

Waiting

Malachi 3:13-4:6

Series: Joel and Malachi (Fall 2020)

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Topic: Walking Faithfully with a Faithful God

Worship: Waiting

Key Sentence: God's promises comfort those who are waiting righteously

Outline:

- I. Frustrated with God (Malachi 3:13-15)
- II. Waiting with godly fear (Malachi 3:16-18)
- III. Waiting in righteousness (Malachi 4:1-4)
- IV. Waiting with hope (Malachi 4:5-6)

Malachi 3:13-18 “Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ ¹⁴You 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? ¹⁵And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.’”

¹⁶Then 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. 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. ¹⁸Then 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.

Malachi 4:1-6 “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. ²But 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. ³And 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. ⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And 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.”

Waiting Malachi 3:13 – 4:6

How would you feel if somebody made you a promise, but you had to wait hundreds of years for them to fulfill it? Imagine a promise of rescue: “I know you’re in terrible trouble, but it’s not the right time to rescue you; be patient and hang on and in 400 years or so, rescue will come.” Or a promise of marriage: “I love you and I long to be with you. I’ll be back in two or three thousand years, and we’ll be married then.” You’d say “that’s absurd!” But the last promises of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, were promises that called God’s people to wait not days or weeks but centuries: 400 years of God’s silence until Christ came, and then who knows how long until he comes again? Yet God desires that such waiting be done with hope and righteousness.

So this passage has something to say to all who wait, either for Christ to come or for other things we long for. Ben Patterson wrote a good book a number of years ago called *Waiting* subtitled “finding hope when God seems silent.” That’s what Malachi’s readers needed and that’s what we need - hope. In his book Patterson applies Biblical principles to our lives and teaches what Malachi also teaches, that God’s promises comfort those who are waiting righteously.

Patterson begins this way: “I hate to wait. My image of hell is an eternity of standing in line. My teeth clench, my blood pressure rises, my field of vision narrows and my temper erupts. I’ve embarrassed my wife, my friends and myself at things I’ve said and done when I’ve had to wait. I’m forced to do it several times a week at supermarket checkout counters, in freeway traffic snarls, at the bank, and in fast food drive throughs. These daily waits try my nerves. But there is another, more acute kind of waiting: the waiting of a childless couple for a child; the waiting of a single person for marriage or whatever is next; the waiting of the chronically ill and their loved ones for health or death; the waiting of the emotionally scarred for peace; the waiting of unhappy marriages for relief or redemption; the waiting of young people to get on with life; the waiting of the lonely to belong. For Christians caught in waiting, the question is, “How long, O Lord?” It’s a biblical question. Even martyred saints, standing in the presence of God in heaven, ask it. And we don’t really want the answer in weeks or years. What we want is hope. We’re asking: “Can I trust you, God? Is there any meaning in all this? What are you doing, Lord?”

Patterson goes on to say that “To wait with grace requires two cardinal virtues: humility and hope.” In today’s passage we’ll see that we can do that because God’s promises comfort those who are waiting righteously.

The final section of Malachi begins with yet another complaint. Despite their own lack of faithfulness, some of God's people are blaming him for their problems. Malachi 3:13-15 *"Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' ¹⁴You 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? ¹⁵And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"*

The arrogant, skeptical members of Malachi's audience had hardened themselves against God's offer to put him to the test and receive his blessing. They say "The wicked have already put you to the test and they prosper. It doesn't pay to serve the Lord, or honor him by obedience. What difference can anyone point to that results from keeping God's ordinances? All service to God, they claim, is materially and spiritually useless. There is no profit in it. The word "profit" occurs thirty-nine times in the Old Testament as a technical term for the weaver's act of cutting a piece of cloth free from the loom. Thus in Malachi it has the connotation of men expecting their "cut" the finished product of their self-asserted faith. "What are we getting out of this?" they are asking.

The skeptics then charge that "mourning" itself, probably over sin in this context, yielded no profit either. The word "mourning" comes from the verb "to be dark." They had clothed themselves with dark clothing, as if to show grief and sorrow for sin or for the plight of the nation, but they saw no benefit in that either. Little wonder, for false piety is useless without a right heart attitude. So the skeptics look around and conclude that the proud and arrogant are blessed – the same blessing that we was promised last week to the righteous. The wicked, it seemed, could tempt this impotent God and go free; nothing bad ever happened. These accusations are still heard today. What good does it do to follow God, to be "all-in"? If the gospel is not a prosperity gospel that benefits me, then why bother with it, why not give in to the enormous peer pressure of our culture to abandon God's ways and God's standards?

That's how one group of people in Malachi's day responded. But in verse 16 we see another group, like a breath of fresh air. These people feared God and were waiting for him to act. To them God affirms his promises. Verses 16-18 *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. 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. ¹⁸Then 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.*

This is the believing community, the remnant God always preserves. They had an altogether different attitude. As they talked, their conversations focused on Him. We are told twice in verse 16 that they feared the Lord. In verse 5 we saw that the sinners in Israel didn't fear him. But these few remained in awe of him and respected his desires and feared his judgments. They were also distinguished by their mind-set: they "thought on his name." or "meditated on His name." These believers were "setting their value on, esteeming as their highest prize," the name of the Lord; his person, his qualities, his ethical and moral standards. If you asked any of these God fearers what they judged to be their wealth, their greatest asset, they would point to the name of God and all it stands for. Their focus was on God, so they honored and served him. Over and over and over and over in Scripture God upholds just this kind of God-centeredness. But do we? Do we even try to be this God-centered?

God, in turn, "listened and heard them." God is never so far away as to miss the smallest voice honoring him. These people made a solemn commitment to him and wrote their names in "a book of remembrance." Some say this was God putting their names in a book, but I don't think so. It's more like the signers of the declaration of independence pledging their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. These people pledged it all to God. God, in turn, makes precious promises to them. "They will be mine in the day when I make up my treasured possession." The last phrase means that they will be his jewels, his treasure. My wife Gail discovered this phrase years ago, and the wonderful truth that God treasured her changed her life. God treasures you. Do you know that? Do you believe it? The phrase before is an even more pervasive promise. "They will be mine," echoes God's big idea "you will be my people and I will be your God." God dwells with those who turn to him, who honor, serve and fear him. It's not that they're sinless. God says he will show compassion on them the way a father spares his son. He forgives those who turn to him.

When the day comes for God to judge and rescue the believing community will be cared for. God will spare the righteous believers, but he will punish the wicked. Then the distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be clear. The accusation these people made of God's injustice and his tolerance of the proud and arrogant will be proven wrong. The righteous, the ones who, by faith, fear, honor and serve him will enter into eternal life, but the arrogant, disbelieving and sinful will get what they want, eternal separation from God.

So we wait in awe, fear and respect for a God who loves and treasures us, who makes us his own, who offers us compassion. Whether you're waiting for something as ephemeral as the end of COVID or as eternal as the return of Christ, your calling is to hope in God's promises, and live righteously in the meantime.

The last chapter of the Old Testament assures us that a day is coming, a day of judgment and rescue. Malachi 4:1-4 *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. ²But 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. ³And 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. ⁴”Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

A day is coming for the wicked. A day is coming for the righteous. Same day, different outcome. The “day,” of course, is “the day of the Lord,” which we looked at in detail when we studied Joel. Let me remind you of a few of those Scriptures. Joel 2:1 “Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near.” Joel 2:30 “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” Remember the cosmic nature of that day - the sun, the moon and even the stars are affected. Yet it is not a day without hope. Joel 2:32 goes on to say “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”

The Day of the Lord begins his final reign on earth. Zechariah says “On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. . . Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. . . and the LORD will be king over all the earth.” It’s a day of culminating judgment, characterized by the fire of God’s wrath, long withheld in patience, finally bursting forth on the earth, and changing even the heavens. For the wicked, it will be as if they are the dried stalks of a failed harvest, consumed in a moment. That’s Malachi 4:1. The Day of the Lord is coming.

But that day will be very different for believers than for those who despise faith. Rather than dark fire, for them it will be a day of joyous light. Verse 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.” Aren’t those great images? The sun of righteousness rising, and us leaping like calves who feel the joy of spring freedom. It’s the same day, but the experience is totally different. In fact it seems to me that the same sun of righteousness that is dark fire to the unbeliever is gentle light to the believer.

As Kaiser says in his commentary “Meanwhile, the righteous God will come as “the Sun of Righteousness”. No doubt Malachi means to point to Christ, the one who would be the “Light of the world,” and “the Lord our Righteousness”. Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, called Jesus “the rising sun” who “will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness.”

Malachi further says that the one who comes will have healing in his wings. He will come to set right all that has been wrong with creation and with mankind ever since the fall, to heal this world of sin and sickness, sadness and death. When this new dawn came the the long winter of suffering for the righteous would end. Those who feared God's name would be as invigorated as calves released after a long winter boxed in a stall. For you and I who believe in Jesus his second coming will be joy and relief, an amplified version of what we feel when a baby is safely born, or a child returns home, or the marriage ceremony is complete. It will be the moment we’ve always waited for. The wicked, however, will be trampled under foot, just as Genesis 3:15 and Romans 16:20 promise. God will tread the winepress of His justice, and the wine of the bad grapes will flow as He crushes them under His feet.

These promises are not different from others, but are significant as the last promises before the silence, before the years of waiting. It’s as if God says “hang on to these while you wait.” That’s a tremendous principle for you and I when we wait. We cling to the fact that God is a God who has ordained the future, and revealed just enough of it for us to know that he has in mind fulfillment and joy for us. Ben Patterson tells a story about counseling a young husband who was determined to get a divorce. No adultery or abuse, just boredom. Patterson tried to persuade him to go the long haul with the woman he promised to love until death did them part. But the young man couldn’t embrace the long haul. He wanted to be happy now. He didn’t want to invest now in happiness later.

Yet that’s what we are called to do. We wait now, not for all happiness, but certainly for ultimate happiness. Malachi shows how we invest now in happiness later. Malachi 4:4 “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.” Malachi’s message has been that if God's people would not keep his Law, they must expect the judgments the Law promised. But these few faithful whom Malachi wants to encourage, need to wait for their rescue by being faithful to that law, waiting righteously. The Law was a picture of righteous living. The ceremonial law and the sacrifices reveal the path to righteousness and point to Christ. But the moral laws describe righteous living: loving your neighbor as yourself, loving the Lord your God, fearing, honoring and serving him, valuing life, valuing marriage, valuing the property and honor of others.

These things showed God's people how to live and even thrive while waiting for God to keep his promises. In the silent years about to start it was those who clung with both hands to what God had already said and taught who waited righteously. What about us, though. Must we keep the law? On the one hand the law and its rules of righteousness no longer determine our legal standing before God. God's grace in the death of Christ for our sins determines whether we're declared righteous and forgiven or recognized as wicked and judged. But the moral law still describes righteousness, and is given to us as wisdom for right living. In the same way the moral and ethical teachings of the New Testamen show us what righteous living and waiting look like. Last week we talked about the blessings we receive from the Beatitudes. But when we study them in January we'll also see what a radical change of heart and life they call out in us. Waiting righteously means moving toward that transformed state. The Beatitudes are a great place to start memorizing the Sermon on the Mount.

The last two verses teach us not only to wait righteously, but to wait forwardly, with hope. Verse 5: *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And 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.*

God reminds the people that though he is about to be silent, the story is not over. If he seems silent in your situation, whether your family situation, your work situation, financial situation, marriage prospects, health or the health of your loved ones, I think he would have me tell you "your story isn't over, there are more chapters." He says to Malachi's readers "Look, I'm going to send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord!"

There is a clear relationship between this verse and Malachi 3:1. They both contain: (1) the word "Behold!" (2) the participle "I am sending," (3) calling the people to "turn," and (4) reference to the day of the Lord. Elijah is God's messenger who announces the coming of Christ. In the first advent he is John the Baptist. In the second he may be one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11. He isn't called Elijah there, but like Elijah he has the power to shut up the heavens so it does not rain. Malachi tells us that his message will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children to their fathers, creating peace in this most fundamental of relationships, so often fractured. Jesus has the power to do that now, through the Holy Spirit, and we pray he will. But that power will be even more evident in the life and message of this forerunner to his return. Sadly, Revelation teaches that the conditional clause in this last verse of the Old Testament will not be met. Humanity will not turn to the Lord, and God will come to smite the earth with a "curse."

Revelation shows this fulfilled when Jesus comes to smite the nations with the sword of his mouth. But praise God though “curse” is the last word of the Old Testament, it is not the last word of God’s plan. It is followed by the new heavens and the new earth, which Peter calls, “the home of righteousness.”

So we are called to wait righteously and to live expectantly. Remember Patterson’s book on ‘Waiting’? He said the two cardinal virtues for waiting are humility and hope, which correspond to living righteously, and living expectantly. Max Lucado call this “living forwardly,” and illustrates it from the Christmas narrative in Luke. He says “Let's take a look at Simeon, a man who knew how to wait. The way he waited for the first coming is a model for how we should wait for the Second Coming. Luke 2:25 “Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” Our brief encounter with Simeon occurs eight days after the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary have brought their son to the temple. It's the day of circumcision, the day of dedication. But for Simeon, it's the day of celebration.

Let's imagine a white headed, wizened fellow working his way down the streets of Jerusalem. People in the market call his name and he waves but doesn't stop. Neighbors greet him and he returns the greeting but doesn't pause. He has a place to be and he hasn't time to lose. Verse 27 says that “prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple.” We don't know how the prompting came: a call from a neighbor, an invitation from his wife, a nudging within the heart we don't know. We do know this wasn't the first-time God tapped him on the shoulder. At least once before he had received a message from God. Luke 2:26 “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” You've got to wonder what a message like that would do to a person. We know what it did to Simeon. He was “constantly expecting the Messiah” or as Phillips paraphrases it, he was “living in expectation of the salvation of Israel” Simeon is a man on tiptoe, wide eyed and watching for the one who will come to save Israel.

“Maybe you know what it's like to look for someone who has come for you,” Lucado says. “I do. When I travel somewhere to speak, I often don't know who will pick me up at the airport. Someone has been sent, but I don't know the person. So I exit the plane searching the faces for a face I've never seen. And I know I'll find him. He may have my name on a sign, or my book in his hand, or just a puzzled expression on his face. Were you to ask me how I will recognize the one who has come for me, I would say, “I don't know, I just know I will.” I bet Simeon would have said the same. “How will you know the king, Simeon?” “I don't know. I just know I will.”

“So he searches, like a detective after clues. Studying each passing face. Looking into the eyes of strangers. The Greek language, rich as it is, has a stable full of verbs which mean “to look.” One means to “look up,” another “look away;” one is used to “look upon” and another “looking in.” Of all the forms of “look,” the one which best captures what it means to “look for the coming” is the term *prosdechomai*. *Dechomai* means “to wait.” *Pros* means “forward.” Combine them and you have the graphic picture of one “waiting forwardly.” The grammar is poor, but the image is great. Simeon was waiting; not demanding, not hurrying. At the same time, he was waiting forwardly. Patiently vigilant. Calmly expectant. Eyes open. Arms extended. Searching the crowd for the right face, and hoping the face appears today.

This was Simeon’s lifestyle, and it can be ours. Haven't we, like Simeon, been told of the coming Christ? Aren't we, like Simeon, heirs of a promise? Aren't we longing to see the same face? Absolutely. In fact, the same verb is used later in Luke to describe the posture of the waiting servant. “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶and be like men who are waiting (*prosdechomai*) for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.”

“Wait forwardly.” Both words are crucial. Peter tells us that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The skies will disappear with a loud noise. Everything in them will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be burned up. In that way everything will be destroyed. So what kind of people should you be?” Great question. What kind of people should we be? Peter tells us: “You should live holy lives and serve God, as you wait for and [here is that word again] look forward to the coming of the day of God” Lucado is showing us that hope of the future is not a license for irresponsibility in the present. We need to wait forwardly, but we also need to wait righteously.

“Simeon reminds us to “wait forwardly.” Patiently vigilant. Not so patient we lose our vigilance nor so vigilant we lose our patience. In the end, Simeon’s prayer was answered. “He took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation.” One look into the face of Jesus, and Simeon knew it was time to go home. One look into our Savior’s face when he comes, and we will know we are finally home.

We wait righteously, allowing our lives to be changed. We wait forwardly, leaning into the promises of God.