy. . . .*

*► It also seems that a new conscience has appeared, one that chides me and brings on a bit of guilt over selfish or not-right actions. ► It pesters me to stop it (such as talking about someone, or telling different people different things). It's visceral but not negative or paralyzing. It is a good parent.*

*Wow. . . .*

*► What does it mean that I enjoy reading and studying this and asking you questions better than ANYTHING else I read and study?*

I think it means she has herself a relationship. Obedience in relationship with God is worth it, religiosity isn't.