

**God Spares His Children**  
**Malachi 3:13-4:3**  
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**Nathan Gray**

*Introduction*

In the city of Liverpool, there are two camps. One wears blue and the other wears red. In Manchester, there are also two camps. One wears blue and the other wears red. I'm talking, of course, about rivalries in the world of football. Two distinct groups of people are defined by the team they support and the colours they wear. And it's not just sport that splits us. Even food divides us. I think pineapple does go on pizza.

At the end of the day, there's only one division that matters. There are many ways we can be divided into two camps, but only one really matters. Malachi 3:18 says, "You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked."

Every single human being belongs to one of these two groups. Only football fans get involved in their team's rivalries. Only people who eat pizza care about your choice of toppings. But every single human being is either righteous or wicked. You are either right with God or not right with God.

And there's great news for those who are right with God. The Bible promises them eternal life in heaven. But there's bad news for the other camp. The Bible warns of a much darker future for those who aren't right with God.

It's that warning that God offers the Israelites in the book of Malachi. God warns his arrogant people about their fate. Not for the sake of it, and not with vindictive glee, but with the sternness of a father correcting his children for their good. And, like a compassionate father, God will spare them if they return to him.

My plan this morning is to share some background information on the book of Malachi. Then we'll dive into the passage itself. Then I have two messages for us.

*Background Information*

So, the book of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and it was likely the last to be written, in about 430 BC. The Jews had returned from exile a hundred years earlier and, since then, they'd rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. At the same time, they were waiting for exciting promises to come true. Through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, God predicted a glorious future for Israel filled with blessings and the arrival of the Messiah. So, things are looking up for the Israelites.

But, as time passed, they began to lose faith in these promises. And their lack of faith led to apathy. They treated God's way of life with indifference and even disregarded parts of it. So, God decided to speak into their situation.

Now, many of the prophets spoke to God's people in the form of sermons, but not Malachi. Through Malachi, God brought a series of disputes against Israel. In each dispute, God makes a statement. He then anticipates the Jews' objection, so he provides evidence for his claim. The book of Malachi contains six of these disputes and our passage today is God's final disagreement with his people.

### *Unpacking the Passage*

Now let's look at the passage itself. In verse 13, God says to Israel, "You have spoken arrogantly against me." God begins this dispute by accusing Israel of making ignorant and selfish remarks.

And he has the receipts to prove it. God reveals what they've said. First of all, Israel have said, "It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?"<sup>1</sup> In their optimism about the future, Israel have become short-sighted. This is a silly argument for two reasons. One, serving God is not about what we can get out of it and, two, they've lost sight of what God's done for them. It wasn't long ago that God brought his people home from exile. This is the epitome of arrogance.

But their second complaint is far more reasonable. Israel also said, "But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly, evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it."<sup>2</sup> We can empathise with their frustration. It's difficult to accept that good things happen to bad people. But this is still a selfish comment from Israel. All in all, they're calling God useless. They're saying that serving God is pointless because they want to be rewarded and they want the wicked to be punished.

Remember that this is God's final dispute with Israel. God has come to the end of his argument. He has thoroughly exposed Israel's arrogance. How are they going to respond?

Verse 16 says, "Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other." They've heard all that God has said and they gather to discuss it. Unlike the arrogant majority, this group are sincerely seeking to honour God. And so, "a scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name."<sup>3</sup> This scroll of remembrance is like an honour roll. The names of those who genuinely fear the LORD were written down as a sign of their faithfulness to him.

Then God turns back to the whole of Israel and points out these faithful people. 'On the day when I act,' says the LORD Almighty, 'they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him.'<sup>4</sup> This is an incredibly significant statement. God isn't just being nice when he calls them his treasured possession. This is what God called his people. This was God's pet name, if

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<sup>1</sup> Malachi 3:14

<sup>2</sup> Malachi 3:15

<sup>3</sup> Malachi 3:16

<sup>4</sup> Malachi 3:17

you like, for Israel. In Deuteronomy 14:2, God says to Israel, “Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.” God is saying to the whole of Israel that this group of faithful Jews will be his treasured possession. He is going to treat them with compassion like a father shows compassion to an obedient son, and he’s going to spare them from the day when he acts.

Speaking of the day when God acts, the tone then shifts. God tells Israel what that day will be like, and it will not be a good day. It will be a day of fierce judgment. ‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them.’<sup>5</sup> This is a picture of total destruction. Picture a forest fire. Where once there were flourishing green trees, there is now just ash and charcoal. Nothing has been left alive. Not even the roots or branches.

In contrast, those who revere God have lots to look forward to. “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.”<sup>6</sup> A new day will dawn for God’s faithful followers. Their fortunes will be restored. Righteousness will reign instead of apathy. Light will shine in their darkness. God’s people will experience joy like that of a frolicking calf, which is a lovely picture.

### *Two Messages*

This passage is very straightforward. It’s black and white. There are two camps and there are two futures. But, as I said at the start, God does not take pleasure in condemning the wicked. He tells Israel about his day of judgement so that they’ll return to him and be spared. This passage is a message of warning for the wicked in Israel as much as it’s a message of hope for the righteous among them.

Those two camps and those two futures are still a reality today. God’s messages to Israel are just as relevant to us as they were to them. And so, they are also my messages for us this morning. I have a message of warning, God destroys the wicked, and I have a message of hope, God spares his children.

### *Message of Warning: God Destroys the Wicked*

Let’s start with the warning: God destroys the wicked. So, what does it mean to be wicked? Well, I think we all know what it means to be wicked, especially considering the other words used to describe them in this passage. The wicked are described as arrogant evildoers and people who put God to the test. They behave in an unacceptable way. We might simply describe them as bad people who do bad things.

So, when we think about who’s in this group of people, we might come up with a list like this. John writes in Revelation, “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all

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<sup>5</sup> Malachi 4:1

<sup>6</sup> Malachi 4:2

liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur.”<sup>7</sup> There are some obviously bad people on this list. Thank goodness I’m don’t practise dark arts or murder. There’s no way we respectable people would be considered wicked, right?

Well, consider this prayer from the book of Daniel. Daniel confesses, “Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.”<sup>8</sup> Daniel defines wickedness as disobeying God and ignoring his way of life. The camp of the wicked also includes anyone who has sinned, anyone who has done something wrong, and anyone who has ignored God. Suddenly, we all count as wicked. We’ve all sinned, we’ve all done something wrong, and we’ve all ignored God at some point in our lives.

And this means we’re not right with God. Imagine you’re caught speeding on a road from Malvern to Worcester. For some reason, you end up in court, but, surprisingly, you hit it off with the judge. You have a great conversation about Worcester Warriors or something. You feel like everything has been smoothed over. But at the end of the day, you can get along with every court official, you can drive perfectly for the rest of your life, but your record won’t be right until you pay that ticket. In a similar way, until our sin is dealt with, we are not right with God.

And not being right with God is a big problem for us. God is the ever-present creator and judge of the world. We will never escape him or his verdicts. Not being right with God means he finds us guilty, and we know what guilty people deserve. Guilty people deserve to be punished for their actions.

So, what punishment does God have in store for guilty and wicked people? Malachi describes a day of fiery destruction and Jesus says the same thing. One day, Jesus tells a parable to a crowd, and the parable is about a farmer who allows some weeds to grow alongside his wheat until the wheat is ready to harvest. Later on, Jesus’ disciples ask him what this parable means, and this is Jesus’ answer, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>9</sup>

We don’t like to think or talk about hell. But hell is real, and it’s frequently described as a place of fire. The book of Revelation describes hell as a lake of burning sulphur where Satan and the wicked will be tormented day and night forever and ever.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Revelation 21:8

<sup>8</sup> Daniel 9:4-5

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 13:37-42

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 20:7-10

Nobody wants that. I don't want that and I don't want it for you. And God doesn't want that for you. God must be just, he must punish wickedness, but he'd much rather we avoid hell. Peter writes, "the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."<sup>11</sup>

God will destroy the wicked, but he's holding off his judgment of the world because he wants them to repent. And that's my desire for you as well. If you are not a Christian, I plea with you: repent of your sins, return to God, and be spared from this horrible punishment. I would not be doing my job as a believer of God's Word if I didn't warn you about the fate of the wicked that I believe is very real. If you saw someone walking towards the edge of a cliff, you would shout a warning in the hope they don't fall. This is my shout. Please move away from the edge of the cliff.

This warning is not just for non-Christians but for Christians as well. We shouldn't get complacent and overlook what God has spared us from. It's good for us to meditate on hell every so often so that we will marvel all the more in what God has done for us. God has not treated us as we deserve.

We understandably don't like to think about it, but we cannot forget that God will destroy the wicked.

### *Message of Hope: God Spares his Children*

With that warning firmly in place, let me give you a message of hope: God spares his children.

As we discovered in Malachi, God's children are those who are righteous. To be righteous simply means to be right with God. But, as we've just considered, none of us are right with God at first. Romans 3 says, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God."<sup>12</sup>

So, how can we be made right with God? Because that seems like an impossible task. Think back to the speeding ticket. Paying off a speeding ticket doesn't guarantee that you won't speed again. And paying off that ticket might clear your debt, but it won't clear your record. We need more than a blameless life to get right with God; we also need a blameless record.

And this is where Jesus comes in. Jesus solves both of these issues for us. Jesus came to earth and lived a life unlike any ever lived. He was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."<sup>13</sup> And then

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Peter 3:7-9

<sup>12</sup> Romans 3:10-11

<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 2:22

Jesus let himself be killed on a cross so that he could receive punishment from God in the place of sinners. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”<sup>14</sup>

This incredible exchange is available to you today and all you have to do is believe in Jesus. All you have to do is to recognise that you are a sinner then trust Jesus to rescue you from your sins. Then you will be united to him. United to him, not only will your sins be paid for, but you’ll receive Jesus’ blameless record. When God looks at you, he won’t see your tarnished past or the mistakes you’ll make in the future. He’ll see the clean slate of his Son. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>15</sup>

Then you can call yourself a child of God! “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”<sup>16</sup>

This is cause for great rejoicing. God has shown incredible compassion to us his children. We have been spared from judgment and punishment that we totally deserve. Instead, we can look forward with hope to a glorious future. Our lives are now ruled by godliness rather than darkness. Sins and pains and temptations can be healed. And we experience the true joy of a life made right with God.

And all of this is just a foretaste of what’s really in store for God’s children. Jesus didn’t stay dead. He rose to life and ascended into heaven where he’s waiting to come back and take his brothers and sisters to their eternal home. There, God’s children will truly be free from sin. There, God’s children will truly be healed of all pain and temptation. There, we will frolic like well-fed calves because we will be in the presence of God himself forever.

There is hope for even the vilest sinner in the world. “Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus has made a way for us to be made right with God and spared from destruction.

So, if you are not a believer, don’t let this hope pass you by. Grab hold of it. Believe in Jesus, become one of God’s children, and be spared from the fate of the wicked.

If you are a believer, then you are God’s treasured possession. There is hope in every unjust and uncertain situation because we have a heavenly father who showers us with compassion. God doesn’t just spare his children; he upholds his children throughout their lives. And we have the ultimate hope that will truly answer any troubles. We have the hope of heaven where pain will be no more. Don’t let this hope pass you by. May it be a balm to soothe you.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>15</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>16</sup> 1 John 3:1

<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 3:18

God does not leave us facing sin without hope. God spares his children in life and in death.

*Conclusion*

So, as we close, which camp are you in? Are you righteous or are you wicked?

“On the day when I act,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘[the righteous] will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.’”

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Our heavenly Father, thank you so much for sending Jesus to make to us right with you. Thank you for making us your children and sparing us from the unthinkable. Please help us to take the warnings in your Word seriously and, if we don't have it already, give us the gift of faith. Please help us to grasp the hope we have in Jesus. May our hope be a living hope and an anchor for our souls. Amen.