

# Sound Living

Malachi

Jerry Nelson

The Book of Malachi burns through our expectations of God and re-orders our thinking. God loves us and sets out to tell us that and then moves on to address marriage, divorce, justice, giving, heaven, and more. Malachi calls us, like his first readers, to stop being quiet hypocrites rebelling against the authority of God in our lives. God calls us to change our mind and to repent: to agree that we need the healing of our souls and to seek His mercy, ask His forgiveness and accept His grace. God's call is to us—we who call ourselves God's people. He wants to revive us, save us, and restore us to Himself. Will we respond to His mercy today?

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# The Book of Malachi

## Chapter One

<sup>1</sup>An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

<sup>2</sup>"I have loved you," says the LORD.

But you ask, "How have you loved us?"

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, <sup>3</sup>but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.

<sup>4</sup>Edom may say, 'Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.'

But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!'"

<sup>6</sup>"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name."

"But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'

<sup>7</sup>"You place defiled food on my altar."

"But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?'

"By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. <sup>8</sup>When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>9</sup>"Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?" says the

LORD Almighty.

<sup>10</sup>“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands. <sup>11</sup>My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>12</sup>“But you profane it by saying of the LORD's table, ‘It is defiled,’ and of its food, ‘It is contemptible.’ <sup>13</sup>And you say, ‘What a burden!’ and you sniff at it contemptuously,” says the LORD Almighty.

“When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?” says the LORD. <sup>14</sup>“Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the LORD. For I am a great king,” says the LORD Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations.”

## Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup>“And now this admonition is for you, O priests. <sup>2</sup>If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,” says the LORD Almighty, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me.

<sup>3</sup>“Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. <sup>4</sup>And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>5</sup>“My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. <sup>6</sup>True instruction was in

his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

<sup>7</sup>For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. <sup>8</sup>But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>9</sup>“So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

<sup>10</sup>Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?

<sup>11</sup>Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. <sup>12</sup>As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob – even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty.

<sup>13</sup>Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. <sup>14</sup>You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

<sup>15</sup>Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

<sup>16</sup>“I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in

your spirit, and do not break faith.

<sup>17</sup>You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask.

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"

### Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup>"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>2</sup>But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

<sup>3</sup>He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup>and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

<sup>5</sup>"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>6</sup>"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. <sup>7</sup>Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

<sup>8</sup>"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me." "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup>You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. <sup>10</sup>Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD

Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. <sup>11</sup>I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. <sup>12</sup>"Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>13</sup>"You have said harsh things against me," says the LORD.

"Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'

<sup>14</sup>"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? <sup>15</sup>But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.'"

<sup>16</sup>Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

<sup>17</sup>"They will be mine," says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. <sup>18</sup>And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

## Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup>"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. <sup>2</sup>But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. <sup>3</sup>Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>4</sup>Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

<sup>5</sup>See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup>He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”



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## Chapter One

### God Loves You

#### Malachi 1:2-5

A little four-year old girl of our church was recently preparing to leave the house with her father to run an errand. As little children are prone to do, she was dawdling and not getting ready as soon as she needed to. Her mother in an attempt to get her to hurry said to her, "You had better hurry or your daddy will leave without you." At that the little girl nonchalantly looked up and with complete sincerity and belief said, "He wouldn't leave me." Her mother was caught up by the truth of the statement and said, "You're right, he wouldn't." That little girl was absolutely secure in her father's love.

God through the prophet Malachi says to us, "I love you unconditionally!" And His love is even more certain and more secure than that little girl believed her father's love to be.

"God loves you unconditionally" is probably one of the hardest truths for us to accept. Why is it so difficult? Because of incorrect theology. Most people are convinced love is based on performance. Our understanding of God's love ranges from, "Of course God loves me, I'm lovable." to, "I hope He loves me, I do the best I can usually." to, "I know He doesn't love me; He couldn't possible love me." I want you to look at God's statement of unconditional love for you in the book of Malachi.

## History and Context

The prophet Malachi lived and preached the messages contained in this book about 400 years before Christ was born in Bethlehem. Less than a hundred years earlier, the Jews were allowed to leave Babylon where they had been virtual slaves for the previous seventy years. They came "home" to Israel with great anticipation. Under their new governor's leadership and the spiritual guidance of Ezra they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem and began celebrating God's grace to them in freeing them from tyranny and returning them to their ancestral home. Under the leadership of a new governor, Nehemiah, they rebuilt the walls of the city, indicating a measure of autonomy and security.

*They were certain that all of God's predictions of their full freedom from foreign domination would now come to pass.*

These were heady days. They were certain that all of God's predictions of their full freedom from foreign domination would now come to pass. They were certain the Messiah would come and Israel would return to her former strength and glory. But months and then years went by with no Messiah, no freedom. Though there was relative peace, there was no real prosperity—life became dull, routine, hope faded, cynicism grew. It was as if they had been forgotten by God. Have you ever been there?

### Can We Believe?

The response of the people in verse 2, to God's statement that He loves them, gives an idea of the doubt or cynicism they felt: *"How have you loved us?"* Things hadn't turned out as they had hoped. For all their attention to their religion, it hadn't worked. Maybe because they were afraid to quit their religion or just because it was habit now, they

didn't stop being religious but it was hollow—they were making no investment in it. In fact, their question of God is so impudent that we are led to think they were cynical at best and at worst, more than a little angry at God. They were no different than many of us are prone to be. We experience some difficulty and we begin to doubt God's love for us. Then we move to assuming He has something against us and doesn't love us. Then we make another jump in our logic: "If God has no regard for me personally, why should I bother with Him?" We begin justifying our disregard for God and His will by accusing God. It's okay that I do these things. I have to watch out for myself, since no one else is.

It is to these people that God through Malachi comes announcing His love and His concern for them. If you have read Malachi you may remember that God has some hard things to say to these people but He starts by laying a very necessary foundation: I love you. It is very hard to take constructive criticism from people who you believe don't like you. Unconditional acceptance forms the basis for real change. God begins His call to the people to repent by reminding them of His love. But again, when God says, "I love you" how do the people respond? Their doubt or cynicism shows in their question: How have you loved us? God's response to their question marks the central teaching of this passage. It will surprise you. What does God say?

But before looking at the response, read Genesis 25:21-26: *"Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The Lord answered his prayer and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb and two peoples from within you will be separated: one people will be stronger than the*

*other, and the older will serve the younger.' When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob."*

Two boys who have the same mother and father and who would each become the first of a whole nation-tribe of people: Esau's descendants would become the people called Edom living in a land that took that name (today it is south Jordan); and Jacob's descendants would become the people called Israel living in a land called by that name. The most noteworthy comment to point out however is the Lord's declaration in verse 23 about the relationship of the two brothers. Contrary to the normal cultural laws of inheritance and leadership, the younger brother would be preferred over the older.

Now look again at Malachi 1. God is answering the people's question: "How have you loved us?" His answer:  
*"But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the Lord says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.' Edom may say, 'Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.' But this is what the Lord Almighty says: 'They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord'." (Malachi 1:2-4a)*

In proving His love for them, this seems a rather strange way to do it. Wouldn't you have expected Him to speak of a father's love for his son as He does in Hosea? Or of a mother's love for her children as He does in the Psalms? Wouldn't He better have stated in positive terms all He has

done for them from the days of Egypt? How does this statement about His hatred for Esau prove anything about His love for Israel or for me?

Is God saying, "If you think you have it bad, look at Edom,"—a kind of a variation of "I complained about having no shoes until I saw a man with no feet"? No, that's not the rationale. Look how God starts His answer: "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" When God said that what would the people have remembered? They would have remembered the story from Genesis 25. They would have remembered that Jacob and Esau were brothers. They would also have remembered that Esau was the older, even though just barely older. They would have remembered that God's choice of Jacob to form the nation of Israel ran counter to the usual human way of making choices. And, they would have remembered that if anyone had the "right" to be chosen it would have been Esau, but personal worth or rights are not the basis for God's choices.

*The primary message coming through is that God's love for them, as for you, is not based on your worth or your performance, but solely on God's choice.*

The primary message coming through is that God's love for them, as for you, is not based on your worth or your performance, but solely on God's choice. With each description of Esau's condition and destiny is a corresponding, understood but unwritten, description of God's gracious unearned love for Israel. With each new phrase here describing Esau's condition, the hearers would have been reminded of God's love toward them.

Think of the contrast: In verse 3, Esau's mountains or land had been turned into a wasteland and his inheritance given

to desert animals. In contrast, what had been God's promise to Israel? Their land would be fruitful and by God's grace it had—they were living in it again. What had God said about Israel's inheritance? Their land would be for their children and their children's children forever. For 1500 years since the days of Abraham, God had kept that promise. In verse 4, Esau's descendants, called Edom, rebelliously said they would rebuild their nation after God judged them. But to that day their country was demolished, gone. In fact, to this day that land is nothing; it looks like parts of Utah—a lunar landscape. The ruins of Petra in Edom are a memorial to a country that once was but is no more.

*God says there is coming a day when you will get your eyes off your own situation long enough to see that God is truly working*

But what had God said about Israel after judgment? They would be returned to the land and they had—they were living proof of it. Verse 5 is predictive. God says there is coming a day when you will get your eyes off your own situation long enough to see that God is truly working everywhere in this world—and you will then say with renewed conviction, "Great is the Lord!" Each reminder of Esau's/Edom's condition points out graphically another dimension of God's grace toward Israel. Esau has been rejected and condemned but not you Israel! You are loved and chosen and blessed. But don't forget the point: Why are you loved?—Because you were better than Esau? Not a chance. In fact if God had used human reasoning, He would have chosen Esau. But He chose you, Israel. Why? Because He fixed His love on you!



I have intentionally avoided the first phrase of verse 3, where God says, *"Esau I have hated."* We don't want to hear God saying such a thing about an individual. The statement causes us consternation. Some have tried to say it is a comparative statement meaning that God loved Esau less. There are places where such stark language is used to describe love and less love but as I will show later, that is not what God is doing here. Some have tried to say that God hated Esau because Esau deserved it—after all, Esau rejected his birthright, he sought to kill Jacob, and he married foreign women of an ungodly religion. But if Esau deserved it, so did Jacob. Even his very name is an indication of the kind of man he was—it comes from the word "deceive." (Incidentally, if you are named "Jacob" it is an excellent name. By God's grace this Jacob became a man of God.) It will not do to say God didn't love Esau because Esau was evil. If that were the basis, He could not have loved Jacob either or any of us for that matter.

Many of you know the Apostle Paul picks up on this Malachi passage and quotes it in Romans 9 when he makes the same point Malachi is making here.

*"Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by Him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!"*  
(Romans 9:10-14)

What does God say through Paul? Esau and Jacob were brothers. In fact they were twins. But before they were even born, before they had done anything good or bad, God said the older would serve the younger—meaning God would love Jacob but hate Esau. And why would God do

this? Because of the things they would do? No. Specifically He says it is not because of their works but so that God's purpose in election might stand. The choice to love Jacob would come not out of Jacob's goodness but solely out of God's choice.

Because of their sinful humanity they were both deserving of God's eternal judgment. All people are descendants of sinful Adam and Romans 5 teaches us that as a result, every person is conceived a sinner and born a sinner. And also because of their sinful actions they were both deserving of God's eternal wrath. The Bible confirms our experience—every one of us sins. For both of those reasons they were both deserving of condemnation. But what does God say? He chose Jacob to bless.

Is that actually what this passage says and means? Paul answers that question in verse 14: "*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!*" (Romans 9) God makes His choice of some to show mercy based on nothing He sees in them but based only on His good pleasure. But you say, "If God does that, He is unjust!" And what does Paul say to that? No! God is not unjust. As God said to Moses in verse 15, "*I will have mercy and compassion on whom I choose.*" It would be unjust if God punished you when you didn't deserve it. But it is not unjust for God not to punish you, by punishing Christ in your place on the cross—that is mercy. God is under no obligation to show mercy. We deserve His wrath. If God acted solely out of His justice, we all would perish.

"Well," you say, "it's unfair. If God is going to show mercy to some He must show mercy to all." Though I understand the sentiment behind such a statement I must object that it is simply unbiblical and wrong. God is under no obligation to show mercy at all much less to all.

The wonder of wonders is not that He doesn't show mercy to all but that He shows mercy to any! I have heard some go so far as to say if this is how God acts they don't want such a God! But, what kind of a God do you want?

- One who gives people what they deserve? Not me. We deserve eternal wrath.
- One who saves only those who prove they want to be saved, those who seek God? Not me. No one has ever sought God—God had to initiate the action and if God didn't start it no one would ever be saved.
- One who is at the mercy of the choices of people? That is no God at all but simply a pawn in the hands of people.

Often we seem so determined to make God's choice of us somehow dependent on us—what God sees in us, or what God foresees in us, or how we will respond. But Romans 9:16 wipes that possibility out for good. *"It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."*

*The wonder of wonders is not that He doesn't show mercy to all but that He shows mercy to any!*

God's choice of us is not dependent on something in us but rather something in Him. Some would say, "That is what I mean. If what you say is true then God is unfair; He is arbitrary in His choice." No, God's choice is not arbitrary. Arbitrary would mean God's choice is based on nothing, not even random. But God is clear that His choice is based on something but that something is not in us but in Him. Ephesians 1:5 says His choice is according to His good pleasure. God has not chosen to reveal to us yet what that basis is but we know it is in Him.

The Apostle Paul finishes this section in Romans with an outstanding hymn that sets forth the whole truth of it:

*"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen."*(11:33-36)

That is what Malachi is describing in those first few verses of his book. Israel, you didn't earn God's love. When you look at Esau/Edom don't you see it? That would have been your fate as certainly as it was his if God hadn't intervened.

*You didn't earn God's love and there was nothing in you that made God choose you. You*

And there was nothing in you that made God choose you. You are His by grace. And that will never change.

And I say to you, reader, "God loves you!" You didn't earn that love. When you look around you at those who want nothing to do with God do you understand that would be your fate if God had not intervened? God chose you, not based on what He saw in you but solely out of His good pleasure.

You might ask, "If God isn't required to choose all, how do I know if He has chosen me?"

- Do you truly care to know Jesus?
- Do you trust in His death as payment for your sin?
- Do you want to follow Him?
- Do you want to trust in His death on the cross for

your salvation?

- Do you even care about the things this passage describes?

Then I know you are chosen of God. For unless God chose you and loved you, you would not care about these things. He has placed that desire in you because He loves you. God's love for you is unconditional. Your performance didn't earn it and your performance can't lose it. You can't make Him love you more or less—it isn't dependent on you.

When you look around and see things aren't going the way you expected, it is tempting to wonder if God still cares. Never forget, His love for you is intimately personal; out of all He created, God decided to set His love on you. There is no truth that has revolutionized my thinking and my attitude more in the past two years than this great truth—God loves me! Me! Do you realize that God's love for you is not based on any performance of yours? Do you realize His love for you is not based on your response?

You didn't earn His love. You didn't choose Him; He chose you.



## Chapter Two

### Wiping my Spit from His Face Malachi 1:6-14

My undergraduate college days were in the late 60s and early 70s. At the University of Minnesota, it was not uncommon to go to classes and see hundreds and sometimes thousands of students demonstrating against the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. I was too busy trying to support a family and get through school to be very involved politically in those years but I well remember the times that an American flag would be burned. I remember being greatly disturbed when before burning the flag they would drag it along the ground and then dozens would step forward to spit on it. To them the flag and the country it represented were worthless or worse.

If you have watched the film *Jesus* or Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* then you have seen how the Roman soldiers took Jesus and stripped His clothes from Him and beat Him before making Him carry His own cross to the hill where He would be crucified. This was God in human flesh, standing before those Roman soldiers. Undoubtedly the most difficult thing to watch however was when they spit on Him. By spitting in His face, they showed their contempt for Him. They considered Him worthless or worse. Do you wonder how anyone could do that? Look at Malachi 1:6-14:

*"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. "But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' "You place defiled food on my altar. But you ask, 'How*

*have we defiled you?' By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.*

*"Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.*

*"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.*

*My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun, says the Lord*

*"But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.' And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD.*

*"Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations."*

God, through the prophet Malachi, says He has something against His people. It is as if they are spitting in God's face. Their actions are as obscenities hurled at God. Their



attitudes are as attacks on God's character. Before we hear God's very pointed criticism of maybe even some of our conduct, it is imperative that we hear again the setting for these words. When God spoke through Malachi to begin this book, He started with this great affirmation: "I love you!" In these opening verses, God declares His unconditional love for His people. We may have difficulty believing God loves us unconditionally, but God shows it through the world He has made, He says it through the good things we enjoy daily, and most of all He shouts it through His son Jesus. Who could reasonably doubt the love of a God who died for us?

And it is because He loves us that He gives His stern rebuke—otherwise He wouldn't care. It has probably happened to you many times. A couple of months ago I was in Wal-Mart and from near the checkout counters came the ear-piercing scream of a young child. You could tell by the sound that it was not a cry of pain or fear but of anger. And it went on not for 15 seconds but for over five minutes and could be heard all over the store. Like others, I was embarrassed for the parent and then angry at both the child and the parent for not putting a stop to it. Oh, I wished there was something I could do to help them but mostly I was upset, I didn't really care. I knew that in a few minutes I would walk away from the store, never see that child again, or so I hoped, and I would never have to deal with him. I didn't care so I walked away.

God can walk away too, but He doesn't because He loves us! When I was studying these hard, indicting words I was seeking a way to soften them. I was afraid you might only feel condemned and not loved. The more I studied, the more I realized God wasn't afraid of that. That's a lot like my father. When I had discipline coming, I got it. He didn't worry that I might dislike him or think he didn't love me.

Some parents today seem afraid—afraid their kids will think they don't love them. And some kids will use that on you: "You don't love me." "You hate me." That didn't work with my dad, however. His response was very clear: "It is because I do love you that you are about to get it!"

God begins, continues, and ends this book with His affirmations of His love for us and His desire for our good.

1:2-6 I love you

3:6-7 I am God who doesn't change, that is why you aren't destroyed.

4:1-2 I have a great future planned for those I love.

It is as if He says, "It is because I love you so deeply and so unconditionally, that I am going to discipline you—that I make these hard charges against you."

Look at God's complaint against Israel and His complaint against some of us. *"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.*

*"But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'" (1:6)*

The word "honor" is from the root word meaning "heavy" or "weighty." It meant impressive or worthy of respect. It is as if God says, "Wait a minute, there is something wrong here! I am your father—I love you. I am your master—Your creator. In fact, I am the Lord Almighty." Seven times in nine verses God is referred to as the "Lord Almighty." This title is used of God to refer to His authority over everything. He is king over all the world and will certainly some day visibly display that authority. I am the Lord Almighty, Your master and Your loving father and yet what do you do?

“You show contempt for My name!”

To show “contempt” for something is to treat it as if it has no value and even more to have an active disregard for it—to heap insult on it. To spit on Jesus is to show contempt, to indicate you think He has no value. When God says, “you show contempt for my Name,” He means you show contempt for Him. A name in the Bible stood for the person even more than it does in our culture. To show contempt for God's name was a way of saying they were showing contempt for everything about God.

You probably noticed in verse 6 that God mentions the priests specifically as the ones who are doing this. And it is true that God's indictment of His people is usually aimed

*I am your father—I love you.  
I am your master—Your creator.  
In fact, I am the Lord Almighty*

first at the leaders but includes the rest of the people as the chapter indicates. It is appropriate to include not only the rest of the people of Israel in this indictment but us as well.

How have we shown contempt for your name, the people ask? God answers: *“You place defiled food on my altar.”*

You probably remember that when God set up worship for the Israelites He was very specific about what kind of sacrifices were acceptable in the Tabernacle and later the Temple. For obvious reasons, sick, crippled and blind animals were not appropriate offerings to sacrifice. The offerings were to reflect as nearly as possible the perfect character of the God being worshipped. The offerings were to be the best the people had. But these people, under the leadership of the priests, had begun using unacceptable

offerings and giving them in worship to God.

The people again responded: "How have we defiled YOU, God?"

It was almost as if they were saying, "Maybe we haven't lived up to the letter of the law with our offerings, maybe we have let a few shoddy sacrifices slip through. Why are you so picky about our offerings. It doesn't mean we love you any less. So, how have we defiled YOU?"

Actions express attitudes that in turn express ones heart. Whether they wanted to admit it or not, their conduct in worship revealed their hearts and what they truly thought

*Whether they wanted to admit it or not, their conduct in worship revealed their hearts and what they truly thought of their Father God the Lord Almighty*

of their Father God the Lord Almighty. God again responds: How have you shown contempt for Me? Let Me show you. His answer begins at the end of verse 7.

Before going further with this description however, I want you to see something in the text that helps me understand this passage: If you look at verse 7 you find it is similar in content to verses 12 and 13. If you look at the first part of verse 8 you will see it is similar to the middle of verse 13. Verse 9 is the same idea as the very end of verse 13 and verse 10's idea is repeated in the first part of verse 14. And last, you see that verse 11 and the last part of 14 are the same. Clearly there is a repetition here and it is intentional to emphasize God's point.

Now let's go back to the issue: How have the people shown contempt for God?

First, in verse 7 as in verse 12, God says, You've shown contempt for Me by your attitudes.

Specifically He says, you've shown your contempt *"by saying that the Lord's table is contemptible."* A little study reveals that the "Lord's Table" as used here refers to the altar where the sacrifices were placed in the Temple. The Lord's Table here then is simply one illustration of all of the religious practices of the people in worship. God says your attitude toward the worship I called you to is one of contempt. You treat worship as if it were repetitious, pointless, and not valuable. They were going through the motions but inside they were treating worship as if it had no real value.

Spoken or not, their lackadaisical and careless attitudes were indicating: "Why pray?" "Why worship?" "Why give?" "Why spend my time serving?" "Why study God's word?" It doesn't produce anything of value—what's the point? The leaders and workers were thinking they were martyrs, overworked, and underpaid—they could hardly wait to get out from under the burden of service. God says it demonstrates an attitude of contempt for God—you place little or no real value on God.

Secondly, in verse 8 and again in the middle of verse 13, God says not just your attitude but your very actions show your contempt for Me.

*"When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?"*(1:8)

God was very clear in Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 15 that animals brought for sacrifice in worship were to be without blemish—they couldn't be sick, crippled, or blind. To make

an offering of these animals to God was blasphemous! But what God got was what was left over after the people got what they wanted. They gave to God what had no real value. It wasn't that it had absolutely no value but compared to what the people used it was of very little value. God got the leftovers.

When it came to worship, God got the time that couldn't be used for something more fun. Today it is reflected in sporadic attendance in worship. I'll worship if I have nothing better to do. Sunday is my day and if a worship service fits in then maybe I'll go. God should be glad if I show up two out of four weeks. Today it shows up in our reluctance to give more than passing attention to prayer and exclusive time with God. We fit God in when it's convenient if at all.

When it came to money, God got what was left over after they purchased all or nearly all they wanted. God sees what excites us when we think of spending money. He knows how often the expansion of His kingdom excites us. When it came to service, God got the time left over after all the other more important things were done. Are our attendance in worship together, our offerings, our time in prayer, our commitment to service of others, and our dedication to the Word of God indications of the regard we have for God? God says they are! Do we have little regard for God? Do we hold Him in contempt?

### **Tired in Worship**

Looking at verse 13, we see the third indication of the people's contempt for God. They said worship of God, religious activities, following God was a burden—it made them weary. Getting tired **in our** service for God is human. But being tired **of service for God** is something else. They thought about their responsibilities toward God and they

said, "It's just a burden"; they found it wearisome. It didn't have enough value to make it worth it.

After illustrating this contempt for God, God asks a question:

*"Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty. "Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty. And you say, "What a burden!" and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD."* (1:8b-9, 13c)

*Getting tired in our service for God is human.  
But being tired of service for  
God is something else*

Do you really think such worship has any value with God? Do you truly think God is pleased with such an attitude? Do you actually think you are buying favor with God by going through the motions?

And then in verse 10, God has a sharp response:

*"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands."* (1:10)

Basically God says He'd rather we didn't pretend to be worshipping. Shut the doors and stay home. Don't come and go through the motions. We come asking forgiveness but we have no heart for God. We come expecting His favor but we couldn't care less about His laws. God says our attitudes and our actions betray our hearts. God is not

valued in our lives. Or worse yet, we come expecting nothing at all—going through the motions but not even expecting to meet with God.

God says I'd rather you shut the doors. This shutting the doors is a metaphor for putting God out of our lives; we live as if we don't belong to God because that is what our conduct demonstrates. Verse 14 says something similar: If you are going to say one thing but do another, if you are going to pretend God is important in your life but then when you have to follow through and you don't, then a curse be on you. A curse means to be shut out of God's presence, just like shutting the doors to God's presence in verse 10.

*God says our attitudes and our actions betray  
our hearts*

As Jesus told the Pharisees, hypocrisy is the most despicable form of contempt for God. But that is not where God leaves it.

*"My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.*  
(1:11)

Here in verse 11 as at the end of verse 14 God gives the people a picture of the future. I see this as God's gracious call to repentance. God says, You may treat my name with contempt now but there is coming a day when My greatness, My value, will be evident everywhere. All over the world, from East to West, true worship will be given to God. The Lord Almighty, the king of kings, the one who will reign supreme when all other kingdoms fall, that God will



not be treated with contempt (as of little value) but He will be treated as the Great God—the God of greatest value. Return to Me, the Lord Almighty says in 3:7 and I will return to you! This is God's call throughout this book: turn away from your sin and I will forgive you and restore your relationship to Me.

When I began studying this text in Malachi, I was struck with that word "contempt." I had to ask myself in what ways do I hold God to be of little value. In what ways do I figuratively "spit in His face" as the Roman soldiers did as they led Him to the Cross? Are my indifference, my carelessness, my apathy, or my negative attitudes as spitting in God's face? And though the image is crude, I wondered, if I had the chance, would I reach out with a clean cloth and gently wipe that spit from His face as an indication of my sorrow at having treated Him so. Would I ask His forgiveness? Would He look me in the eye and with tears of compassion filling His own eyes would He say, "You are forgiven, go and sin no more?"

Please remember, God's indictment of our worship is not out of retribution but out of love—a loving call to a renewed relationship.



## Chapter Three

### Know My Word Malachi 2:1-9

TIME magazine once had a striking picture on the front cover of David Koresh of the Branch Davidians who had recently been incinerated in the fire at his Waco, Texas cult compound. In an almost surrealistic effect there was the juxtaposition of a close-up of Koresh, flames of fire, and words from the book of Revelation of the Bible. As a Christian who holds the Scriptures to be very important and sacred, it hurt to see something so precious as God's words put in connection with something as bizarre as the Branch Davidians. Throughout the article, words from Revelation were used as the visual unifying element. Whether the editors meant it this way or not, it conveyed the sense that the Scriptures were somehow behind such behavior. The Word of God was held in the same contempt as a self-immolating cult.

As it is written, *"God's name is blasphemed because of you."*

Christianity suffered even greater embarrassment when Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart fell in disgrace from their lofty positions of influence. Though we differed on style and even on some practices, Baker and Swaggart were one of us—they were proclaiming the same Christ, the same salvation, and the same Bible. It felt like God Himself was being ridiculed when Swaggart held up his Bible and used God's name to rationalize his actions while rebelling against godly authority.

As it is written, *"God's name is blasphemed because of you."*

Is it possible that Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart are just larger than life versions of some of us? It may seem negative but God, in Malachi 2, challenges His people with even more difficult words. The book of Malachi, in some ways, reminds me of the first three chapters of Revelation. In Revelation God speaks to seven churches and in almost every situation He affirms them but then adds, *"But I have something against you."* In Malachi, God begins with a resounding affirmation of His love for His people (as we studied in the first chapter) then He begins pointing out the issues in their lives that are a contradiction of their relationship to Him. He started with their worship: it was thoughtless and worthless. And, now, in the first part of chapter two, we see God's warning to the leaders of the people.

There are three things I want to point out:

1. God's warning
2. God's comparison between what God has called leaders to be and what some of them were
3. And, God's call to repentance.

In these verses God is calling leaders to return to a commitment to honor God through their lives and for their teaching to be consistent with His word.

## **The Warning**

What is the warning itself?

*"And now this admonition is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will*

*spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it." (2:1-3)*

Who is the warning to? Specifically God says, this admonition, this warning is for you "priests." These are not Roman, Eastern, Russian or Anglican priests—these are the descendants of Levi and Aaron, the Sons of Jacob, who were named by God as the religious leaders of the Israelites. Their job was not only to administer the sacrifices in the Temple but also to teach the people the word of God. There were very specific instructions given about the kind of men these teachers were to be and the kinds of lives they were to live.

*God has called each of us to exercise influence  
on others—to be salt and light  
in this world*

It is easy to see that Christian pastors are the New Testament counterpart to these Old Testament priests and that this warning is to present-day pastors and elders as well. I think it is appropriate to make that kind of application. But I believe, without any stretch, it is right to apply this warning to any Christian who exercises influence over others. This includes every Christian because God has called each of us to exercise influence on others—to be salt and light in this world. So this warning is for every one of us but I do want those of us who teach to take particular note.

What is the essence of God's charge in the warning?

*"You have not set your heart to honor me." (2:2b)*

To get an idea of what "setting your heart" means, listen to

these words from elsewhere in Scripture:

- Jesus said, don't set your heart on physical things like what you will eat or drink, or what you wear.
- The Psalmist wrote, don't set your heart on riches, but do set your heart on God's laws.
- Of King Jehoshaphat it was said, *"He sought God, his heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord."*
- Of King Rehoboam it was said, *"He did not set his heart to seek the Lord and he did evil."*

To "set your heart to honor God" is to "make up your mind," or "determine beforehand," to "give careful thought and serious consideration" to knowing and living for God. God's charge against the leaders is that they did not set their hearts to honor God. Their relationship to God was incidental to what they thought was more important in life.

*God's charge against the leaders is that they did not set their hearts to honor God. Their relationship to God was incidental to what they thought was more important in life.*

Their role as a teacher/leader of God's people, their role as an influence on other people for God, was secondary to the other concerns of life. In verses 5–9, God describes this more fully as He draws out a comparison between those who have "set their hearts to honor God" and those who have not. We'll look at that later.

But before we do, I want you to see how seriously God takes this matter. I want you to see the severity of the

warning:

*"If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. "Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it."*

(2:2-3)

For not "setting your heart to honor God," God says He will curse them and curse their blessings. There are two related issues here. When God put these people into leadership, He made a covenant with them. If they would honor God by their lives and teaching, God would bless them with both physical and spiritual good. In Deuteronomy 28 those blessings are spelled out. But God also said that if they would not honor Him, they would experience His severe discipline—the curses. In this verse in Malachi, God says the leaders themselves will experience those curses on their lives for their failure to honor Him.

But the second thing He says is that He will curse their blessings. Their role as a leader of the people was to teach and live in such a way that others would follow God. They were empowered by God to pronounce blessings on the people—blessings that God would honor. But now, God says, when you pronounce your blessing on them I will turn your blessing into a curse instead. A parent, a leader, or a teacher in our church who is not setting his/her heart to honor God is not just a neutral influence. God says they are worse than neutral; they are a negative influence.

But that is not all God says about how seriously He takes this matter. In verse 3 God says, *"because of you I will rebuke your descendants."* The Hebrew can be translated

loosely as either stopping the growth of the number of your descendants or stopping the growth of your crops. In either case, it is a curse on the leaders. Applying it to ourselves, it means leaders who do not set their hearts to honor God will have no effectiveness in their ministries.

The text goes on to say that God will take the feces from their animal sacrifices and spread it on their faces and throw them out with the intestines. In offering animal sacrifices, the priests were to carefully separate the entrails, the guts, from the meat. The intestines and feces were not to be offered. They were to be taken outside the city and burned as trash.

Imagine the picture: a priest smeared with animal guts and then dumped outside the city with the rest of the garbage. God says, if you dishonor Me, I will dishonor you. If you disgrace Me before others, I will disgrace you. I have friends in ministry who recently, because of their dishonoring God, have been removed from their place of influence; their names are remembered now for moral failure, their families have been shamed and scarred, and their children will live with that disgrace for the rest of their lives. God takes His honor very seriously. He is not to be trifled with. No one is to take His name or especially teach or influence others in His name without setting their heart to honor God—it is to be their highest priority.

## **Comparisons**

After seeing the warning itself, I want you to look with me now at the comparison God draws between what He called leaders to be and what some of them were. In verses 5-7, God gives the character and job description of a godly leader. In verses 8-9, He describes, in contrast, what some of the leaders were doing. First look at God's desire for leaders:



*This called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty." (2:5b-7)*

I find three things that characterize a godly leader:

*A godly leader reveres God. He is so aware of the greatness, glory and worth of God that he stands in awe of God.*

1. He reveres God. He is so aware of the greatness, glory and worth of God that he stands in awe of God. God's personality has captured his attention; honoring God has become his life's ambition.

2. He knows God's word and he teaches it accurately. Read verse 7: *"the lips of a priest/leader ought to preserve knowledge."* It ought to be expected by children of their parents, by students of their teachers, and parishioners of their elders and pastors, that they are serious students of God's Word—that these leaders work hard at knowing what God says.

The primary means God ordained for changing lives is His Word. In 2 Timothy 3:2-4, Paul describes what sinful people are like.

*"People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than*

*lovers of God."*

The description is as true today as then. And Paul is not describing the world around us but in these verses is describing people who claim to be Christians. If Paul wants this leader Timothy, to whom he is writing, to do something to change these conditions, I would expect Paul, at this point, to indicate the most powerful spiritual weapon Timothy could use to turn people around. And what is that weapon? The Scriptures: Preach and teach the Word, Timothy. God says, curses on us if we are leaders and don't study the Word and teach it.

*Paul indicates the most powerful spiritual weapon Timothy could use , the Scriptures.*

People should expect to hear Bible truth from leaders. Children have the right to expect Bible truth from their parents. Students in any class at church have the right to expect Bible truth from their teachers.

3. He lives out what he has learned from God's word. Verse 6 says it well:

*"They walk with me in peace and uprightness and turn many from sin."*

Not only did they know the word of God, but they also personally lived it. It is written of Ezra that he devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord. Paul wrote to Timothy, *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."* They were careful to live above reproach. They would abstain from all forms of evil, even the ones considered insignificant by others—their hearts were set to honor God.

But in verses 8-9, we see instead a sad description of the

leaders at the time:

*"But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law."*

They were not following God. They had the same standards or lack of them as the world had. Their attitudes, their habits, their language, their goals and aspirations were no different than those around them. They were, *"blind guides."*

They were supposed to be leaders of a better way, of a godly way but they were teaching mostly by example in ways that were leading their children, their students, and their friends away from God. Parents and youth leaders can't personally ingest the sewage of much of the motion picture industry and then pretend they can lead children to godliness.

Parents and teachers can't personally disobey God and expect their children or students to do anything other. Jesus said, *"If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large stone hung around his neck and be drowned in the sea."* I believe He feels strongly about the subject!

They were corrupting the covenant God had with them. The agreement was that they would lead and teach people to honor God but by their teaching and their example they despised God. God says, "therefore I will despise you and humiliate you."

## Repentance

The third and final part of this warning from God is in verse 4:

*"And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty. (2:4)*

God's desire is for repentance, for change. He warns them and us so that we may see our sin of dishonoring God and turn to truly honoring Him. God doesn't say all of this just so He can blast them. He graciously, though not gently, gives a very stern warning—He loves them and He loves you and me. He calls us to change. And gives us hope!

I think it may be time for some of us who have leadership, teaching, or parenting responsibilities to check our hearts and then reset them to honor God. It may mean some significant changes in our lifestyles. It may mean some confession of carelessness and disregard for God. It may mean some reordering of priorities. And, it will certainly mean a reappraisal of the great responsibility we bear as teachers and leaders of God's people.

## Chapter Four

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### **Marrying a Non-Christian Malachi 2:10-12**

She was attractive and energetic. She laughed easily and people seemed to be naturally drawn to her. They met at a volleyball game—they worked for the same company but he hadn't even seen her before they started playing in the league. He introduced himself and after a few weeks he asked her to have dinner with him after a game. Within two months he felt a growing affection that she seemed to share. She was so easy to be with, their interests so similar, with so many values in common.

But one thing bothered him—it had to do with religion. Oh, she attended church but there was no indication she had a personal relationship with Jesus. Discussing faith in Christ seemed to make her uncomfortable. She said she believed in God but he could tell her religion was academic and cultural, not personal and alive. Something inside him said he should end the relationship. During his growing up years he had been taught not to date anyone who wasn't committed to Christ. By that time however he knew he loved her and he decided he would just show her what it meant to be a true follower of Jesus; just give her time, she'd become a real Christian.

For the next two months he tried talking to her about Christ but because it seemed to upset her and caused her to withdraw from him he stopped bringing it up. By this time the struggle inside was intense; he loved her and felt a strong emotional attachment to her, and he knew he wanted to marry her. But he also knew what he had been taught: don't marry a non-Christian. At that point he looked

for any evidence that would suggest she was maybe a true Christian but was just different in the way she expressed it. He also began to question the wisdom of making such a big deal out of whether she was a Christian or not—after all she was a fine, moral, high values person who acted more like a Christian than lots of Christians he knew.

*He also began to question the wisdom of making such a big deal out of whether she was a Christian or not—after all she was a fine, moral, high values person who acted more like a Christian than lots of Christians he knew.*

Eleven months later, over the objections of his parents and his pastor, they were married. In the first year after their wedding, the novelty of marriage and the busyness of life combined to make it an apparently successful union of two people. He did notice, however, that though she attended church with him it was with reluctance and certainly without interest. After about a year he grew tired of "forcing" her to go and found it was easier to just not bring it up. Though he felt a little guilty, Sunday mornings became their time.

It was after their son was born that he felt the new need to get back to church and to God. But by this time in their marriage she clearly rejected it. She said she had always felt uncomfortable around his church and his church friends—they were holier-than-thou and hypocritical. Furthermore she was tired of his reluctance to join in enthusiastically with her friends and their parties and entertainment. And most of all it irritated her greatly that he insisted on giving money to the church when there were things they couldn't afford.

Within four years of their wedding he felt he had made a great mistake. The more involved she became with her work friends the more involved he became at church. At church there was a woman who seemed to understand fully what he was going through. She too had an unbelieving spouse and the two of them spent hours over coffee talking about the impossibility of their situations. Within a year, he had convinced himself that God couldn't possibly want anyone to be as miserable as he was in his marriage. He further convinced himself that his son would be better off if he and his wife stopped their constant bickering by him moving out. And most of all he convinced himself that he had the right to be married to someone who understood him and believed as he did. And certainly God would look with favor on the union of two people who loved God so much. Five years and one child after what seemed so good, the marriage ended.

Though the account I have just given is intentionally fictional, this story, with varying details could be told over and over again by people within this congregation not to mention the many who have walked away from any relationship to God. I told the story to illustrate the breaking of two major covenants.

- A covenant with God was broken when he emotionally tied himself to and married a person not committed to following Jesus.
- And a covenant with his wife was broken when he divorced her.

In the second chapter of Malachi, God addresses these two covenants.

*"Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?"*

*Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?" (Malachi 2:10)*

Speaking for God, Malachi is writing to those who call themselves God's people. He emphasizes that by asking several rhetorical questions: "Don't we have the same father? Don't we have the same creator?" The obvious answer is "yes"—those who are trusting in God are part of the same family—God's family. We belong to God and to one another; we have obligations as a result of being part of the same family.

Malachi then asks, "Then why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?" A covenant is an agreement, an agreement between two parties wherein they both commit to certain obligations. Years earlier, the Israelites had entered into a covenant with God. God would guide them, bless them, and keep them if they would walk in His ways, believe His word and trust His promises. But, Malachi writes, you have treated that covenant-agreement as if it is worthless by the way you break your agreement with God and with each other.

Some of you may be looking at a King James Version or New American Standard Bible translation. There you will see the words "deal treacherously." This is a person who makes an agreement with someone leading them to believe they can be counted on but then doesn't keep the agreement thus setting the other person up and then violating the relationship. That is treachery. The New International Version (NIV) translates it "break faith." They trusted you but you broke faith. There is the basic charge God makes against the people: They are covenant breakers—they deal treacherously and break faith with God and each other.

In these verses Malachi points out two of the ways in which



they are doing this. The first is in verses 11 and 12. God says it is a detestable, abominable, loathsome thing you do. Those are strong words. What? What is so despicable in God's eyes? Wouldn't you expect God to say it is murder or blasphemy or something truly horrible? But what is it?

*"You treat my sanctuary, my dwelling place as if it is worthless—you profane it."*

How? Oh, God what is it we do that causes You to say that we think Your dwelling place is worthless?

*"You marry the daughter of a foreign god."*

Followers of God were marrying people who weren't followers of God. In Exodus 34, and several other places in the Bible, God tells His people that He has made a

*Don't engage in covenants or agreements that  
will compromise your  
relationship to God.*

covenant with them and part of that covenant is that they are not to marry people who are not faithful followers of God. God says if you do marry them they will turn your hearts away from God. Several times in Scripture, Solomon is used as an example of a man whose spiritual life was compromised by his marriage to women who did not love his God. In the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 6 as elsewhere, God's commands His people to never bind themselves to unbelievers. Don't engage in covenants or agreements that will compromise your relationship to God. One clear application of that is given in 1 Corinthians where God instructs a believer to marry only another believer.

Jesus said a person cannot serve two masters. When you make a covenant you bind yourself, you obligate yourself, you commit yourself to that relationship. When you committed your life to Christ, you responded to the

covenant that He offered—a covenant of grace and obedience to Christ. When you marry someone you bind, obligate and commit yourself to that relationship.

In verse 11, Malachi says these who marry unbelievers are desecrating the sanctuary the Lord loves. The Apostle Paul made the same point in 1 Corinthians 6:

We belong to Christ, we are His dwelling place—God has chosen by His Spirit to take up residence in us. Would we then join ourselves to someone who doesn't desire to follow God, someone who doesn't belong to Him and thereby force God to be joined to such a person? You have said you are committed to God, set apart for His use and then you join yourself to someone who is not committed to God or set apart for His use. If that person has no relationship to Christ then you have committed yourself in mutually exclusive directions. Christ and that unbelieving dating partner or spouse are moving in opposite directions. God says when you marry a non-Christian you violate the covenant you made with God—you break faith, you deal treacherously with God—you made an agreement you now don't intend to keep.

There are three kinds of people who have the most need to respond to this teaching from Scripture:

1. There are those who are **not now dating**.

God's instruction is very clear—don't marry a person who isn't a follower of Jesus Christ. It is not that Christ-followers are better than others but that they are so different. If you have covenanted with God by trusting in Christ and committing to following Him then you are moving in a very different direction than one who doesn't know Jesus.

And it is fraudulent to pretend you are compatible when you know you have different masters. I have often said to

those who are honest enough to admit they do not want to be a Christ-follower, "You don't want to marry someone who is fully committed to Jesus because they will not be the spouse you thought you were getting." And it seems equally obvious that if you aren't to marry such a person then you shouldn't date such a person. In this culture, casual recreational dating is the way most serious relationships begin. Don't start what you cannot conclude. Students, decide now who your master will be—if Jesus, then obey His command and don't link yourself emotionally or in marriage to someone who isn't following Him.

*Dating or marrying a Non-Christian is expressly forbidden by God.*

Parents, teach it as a family value from early in your child's life and hold to it tenaciously when your children begin building opposite-sex friendships and dating. Early in their high school years, I asked each of my daughters to write out a dating covenant—an agreement with God on what they would and would not do in dating. I asked to see that agreement so I could hopefully appropriately remind them of it from time to time.

Dads and moms, build friendships with Christian families with children your children's age. Let them meet and know godly adult men and women whose marriages are healthy and God honoring—give them role models. Encourage, don't discourage, your children to be involved in the activities of an evangelical church with children their own age. I know of parents who actually discourage their children from being involved in Christian activities by encouraging them to be involved in sports or hobbies that conflict with their church activities. While not every child or high school student attending a church is necessarily a

Christian there certainly is a greater likelihood that in a church they will have the opportunity to build same-sex and opposite-sex friendships with other children and young adults who know and love the Lord. I again say to you who are not yet dating and to your parents, God's word is abundantly clear, "Don't marry (and by inference don't date) someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ."

2. The second kind of person who needs to respond to this teaching from the Bible is the person who is **now dating someone who is not a follower of Christ.**

Maybe you have just begun a relationship. Maybe you have already become emotionally and romantically involved. Maybe you are engaged to be married.

This is one of the most difficult things to ask a person to do: break an engagement or break off a serious relationship with a non-Christian.

*This is one of the most difficult things to ask a person to do: break an engagement or break off a serious relationship with a non-Christian.*

What many Christians are tempted to do is to rationalize, continuing the relationship by saying they will help them become Christians. We call it "missionary dating." And it seems most Christians who are dating non-Christians convince themselves this is why they are together—to lead that person to Christ. And while there are examples of where it apparently succeeded I could parade before you many examples where it ended in unequally yoked marriages: Christians violating the explicit command of their God and paying the price in their marriages. As difficult as this may be, God feels strongly about a Christian marrying a non-Christian. Read verse 12:

*"As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty." (2:12)*

To understand this metaphor, imagine the people of Israel traveling by foot across the Sinai desert as they escape from Egypt. They were a large group of people, hundreds of thousands. They traveled by tribe, or by clan and when they stopped at night they set up tents over a huge area of land. To stay alive it was imperative they stay together. They would be lost if they were separated from the larger group while traveling through enemy territory and through inhospitable terrain. To be cut off from the tents of Jacob was to be put out of the community—to be treated as an unbeliever.

My belief is that when someone openly defies God's command, whatever that command is, the person is to be challenged by their Christian friends and eventually the church. And according to Matthew 18, if they do not repent, change their minds, they are to be treated as an unbeliever. They have evidenced they are not Christians by their flagrant disregard for the teaching of the Word of God and their unwillingness to repent. It is for that reason we on staff at my church are unwilling to perform the marriage of someone who professes to be a follower of Christ marrying someone who is not. I suspect that if we take this teaching seriously we would go further than that and even exercise church discipline if they persist in proceeding with the wedding.

It will probably be one of the most difficult things you will ever do but God's word is clear: break it off. Be done with it. Decide today whom you will serve. I said it would be one of the most difficult things you have ever done but not the most difficult—the most difficult would be to care about

following your God and be married to someone who doesn't. I beg you parents and friends of those who are engaged to unbelievers, don't let it pass. Don't say your friendship is more important. Is what they think of you more important than their obedience to God?

3. The third kind of person who needs to respond to this teaching from God's word is the person who is **now married to someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ**. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 deals specifically with this subject:

*"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."*(7:12-14)

Don't divorce your unbelieving spouse just because he or she is an unbeliever. In fact, God desires that your presence be a positive spiritual influence on them and your children. The Apostle Peter went on to say, *"if your spouse does not believe the Word of God, live in such a way that they may be won over without words by your pure and reverent behavior."*

Someone could hear these words and say, "There, isn't that a good reason to marry a non-Christian? I will marry them and then win them to Christ." In both the instruction from Paul and from Peter, the counsel is to those husbands or wives who became Christians after they were married but their spouses were not yet believers. There is no support in this text to disobey God and knowingly marry someone who is not a follower of Christ.

But what about those who did disobey God and married someone who was not and is not a believer? Upon confession of sin there is forgiveness from our gracious God. I am so thankful for that. When we acknowledge our sin and turn to God, He forgives and gives us grace to press on in obedience, even the obedience of being a faithful, loving spouse to an unbeliever. Again I say to you who are dating a non-Christian or planning to marry someone who is not a believer, don't attempt to circumvent the clear teaching of God by saying you will go ahead and marry them and if it doesn't work out you'll just ask God's forgiveness. I once had a person ask me, "I know I shouldn't get a divorce but if I do it anyway will God forgive me later when I ask for it?" I think it is dangerous to trifle with the mercy of God. Obey God today. Don't presume upon His grace.

Let me say a word to those of you who would acknowledge you are not a follower of Jesus Christ but you are married to someone who is. You are a very fortunate person. You are married to a person who takes his or her commitment to you very seriously; they believe God is witness to your marriage. Further they care about you not only here and now, but also about your eternal destiny. You could not be married to someone who would care for you more deeply than they do. And furthermore, their prayers for you are powerfully effective. I urge you to not only delight in them but respond to their God—in Him alone is forgiveness of sins, lasting purpose in life, a sense of true belonging and security about the life to come.

Hear the teaching of God's word: A detestable thing has been committed in Israel; they have desecrated the dwelling place of God by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. If you date and marry, date and marry only in the Lord.





## Chapter Five

### Divorce Malachi 2:13-16

It doesn't take a social scientist to see that many of the children and youth of this country are in trouble. One in four is raised by just one parent. One in five is classified as poor.

Half a million babies are born each year to teenage girls ill-prepared to assume the responsibilities of parenthood. Another half million babies each year are killed in their teenage mothers' wombs. That means one million young men each year have likewise entered into a relationship for which they are not prepared.

Yes, every generation has decried the condition of its youth, but no one would disagree that a higher percentage of our children than ever are in danger. A *TIME* magazine cover story wrote of the confusion in the minds of our youth—confusion over values:

"In times past some youth broke the rules. Today they don't know what the rules are."<sup>1</sup> And largely that is because the adults in their lives won't tell them what the rules are or won't model those rules even if they do.

Where would you expect to read the following quotes:

"Parent's bear the primary responsibility for...providing moral guidance and direction" (for their children).

"Children do best when they have the personal involvement and material support of a father and a mother and when both parents fulfill their responsibility to be loving

providers.”

“The family is and should remain society's primary institution for bringing children into the world and for supporting their growth and development throughout childhood.”<sup>2</sup>

*"The family is and should remain society's primary institution for bringing children into the world and for supporting their growth and development throughout childhood."<sup>2</sup>*

No, these were not from a Focus on the Family newsletter or a Chuck Swindoll book on parenting. These quotes were from the report of the National Commission on Children appointed by the President and Congress of the United States and chaired by Senator John D. Rockefeller IV. Now even the social engineers of our age recognize the trouble we're in. That same report indicated that children from single-parent families are two to three times more likely to suffer from developmental, learning or behavioral problems.<sup>3</sup> They wrote that 43% of mother-only families are poor compared to only 7% of two-parent families.<sup>4</sup> And only 36% of black households are headed by a married couple.<sup>5</sup>

The April cover of the *Atlantic* magazine declared, "Dan Quayle Was Right." With memory of the former Vice President and Murphy Brown flap, Barbara Whitehead reported that the scientific evidence is overwhelming: The decline of the two biological parent family is extracting a horrific toll on our nation's children.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean every single parent is failing or that every child of a single parent family is doomed—by God's grace, there are many

single parents who are succeeding but that does not mitigate the growing crisis in our land.

The government's commission on children reports that 84,000 children each month experience the divorce of their parents. In fact, the report admits, divorce and separation are the major causes of single parenthood in the U.S. I believe no one factor is contributing more devastatingly to the decline of the family in America than divorce. Divorce is an assault on our children's physical, psychological and spiritual welfare. It is a killer of the very context in which human relationships (adult as well as children) are best nurtured to maturity and fruitfulness. And it is a blight on the country, causing its very soul to wither. Please understand me, this study is to the perpetrators of divorce and not to the victims, either the spouses or the children.

*Psychology Today* produced a lengthy article on the changing American family. The author wrote that until the 1950s the dominant family form in America was what he calls the **Institutional Family**. This family was based on a network of extended family members, was expected to produce economically and produced a marriage seen as a partnership. Family loyalty and traditions were very important and the highest value was responsibility.

But by the 1950s a new kind of family was emerging. This was the **Psychological Family**. This family was more mobile and thus less tied to the extended family. It was more private and it revolved around the goals of the individual members. The basis for continuing a marriage was no longer responsibility but mutual attraction. The number one value of this new family was satisfaction.<sup>7</sup>

But between 1966 and 1974 this Psychological Family came apart as personal freedom and self-actualization became the most important things in life. The late 60s saw a spate

of books telling us that self-fulfillment, and individual satisfaction were everyone's right. By the early 70s authors were telling us, in books such as *The Open Marriage*, we should be rid of the old moralistic notions of marriage and enter into the exciting new world of unlimited sexual freedom and marital intimacy. The problem is it didn't work. Spouses weren't so tolerant and with every member of the family watching out for Number One, the family came apart.

Following that came a new flurry of books telling us that divorce was the ultimate growth experience and that children would actually benefit from it. The force driving the whole change in the culture was the acceptance of personal satisfaction as a higher value than responsibility. This is not the first time a people succumbed to that lie. It happened 2500 years ago in Israel as well.

Look at the second chapter of Malachi. In Malachi 2:13 we find the people of God discouraged. They are powerless in the face of their foreign governors and their fields and lives are not as fruitful as they expected. Something is clearly wrong—God isn't blessing them like they expected. They cry out to God in their prayers and they bring their offerings in worship but sense they are out of touch with God—that He doesn't hear them or respond. They go through all the motions of worship and living out their lives but it's without joy.

In verse 14, they ask, "Why? What's wrong?" Malachi responds:

*"It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant."*

You are divorcing each other—that is what's wrong! You

are not experiencing the blessing of God because you are sabotaging yourselves. As a people, divorce is ever more common. The very family that ought to provide for the physical and emotional security of its members is being torn apart.

### **A Broken Covenant**

In verses 14 and 15, I see two reasons why God reacts so strongly to divorce:

The first of them, in verse 14, is that divorce breaks a covenant. When you study the Scriptures you discover that God's plan for people throughout the ages is built on covenants. These covenants are agreements: covenant-agreements between God and people and covenant-agreements between people such as the marriage covenant.

*God's plan for people throughout the ages is built on covenants, agreements between God and people and covenant-agreements between people such as the marriage covenant.*

Our spiritual lives are based on God's covenant with us. The New Covenant (New Testament) is that God will forgive our sins based on Jesus' death in our place. Our response must be one of obedient faith in the person and work of Christ. Not only our spiritual lives but our social lives as well are built on covenants. Government is built on a covenant. God established an agreement between the government and the people. The governors had responsibilities and the governed had responsibilities.

Marriage likewise is built on a covenant. In Genesis 2,

Moses, writing at God's instruction describes marriage as a person leaving his parents and joining himself to his wife and the two becoming one. Implied throughout is the covenant-agreement the two make to each other. In fact in Proverbs 2:1,7, marriage is specifically called a covenant made before God.

And in Ezekiel 16:8, marriage, used as an analogy, is spoken of as a solemn oath by which two people enter into a covenant. Incidentally, it is for this reason that it is wrong for two people to just decide to live together. There are people who wonder what the big deal is about a wedding. After all if they love each other why can't they just move in together? The "big deal" is the covenant! A covenant is a very specific and intentional commitment accompanied by symbols of that covenant and attested to by witnesses. It is not a marriage and it is fornication if there is not the formal entering of a covenant-agreement.

It is interesting that for at least 4000 years some of the accouterments of the making of the marriage covenant have remained the same:

- In Genesis 29, there was a feast as part of the marriage
- In Psalm 45, there is reference to the bridesmaids
- In Genesis 24, the veil is spoken of
- In Isaiah 61, there is reference to the special wedding clothing.
- And in Jeremiah 7, there is a wedding procession through the streets.

But most important has been the spoken taking of the oath, the vows of the covenant.

Another characteristic of a covenant is that it is unalterable

and permanent. God intended that the covenants we made with Him and with each other be kept. Our God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. Our God has called us to make the proper covenants and to keep them. To break a covenant is despicable in God's eyes. To break one covenant is to treat all covenants as less valuable. For millions in a culture to disregard their oaths, their vows, is to create a climate in which all vows are cheapened.

*God intended that the covenants we made with Him and with each other be kept. To break one covenant is to treat all covenants as less valuable.*

Malachi gives us a sense of the injustice, unfairness and downright treachery of breaking the covenant of marriage. He describes the wife in three ways (it could be applied to the husband as well):

- She is the wife of your youth,
- She is your partner, and
- She is the wife of your marriage covenant.

One Puritan writer summarizes it very crisply:

"She whom you have wronged was the companion of your earlier and brighter days, when in the bloom of her young beauty she left her father's house and shared your early struggles, and rejoiced in your later success; who walked arm in arm with you along the pilgrimage of life, cheering you in its trials by her gentle ministry; and now, when the bloom of her youth has faded and the friends of her youth have gone, when her father and mother whom she left for you are in the grave, then you cruelly cast her off as a worn-out, worthless thing and insult her holiest affections by putting another in her place."<sup>8</sup>

God declares He hates divorce—it is the breaking of a covenant you made with another human being and God was one of the witnesses to it. Covenant breaking is a serious matter to God. It is for that reason, Malachi writes, that your prayers are not heard and your worship is unacceptable.

## **Destroying God's Kingdom Building**

But there is another reason why God hates divorce:

*"Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring." (2:15)*

This is admittedly a hard verse to interpret because it is first of all a hard verse to translate. The Hebrew is quite obscure. But Hebrew scholars indicate that the sense given in the NIV is probably closest to the meaning. And certainly the meaning given here is taught elsewhere in the Scriptures: By divorcing your spouse you are corrupting, you are destroying, and treating as worthless two primary means God has established by which He will build His kingdom. Those two primary means are Godly parents and a Godly marriage.

The seventh commandment of the Ten Commandments is to *"honor your father and your mother."* When that command is coupled with the many other instructions throughout the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that God ordained the family, a mother and a father, to be the school where God's way of life is learned and practiced. God designed marriage (one man and one woman who are following Him) to be the nurturing environment in which children (the parents' off-spring) would learn of God. I think it is safe to say that more people come to saving-faith in Christ through the godly influence of their parents than by any other single means—maybe than by all other means



put together. When divorce occurs, it does more than change people's addresses. It destroys the best, God-ordained nursery for young spiritual life. Writing of divorce, one psychologist spoke of the effect on children:

"Today half of all marriages end in divorce. People who cohabit, just live together, are more likely to divorce, not less. Most divorced people remarry. But more second marriages end in divorce than firsts end in divorce and more thirds than seconds and so on. More and more children are living in single parent, stepparent and cohabiting homes.

*God designed marriage to be the  
nurturing environment in which  
children would learn of God.*

"While there are many notable exceptions, children of marriages that end in divorce, and children of single mothers are more likely to be poor and stay poor, to be dependent on welfare, essentially to be deserted by their fathers both financially and relationally, to fail to achieve academically, to get pregnant, abuse drugs and alcohol, to get in trouble with the law, and to be sexually and physically abused.

"Children in stepfamilies are generally worse off than kids in single parent homes. They are more likely to be sexually or physically abused. They are less likely to feel a part of a family. Stepparents invest less rather than more time in their kids. In perhaps the most tragic irony, many have difficulty forming lasting love relationships and are more likely to get divorced themselves."<sup>9</sup>

Is that environment one in which children can best come to know, trust and love God? Is it any wonder God hates divorce?

## Godly Parents

I said divorce corrupts two primary means by which God has chosen to build His kingdom: the first was godly parents and the second is a godly marriage. When the Apostle Paul spoke of marriage to the Ephesians, he made reference to the same Genesis text I think is alluded to here in Malachi 2:15: in marriage the two become one. The Apostle Paul uses the marriage analogy to describe the Christ-Church relationship. Godly permanent marriages are witnesses to those around of the relationship God desires with each of us—an enduring relationship of love.

That is not far-fetched. In John 17, Jesus said our unity, our enduring love for each other is the strongest testimony to the world around us that Jesus has come from the Father. Certainly, marriage, the most intimate of relationships should best reflect that unity demonstrating God's life-changing power. Divorce says to a watching world, there is no more love and unity here than what you experience. Divorce corrupts the witness of a godly marriage. Is it any wonder God hates divorce?

Even the secular psychologists and sociologists recognize that what has happened in our culture is a value shift. We have moved from being a people who value responsibility most to a people who value personal and immediate satisfaction most. Even in the Church, as in Israel of old, we have made the same shift. The dominant value is immediate personal happiness. Obedience to God, trust in the ultimate justice of God, and faithfulness to the covenants we make are secondary to our "rights," what we "deserve," our "freedom," and our limited perception of what is "best" for us.

Malachi ends this warning with a call to "stop it"—stop breaking faith. Guard yourself in your spirit or "watch out

for your life" and stop divorcing one another. Malachi's teaching and warning are not very popular today. He doesn't seem to realize that we are not supposed to make people feel guilty. You see, one of the highest virtues in our culture is the uncritical acceptance of whatever people want to think or do. They alone are the judge of whether their action is right or wrong. To suggest that there are absolutes by which decisions are made, even hard, painful, life-long decisions, is considered impossible, impractical, and opposed to human freedom.

*Obedience to God, trust in the ultimate justice of God, and faithfulness to the covenants we make are secondary to our "rights," and our limited perception of what is "best" for us.*

But Malachi comes along and says "stop it"—don't divorce and if you do "shame" on you. The world wants nothing to do with shame or guilt—they don't want to hear it because the world doesn't know what to do with it. And because they don't know how to handle it, they try to pretend guilt and shame don't exist. But guilt does exist and God knows how to handle it: If we have sinned, God calls us to repentance and confession.

*"And if we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (I John 1:9) Our gracious God pardons even the sin of covenant breaking.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

What then do we do in light of God's teaching on divorce? First of all we pray for, encourage and support those who are victims of divorce. The people of God, the church, more than any others bear the responsibility to help those who have been treated unjustly through divorce

Second, we must teach and model for our children and each other the inviolability of marriage. Each married couple bears responsibility not only for their children and grandchildren but for every other person in the community. Yes, we either build or tear down the concept of covenant keeping by our conduct. Your children are confronted by divorce all the time. Talk about it, assure them of the security of their home, help them see that strain, difficulty, and problems in marriage don't mean divorce but mean faithful hard work.

*We must teach and model for our children and each other the inviolability of marriage.*

Third, we must help those who are married. I believe the most important thing we do for marriages at Southern Gables is the weekly teaching of God's Word in sermons, Sunday School, Bible Studies and through the encouragement of personal Bible study. The strongest foundation of an enduring marriage covenant is one or two people who are personally committed to obedience to Jesus Christ. But in addition to the regular teaching of the Bible there needs to be Godly counsel available. There needs to be special emphases on marriage in Adult Congregations and Growth Groups. There need to be seminars made available where couples can give concentrated attention to their marriages.

Fourth, we must help those who are now struggling with the temptation to divorce. Some of you are in very difficult marriages—divorce is not only tempting but it seems like the only reasonable solution. I agree there are exceptions to "no divorce." God specifically says that when your spouse breaks the covenant by adultery or by desertion you are not bound by the covenant any longer. Incidentally I do believe God gives you the freedom to reestablish the covenant if you wish. God would rather we be **for** marriage than looking for church-sanctioned ways to get out of our marriage.

But with those exceptions in mind, I do believe God has forbidden us from breaking the marriage covenant. Let me quickly say I do not mean that a man or a woman is thereby required to stay in a situation dangerous to him or her or their children. While divorce may not be appropriate, separation is certainly called for when lives are at risk. I do not say any of this lightly. I have sat with hundreds of people and my heart has broken as I have heard of the pain through which you are living day after day and the seeming impossibility of your situations. But even as I hear the pain, I know that my God loves you more deeply than I ever could and He has said to trust Him, to believe Him that enduring obedience will bring a more lasting joy and satisfaction than the temporary respite of divorce.

And what we must offer to each other is the day-by-day support of prayer, listening and encouragement—standing with each other through those struggling hours. We must all decide to stand with each other and hold each other accountable for the covenants we made.

James Dobson, of Focus on the Family, once wrote of his father's letter to his fiancé:

"I want you to understand and be fully aware of my feelings concerning the marriage covenant which we are about to enter. I have been taught at my mother's knee and in harmony with the word of God that the marriage vows are inviolable, and by entering them I am binding myself for life. The idea of estrangement from you through divorce will never at any time be permitted to enter my thinking. I'm not naive in this. On the contrary, I'm fully aware of the possibility, unlikely as it now appears, that mutual incompatibility or other unforeseen circumstances could result in extreme mental suffering. If such becomes the case, I am resolved for my part to accept it as a consequence of the commitment I am now making, and to bear it, if necessary, to the end of our lives together."<sup>10</sup>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> *TIME*, May 30, 1993

<sup>2</sup> National Commission on Children, *Beyond Rhetoric*, 1990, p. XIX

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24

<sup>5</sup> Family in America Feb 92, p. 1NR

<sup>6</sup> *Christianity Today*, May 17, 1993, p. 20

<sup>7</sup> *Psychology Today*, June, 1992

<sup>8</sup> Walter Kaiser, *The Communicator's Commentary, Micah to Malachi*, p. 465

<sup>9</sup> *Christianity Today*, May 17, 1993, p. 20

<sup>10</sup> Source Unknown

## Chapter Six

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### **The Certainty of Justice Malachi 2:17-3:7**

The Denver Post gave a story of a 42-year-old father who held a pillow over the face of his young child so he would stop crying. The child suffocated. Several years ago television brought us daily pictures of the atrocities committed in Bosnia—Muslim women and children burned out of their homes and then shot like animals. The barrage of pictures and the sheer magnitude of the pain and suffering in the world usually allow us to escape feeling anything about what we see. But every so often we hear a particular story or see a specific event that bothers us deeply and we wonder how such injustice can be allowed.

By the time Sharon was 2 years old, her parents knew she was different from her two older sisters. She couldn't talk right and she seemed slow. Probably out of embarrassment her mother began to treat Sharon differently. She withdrew from Sharon emotionally and even physically. By the time Sharon was kindergarten age someone realized she could get help with her speech problem and slow learning ability. But her mother didn't want Sharon to get the help, saying it was a waste of time and money. But therapy began and every day on the bus on the way, Sharon's mother would remind her that Sharon was the reason she, the mother, did not have a new coat. Every day she would be reminded that her therapy was depriving the rest of the family from things they wanted. I can only imagine the pain in that little 5-year-old's heart when day after day she would hear her mother express such rejection.

Whether it is in Bosnia, or Somalia, or a little child in Denver, there are things that go on day after day and year after year in our world that I can't explain and I most often just dismiss from my thinking because I don't know how to handle them emotionally. However as one who believes in God, every so often something inside of me wants to scream out, "Why doesn't God do something about that?" Years ago I saw part of a television program where they were interviewing Hugh Hefner, the man who built the Playboy empire. There sat a man who made millions exploiting women and pridefully engaging in every kind of indecency imaginable. There was a man bragging about his past immoralities and was living his later years in the lap of luxury. I saw that and then I thought of the godly men and women I have known who have struggled in their lives just to make a living and then they die miserably painful deaths while they are yet in their prime. And I say, where is the justice? Why doesn't God do something?

*As one who believes in God, every so often something inside of me wants to scream out, "Why doesn't God do something about that?"*

Apparently the people in Malachi's day found themselves thinking some of the same things. Look at Malachi 2:17: "You have wearied the LORD with your words. *'How have we wearied him?' you ask. By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?'* "

Up until 150 years before the time of the events described in this book, the people of Israel had lived as an independent country. But at that time, 150 years earlier, their country was conquered and their king and most of the



people who had not been killed had been taken into slavery in another country. Now 150 years later and even 80 years after some of the Jews had been allowed to return to their country, these people were still barely eking out an existence and were still dominated by a foreign government. They were supposed to be the chosen people of God and yet their lives were a daily grind. And worst of all, the immoral heathens around them were living it up at the expense of the Jews.

How did these people respond? According to the last part of verse 17 many of them were thinking God wasn't fair.

"By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?' " (2:17b)

When they saw injustice around them day after day, when they didn't get in life what they thought they deserved, they began making these comments.

I call them comments rather than questions for a reason. In a similar situation recorded in Psalm 73, King David faced this same issue—a belief in God and yet all the injustice around him. He wrote, *"I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles and their bodies are healthy and strong. They are proud and they scoff at the idea of God. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure - all day long I'm plagued."*

But although David had those thoughts, he turned to the truth about God and satisfied his troubled heart by reflecting on God's promise that justice would come.

In the situation of the people in Malachi's day they drew different conclusions. The questions they asked as indicated

by the context were actually conclusions they had drawn. They looked around them and concluded there was no God of justice. They thought about it and concluded that if there were a God, He was as unmoved by injustice as He was by justice; He was as pleased with evil as He was with good. God made no difference in their lives.

Do you get a sense of the progression of thoughts? I suspect that like most of us they started out believing in God. After all, that is what they had been taught from childhood. But as things didn't go the way they thought they should, a doubting began. As life pressed in on them in ways that were painful, when they were the victims of injustices, and when people they cared about were victims as well, the doubting increased. And when life began to settle in as something of a disappointment, the questions formed—"Why doesn't God do something about this? Is He unwilling? Unable?" As time went on and the injustices weren't corrected and the disappointments increased, the doubts turned to cynicism. They settled into a conviction that God wasn't going to do anything about life.

These weren't atheists; these were people who said they believed in God. But if you listened carefully, looked closely, they didn't. They would never say there is no God but they lived as if He didn't exist. Their lives were open testimony to their belief that God's will didn't matter because to them, God didn't matter. They had concluded nothing in life changed because they believed in God. Injustices went unpunished, sin seemed to bring pleasure not pain, and obeying God seemed to result in misery not happiness. They became functional atheists. They no longer made their decisions in life based on whether it was God's will or not. They no longer even considered God in the equation of life.

To what extent have we done that?

- Have we grown cynical of God's apparent inaction in the injustices of life?
- Have we given up on God making any difference?
- Have we effectively ruled Him out of consideration in our decisions?
- Have we ceased to believe He matters in real life?"

"Now wait a minute," you say, "I can understand why people would doubt God. It is almost impossible to accept the injustices that exist in this world." I too, have been confronted by the apparent contradiction of Christianity. How can I believe in God as all-powerful and all good and yet account for the presence of evil in the world? Either He is all powerful and He doesn't choose to do anything about injustices in which case He is not all good OR He is all good but powerless to do anything about evil. In either case, He ceases to be God.

*Having such thoughts about the apparent contradiction of a good God and the presence of evil in the world is not of itself wrong but drawing the common conclusions is wrong.*

Having such thoughts about the apparent contradiction of a good God and the presence of evil in the world is not of itself wrong but drawing the common conclusions is wrong. Malachi says in verse 17, "You have wearied the Lord with your words." God is sick and tired of blasphemous conclusions quoted at the end of verse 17. In Habakkuk 1:13, God says His eyes are too pure to even look on evil. And, in Psalm 5:4, God says He takes no pleasure in evil

and yet these people have the audacity to say God must be pleased with those who do evil; a "flat-out" contradiction of God.

Elsewhere God said, the soul that sins will die. God said He will vindicate the righteous. God said He will defend the widow, the orphan and the alien. God said truth and justice will prevail and yet these people say they do not believe God. God is not just. By their conclusions and their lives, they call God a liar. Taken together, their questions declare they don't trust God—they don't believe Him.

### **Do We Still Believe God?**

As I said earlier, it is not wrong to question the apparent problem raised by the presence of evil in a world the Bible claims is ruled by a good and all-powerful God. The sin is not in understanding the apparent problem but in the conclusions drawn by too many: in real life God doesn't matter. I must take care of myself because God is either unwilling or unable to make a difference.

- We conclude the only justice that will ever come to our situation is the justice we make:
- We lay up treasure on earth rather than in heaven because we don't believe God.
- We marry non-Christians because we don't believe obedience has better rewards.
- We divorce our spouses because we don't trust God that justice will come and that faithfulness is better than life.
- We treat religion and our faith as trifling matters because we don't believe God is actually coming back.
- We go ahead and sin, disregarding the commands of God, because we are convinced it won't matter.

## **Where is the God of Justice and Mercy?**

Beginning at chapter 3, verse 1 God responds. I sense God responds both to the honest questions raised by the problem of injustice in this world and to the sinful conclusions drawn by too many. The problem of evil in the world has often been called the Achilles heel of theistic religion and particularly of Christianity. Down through the centuries philosophers of religion have attempted to defend God by thinking of "theodices." Theodicy is from the Latin and it comes from the two ideas of God and justify. It is an attempt to justify God—to exonerate God from both the charge of not caring about evil thus not being good or the charge of not being able to do anything about evil thus being powerless. There have been many attempts made by people to explain away the problem.

What is particularly interesting in Malachi 3 and in the Book of Job is that when God is faced with the problem He doesn't attempt to justify it—to create a theodicy. God just states the facts and calls on people to believe Him. Is God then avoiding the problem? No! God simply cuts through the issue and declares the outcome of the whole matter.

- Do you have questions about whether God is good and just?
- Do you have questions about whether God is powerful?
- Do you have questions about whether being good is worth it?
- Do you wonder if evil will ever be punished?

God's answer is, "I am coming again and I will bring justice!"

In chapter 3, God says, "*Look*", (see, behold) *I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.*" Just 400 years later, Jesus stood in Jerusalem and said John the Baptist was the one of whom it was written in the prophets: "*I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.*" And so in Malachi 3:1, The Lord Almighty says, "*Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come.*" The first part of verse 1 declared that a messenger, whom we now know to be John the Baptist, would come. Now in the second part of verse 1, God declares that another messenger would come. Who is this messenger? It is the Lord Himself who is to come. Furthermore He is the "messenger of the covenant."

Most of you know Jesus came announcing a new covenant, a new agreement between God and people. This agreement would be established by Jesus' own death and resurrection. He would pay the penalty for our sins by His death in our place. And then He would freely offer us forgiveness and life if we would repent of our sins and place our faith wholly in Him. God declares that He, Himself, would come to set in motion real justice and yet real justice with an offer of mercy.

Verse 1 refers to the First Coming of Jesus—when God the Son came to earth taking on humanity. Jesus came to die for us and rise again from the dead. When He came that first time, He said He did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. And that anyone who would believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life—justice with mercy. But in verses 2-5 we see a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus—when God will come to earth to finish the task begun in His first coming. Having offered to us a just mercy based on His death in our place, He will return to take to Himself all who trusted in Him.

Clearly these verses show that those who had not trusted in Him would be judged. Let's look at this more closely: God says, *"Who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when he appears?"* (3:2)

The obvious answer is "no one." The Bible declares that when Jesus comes again in all His power and glory every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Lord's coming *"will be like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap"* or lye. A refiner puts metal to the fire to separate the slag from the precious metal. A launderer puts lye to clothing to separate the dirt from the pure cloth. When Jesus comes, as He said in Matthew 13, He will separate the weeds from the wheat—the fake from the real thing. Likewise in Matthew 25, Jesus said, *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

*"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

*"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

*"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matthew 25: 31-33, 41-46)*

Your lives proved you didn't believe Me—you didn't trust

Me.

Look at Malachi 3:5. Here the Lord says in essence the same thing. I will be quick to testify against you and I will judge you. Why? Because your lives proved you didn't believe Me. They proved you didn't fear Me or hold Me in respect or believe I would bring justice. You thought I was toothless or that I was insignificant in life; that I would make no difference ever. You were wrong!

### **I am the God of Justice. Justice Will Come.**

But in these verses God speaks not only of judgment but He also speaks of mercy. Look at verses 3 and 4:

*"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years."*

*Your lives proved you didn't believe Me—you didn't trust Me.*

In language consistent with the worship of that day, God tells what He will do with those who are truly His—those who did believe Him, did trust Him and accepted His mercy and followed His ways—God will finish the work He began in them. He will separate them out from the rest and they will have an eternal relationship with God. God summarizes the whole thing in verse 6: *"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed."* The very fact that we have not yet been destroyed is proof of God's trustworthiness. He said He would offer forgiveness—that He would make a way whereby sinful people could have a relationship with God. Through all these years and through



all our rebellion, He has not forgotten that promise—He still offers it today.

But as certain is His mercy is so also is His justice. Do you find injustice in the world? God says trust Me; I will bring justice. Do you doubt the goodness of God? God says believe Me, justice will prevail; that which is good and right will be vindicated. Faithfulness will be rewarded. Do you wonder if anyone is in charge in this world? God says, I am coming and when I come, I will judge the earth.

*Do you wonder if anyone is in charge in this world? God says, I am coming and when I come, I will judge the earth.*

Will you believe Him? Jesus says that even if we have not yet believed Him, there is still time. *"Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"* (3:7) If we will acknowledge our sin, and our unbelief, and trust in Him, God will forgive.

All of life truly does hang on this question: Do you believe God? Not do you believe in Him, but do you believe Him? With all the evil, injustice, pain and suffering that exists in this world I think there are really only two rational ways to think:

One is to accept that God isn't there, isn't just, and isn't capable of making a difference. In that case it seems to me you are forced logically to despair. There is no hope and life is absurd because it is out of control.

The second way is to trust God for who He is and what He

says He has done and will do. Will you trust Him today? Will you live your life as if God makes a difference? Will you believe Him? Return to Him and He will return to you.

## Chapter Seven

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### Giving and the Blessing of God Malachi 3:7-12

Most people who have been around churches very long know that "tithing" has to do with money—specifically giving your own money to the church. Because preachers receive their income from the church offerings, anytime preachers talk about money it can sound rather self-serving. And if not self-serving then at least institution-serving—getting money out of you for the church. For that and other reasons I want all non-Christians to understand that this sermon is not given with you in mind; this chapter is to those who call themselves Christians, God's people.

A quick reading of Malachi 3:7-12 reveals the straightforward meaning of the text:

**The Problem:** God's people are robbing God of what is rightfully His.

**The Result:** They are under a curse – Life isn't going as they would like or as God wished for them.

**The Solution:** If, however, they will change their ways and begin to give to God as they should, God will bless them richly.

Now if you had been Malachi, what response would you obviously be seeking from the people? What would you want them to do as a result of this message from God? I would want them to tithe. I would want them to give to God the portion of their income God had commanded. Wouldn't you expect those first readers to have some of the

same difficulties believing this text that we have today? I can just hear them: "Hey Preacher, get real! We didn't just get off the camel yesterday. We've read about Job—he was a righteous man and he lost everything. Some of your choicest servants lived and died with next to nothing. Do you actually expect us to believe that if we give to God He will *'throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that we will not have room enough for it?'*" What then are we to make of such a passage of Scripture?

## **The Problem**

Let's start with the problem.

*"Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"*

Malachi here gives us a summary statement of all he has challenged the people with in the previous chapters. He declares they are not truly followers of God.

- They have entered into worship in an intermittent and hollow way.
- They have set their hearts on their own desires rather than on knowing and obeying God.
- They have entered into the deepest of relationships, even marriage, with those who do not care about God.
- They have treated their relationship to God as worthless by illegally breaking their marriage covenants.

But God in His mercy calls out once again, as He has done for generations: *"Return to me and I will return to you."* Renew your commitment to follow My leading, obey My commands, and seek Me with your whole heart and I will restore the relationship.

In the height of ignorance or arrogance, the people respond:

*"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"*

What have we done wrong? From what do we need to return? Like a child challenged by his parent, so these people answer a charge with a question: Me! What did I do wrong? The question is asked to counter the charge—to suggest the authority doesn't know what He's talking about. The question is asked to stifle conviction. We don't want to consider what has been charged so we ask a question to distract not only the authority but to distract ourselves.

*Renew your commitment to follow My leading, obey My commands, and seek Me with your whole heart and I will restore the relationship.*

They took it as an affront when Malachi tells them their faults. They are offended that the prophet should tell them to change. Like Saul, before the road to Damascus experience, they had been "kicking against the goads"—resisting the conviction of the Holy Spirit. They were so ignorant of their own sinful hearts that they saw nothing to repent of. A wise Bible scholar said, "Many ruin their own souls by intentionally distorting the calls (of God) to repent of their sins." <sup>1</sup> Look at verse 8:

*Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings."*

God in essence asks: Do you wonder how you are to return? Do you wonder what you have done wrong? Let Me tell you.

Now remember God has already spelled out several things that were tragically true of these people. But here He is about to give them something so tangible, so immediate, it ought to shock them into a realization of how far from God they truly are. God asks a question: *"Will a man rob God?"* Does a man or a woman have the audacity to steal from the God of the universe? Could anyone be so foolish as to rob God? Then He answers His own question: Yes, you are that foolish. As unimaginable as it is for someone to rob God, you rob Me.

What we hear next is another of those "smoke screen" questions:

*"How do we rob you, God?"*

They act incredulous. They act as if they have no idea what God could be talking about. "God we're Your people. We're here; we're reading Your word. Surely You're talking about those people who don't believe in You."

*"How do we rob you, God?"*

God's answer is short, making it as pointed as a spear: How do you rob God? "In tithes and offerings"—by withholding the offerings that belong to Him.

In both the Old and New Testaments, under both the old covenant and the new covenant the idea was the same: A grateful heart results in a generous hand. Under the Old Covenant, in the Old Testament, that generosity was spelled out clearly: the people of God were to give 10%, sometimes 20% and sometimes 30% of their income to the work of ministry. And after that they were to make their freewill offerings. And just because it was required didn't mean it could be given any less willingly. Parents are

required to care for their children. I hope that doesn't mean they must do so unwillingly and grudgingly.

Under the New Covenant, in the New Testament, generosity is also spelled out: the people of God are to give regularly and proportionally. Paul told the Corinthians they were to give regularly "on the first day of the week"—Sunday. He also instructed them to give proportionally "in keeping with your income." And then Paul spells out the same attitude as expressed in the Old Testament: God's people are not to give grudgingly or as if under compulsion but cheerfully, with a willing heart. A grateful heart results in a generous hand!

*A grateful heart results in a  
generous hand!*

But these ungrateful hearts, these untrusting hearts, were robbing God of the tithes and offerings belonging to Him. They were not bringing God the whole tithe; they were bringing only a part or none at all. They were commanded to bring the best of what they had, not the lame or the diseased. But if they brought anything, it was after they had taken the best for themselves. They were commanded to bring the first of what they received, not the last. But if they brought anything it was what they had left over. The comment, "I can't afford to give" is an insight right into leftover giving and not first-fruit giving.

### **The Result**

The result of their disobedience is given in verse 9:

*"You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me."*

Their fields didn't produce the crops they should have. Their cattle didn't grow and reproduce as they could. They

found themselves scrounging for a living and anxious about tomorrow. Am I suggesting that all financial hard times are a result of God's curse on us? Absolutely not. That is not at all what God is teaching here. What is being taught is if you walk away from God, God loves you enough to get your attention. If you rob from God, He will discipline you.

The Israelites, like us, found that what they did have wasn't satisfying. Life, even for the wealthiest of them, was flat if not miserable. They stopped trusting God and pulled away from their relationship to Him. In their selfishness over what they did have and in their anxiety over what they didn't have, they decided they could manage their affairs better on their own. They took the heart out of life—they took a relationship with God out of life. And the result was emptiness. Instead of steadfastly pursuing God and faithfully obeying Him, they abandoned Him. They lived under a self-induced curse.

### **The Remedy**

In verse 10, God gives them the remedy for their poverty of heart and body:

*"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."*

Just in case the language of this verse is strange to you consider these definitions:

The "whole tithe" means all God commanded them to bring and with the attitude of gratefulness. The "storehouse" was just that—a storage area where they brought their offerings. *"That there may be food in my house"* is speaking of the fact that what the people brought was their income—and their income was crops and cattle. They were to bring at least one-tenth of their produce to the



Tabernacle because those grains, wine and cattle were what the priests, at God's direction, lived on.

The simple teaching is this: If we give as God commands us to, God will pour out His blessing on us in such measure that we won't be able to contain it all. Is that a guarantee? Is that an automatic, cause and effect, mechanistic quid pro quo—I put money in and God puts money out? No! It cannot be that. That defies experience. We all know godly people who have never experienced wealth. Even Jesus had no place to lay His head. Not only does such a mechanical view of this verse defy experience it also violates relationship. Relationships don't work in a mechanistic, automatic, cause and effect way.

Let me try to explain that: God had made a covenant with His people. All God owes us for our sin is judgment, but nonetheless He graciously offers us a relationship with Himself. He said He would save us, keep us and be our God. In this relationship to Him we would experience peace of mind both in the present and the future because of the solemn promises of God. We would experience joy over being so intimately loved by God, and we would experience purpose at being part of so large and enduring a plan as the Kingdom of God.

These benefits are not commodities, things God will send to us as if they were packages arriving by mail. These benefits can only be experienced through the connection of relationship—through knowing, trusting and walking with God. God does not want His people just to get things; He wants us to have the very source of those things—Himself. We know that about relationships don't we? Being a father or a mother is not just providing a house, clothing, education and discipline. It is belonging to and connecting with another human being. It is truly loving and caring and

shaping actions based on that love. That is what God desires. He has called us to be in relationship with Him. He has granted us forgiveness through Christ. He gives us peace, joy and purpose. He promises to lovingly meet our needs—knowing better than we do what we need both now and for eternity.

As evidences of our response to His grace, we are to follow and obey Him. And as evidence of our trust in Him we are commanded among other things specifically to give to the Lord the first and best of everything we received. These verses are not ultimately about giving offerings as if God had any need of them nor are they even about our receiving material wealth from God. These verses are about God's integrity and our trust. The deepest issues are whether God is trustworthy and whether we will trust Him. The people Malachi addresses didn't trust God. The injustices around them yelled so much louder than the promises of God that they stopped believing Him. But again, God responds to their unbelief by declaring that He is coming again and those who are faithful will understand it was worth it.

*"And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not." (3:18)*

God speaks about tithing, giving, right in the midst of this larger issue of His integrity and our trust.

Are we having trouble trusting God with the ultimate issues of life? Do we find it hard to believe that justice will finally prevail? Is it difficult for us to just be faithful when the reward seems so distant—when Christ comes again? I think God is responding to that and is, in these verses, suggesting a tangible, "right now," experiment. God says, "Test me." Try me in something right here and now. Give out of what you have, be it ever so small. Give generously

and gratefully. We are called on to trust Him in something fairly small compared to eternity. He's not even asking us to give all of it: just a portion. And God will have an opportunity to show you His credibility, and His trustworthiness. He promises to pour out His blessing. You will experience His favor. You will see and understand that God keeps His promises —He will meet your needs.

Does that mean He will make you wealthy? Maybe, but maybe not. It won't matter. You will experience His favor and will say as will those around you, "That person lives

*God responds to their unbelief by declaring that  
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it was worth it.*

under the favor of God." Does that mean you'll have everything you ever wanted? When you experience God's presence and favor you may find that what you want then is quite different than now. Doesn't every true Christian understand that to be Mother Theresa is far more satisfying than being Donald Trump. Who today wouldn't rather be John the Baptist than Herod the Great? God says, "Test Me." His integrity will be established and your trust will grow.

Have you, in unbelief and fear, been robbing God? Are you living under a self-induced curse? Would you take God at His word in this small matter? Test Him. Give cheerfully, generously, regularly and proportionally and see what God will do.

## **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Bible*, p. 1495

## Chapter Eight

### No More Taxes Malachi 3:16-18

Very early in life, even in infancy, most people pick up some idea of "heaven." Even the irreligious will often assuage their children's fears about death with some vague discussion of life after death. Sometimes it's a school-mate who dies. Sometimes a grandparent. Sometimes nothing more than the death of a pet bird or hamster but when death first rings real to a young child they will often ask the hard questions not only about their loved one or thing but about themselves:

"Will I die?"

"When will I die?"

"What happens when I die?"

"Does it hurt?"

"Where will I be then?"

"Where is grandpa now?"

By early adolescence most of us have learned to mask our real fears and questions about death. And if we are fortunate enough not to have lost anyone dear to us, we aren't even affected by the subject—it seems so distant, so irrelevant. But as unaffected as we may be by the subject much of our early life, all it takes is the death of a special friend, a parent, a much loved grandparent, a child, or a spouse and we are thrown right back into those questions from earliest childhood:

"Where is my loved one now?"

"What happens when I die?"

"What is death like?"

In our study of the book of Malachi, his messages to the people challenge their idea that it makes no difference whether one is good or bad in this life. It seems that some of the people had become cynical, believing that it made no difference whether a person believed in God or not. It appeared to them that the most anti-God, arrogant people were the most blessed in this life. Malachi responds to that challenge in several ways but one of those ways was to reiterate that there is a day coming when God will come in all His justice and power.

*"And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not." (Malachi 3:18)*

Malachi goes on in Chapter 4 to describe the difference between how the righteous will be treated when God comes and how the wicked will be treated. Malachi only introduces the subject and I thought it would be helpful to spend some time looking at what else God has to say about that great distinction between those who follow God and those who refuse Him.

We speak generally of the eternal destinies of people as being either heaven or hell. Heaven, we say, is the place where the righteous will spend eternity and hell is the place where the wicked will live forever. But when does a person go to heaven or hell? At death? Or after some waiting period? Is there a purgatory through which we must go before entering heaven? What about our bodies? They are buried. Is it just our spirits that go to heaven or hell? The Bible teaches about a resurrection. Is that literal? Do these bodies come out of the graves? When does the resurrection take place? What happens to us between death and the resurrection? What about cremation? If the body is burned can it be resurrected? Who are the righteous and the

wicked? Which am I? Which are you?

Many people seemed fascinated by the subject of death and dying. Not only the *National Enquirer* but also more mainstream magazines and books will often publish accounts of someone's near-death experience. People will tell of warmth and peace. They will tell of a light that beckoned them on. They will speak of their disappointment at being called back to this life. What do we learn about death from these personal accounts? Nothing! Do not misunderstand, we may learn something about the process of almost dying but we learn nothing about death itself—that condition in which we exist after we die. In no case has anyone actually returned from the dead to tell about it. The process of almost dying and being dead are two very different things. The one has nothing to teach about the other.

*What do we learn about death from these personal accounts? Nothing!*

Where then do we get our information? For many reasons we get the only factual information from God Himself, through His Word. To be able to get our minds around this large subject, let's break it down into five parts arranged chronologically: Three time periods interrupted by two events: Life, physical death, the interim period, the resurrection, and eternity.

### **1. Life**

The Scripture teaches that the decisions we make in this life affect what happens in the life to come. In Hebrews we read, men and women are "*destined to die once and after that comes the judgment.*" There is no after-death second chance taught in the Bible. The Bible does not teach

reincarnation. And the Bible doesn't teach annihilation either. There is life after death but the kind of life you live after death is determined by your response to God in this life. Now whether you believe the Bible or not is another issue but what the Bible teaches on those subjects is very clear.

## **2. Death**

What comes between life as we know it and that intermediate state or condition which I mentioned earlier is the event of dying. What is dying like? Earlier I said that while we may not learn anything about death from the near-death experiences of others we may learn something about the process of dying. But rather than reading the sensational tabloid accounts of near-death, we would do much better to read of the death-bed conversations of the men and women of God who down through the centuries have written of their experiences and thoughts as death neared. There is much to be learned but most of us find the subject too morbid to even consider. But whether we consider it or not it eventually comes.

What is death? Biblically it is when the body and the spirit of a person separate. Today with our medical ability to keep the physical body functioning long after it would have in earlier times, we create ethical dilemmas for ourselves. It is not my intention to try to address that in this series though I have great compassion for those who must deal with the hard choices foisted upon them.

## **3. Interim Period after Physical Death**

What happens at death? The body and the spirit separate. The body is buried and the spirit, without a physical body, goes somewhere, but where? Again we are tempted to quickly and imprecisely respond: heaven or hell, that's where we go when we die. That's correct but not as correct



as it should be to avoid confusion. In the Old Testament there is a word that is most often used to describe the place where the dead go. That word is SHEOL—it is sometimes translated the "grave" or "death." In the Old Testament there doesn't seem to be any specific indication of what that place is like. A person was either alive or dead. But it is clear from several passages that even though they knew little about the intermediate place of death they looked forward to something else.

Job writes of this place:

*In the Old Testament there is a word that is most often used to describe the place where the dead go. That word is SHEOL.*

*"After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh will I see God." (Job 19:26)*

And, David wrote, *"God will redeem my life from the grave (Sheol) and he will surely take me to himself." (Psalm 49:15)*

And even later Daniel wrote, *"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." (12:2-3)*

God teaches in the Old Testament that between physical death and the resurrection there is an intermediate state—a place where those who have died wait for the end.

In the New Testament, God gives us more information about this intermediate place. Just as there is a Hebrew

word in the Old Testament (Sheol) that refers to the place of the dead so there is a Greek word in the New Testament that refers to the place of the dead—Hades. That Greek word 'Hades' is translated into English as "Hell." Please note that nowhere in the New Testament is that word "Hell" a reference to the place where the wicked spend eternity. Hades or Hell is a New Testament word referring to the same place as "Sheol" in the Old Testament. God teaches in the New Testament as He does in the Old that between physical death and the resurrection there is an intermediate state—a place where those who have died wait for the end. Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God's people, who anticipate death and that intermediate state, look forward to what comes after—the resurrection. But what about now? What about between death and the resurrection? Is there a difference in the experience between those who belong to God and those who have refused Him? Look at Luke 16 as Jesus tells the parable of the "rich man and Lazarus."

*Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God's people, who anticipate death and that intermediate state, look forward to what comes after—the resurrection.*

*"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water*

*and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'*

*"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'*

*"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'*  
*Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'*

*'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'*

*"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "*

Though His purpose in telling the story is evidently not to teach us about the particulars of Sheol or Hades or Hell, it is apparent that it does give us some insight into that intermediate state.

- First of all we see that both the wicked and the righteous are there.
- Second, we see the experience of the wicked is negative and the experience of the righteous is positive.
- Third, we see the separation between them is fixed—you don't go from one side to the other.
- Fourth, we see that once you die you don't come back to this life.

And I have great confidence that these conclusions are true when they are corroborated by other passages of Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, the Apostle Paul tells of being caught up whether in a dream or not, but he is caught up into the "third heaven."

The first heaven to people in Paul's day was the atmosphere. The second heaven was the skies beyond—the stars, sun and moon. The third heaven was the place called Paradise, where God was. This same word, "Paradise," was used by Jesus on the cross when he responded to the believing thief crucified with him. *"This day you shall be with me in paradise."* The Apostle Paul says elsewhere in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that for him to be *"away from his body is to be at home with the Lord."*

So what happens at death? For those who are **not** trusting Christ, their bodies go into the ground awaiting the resurrection and their spirits go to Hades/Hell where they await the judgment at Christ's return. Their experience is probably one of conscious suffering of some kind though of that we cannot be certain. For those who **are** trusting in Christ, their bodies likewise go into the ground awaiting the resurrection, and their spirits go into the presence of the Lord—into "Paradise."

Is that a separate section of Hades as indicated in the parable of the "rich man and Lazarus"? I don't know but whether it is or not it is positive because both Jesus and Paul made it clear that it is something to be looked forward to. But remember that while believers during this waiting period are in a positive situation it is not what God ultimately has in mind for us. That comes after the resurrection. So what about those who are with the Lord now? They don't have a body but their spirits are there. Can they see the Lord and others in heaven and can they

see what is happening here on earth? Certainly they cannot see in some literal sense because they do not have a physical body. But can they sense in some other way what is happening in heaven and what is happening here on earth? Apparently they can sense something of what is going on where they are or else it wouldn't be positive. But as to sensing what is happening on earth, we don't know though it seems unlikely since they are neither omniscient nor omnipresent. It seems more reasonable to assume they know only what the Lord tells them.

*While believers during this waiting period are in a positive situation it is not what God ultimately has in mind for us.*

Can we contact those who have died? Whether we can or cannot seems open to question but whether we should or not is abundantly clear: Under no circumstances are the living to attempt to contact the dead. Deuteronomy 18:11 says it is absolutely forbidden.

And, what about Purgatory? The Roman Catholic Council of Trent officially declared that "anyone who rejects the doctrine of purgatory is anathema—damned to eternal punishment."

Purgatory was the Catholic attempt at explaining how a sinful person could be prepared to meet a holy God. That intention is commendable because at least it acknowledged that human beings are not fit for heaven. But it unfortunately finds the solution in the wrong way. The Catholics taught that during this waiting period, people can atone for, be purged of, or make up for their sins. They can do it on their own in purgatory and they can be assisted by the prayers and masses of those who are still on earth.

There is no Scriptural support for this intermediate state, this waiting period after death, being a time to purge oneself of sin. Furthermore the idea of atoning for your own sins in Purgatory denies justification by grace through faith in what Christ has already done. The very idea of this intermediate state of the dead awaiting the resurrection being a Purgatory—a place to purge sins—is wholly without merit and the very opposite of biblical doctrine.

What happens if a person commits suicide? Is suicide a sin? Is it forgivable? The Bible gives no explicit statement on suicide. Why not? Is it because it is simply a choice that each person must make? No, I don't think so. I think there is no explicit prohibition of suicide because the whole of Scripture so clearly prohibits it. (See Appendix A for more information on Scripture and Suicide.)

*Those who are believers are with the Lord in a place He called Paradise awaiting the resurrection of their bodies and the life to come.*

So what then of the dead? Those who are unbelieving are in this waiting place called "Hell" awaiting the resurrection and the judgment at Christ's return. And those who are believers are with the Lord in a place He called Paradise awaiting the resurrection of their bodies and the life to come.

#### **4. The Resurrection**

What comes next? Revelation 19 describes in awesome imagery that cataclysmic day when Jesus comes again. Paul describes it as a day when, *"the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God."*

What happens then? Paul says in I Thessalonians 4 that those who had died before—those who are with Christ—will have their bodies resurrected from the graves and will be united, body and spirit. But this body, while the same in many ways as the body they had, will be a new body in that it will be incorruptible. It will be a body with which they can live for eternity in the presence of the Lord.

God further teaches through Paul that those who are still alive at Christ's coming and are trusting in Him will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord and will, as He teaches in I Corinthians 15, in that instance, have their bodies changed to be as incorruptible and eternal as those bodies that were resurrected. What if your body were cremated, will that make a difference at the resurrection? If you think about it you will realize it cannot make any difference at all. There is absolutely no Biblical prohibition of cremation. I do believe a case can be made for treating the body with respect because it was created by God but whether it is buried in the ground or at sea or cremated or lost in a woods or desert will make no difference when our bodies are resurrected. Whatever God needs of this present body to resurrect it as a new body, He knows how and where to find.

But what of those who were not in Christ, those who were not trusting Christ when they died? Are they resurrected at this time? Revelation 20:4 specifically says they are not resurrected at the same time as the believing dead but wait until the judgment. When Jesus comes again according to Revelation 20, He will first set up a physical kingdom on this earth and will serve as king for 1000 years. If you look at Revelation 20:11 and following you see that then Jesus will resurrect all those who are unbelieving. Out of Hades/Hell they will come and they will stand before the Lord. Who will stand before the judgment of Christ?

Everyone? No! Only those who were unbelieving, unwilling to trust Christ, and they will all be found guilty.

## **5. Eternity**

At that point we come to the fifth and final part of this chronology of time periods and events. What we commonly call Heaven and Hell are more specifically referred to in the Scripture as Everlasting Life and Eternal Punishment. The unbeliever, in his resurrected body following judgment, goes into what Revelation 20:15 calls the Lake of Fire. Elsewhere in the Bible it is called Gehenna, eternal fire, damnation, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, and eternal separation from God.

According to Revelation 21 coupled with 2 Peter 3 and Romans 8 we know that God will recreate the heavens and earth into a new heavens and earth. According to the imagery of Revelation 22, this place where we will dwell for eternity will be large, unsurpassed in beauty, and of infinite worth. The place where believers will spend eternity, the place we call "heaven" will be this earth – recreated! And most important of all it will be the place where our Lord Jesus is. God describes it in Revelation this way:

*"Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...The throne of God and of the Lamb (Jesus) will be there and his servants will serve him. They will see his face." (21:3)*

The greatest feature of our eternal destiny is not streets of gold, or pearly gates, or large mansions, or any of a thousand other earthly wants—the greatest prize of that day will be to see Jesus face-to-face.



Down through the centuries as God's people have waited for that coming again of Jesus, they have sung most beautifully and prayed most fervently for that day when we shall be with Him. Who are the righteous who will inherit this everlasting life with Christ? In John 3 Jesus says He did not come to earth the first time to condemn people but to save them. He said that God loves us so much that Jesus came and died for us—He purged our sins. If the Catholics were right about purgatory we'd spend eternity trying to make up for or pay for our sins against God and against each other. But the only payment for sin that satisfies divine justice is the sacrificial death of Jesus, the perfect Son of God. He died for us and He offers forgiveness—a pardon—a total purging of all our sin.

God said *"If we confess with our mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead, we will be saved. For it is with our heart we believe and are justified and it is with our mouth that we confess and are saved."*(Rom. 10: 9-10)

Are you ready for death and the second coming of Jesus? If we will come to Him, humbly acknowledging our need of a savior, admitting our guilt before God, asking for mercy and pardon, and trusting Him to forgive us and give us new life, He promises to save us from the judgment to come and to give us His life—everlasting life.



## Chapter Nine

### The Joy of Grace Malachi 4

Their hearts were breaking as they sat in my office and quietly wept. As they alternated between composure and tears they spilled out the pain of knowing their son was rushing headlong into a spiritual wilderness and a lifetime and maybe an eternity of separation from God. They loved him! Yet nothing seemed to penetrate his wall of disregard for God and his fascination with sin. Have you ever loved someone deeply? Have you witnessed them heading for trouble and nothing you said or did seemed to dissuade them? Have you felt the hurt in your heart when you thought of the consequences of their actions? God loves you that much! Through His messenger Malachi, God calls out yet one more time, "Turn and follow Me, experience My love, enjoy My presence, know My grace, be My child."

#### God's Message

To set this final study in context, review with me the primary thoughts of the Prophet through Malachi: God began this message to His people with a pronounced declaration of His unconditional love for them. He loves them deeply. It is because of His love that He will take the time to explain the predicament they are in and His offer of mercy. In the verses that follow, God spells out the sin of His people—sin that will, if unchecked, destroy them.

- In 1:6-14, God indicts them for their thoughtless worship.
- In 2:1-9, He charges them with caring far more for other things in life than Him.

- In 2:10-12, He says they evidence that disregard for their relationship for God by marrying people who are not committed to Him.
- In 2:13-16, He further evidences their disregard for God by pointing out their covenant breaking divorces from each other.
- In 2:17-3:5, God challenges their cynical unbelief when they say it is futile to serve God.
- And in 3:6-12, He says another evidence of their hypocritical relationship to Him is their failure to give their offerings.

These six activities and attitudes reflect the real heart of these people—they may call themselves God's people but they are not.

The question of the people implied at the end of chapter 3 is "What difference will it make?" In their cynicism, they ceased to believe that how they live would truly matter. And so at the end of chapter 3, especially in verse 18, God makes it clear that such disregard for God, as evidenced in their lives, will make a difference.

Now in chapter 4, God places in sharp distinction the destiny of those who serve Him with those who do not. Malachi looks at that day when Christ comes:

*"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample*

*down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.*"(4:1-3)

The "day" that is coming or the "day of the Lord," as it is called in verse 5, is a reference to the coming of God to earth in a powerful and life changing way. It is a reference to God's most dramatic invasions of time and space when everything on earth is altered. Though there are other occasions that are called the "day of the Lord," they all look forward to one, ultimate, end-all invasion of time when the Son of God comes at the end of this age. We refer to it as the second coming of Jesus. It is that time to which Malachi is referring primarily in chapter four. "Surely the day is

*Though there are other occasions that are called the "day of the Lord," they all look forward to one, ultimate, end-all invasion of time when the Son of God comes at the end of this age.*

coming!" The point of this text shows that day has both a dark and a bright side. That "day" is both the worst of days and the best of days.

### **Dark**

Look first at how Malachi describes that worst of days:

*"That day will burn like a furnace."*

We get a mental picture of intense heat from controlled fire. The next mental picture to describe that day is one of "stubble" set on fire. We moved from a picture of controlled intense heat to wild, spreading fire that burns a field.

Growing up in the country, especially on a farm, allowed me to see some things that help me identify with the

agricultural and rural metaphors of the Bible. In late summer, we would cut the oats or other grains from the fields. The mowers would leave part of the grain stalk standing in the field—about 4-6 inches. The fields were dry and the temperature usually hot. Very occasionally a fire would be accidentally set to those "stubs," that "stubble" that remained in the field. You can easily imagine that intense, wild, wind-whipped fire as it spread out across those fields. It was an awesome and frightening spectacle. The Lord Almighty says that is what is going to happen in that day. There are those who are going to be destroyed like that burning stubble.

Throughout the Bible, "fire" is used as a common metaphor for judgment and destruction. That judgment in the day of Christ's return is sometimes referred to as an unquenchable fire or the hell of fire or the lake of fire. At other times this final judgment by God is referred to as:

- the weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- as the worm that never dies—a reference to the body's decay.
- as eternal darkness.

These are obviously all word symbols of an event and time period so dark and terrible that it cannot be adequately described. It is terrible, it is eternal and it is irrevocable. Jesus said it lasts for eternity and when He comes the door of opportunity is shut for good.

Who is this judgment for? God says in verse 1, it is for the "arrogant and the evildoer." There are those who rebel against God in loud blasphemous ways. They call themselves Christians but have no intention of following Christ. They may even brag of their eternal security as they openly disregard the commands of God. But there are also those who rebel against God in quiet ways of hypocrisy.

They call themselves Christians and they give the overt signs of being Christians but, inside, their unbelief and self-centeredness are obvious to God. This quiet hypocrisy is described in these chapters of Malachi.

These people mouthed worship but they did so thoughtlessly.

These people gave their offerings but they did so reluctantly and miserly.

These people married in God's name but they married contrary to God's will and they divorced at their will.

These people said they belonged to God but they gave their

*They call themselves Christians and they give the overt signs of being Christians but, inside, their unbelief and self-centeredness are obvious to God.*

hearts and lives to other pursuits.

Whether it is the loud, blasphemous rebel or the quiet, hypocritical rebel their end is the same—eternal judgment.

## **Light**

But if you look at verse 2, you will see that in sharp contrast to that day of judgment is another aspect of that day. The same day that brings the furnace heat of destruction for the rebel also brings the "sun of righteousness" for the faithful. Though the description of judgment is necessary because it is truth, it is this description of the joy of grace that I most want to describe. This second verse is filled with bright, joyous, life-giving, happy word pictures. In contrast to a burning furnace, that day will also bring the "sun of righteousness." Though Malachi may not have seen it clearly, this "sun of righteousness" can be none other than the Messiah, the

Christ, the Son of God, Jesus.

When I look at the context of this passage and when I think of all the ways throughout the Old and New Testaments Jesus is referred to as light, I come to believe it refers to Jesus,

- David called Him the fountain of light
- Balaam called Him the star out of Jacob
- Isaiah said He is a great light and the light of the gentiles
- Luke called Him the rising sun
- John called Him the light of the world and the light of men.

If you look at verses 2 and 3, you see there are at least three things Jesus brings when He comes again:

### **1. The first is healing.**

The picture is of the sun rising and its rays of light spread out like wings in both directions. So when Jesus comes again our bodies and our souls will be finally and completely perfected. No longer a struggle with sin. The hard battles with temptation, the weaknesses of our immature spiritual lives, and the too-oft repeated failings will be over. We will no longer carry the burden of a dying, sin-afflicted body; our weak body, our often sick or diseased body, will be changed.

Look at Romans 8:18 and following: When I see this description of the healing wings of the sun of righteousness, I cannot help but think of Paul's description of the resurrection of believers.



*"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.***

(8:18-23 – Emphasis Added)

As Paul told it to the Corinthians, the body that is buried

*The Judge who comes with fire to destroy the arrogant and evildoer will come as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings for those who revere His name.*

perishable is raised imperishable. It is buried in weakness; it is raised in power. It is buried a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. Just as when we were describing judgment so this language has limitations when describing what those resurrected bodies will be like but they will be real and they will be healed of all their limitations.

The judge who comes with fire to destroy the arrogant and evildoer will come as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings for those who revere His name.

## **2. The second He brings is joy.**

*"And you will go out and leap like calves released from the*

*stall." (4:2b)*

For you city-slickers to understand this I must ask if you have ever owned a puppy? Have you ever been gone from your home and puppy and then returned? Didn't that puppy almost turn inside out with joy at seeing you again? His whole little body vibrates as he turns round and round in excitement. I know what it is like to see a herd of calves that have been penned up in a barn all winter finally released into the green fields in the spring. They will run and frolic and sometimes stand in one spot and just jump up and down. It is unrestrained, uninhibited joy. You can't help but smile at the sense of freedom they experience.

*We believed He is coming, we believed  
faithfulness would be worth it, we trusted that  
the end will be as He described it,  
but to see it, experience it, live it—  
oh, what joy!*

It is that picture Malachi paints describing the unrestrained, uninhibited joy that will be ours when the Sun of Righteousness comes again. Oh, we believed He is coming, we believed faithfulness would be worth it, we trusted that the end will be as He described it, but to see it, experience it, live it—oh, what joy!

3. He also brings satisfaction.

*"Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty." (4:3)*

This is not petty vengeance—a feeling of "they sure got theirs!" No, this is a satisfaction that justice has been served. God's Word and will have been vindicated and God's honor has been fully revealed. Will there be no

sadness over the lost? If there is it is overpowered by the sense of justice; we will agree with God that what has happened is right.

All that is discordant, all that is out of whack, all that is wrong will be righted, corrected, and made right. The evil that caused the millions who died at the hands of the Hitlers, Stalins, and Pol Pots of the world will be destroyed. The wickedness of human hearts that caused adults to abuse children, children to hate their parents and people to betray each other will be forever gone. The earth and relationships will be as we have known all along they were meant to be. It is the ultimate of satisfaction.

And who is it that will experience this healing, joy and satisfaction? Those who revere God's name. It is those who give God the glory due Him. It is those who stand in awe of the God others mock and ignore. It is those who trust Him and love Him. What a day that will be! The Son of God will come as a burning furnace for those who do not trust God and He will also come with healing in His wings for those who do trust Him. Will there be a distinction between those who serve God and those who do not? Oh, yes there will be a great distinction.

But Malachi does not end his book there. He does not simply describe the end; he offers mercy:

*"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."*(4:5-6)

Elijah was a courageous spokesman for God in his day—several hundred years earlier than Malachi. In the writings of the prophets, Elijah became symbolic of men down through the ages who would be forerunners, special

heralds of God's dramatic interventions in history—those "days of the Lord."

Even in the New Testament, John the author of Revelation says an Elijah figure will come just before the second coming of Jesus. This Elijah will announce Christ's coming. In Luke 1 before John the Baptist's birth, the angel announces that he will be the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6. And, in Matthew 11:10, Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Malachi's Elijah. What Malachi is doing in verses 4-6 is describing not the second coming of Jesus, that great and dreadful day of the Lord, but he is describing the first coming of Jesus—what we call Christmas. Before God comes in judgment, He comes in mercy. God says that before He comes in that Day of the Lord when all is over, He is coming first with a message of repentance.

*"He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."* (4:6)

Here we see God's message of repentance that results in people's relationships being changed. Hearts are changed.

It doesn't take much of a look into our own attitudes, our own hearts and motivations, for us to see that we are a sin-sick people in a sin-sick world. It is not only the Hitlers, Stalins, and Edi Amins of the world who are sin-sick. It is not only the millions in homes across America who are abusing each other who are sin-sick. It is not only those whose names appear on our television screens during the nightly news who are sin-sick. We know we have the disease within us as well.

And where is the doctor for the human heart? An Elijah-

John the Baptist person came 2000 years ago announcing the Messiah. The Lord Jesus Himself came and He came not to condemn (that comes next time) but to save. The Sun of Righteousness will come not only at the end of this age but He has already come—rising with healing in His wings. He is righteous. He alone is perfect. He alone has the ability to forgive sins and heal our souls. He offers forgiveness, cleansing and healing—changed hearts.

Are we like Malachi's first readers—quiet hypocrites rebelling against the authority of God in our lives? God calls us to change our mind and to repent: to agree that we need the healing of our souls and to seek His mercy, ask His forgiveness and accept His grace.

God's call is to us—we who call ourselves God's people. He wants to revive us, save us, and restore us to Himself. Will we respond to His mercy today?



## Appendix A

### Scripture and Suicide

Suicide has, I think, rightfully been defined as "the act of willfully causing ones' own death in order to escape a condition of living that one deems intolerable." The last part of that definition "in order to escape a condition of living that a person deems intolerable" distinguishes suicide from sacrifice. As human acts, suicide and sacrifice could not be further apart even though they may look alike.

Sacrifice is when Jesus gave His own life for us, as when Samson gave his life for the Israelites, when a man or woman in war gives his or her own life to save others. Suicide is taking one's own life to "escape a condition of living that the person deems intolerable." Suicide is very different from sacrifice.

Is suicide a sin? Is it forgivable? The May 31, 1993 issue of TIME magazine had another article on the infamous Dr. Kevorkian of Michigan. Part of the article is about a woman named Sue who used one of Dr. Kevorkian's death machines. Before her death she discussed taking her own life with her sisters. Dr. Kevorkian said that the archbishop of Detroit had pronounced suicide a sin. One sister said she thought it was the only unforgivable sin in the Bible. Sue's husband said he didn't think it was a sin. Another sister asked Sue, "If the Catholic church teaches that you're going to go to hell over this, do you think you're going to hell?" To that Sue responded, "No, I think I'm going to heaven but I'll never see God."

Is Sue's theology right? Is Sue's sister right? What about her husband?

Let me give four reasons from the Bible why suicide is wrong:

1. There are five accounts of suicide in the Bible and in every case the suicide is seen as a sad and inappropriate end to a life. All are written of in the context of being less than what God desired for a person.

2. The commandments are clear that "you shall not kill." Taking one's own life is every bit as much murder as the taking of someone else's life.

3. God says He alone has the legitimate power of life and death and only as He grants that power can others use it legitimately. Incidentally, never in Scripture is that power granted to an individual acting on his own behalf but only acting on behalf of a legitimate government. One person does not have the right to take a life, not even his own.

4. Suicide reflects despair not faith. Steven Schmidt has had Crohn's disease for 12 years. He writes that for many reasons he cannot commit suicide but most of all because suicide denies the Lordship of Christ. We usurp God's authority when we take our own life to escape a condition of living we deem intolerable.

Please do not think I'm unaware or insensitive to those who live in unbelievable pain. I have been with families in the anguish of loved ones who are suffering. These principles do not in any way suggest that we must artificially prolong life. We are not compelled by these principles to use extraordinary methods to keep ourselves, or others we love, alive. Now I realize that these principles do not automatically determine every difficult decision that families may face, but they do lay out the foundation upon which prayerful wisdom builds in making those seemingly



impossible decisions of life and death.





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