



ST. PAUL BAPTIST CHURCH

FAITH STRONG

HOLDING ON WHEN LIFE GETS HARD

Small Group Conversation Guide

Quarter 4 • Faith Strong • October 4 – November 29, 2026

"Hold on when life hits hard."

St. Paul Baptist Church • Peoria, Illinois

This guide is for your small group's monthly meal gathering. Each of the three gatherings corresponds to one of the three movements of our series through the Book of Malachi, as the whole church walks through what it looks like to hold on to God when life gets hard, when relationships strain, and when we feel hopeless.

You don't need to attend every Sunday service to participate. These questions are designed to meet your group wherever you are in the season and draw you into honest, unhurried conversation together.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- Gather around a meal. That matters. Malachi's whole indictment of Judah begins at the altar with what they were and weren't willing to bring.
- Read the gathering's theme aloud together before the first question.
- Take your time. Three questions for one evening is enough. Go deep, not fast.
- There are no wrong answers here, only honest ones and unspoken ones.
- Close each gathering by speaking the two Weekly Refrains together (printed at the end of each section).
- **Between gatherings**, keep the 40 Days of Stillness (November 1 – December 10) together. The practice is introduced at the end of Gathering 2.
- Pray for each other before you leave. Specifically. By name.

THREE GATHERINGS • THREE MOVEMENTS

Gathering	Movement	Malachi Is Asking...
1	Faith that Still Believes It's Loved	Do I still believe God loves me?
2	Faith That Keeps Its Word	Am I keeping faith with the people closest to me?
3	Faith That Returns Before It's Forced To	What will I trust when the wait feels endless?

"The heart doesn't usually announce its drifting. It just quietly stops bringing its best."



Gathering 1 - Faith That Still Believes It's Loved

Malachi 1:1-2:9 • Weeks 1-3

Malachi opens with two words that run through the whole letter: ahav (love) and bazah (contempt). Before a community can be healthy together, its worship has to be honest again. Judah's problem was never open rebellion; it was quiet drift. They kept showing up. They just stopped bringing their best.

In this gathering, you're not trying to solve anything. You're trying to be honest about whether you still believe God loves you, what your worship truly costs you, and how you carry the influence you have.

**Malachi 1:1-2:9
Weeks 1-3**

MALACHI IS ASKING...
Do I still believe God loves me?

**GATHERING ONE
Faith That Still
Believes It's Loved**

Leader note: Consider also asking this as an open question tonight: What makes it hard to bring God your honest questions instead of a performance of devotion you don't feel?

QUESTION 1

Think about the last few months. Has there been a season where God's love felt like a fact you knew but didn't feel?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- What evidence would actually satisfy you that God loves you and is that a fair standard to hold Him to?
- What's the difference between not feeling loved and not being loved? Have you ever confused the two?
- Malachi 1:2 opens with a settled fact, not a fresh negotiation: "I have loved you." What would it look like to treat God's love as something already true, rather than something you're waiting to feel again?

QUESTION 2

What's the "blemished offering" you've been bringing God lately?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Judah brought God their leftover, damaged animals instead of their best (1:7-8). What's your equivalent — time, attention, honesty, obedience?
- If God evaluated your worship the way He evaluated Judah's sacrifices, what would He find?
- Is there a place you're "showing up" physically while your attention has already left the room?



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- What would change about your worship this week if you prepared it like a gift for the person you respect most?

QUESTION 3

Who is watching how you carry your influence right now?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Malachi's priests taught truth publicly while living something different privately, and it corrupted an entire community's understanding, not just one transaction (2:8–9). Where is there a gap between what you teach or model and how you actually live?
- Who is watching you right now — whether or not you think of yourself as "a leader"? A child, a mentee, a coworker, a friend?
- Where have convenience or comfort quietly shaped what you say or model to someone else?
- What would it take to close one small gap this week between your private practice and your public instruction?

BEFORE YOU CLOSE

Take a few moments to ponder tonight's conversation. What is your one takeaway, and how does it challenge you as you consider what it means to live based on your values? If you feel comfortable, share it with the group, not as a performance, but as accountability.

CLOSE TOGETHER — SPEAK THIS ALOUD AS A GROUP

"I the LORD do not change."

"Return to me, and I will return to you."

Pray for each person in the group by name. Ask God to meet them at the specific place they named tonight.

"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you ask, "How have you loved us?" — Malachi 1:2, CSB



Gathering 2 - Faith That Keeps Its Word

Malachi 2:10-3:5 • Weeks 4-5

Malachi turns from the vertical to the horizontal. A people who no longer trust God's love begin to break faith with each other — at home and in their cynicism about whether justice is even real. The key thread: you cannot claim to love God while quietly abandoning the people He's placed in your life.

In this gathering, you're not just talking about faith in general. You're talking about the specific people in your life who are owed your faithfulness and about the cynicism that grows in you when it seems that doing right isn't paying off.

**Malachi 2:10-3:5
Weeks 4-5**

MALACHI IS ASKING...
Am I keeping faith with the
people closest to me?

**GATHERING TWO
Faith That Keeps Its
Word**

Leader note: Some in your group may be carrying real pain from a broken covenant — their own or someone else's. Handle Question 1 with care. This is a night for honesty, not diagnosis of anyone's marriage or past.

QUESTION 1

What promise have you made that's costing you more than you expected?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Malachi 2:14 describes tears at the altar going unanswered because a covenant had quietly been broken. What vow — at home, in a friendship, in a partnership — are you tempted to treat as disposable right now?
- Who in your life is "the companion of your youth" (2:14) you've drifted from — not through betrayal, necessarily, but through neglect?
- Is there a promise made in a season of ease that's quietly being broken in a season of stress?
- What would recommitting to that person look like this week, in one specific, concrete way?

QUESTION 2

Where have you started quietly believing that doing right doesn't actually matter?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Judah's complaint in 2:17 was cynicism dressed up as theology: "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD." Where have you watched someone who cuts corners get ahead while you stayed honest and struggled?
- What would it look like to bring that cynicism honestly to God this week, instead of just carrying it silently?



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- Malachi's answer is that God's justice starts by purifying His own house first (3:2–4), not by settling scores against everyone else. How does that change how you wait for things to be made right?
- Is there one place this week you could act on behalf of someone being treated unjustly, even in something small?

QUESTION 3

Who is carrying a covenant or a cynicism they haven't named out loud to anyone?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- James and Malachi both agree: faith is proven in the ordinary, unglamorous places — at home, and in what we quietly believe about whether God notices. Which of those two rooms — your relationships or your trust in God's fairness — needs the most honesty from you right now?
- What would it mean to name that here, instead of carrying it alone another month?
- Who in this group could you check in with between now and the next gathering, not to fix anything, just to keep the conversation honest?

BEFORE YOU CLOSE

Go around the group. Each person names one relationship they will move toward this week — a call, a visit, an honest conversation — as a specific act of covenant faithfulness.

CLOSE TOGETHER — SPEAK THIS ALOUD AS A GROUP

"I the LORD do not change."

"Return to me, and I will return to you."

Pray for the person or relationship each group member named. Ask God for the courage to move first.

I hate divorce, says the LORD... So be on guard for your life, and do not be unfaithful. — Malachi 2:16, CSB



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40 Days of Stillness

November 1 – December 10 • A practice to carry between gatherings

Malachi is the last prophetic word before centuries of silence. That silence was finally broken by a voice crying in the wilderness, the very messenger Malachi promised (Malachi 4:5–6; Luke 1:17). Beginning November 1, our whole church will practice 40 days of stillness together. It isn't an escape from the noise. It's a way of waiting for God to speak.

THE DAILY PRACTICE

- **Set a time.** Begin with 5 minutes of silence a day, and gradually extend the time as you grow in stillness over the 40 days.
- **Find a quiet space.** Turn off distractions (phone, TV, and music).
- **Be present.** Breathe deeply and invite God to meet you there.
- **Listen and reflect.** Read a short passage or pray silently; don't rush to fill the space.
- **End with gratitude.** Thank God for His presence and what He revealed.

BEFORE YOU GO

- **Name it out loud.** Each person shares when and where they will keep their stillness. Saying it at the table turns a private resolution into a shared practice.
- **Pair up.** Choose a stillness partner in the group. Once a week, send a simple text: "How's the quiet?" Don't track minutes. Don't fix anything. Just keep each other honest.
- **Use the readings.** "Readings for the Quiet" near the back of this guide gives a passage and a question for each week, tied to Sunday's sermon.
- **Miss a day? Return.** Stillness isn't proven by a perfect streak. Like faith, it's proven by returning.

Leader note: If your group's Gathering 2 falls after November 1, introduce the 40 Days at the end of Gathering 1 instead so no one starts late.



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Gathering 3 - Faith That Returns Before It's Forced To

Malachi 3:6-4:6 • Weeks 6-9

The hinge verse of the whole book opens this final movement: "I the LORD do not change." Malachi tests that claim through money, through the quiet remnant who kept believing anyway, through the coming Day that resolves every complaint in the book, and through one final charge to remember and return before the silence begins.

This gathering is about the whole quarter. You've talked about your worship. You've talked about your relationships. Now you're talking about what it actually looks like to trust God with the thing you control most tightly, to keep believing when no one's watching, and to hold both grief and hope at the same time.

Malachi 3:6-4:6
Weeks 6-9

MALACHI IS ASKING...
What will I trust when the wait
feels endless?

GATHERING THREE
Faith That Returns
Before It's Forced To

Leader note: Before Question 1, give everyone a chance to share how the 40 Days of Stillness is going. "I've missed more days than I've kept" is an honest answer and a welcome one. The invitation is to return, not to keep score.

QUESTION 1

What does your generosity say about what you actually believe about God's provision?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Malachi 3:10 is the one place in Scripture where God explicitly invites being tested. What would it look like to test Him on a specific promise this month?
- Where does your generosity change the moment the budget gets tight and what does that reveal?
- Is trusting God with money, in your gut, naive or faithful? Be honest about which one it feels like.

QUESTION 2

What unnoticed faithfulness have you kept up that you've started to wonder is even worth it?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Malachi 3:16 describes a remnant who, in the middle of a discouraged community, just kept talking honestly with each other about God and heaven noticed. Who do you talk to regularly about your faith, not performing it, just being honest about it?
- Is there something faithful you've kept doing with no recognition at all? What would it mean to name it out loud tonight?



- What would it change if you believed God is keeping a record of exactly this kind of unnoticed faithfulness (3:16)?
- For those keeping the 40 Days of Stillness: What have you noticed in the quiet these past weeks that you wouldn't have heard otherwise?

Leader note: If your group opened Gathering 1 with the question "When have you caught yourself thinking, 'How have you loved me?'" — return to it here. Ask the group: How has your answer changed over these three gatherings?

QUESTION 3

What has God already told you that you need to simply remember and obey, rather than wait for something new?

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Malachi's closing charge (4:4) looks backward to what God already said before it looks forward to anything new. What's one thing you already know God wants from you that you've been waiting on instead of doing?
- What in your life or the world are you most longing to see set right? Does the promise of that day (4:2–3) change how you carry the wait for it?
- Malachi ends on reconciliation across generations (4:6). Is there a relationship across generations — parent, child, mentor — that needs the kind of turning this whole series has been about?

BEFORE YOU CLOSE: A QUARTER-ENDING PRACTICE

Go around the group. Give each person 60 seconds to answer: 'What is different about you after these nine weeks in Malachi — in how you worship, how you treat people, what you trust God with, or what you've heard in the quiet?' Don't rush it. This is the harvest.

Then, if anyone is willing, take a moment to name someone in the group who helped them hold on this quarter and say that it mattered.

CLOSE TOGETHER — SPEAK THIS ALOUD AS A GROUP

"I the LORD do not change."

"Return to me, and I will return to you."

"Faith isn't proven by never going cold. It's proven by returning."

Pray together. Pray for whoever came to mind during Question 2. Close by thanking God for what He has built in this group over the past quarter.

"Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. — Malachi 3:7, ESV



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SENT INTO THE QUIET

The series ends tonight. The stillness doesn't. The 40 Days continue through December 10, into the first weeks of Advent. Malachi's last word left God's people waiting in the quiet for a voice. We know how that waiting ended: the messenger came, and after him, the Lord Himself.

Keep your time. Keep your place. Keep checking on your partner. And carry this with you into the silence:

"Be still, and know that I am God." — Psalm 46:10



40 Days of Stillness · Readings for the Quiet

November 1 – December 10, 2026

Use these for the "Listen and reflect" step of your daily stillness. Read the week's passage slowly; a few verses a day is plenty. When your mind wanders, come back to the focus verse. Then sit with the question. Don't hurry to answer it.

Days	Sermon Week	Read	Sit With
Nov 1-7	Week 5 · Where's God When Life Feels Unfair?	Malachi 2:17-3:5 <i>Focus: 3:3</i>	<i>Where do I need God to refine me before He sets things right around me?</i>
Nov 8-14	Week 6 · Can You Trust God With This?	Malachi 3:6-12 <i>Focus: 3:6</i>	<i>What am I holding too tightly to hand over to a God who does not change?</i>
Nov 15-21	Week 7 · Is It Worth It to Keep Believing?	Malachi 3:13-18 <i>Focus: 3:16</i>	<i>What would I say to God if I knew He was writing it down?</i>
Nov 22-28	Week 8 · Judgment Is Coming, So Is Joy	Malachi 4:1-3 <i>Focus: 4:2</i>	<i>Where am I waiting for the healing Malachi promises to rise?</i>
Nov 29-Dec 5	Week 9 · Remember the Promise, Return to Hope (First Sunday of Advent)	Malachi 4:4-6; Luke 1:13-17 <i>Focus: Luke 1:17</i>	<i>What turning, toward God or toward someone, is this quiet preparing me for?</i>
Dec 6-10	After the series · Advent	Isaiah 40:1-5; Psalm 46 <i>Focus: Psalm 46:10</i>	<i>Now that I have learned to be quiet, what is God saying?</i>

A reminder for the whole 40 days: Start at 5 minutes and let the time grow as you do. Some days the quiet will feel full; some days it will feel empty. Both count. What matters is that you keep coming back to meet Him there.

"Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. — Malachi 3:7, ESV



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Notes



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A Note for Group Leaders

You don't need to be a Malachi scholar to lead these conversations well. Your job is not to teach; it is to create a safe enough space that people feel free to bring their real questions to God — the same posture Malachi's own audience models throughout the book. A few things that help:

- Start with yourself. If you go first and go honestly, the room will follow.
- Protect the quiet voices. The loudest person in the room rarely has the most important thing to say.
- Don't fix. Resist the urge to solve someone's problem the moment they name it. Let it breathe.
- Keep what's shared here. Trust is what makes these questions answerable.
- The goal is not to complete all the questions, but to begin a dialogue and allow the Spirit to guide the discussion. Each gathering includes three bold questions, but the leader should choose which one to explore most deeply and let the "Keep the Conversation Going" prompts underneath it drive the discussion. It is better to go deep on one question than to move quickly across all three.
- Watch for Judah's pattern in your own group: people rarely walk away loudly. Listen for the quiet, reasonable-sounding question that shows up when a truth lands close to home — that question is usually the more honest place to start than the answer.



Frequently Asked Questions

What if my home isn't big enough?

That's okay. Faith Strong is about people, not square footage. A living room, dining room table, apartment, backyard, community room, church classroom, coffee shop, or restaurant can all work. If people can see each other and have a conversation, your space is big enough.

What if I've never hosted a group before?

Perfect. You do not need experience to host. You do not need to be a Bible teacher, counselor, or ministry expert. Your job is simple: welcome people, create a safe environment, and help the conversation get started. The guide will do the heavy lifting.

What does it mean to create a safe environment?

A safe environment is not a place where everyone agrees. It is a place where everyone is treated with dignity. In a healthy Faith Strong group, every person should feel respected even when their experiences are different, valued even when they don't speak often, honored even when they are struggling, and treated with dignity regardless of where they are in their faith journey.

What if I don't know the answer to a question?

You are not expected to have answers. Faith Strong is built around conversation, not teaching. If a difficult question comes up, it's okay to say, "I don't know." Sometimes the most spiritual answer is honesty — which is exactly the posture Malachi calls Judah back to.

What if nobody talks?

Give it time. Most groups need a few minutes to settle into deeper conversation. Silence isn't failure. Often it means people are thinking. Answer first. Share honestly. Then give others room to respond.

What if one person talks too much?

Gently make room for others. A simple "Thank you for sharing. I'd love to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet" is usually enough. Your role is not to control the room but to make sure every voice has a chance to be heard.

What if someone disagrees with another person?

That's okay. People come from different backgrounds, experiences, and stages of faith. Healthy conversation allows room for respectful disagreement. Focus on listening, understanding, and learning rather than winning an argument.

What if someone becomes emotional?

That's okay too. Tears are not a problem to solve. They are often a sign that something important is happening. Listen. Be present. Thank them for sharing. Allow the group to support them.



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Do I have to provide food?

No. Many groups choose a potluck approach where everyone contributes something. The goal is not an impressive meal. The goal is sharing life together around a table. Keep it simple.

Can children be present?

Yes. In fact, we encourage families to participate together whenever possible. Children are welcome to be part of the evening, and a separate age-appropriate children's conversation guide is available to help them have meaningful discussions of their own.

Depending on the age of the children, they may gather in another room, around a separate table, or in a nearby space while adults participate in the main conversation.

Faith Strong is designed to strengthen faith across generations. The goal isn't to separate families. It's to create space where everyone can engage at a level appropriate for their age and stage of life.

Can I invite friends, neighbors, or family members?

Absolutely. Faith Strong is designed for people at every stage of faith. You do not need to be a member of St. Paul to participate. In fact, one of the best ways to build community is to invite someone who may not normally walk through a church door.

Can I use the group to promote my business, products, services, or organization?

No. Faith Strong groups exist to build covenant community, not professional networks. Please do not use gathering time to advertise a business, sell products or services, recruit customers or clients, promote political causes, or distribute marketing materials.

People are welcome to naturally share what they do for work when it relates to the conversation. But the purpose of the gathering is spiritual growth, encouragement, and authentic community. We gather as brothers and sisters in Christ, not as consumers, customers, or prospects.

What if I make mistakes?

You will. Every host does. The conversation may go somewhere unexpected. A question may land differently than you anticipated. Someone may share something that surprises you. That's not failure. That's real life.

What people remember most is not a perfect gathering. They remember feeling welcomed, valued, heard, and loved. Trust God to work through your willingness, not your perfection.

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