

[Slide] During the spring of 1988, I was invited to participate in a church youth group activity of some friends of mine from high school. The activity? A charity walk they had been preparing for, a fundraiser to help cure cancer. It was for a good cause, and it would be fun to hang out, so I said 'Sure, I'm in.' I imagined it would be a relatively short walk, too; two, maybe three miles in length. No problem. After all, I was used to running two-mile track races and three-mile cross-country races back then. But much to my surprise. My friends **then** informed me the walk would not be 3 miles long, 5, or even 10. No, this charity walk would be 19-miles long, winding all around the western suburbs!

Well, what could I do? I had already agreed to go, and I didn't want my friends to think I was a wimp. So, I still agreed.

The day of the walk came. It was a nice spring day, and the first five or six miles were fun and easy with lots of good conversation and joking. But somewhere around mile nine or ten, my legs were starting to get tired; to the point that they were hurting in ways I just wasn't used to from running. What in the world had I gotten myself into? I wondered. 'What good is going on a 19-mile torturous walk anyway?' I started to complain. At about that point I really just wanted to get off the path and sit down on a bench or even the ground.

(Pause) Sometimes the journey gets **long**, doesn't it? The hike, that is living in this world from day-to-day, gets **tough**. The going gets really, really, **really** rough. And so, we stop walking. We sit down and refuse to budge. This is especially true when it comes to managing our money for Christ and His Church.

[Slide] It's been a long, uphill hike for Judahites in the post-exilic Persian province of Judah. We can hear Malachi's fellow travelers throughout the book, "The LORD's table is contemptible" (Mal. 1:7). "What a burden" (Mal. 1:13). "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17).

[Slide] "Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape." (Malachi 3:15) At the root of the problem is the complaint that the righteous are not cared for while the wicked aren't punished. These were antagonistic and aggressive hikers! They had had enough and were blaming God for the whole thing.

[Slide] Then they said, "It is vain to serve God." (Mal. 3:11) The Hebrew noun *shav*, translated "vain", refers to what is worthless and without result. In some contexts in the Old Testament, it is synonymous with deceit and treachery. *Shav* lies in the same semantic field as *hevel* which means "nothing" or "empty." This hike is going nowhere, fast. "It is vain to serve God."

You and I know the feeling. Too often we plop ourselves down to moan and groan about how worthless the whole thing seems to be. Overcome with cynicism and sarcasm, our prayers don't deepen, our devotion doesn't increase, our zeal doesn't grow, and our financial giving remains stagnant. Why? "It is vain to serve God."

And woe to the traveler who challenges us to resume the journey. Woe to the prophet who dares to point out our justifications and rationalizations. Woe to the hiker who reminds us that we haven't budged for months, even years. We would rather sit around moaning, "Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape" (Mal. 3:15).

Please, don't be fooled. When it comes to very stressful times in life, on the outside I keep up my normal routine, but on the *inside* it's easy for me to stop hiking. I often settle for sameness, safety, and the status quo. Comfort, complacency, and convenience are my watchwords.

It is exactly then that I know I need some encouraging words, just like I needed encouraging words from my friends at the half-way point of that long walk all those years ago. God knows we need encouragement along the way, and He delights to give it to us.

[Slide] One way He does so, is He tells us WHO WE ARE. In Malachi 3:17 he reminds the Judahites that they are his *segulah*, his treasured possession, his prized priceless people. Used six times by the LORD in the Old Testament, *segulah* is the most endearing word He has for his Israel. A *segulah* is loved not because it is valuable. No, a *segulah* is valuable because it is loved.

[Slide] "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, **his treasured possession** (*segullah*). The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples."

[Slide] To get through my 19-mile charity walk that day, I needed something big to look forward to. My friends and I agreed that as soon as we were done, we would go out for pizza. It was just the incentive that I needed to make me forget about aching legs and sore feet. When you and I are stuck we need someone to direct us away from our present pain and help us to see our future deliverance.

[Slide] God also tells us WHERE WE ARE GOING. That's why God pulls out *His* biggest Word of encouragement. Malachi 4:2, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves released from the stall." Christ Jesus, the Sun of

Righteousness will bring with Him a new day when every hint of darkness will be scattered, all gloom will be gone, and the night of terror and dread will be forever banished. On that day our righteous standing, by faith, will become clear, just like the shining sun in all its brightness and beauty.

[Slide] But there is more. The Sun of Righteousness will bring healing in His wings! He will restore everything we have lost. All the years of pain will be erased; every tear of disappointment will be wiped away; and the symphonies we missed and sunsets we didn't see will be beautifully played over again and again!

The child snatched by disease will run into your arms. The health that eluded you in the winter of your life will return a thousand-fold. The friends and family members who died in the faith will sit next to you, singing in the heavenly choir, forever!

[Slide] All of this will be ours on that day, and so much more, because when **the** Son of Righteousness arose in the eastern sky, he continued steadfast in his journey all the way to the end. The Son finished, in spite of His disciple's kiss of betrayal, His friends running for cover, and His countrymen clamoring for his death.

Look. The sky is dark. Two criminals are slowly dying, one on His right and one on His left. Jesus is in the middle, taking a deep breath and speaking His last word. John records it, "It is finished." The veil rent. The blood poured. The curse removed. The sacrifice complete. Death is defeated. And paradise is restored, forevermore! And it is because this Son of Righteousness rose on the third day that He will come again with healing in His wings.

By the way, my friends and I finally made it to the finish line, just as it was starting to get dark. Now it was time to eat pizza and best of all to sit down! Looking back, one thing I learned from that day is that when we're paralyzed by discouragement and every bone in our body wants to quit, Jesus finds us on the trail, picks us up, encourages us and sets us back on our way.

[Slide] When Christ comes again, we won't collapse; we won't need rest to recuperate; and we certainly won't need any long-term health care. No. Malachi says that we will go forth "leaping like calves released from the stall."

Why does the prophet write all of this? So, we pick up the pace, bring others with us, manage our money to the glory of God and begin our leaping freedom **now**. Amen.