

Malachi 3:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.

Analysis

Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked—שׁוּב (shuv, return) carries double meaning: geographic return from affliction and spiritual return to proper understanding. The וְרָאִיתֶם (ur'item, you shall see/discern) promises restored moral clarity after the refining fire of 3:2-3. בֵּין (bein, between) indicates sharp distinction—not gradations but binary categories: צַדִּיק (tsaddiq, righteous) versus רָשָׁע (rasha, wicked).

Between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not—עֹבֵד אֱלֹהִים (oved Elohim, one serving God) versus לֹא עֹבֵדוֹ (lo avado, one not serving Him). The verb עָבַד (avad) means covenant service, not mere ritual observance. This verse answers 2:17's cynical question 'Where is the God of judgment?'—He will come (3:1) and make unmistakable distinction between genuine servants and fraudulent worshipers. The visible vindication will silence those who claimed God delights in evildoers (2:17). This eschatological hope sustained the faithful remnant through present ambiguity.

Historical Context

Written to a community confused by the apparent success of the wicked (3:15) and the suffering of the righteous, Malachi promises coming clarity. The 'book of remembrance' (3:16) records the faithful, ensuring none are forgotten. This hope of ultimate divine vindication became foundational to apocalyptic literature

(Daniel, Revelation) and Jesus's teaching on final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). The early church, facing similar persecution and theodicy questions, found comfort in Malachi's promise of visible eschatological distinction.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the promise of future vindication sustain faithfulness when present circumstances obscure the distinction between righteous and wicked?
2. What does 'serving God' versus 'not serving Him' reveal about the nature of true righteousness beyond external religious performance?
3. In what ways does contemporary culture blur the distinction Malachi promises God will make unmistakably clear?

Interlinear Text

וְשָׁבְתֶם	וְרָאִיתָ	בֵּין	צִדִּיק	לְרָשָׁע	
Then shall ye return	and discern	H996	between the righteous	and the wicked	
H7725	H7200		H6662	H7563	
בֵּין	עֹבְדוֹ:	אֱלֹהֵי	לֹאֲשֶׁר	לֹא	עֹבְדוֹ:
H996	and him that serveth	God	H834	H3808	and him that serveth
	H5647	H430			H5647

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 25:46 (Righteousness): And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Genesis 18:25 (Righteousness): That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Joshua 24:15 (Evil): And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Jeremiah 12:15 (Parallel theme): And it shall come to pass, after that I have plucked them out I will return, and have compassion on them, and will bring them again, every man to his heritage, and every man to his land.

Acts 27:23 (References God): For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve,

John 12:26 (Parallel theme): If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.

Acts 16:17 (References God): The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.

1 Thessalonians 1:9 (References God): For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;

Malachi 1:4 (Evil): Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever.

Job 6:29 (Righteousness): Return, I pray you, let it not be iniquity; yea, return again, my righteousness is in it.