

The Difference Eschatology Makes

13 "Your words have been harsh against Me," Says the LORD, "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?' 14 You have said, 'It is useless to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, And that we have walked as mourners Before the LORD of hosts? 15 So now we call the proud blessed, For those who do wickedness are raised up; They even tempt God and go free.'"

16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, And the LORD listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him For those who fear the LORD And who meditate on His name.

17 "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "On the day that I make them My jewels¹. And I will spare them As a man spares his own son who serves him." 18 Then you shall again discern 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, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," Says the LORD of hosts, "That will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves. 3 You shall trample the wicked, For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet On the day that I do this," Says the LORD of hosts.

4 "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." (Mal 3:13-6)

Most everything in our culture tells us that it makes very little difference what you believe, what faith you are of, what religion you belong to. When we measure the value of faith by utility, by how many physical benefits we get from it, we struggle to see how being a Christian is any more beneficial than belonging to any other faith, or being an atheist. We all seem to have the same kind of lives, the same kind of mixed bag of happiness and sorrow, troubles and ease seem to come to all, regardless of what they believe.

Think like that, and you will find yourself feeling very similarly to the Israelites in Malachi's day. Here, in this last section of Malachi, were a group of people who measured the truth of knowing and loving God by its visible usefulness in life. They applied this test: does being a God-fearer make me more prosperous more protected, more successful than the wicked? And since the answer was no, they began to doubt whether there was any point to being a believer against being an unbeliever.

Now perhaps you have not reached the same point of despair, but I am sure you do struggle with some of these doubts. Does it really make a difference? Do evil people get away with it? I'm taking the hard road, the narrow road, but I see plenty of cheats, plenty of selfish people doing really well. Maybe all that matters is sincerity, believe what you want but be sincere about it. Maybe I'm taking this all too seriously.

Or perhaps you have struggled with real hopelessness – will evil ever be punished? Is it worth being and doing right? Will believers ever be vindicated? Is there really a difference between godly people and ungodly?

What we'll see is that the surprising doctrine that comes to our rescue is the doctrine of future things, eschatology. The answer to the question of, is it worth it?, is actually found in how God is going to bring things to a conclusion, how things will end, how it will come together in judgement.

I. The Skepticism About the Present

13 "Your words have been harsh against Me," Says the LORD, "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?' 14 You have said, 'It is useless to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, And that we have walked as mourners Before the LORD of hosts? 15 So now we call the proud blessed, For those who do wickedness are raised up; They even tempt God and go free.'"

Here are some people who made a harsh accusation against God. This was it: it is useless to be a believer. It has not helped us, benefited us, in any way. We have walked as mourners, that is, we have lived lives of self-denial, we have accepted loss, we have sacrificed to follow him, and for what? Proud, independent, self-sufficient people who do not acknowledge God do well, they are blessed. Wicked people who flaunt God's laws, are promoted and exalted and climb the ladder of life. People who even mock God, taunting Him to judge them if He can, go free, and they live their own lives.

And the conclusion is, if living for God doesn't advance you materially and give you your best life now, what's the point of being a believer? If unbelievers have great lives, what difference does it make?

God calls this a harsh attitude. It is also an irreverent attitude. We have seen through this book that the awe of who God is was supposed to drive the Israelites. They gave him leftovers because they did not respect Him. The priests were hypocrites because they did not respect Him. They intermarried and divorced because they did not respect Him. They doubted God's justice because they did not respect Him. They withheld their tithes because they did not respect Him. And to each of those failures God revealed something majestic about His character that was the remedy.

Now I want to come back to the God-fearers of verse 16, what their response was. But for now, how does God answer this skepticism? How does God answer this challenge that being one of God's people makes no difference to life?

II. The Solution From the Future

16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, And the LORD listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him For those who fear the LORD And who meditate on His name. 17 "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "On the day that I make them My jewels¹. And I will spare them As a man spares his own son who serves him." 18 Then you shall again discern 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, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," Says the LORD of hosts, "That will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves. 3 You shall trample the wicked, For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet On the day that I do this," Says the LORD of hosts.

In contrast to the wicked, who scorn serving God, the righteous quietly and humbly spoke to one another, feared God, meditated on His name.

Does God see? Does God notice those who are His? Does God see a difference?

Look at verse 16. First, it tells us the Lord listened and heard them. The conversation of God's people filled with faith, filled with reverence, God hears. Second, a book of remembrance is written. In Scripture we see books like this containing names, books containing memorials of those who served God, or who belong to God. Whatever this book is, the point is, God records the righteous. He does not forget. He is not fickle. He is not whimsical. God's people are God's people.

19 Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," (2Ti 2:19)

Verse 17 carries it even further. The righteous are to God as precious jewels. His own precious possession, highly valued, to be protected, kept safe from theft or damage. God says, if you are one of My people, then I will deliver and save and spare you even as a father will protect his own son. So God sees a difference. God knows there is a huge distinction between being one of His and

rejecting Him.

But that's in God's mind. How will we know? Will that difference ever come to light? Here is God's major answer. You will know, you will discern that there is a difference between My people and unbelievers, between God's family and the Devil's, between the righteous and the unrighteous when a future day of the Lord comes.

On that day, the day of the Lord, God will spare His people and God will consume unbelievers. The day of the Lord is a term used in several books like Joel, Amos, Zephaniah, 1 Thessalonians and others to speak about a period of time when God's judgement comes to a climax. God will come in judgement, a judgement of fire, and the fire will purify and spare those precious jewels, but it will consume and burn up the wicked like stubble. John the Baptist predicted this idea of Jesus, at the time not necessarily knowing that it would take two comings to do this:

Mat 3:12 *"His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

On this future day of judgement, the wicked will be burnt up, and burnt not only on the surface, like usual fires do, but burnt down to the roots, completely removed, completely uprooted and destroyed. They will be ashes under the feet of believers.

2Th 1:8 *in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

By contrast, God says, *But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves.*

God's people will experience the coming of God Himself, whose light will dawn, bringing healing as He spreads over the Earth. God's people will experience the fullness and blessing of God, on the earth.

This is what Christ is speaking of in the parable of the wheat and tares. They might look alike, they might grow up together, but God will eventually do a final harvest, and a final sorting. The same is true of the parable of the dragnet. They might all be together, but eventually there will be a sorting process.

Now on that day, will it matter whose side you are on? On that day, will it matter if you are one of God's people or not? Will it make a difference to have been a believer? Will it make a difference if you have been proud and defied God? The Gospel is not open-ended regarding time – there is an end. In our time, the final discrimination has not yet been made. But it will, and in that time, there will be no more question of 'was it worth it to serve the Lord?'"

Second Peter 3 warns against the scoffers who say that a long history of not seeing God's judgement means there never will be one. No, says Peter, the Flood is evidence of a global judgement in the past, and there will again be a global judgement in the future.

Do you see how God uses the doctrine of last things, the doctrines of eschatology to drive faith, and produce purity? Here the Bible is showing you how practical and how useful the doctrine of future things, the doctrines of Judgement and Second Coming are.

We see a lot of misuse of eschatology around us. I can suggest four ways to abuse eschatology. First, to try to produce sensationalism and hype around Scripture. You can create lots of interest

and hype and buzz when your topic is the future. Which conference do you think will be better attended, a conference on How to Bridle Your Tongue or a conference on Deciphering the Mark of the Beast? To use eschatology because it's the only topic your people get interested in is a sign of sickness in a church. When the topic gets more and more peripheral, and people get more and more excited, something's wrong with the maturity in that church.

A second misuse of eschatology is to try to avoid practical questions of personal holiness. While I'm figuring out precisely who the king of the South is in Daniel 11, I can conveniently ignore my ungodly temper, because I'm so embedded in a deep Bible study. While I'm figuring out if the battle of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 is before or in the middle or at the end of the Tribulation, I can ignore my selfish attitudes, my growing covetousness, my problem with lust or laziness or gossip. It becomes a cover – who is more committed to the Bible than I? See how deep and detailed I go! Yes, indeed, and nothing wrong with that, so long as you go as deep and as detailed into questions of sanctification and godliness and Christlikeness.

A third misuse of eschatology is to make it into a stick to beat other Christians with. You can use these doctrines to denounce and to deride and to dismiss. “Those idiotic dispensationalists! Who can believe such implausible things?” “Those amillennialists – they're practically liberals!” “Those foolish postmillennial dreamers!” And once again, if you set your pulpit up as a boxing ring every Sunday, you will draw a crowd. People like controversy. People like conflict. When I was at school, you never saw boys run as fast as when a fight was on. But it is an abuse of the noble calling of preaching to appeal to the baser lusts of watching a fight. Now that doesn't mean we become agnostic on these questions. My own church is explicitly premillennial. We believe that, and believe it strongly. It does affect our interpretation of Scripture, it partly shapes our witness, it even affects our view of Christ and culture. We hold our views clearly and decidedly. But I do hope we always hold them humbly, accepting that the less biblical evidence for a viewpoint, the less firmly we should hold it, and the more ambiguous the Scriptures, the more careful we should be in dogmatising. We want to accept that diligent students of the Word have come to very different conclusions to ours, and while that doesn't mean that we have a big group hug and pretend we don't have differences, we don't have to use eschatology to deride. Far too many casualties from friendly fire in Christianity.

A fourth way to misuse eschatology is to use it to supposedly decode the secrets of the present and future. I was a boy in the 80s, when everyone feared World War 3 between the Soviet Union and the United States. And I remember the prophecy teachers then explaining how the Soviet Union was clearly seen in this and that passage, and how soon the Soviets would invade Israel. That all came to an end in 1990, but that didn't stop those folks from reading the newspaper into the Bible, telling us what was just ahead, but then quietly discarding those confident assertions when they didn't happen. It's a dangerous game, claiming you know exactly how prophecy is being or will be fulfilled on the world stage. Now I have no problem with a preacher looking at current events and speculating that perhaps this could be setting the stage for such and such a prophecy. No problem with trying to understand how scenarios will play out. But there is a long Hall of Shame for failed predictions, failed date-setting, failed interpretations of world events. God did not give us eschatology to tickle our desire for occult knowledge. He did not give us a sanctified crystal ball.

So how should we use eschatology? Why did God give it? Just look at how it is working here in Malachi. It's solving present-tense spiritual problems in the lives of God's people.

First, to sustain hope in God's deliverance. God uses this promise of Messiah's return to say to His people, in spite of your trials, in spite of the wicked, know that one day I will spare you and I will

not spare them. When we think of the doctrines of Christ's Second Coming, the kingdom and Heaven, it is supposed to produce hope. We are supposed to see how prophecy has already been fulfilled in Scripture, and with that ignited faith in the power of the prophetic Word, we can have every hope that the future prophecies will take place. When you are suffering abuse, injustice, or wondering if it makes a difference, these doctrines tell you, it does. Hope in God.

Second, to produce perspective on Earth and longing for Heaven. God said to these Israelites, Messiah is coming. Now for the ones who heard this, it would still be another 400 years before He came. And that meant that this promise by itself was enough to say, lift up your eyes from this present moment and this present time and know God will sort this out.

The fact that God puts this in the future is meant to say to us, don't expect this place and this time to be your final home. Don't look for everything to resolve and work out here. Don't look for the absence of the wicked, and for a perfect society here. Don't look for perfect justice here. God says, this is going to burn, and only after the judgement, will the righteous enjoy the happy freedom of life in Me.

Third, to give endurance in our obedience. God's people were no doubt wondering if there was justice, if there was any truth to the skepticism. They heard the complaints we have heard through this book. The doctrine of last things tells us, justice is coming, be patient. Keep obeying. Keep persevering. You're on the right side. You may not even live to see God bring final justice to the Earth, but understand it is coming, and you want to be on His side when it does. The doctrines of the Second Coming and future judgements are supposed to provoke purity in us. *2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*

3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1Jo 3:2-3)

This is why we love God's promises of His Son's Coming, of justice reigning on the Earth, of judgement. Because it tells us, it will be worth it all, when we see Jesus. It's worth obeying. It's worth trusting. There will be justice, and an end.

III. The Summary of the Book

16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, And the LORD listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him For those who fear the LORD And who meditate on His name.

Here is the highlight or the climax of the book of Malachi. In the middle of all this irreverence and skepticism and cynicism and hypocrisy and stinginess, and disloyalty were a few people who were still in awe of God. Here were a group of people who still meditated on God's character.

And notice what these people did. 16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, Amidst all the confusion and the false worship, true believers spoke to one another. What did they speak about? No doubt they spoke about these very questions. Is it useless to serve the Lord? Is God a God you give leftovers to? Should we remain loyal to our covenant with God, and express it in family? Should we give God what is His? Genuine believers confess their faith to one another. They grow each other by regularly speaking of the truth of God's Word.

Heb 3:13 *but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*

Heb 10:24 *And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,*

Believers need to be telling each other the words of 1 Cor 15:58:

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (1Co 15:58)

9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. (Gal 6:9)

And it's to these God fearers that God say the last words of this book.

4 "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." (Mal 3:13-6)

God's people are to remember His Word. For Israel, that was the Old Testament, often called the Law and the Prophets. The Law symbolised by Moses, and the prophets symbolised by Elijah. God says to Israel, remember my Word. Meditate on it.

Know that I am sending Elijah before this day of the Lord spoken of earlier. He will preach and prophesy in ways that will bring about humbled hearts, regenerate hearts, where fathers compassionately turn to their children, and children submissively turn to their fathers. This speaks of salvation and the Gospel.

We remember that this prophecy was quoted in respect of John the Baptist, whom Jesus said was one who came in the spirit and power of Elijah. At the same time, John denied being Elijah, so it is very possible that Elijah himself will be sent back before the final and ultimate day of the Lord.

But again, the right use of these promises are not for curiosity. It is to say, keep obeying. Meditate on God's Word. Hope patiently, speak to one another.

So here is a fitting end to a book about fearing and reverencing God. Do you want to be one of God's jewels? Then when you hear people doubting God's love like in chapter 1, giving God leftover worship, being hypocrites as in chapter 2, being disloyal to God in dating and marriage, being skeptical about His justice in the world, being stingy with giving as in chapter 3, or doubting that it makes any difference to even be a Christian, you can say – that comes from a low view of God. That comes from not meditating on His name. For every one of the irreverences in this book was a solution found in the great attributes of God. That comes from not loving the Word, thinking about God's attributes, and speaking often with other believers on it.

It was Tozer who said, what comes into a man's mind when he thinks of God is the most important thing about him. Your awe for who God is will be directly proportional to how much you give yourself to meditating on what God had said about Himself. This is the message of Malachi to Israel, and to all God's people.