

Malachi Chapter Three (vv.13-18)

Dispute Six: Despising God's Service [3.13-4.6]

False Reasoning of the People [3.13-15]

v.13: Sadly, the mass of the people had become spiritually blind. They were satisfied with a correct *position*, by the outward performance of religious observances, but their *hearts* were far from God. Like the Pharisees they were particular about certain ritualistic observances but had neglected the weightier moral matters of the Law (Matthew 23.23). Their words had been “stout” (strong) against Jehovah in the form of *harsh* or *sharp* criticism. Their response, “How have we criticised you?” (NET) is written in such a way (in Hebrew) as to suggest they were speaking these words to each other, complaining among themselves *against* Jehovah, rather than directing their complaint *to* Jehovah. **v.14:** Their complaints were twofold. First, there was no apparent **profit** (reward) for those who *did* serve God. Second, there was no apparent **punishment** for those who did *not* serve God (v.15). It was therefore better to give up service for the LORD and live to please self. “It is vain (futile) to serve God” because there was no apparent “profit” in keeping the ‘requirements’ (general religious duties) of the covenant. Personal acts of obedience and righteousness were not worth the effort! The word “profit” was a technical term used for a weaver cutting a completed piece of woven material (cloth) free from the loom. These people therefore expected their *cut* or *percentage* of material blessing (prosperity) for divine service. What is our motive for serving the Lord? Is it love *for*, and devotion *to*, Christ or for selfish reasons of popularity, position, financial gain, or ego? In addition, they had “walked mournfully”, literally ‘in blackness’, in the sense of clothing themselves with *dark sackcloth* or even *blackened* their faces to convey apparent grief and sorrow for the sin and plight of their nation. This was *pretend* grief – outward emotion and religious exercise with no corresponding repentance. However, as the dialogue unfolds it becomes clear that there **is** great *profit* in serving the LORD (3.16-17; 4.2-3) and severe *punishment* for those who do not (4.1).

v.15: Given Jehovah’s apparent lack of material blessing for their religious behaviour, the people had made some appalling conclusions. They deemed the “proud” (arrogant) – those rebellious pagans who considered themselves above God’s requirements – to be the “happy” or blessed (favoured) ones. Those who “work wickedness” or ‘practice evil’ were “set up” or ‘built up’ (established) in material prosperity. Even those who “tempted” (to test) or provoked God’s patience by persevering in every kind of sin were “delivered” – they escaped His punishment. John Riddle writes, “*Their complaint reminds us that **obedience** to the word of God is not necessarily accompanied by immediate and spectacular blessing. We should obey God’s word whether or not He is pleased to show His approval at once. We obey because it is God’s word.*” And, likewise, **disobedience** is not necessarily accompanied by immediate and spectacular judgment!

Faithful Remnant and Their Blessing [3.16-17]

v.16: These beautiful and well-known verses describe a *remnant* within a remnant. Here was a small company of people who disassociated themselves with the corruption around to gather in happy fellowship to esteem the name of the LORD. In 400 years, a similar remnant would be found *expecting* and ready to *receive* the Messiah. Anna “spake of Him” and Simeon rejoiced in the Lord’s salvation (Luke 2.30, 38). A similar group is found in Philadelphia, that, despite having only “a little strength” had kept the word of the Lord and not denied His name (Revelation 3.8). However dark the day, God will always maintain a witness to Himself. The distinguishing features of this remnant are **moral**. Hamilton Smith notes, “*It is not their outward position, however correct, or their outward service, however zealous, which gains the Lord’s approval. It is their moral condition which He approves, and which makes them precious in His sight.*” When outward testimony is ruined, the Lord looks, above all else for a moral condition suited to Himself. Again, this remnant is no doubt representative of another that will form the nucleus of restored Israel in a future day (4.2).

- **Reverence.** “Then” could be translated ‘at that time’. The light shines *brightest* in the *darkest* of nights. These individuals were characterised by “fear” of the LORD – a reverential awe which shrinks from *dishonouring* or *displeasing* Him. They obeyed the LORD, not men, giving Him supreme place in their lives.
- **Relationship.** “Spake often one to another”. Those who are godly will seek out those who are likeminded that they might converse together about spiritual things. Whilst the low moral conditions of society *drove* them together; their common love of the Lord *drew* them together in happy fellowship for spiritual help and encouragement. Thus, we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together! They did not speak *about* one another or in a critical spirit about the LORD (v.13; Galatians 5.15). The word “often” is not in the original text and would be suggestive of gaps in their communication (fellowship). Rather, they “spoke to one another” conveys their *ongoing* attitude of spiritual conversation. This was no ‘social chit-chat’ but communion about the name of the LORD. Man’s tongue will always reveal his heart and thoughts (Luke 6.45; John 10.41; 12.41).

- **Remembrance.** The LORD “hearkened” and “heard” means to ‘prick the ears’ or ‘bend down and listen intently’, almost as if He would not miss a single syllable of their conversation. Society at large was not interested in this little remnant, but they were of great interest (and value) to the LORD! He was so delighted with their behaviour (and words) that a record was made before Him. The “book of remembrance” is not the “book of life” (cf. Revelation 20.12, 15), but more like a royal diary where was recorded events of special significance, and the names of those who rendered special service to the king or kingdom (1 Kings 4.3; Esther 6.1-2). The book is a figurative way of showing that God will not forget, or act to deliver and reward, these people (4.2). Of course, God does not need a written scroll to remember, but it symbolises the permanence of the Lord’s intention. The scroll was not written ‘before the world’ – it would record quite different *names* for quite different *reasons* of wealth, intelligence, scientific advancement or fame and the like. “*These are not traits that will inscribe a man's name on the roll of this world's worthies*”. Rather, it was written “before Him”, with Jehovah’s approval and commendation.
- **Reflection.** They “thought upon” or ‘esteemed’ (valued) the name of the LORD – He was valued as their most prized possession. The name of Jehovah stands for the person Himself, referring especially to His nature and character. They sought, not to magnify their *own* names, but to maintain the honour of *His* name. This dedication to Him was reflected in their obedience and godly behaviour. Campbell Morgan says, “*It is that they set value upon the name of the Lord, esteemed it, made an inventory in it, accounted it as their property, wealth, riches. It was the chief thing; nothing else was worth consideration to these faithful people.*”
- **Reward [v.17].** “They shall be mine” is *emphatic* in the Hebrew – the godly remnant will be *gathered* and *manifested* as God’s own special treasure on the day of judgment (His appearing) – a day He is preparing to separate the righteous and the wicked (cf. v.18). Just as Mordecai’s honour was delayed until Ahasuerus read the royal records, so the full reward of the righteous is delayed until a future day that God has prepared (Esther 6.1-3). “*Not only did they experience the Lord's secret approval in a day of ruin, but they will be honoured with His public recognition in the day of glory*”. “My jewels” translates the Hebrew word *səgullâ*, found eight times in the OT, which describes a precious *personal* or *unique* possession. Israel is a ‘peculiar treasure’ (Exodus 19.5; Psalm 135.4) and a ‘special people’ (Deuteronomy 7.6) to the Lord. As ‘jewels’ they possess the properties of *reflecting* and *sparkling* in the light of the glory of God. Thus, He will “spare” the remnant, preserving them through the Great Tribulation and delivering them from judgment at the Second Advent. The word “spare” properly means to show *mercy* and *compassion* as a father would his “own son”. The remnant is compared to *beloved* children (cf. 1.2, 6) who “serve” (obey) their own parents.

v.18: “Then shall ye return, and discern” is better translated ‘ye shall again discern’. The people had complained that God no longer made any distinction between the *righteous* and the *wicked* (v.15), but the day of judgment will clearly reveal the difference between those that *serve* God (righteous) and those that *do not* (wicked). There had been many opportunities in the history of the nation and life of individuals to observe this principle of God’s moral government, but more plain and convincing proof would yet come. The accusation that God favours and blesses the wicked will again be proven to be false.