

Malachi 3:14

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?

Analysis

Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? This verse specifies the harsh words mentioned in verse 13. The accusation **It is vain to serve God** (שָׁוְיָ אֲבוֹדָה אֱלֹהִים, shav avod elohim) uses the word שָׁוְיָ (shav)—vanity, emptiness, futility. They've concluded that serving God yields nothing worthwhile, that faith is unprofitable.

They complain: **what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance** (וְמַה־בְּצֵעַ כִּי, u-mah-betza ki shamarnu mishemarto). The noun בְּצֵעַ (betza) means profit, gain, advantage. They view covenant obedience as an investment expecting return—when the expected dividends don't materialize, they feel cheated. The phrase **walked mournfully** (הָלַכְנוּ קְדֹרָנִית, halakhnu qedorannit) describes going about in dark, somber garments—the external appearance of repentance and humility (like fasting, sackcloth, ashes). They claim to have performed religious duties but received nothing in return.

This complaint reveals a mercenary spirit—serving God for what they can get rather than for who He is. They demonstrate Job's adversary's accusation: "Doth Job fear God for nought?" (Job 1:9). True faith serves God because He is worthy, regardless of circumstantial blessings. The irony is that their very complaint—treating relationship with God as a business transaction—proves their hearts aren't right, explaining why blessing eludes them. Jesus taught that those who

seek first God's kingdom receive what they need (Matthew 6:33), but those who serve for earthly gain have already received their reward (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16).

Historical Context

Israel expected that temple restoration would bring messianic glory (Haggai 2:7-9). When this didn't immediately occur, cynicism grew. They observed wicked neighbors prospering while their own obedience seemed unrewarded (v. 15). Economic hardship, crop failures, and political subjugation to Persia all contributed to disillusionment. Yet their complaint overlooked God's mercies: He preserved them through exile, restored them to the land, protected them from enemies, and continued covenant relationship despite their unfaithfulness. They demanded spectacular blessing while ignoring daily grace. This mirrors the elder brother in Jesus' parable (Luke 15:29-30) who served the father for years but never appreciated the privilege of sonship, focused only on what he didn't receive. Throughout church history, believers have struggled with similar temptations—when trials persist or obedience seems unrewarded, questioning whether faithfulness is worth it. The biblical answer consistently points beyond present circumstances to eternal reward (Hebrews 11:13-16, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How do we guard against serving God with a mercenary spirit that expects specific earthly rewards for obedience?
2. What does it reveal about our hearts when we view faith primarily in terms of "profit" or personal advantage?

3. How does focusing on God's character and worthiness (rather than circumstantial blessings) transform our motivation for obedience?

Interlinear Text

אָמַרְתֶּם	שֶׁיֵּא	עַבְד	אֱלֹהֵי יָם	וְיִמָּה	בְּצֵעַ	כִּי
Ye have said	It is vain	to serve	God	H4100	and what profit	H3588
H559	H7723	H5647	H430		H1215	
שָׁמְרָנוּ	מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ	וְכִי		הָלַכְנוּ	קָדְרָנוּ יָת	
is it that we have kept	his ordinance	H3588		and that we have walked	mournfully	
H8104	H4931			H1980	H6941	
מִפְנֵי	יְהוָה	צְבָאוֹת:				
before	the LORD	of hosts				
H6440	H3068	H6635				

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 58:3 (Parallel theme): Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

Job 35:3 (Parallel theme): For thou saidst, What advantage will it be unto thee? and, What profit shall I have, if I be cleansed from my sin?

Zephaniah 1:12 (References Lord): And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.

Job 34:9 (References God): For he hath said, It profiteth a man nothing that he should delight himself with God.

Joel 2:12 (References Lord): Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:

Job 22:17 (References God): Which said unto God, Depart from us: and what can the Almighty do for them?

James 4:9 (Parallel theme): Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

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