

MALACHI'S MODERN MESSAGE

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*A series of sermons by
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Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 1

"Message On Love"

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I want you to turn with me to Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, chapter 1 - I don't know really how many weeks it's going to take us getting through this study, I anticipate perhaps nine or ten weeks in this series, but as I know from experience, and you from greater experience, it doesn't always work out that way! Sometimes we have to take a little bit more time, but nevertheless I don't anticipate it going on too long, but we do want to find out what the Lord is saying to us in this age, in the message that I believe is so modern to our contemporary day and age from a prophecy that is so old. Maybe you're wondering, or even questioning the title that I've taken for this series 'Malachi's Modern Message' - how can it be modern? Because many people would look at these Old Testament Scriptures, particularly major and minor prophets, and see them as antiquated historical literature that was penned millennia ago by prophets whose messages have little application to our 21st-century day - but if that's the way you think about prophets like Malachi or any of the major or minor prophets, or indeed any book of Scripture, you couldn't be further from the truth. The minor prophets in particular, I believe, are treasure troves full of practical truth that is particularly, in a modern sense, relevant to our day and age. Because the messages within all of the word of God, but I think particularly in these minor prophets, are timeless messages, because the truth of God is timeless and the truth of God always speaks to the human condition, because we must admit tonight - and we'll see from Malachi's prophecy - that the human condition has not changed from the days of Malachi. Human beings are the same today, they're the same in whatever age we may live, they are sinners fallen from the grace of God, deprived and needing God's salvation.

Though Malachi is only four short chapters long, and in fact in the Hebrew Bible it's only three chapters long, it has much to say to the social, the political, and the religious compromise of both Malachi's age and our age today in which we live. The message is contemporary, and the message is equally convicting even though it was spoken first 2500 years ago. So keeping in mind that Malachi's message is very modern, let us read the first five verses of chapter 1 for our study this evening: "The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. I have loved you", or it could be translated 'I have loved you deeply', "saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever. And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel".

Now let us look at verse 1, which tells us the author of this little prophecy: 'The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi'. 'Malachi' simply means 'my messenger', and there's a little bit of dispute over what the name really means. Others believe it means 'my angel', but of course the word for 'angel' and the word for 'messenger' are the same; but we don't find the name 'Malachi' anywhere else outside of the book of his prophecy. In fact, at the beginning of this book he doesn't even tell us who his father is, which many of the other prophets do, to give us an idea where he came from and who he is, and his personality. Because of that reason, some scholars believe that this name 'Malachi' is not a proper name at all, rather it just means 'my messenger', and it could be any prophet - some believe it is perhaps one particular prophet or another, and they name them, but they don't believe Malachi was an individual. Some believe it's even the surname of one particular prophet, but nevertheless I think that the Bible is clear, and it'll be clear as we go through this

study this evening and in further nights that Malachi was an individual person, and indeed he was the last prophet who wrote in the Old Testament Scripture, although he is not classed as the last Old Testament prophet - because we know that John the Baptist was the last Old Testament prophet, although Malachi is the last prophet that writes in the Old Testament Scriptures.

I think what the Holy Spirit is really telling us, perhaps, through the fact that Malachi's name means 'my messenger', and there's not a lot more told to us about Malachi, is simply that God wants to communicate that the most important thing is not the messenger that brings His message, but the message that the messenger brings. It would do us all well to remember that, and I think Malachi's chief concern was his faithfulness delivering God's message, rather than his personal desire for fame as God's messenger. Let us discern tonight, as we study this little book, and in the weeks that lie ahead of us, that the most important thing that we look at tonight - and we may touch some very controversial subjects - but the most important thing is to receive the message from the Lord: what the message is saying to your heart and my heart; what the modern message is that God is trying to communicate not just to Malachi's contemporary age, but to our modern age in which we live as the people of God.

Now the date and the background of this book are pretty clear, as I've said it's the last Old Testament book penned, and it was written approximately 100 years after Cyrus decreed that Judah could return to the land in 538BC. That means that Malachi is the last of the post-exilic prophets. Judah has returned to the land, they have begun to build the temple. Even though they are under the rule of Persia still, they're back in the promised land and they have been seeing God's blessings again - and 100 years later, after they are found in the land, post-exile, we find this prophecy of Malachi written. Now we have to understand the background of this book, context is so important in everything that we learn from the Holy Scriptures, and we need to understand the background of Malachi's message to understand the import and the force of what God was saying to these Old Testament, post-exilic people. During this time that the people find themselves back in the land, their Jewish faith had been reformed. Not so long ago we were looking at this reformation that happened under the leadership of Nehemiah and also Ezra. But you know, it wasn't long after that reformation - and this is a tale that is told in itself - that the people backslid once more. So often we find that in Jewish history, don't we? There's a kind of revival, or maybe we couldn't use that in the perfect sense, but at least a reformation in religious terms - but all of a sudden, it's not long until we see the people again gripped with apathy and indifference, and becoming morally corrupt in their old ways. Ezra and Nehemiah have reformed the people, but again they return to the vomit like a dog - but there's one thing, one difference that I want to highlight right at the very beginning of our study in this series, a difference in Malachi's prophecy from many of the other Old Testament prophets. Most of the major and minor prophets lived and ministered, prophesied, in days of change. What I mean is, days of political or religious, spiritual upheaval - but Malachi is different: the people are back in the land and, if you want, it is an uneventful time, it is a time when nothing much is happening. Politically, religiously and spiritually, it is a day of small things - God isn't doing mighty things in the land through religion or through politics. You could say that, in a sense, it was a waiting period; they were waiting to see what God was going to do next - but at this present time God didn't seem to be doing anything. In fact, they were going as far now as to say in their apathy and indifference and moral corruption: 'Has God forgotten us? Has God forgotten His people? All the promises that have been spoken to us in the past, God doesn't seem to have honoured them to us'.

If you know the Old Testament history, you'll know that Zerubbabel and Joshua - whom Haggai and Zechariah named as God's chosen men for a new age to build the temple and bring the people back into the land - they had now died. For many Israelites the promises of God's blessing through Zerubbabel and through Joshua had died with their decease. As far as they could see, the temple was now completed - but the prosperity that God's prophets promised had not come to the land: the expansion of peace, the return of God's own glory in the temple had not come to pass - 'Why is this? Has God let us down? Has He forsaken us?'

Let me illustrate this for you, if you turn to Zechariah - just the book before Malachi - and chapter 1. There are many portions I could show you, but we'll just look at one, chapter 1 and verses 16 and 17 - Zechariah says: 'Therefore thus saith the LORD; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies', this post-exilic people would know the mercies of God. Speaking of the temple: 'My house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem. Cry yet, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; My cities through prosperity', that was the word that gripped their attention, 'prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the LORD shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem'. You can read about it in chapter 2 as well, these people were waiting - the temple had been completed, but this prosperity had not come. There was nothing momentous or significant that was happening in their age, there was nothing that was occurring to indicate that God's presence had returned among His people.

Literally Ezekiel prophesied, and we studied it a couple of years ago in chapter 43, he told that God's Shekinah glory would one day return to His temple. These people were looking for it, but they never saw it. Now you could imagine, perhaps even forgive or empathise with the people, that they became disillusioned. It seems that God's promises to them were not being fulfilled, in fact, worse than that, they were failing them. As far as they were concerned, as they looked over their prestigious history, the day of miracles had passed. The miracles of their fathers that they had told them of, the days of Elijah and Elisha had died, and God didn't seem to be working any longer in signs and wonders. Yes, in the temple, among the levitical priests there were sacrifices, the routines of religious practices were continuing - but the people weren't stupid, they could see that there was no power, there was no enthusiasm in their worship to God, there was no real meaning in their religion, and they were asking: 'Where is the God of our fathers? Where is His glory that we were told of in His past?'. Then the reasonable depression of thought was that they came to ask the question: 'Well, does it really matter whether we serve God or not? Where is God now? Where is He as our defence? What's the point of serving God, does it really pay off in these days to worship God, and to follow God?'. There were generations who were dying, continuing the Jewish religion without meaning, and many of them were losing their faith simply because they had not received the promises that God spoke to them of.

Someone has said that this period in Israelite history was, if you like, the period after the fireworks, after the climax and the great crescendo. If you like, it is the anti-climax of Israelite history - nothing of significance was happening, and that led to apathy, it led to backsliding, it led to these people questioning God. Now I ask you the question tonight, under the title of this modern message: are we not in a similar situation tonight? I know it's the church period, but is it not a period of waiting in our history? You have to acknowledge that we're not living - no matter what charismatics claim, at times, with signs and wonders - we are not living in apostolic times. The apostles have died and that era has passed on, and even though we have known revivals in our history down through the years, we at this corner of God's world are certainly not experiencing any revival! Now, in one sense, we're to expect that. In fact, the apostles teach us through the epistles that God's people in this age of grace are to be a people who live more by faith and less by sight. You remember in John chapter 20 and verse 29, the Lord Jesus told doubting Thomas, Thomas Didymus: 'You have seen and believed, but blessed are they that do not see, yet believe'. In 2 Corinthians Paul told us and the church in Corinth that we walk by faith, not by sight - we will see less, but we are still to believe. Maybe you know 1 Peter, if you turn to it for just a moment, 1 Peter and chapter 1 verse 8, Peter gives the same sentiment: 'Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory'.

Now turn with me to 2 Peter, because I want all of us to read a few verses of Scripture together which are so important to understand how we are in a similar situation today as the people of Israel in Malachi's day. Second Peter chapter 3 and verse 3, Peter says: 'Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming?', Christ's second coming, 'for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth

standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness'.

Now I believe that we are in a similar period to those in Malachi's day, we are in a period of waiting, we are in a day of small things. Certainly in the West we're not experiencing apostolic signs, we're not knowing the reviving of the Spirit of God, and God knows that my heart has the desire to see it again - but we're not experiencing it! We are in, I think, a Laodicean period. Our eyes are looking to heaven and we're waiting on the coming of our glorious Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, and there are those in the world - and, sadly, in the church tonight - that are asking the question that men even in Peter's day were asking: 'Where is the promise of His coming? Time has always ran like this, the fathers have died, their promises have died with them, where is all that God's word said would come to pass?'. Maybe some Christians are even asking the question, someone has said in the past: 'Doubt the man that never doubts' - who of us have never doubted, at some time or other, the promises of God? Maybe, as you live in a day of small things, and maybe you don't see much happening for God in your life, in your church, in this land, in this continent - you're asking the question: 'Where is the God of our fathers?', and you're despairing. Maybe you're coming to some of the conclusions that the philosophy and science of the world are coming to today? I think much of the church is there as we speak, I think they have given up, to a large extent, by default, without admitting it, to the spirit of the age. They're imbibing the ways of the world, the thinking of the world; and though they take the name of Christ, they're living in the same way as the world lives because they feel that their faith has been unanswerably challenged by science. Maybe it's evolution or physics at university or at school, and you feel the Bible has no answer for these things; so you just go along with it. Maybe it's the philosophy of the age, and you've embraced it; maybe it's world trends, because you just can't beat the flow so you go with it - and you have begun, because of the circumstances that prevail in this land and in the church, to question God, maybe even to question His word. The reality is, whether we want to admit it or not, that just like in Malachi's day, because of the conditions that prevailed in his age, many even today too are losing touch with the living God. They do not have a vital, vibrant, living, burning, electric relationship with God!

Israel had lost touch with God, but Malachi's message - modern to them and modern to us tonight - was simply this: whatever changes in the world, whatever changes among my people, whether they be Israel or whether they be the New Testament church, whatever changes in your transitory life, God never changes! You may be living in a period of time where you're waiting, you may be living in a day of small things when little is happening spiritually in your life or in your church or in your nation, but yet God's word through Malachi - look at chapter 3 and verse 6: 'I am the LORD, I change not'. What God was also saying to them is not the theological dogma of His immutability - that He never changes, that He is the eternal God, the same - but what Malachi is really saying to the people is 'If God does not change, God's word does not change, and what God requires of every man, woman, boy or girl in creation does not change either'. The content of this book bears it out, because chapter 1 that we read this evening, the first five verses open with a declaration of God's unconditional, unchanging love for His elect people, Israel. But the fact of the matter is, as we'll see in a few moments, they were indifferent, they questioned His love for them; and that indifference manifested in the lives of the priests, the clergy of the day, because we'll find out later on in chapter 1 next week that they

give polluted sacrifices to the Lord. They polluted the temple sanctuary and their service to God, and their entire worship to God was rejected by holiness because it was corrupt, it was not the best. In chapter 2 we will see that the priests, God said, would be judged if they would not repent and refused to submit to God's will; and then in chapter 3 we will see that God declared that He would send His messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah who would come as a refiner's fire, and purify both the temple and the priesthood and the holy remnant, He would judge the wicked and restore the righteous. We will see how God accused His people of robbing Him: 'Can a man rob God?'. He accuses them of the same sins that were in Israel in Nehemiah's day, and Nehemiah and Ezra condemned: divorcing their Israelite wives to marry foreigners who worshipped pagan gods; fraud and extortion and cheating in business; not paying their tithes as the temple offerings to fulfil the wages for the temple priests. God is calling them through Malachi to change their ways: they may have changed, the situation in the land and in their religion may have changed, but God has not changed! If they disobeyed God, God would judge them; but if they obeyed God, He would bless them.

Has it ever been any different? Then in chapter 4 we will see that the final warning before the Day of the Lord, which has not come yet, which will include the coming of Elijah and Messiah, will mean the final judgment of all who have not obeyed the Lord: the wicked and the deliverance of the righteous, those who please God. Malachi's burden that we read of in verse 1: 'The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi', was simply this - and it should be the burden of all his namesakes, that means every messenger with the word of the Lord should have a call to renewal, a call to revival, a call that God has never changed and what He expects of His people never changes either! That call must come forth, whatever the season is in which we live. If the people of God have become cold, become cynical in their faith and in their doubt, that must be the clarion message that is cried by every prophet of God in every age; because what you will have, if you have all the truth like the people of Malachi's day, but do not have a living vital relationship with God, is nothing but dead orthodoxy! Charles Feinberg, in his commentary on the minor prophets, said that the spirit of the people in Malachi's day developed later into the sects of the Pharisees and the Sadducees that we find in the New Testament. The Sadducees were the liberals that doubted in resurrection, doubted the existence of the supernatural - that's where we will be led to if we do not have a living relationship with the covenant God! The other extreme from liberalism will be dead orthodoxy and legalism of the Pharisees, following a list of rules and regulations, having all our i's dotted and our t's crossed, yet we do not know the living God in a personal, vibrant, renewing, reviving way.

So God invites all men in Malachi's day and in our day to return to Him, chapter 3 and verse 7: 'Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?'. God doesn't change in His demands, and isn't it very refreshing that although there's a lot of judgment in this little book, that God never changes in His gracious invitation to all of us to be renewed, to be revived, to come again. Isn't it wonderful to know, as verse 16 of chapter 3 tells us, that all who will come to Him in that spirit of reviving renewal will be accepted: 'Then they', verse 16 of 3, 'they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name'.

Now we will see in the subsequent weeks how this book is written, the style of Malachi is very unique because the book takes the format of a dialogue, it's like a conversation between God and the people. First of all, what you find throughout this book is that God charges Israel with a breach of the covenant relationship He has with them, He charges them with failing in something that He has commanded them to do. Then the second thing that we usually read is the people's response, now it is the prophet's version of the people inspired by God, so we can believe it, the way the people react to God's charge upon their covenant relationship. They actually say to God: 'Show us the evidence of what You're saying!'. Thirdly we find in this dialogue that God pronounces His evidence and His subsequent judgment upon their behaviour.

We're going to see this in what is the first symptomatic sign of their spiritual bankruptcy - what is the first symptomatic sign of the spiritual bankruptcy of these people that God cites? It's very, very, very clear - verse 2: 'I have loved you deeply, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob and I hated Esau'. What God is doing is, He is saying: 'The first sign of your backsliding is a complete insensitivity to my love for you!'. Now how does God address that symptomatic sign of their spiritual bankruptcy? The first way He addresses it we find in the first phrase of verse 2, God's pronouncement of His love. He says, 'I have loved you deeply'. Now the word 'love' there in the Hebrew language is in the perfect tense, that means that He is saying 'Not only have I loved you in the past, but the love wherewith I loved you in your history is the same love that I love you with in your present. Whatever is going on, whatever is not going on in your life, I have the same love for you that I've always had'.

God's pronouncement of His love. Now, we don't have time to look at His love for His Old Testament people, but let me give you some of the ways in which He expressed his love. It was an unconditional love. You don't read long into the Old Testament till you find out that God's love for His ancient people Israel was an act of pure grace. If you turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 7, you'll find in verses 7 and 8: 'The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt'. In chapter 9 we find out that God even admits that they are rebellious and stiffnecked, hard people, yet He saves them - not because of anything that they are, but because He loves them, and in love He has unconditionally chosen them.

His love in the past to Israel was an unconditional love, and it still is to them in Malachi's day. We see secondly in the Old Testament, added to that, God's love to them was sovereignly bestowed. You remember their history, God called Abraham from the Ur of the Chaldees, and God made a covenant with him, and God confirmed that covenant unto Isaac and unto Jacob out of grace! Why did God pick Abraham? Why did God bless his descendants in Jacob and in Isaac? It was simply God's sovereign choice.

Thirdly we see that His love for Israel in the Old Testament was an everlasting love. In Jeremiah 31 and verse 3 you read those very familiar words, where God says to His people through the prophet: 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love'. He goes on to say how He loves His people like a mother loves a child. He then says in Isaiah 49 that He has graven His people upon His own hands, a sign of writing and cutting the covenant on the palms of His own divine hands. He expresses also in the Old Testament His love for Israel like the love of a husband and a wife. In Malachi, in chapter 2 and verse 11, we see that borne out: 'Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god'. He sees His covenant relationship with His people like a marriage bond, they have been unfaithful to it and God is grieved. In chapter 1 and verse 6 He says: 'A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master', He is likening the love that He has for His people like the love that a father has for his son. Then in Deuteronomy 32, you will know this verse well, God said that His people Israel were the apple of His eye, and literally in the Hebrew the word 'apple of His eye' means 'the pupil'. It's this sense that, just as you or I would protect our eyes from being hurt, God protects His people like He would protect His own eye. And the antithesis of that is that if anyone touches Israel, if anyone touches God's people - if I can say it reverently - it's like poking God in the eye! It invokes His wrath, His anger, because He loves His people with an unconditional, a sovereign, and everlasting love. He says: 'That love that I have always loved you with is the same love that I love you with tonight!'. He said that to Malachi, and I believe He says it to us in the New Testament sense, that we have entered into the covenant, a new blessing.

God's pronouncement of His love to you here tonight...well, let's tease it out a little more, because we see that that wasn't enough for the people. The second thing we see is the people's protest against God's love. They say: 'Wherein hast Thou loved us?'. Do you know what they're saying? 'What? You love us? Prove it! Where is the evidence? Wherein have You loved us? How have You loved us? We don't have any evidence in our day and age how You're loving us, God! We've got the opposite!'. They began to doubt God's love, living in a day of small things. You know, we can be guilty of the same sin, but you know their problem is ours at times: they had, and we have short memories. You see these people, although they were living in a spiritually mundane time, they had experienced many privileges. They had known the protection of God from their enemies, they had known personal blessing, He had restored the land to them, He had allowed them to re-establish the temple, to reinstitute the temple worship and priests, and He even brought revival not so long ago through Ezra and Nehemiah, and He had given them rest from their enemies - but they showed complete indifference, apathy, ingratitude to it all.

What a lesson all of us can learn tonight, and it is this: ingratitude for past blessings blinds us to present blessings. When we forget what God has done for us in the past, even if it only - and I use that word 'only' advisedly - only be our salvation experience, ought that not to be enough for us to have great gratitude in our hearts for the love that God has showed toward us? Someone has said: 'Where love is most manifested, it is often least appreciated', is that not true? You often see it in the relationship between a husband and a wife, a greater human love cannot be known yet at times the one that is closest to you is the one that you seem to hurt the most. You can see it in all sorts of relationships, and we must make sure that we have an appreciation of the mighty love of God, that we never become ungrateful for it or even doubt it in our present circumstances - and this is a warning to us all, because it's a dangerous thing when we start to argue with God, and we try to defend our sinful ways and accuse God!

I don't know about you, but I find that Malachi's teaching strikes at the heart of today's nominal, easy-going Christianity, just as it does at the easy-going nominal Judaism of Malachi's day. I don't know where you are tonight, maybe Satan comes to you and tells you that God has neglected you, God has forgotten you in that illness, in that problem, in your turmoil; that God has failed you, that God has let you down! Maybe he's whispering in your ear: 'Look at your life, it's a disaster! Where is God now? Where are His promises?'. Be very careful, because doubting God's love is the beginning of unbelief, and the beginning of disobedience, and we have that right at the very beginning of the Bible when Eve believed Satan rather than God, and effectively Eve doubted that God loved her. She thought that God was disenfranchising her from something that was good, something that would add to her life. When we start thinking like that about God we're doubting His love. Satan came to the people of Israel and said: 'Where are your crops that God has promised? What has happened to His promises spoken through His prophets? Why doesn't God look after you the way the prophets have told you all down through the years?'

God's pronouncement of His love wasn't enough, because the people protested against God's love. But the third thing I want you to see tonight is that God cited His proof of His love. God's proof of His love, He said: 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness'. Basically, 'Edom, as she tries to build her cities and her civilisation, comes to nothing; because I've loved you Jacob, Israel and not Esau'. God cites two ways in which He has loved His people. First of all He tells them how He graciously chose Jacob, their father, and rejected Esau. We'll look at that in just a moment, but then secondly He tells them how He judged the Edomites, that is Esau's descendants, verses 3 and 4, and gave to Israel the best lands, and has prospered Israel - and yet Edom are a waste, wilderness, for jackals.

What God is saying to them is: 'Do you want proof that I love you? My divine sovereign election is proof that I love you. Esau have I hated, you Jacob have I loved'. Now, I know what's going through some of your heads now: 'What's he going to say on this word 'hated', how is he going to talk about election?'. You might

even, as you read those words, feel that they jar against your conscience or your heart to think that God could pronounce that He hated someone! 'Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated' - what does that word 'hate' mean? Let me say, before I go on to comment - and I will say in preface that a lot of you won't agree with what I'm going to say tonight, and I'd be surprised if all of you did agree, but I would ask you to disagree graciously if that is within your being, and I don't really want to debate it at the door - but whatever it does mean, do not question God. Surely that's the one lesson that we find in Malachi? It's not advisable to question God, and we have to start with the common denominator that whatever God does is right. God doesn't just do right things, whatever God does is right, even though we may not be able to reconcile it in our own human ingenuity, no matter how intelligent we think ourselves to be.

Now I'm not going to enter into a whole exposition of this word 'hate' tonight, save to say that many commentators say that we can understand this word 'hate' by looking at Luke chapter 14 and verse 26, that is the passage where the Lord Jesus, with the call of the disciples, says: 'Except you hate your father and mother', and mentions a number of other family relations, 'you cannot be my disciple. You must deny yourself, you must take up your cross and follow me'. Then the commentators will turn you from Luke 14 to Matthew 10, and then show how the Lord Jesus in the same vein says it a little different: 'He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me'. So they conclude that when the Lord says you have to 'hate' father and mother, that it just means that you don't love them as much as you love the Lord - it doesn't mean an actual, positive hatred of them, but it's a lesser love. Now that is correct in that sense; and Jesus, of course, when He tells us to hate father and mother, He doesn't mean to hate them in the wrong sense. But is that the way we're to understand this word 'hate', which it definitely is, in the book of Malachi?

Now I think one of the reactions people have against this word 'hate' is that they think that what God is saying here is 'Jacob have I saved, and Esau have I damned'. Now that is not what God's word is saying here, because we need to remember that election in this verse is related to God's purposes through a nation. Just because Jacob was chosen did not mean and transpire that all the Israelites after Jacob would be saved, isn't that correct? Just because Esau was not chosen does not mean that all the Edomites would be damned, so I think that we can conclude that that word 'hate' does not mean 'damned'. We have to therefore also say that Jacob was born in sin and shapen in iniquity, just as Esau was, was he not? Because we are all damned, we are all judged in Adam as being sinners, and we are all condemned - so God does not condemn one over another, we have condemned ourselves because we are in Adam and we are judged for such. Jacob was a sinner under condemnation like Esau, but this is what I want you to notice - and we get to the definition of this word 'hate' by this - what made the difference between Jacob and Esau was that God graciously chose Jacob. Whatever it means for God to graciously choose Jacob, the opposite of that is what that word 'hate' means. It means 'reject', God chose Jacob and God rejected Esau. One thing that it definitely means is that Esau was not chosen, and whatever this elective love was that God shows towards Jacob, it is not shown toward Esau. Esau was the first born, the birthright did belong to him, a double portion of the inheritance, nevertheless God set His love upon Jacob and not upon Esau.

Some people, and I want a bit of time to explain this, some people maintain that divine foreknowledge of the character of Esau was the reason for Esau's rejection, that means that God knew he was going to be a bad spud and so He didn't choose him - He knew all the things he was going to do in his life. But that doesn't weigh up, because Jacob was far from a man that was eligible for divine election if that was the grounds of it. The whole point of God's sovereign election is simply this: it's not upon any merits of our own, it's by grace and grace alone! When Paul, in Romans chapter 9 cites this little verse, if you turn with me to it - this verse from Malachi, 'Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated' - this is the very argument that he makes concerning the nation of Israel, verse 11 of chapter 9: 'The children being not yet born', that is Jacob and Esau, they weren't even born, they hadn't done any good or evil, but 'that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth; It was said unto her', Rebecca, 'The elder shall serve the

younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'.

Jacob was not a deserving individual, it was grace that saved him. Now let me say, in case you think that I'm going down some kind of hyper-Calvinistic line, the Bible teaches that human beings are responsible for their actions as creatures of God. The Bible does not teach a fatalism, a fatalistic view that all events are determined by a blind necessity; but can I categorically say tonight: let us never attempt to explain away the biblical mystery of God's election! It is in the Bible, and if you can't reconcile it with man's responsibility, you've got the problem! The greatest tragedy that I want you to think about tonight is that we lose an aspect of divine love if we ignore God's sovereign election. The doctrine of God's divine elective love, it's not there to perplex us, it's not there to trouble us, when it's properly understood it's there - just like it was for the people in Malachi's day - to revive them, to thrill them, to warm their hearts! What could warm your heart more tonight, if you're downcast as a believer, if you think that God's forgot you, than what Paul said to the Ephesians in chapter 1 and verse 4, that you were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, before creation was. What can warm your heart more than what the Lord Jesus said in John 15:19, that He chose His own out of the world. Peter, yes, declared that that choosing was according to the foreknowledge of God, but please do not say that that means that God just saw that you were going to turn out well and believe God's message. It's not according to your merit! Now don't ask me to explain it, I can't! But don't dilute it, because it's in God's word - I can't understand it, I can't reconcile it, but I'm not required to understand it or reconcile it, I'm called to believe it and enjoy it! For the Lord has declared it: 'All whom the Father gives me, shall come to me'. He plainly stated: 'No man can come to me, except the Father who has sent me draws him'. He held that doctrine in complete balance with the other doctrine that men were responsible: 'Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out'. He said to the Jews: 'Ye will not come that ye may have life'; and He invited people 'Come unto me all ye that labour'. As 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and 14 says, this doctrine that we have been chosen by God, Paul says, therefore salvation ought to bring thanksgiving, reviving praise from our heart!

What is the first step of renewal that Malachi gives these people? It's simply this: get touched again by the eternal never-changing love of God for you, that He chose you in grace, that the Saviour died for you and shed His blood in love for you, and has drawn you to Himself, and one day will make you perfect. I go as far as to say that it is almost blasphemous for a child of God in this age to say: 'How has God loved me?'. In 1916 a man called F.M. Lehman was touched by the words that he saw scribbled on the wall of an asylum, and he incorporated them into the last stanza of his hymn, and the lyrics read like this:

'Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky'

If that was madness, we all could do with a dose of it, and it would revive our hearts in love for God for His love for us; it would take us from dead orthodoxy into a living, vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 2

"Message On Service"

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We want to turn again tonight to Malachi's prophecy, the last book in the Old Testament. God willing, after next Monday's break, after Tom Orr has visited us, we'll take up our studies once again. Please do make these meetings known among your friends and fellow Christians, it's an encouragement to see as many people as possible here, of course, from the preacher's perspective - but the most important desire that we have is that the word of God should go forth to as many people as possible, whether that's through the recordings, or through people actually gathering here. You have partly a responsibility in that regard, to let people know that the word of God is going forth in this place this very evening in this series, and it would be a great benefit if you could bring people under the sound of it.

We looked last week at chapter 1 verses 1-5, and we're taking up our reading tonight at verse 6 - and, God willing, if time allows, we will get to the end of the chapter. You might say: 'If you allow it we'll get to the end of the chapter!'.

"A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father", this is God speaking through the prophet, "if I then be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts. And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons? saith the LORD of hosts. Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the LORD a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen".

Our title tonight is "Priestly Compromise". You remember last week that I told you in introduction that most of the prophets in the Old Testament, both major and minor prophets, prophesied and lived in days of change. They were either days of political upheaval, or religious turmoil, but one way or another they were times of transition - and God chose them as His men to bring His message during those turbulent times. Now you remember, I hope, that we marked that Malachi found himself unique in this sense, that he was the prophet of God in an uneventful day - in, if you like, we could call it 'a day of small things', a day when great and tremendous things were not happening in governmental life, in the policies and politics of Israelite rule. There were not great traumatic changes within the priesthood or among the prophets, spiritual life was mundane, there were no great signs and wonders that followed the prophets and preachers of God's word. We said that Malachi, perhaps we could define it that: he was prophesying during a waiting period, a period

a bit like the one that we're in as the church of Jesus Christ, we're after the apostolic age where we saw signs and wonders, we're after an age when the word of God has been revealed to us, we have a full and complete canon of Scripture. Really we're waiting, as Peter has said, on the coming of the Lord: we look for our Saviour from heaven, that is the Lord Jesus Christ. We are experiencing, perhaps today, what God's people experienced in Malachi's day. They were asking the question: 'Has God forgotten us?'

Because we're not living in significantly spiritual days, we may start to question the promises of God and ask ourselves: 'Is God really honouring His promises in our modern age, in our contemporary environment?'. These people were asking the same questions. Zerubbabel and Joshua were dead, and with them had died the promises of blessing, that if the temple was rebuilt - and now it had been rebuilt - the people would know prosperity, expansion, peace, and there would be a great return of the Shekinah glory of God to His temple, to the chosen city of Jerusalem - but, lo and behold, it had not come to pass. The day of miracles passed, as far as Israelite history was concerned, with the passing of Elijah and Elisha. People were asking, as in the days of Gideon: 'Where is the God of miracles? Where is the God that our fathers told us of?'

Now the routine of the religious establishment, religious rites and practices, were continuing. But everybody in the nation, including the ecclesiastical hierarchy, would have to admit that there was no meaning behind it, it was powerless, the unction and Shekinah glory of God had departed from Israel. Individuals and leaders in the nation were asking: 'Where is God?'. They were becoming disillusioned, and some of them were even going as far as to ask the question: 'Does it really matter if we serve God, if we honour Him, or not?'. Because of that, some of them were losing their faith.

Now we saw last week that this book of Malachi, four chapters, three in the Hebrew Bible, takes the format of a dialogue, a hypothetical dialogue that the prophet writes, which has God first of all charging Israel with a breach of their covenant relationship with Him. We saw it last week, where God pronounces His love for His people, and He charges them with breaking the covenant of love, they have not reciprocated the love that He has shown toward them. The second stage in this dialogue that we find is that the people give a response, demanding from God evidence for the grounds of His accusation towards them. We find it couched in this word, continually through the book, 'wherein'. In the first five verses they replied to God's pronouncement of love to them: 'Wherein have You loved us?'. In other words, 'Prove it! Where is the evidence of Your love to us in our lives today?'. Then we find the third part of the dialogue is that God gives His evidence, and then He pronounces His judgment upon the people for breaking their covenant relationship with Him.

Now we saw last week that the first symptomatic sign of their spiritual bankruptcy that God cites was their insensitivity to His divine love. They were questioning that God, their covenant God Jehovah, should love them: 'Wherein have You loved us? Prove, Lord, that You have loved us!'. We saw God's pronouncement of His love: 'I have loved you deeply', verse 2, 'saith the Lord'. Then we saw that the people ask again in verse 2, the people protest against God's love: 'Where, how, have You loved us?'. Then we see at the end of verse 2, God gives the proof of His divine love: 'Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated', and we tried to explain that very delicate truth last week.

What we're going to look at this evening is the second symptomatic sign of their backsliding. God, if you like, is creating a legal case to these people of why He is going to judge them if they do not repent. The first was their insensitivity to His divine love, and the second symptomatic sign now is not just their doubt of His love, but God accuses them of actually despising His name! Now that is a very serious accusation, but six times in these verses the Lord refers to His name. You see it in verse 6, verse 11, and verse 14: 'My name' - God is jealous for His name, the reason is, in the biblical language 'His name' is a euphemism, another term simply for His character or His reputation. It sums up who He is in His holy, righteous character and personality. What God is saying here is that His name is at stake, in other words His holy reputation is at stake because of His people's backsliding and spiritual indifference and apathy. Now in verse 5, if you look

at it, we read it last week: 'Your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel'. It was God's desire that His name should be magnified in all the earth, but now He's coming and accusing His people of not magnifying His name as they should have done as His chosen nation of Israel, to be a light unto the rest of the world and the Gentile people. But He actually accuses them, not only of doubting His love, but despising His holy name; in other words, despising His character.

He addresses primarily the priests, and this is so important that we know this right at the outset of our study tonight. He's accusing not just the people, although that is inferred, but particularly the priests or the leaders of the people, of despising His name. They were the chief culprits. If you like, from verses 1-5, God is now turning the tables from the people to the priests, those who should have been leading the people spiritually, those who should have been spiritual and upstanding and defending the name, the reputation and the characteristics of God - they were the ones who were chiefly guilty in this regard of despising God's name. Now God has already proved His love for them, that it's not in dispute, but now He is actually questioning the quality of the people's love for Him. It's clear, it's been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt: 'Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated', this elective love that He has shown to the people of Israel right from the beginning of their existence proves that God has loved them. But now He turns to the spiritual leaders, the priests of the land, and questions their love, their respect and reverential fear for Him.

Now, of course all of the people were guilty, but God rounds His condemnation on the priests. We could ask the question: why is that? It's simply because the responsibility for the spiritual health of the people rested upon the spiritual leaders of the people. Their responsibility was to guard the sanctuary, to make sure that nothing went on within the temple of God that was unseemly or despised His name, or took away from the character and the reputation of Almighty God. They were to keep the cultis free from defilement, the sacrifices and the offerings. They were to inspect the sacrifices to make sure that no one was offering a blind lamb or a blemished sacrifice. They were the ones who were to prevent the people bringing lame and sick and weak offerings to God. Yet the indictment that is brought by the prophet of God, Malachi, on them is: far from being the ones to protect God's name, they were actually engaging themselves in these despicable sacrifices.

Now before we go on any further, I want us to highlight two lessons that I hope we already, from the Spirit of God speaking in a still small voice to all our hearts, learned. These will be borne out as we go through this study this evening. Here is the first lesson, and it would do well for all leaders, whoever you are in the place tonight, whether you're an elder or a deacon, or a leader in a youth work or a children's work, to mark this: a congregation, whoever the congregation may be, will never rise above the spirituality of her leaders. The second lesson that outflows from that is that with the privileges of leadership must follow the fulfilment of its responsibilities. Privilege brings responsibilities, but no more than in this Christian realm of leadership. If you're an elder tonight that's a tremendous privilege. If you're a deacon that, although you may not think it, is a privilege. To be one who is a leader among youth or among children is a privilege. There are decisions that you get to make that others don't make and don't have a say in. You have a certain amount of God-given power that others, perhaps, do not have - and you ought to command a respect from others - but all too often those divine privileges are not met with the balance and the parallel of the reflection of the responsibility that God requires of those blessings.

The greater the responsibilities, the greater the accountability. That is what God is trying to impress upon these Israelites, and that's what the Lord Jesus Christ said, did He not, in Luke's gospel 12:48: 'For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more'. That's why James said in James 3 verse 1: 'Do not desire to be many masters, for you will incur a greater judgment' - a stricter judgment! It's a great privilege to be a master or to be a leader in the household of faith, but there's a greater responsibility upon you! If you can remember our study in Ezekiel, I'm sure you'll not remember this point, but Ezekiel's executioners were to go throughout the people and

wipe out those who were unfaithful to the Lord - but in Ezekiel 9 he was told to start in the sanctuary of the Lord. The executioners were to begin slaying those who were meant to stand for God's name, because they were despising God's name! Is that not what Peter means when he says: 'Judgement must begin in the house of God'?

That's why the Lord singles out the priests. Now if I was to ask you the question tonight: what was the highest office in all the nation of Israel? I doubt that some of you would probably reply back: 'Well, it must be the king', but that is false. The priesthood was the highest office in all of Israel, because the priest was, in the Old Testament, a mediator between God and men. The priest had the holy obedience of taking the sacrifice, the atoning sacrifice, that would pave man's way to God, and offer it. So he was conveying to God man's repentance, but he was also conveying from God to man God's love, mercy, and God's incumbent blessing on all the nation. It was the priest who had the wonderful position of instructing the people of God in the laws of holiness that God gave them. But more than that, the priest also functioned in Israel's High Court as a judge, he had a say on legal matters, matters of purity, ceremonial ritual qualifications. To mark the greatness of this office the priest, in his elaborate consecration ceremony, was taken and his body was washed clean with water, a blood atonement was made on behalf of his sins, and then holy anointing oil was poured over him, and official garments of service were put on him - all of them pointing to the awesome privilege, but the awesome responsibility before the Lord of being a priest to Israel for God.

But by the time Malachi wrote his prophecy, they had desecrated the office, they had defamed God's name, and they were held in disgrace by all the people. As far as God was concerned, God had given them His very best. He had loved them with His love, He chose them, He gave them the covenants and the blessings, and He expected in return their best from them to Him - but what the priests did was this: they took the best for themselves! We read in verse 6, God says to them: 'A son honours his father, and a servant his master: if then I am a father, where is my honour? if I am a master, where is my fear?'. God is accusing them that their sense of propriety was more sensitive on a human level than it was towards God. They had business etiquette, they had etiquette within the family relationship, they knew who their seniors were and the very important people in society and in the religious establishment, but God throws towards them an accusation that they were more responsible in pleasing men than they were in pleasing Him!

God, in a kind of shock therapy, tries to bring them to their senses, and He contrasts their honour for others with their dishonour for God. A son is meant to honour his father, an employee is meant to honour the employer, and you do it - you do it in Malachi's day, God is saying, you do it in your modern day today - but God asks them: 'Where is my honour? You're showing impartiality in your reverence. In verse 8 He challenges them: 'If ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts'. What the Lord is saying here is: test the quality of your sacrifices by offering them to your Persian governor instead. At this time, although the Israelites are in their own land, they're back in Jerusalem, they've built the temple, they're worshipping God, they're still under the empirical rule of the Persian Empire. They still have over them a Persian Emperor, and God is saying: 'Give these offerings, the offerings of the blind, and the sick, and the lame, to your Persian governor and see if he accepts them!'

A merely human governor, or a master, or a father receives and deserves greater honour than the supreme Father, the supreme Master. God is saying: 'Human leaders get more than you give to the great God of all the earth!'. What an indictment! Well, what I want to ask to you, seeing that this Malachi's prophecy is also a modern message to us all, is: if we gave the same commitment that we give to the things of God to our family, and to our employer, how many of us here tonight wouldn't be divorced or unemployed? The commitment that we give to the things of God, if we gave the same commitment to our business, to our relations, to our hobbies, to our appearance, to our physical, financial, psychological, emotional well-being - where would we be? The same spiritual principle applies to us today as it did to Israel. Of course, perhaps

we, like the priests, are nonplussed. Their reaction was: 'What on earth is God talking about? We don't understand!', and they say, 'How, wherein have we despised Thy name? Us? We're the priests, we're not just the people of God! We're the leaders of the people of God! How have we despised Thy name?'

Doesn't that tell a tale? Sinful attitudes are often concealed to those that hold them, and often those sinful attitudes are secret faults - and those that are guilty of them are most oblivious to them. They couldn't even see it. In fact, I would go as far as to say that they had deluded themselves into thinking that when it came to worship, when it came to their offerings and their execution of the ministry of the priesthood, something was better than nothing. They were doing something for the Lord, was that not something better than nothing? Was the lukewarm not better than the cold?

Now God's reply hits at the heart of what I think is an evangelical attitude, especially in the Christian West today. You may have heard this statement at times, or at least you may suspect that people are thinking it in their minds, it's the attitude of: 'Well, that'll do'. 'That'll do rightly', people say here in Ulster, 'It's for the church, or it's for the Lord, and the Lord knows my heart, and the Lord'll take what's from my heart even if it's not the best or even my best - that'll do rightly!'. What we tend to do is, because we live in a dispensation of grace, we think that God should be satisfied with our spiritual leftovers. When we've enjoyed our lives, whatever that may be, we scrape the titbits off our plate - and that's God bit! Malachi says: 'That'll not do'. In verse 7 he says: 'Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar' - now that bread does not mean the shewbread, I believe it means actually the sacrifices and offerings that were sometimes spoken of as bread; and the altar there is literally the tables that many of these sacrifices were made upon, it's not the table of shewbread. But they're asking the question: 'How have we defiled these offerings?', and God says this: 'In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible'.

Now they ask a question, mark this: 'How have we defiled the offerings?'. Now that is a practical question: 'What have we done, physically done in an action or a deed, to defile the offering?'. Now the answer that God gives back is: 'No, you haven't done anything, it is something you have said, in that you have said 'The table of the LORD is contemptible". So what God is saying is that it's not just the fact that you have defiled the offering, the problem is not just the offering that you have given, but the problem is the attitude wherewith you have given it: 'in that ye have said, The table of the LORD is contemptible'. They ask the question: 'Wherein have we polluted', some versions say, 'it', the Authorised says correctly, 'Thee?' - 'Wherein have we polluted thee?'. Now here's a lesson for us all, that when you get to the stage, whether as a Christian or not, that you despise not just God but the things of God, you don't just defile the workings and the mechanics of an ecclesiastical spiritual system, but God is actually telling us that it is as if you are polluting God Himself!

Now I don't take that unadvisedly upon my lips, because I don't believe you can pollute God, you can't take away God's holiness by your unholiness, but God is saying: 'My name! My reputation! My character is at stake in you! You are to be a reflection of it, and you are polluting me!'. It was their attitude, but as many of you will know it's not long until eventually hidden attitudes become open actions. They manifest themselves in our deeds, and in verse 8 we see this, the attitude that they gave the sacrifices and offerings in was manifest in that they actually offered blind sacrifices, they offered lame and sick sacrifices. God asked: 'Will I be pleased with those things?', and God had reason to ask for in Deuteronomy 15:21 God had forbade them giving exactly that - blind, and lame, and sick sacrifices. Some scholars even believe, and I'm sympathetic to their view, that some of the people may have brought pure and unblemished sacrifices, but the priests were so corrupt and despised God's name that they actually took the blind the weak and the lame, and they swapped them with the good ones and they took the good ones home to their own farm!

In verse 9 we read: 'And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons? saith the LORD'. Now some people interpret that as being a call of

God to repentance: 'See the error of your ways!'. I don't believe that's what God is saying, I believe it's a statement that is ironical. The New King James translates it better, I feel: 'While this is being done by your hands, will He accept this offering favourably?'. What He's saying is: 'Oh, go on, repent of this sin, but I'm not going to accept these sacrifices, these offerings'. In other words, 'It doesn't matter how much you pray, how much you ask forgiveness, unless you change your ways I'll never forgive you!'. There we have the doctrine of repentance, as one writer put it: 'The prayer of the impenitent who has no intention of altering his ways can only be ineffectual'. What God is saying is: 'You would be better to shut your mouth. You would be better, my people, to withhold your beggarly apology than insult me by saying you're sorry, and saying you're offering the best sacrifices, and offering to me what is unacceptable - because I am God who changes not! I am the holy and righteous God that will not tolerate hypocrisy and insincerity: these things are repugnant to me!'. Can I tell you tonight: God, though He is the God of grace and love, has not changed.

In verse 10 God says: 'Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought', now some believe that that means that these priests wouldn't even serve God by shutting the door of the temple and kindling a fire on the altar without being paid for it. I'm sure that's the spirit that they had, but the real meaning is this, God is saying: 'Who is there spiritual enough to shut the doors of the temple and put an end to all this hypocrisy?'. What is God is saying? He's saying: 'I would rather see the temple closed than my name being despised and you Israelites playing religion, honouring me with your mouth, when your hearts are far from me. This slovenly, irreverent, hypocritical worship must cease!'. Imagine this! God is declaring that it would be better that the doors of the temple would be closed, than that they offer to Him these unfit sacrifices.

Maybe you find this hard to believe? Turn with me to Isaiah chapter 1, Isaiah 1 verse 11, God says: 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood'. Then Revelation chapter 3, to just see that our God in the New Testament has not changed, you will remember to the church at Laodicea in verses 15 and 16, out of the many things He says to them, He says this: 'I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth'.

There it is from the very mouth of the Lord Himself: 'I would rather that you were cold, I would rather the temples of my worship were shut, than that you were lukewarm and engage in some outward sign of godliness without the power'. God always rejects indifferent, insincere, hypocritical religion! In verse 11 he looks forward, I believe, to a day when: 'from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same God's name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto His name as a pure offering'. Some people think that the pagans were worshipping God righteously in Malachi's day, that's not what it means, and it doesn't condone a pluralistic ecumenism or syncretism in our world today, thinking that all roads lead to God. The Roman Catholic Church believes this is talking about the Mass - it's not talking about anything like that, it's talking about Ezekiel 43 through to 48, where there will be a millennial temple when all the nations will come to the hill of the Lord and worship Him, and there will be these offerings that will rise in absolute purity and perfection in Christ. But I want you to feel the import of what God's prophet is saying to the people: 'You're my chosen people, yet what I'm looking for now is not you to glorify me, I'm looking for a day that hasn't come yet when the Gentiles - yes, those pagans, those unclean, impure ceremonially, ritualistic people - they will worship me in a way that you have not!'

How would you translate that argument into the modern church today? Well, one way you perhaps could do it, maybe not exactly, but you could say: how is it that many of the false religions in our world and cults serve their false deities and salvation ethics in a way that is far more zealous than we as Christians do? How is it? Why is it?

Now, we want to learn the lessons from this lax priesthood, lest we contract their same lukewarmness in our spiritual life as Christians. Let me leave two practical principles that we can learn as lessons from this lax priestly compromise. Here's the first thing: their worship was careless, and their service was heartless. Their worship was careless, and their service was heartless and burdensome. Look at verse 13: 'Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness it is!'. They began to do God's work carelessly, it was wearisome to them. William Kelly said this: 'Familiarity with the presence of God, unless it be kept up in His fear, borders on contempt'. You become familiar with the Lord's Table, you become familiar with the worship service, you become familiar with the leaders in the assembly, you become familiar perhaps with the very blood of Christ and the spiritual principles and dogmas and doctrines of holy Scripture - and you can almost get to the stage in your familiarity with holy things that it breeds contempt.

How many Christians today are getting bored with their blessings? How many Christians are wearied in the work? The reason for it all is simply this, the same lesson that we need to learn from these priests: their heart is not in it. You will become weary if your heart is not in it. In Isaiah 43, God actually says to His people: 'Thou hast been weary of me, O Israel. In Micah 6, He says: 'O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me'. Imagine the true people of God becoming weary with God Himself! The outcome was that these priests disparaged and disdained the offerings of the Lord, and verse 13 - look at it - actually says: 'They snuffed at it', literally they snorted at it, they were treating it with the utmost contempt. You could translate it like this: 'They turned their nose up at me, says God'!

Now here's a lesson for us all: I don't care who you are, but if you despise the things of God, God says you are despising Him Himself. The two are inextricably linked. That means if you despise a brother in Christ, you are despising one for whom Christ died, who is in the body, a part of Christ Himself - and as much as you may not like what he is, or what he does, you despise God Himself! If there are certain doctrines that you just can't take, so you reject them, or certain Scriptures that don't fit in with your scheme of things - you're not despising those doctrines, you're despising God! Someone has envisaged the priests in this way, he writes: 'What a weariness to stand all day long, and be ready whenever someone feels like bringing a sacrifice. What a weariness it must have been for them to slay it, and to skin it, and to gut it, and to cut it up - a filthy, bloody job - and 'What do we do? What do we get out of it?', the priests say, 'A few pieces of tough meat, unfit for food - what's the point?'.

This is how they reasoned, their heart was out of the work, they became wearied in it, they were careless in their service because their service became burdensome. Do you remember everything that Paul went through? I think he suffered in every possible physical and mental way. He was discouraged, near to death, he knew every weariness that has ever been known by any servant of God in the ministry - but what did he say in 2 Corinthians 4 verses 16 and 17? 'For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory'. Wasn't it D. L. Moody who said: 'I may become weary in the work, but I will not become weary of the work'. When you become weary of the work, you become weary of God.

Let us learn the lesson how their worship was careless and their service burdensome, and may our worship never be careless and our service never be burdensome. Here's the second lesson: they kept the best for themselves, and they thought that they were deceiving God. They kept the best for themselves, and they thought that they were deceiving God. At the end of verse 13 we read about these torn and lame and sick

sacrifices that were brought as an offering, God says: 'Should I accept them at your hand? But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the LORD a corrupt thing'. They were not giving God their best. Now that is the question we need to ask ourselves tonight, in the mirror of God's word as we see ourselves: do we give God our best? Do we give Him our best hours in the day? Do we give Him the best years of our life? Do we give Him the best cut and the first of our pay packet? Do we give Him the best energies of our body? Do we give Him the best intellect of our mind? Or do we give God Sunday, maybe a midweek, maybe some other monthly or occasional activity, but He doesn't get our best!

Do you remember when David wanted to buy Ornan's field? Ornan said: 'No, I'll give it to you because it's for the service of the Lord, and it's for the King, I'll give it to you free gratis'. What did David reply? 'I will not take what is yours for the Lord. I will not offer burnt offerings of that which doth cost me nothing'. You see, the priests in Malachi's day lost sight that God measures the value of the offering by its worth to the offerer. If it doesn't cost you anything to give it - now listen carefully - it's not worth anything in the sight of God!

In verse 14 he tells us that there were cases where the priest promised to give a male sacrifice unblemished, and after he vowed to give the male sacrifice, he would switch the sacrifice to a corrupt sacrifice - probably a female sacrifice. Do you see this? With their mouth they're promising to give God what He has asked of them, and then they fulfil the vow and they give an unsuitable animal, and God said: 'This is an insult to me, for I am the great King, I am the LORD of hosts, my name is dreadful among the heathen'.

Now friends, God never changes, we know that from Malachi. Though we live in a day of waiting, a day, perhaps, of insignificance in Christian history we may feel - God still says, as He says in Malachi's day: 'I am the LORD, I change not'. He doesn't change, what He expects from us doesn't change. You remember Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts chapter 5, and they tried to deceive God. They sold a field, and they were making out that they were giving all the proceeds of the field to the church. How did God react? They paid the penalty for their prevarication, and God struck them down!

Now here is perhaps the most frightening statement of this message tonight. The days of the Levitical priesthood have passed, but we as Christians are all priests unto God, everyone of you. Does that not frighten you? It's a tremendous privilege, and never lose the thrill of the blessing, but please do not forget about the responsibility. Peter says: 'We are also to bring spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God'. What are those sacrifices? Warren Wiersbe outlines it well, he says the first is our bodies, Romans 12:1-2: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God'. Have you given your body? You've to give of your substance, Paul said to the Philippian believers that when everybody else forgot him the Philippians gave to him, and their financial giving to the work of God, he says, was like a sweet smelling savour to the nostrils of God. Are you giving of your substance? For if you're not, you're despising God.

Our bodies are an offering, our substance is an offering, our praise is an offering: Hebrews 13:15, 'By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name'. Are you a praising Christian? When you sing the hymns, do you praise from the depths of your soul? Hebrews 13:16, the next verse, tells us that good works are also our offerings as priests: 'But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased'. Doing good - we demean good works, don't we? We can't get saved by them, but you can't be saved and not have them! Then finally, one of the offerings is souls won for the glory of the Lord Jesus. Romans 15 and verse 16 talks about this, Paul said that he was given grace to preach to the Gentiles, that he should 'minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God' - mark - 'that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable,

being sanctified by the Holy Ghost'. A priest is to win souls!

You're to give your body, have you done it? You're to give of your substance, are you doing it? You're to give praise unto God morning and evening! You're to give good works! You're to give souls to God! Are we bringing Him our best? Or are we deceiving ourselves and thinking that we're deceiving God? Jesus asks the believer priest today: 'Why call ye me 'Lord, Lord', and do not the things that I say?'. There is a charge to keep, we are priests. There is a trust to keep when you claim Christ as your Lord, are you keeping it? David Levy, in his commentary on Malachi, ends this chapter with this story, and I end my message with it this evening. He tells how Charles Wesley caught this vision that we have been speaking about tonight when he was reading Matthew Henry's commentary on Leviticus 8:35. Henry wrote these words, I quote: 'We shall, everyone of us, have a charge to keep, an eternal God to glorify, an immortal soul to provide for, and one generation to serve'. Wesley was so inspired by those words that he wrote a hymn entitled: 'Keep the Charge of the Lord That Ye Die Not', and later it was entitled 'A Charge to Keep I Have'. Here's how it goes, and we're going to sing it for our final hymn, but listen

'A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill:
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Father's will!

Arm me with jealous care,
As in Thy sight to live;
And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,
And on Thyself rely,
And let me ne'er my trust betray,
But press to realms on high'.

Can you sing that hymn sincerely from your heart? If you cannot, and I wonder even if I can myself, why not again, afresh, submit to the Lordship of Christ and give Him all of yourself now and forevermore as a living sacrifice unto God.

Father, I know that I in the light of God's word feel myself weighed in the balance and found wanting. Lord, who of us can say that we have apprehended, but O God we pray that as we have seen the standard that Thy holy Word implores upon His priests, and we have seen that God does not change, nor does what He requires of us men and women change, we pray that we will be given grace that we may not betray our God-given charge, but we will live lives worthy of the calling wherewith we were called. May we follow our Master who said: 'I have come to do Thy will, O God, I have finished the work that Thou gavest me to do'. A perfect High Priest we have, may we follow Him well. Amen.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 3

"Message On Discipline"

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We're turning in our Bibles to Malachi's prophecy, and as I've already said we've already spent two weeks in our studies, and we're now in our third week and we're beginning to enter into chapter 2. God willing, if time permits, we will get down to verse 9 of chapter 2 - and our title this evening is 'Covenant Corruption Condemned', covenant corruption condemned. We take our reading up at verse 1:

"And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it. And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law".

You will recall from our first week's study that Malachi the prophet very forcibly brought to the people from God's perspective the first symptomatic sign of their spiritual bankruptcy. We must remember that although Malachi is the instrument, God's messenger in this case, God is citing the case against His people Himself. In verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1, we saw that He cites first of all their sign that they had become lukewarm in their faith, that the zeal had gone, the power had gone from their relationship in covenant with God. The first sign, of course, you will remember, was that they were completely insensitive to God's divine deep love towards them. You remember God gave a fresh pronouncement of His love in verse 2: 'I have loved you deeply'. Yet God says that they replied back to Him: 'Wherein have you loved us?', and God gives the pronouncement of the people's protest against His love, they're actually questioning, doubting God's love. They're asking God, and challenging Him: 'Prove to us! Where is the evidence in our lives of your love?'. And so we found thirdly that God gave the proof of His love, and He told them that He loved him in this: 'Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated' - God loved them in that electing love right from the very beginning.

Then you will remember that in our second study we dwelt on the second symptomatic sign of the people's backsliding in verses 6 through to 14. This was not so much that they doubted God's love, but we found out that God saw that they were guilty and charged them with despising His name - several times we found that His name is mentioned. In verses 6 through to 14 we found how God was levelling, particularly at the leadership in religious Israel, levelling towards them the accusation that they were compromising in their priestly duties in the land, that the sins of the people were only symptomatic of the sins of their leaders. We saw how, as priests, God had given to them His very best, and committed to them His charge of worship and representing God to the people, and the people to God. Yet, although God had given to them His very best, He expected their best in turn - but we find that all they did was use God's best for themselves. They looked after number one. We concluded from that study that their worship was careless and their service became burdensome. They were asking the question: 'What's the point in serving God? In a world that we live in like

this, God isn't honouring us, His power and glory has departed from our midst, what's the point?'. Then they moved on to the stage where they were keeping the best things that God was giving them for themselves, and they actually got to the position where they thought that they were deceiving God.

Now this evening we're coming, at the beginning of chapter 2, to look at God's condemnation upon this compromising priesthood. We've already looked in verses 6 through to 14 at God's charge against them, and the various ways that they were offering false and defiled sacrifices to the Lord. But now He comes in verses 1 to 9 of chapter 2 to actually pronounce His condemnation upon these compromising leaders. Now you will see, if you read a little bit through the whole of chapter 2, that there is the great emphasis on covenants. You find the word 'covenant' in verse 4, in verse 5, and verse 8, in verse 10 and in verse 14. There are three covenants that are mentioned specifically in all of verses 1 to 9 that we will consider tonight. In verses 1 to 9 there is the covenant with Levi - I should say three covenants emphasised in the whole of chapter - in verses 10 to 12 there is a covenant of God mentioned that He made with Israel; then in verses 13 through to 17 there is the covenant made with God in marriage between the man in Israel and the wife of his youth. God is charging each time, three times, Israel with breaking the covenant. The priests were breaking their Levitical covenant; the people were breaking the covenant that had been made with Israel; and the husbands were breaking the covenant that was made with their Jewish wives of their youth, they were divorcing those wives and marrying pagan wives, and following pagan gods.

Now for our consideration tonight is this Levitical covenant that was made and specified in verses 1 to 9. We need to ask the question first of all, when this covenant was formed, for unless we understand when and how it was formed, we'll not understand the significance of God's condemnation for them breaking it. Now some people think that this covenant was formed when, you remember, Moses was coming down Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, and the people of Israel were making merry and worshipping the golden calf. The Levites stood with Moses and stood with God, they separated themselves unto God and they were actually used as God's instrument to slay all those who would not stand loyal to God and would follow foreign gods. But most scholars, and I myself, believe that this covenant with Levi refers specifically to the covenant of life and peace that we read about in Numbers 25. If you wish you can turn to it, but I'm going to recap on the story there, and that is the story about how I believe this first covenant of life and peace with Levi was bestowed on a man called Phinehas. Phinehas was a Levite, and Phinehas took a great stand against evil, and he honoured God in the nation.

Now let me give you a bit of contextual background to this story. This is before Israel had entered into the promised land of Canaan, and you may have heard about the false prophet Balaam. It was Balaam who tried to curse the nation, but Balaam, of course, was unsuccessful in his curse, because when he tried to curse the people God - you remember - turned his curse into a blessing, and God blessed the people through Balaam's attempt to curse them. Now because the curse didn't work, Balaam tried again. He tried to corrupt the nation by encouraging them to worship a false god, and the god was called Baal-Peor. He encouraged them to worship Baal-Peor through the practice of sexual immorality with Moabite women, and that was part of the worship of Baal-Peor. It was a fertility religion, and there was this fertility practice associated with the worship of Baal. Now once that was starting among the people of Israel, Moses made a pronouncement. He pronounced that all those who were practicing such immorality in worship of Baal-Peor were to be put to death, all of these abominations were to be destroyed.

Now picture the scene for a moment, it's so graphically outlined for us in Numbers 25. At the very moment that Moses makes this pronouncement, and the people start weeping because of the consequences of their filthy sin of immorality and idolatry, one man - bold in his rebellion and his sinfulness - a man called Zimri, went forth, took a Midianite prostitute woman, and before all the people, before Moses and before God, took her into his own tent, committed fornication with her in bold rebellion to the will of God. Among that crowd of God's people there was that man called Phinehas. Phinehas was Aaron's grandson, therefore a Levite. He

was outraged by this man's arrogance before the clear word of God, and Phinehas, in godly jealous zeal, took a javelin in his hand, went into the tent, killed Zimri, killed Cozbi the Midianite woman, and thrust the javelin through her belly, through the child of sin in honour of God.

It's a shocking story, it seems such a violent act, some may say, such an unnecessary act - but for this deed, God said to him and his descendants: 'I give unto you my covenant of peace, and he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood'. It was the deed of Phinehas that turned away God's wrath from the people. Now I want you to remember that: it was this zeal, this deed of fervent jealousy for the name of God, that turned away God's wrath from His backsliding, idolatrous, immoral people. Now, why should Malachi mention this? Well, very simply: Malachi wanted the priests of his own day to compare themselves with their forefather, Phinehas. Do you see it? He wanted them to compare their service and their zeal with their forefather. Here was Phinehas, who showed that he held God's name in reverential awe. But what is Malachi accusing the priests of his day of doing? They are despising God's name. Phinehas, because of his act, experienced peace and life during a very turbulent time in Israel's history, but as we learnt in previous weeks this is far from a turbulent time in Israel's history in Malachi's day. In fact, it's a time of non-events, it's a time of peace, nothing seems to be happening - but these people are going to lose peace and life. God, in verses 2 and 3, says: 'I'm going to take away from you peace and life'. Rather than the priests, like in Phinehas' day, taking and turning away God's wrath from the people, the actions of the priests in Malachi's day, despising God's name, is actively bringing God's wrath upon the nation. That's why God brings up Phinehas and the Levitical covenant.

Now this series is called 'Malachi's Modern Message', and the question hangs: how do we apply such a truth to today, and especially to the church of Jesus Christ? Well, I'm sure that if any of you are spiritually adept at all, you'll be able to make the application right away. The early church lived in a time of turmoil, Nero was feeding them to the lions, setting their heads alight on pitches, they were tarred and set alight in arenas, fed to the lions, chained in dungeons, sawn asunder, burned at the stake - yet the fact of the matter is: was there a greater time than that early church day, where the apostolic power was displayed and God's glory was seen, and it was said that they turned the world upside down? It wasn't a time of peace, it was a time of persecution. When the reformers come on the scene after the dark ages of the rule of Rome, we find that they too are persecuted, all manner of evil is spoken against them, they're burned at the stake, they're beheaded. The Puritans come on the scene, and they're excluded from the established church. The 18th-century revivalists, like John Wesley and George Whitefield, are put out of their church pulpits in the Church of England because they're preaching a gospel to the masses that the masses are hearing and believing. John Bunyan is put in prison because he's a nonconformist, and preaches the unadulterated gospel, and not an ordained minister.

All of these great men of God who had the fire of God in their bones, and knew the blessing of God's Spirit on their ministry - they didn't live in peaceful times, but here are we tonight in the 21st century, and we're living in peace, we have freedom to preach the gospel - but where's the glory? The glory has departed from the church, certainly in the West. I'm asking the question tonight: could it be that in this affluent and comfortable age we live in, we have become bored with our blessings - just like the priests in Malachi's day. We are bored with our blessings to the point that familiarity with all the things that we have in Christ has bred contempt! 'Too strong', you say? I'm accused often, I think, of being too strong, but I happen to see it as being too obvious, too obvious in its application that this is the only truth that I could possibly bring to you from this portion of Scripture tonight. We live in an age that is second to none in relation to the freedom that we have to proclaim the gospel, yet we are colder today than any church that has ever lived in the West.

David Levy, in his commentary on Malachi, says that he can agree, and I can agree too, with a man called V. Raymond Edmund in his statement when he said: 'In an undisciplined age, when liberty and licence have replaced law and loyalty, there is a greater need than ever before that we be disciplined to be disciples'. Can I

read that again? 'In an undisciplined age, when liberty and licence have replaced law and loyalty, there is a greater need than ever before that we be disciplined to be His disciples'. I'm going to present to you tonight the proposal that we here in Ulster, the church of Jesus Christ, is under the disciplining hand of God.

It was no light thing to be a priest in the Old Testament. It was a gracious gift of God through His covenant with Levi, and we saw last week at the tail end that it is no light thing either to be a priest in the New Testament sense, that is what we are. There is no sacerdotal order of priests making sacrifice in the Old Testament sense today, we're in the age of grace, that has all been done away with and superseded. But the fact of the matter is, we find in the New Testament that we are priests - all of us - we believe, male and female, that we are a priesthood, we have a priesthood, the priesthood of all believers, and we are to worship God and bring spiritual sacrifices to God. We saw that one is to bring our body to God; another is to bring our substance to God, our financial giving; another is to bring our praise to God, morning and evening bringing our prayers to God; bringing our good works to God - even to the extent, we saw Paul outlined, he talked about bringing lost souls to God as an offering, as a priest.

Now in verses 5 to 7, Malachi outlines for the people in his day what the duties of the priest ought to be. I think they're very applicable to us as New Testament priests in this particular age, if you look down at them. He describes the standard of their priests, according to the life of their forefather Levi with whom the covenant was made. Basically, what He's saying is: 'This is the first priest that I made this covenant with, and I want you to live up to his standard'. Look at it, verse 5: 'My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name'. He feared the Lord and he obeyed the Lord. I'm not sure that Christians today, to a large extent, even know what the fear of the Lord is - a reverential fear and awe that leads to obedience. That was necessary in a priest, it's necessary in us. In verse 6, at the beginning, we see that he receives the word of God and he teaches it: 'The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips'. We have received the word, we have it in our hands, but the question is: are we teaching others? Teaching and making disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!

That word 'iniquity' at the beginning of verse 6, the Pulpit Commentary says it could be translated 'unfair decision', 'there's no unfair decision in his mouth', because a priest also operated on occasions as a judge. He was to be impartial in his wisdom and in his judgments. Such wisdom is not just for elders, it should be in all of our hearts as priests before God. Then the third thing we see in the middle of verse 6: 'He walked with me in peace and equity', he lives what he teaches! It's not just the talk, it is the walk, an intimate communion - as James said in chapter 1 verse 22 - not just to be hearers of the word, but doers of the same. Then at the end of verse 6: 'and did turn many away from iniquity' - a priest ought to be a man who turns others away from sin. Is that what we do? The problem was in Malachi's day that sin had shut their mouths, they were dumb. The great commission that we are given is to go into all the world and preach the gospel, and Paul asks the question in Romans 10: 'How shall they hear without a preacher?'. I have a real question of myself and of believers in this age: why are their mouths so shut in proclaiming the Gospel?

Fifthly, in verse 7: 'the priest's lips should keep', that word 'keep' could be translated 'guard', 'knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts'. He is to guard and preserve the law of God from perversion, and how many Christians are doing that today? How many leaders are doing it? That is our duty! To keep the doctrine of God pure! But the priests in Malachi's day actually, in verse 8, led the people astray: 'But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts'. They were leading people astray from God, and God charges them with defiling the covenant that He made with Levi.

He condemns them for covenantal corruption, and when we ask the question: what will God do to them? We see very clearly at the very beginning in verse 2, God says: 'This is my judgment upon you: I will curse your

blessings'. If you underline your Bible, underline that: 'I will curse your blessings'. It wasn't just the blessings that they inherited as descendants of Levi through the Levitical covenant, but it was also meaning that the blessing that they would make over the people would be cursed. As they ministered to the people, they would minister a curse! Do you know what the Aaronic benediction and blessing is in Numbers chapter 6 and verses 23 through to 27? 'Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace'. Imagine that: this Levitical priest pronounces this Aaronic blessing that we know all too well off by heart, and God says: 'As you try to bless these people, I'm going to make you curse them! I'm going to turn your blessings into cursings!'

In Deuteronomy 28 God had told the people very clearly what would happen if they didn't obey His word. Instead of Israel being a light unto the Gentiles and a blessing to the whole world, God said that He would turn their blessings into a curse, and He would make them a curse to all of humanity. I'm asking the question, as we seek to grapple with the modern message of Malachi and apply it to our contemporary age: is it possible - and I'm asking the question only - is it possible that God's people today, as the church of Jesus Christ, is more of a hindrance than a help to the world around it? Is it possible? Yea, I would say it's more than possible, it's probable. I personally would go further and say it's inevitable.

Now this condemnation to the priests is connected a bit with chapter 3 and verse 9, if you look at it for a moment: 'Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation'. You see, God's people were to bring tithes and offerings, and through the tithes and offerings the priests would actually be fed - their livelihood came from many of these offerings. But because they were sinning against God, God cursed the crops, cursed their seeds, the people became poor, they didn't bring the offerings for the priests - and because they didn't bring those priestly offerings, the priests went hungry. God is saying to them: 'Because you're sinning against my covenant, you're only hurting yourself! You're not getting fed'.

Let me take you, for a moment, back to the Garden of Eden, to Eve and how she was deceived in the very beginning. We have there a cameo of how every man, woman, boy or girl has been deceived since - and it's simply this: Satan said, 'Yea, has God said?'. He was accusing God in the mind of Eve of disenfranchising her from some kind of blessing that she should have had and God was withholding from her. Everyone who sins does exactly the same, and don't you say that you're not guilty of that as a believer yourself, because one of the chief reasons, I feel, that we resist God's will in our lives is that we feel that we're going to be robbed of something. Is that not true? But what God is saying to these priests is: 'I'm going to curse your blessings, and by robbing me of what I am due, you're only robbing yourself!'

Is it not a revelation to you, it certainly has been to me, not just from the case of Balaam, as we have already mentioned, that God can turn someone's cursings into blessings; but how often do we ever contemplate this possibility, indeed this probability and inevitability that when God's people live like this, God will turn their blessings into cursings. I'm going to let that hang in the air, because I'm just not sure 100% how that is applied in our day and age - but it has to be. Not one jot or tittle of God's word fails, and I'm contemplating how in the church, the blessings that we have inherited can now perhaps be cursings because it is a form of godliness much of the time, but denies and lacks the power of God. God, perhaps, could be using those very things that He has blessed in the past as a curse upon us, to discipline us! I think you would agree with me, it's painful enough when God removes His blessings from us, but what must it be like when God turns the very things that are meant to be blessings and makes them a curse to us - how painful and terrible that must be!

In verse 9, God said: 'Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law'. The Lord is threatening to punish them in a

manner that fits the crime. Do you see what God's saying? 'You have shown contempt for me, the Living God, and for that crime the punishment will fit it - I will make you contemptible before all the people. You will be despised, you will be humiliated before the people, because you have despised and humiliated me, because you have defiled me'. Remember He said that in chapter 1 and verse 7? 'You have defiled me, I will figuratively defile you in front of the whole nation'. This is one of the most difficult verses in the whole of this passage - not difficult to understand, difficult to take in. Verse 3: 'I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it'. Because they had defiled God, do you know what God said He was going to do? In the sacrifices and offerings to God the offal, the inward parts, were removed. Inside those inward organs of digestion there was dung, animal excrement that was removed along with the offal. The offal and the excrement were taken without the camp to the Valley of Hinnon, and were burned outside the camp because they would have defiled the sacrifice, and God said: 'I'm going to take that excrement and that offal, and I'm going to spread it upon your face to defile you, because you have defiled me!'.

The Jewish Targum thought that this verse was so grotesque that it dispensed with the metaphor and translated the verse: 'I will make visible on your faces the shame of your crimes', but do not dilute God's word. If a preacher said such a thing, he would be pulled right away down from the pulpit - but friends tonight, God has said this: the seriousness of their sin was such that He pronounced such a defiling judgment upon them. In other words He was expelling them outside the camp. He was showing them up! Their hidden sin would be hidden no longer! Now, it's impossible to not see the New Testament counterpart of this truth, because the Lord Jesus in the book of Revelation pronounced to that lukewarm nauseating church of Laodicea: 'Because you're neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm, I will spew you out of my mouth'. It was Matthew Henry, that great commentator, that said: 'Nothing profanes the name of God more than the misconduct of those whose business is to do honour to it'.

Do you know it's possible for a New Testament Christian in this day and age, just like the Old Testament priest in Malachi's day, to be disqualified for service? To be defiled to such an extent that God cannot, and will not use you - Paul had a fear of that, and so he buffeted the body, as he said in 1 Corinthians 9:27, to bring it into subjection. He used holy violence to make sure, as he said, when he preached to others lest he should become a castaway - the word is 'disqualified'. This has been a piercing sword through my heart, and I thought to myself today: imagine if God fitted my punishment according to my crimes. Just imagine it, if you will. I've said before, and we're shared together: imagine if God judged us the way we judge other people. You don't have to imagine it for too long, do you know why? Because the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 7 that there's a day coming when we will be judged, as we have judged others. But let me take you a step further, for the point that is being made here is: imagine if God treated us with the same contempt that we at times treat Him!

Imagine, if I'm allowed to make this illustration: you come to the throne of grace in prayer, and you pray, and you pray, and you pray, and five weeks later God says to Himself: 'O, I haven't answered any of those prayers, I've been too busy with more important issues in the universe'. We expect God to be faithful to keep His word, don't we? Why is it, why is it that we think that we have the privilege not to be faithful to Him, not to give everything? These priests fell down because they forgot that the blessings of God were dependent upon their walking in obedience. You can't get blessed if you're going to be disobedient! The hymn is correct: 'Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey'. But the message of Malachi, if it is anything, is encapsulated in chapter 3 verse 6: 'I am the LORD, and I change not'.

God still looks for obedience to bless, but friends tonight, I believe that the weight of the message that is on my heart and has pierced my soul today as I've been before God's word is the cry of Malachi to his own priestly people: how do you fare in comparison to your forefather Levi and Phinehas? How do you measure up? The priests of Malachi's day were weighed in the balance and found wanting, and I'm asking us tonight

and my own heart: how do we compare with our forefathers? What have we done with the privileges that we have because of their faithful endurance? They have passed down the charge of the Gospel in their trust to us - what have we done with it? How are our lives measuring up to the standard that they lived?

I read a profound statement in the last couple of weeks from an author called John White, and I want you to listen very carefully to it. He is writing on the subject of evangelical pride in the world today, and he says this: 'We all forget our beginnings. We all accept the costly heritage that has come down to us, forgetting that we never paid the price for it. We are better off financially because they accepted low pay. We enjoy the respect of our neighbours while they endured the scorn. Yet the price we have paid for our respectability is a far bigger one than they paid for their faithfulness, for we have lost God's smile and are too blind to recognise it!'. Can I quote you that last line again? 'We enjoy the respect of our neighbours while they endured the scorn. Yet the price we have paid for our respectability is a far bigger one than they paid for their faithfulness, because we have lost God's smile...yet we're blind...'

Isn't that what the Lord Jesus Christ said to the Laodiceans: 'You say, I am increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked'. The trouble, at times, with God's gifts is that we begin to trust them and not God. We become proud of our heritage, yet we fail to live up to its standards. Oh, we love to quote our forefathers, but who of us will live up to the lives that they lived? This is why, friends, we do not have the power! I believe the church in the West today, like Malachi's priesthood, is eaten up with evangelical pride - perhaps more in Ulster than anywhere else - and because of it we've lost God's blessing! Could it be even to the extent that our blessings have been turned to curses?

C.S. Lewis said that 'Pride was that complete anti-God state of mind' - I think that's tremendous. He went on to say that it was that complete anti-God state of mind, pride, that made the devil the devil! What about the blessings that he had, second to none! A place that no other angelic being had, all the blessings were his, but pride caused him to abuse them and they became a curse, and so he fell! He was the first to fall, but he will not be the last.

Friends, can I end on this note, turning our attention to the New Testament. The New Testament knows of three kinds of Christians, you can turn to it in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. In verses 9 to 17 of 1 Corinthians 3 we read of three types of workmen, three children of God, or if you like servants of God. First of all there is the master builder, then Paul talks about the shoddy builder, then he mentions the destructive worker. Now the master builder is the one who lays a good foundation and builds a good structure of good works to glorify God. Then the shoddy builder is careless and unskilled in his building process, and what he builds does not endure. Then the destructive worker, he doesn't know how to be constructive at all, and he seeks to pull down rather than to build up. All of them, as we analyse this passage, use different materials in their building. The house that is built by the master builder, that lasting edifice, is built by great materials, lasting materials like gold, silver and precious stones. But the building built by the shoddy workman is built by not worthless materials, but less valuable and less durable material: wood, hay and stubble. The punchline of Paul's passage is simply this: every person's service, every child of God one day at the judgment seat of Christ, will be tested by fire what sort of work it is - and it will be more ruthless than Malachi's little four chapters!

The combustible materials will inflame and disappear, and the shoddy builder will suffer loss but he himself shall be saved yet as by fire - by the skin of his teeth. You'll be saved, my friend, but what if the edifice of your Christian life falls down around your ears. Those who will have built on a sure foundation with gold and silver and precious stones, to the glory of God, they will receive a reward. But friends, what I want you to see tonight is that Malachi's modern message is that, as his priests received judgment they deserved, we will receive it too! Hallelujah, Christ took the judgment for our sins on Calvary, and we will never be

condemned for those sins as Romans 8:1 says: 'There is now no longer any condemnation for them that are in Christ Jesus'. But I warn you, as Paul warned the Galatians: God is not mocked, and whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. Be not deceived! I feel that perhaps all of us could be, in our day and age in the West - particularly in this province, and certainly, could I say it, in this church - under the discipline of our fathers! But the real question that Malachi would pose to us tonight, and that I ask us all, is: are we learning the lessons of that discipline? For if we don't, our blessings will continue to be a curse as God's hand is heavy upon us.

What's the antidote? It's found in 1 Corinthians 11 verse 31, Paul said: 'For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged'. In other words, if we would erect a mini judgment seat in our hearts to judge ourselves before that great day, if we would analyse our hearts, search ourselves and see if there be any wicked way in us, we wouldn't need to be under such a discipline. We are still disciplined, for every son whom He receives, He chastens - but nevertheless, the choice is ours, and we can't get away from it. Oh, my prayer for myself is that I would see that my life is now dictating, word-for-word, into Christ's lips what He is going to say to me at that adjudication of service on the day of judgment! I am writing it now, with my life! Oh, that today I and you would live in the light of that day in eternity. It was George Whitefield who said: 'O that I could always live for eternity, preach for eternity, pray for eternity, and speak for eternity'.

There is a poem that I have quoted to you before, and others have done so, but it never leaves me when I think of this subject and I must leave with you again tonight. It goes like this, listen carefully:

'He would have me rich, but I stand here poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
And memory will run like a hunted thing
Down the years I cannot retrace.
And my penitent heart will well-nigh break
With tears that I cannot shed.
I'll cover my face with my empty hands
And I'll bow my uncrowned head'.

Our Lord lived His life for our eternity, may we live in the light of eternity for Him.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 4

"Message On Marriage"

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We're turning in the Scriptures again to Malachi's prophecy chapter 2, Malachi chapter 2, and we left off last week at verse 9, and we take up our reading this evening at verse 10 through to verse 16 - just leaving one verse undealt with this particular night, we'll begin at verse 17, God willing, next Monday evening.

Verse 10: "Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously".

'Malachi's Modern Message' - we saw in our first study in verses 1-5 of chapter 1, the first symptomatic sign of Israel's spiritual bankruptcy - what was that? Well, we found out that it was an insensitivity to God's divine deep love towards His people. Then we saw their second symptomatic sign of spiritual backsliding: God levelled at them the accusation that not only had they been insensitive to His love, but they had actually despised His name. He was levelling that accusation specifically at the priests, the spiritual leaders, the ecclesiastical system in Judaism of the day - and He accused them of being a compromising priesthood. God told them that He had given them His very best, and He asked their best in return - but we found out that they used God's best for themselves, they were selfish in their service to God. Then last week, thirdly, we saw the third symptomatic sign of their spiritual bankruptcy in verses 1-9 of chapter 2, was in the form of God's condemnation of that compromising leadership. He spoke specifically to them about the levitical covenant that He had made with all of the levitical priests, yet they had profaned God's covenant, they had broken the agreement that He had given to them in the ministry wherewith they were to serve Him. We saw last week that in chapter 2 there is a great emphasis on covenants in general - in verse 4, verse 5, verse 8, verse 10 and verse 14 - the covenant is mentioned.

There are three specific covenants that Malachi mentions to the priests within this chapter. The first that we dealt with last week in verses 1-9 was the Levitical covenant that was made, not just with Levi and the tribe of Levi, but also with that great warrior of God, Phinehas. This covenant of peace was given to the tribe of Levi to keep in their priestly ministry. But what we're going to see tonight in verses 10 through to 12, and also in verses 13 through to 16, there are two more covenants that Malachi speaks to the priests about, and that is the covenant that God made with Israel as a nation, and also the covenant that God makes with a man and a woman in Israel in their marriage bond - which is a covenant. That's so important to note at the very outset of our study this evening.

Now if you look at verse 10, Malachi says - of course, God through Malachi - 'Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?'. God is speaking through Malachi to the people, to the priests specifically, about the covenant that God made at Sinai with the nation of Israel. It's spoken of in Exodus 19 and Exodus 20 as 'Israel's marriage to Jehovah'. That is so important, because that's the metaphor that God uses in making His covenant between He, the covenant keeping God, Yahweh or Jehovah, and His covenant people Israel. The picture that is used is an actual marriage covenant between God and his people. But of course the whole story of the Old Testament Scriptures is how this wife of Jehovah, Israel, has been unfaithful to her husband. Right throughout the Old Testament, the major and the minor prophets, we get this continual theme repeated that God's people have committed adultery with false gods against their husband, Jehovah.

We need turn no further than to the prophet Hosea, and as you read that great graphic prophecy, we find that it is none other than an allegory of the way that God, represented in the person of Hosea, God has had adultery and fornication committed against Him by His people, represented by Gomer - the prostitute that Hosea is commanded to marry. There you have a great picture of how God married Israel at Sinai, but God's people have been unfaithful to Him. Not only in the covenant is there this husband-wife relationship, but there is also a father-son relationship. God is seen as the people's father, they as the children, and we've seen this already in chapter 1 where God asks: 'If I be a father, where is my honour?'. In verse 10 we have another question rhetorically: 'Have we not all one father?'. Now some scholars believe that the father that is spoken about here is 'father Abraham', the father of the faith - I don't in particular, I do believe that it's referring to God. It does not speak of what is commonly believed today in some universalist circles as the fatherhood of God over all humanity and the universal brotherhood of man. It doesn't mean, when Malachi says 'Have we not all one father?', that God is the Father of every person in every nation upon the face of the earth, and ultimately that we're all brothers under the fatherhood of God, and we're all on our way to heaven because God is our Father. I believe 'father' here is referring to God, but the context of this verse is Malachi speaking to the nation of Israel. What Malachi is saying is: 'God created you, Israel, He is the Father of the nation. He has claimed you' - as we read in Isaiah 63 and Exodus 4 - 'He has claimed you as His son. You have one Father'. He's saying: 'Have we not all the one same Father?'. The implication of what he is saying is this: when you Jewish men divorce your Jewish wives to marry other heathen women, you're not just sinning against God who is the Father of the nation, but you're sinning against your brothers in Judaism - not just against your wives, but against every person in the nation!

That might be hard for us to understand, but what God is laying down very forcibly for us is a principle that we find in the New Testament that is not an ancient outdated one, but it's applicable also to the church, and it challenges the notion that many have in their minds today that they have a personal choice to sin as they wish, as often as they like, because their sin does not harm anyone else, their sin is personal. It was John Donne who said 'No man is an island', and that is exactly what God is saying here. If you claim to be among God's people, you can't claim not to harm anyone else by your actions - but if you're in the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, or if you're in the church of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, no man or woman is an entity of themselves, we have a corporate responsibility in our behaviour. That is what God is saying when He asks the question: 'Have we not all one father?'. So if we deal treacherously with our wives, with other family members, with other people within the household of faith, we are sinning every man against our brother.

Let me show you this in the New Testament, so that you can see that this applies to us in the New Testament era. First Thessalonians 4 and verses 3 through to 6, and Paul speaks, related to sexual immorality that we'll be dealing with tonight in Malachi 2, but he shows the people in Thessalonica their responsibility, corporately, that they can't just sin personally and expect it not to affect other people - 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 3: 'For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That

every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified'. Now look at that verse 6: 'That no man go beyond and defraud his brother' - now Paul is talking about fornication and sexual immorality, but he speaks of the one who is guilty of it as defrauding their brother. Now that seems strange, but it's not when you understand this principle, that no matter how we sin, to whom we sin, there is a corporate responsibility and there is an effect of our personal sin on the whole of the body of God's people that we are in.

That means, put simply, it's impossible to offend God and not to offend our fellow man. In the same way as it's impossible to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and all your strength, and not love your neighbour as yourself; it's also impossible to offend God and not offend your neighbour. Now those priests that Malachi is speaking to not only broke the Levitical covenant that we saw last week, but this week God is laying at their door the fact that they had broken their marriage covenants, not just with the wives of their youth, but that marriage covenant was with the God of Israel whom they entered into a marriage covenant with.

Their sin that we're looking at tonight was twofold, and please don't miss this. You could almost, very casually reading or studying this passage, think that their sin was just one, but it's twofold. The first is this: they divorced their Jewish wives, the Jewish wives of their youth. But the second sin was that they married heathen women, and that was equal to the sin of divorce. Malachi sums it all up in verse 14, and he uses this word several times in this passage: they had dealt 'treacherously' against their families, and against one another in this sin of divorcing their Jewish wives and joining themselves to pagan ones.

Now let's deal with this first sin of marrying the pagan wives first of all. I want you to see this evening, in the light of what God's word teaches not only in Malachi but right throughout the Scriptures, the seriousness with which God viewed this sin of marrying an unbeliever out of the household of faith. Now let's spend a bit of time on this, because it's important that we understand the import of the judgment that Malachi is pronouncing. Turn with me back to Exodus 34, the very beginning where the law is given. Exodus 34 and verse 10, here God legislates that they were to marry among one another, and this was not a racial thing, it was a religious thing. It wasn't physical, it was spiritual. Exodus 34:10: 'And he said, Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation: and all the people among which thou art shall see the work of the LORD: for it is a terrible thing that I will do with thee. Observe thou that which I command thee this day: behold, I drive out before thee the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God: Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods'.

God laid down at the very beginning that they were not to follow other gods, that they were not to make covenants with other nations, they were not to marry the daughters of other nations because they would entice them to worship other gods. Now when we turn to the book of Ezra, you will find a contextual background of some of what Malachi is preaching against - both in Ezra and Nehemiah. We'll look first at Ezra chapter 9 - Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, and then the Psalms - Ezra 9 verse 1: 'Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the

Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass. And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice'.

Now turn to Nehemiah chapter 13, a similar situation, indeed the same, and we see the astonishment of Nehemiah akin to that of his contemporary, Ezra, as he witnesses the same compromise as these Israelites marry pagan daughters and begin to worship their gods. Nehemiah 13 verse 23: 'In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives? And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites. Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business; And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good'.

God was angry! There was an unequal yoke in Israel, and even the priests were marrying pagan gods! Just like Solomon, one of the greatest kings of Israel, their heads were turned, their devotion was directed from their covenant God and their husband, Jehovah, towards the false gods of the Gentiles. That was a serious sin in Malachi's day, and it's a very serious sin in our day today; because, you see, marriage is not just a contract - and oh, I wish I could assimilate that not only into the minds, but into the language of believers in our day and age: marriage is not just a contract! Marriage, according to God's word, Old and New Testament, is a covenant - a covenant not just between a man and a woman, but God says it is a covenant between a man and a woman and He Himself. But the problem in Malachi's day was that that sacred triangle between a man, woman and God was interrupted, because unbelievers were being permitted to enter into that sanctified bond.

You remember, and I'm sure you recall, that when Diana Princess of Wales was recounting Prince Charles' adultery with his future wife, she said these words in a television interview, citing the reason for the failure of her marriage: 'There were three in our marriage'. Do you remember those words? 'There were three in our marriage' - well, there are three in every true marriage according to God's word, and the third person is not the mistress, the third person is God! Because marriage, properly speaking, is between a husband and a wife and God! But the Israelites had departed from this, they had left God out of the equation, they had divorced the Israelite wives of their youth, and they had followed other gods by marrying other wives!

Now Paul reinforces this truth and principle in the New Testament, a bit like Malachi, by asking five rhetorical questions in a similar fashion to the way Malachi does in his book. Those questions are found in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, you can turn to them if you wish. Second Corinthians, I beg your pardon, chapter 6 and verse 14 he says, first question: 'What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? What communion hath light with darkness? What concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they

shall be my people'. The word of God in the New Testament is this: He takes the unequal yoke more seriously, I would say, in the New Testament era than He did in the Old - because we don't just worship in a temple, we are the temple! That's why he says in verse 14: 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers'.

Verse 14 of Malachi 2 tells us why God takes it seriously: because God is our witness, God is the witness in Jewish marriage in the Old Testament, and God is the witness in marriage in the New Testament. It's not just between you and your spouse, it's between you, your spouse and God - and in verse 14 God says: 'The LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth'. You know how, in the marriage ceremony, maybe there is the Best Man, or the bridesmaid, and they stand in a civil, legal sense as a witness to the marriage. God is saying: 'I am the witness between you men, you priests, and the wives of your youth - and I expect you to be faithful because of the covenant that you have not only entered into with your spouse, but with me'.

Now the scene that we have before us here in verse 13 is that these very husbands, probably the priests, were coming before God and they were weeping and wailing as they brought their offering to sacrifice - God wouldn't accept them. We found this in previous weeks: they don't understand why God has taken His blessing away from His people. They don't understand why they're living in the day of small things, the signs and the wonders have all gone away, and as they bring their offerings to God they are crying: 'Lord, why will you not accept what we bring to you?'. God says: 'I will not accept your offering and sacrifice because you have not put away your sins'. They had broken not only the Levitical covenant, not only the Israelite covenant, but the covenant that had been made between them and their wives and God. What God wanted them to see in refusing their offerings was that there were wider implications, even than just for family or for nation, of their idolatry and of their adultery. 'What is it?', you say - look at verse 15: 'Did not he make one?', that could be translated and read like this, 'Did the Lord make husband and wife one? Why? That you might bring forth a godly seed', or 'the seed of God', or 'a godly family'.

Now when we read Exodus 34 do you remember that God told Israel right at the very beginning when He chose them and married them as His wife, that He wanted them to be a light unto the nations, He wanted them to be a witness unto the world. They had been chosen to testify the name of God to all of the universe! Ultimately speaking, as we go through the Old Testament toward the New, we find that Israel had been chosen to be the nation and race that would bring Messiah onto the scene of time. By God is saying to them: 'There are wider implications of your idolatry and your adultery. There are implications for your family, there are implications for the nation, but there are implications for the very coming of Messiah into this world - the holy seed of your Deliverer!'. What am I talking about? God was saying: 'Your pagan marriages and your casual divorce is not only defiling my holiness', as He says in verse 11, 'but it is endangering the promised seed of Messiah'. God says to them: 'You're not just harming your family, you're not just harming the nation, you're actually jeopardising My plan in sending My Son to this earth!'. The people are crying, they're weeping and wailing, saying: 'Why will God not accept our offerings?', and God says to them: 'Because you have broken your marriage covenant'.

Now this series is entitled 'Malachi's Modern Message', and over the last couple of weeks we have looked at how, in application of this Old Testament truth, the church is to function today - not confusing it with Israel, but it is to function today as a light to this dark world, as salt in this dead earth. But we have also seen in application that, just as the people in Malachi's day experienced, we know awful indifference and apathy - and we live in a time, if I could call it, of non-event Christianity, nothing seems to be happening in any ground-shaking manner! We live in a day of little persecution, but even less passion and less power among God's people! Even though we are New Testament priests, all of us, we find that we are not, in the West, living up to the charge that God has given to us - to the extent that last week we saw in chapter 2 and verse 2, that God may even be disciplining us to the extent that He is turning our blessings into cursings. I ask again,

in all that we are experiencing in the church in the West today, is God not disciplining us and chastening us, because we have allowed the world in which we live to push us into its mould?

But the specific question and application here tonight is: have we become so like the world in our family life, like those in Malachi's day, that God's purpose in choosing and saving us to be a witness has been jeopardised? Did you get that? The reason why God chose us and saved us and set us apart - if we are following the ways, the principle, the fashion, the lifestyle and attitudes of the world - there is the danger that the light won't shine, that the salt won't work; and the reason why we were saved in the first place, to be a witness, has been jeopardised.

Specifically to Malachi's day was the matter of pagan marriage and divorce, and both of them are major problems in the church today, I believe. The unequal yoke, believers marrying and going with non-believers, and divorce among the ranks of Christendom. Now before I go on any further, touching this very sensitive and controversial subject of divorce, I want to maintain two positions first and foremost - and I believe that whatever your views are about divorce and remarriage, and you know mine well - if you want to know what they are, you can get the tapes, two of them, one on Corinthians, one on Matthew's gospel where divorce and remarriage are mentioned; you'll find out exactly what I believe the Bible teaches on this matter. But without going into all that detail tonight, I say this: there must be a balance that is maintained when we address this subject, and it is the balance between grace and truth - the balance that was found in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph Stowell, in an article that he wrote called 'The Divorce Dilemma', said this - and I believe it's profound: 'We must keep our commitment to strong families, and still provide welcome and support to those who have been damaged by divorce. Grace that threatens truth is not grace at all; and truth apart from grace requires an impossible goal of perfection'. So if we show grace in relation to this issue of divorce, yet it's not grace and truth, it's not grace at all. Or if we show a cold legalistic truth that is absent from any grace, we set up a standard of perfection that is impossible to gain. This is our challenge, is it not, in a world that is wrecked - families broken, marriages severed - to minister the spirit of Christ to them, whatever their circumstances may be, a spirit of grace and truth.

Now what is the truth regarding marriage? We must maintain both the grace and the truth - what is the truth? It's very clear in God's word, the truth of God demands that the biblical teaching of marriage be this: that divorce must never ever weaken marriage in the Christian life - never! We must never dilute the teaching of the permanence of marriage, it must always be maintained - because, as far as God's word declares from start to finish, God institutionalised marriage at the very beginning as His foremost institution. It is true, as He has given His last word in the Old Testament, that He hates divorce, He hates putting away. The Bible emphasis right throughout, we must maintain, is always clear: that there is permanence in marriage, because marriage, as far as God is concerned, is an indissoluble covenant. That is God's truth, and it's not for you and it's not for me to dilute it. But secondly, the other side of the coin, it's not just truth but grace - and that grace demands that we apply these biblical requirements with a tender compassion. Grace is there to help people, grace is there as remedial, grace finds people in the church that have been hurt and scarred by divorce and puts the arm around them, including children who have been affected by it - and grace recognises the wrenching trauma, and we stand beside the victims of this awful plague. It is difficult to keep those two in tandem, I know, but I believe that however difficult this issue is, any solution must have the combination of those two things: the truth of God maintained and undiluted, but the grace of God in its administration and practice.

Now here is my point, in the light of what Malachi teaches, and it's in the light of the fact that even those who have a liberal view on the divorce and remarriage issue - a more liberal view than I have - testify to this fact in the modern day Western church age: that there is an alarming increase of divorce in Christian homes. Whatever your view is on divorce, you cannot be blind to this fact! Not long ago a prominent American evangelical leader made a statement that many believed was long overdue: he told his audience that the biggest threat to the family in the United States is not homosexuality, it's divorce. Perhaps because the

homosexual wing has been shouting so much, we have missed this fact. According to the latest polls in the United Kingdom the percentage of Christian marriages that are ending in divorce is around 50% - about the same as the national average. Now that also includes second marriages that have failed, but nevertheless - and I hope the statistics are correct - what does that tell us? First of all, that far too many Christian families are being torn apart by divorce, but this is what it tells us in the light of Malachi's Modern Message: there is now little difference between the way the world lives, and the conduct of those that belong amongst the nation of God's people!

I looked on an atheist website - that's right, an atheist website - and they were commenting on the family bond, and they said - I don't know whether this is kosher and can be relied on, but I think it's very interesting in the light of our study tonight - 'the average divorce rate for born-again type Christians and others are both higher than that for atheism'. Divorce rate among Christians is higher than that among atheists! 'Empirically', they say, 'that means', as far as they conclude, 'atheists are more devoted to each other and commit to a more stable relationship pattern than people who believe in God'. 'Yet', they go on to conclude, 'people who believe in God are the ones who say that they stand for family values!'. They make this quip: 'There is a saying that those who shout loudest are normally the least capable'. Now whether those statistics are true or not, I do not know, but one thing I do know is that the trends in Christendom today are certainly reminiscent of Malachi's day.

Do you remember what they were doing? They were weeping, they were wailing at the altar, there was an outward form of religious rite, yet their personal life was a shame and a disgrace! That is why Malachi, and we, must assert unashamedly and without intimidation from the political correctness in the world or in the modern church, that God has laid down His ideal that marriage is permanent, and that He hates divorce! Now I know that it was permitted in Deuteronomy 24, and that does not contradict what is said in verse 16 of Malachi 2, because the Lord Jesus taught that it was because of the hardness of the people's hearts that Moses permitted divorce, but He concluded 'from the beginning it was not so'. It was not God's ideal, and He goes to Genesis 2:24, and says: 'There at the beginning, before even the fall, the man was to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they would be one flesh - the two, one flesh - and what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder'. Here we find that God levels at them the same, verse 15: 'Did he not make one?' - that word 'one' is reminiscent of way back in Genesis; God is saying that He has made one wife, one husband, the two are to become one flesh - and it's the wife of your youth, you Jewish priests, but you have dealt treacherously towards them.

Now people say to me: 'But is there not polygamy in the Bible? Is there not divorce in the Bible?' - yes, there is polygamy and divorce, there's polygamy today and there's divorce today; but let us never as the church get to the point of acceptance, where we start to even preach that it's inevitable that Christians should be divorcing. I know it happens! I know sometimes there's nothing can be done about it, especially in this day and age when you can be divorced by your partner and you've no say in the matter at all. But don't tell me that either polygamy or divorce were helpful in bringing God's plans to completion, because they never were. You look at polygamy, it never worked out for God's plan - Hagar and all the rest of them. It's the same with divorce, it never worked according to God's plan, it never brought the godly seed. We have learnt, if anything, in Malachi's Modern Message in chapter 3 and verse 6 the Lord says: 'I am the LORD, I change not' - and if He changes not, and He says: 'I hate divorce', He still hates divorce for the reasons that I have given you, because it breaks this covenant that he has with his wife and with God. But apart from the reasons already given, in verse 16 He says: 'For one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously'. He says that divorce is actually violent!

Now what's He talking about? Well, he talks about the covering of violence with his garment, and if you remember the book of Ruth you will remember that she requested of Boaz: 'Spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman', and this is an old custom where the husband would put his

garment over a woman to claim her as his wife. But what Malachi is claiming here is that instead of their garment protecting their wives, they were covering the garment of violence, they were expressing violence towards the wives of their youth. Rabbi Earl Grollman is a professional divorce lecturer and author - he's a Jew of course, and he believes divorce can be more traumatic even than death. You heard that right: divorce can be more traumatic than death. He says: 'The big difference is that death has closure, it is over, but with divorce it is never over'. That is the link between divorce and violence that is explained by Joyce Baldwin in her New Testament Tyndale commentary, where she says this: 'Malachi sees divorce to be like the covering of one's garment with violence, a figurative expression for all kinds of gross injustice which, like the blood of a murder victim, leaves a mark for all to see'.

Now those, maybe even in the meeting tonight, who have been divorced and affected by divorce through no fault of their own, know exactly what I'm talking about: the violence that is wrought on your life for all to see because of divorce. Can I express to you my heartfelt and deepest sympathy? We see that violence expressed even more when we look to the children of families that have experienced divorce. Someone has said: 'Fifty years ago parents were apt to have lots of kids, nowadays kids are apt to have lots of parents'. Studies have shown, and I'm only repeating what research has proven, that children who have come from broken homes are more likely to suffer depression, anxiety, even learning disorders, they tend to be more prone to engaging in drinking and drugs and illicit sexual behaviour. Put it this way: it doesn't help. It doesn't help in a godly seed. Pat Conroy wrote a book entitled 'Death of a Marriage', it was his own personal experience of divorce, and he put it like this: 'There is not metaphors powerful enough to describe the moment when you tell the children about the divorce, to look into the eyes of your children and to tell them that you're mutilating their family, and changing all their tomorrows. Personally', he says, 'it felt as though I had doused my entire family with gasoline and struck a match'.

Now whilst we must sympathise with those who find themselves in this predicament, in much of the evangelical subculture of the West today I fear that there is a growing tolerance of divorce, of remarriage, that ignores not only the violence that it does many times to one of the spouses, but the violence that it inflicts upon the family unit, and ultimately to the witness of Jesus Christ. I'm not wishing to add insult to anyone's injury tonight, but let us say in the light of Malachi's Modern Message, that our emphasis as the church of Jesus Christ must not be upon when we can permit divorce, when we can permit remarriage, when we can or cannot give our blessing to it - our clarion cry should be, as always, that God hates divorce and God has laid down a permanent institution in marriage. I know that it's a minefield, and I know that we have to be sensitive and gracious, and I hope that I'm doing that tonight - but I also know this: our young people are growing up in a world where divorce is in the back of everyone's mind who is getting married as a 'get-out clause': 'If it doesn't work, well, this is my fire escape'. I hope to God that when I counsel young couples who come to me to be married, as I do - and I won't marry any that won't be counselled - I hope I'm vigorous in emphasising to them the permanence of what they are entering into; and they will hear those words that 'it ought not be entered into lightly' or unadvisedly, and they will stand before the judgment and give account of all the secrets of their hearts. But apart from the damage and the violence that it can do to couples and to children, and to homes and to families - what about the violence that it can do to the witness of Christ? That is the chief spirit of the message tonight from Malachi.

Now let me wrap all this up tonight in four concluding thoughts. The first is this: what we have learnt tonight clearly establishes the principle that the unequal yoke, a believer marrying an unbeliever, or I would say even going with them, is a recipe for disaster. The word of God teaches nothing else. Secondly: if you are divorced, there is still grace that is greater than any sin, the sin that has been committed to you, or a sin that you may have committed. I believe there still is a road to recovery, and divorce, remarriage, adultery, fornication, immorality, homosexuality - you name it - none of them are the unpardonable sin. Jesus said: 'All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven of men', that's what grace is all about. If your theology doesn't fit into that, that's your problem. There is grace, and we must show sympathy, and the fact of the

matter is: we must waken up to the fact that 50% of our converts, if we get any in the days that lie ahead, are going to come from this background.

Thirdly, if you're contemplating marriage do not enter into it with the assumption that there is a get-out clause. If you're thinking about getting out, get out now while you can, not then when it's too late. Fourthly, if you're here tonight and your marriage is on the rocks, and you come into this place as if everything is all right and everybody thinks you're the most loving and romantic couple - all of us have problems, and you're not any different than anyone else. If the statistics are bore out, some of you here tonight have got those problems too - get help! Get help! As far as is possible, persevere and don't give up to the spirit of the age. 'What is the spirit of the age?', you say. On April 2, 1979, in a radio broadcast, Paul Harvey, with a voice of amazement, reported that Romeo Bittencourt of Brazil had just been granted a divorce. Romeo was a Brazilian farmer, 90 years of age, he had been married 65 years, he had 12 children, he had 50 grandchildren, he had 36 great-grandchildren - what was the reason for divorce? Incompatibility! That's the spirit of the age. Friends, Charles Swindoll, who has a different view on divorce than I have, nevertheless said this: 'Surrendering is not an option if you plan to win a war, or if you succeed in a marriage'. He says: 'I firmly agree with that San Francisco attorney whom I heard say, 'There are two processes that must never be started prematurely: embalming and divorce". A Christian ought never to start that process prematurely. Someone has said: 'When the doors on a marriage are shut and bolted, and a fire breaks out, all your time and energy goes to putting out the flames'.

Are the doors of your marriage bolted and shut as a Christian, and you have decided: 'I have made my vows before God in a covenant in His sight, in His presence, and I am not looking for a fire escape. I will make this work, and no matter how hard things may be all my energy, both of our energies, will go into making this thing work'. I'm not saying stay in a relationship with a man that's battering you - if that's the case, and you can't survive it, get out of the home, be separated if that is necessary - Paul allows that - but divorce is a different thing; and surely, if anything, one of the reasons why we have a lukewarmness in our church today is that Christians are too easily running, for every reason, for a divorce. What does it do to the testimony of Jesus Christ? God says: 'I am the LORD, I change not', and He still hates divorce.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 5

"Message On Messiah"

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This is our fifth study in this series. Let me just recap for you - I gave the titles for the first time last week, because I hadn't got them yet, and all of a sudden it dawned on me what they should be as the theme progresses as we go through this little prophesy. The first study that we looked at was 'Malachi's Modern Message on Love', the love of God, the divine love of God that was shown to His children Israel not just in His practical present love, but in a past love that was demonstrated in election - that God chose Israel not because of the fact that they were a mighty nation, for they were not, or that they were particularly holy, for they were not; but He chose them purely by grace, undeserved favour. That was the love, an everlasting love wherewith God loved His people Israel. Then we saw 'Malachi's Modern Message Concerning the Service of the Priests'. He had a great message as to how they were serving God without their hearts, it was mere empty formal religion without the real spirit and power that ought to be behind the word - the spirit was missing. Then we saw the next week his 'Message on Discipline', the discipline and the judgment that would come to those priests because of their sinfulness in their service toward the Lord. Then last week we looked at 'Malachi's Modern Message on the Subject of Marriage', how they had not only broken their Levitical covenant as priests, and broken their marriage covenant with Jehovah, married to the nation there at Mount Sinai at the giving of the law, but they had also broken their covenant with God and with the wives of their youth in divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying pagan ones, and by inference following the pagan gods of those wives.

Now we come today to chapter 2, the last verse of chapter 2, and the first six verses of chapter 3, and we're looking at 'Malachi's Modern Message on Messiah', or on the coming of Messiah. Verse 17 of chapter 2: "Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment? Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts. For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed".

You will remember, if you have been with us on previous weeks, that when she returned to the land, Judah, well, she was let down. Her expectations were not realised. Religiously, politically, socially and culturally she expected prosperity, she expected glory, she expected a return, a reformation, a revival of the days of Solomon, that golden age of the reign of peace and prosperity. The fact of the matter was, when they reached the land again, and in spite of the promises that God's prophets had given them - and we must mark that, God had promised them further days of prosperity - that prosperity was not realised. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case: God's righteous people seemed to be the ones who were suffering. Religion seemed to be at a low ebb, yet wickedness seemed to prosper, and the wicked seemed to live in prosperity and success while

Judah, God's people, were suffering privation. Now that caused the question to arise in the heart of God's people - and it would do well for us to remind ourselves of this every week that we look at this short prophecy - they began to question the righteous justice of God, the faithfulness of God to His people, and to the promises that He uttered in Holy Word.

In fact, specifically in this portion that we're looking at this evening, they began to question whether God was really holy. Imagine that! The Israelites who, out of all the nations of the world, had the living God revealed to them as the true living God who was known naturally by His holiness, that they of all people should question that God was holy. Not only did they question that He was holy, but they questioned whether or not He was just, whether He was administering justice to the wicked Gentile nations who were Israel's enemies, and whether He was being just toward them in the promises that He had spoken but seemingly had failed to fulfil. As far as they were concerned, they came to the conclusion - they felt they could come to no other regarding the environmental circumstances that were round about them - that God was not holy, that God had not been just regarding them. That plunged them, as you could imagine, into deep despair, and into a despondent disillusionment - not only with God's word, but with God Himself.

If we are honest with ourselves, and I hope that we are when we come to look into the mirror of God's truth, we can fall into the same pit as the Israelites did. When we look around us in the day and age in which we live, and maybe in our own personal lives we feel that God doesn't seem to be answering our prayers, or at least doing it in the way that we would like Him to. Maybe we don't see God blessing in our ministry, whether it's in our evangelism or in our own personal testimony. We're not seeing God save our loved ones the way we long to see it happen, maybe we haven't seen God heal us or another in the way that we feel is our right. Maybe God hasn't helped us, we feel that we've been in the hour of need, and God has said: 'Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer thee' - but He hasn't. For so long we have heard so many people, like the Psalmist, saying to us: 'Where is your God?'. We're perhaps beginning to say to ourselves: 'Where is our God?'; like Gideon, 'Where is our God that our fathers told us of? Where are the miracles that they spoke to us of?'

Now Malachi warned Judah that if they kept questioning God in this vein, God's patience was going to wear thin. Let me just pause there for a moment, because that's a novel concept in itself, isn't it? God's patience wearing thin! We are so accustomed to talking about the long-suffering of God, the patience of God, the tender mercies and compassions and loving-kindness of God. But here Malachi is coming and he is telling us, revealing to us that God's patience is not unchangeable in the sense of His other attributes, that it will never run out - that is not God's patience and long-suffering. Here is a warning for us all, I believe even in the New Testament dispensation, that we ought to never presume upon the long-suffering of God. I wonder at times do we? We carry on in our own sinfulness, our own lukewarmness, our own backslidenness, and we think it's alright because if we keep short accounts with God and confess our sins, He's faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. But I wonder, at times, if that is not presuming on the long-suffering of God.

I ask the question to you: can any of us presume on anything that comes by grace? Grace is unmerited favour, that means it is not our right, it is not our just desserts - our just dessert is hell, and if we want to plead for our rights before the throne of God, that's what we will get! Let us never presume, although we have many promises according to God's faithfulness. Let us never continue in sin, as Paul says, that grace may abound. Now that was exactly Judah's sin: 'We are God's people, we're the commonwealth of Israel, we have His promises, we're married to Him, we're the Levites', specifically these priests that Malachi is addressing would say, 'We have our father Phinehas, and our father Levi, our father is Abraham'. Yet what they're doing in this passage is, and right throughout this book, they're betraying a typical characteristic of human sinfulness. They are swift to see sin in another and not in themselves, but the awful terrible truth of this passage of Scripture and the whole book is that they are actually swift to accuse God of apparent

injustice in the face of their own sin! If they were only as fast to recognise their own failure as they were to throw at the front door of God's heaven their particular accusations of His transgression of His promise, well, they would be a fitter people to bear the testimony of God upon the earth. They were so swift to accuse God of a lack of holiness, a lack of justice, that they didn't see that their own sin was the very cause of their lack of blessing.

Now please feel the weight and import of what we are saying here: this is not a man that we would have in the Sermon on the Mount, a brother who sees the splinter in his other brother's eye, but apparently doesn't see the plank in his own. That's not what we're talking about here, we're talking about a man of God, a child of God, who sees a plank in God Almighty's eye, and doesn't see that there is a forest in his own, a great foreign body in his own sight! Because of this, this continual accusing, questioning, doubting God, and not seeing their own faults, God says through His prophet: 'Ye have wearied the LORD with your words'. Remarkably, though it'll be no surprise to those who have been here week after week, Judah still doesn't see their problem. In verse 17, after the prophet says that God is wearied with their words, they say: 'Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; Where is the God of judgment?'.

They are ignorant of God's charge against them, and even question God, not themselves. They question God's holiness, they question God's righteousness, and they actually ask the question back to God: 'In what way have we wearied You?'. The insolence of it! Robbie Burns penned those immortal words: 'O would some power the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as others see us'. But oh, the gift of grace to see ourselves as God sees us! This is where Judah were falling down. James in his epistle talks of a man who sees himself in the mirror of God's word, and then walks away and forgets what he looks like - but here's a people, and now we're talking about the people of God, and they haven't even seen themselves in the mirror of God's word, let alone forgot it! I ask ourselves, as we try and apply Malachi's Modern Message, when we look into the mirror of God's word, do we see ourselves as we really are, as God sees us? Perhaps more specifically, I ask you here in the meeting tonight: are you here, you're present in this place, with an abject sense of your deep need before God and before His word?

If you don't come into the presence of God and under the sound of God's word with an abject sense of your deep need of God, you have not got a biblical self-image. We hear a lot about self-image today, don't we? The book stores and shops are filled with books on how to get a better one, and all the problems in the world psychologically and emotionally are often put down to a low self-image. That may be true in some rare circumstances, but I'll tell you what is truer: most people have too high a self-image. I tell you, Christian today, that if you don't see yourself in need of everything, having nothing of yourself to commend you to God as a Christian - we're not talking of the Gospel now, we're talking about everyday Christian discipleship - you do not have a healthy biblical self-image, what you may have is a Laodicean self-image which says: 'I have need of nothing, and I am rich, I am healthy, I am increased of goods, I have need of nothing'. This is what God's word is saying right back in Malachi's prophecy: it wearies the Lord when the people of the Lord cannot see their own problems! They were very quick to accuse God of not honouring His promises, or not doing anything in their lives or in the life of their community, yet they will not to look to their own door to see where the fault lies! God says: 'Because of that, your words are starting to weary me'.

Now let's contemplate this - I don't want to push you too far too quickly - but could it be possible that at times our words weary the Lord? Is it a possibility in the New Testament era that our songs weary the Lord? Is it possible that our prayers weary the Lord? I drive by a wayside pulpit on the way home from this meeting every night, and from time to time there's something interesting on it, and there was a slogan recently put on it: 'If you could only hear your prayers, you would sympathise with God'. We might think that that's a little bit sacrilegious, but it would fit in with what God was saying through Malachi: 'If you could only hear your prayers, you would know why I am wearied'. You might say: 'What could weary God in prayer? What could weary God in songs? What could weary God in words?'. It is simply this: the people were drawing near to

God with their mouths, and honouring Him with their lips, but their heart - their heart! - was far from Him!

You might say these things were blessings, the words that they used - they were, their songs were blessings, I'm sure they were even inspired Psalms of God, and their prayers, oh what a blessing the gift of prayer is - these things that we avail ourselves in the church of today. But could it be that these things that have been given to us by God to be blessings to us, God says: 'I will make those blessings a curse to you, a burden to you, because you're honouring me with your mouth - but where is your heart? It's a million miles away!'.

In verse 17 he specifies three false complaints that they uttered against God. Here's the first, they said: 'Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD'. This was their accusation that God was unholy. The leaders were reasoning that if the Lord was prospering wicked people with wealth, that must mean that He liked them, that must mean that He was saying that it's good to be wicked. These people are actually saying: 'God has changed His morals'. We can say this in society today, but imagine saying this of God, accusing God of saying that black is white and white is black, and good is evil and evil is good, and bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter. This is what they're doing: 'God's not holy. The wicked must be considered good in God's eyes!'. Their second accusation was that He actually takes delight in them, verse 17 - He not only prospers them, but He actually takes pleasure in doing so, He enjoys the wicked and their ways. Thirdly their accusation is in the form of a question: 'Where is the God of justice?'. In a sarcastic, skeptic tone, they question whether God is even predisposed to act against injustice and sin in the lives of the wicked.

Now we may frown at their threefold accusation, but the fact of the matter is this has always been a perplexing question to God's people: why is it that wicked people seem to prosper and the righteous suffer? Why does God allow evil things to happen to His own people, when it seems that the most wicked people in the world get away literally with murder? If you don't ask those questions, well, you're not among some of the godliest men that ever lived, because Job asked the question, David asked it, Solomon asked it, Jeremiah asked it, Habakkuk asked it, and many others after them. Especially the Old Testament saints asked this question, because in the Old Testament material prosperity was seen to be the way, or at least one way, that God showed you a sign that He was pleased with you, and that He was blessing you. Now we New Testament Christians have the privilege of knowing from the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the apostles that God's blessings come to the righteous and the unrighteous. The rain falls on the good and the bad, the sun shines on the good and bad, but we still can fall into this pit of disillusionment, despondency and despair if we enter into the difficulties of life and we start to conclude: 'Is God just at all? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has God changed His morals some time in the middle of the night when I was asleep, and I just didn't realise it?'. And we may even get to the extent of saying, as these Judeans did: 'What's the point in being righteous, for it doesn't pay you anything in this world?'.

Now here's Malachi's point, Malachi says in verse 1 of chapter 3: 'Behold, I will send my messenger'. His point is: 'Look, although it looks like to you that the wicked are prospering, although they are entering into prosperity that the righteous have never known perhaps, they're getting away with all their crimes, the Gentile nations are the empires and the superpowers of the world - listen to my word: God's hand, one day, in judgment will come upon all men'. I challenge you, you look from Genesis right to the book of Revelation, the message is the same: God's hand of judgment ultimately will fall on them all - and if not now, in a day that is yet to come. But this is the crux of Malachi's message to God's people, the warning to them is this, and it encapsulated in that warning word 'behold', what Judah had failed to recognise was not only would God not wink at the Gentile's sin, but He wouldn't ignore their sin either! 'Behold, I will send my messenger'.

Of course we know the Jews always sought Messiah, and these Jews were no different - but what they had forgotten was that the judgment they sought upon the heathen by the coming and advent of Messiah, would also include His judgment upon them. God's people who sin, verse 17 tells us, weary Him - whoever they are, not just wicked Gentile nations, but His own people who sin weary Him. They said: 'Where is the God

of justice and judgment?', and God answered them in verse 1 of chapter 3: 'Behold, I will send my messenger, he shall prepare the way before me: and the LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts'.

This is one of the simplest books I have found to apply in a New Testament light, for if you turn to 1 Peter and chapter 4 you have, I would say, almost a New Testament version of Malachi's sentiment. First Peter 4 and verse 14, now remember he's speaking to believers, he's talking to a church that is being persecuted. Peter says: 'If ye', verse 14 of chapter 4 of 1 Peter, 'If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer', in other words, suffer for righteousness sake, don't suffer for sin. There's a lot of Christians running around, and they're always suffering and persecuted, and they just can't see that they're persecuted because of their personality, not because of their righteousness! Don't be persecuted or suffer as a murderer...or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator'. Judgment must begin at the house of God. In Ezekiel's day, where did the Shekinah glory start to judge? God started to judge in the temple, He began with the priests. Who is Malachi speaking to? The priests, the leaders of the people. Who does God want to deal with today in our New Testament era? It is the church!

Let's look in more detail at these verses tonight, and seek further to apply Malachi's Modern Message. I want to do it in the form of three questions, the first is: who is the messenger that is spoken of in verse 1? Who is the messenger? There's great divergence of opinion with commentators and preachers on this subject, and I'm not going to go into the full detail because I don't think it's profitable this evening in measure - but save to say that 'Malachi', if you go right back to our very first week's study actually means 'messenger'. That's what his name means: 'Malachi the messenger of the Lord', but his name actually means that in the Hebrew language. But I don't believe the messenger here is Malachi, because Malachi did not appear again before the Lord Jesus Christ, Messiah, came on the scene of time - and he would have had to if it was a fulfilment of prophecy. But the Hebrew word for 'messenger' also means 'angel', and there is a partial meaning of this that means 'the angel of the covenant' - theophanies and Christophanies - appearances of God in human or angelic form, or Christophanies, appearances of Christ in the Old Testament before Christ was born into the world. That is a partial meaning of 'the angel', or 'the messenger of the covenant'. But this messenger here would appear, verse 1 says, when Messiah, when God's Chosen One would come to His temple. So right away there is a clue: 'He shall prepare the way before me: and the LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple'.

Now the temple here is Zerubbabel's temple that was rebuilt post-exile. It had not the physical glory of Solomon's Temple, people lamented at that even though they had been told that the glory of the latter house would be greater than that of the former, they couldn't understand it because it obviously wasn't, and the Shekinah glory wasn't in it. But there is a further clue to how this glory would return to the temple when we see, read on, that the way would be prepared before the Lord. Someone, this messenger, shall 'prepare the way before me', or 'before Messiah'. Now when we go to Isaiah 40 and verse 3 we almost find the same verse: 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'. When you go into the New Testament it's blatantly obvious that this verse is prophetically speaking about John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the first messenger that we find in chapter 3 and verse 1.

If you turn with me to Matthew, just to prove this for you, Matthew 3 and verse 3 - verse 1: 'In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. I think that's clear enough - you find the same reference in Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, and in John 1:23 the fourth evangelist actually testifies that John the Baptist said: 'I am he', personally. Then when we come to Matthew 11, if you turn to it a few pages over, the Lord Jesus Himself gives His signature to this acclamation that John the Baptist was this messenger, chapter 11 verse 10: 'For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee'. In verse 14 we find He actually equates John the Baptist with the fulfilment that Elijah would come again: 'And if ye will receive it, this is Elias' - Elijah - 'which was to come'.

But if you look at chapter 3 and verse 1, you find that Malachi seems to shift now from speaking about the messenger that would prepare the way of Messiah to actually Messiah as a messenger Himself. Look at the verse: 'I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me' - 'me' being the Messiah - 'and the LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger' - that's the same as the 'me', the Lord coming to his temple - 'the messenger of the covenant', which is the name of Messiah, 'whom ye delight in', they delighted in the prospect of Messiah, 'behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts'. So there are two messengers here in this verse: there's the messenger, John the Baptist, who would prepare the way of the Lord; and there's the messenger of Messiah Himself, whom the people of Israel delighted in, who would come suddenly to His temple - the messenger of the covenant.

Now before I go on any further, let me just say that there's a very interesting three undeniable proofs here of the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ - the deity of Messiah that is found in Old Testament scripture, and the Jews need to look at this, the Jehovah's Witnesses need to look at this, the Mormons need to look at this, and all the false cults that deny the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ - because we see first of all that the Lord Jesus is identified with the Lord God. 'He shall prepare the way before me, saith the Lord of hosts'. Secondly, He is the owner of the temple, 'He will come suddenly to His own temple'. Whose is the temple? It is the Lord's, but it's also equated with being the messenger's. So He's not only associated with God, but He owns the temple as God, and He is actually called here 'the Lord, the Lord whom ye seek'. How can anyone deny the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Two messengers, the second would be God's Son, but please don't miss the point of Malachi's Modern Message, for what Malachi is saying is that the very one whose absence these Judeans lament, whose glory they evidently observe has departed and they feel the loss of, He will come suddenly! But here's the question that is implied in Malachi's statement: Will you want Him? You're crying out for His glory, you look for His person, He is the one you delight in, He is the one whose promises you want to see fulfilled, but when He comes He will come suddenly to judge you in your waywardness.

That is who the messenger is. The second question that outflows from that is: when will He come? Well it says, obviously, suddenly, or unexpectedly He will come to His temple. Now this prophecy, like many Old Testament prophecies, combines the first and the second comings of the Lord Jesus. In Old Testament prophetic scripture, particularly the major and minor prophets, you find that references to the first advent of the Lord Jesus coming to Bethlehem and His second coming to the earth in judgment are often put together, and seem to flow together almost as if they were one coming. Here it is the same, but we find that ultimately the complete fulfilment of this prophecy will be in His second advent, when the Lord Jesus Christ appears unexpectedly to judge the world of sin. But of course, this was fulfilled in His first coming as well when Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus into the temple, and there was old Simeon. His heart missed a beat and leapt for joy as he saw with his eyes God's salvation. Now watch this: from Malachi to then, God never spoke a word - and now Malachi's prophecy is being fulfilled, the Christ is born, He enters as a babe, the

Shekinah glory of God incarnate into the temple as Malachi has prophesied!

Then later in his ministry, at the very beginning of it, there is the cleansing of the temple, as the Lord Jesus goes into the temple and clears out all those traders who had made His house a den of thieves and robbers, when it should have been a house of prayer and worship. So that is fulfilled partially in His first coming, but if you look at this word 'suddenly', or 'unexpectedly', it's found at least 25 times in the Old Testament and all of those occasions except one is in reference to a sudden judgment and destruction that the Lord will bring one day. Do you know what that equates to? Another occasion spoken of in Jeremiah as 'the day of Jacob's trouble', Jacob of course being Israel, a day when Israel will be troubled and judged, and it's referred to in the New Testament as 'the day of tribulation', also 'the day of the Lord', or 'the day of Jehovah'. After the church of Jesus Christ is raptured - we read of that in 1 Thessalonians 4 - this period, Revelation tells us, for seven years will come upon the earth. At the end of that seven year period, when Israel has been refined and purified, as we were reading tonight in this passage, the Lord Jesus will come in His second coming to the earth and judge the world, slay Israel's enemies, redeem the people, the remnant to Himself, and begin a reign of a thousand years of righteousness on the earth. That's when He will come.

The third question that comes out of when He will come is 'Why is He coming?'. This is so important, because this is the weight of Malachi's message. Do remember that the priests in Malachi's day were party to placing obstacles in the way of God's people. It's astounding to us, but the fact of the matter is: the ones who were to lead the people and set an example to them, were the very ones who were causing stumbling blocks, spiritual stumbling stones that John the Baptist was going to have to come in his ministry and clear away to prepare a way unto the Lord. The very sins that Malachi is preaching against here in his prophecy are the embryonic forms of the Pharisaism and Saducee-ism that the Lord Jesus had to face.

Let me show you this in Matthew 3, if you turn to it, verse 7: 'When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers', this is John speaking, 'who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire'. What's he doing? He's clearing the trees away! He is preparing the way of the Lord! In biblical times, when a great leader or a King was coming it was customary to send men ahead of the King to smooth the road, to remove the obstacles, stumbling stones, to fill in the potholes so that he would have a clear smooth run into that city. What God's word is saying in Malachi's day, way back 400 years before Christ came, is that even then they were spiritually unprepared for Messiah's coming. I ask you tonight, what a modern message this is: for how many people in our lost world are unprepared for the judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He will judge the world, when He will refine this place as a refiner's fire?

But of course, contextually, He's talking to Israel, His Old Testament people, and He's talking about how He will refine them as a refiner's fire, and cleanse them like a fullers', a washer's, a launderer's soap in the tribulation period when He brings out of that dead nation a people unto Himself, a remnant in which He will honour His name once more and fulfil all those Old Testament promises. We read that the sacrifices, offerings, will then avail again in that millennial reign to glorify God as they have never done before. The fact of the matter is, if this is really going to be a modern message to all of us, we need to ask ourselves the question: Are there stumbling blocks in our lives that need to be removed before the Lord comes? What if the Lord was suddenly to enter into your life tonight? Or, what if Jesus came to your house tonight, what would He find?

If Jesus came to my house, what would He see?
What impression would He get coming unexpectedly?

What would be my language? What would be my mood?
 What would be the attitude by which I'm understood?'

I could go on: but we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Jesus need not just come into our homes, the Lord Jesus is meant to be in our lives, He's meant to be in our heart. What does He see? Is He at home in our heart? Does He rule in our mind? Does He rule in our emotions, in our volitional will? Does He rule in our affections? Does He rule in our intellect? Does He rule in all our spiritual life? Does He rule in our physical life? He is there, and the question remains to us in the light of 1 Peter 4: it's time that judgment began in the house of God. What's the end going to be of those that obey not the Gospel? We know it's going to be hell. If the righteous are scarcely saved, what will be the end of those who obey not the gospel, but what's your end going to be if the Saviour comes? How is He going to find you?

Malachi had to remind the people: this is the One that you seek, this is the One that you delight in, he says in verse 1. We, especially in our particular theological persuasion are meant to be those, and are apparently those who delight and profess to wait and watch for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ - but how would you feel if He came? I think that in certain ways, this truth of the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in some regards has been turned to a curse rather than a blessing. It was never meant to glue you on your seat, it was never meant to cause your eyes to look heavenward and forget about the earth. It was never meant to make you conclude: 'This is the Laodicean age, therefore just let it all go to hell, for I'm going to heaven'.

The illustration of fire and soap is so vivid, describing the purging which will come when Messiah returns. There are so many judgments I could talk to you about tonight, I don't have time to, but He will come in His second advent to the earth in judgment. Praise God, the believer's sins have been judged on Christ at Calvary, and Romans 8:1 says: 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus' - but there is a judgment of believers works! You'll never be judged for your sins, but that fire will rain down on you - and don't dilute it! If your house is built with wood, hay and stubble it will go in smoke - mine too - and that's a judgment you have to face. There's the judgment of the Great Tribulation for those Jewish people and the Gentile world; there is the judgment of the Gentile nations, before Him shall be gathered all the nations, and He'll separate them one from another as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. There is the judgment of the wicked angels, God's spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, delivered them into chains of darkness to be reserved unto judgment. There is the Great White Throne Judgment - if you're not saved here tonight, you listen to this very carefully. We read in Revelation that John: 'saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire'.

Do you know the sins that cause you to be there? Verse 5: sorcery - Malachi 3:5 - the occult, adultery, false swearing, false witness, lying, living a lie, those who oppress the poor, those who defraud of wages, those who rob the widow and the fatherless, those that turn aside the alien from their land, those who fear not me. And God says in verse 6: 'I am the LORD, I change not', and that means His justice, His holiness never change; and all men - saved and sinner alike - will face and experience the changeless law of sowing and reaping. Whatsoever a man soweth, he reaps, for God is not mocked - whoever they are. Don't say: 'Where is the promise of His coming?'. These who were desiring the presence of the Lord were now asking: could we abide the day of His coming? If the Lord came tonight in all of His presence, I'll tell you: you wouldn't be dancing down the aisle, you would be on your face in tears with a broken heart!

All things will not continue as they have always been, but 2 Peter chapter 2 and verse 8 tells us: 'Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up' - and here is his climactic message: 'Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God?'

God is changeless in His holiness and His justice, He expects more of us in the New Testament than He did of His Old Testament people - but thank God that He's changeless in His mercy: 'I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed'. Do you know something? I deserve hell, every day of my life I deserve hell - but it is of the Lord's mercies that I am not consumed, because His compassions fail not. Paul says in Romans: 'Ought not the goodness of God lead you to repentance?'

Our Father, we come to Thee again in great need. Who of us can say that we have need of nothing? Who would be arrogant enough to say that we have no need of Thee?

'O cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be'.

Give us this life, we pray, in abundance to Thy glory. Amen.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 6

"Message On Stewardship"

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We're turning to Malachi, to chapter 3, and this is our sixth study this evening, and we have looked at several subjects thus far. We've looked at Malachi's 'Message on Love' in verses 1-5 of chapter 1; we looked at his 'Message on Service' from verse 6 through to 14; then we looked in chapter 2 verses 1 to 9 at his 'Message on Discipline' and the judgment that the priests incurred because of their transgressing of the covenant of Levi; and then in chapter 2 verses 10 to 16 we looked at his 'Message on Marriage', and how there was an unequal yoke with many of them, and some of them were divorcing their Hebrew wives of their youth to marry wives of the daughters of pagan gods. Then, in our last study in chapter 2 verse 17 through to chapter 3 verse 6, we looked at his 'Message on Messiah' - how the people of God in Judah were crying out for a deliverer, they were looking for a Messiah, but they didn't realise that when Messiah came that He would come in judgment - and, of course, when Messiah came the first time they didn't even recognise Him. But the Lord Jesus Christ - these verses particularly pointing to His second advent - will come again, but He will come to judge the world; not only will He judge the world and Judah's enemies and the Gentiles, but what they failed to realise was that He would also come to judge them.

Now tonight our study takes us to verse 7 through to verse 12, in the will of the Lord. Malachi's message this evening to us is the message that he gives on stewardship - 'Malachi's Modern Message on Stewardship'. So we begin our reading at chapter 3 and verse 7 - Malachi says, remember in verse 6: "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts".

'Malachi's Modern Message on Love' was that God loved His people deeply, but of course the people doubted Him: 'Wherein have you loved us?'. He had to prove to them in chapter 1, of course, as we have learned, that He loved them from even before the beginning of time, that they were chosen not for good in them but by grace, they were chosen not because they were great in number or strength but because He loved them. But yet in their service to Him, they began to serve in drudgery, they believed it was a vain thing to serve the Lord. The offerings that they were bringing were defective and defiled, they were bringing the lame lambs and the blind beast to offer to the Lord. There was this attitude that prevailed: 'Anything will do for the Lord, for what does it matter anyway? The wicked are prevailing and the righteous are suffering, so what does it matter how we serve the Lord?'. God brought this message through Malachi about service, and the service that God required. He had given the Levite His best, and He expects nothing less than his best from those who serve Him.

Chapter 2 verses 1-9, then the message came on discipline - how the Lord would judge those Levitical priests, how He would actually smear the dung of their offerings upon their faces - because they had defiled

the name of the Lord, He would defile them. Then His message on marriage, as we have alluded to already: the unequal yoke, and how important it is even in this day and age that we make sure that we don't fall into that Satanic trap. Then there was the issue of how God spoke that He hated divorce, and in this specific instance how they were divorcing their Jewish wives that they had entered into covenant before God and with their wives in their youth - yet they divorced them to marry the daughters of pagan gods, and they had seduced them to follow those gods in idolatry! Then we saw how they were complacent to think that their Messiah would come and deliver them, and they had forgotten to realise that the Messiah was going to come as a refiner's fire and judge them along with the nations.

But tonight we're looking at his 'Modern Message on Stewardship'. Now before we go on any further, need I ask the question: have we realised already that Malachi does have a modern message to the world in which we live? You would think, as we read down all these messages that he's already preached, that he was compiling a Top Ten list of problems among God's people today - things and issues that we're all struggling with in this world. You'd think, almost, that he was writing to the year 2005 rather than writing 2500 years ago. The simple message of Malachi, if you could sum it up in any shape or form, I have found at least, is this: not only is God an unchangeable God - as we find in chapter 3 and verse 6: 'I am the LORD, I change not' - but the human condition has not changed either. In fact, in verse 6 of chapter 3, if you look at it, where it says: 'therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed', the Hebrew literally reads: 'For I the LORD do not change, and you sons of Jacob have not ceased'. The Authorised Version translates it correctly: 'therefore ye are not consumed', but there is a sense in which this verse can mean, 'you too have not ceased to be the sons of Jacob'. 'I am the LORD, I change not: but you sons of Jacob have not ceased being the sons of Jacob', in other words, being a wayward people, because of course that's what 'Jacob' meant - 'sojourner', 'supplanter', 'one who is a twister'.

Isn't it so true, as we've looked at the issues that God's people grappled with 2500 years ago, that these are the same issues that God's people are grappling with in 2005 - because not only does God not change, and the standards that God requires of men do not change, but the human nature, the depraved, adamic, fallen nature of the whole race has not changed either. The Jews, sad to say, have not changed - and when their Messiah came in the first century they would not change. When the apostles preached the gospel they would not change, and up to this present modern day they have not changed - praise God, a remnant will be changed in a future day - but even Stephen had to say, after their Deliverer had come, as he preached that great sermon before his martyrdom in Acts 7:51, 'Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye'.

That was the history of their people: they continually resisted God's command. This is exactly what Malachi echoes in verse 7, if you look at it: 'Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them' - 'You have disobeyed my laws'. Even in this present age, God's people in the church of Jesus Christ struggle with the issues that confronted Judah, the problems have never seemed to change - and the sad fact is, God's people find it harder to change those problems today than they have ever done. So, far from being an antiquated piece of historical literature, this book of Malachi we have found to be a treasure trove of practical truths - as contemporary and convicting as it was all those years ago. The clarion call of God is the same tonight as it has ever been in verse 7, the second half: 'Return unto me, and I will return unto you' - that was the cry of the God of Israel to His people all through the Old Testament. It is still His cry to the people of Israel today, and it is His cry to His church in this age that is probably going to usher in the second return of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'Return unto me! Return unto me, and I will return unto you!'.

The trouble was, Israel could not see their need of God. As far as they were concerned they had not left God, and God had not left them - though it felt like it at times. That is the reason why they answered again, as they have been prone to do in this discourse: 'Wherein shall we return?' - verse 7, the very end. 'Wherein, why do

we need to return Lord? What are You talking about? We haven't left! You haven't left!'. I think this highlights one of the greatest problems that a child of God can ever have, and I don't think there's anything worse than this particular problem: it is the problem of spiritual delusion. Spiritual delusion: there are many ailments that the church of Jesus Christ suffers from today, but I believe that it is a spiritual ailment that affects the church today - delusion. It's been almost unavoidable for me, as I've gone through this study, to see the blatant parallels between the people of Judah here in Malachi's day and the church of Jesus Christ just before the second advent of our Lord. In other words, the church of Laodicea that we find in Revelation chapter 3.

Let me show you what I'm talking about, turn with me to Revelation 3. We'll not read the whole account of the church of Laodicea, but you know that because they were neither hot nor cold the Lord was going to spew them out of His mouth, being lukewarm. In other words, that type of indifference and apathy, spiritually speaking, makes the Lord Jesus sick! Then in verse 17 He gives the reasoning and rationale for His rejection and expulsion of them: 'Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not' - there's the delusion - 'thou knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me'.

He accuses Laodicea of not only being lukewarm, being indifferent and apathetic spiritually, and being deluded, but being blind - having spiritual myopia, shortsightedness or, if you like, not being able to focus regarding their true spiritual condition before God. They didn't see themselves the way they really were; they didn't see themselves the way the Son of God saw them; they were deluded. Because of that, even though the Lord Jesus told them to repent, they felt little need to repent - 'What do I need to repent of?'. When you talk to Christians in the day and age in which we live, we find the same result. Many Christians feel that repentance is something you did the night that you were born-again, and once you do it then that's the end of it - well, that's not a New Testament Christianity if that's what you believe. The Lord Jesus taught us to take up our cross daily, that's repentance, and follow Him; denying ourselves and following Christ. One of the greatest problems of the church today, and the reason we're in the lukewarm deluded position we are, is that we don't repent every day of our lives.

A. W. Tozer, that great preacher and writer, said that we're in the predicament that we are as the church because 'ignoble contentment has taken the place of burning zeal'. He goes on to say: 'We are satisfied to rest in our judicial possessions, and for the most part we bother ourselves very little about the absence of personal experience'. In other words, we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, we know what our standing is: but what are we experientially before God? Do we experience the blessings that we ought to have in Christ? Or have we lost the zeal and has it given place to ignoble contentment? We're a bit like the bus conductor who has called out the destination that many times that he thinks he's been there. We know the verses, we know the expressions, we know the doctrines, we know them, perhaps, inside out and we know when others go wrong regarding them - but there is a possibility that, just like the Levitical priests and the whole Judean nation in Malachi's day, we have a form of godliness but there is no power! They were engaged in the rituals, the practices, the ceremonies of the temple and the sacrifice and so on - but the God of power was not there, and they knew it!

Even though they were in an awful state, God still displayed His unchangeable graciousness. Isn't it wonderful that, no matter how far Israel seems to go in their depravity and rebellion and backsliding, God is there again and again and again saying: 'Return unto me! Return unto me, and I will return on to you!'. The tragedy is that, no matter how much He cries again and again and again 'Return!', they fail over and over,

again and again to return. But I'm asking you tonight in the light of this modern message to us: do you hear the Lord's voice to return? It may be a voice crying in the wilderness, I believe it is in the day and age in which we live, yet nevertheless I am crying to you tonight, I believe on God's behalf, on the authority of His word, and inviting you to return unto the Lord, and He will return unto you!

Are you a backslider tonight? Are you cold in heart and zeal towards the Lord? Are you indifferent to spiritual realities, to the prospect of eternity, to the knowledge of what will happen to those around you who are unconverted? I'm saying to you tonight exactly what Malachi said all those years ago: let us search and try our ways, and turn again unto the Lord! Now if you're here tonight and you don't feel any need of repentance, you're in the same sorry predicament as Judah was. You're sitting there tonight as I'm crying this clarion call: 'Repent! Return!' - and you're saying, 'Wherein shall we return? Wherein shall we repent? What are you talking about?'. Well, can I exhort you to beware - because do you know what happens when we challenge God to show us where we need to change? He hits us where it hurts.

If you, like the Judeans, come to God after He has implored you to repent and return to Him, and you say: 'Wherein shall we return?', God will hit you where it hurts! That can be seen in the next cry that comes from God. The first cry in this passage is that of 'Return!', and the second cry is that of 'Robbery!'. 'Wherein shall we return?', and God tells them in verse 8: 'Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me' - robbery! That's where you ought to repent, that's where you ought to return! The Hebrew word 'rob' here occurs only on one other occasion in the whole of the Bible in Proverbs 22:22, and it means 'to defraud'. The verb is used often in Talmudic Jewish literature, and means 'to take forcibly'. Imagine this, God is saying: 'Here is where you need to repent and return, you have defrauded me! You have taken forcibly what is mine, therein do you need to repent!'

What is the old prophet getting at? Harrington C. Lees said these words, and I want you to listen to them very carefully for they are very perceptive: 'The most sensitive part of civilised man is his pocket, and one of the fiercest fights a preacher has to wage is when his preaching touches the pockets of his hearers'. Malachi comes and he touches their pockets: 'You have robbed me', God says. Malachi comes and touches their pockets because he wants to make their repentance costly, and he wants to make their repentance costly because he wants their repentance to be genuine. Can I say this categorically on the authority of the Holy Scripture: if your repentance doesn't cost you anything it's worth nothing. In fact, if your Christian life hasn't cost you anything, it's debatable whether you're saved at all!

Their giving was deplorable, not only were they giving defective gifts and animals, the blind and the lame and the blemished, but they were actually not giving what they ought to give. God is coming, and He says: 'Look, if you want to know wherein you ought to repent and return, here's a good guideline from me to know that you have done it: stop robbing me! Pay back what you owe me! Your giving will be a guide to your repentance'. Now why should that be? Well, simply for one reason: their giving could be measured. I can't see into your hearts, thank God you can't see into mine, but the fact of the matter is: that makes it easy for many of us. I don't know if you had a quiet time this morning, I don't know how long you prayed, I don't know how many people you have spoken to for the Lord today - but the fact of the matter is: in the Jewish people's age, God would know very clearly and the temple would know if the people were giving to the ministry of the temple. It could be measured. Therefore their repentance was measured by their giving.

Now you've heard it said, I think it was Murray M'Cheyne, that 'A man is what he is on his knees, and no more'. But in the context of this portion of Scripture, I would like to change that to say: 'A Christian is what he gives, and no more' - for your giving is a barometer of your spiritual health. Here is a man, Malachi, just like the Saviour Himself, who is not afraid to preach against the dangers of hoarding money personally for yourself, neither is he afraid of preaching that the money of God's people ought to be dedicated and devoted to God's service. Now their reaction was as predictable as people's reaction today - they didn't like it, because

their wallets were too close to their hearts! They say: 'Wherein have we robbed Thee?' - do you see it? Verse 8, again they question God: 'Wherein have we robbed Thee?', and God comes back with lightning pace, 'In tithes and offerings! Do you want to know? I'll tell you!'

Now most people assume that the tithe in the Old Testament was 10% of the people's income, but that is a woeful misconception. There were multiple mandatory requirements of the Old Testament people of God, and the one that is spoken of here in this verse is the Lord's tithe. That was the fact that the Levites in Numbers 18 were to be supported in their priestly ministry by the people of God. They were to submit supplies in order to help the ministry of the priests, it was also called the Levite's tithe. People would tithe of their animals, of their crops, of their produce, and that is what is spoken of specifically here in Malachi 3 and verse 8 - this 'Lord's tithe', they were withholding it. But there were other tithes - don't you think for one moment that Old Testament saints only had to give a tenth of everything they had - there was another tithe. There was the 'festival tithe' that you read of in Deuteronomy 12, that was often taken when there were great festivals, and after they had conquered the Promised Land there was to be annual festivals to celebrate that great event, and that was another tithe - so that's now a mandatory 20%. The Lord's tithe, 10%; the festival tithe, 10%; and then there was another tithe - the 'poor tithe' that we read of in Deuteronomy 14, that was for social welfare to help the poor and widows in society. That was taken every three years, not every year, every three years - divide 10 by 3 and you get roughly 3.3, that means 3.3% per annum was given to this Poor tithe. Add it all up: 10% for the Levites, the Lord's tithe; 10% for the Festival tithe; 3.3% per annum for this Poor tithe - and that is 23% per year per person of their income! That's not where it ended, for in Leviticus 19 you were to add to that the fact that you were to refrain from harvesting the corners of the field. If you were a farmer you weren't allowed to harvest the corners. If you were a husbandman you weren't allowed to pluck all the grapes in the vineyard, you were to leave some of them just in case poor people could come by and glean food for themselves. In addition to that, there were other taxes from time to time, such as the tax of a third of a shekel that later had to be paid for the materials of the temple, that we read of in Nehemiah 10.

Now what am I telling you all this for? Get it out of your head that the Jewish people only gave to the Lord one tenth! The bottom line is, at a bare minimum everyone was required to give 25% of their income - and added to that there was what was called 'freewill offerings'. The first fruits, if you loved the Lord enough, you would give the best of your crop and the best of your farm to the Lord. There were other freewill offerings: when Moses built the tabernacle in Exodus 25 the people were invited by God to bring all they could, and in Exodus 36 we read that there was so much brought by the people that Moses had to ask them to stop! They were bringing too much! Now what had happened here in Malachi's day, you may ask. Well, obviously they had stopped bringing the Lord's tithe - but in all probability they had decreased their tithes and their offerings because of the adverse conditions that prevailed.

What am I talking about? Well, they seemed to try and justify that they were not bringing this Levitical tithe, because the crops were failing and they didn't have hardly enough crops to live themselves, so how could they be expected to bring that tithe to the temple? There was a drought, there was a pestilence - that's what we read of in verse 10 and in verse 11. But the Lord reveals to them: yes, there are natural disasters; and yes, you're not as well off as you ought to be; but those natural disasters are the result of your disobedience, those natural disasters are not the cause of your disobedience!

Let me show you what I'm talking about, turn to Haggai chapter 1. This crop failure, drought and pestilence, are the result of their disobedience before God and not the cause of the nation's disobedience. Verse 9 of chapter 1, the same epoch, the same conditions prevail - Haggai verse 9 of chapter 1: 'Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. And I called for a drought upon the land, and

upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labour of the hands'. Look back to verse 6: 'Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes'. What does God say to them? What is God saying to them? Verse 7: 'Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways'. Verse 5: 'Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways'. These natural disasters are the result of your disobedience, not a reason to be disobedient! He's saying what he said in Malachi 2 and verse 2 to them: 'Because you have despised me, because you have dishonoured my name, I have cursed your blessings'.

God had shut the rain off, God had spoiled the crops, all because of the people's selfishness - yet they used that as an excuse not to give to God. They didn't realise that if they would only give to God, God would give back to them. If they returned unto God, He would return on to them. They didn't realise that not only were they robbing God by not giving their offerings, but they were robbing themselves! Someone has said, and I think said well: 'If God's larders are empty, His people are to blame'. If God's larders are empty, His people are to blame. Malachi's modern message is the same today as it was then, and it's simply this: God has promised to bless and care for those who are faithful in their stewardship toward Him.

Do you not believe me? Well, turn with me to Philippians 4 for a moment. Paul talks of his own experience of how kind the church at Philippi were to him. Philippians 4 and verse 10: 'But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. Notwithstanding ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction. Now ye Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only. For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity. Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account. But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God. But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus'. Do you see what Paul is saying? 'Because of your faithfulness in providing my need in the gospel, God will reciprocate that and bless you for blessing me, and God will supply all your need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus'.

Now, let us gather in these lessons, these modern contemporary lessons for us tonight, and ask a very sobering question of ourselves. First of all, the obvious answer to the first one is given: can God be robbed? Categorically yes! Can we rob Him? Would we not be very inconsistent if we were to answer 'no' to the second question? William MacDonald has made this very piercing statement regarding the lack of stewardship in the church of Jesus Christ today: 'We rob God in this sense: often times the Lord's own money is not available to Him'. Imagine and contemplate the possibility that God's own money is not available to Him, because the Christians of Malachi's and today's day are so tight-fisted that they won't let go of it and allow Him to use it! This is the principle of stewardship, and please do not misunderstand what I'm saying tonight as an appeal for the Building Fund - it is not - I am preaching in God's word consecutively, and don't you dare accuse me of doing anything else. I haven't got the privilege of skipping over verses, I have to answer the question before God rather than you: can a man rob God? Can I rob God? Can you rob God? And the answer is 'Yes!' In fact, I would go as far as to say that the average child of God in this generation is robbing God!

I was only able to find statistics for the United States, but they'll do when we consider the United States as the biggest evangelical Christian nation in the world, and also, in parallel, the most wealthy nation in the

world. In 1969 the average church member in the United States give 3.1% less than his tithe - 3.1% income less, that is less than a third of the tithe. That figure dropped every year until 1990, and then it recovered slightly to 2.66% - that's approximately a quarter of a tithe. In 1990 the average American Christian was giving less than a quarter of a tithe. This statistician, who is a Christian, observed the trend over the years from '68 until 1990: as the Christians in America got richer and richer, evangelicals chose to spend more and more on themselves and give less and less, a smaller percentage to the church. Now isn't that interesting? 'Why?', you might say. Well, the reason why God was reprimanding His Old Testament people was because they thought they had just reasons for withholding the tithe, there was a famine, there was a drought, there was a pestilence - yet God's people today, as they increase in affluence, think it is just to hold back more and more from God's work! If God had reason to judge them, has He not reason to judge us this evening?

Today, on average, evangelicals in the United States today give about two fifths of a tithe - two fifths of a tithe! In 2002 a Barna poll was taken, and it was discovered - listen to this now - that 6% of born-again adults tithed! From the year 2000 - now wait for this - to the year 2002, there was a 50% reduction and decline. In 2000 12% of evangelicals in America tithed, and in two years it was cut by half to 6% - and there is more money spent in the United States to feed and to care for their pets than is given to churches and charities. The wealthiest nation, the most Christian nation, so-called: and I say to all of us tonight, the divine message remains unchanged, 'Ye have robbed me, saith the LORD'!

The New Testament teaches us, and I haven't time to go into this but I have ministered on it in the recent past, that believers in Christ are not required to give a tithe necessarily, although that may be a good starting point, but believers are to give sacrificially, they're to give systematically on the first day of the week, they're to give liberally, they're to give cheerfully - for the Lord loves a cheerful giver. They're to give as the Lord has prospered them, that is proportionately to the wealth that God has given them. Although no tithing is mentioned in a commendatory sense in the New Testament scripture, the suggestion that we have in principle in the New Testament is that if the Jew was living, giving a tithe and several tithes, under the law - how much more ought the child of God to give under grace?

The reward in the Old Testament for faithful tithing was the blessing of material wealth. Though there may come a certain amount of reciprocation, as the man said: 'We give a spoonful, and God gives us back a shovelful'; the spiritual blessings are the main ones that we get today when we give in our stewardship sacrificially, systematically, liberally, cheerfully, and proportionately to the Lord. But there is an important spiritual principle here that's enumerated in Malachi, and it's applicable to every age. It's simply this: God meets with blessing any heart of any man or woman, boy or girl, that is completely devoted to Him. If you want God's storehouse to be opened to you, you need to open your storehouse to God. It's just as simple as that. It's not all about money, it's about time, giving your time to God. You can rob God of your time in the morning, and in the evening, and on the Lord's day. You can rob God of your energy, you can rob God of your intellect, you can rob God of your talent, you can rob God of your possessions - whether it's your home, or whether it's your car, whatever it may be. The simple message of Malachi is that the pathway to blessing is always obedience.

'Do you want to be blessed?', God says to His ancient people Judah, 'Here's the way to do it: return unto me, stop robbing me, and gather all the tithes and the offerings into the storehouse; and I will open my storehouse in heaven and pour you out a blessing to exhaustion!'. Isn't that what verse 10 says? They had been questioning God, hadn't they, over and over again? 'Lord, prove it. Wherein do You love us? Wherein have we robbed You?'; and now God is saying, 'It's now your turn to prove me. Prove me not to be unfaithful, as you accused me of; but prove me to be faithful. Try me, test me, and see - when you bring all your tithes in - if I will not pour you out a blessing until there is a failure of sufficiency!'. That's literally what it means: until you haven't room to receive it.

Now this is mind-boggling, because this is the eternal God - as you know, He owns the cattle on a thousand hills, the wealth in every mine, the heavens and the earth are His and everything in it - yet He is saying, 'I will reciprocate your blessing to such an extent that it will be almost as if I have exhausted the resources of heaven to give you the blessing'. God is challenging the people to try and exhaust Him with their giving, He says: 'I will give over-proportionately to everything that you do'. The first cry has been 'Return!', and then the next cry was 'Robbery!', but if you want the blessing the cry that comes is 'You will be rewarded if you repent!'. God's word does not change: 'He who soweth sparingly, shall reap also sparingly; and he who soweth bountifully, shall reap also bountifully'. God told them that if they would do this, in verse 11, the pestilence would be removed; verse 12, they would be restored to prominence one day that will be fully fulfilled in the millennial reign of Christ, when they will be called again 'a delightful land', and the land will bring forth plentifully.

I'm asking you the question tonight, and I'm asking myself this question: are we, as Christians in the 21st century, failing to obey the elementary commands that the Lord Jesus Christ has left us regarding stewardship? What am I talking about? Listen to these words, His words: 'Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again'. Another: 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'. 'No man can serve two masters, you cannot serve God and money'. Could it possibly be that our spiritual blessings could be turned into cursings because we don't do stewardship right? Please do not dispensationalise the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to suit your cheque-book. These teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ are either expected of us, or they are not, and He even goes as far as to say in this parable in Luke chapter 16: 'If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous money', the money that's in your pocket, 'who will commit to you the trust of the true riches?'.

God requires of us that we turn our money into Bibles. God requires of us that we turn our money into Testaments, and Scripture portions, and tracts, and other Christian literature. He requires that money is used to support missionaries, and evangelists, and pastors and teachers. He asks that money would be used to finance Christian radio to preach the word of God all over the world, and many more worthy endeavours and activities - in short, what Christ is telling us and Malachi is telling us, and the Holy Spirit is saying to us all this evening, is that if you use your money for the spread of the gospel in any or every way, it will not be lost! Someone has put it: 'The only way we can lay up our treasures in heaven is to put them into something that is going there'. Are you putting your money into something that's going there?

Dr Adam Clark preached on the text on one occasion: 'Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely', from Revelation 22:17. At the conclusion of the meeting he announced an offering, and afterwards a lady asked: 'How can you reconcile the freeness of the water of life with the collection at the close?'. 'Oh Madam', he answered, 'God gives the water without money and without price, but you must pay for the waterworks, for the pipes and the pitchers to convey the water'. Can I say something to you from my heart tonight: don't insult God by asking why the Gospel is not blessed in your church, if you're not willing to reach into your pocket to bless it. I read a poem that is searing, and I finish with it, it's called 'A Dollar to God':

Three thousand for my brand-new car,
 Five thousand for a piece of sod
 Ten thousand I paid to begin a house
 A dollar I gave to God!

A tidy sum to entertain my friends in chatter

And when the world goes crazy mad
I ask the Lord what's the matter
--a dollar I gave to God!

Yet there is one big question
For the answer I still search
With things so bad in this old world
What's holding back my church?'

Are you robbing God? Let us search our hearts, whatever assembly you belong to, I don't care - do you give? When was the last time you gave to missionary endeavour, when there are millions dying without Christ that have never heard His name? You're not robbing the church, you're not robbing the Missionary Society, you're robbing God!

Father, forgive us, forgive me when I live for self, and the service of the King suffers, and souls that will never die enter into eternity for want of a piece of paper with a verse upon it. Oh God move us, revive us to follow in our Saviour's footsteps, the One who had no place to lay His head. Oh God, help us to forsake all and to follow Him, and may we put all that we are and have into the storehouse of God, that Thou mayest open Thy windows, and pour us out a blessing, O God, that we would not have room to receive it. O, have mercy upon us, and hear our cry in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 7

"Message On Faithfulness"

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Malachi chapter 3, and if you haven't been with us in recent weeks, let me just recap on where we have come from and what we have learned. We began in week 1, in verses 1-5 looking at 'Malachi's Modern Message on Love', and as you have been with us these weeks you would have found out very quickly that this book is a series of questions or accusations that the people of God throw in the face of Almighty God, Jehovah, their covenant keeping God. They accuse Him of certain things, and then God comes back to them and gives them an evidence of why their accusation is wrong, and then He begins to judge them and condemn them because of their accusations, and because of the guilt that He has found in them. In verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1, they accused God of not loving them: 'Wherein have you loved us?', and God had to start from the very beginning to show how He chose them by grace, not because they were a great people or a strong nation, but because He loved them and set His love upon them in grace and the election thereof - He loved them with an everlasting love - 'I have loved you deeply, saith the LORD. Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated'.

Then we found in verses 6 to 14 his 'Message on Service' - how they were serving Him not with their heart, but only in an external profession of religion. Then God disciplined them for that in chapter 2 and verses 1 to 9, and because they had despised His name in the offerings that they were bringing and in their lack of heartfelt service to Him, He told them that He would judge them - in the same way that they despised Him in their service, He would despise them in their discipline. Very harsh discipline it was, to such an extent that God said that He would smudge the dung of their offerings upon their faces. He would make them an abomination, just as they had despised His holy name.

Then we found out in chapter 2 verses 10-16, 'Malachi's Modern Message on Divorce' - for these Israelite priests and people in the nation were divorcing their young Judean wives of the covenant that they had made with God, and before their wives and the company, that they would love them with all their heart, for all their lives. They were divorcing those Judean wives and marrying pagan wives, and those pagan wives were leading them astray to follow their pagan deities.

Then in chapter 2 verse 17, the last verse, through to chapter 3 verse 6, we have his 'Message on Messiah' - and Israel and Judah particularly were continually looking for a Deliverer, someone to come and deliver them from their enemies and to judge their enemies for their sin, but they didn't realise that when this Messiah-Deliverer would come, He would judge them for their backsliding and for their failure. God told them through Malachi that Christ would come as a refiner's fire, not only would He judge the nations of the world round about, but He would judge in the house of God first of all for how they had not been a light to the nations round about them.

Then last week we looked at chapter 3 verses 7 to 12 at his 'Message on Stewardship' - how these priests and the people, following the lead of the priests, were robbing God. They were not bringing their tithes and offerings into the house of God, and for that they were suffering. But we see a little spring of light, for God tells them: 'Return unto me, and I will return unto you - and if you bring all the tithes and the offerings that you've been robbing me of, and bring them into my storehouse, I will open the windows of the storehouse of heaven and pour you out a blessing, so much so that it will almost exhaust heaven!' - now that's impossible, but He was communicating to the people what He would do for them if they would return unto Him.

Now this evening we're looking at his 'Message on Faithfulness' in chapter 3 and verses 13 to 18, and we want to see this evening what his modern message to us on faithfulness is, as we seek to apply the word of God written thousands of years ago to our modern age and to our personal lives. So we take up our reading at chapter 3 verse 13: "Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered. Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not".

'The Message on Faithfulness'. Matthew Henry in his commentary, in an introduction to his comments on these particular verses, verses 13 to 18 under our consideration tonight, says these words - listen very carefully: 'Among the people of the Jews at this time, though they all enjoy the same privileges and advantages, there were men of very different characters (as ever were, and ever will be, in the world and in the church), like Jeremiah's figs, some very good and others very bad, some that plainly appeared to be the children of God and others that as plainly discovered themselves to be the children of the wicked one. There are tares and wheat in the same field, chaff and corn in the same floor; and here we have an account of both'.

We have to concur that in Judah everyone had the same privileges, everyone had the same advantages, but as we've been studying over these weeks the two types of individuals that we find in our portion this evening are two very different types of characters. That is the way it has always been among God's people, and that is the way it will always be even in this modern church age. That's why we have so much practical truth to apply to our lives from a book like Malachi, that's why Malachi has such a modern message for us all - because not only, as we have found as we have gone through this book in chapter 2, God says 'I am the LORD, I change not', we as human beings do not change, as sinners we do not change, and even though we may call ourselves 'sinners saved by grace', largely speaking God's people have not changed much since His ancient people in Judah. We would have to say that if you're successful and overcoming and victorious in the Christian life, it's not because you have had any added privileges or more advantages than those who are struggling and those who are backsliding. The fact of the matter is, like the Judeans, as Matthew Henry testifies in his commentaries, these two characters that we find in our reading this evening all had the same privileges, the same advantages, but they are found to be very different characters - not just in my judgment, but in the judgment of God's Holy Spirit.

Now I'm sure you're aware what a 'hypocrite' is. But you may not be aware that the derivation of that word 'hypocrite' comes from a Greek word that speaks of an actor in the Greek auditorium that used to use a mask, he was hiding his face with a facade. That is where we get the modern idea of 'hypocrite' from, someone who puts up a mask, a facade, you could use the modern day expression 'two-faced' to hold the sentiment of the meaning of 'hypocrite' in our day and age. Now it's one thing to be two-faced and hypocritical with other men and women, and even our brothers and sisters in Christ, but it's an entirely different thing and so much more a dangerous thing to be found to be two-faced with God. That's the case in point this evening in our study: those who were genuine with God, those who were real with God; and other people who were portraying a type and character of life that was not echoed by their soul, their heart and their spirit.

I want you to see very definitely, at the very beginning of our study this evening, the evidence upon which God judges these two characters: those who are found to be righteous, and those who are found to be hypocritical; those who are found to be the wheat, and those who are found to be the tares. How does He

judge them? The prime evidence He uses is their words - that's how He judges them. That's how, in His Old Testament context, if I can use the analogy, He separates the sheep from the goats - by their words. Now we've already found out as we've gone through this book, in chapter 1 and verse 10, that God has no pleasure in His Old Testament Judean people at this particular time: 'I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD, neither will I accept an offering at your hand'.

Then later we find in chapter 2 verse 17, He says that they have actually wearied Him with their words - yet they continued to retort to Him: 'Wherein have we wearied Thee? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?'. God is starting to be wearied by their accusations toward Him, but now He moves on in chapter 3 to condemn them for the specific accusations in their words. He's saying now: 'I'm not just wearied by your words, but I'm going to come and judge them for the accusations that are in their words'. He condemns first of all this group of the unrighteous, of the chaff, of the goats, this is the group that are judging Him in their words. Then we find that the end of this portion that He commends as His jewels those who honour Him in their words, in their conversation.

So let's look at these both in some detail tonight, and see what we can learn as a modern message to us all from those who have judged the Lord in their words, and those who are found to be jewels in the words that they speak about the living God. First of all, His judges - verses 13 to 15 - His judges. Let's read them again: 'Your words have been stout against me'. Again the Lord is charging His own people with accusing Him, but now He's defining their accusations that have been coming time after time after time as we have studied this book week after week, He charges these accusations as being 'stout against Him'. Now we would expect the Lord's enemies to speak stoutly against Him, in fact Jude in verse 15 of his book in the New Testament says that the Lord, when He comes again in judgment, will come to execute judgment upon all the hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him. Centuries before Malachi prophesied in this book, Job quoted the wicked men who say: 'What is the Almighty that we should serve Him? And what profit should we have if we pray to Him?'.

We don't usually expect those guilty of such ungodly speeches to be among God's people, but here Malachi is accusing his own Judean people of speaking stoutly against Him. Now that word 'stout' simply communicates that they're speaking proudly against the Lord, they're speaking arrogantly to Him, they're even speaking loudly in His face - and they're not caring who hears their accusations against God. Not only are they not ashamed, but they, as Matthew Henry again says, 'Desired to propagate their atheistical notions to infect the mind of others'. They spoke proudly and loudly because they wanted to sway others' opinions about God's dealing among His own people. They wanted their scepticism and their cynicism to spread and take root within the commonwealth of God's people. From those stout sayings against God, one commentator has put it: 'Through their unguarded conversation they undermined morale'. Listen to that statement very carefully: 'Through their unguarded conversation they undermined morale' - and that is still the case today!

I wonder do you ever ask the question: why do people speak out as they do? Well, obviously, if you think about it for a moment, it is simply not only to let you know what they are thinking, but in some shape or form to influence you to their thinking. Now, if it's for a good cause, that can only be good, and that's what we do in the gospel, that's why we preach the gospel and speak out, that's why we proclaim the truth of God's word - positive truth, the truth of the Almighty, because we want to sway people's minds and hearts to come into accordance with that truth. But when what is being spoken is evil, that means that those who are speaking the evil desire that others should be influenced and swayed by the evil, and ultimately that that evil should take root in their hearts and bear fruit. What happens in a community, whether it's Judea, whether it's in the church of Jesus Christ, or an individual local assembly, is: unguarded conversation can undermine morale. Just as it did in Malachi's day, it does so in our modern day and age.

I say this categorically and unashamedly: whoever's company you are in, if they begin to propagate evil, if they speak of slander, if it comes under the definition of gossip in any shape or form, all such evil speaking should be checked and should be censured by men and women of God. We've got to get beyond being afraid of offending people, to check and censure them, if what they are saying has potential to offend the peace and the unity, and the bond of peace that is in the church of Jesus Christ.

You've heard of 'Valiant-for-Truth', most of you anyway, in John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress'. Well, the individual characters that Malachi is speaking against here are those who are 'Valiant-for-Error'. They're not ashamed, not concerned about even a check or a censure from God Almighty. They're determined to speak their mind, they're determined that they should evangelise others with their scepticism and with their cynicism, and they don't care what God thinks of them because they feel they are right. As residents in Zion, effectively they are speaking treason against their King, who is of course the King of Kings. Elpihaz threw this accusation at Job, and it wasn't true of him, but it is true of these people: 'They stretch out their hand against God, and they strengthen themselves against the Almighty'. The irony of it is this, and we have found this characteristic of these people as we've gone through this book: they are absolutely oblivious to their guilt in this regard and every other regard. As far as they're concerned: when God brings His guilt upon them, they retort back to Him, 'Wherein have we done this? Wherein have we said this? Wherein have we felt this against You?'. They're oblivious to their guilt - as far as they're concerned: they're right, God must be wrong!

We find it in chapter 3 verse 13 at the end, they question God's accusation again: 'Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee?'. They don't believe that God, Almighty God, is justified when He speaks. They are beginning to doubt that God is clear when He judges, and if I could put it into our contemporary language, they're effectively saying in the second half of verse 13: 'What's all the fuss about? Why are our words riling you God? Why does it annoy you? And even if we say these things, what's the problem? Is it not true what we say?'. Now I want you to listen very carefully, because what we find here is a trait of those who are unconvinced and unhumiliated by their sin. The reason why people are oblivious to their guilt is because they are unconvinced that they've got any, and they don't feel that they have to bow and submit low before God. When people are like that, do you know what they begin to do? First of all, they deny their sin and guilt; and then when they're faced with it and they can't handle it, or won't admit to it, they trivialise it.

First they deny it, then when they are faced with it they trivialise it; but on both counts they are completely oblivious to it - and especially when you come to folk and it involves what they say. 'What's all the fuss about?'. I wonder have you ever gone to anybody and said: 'I have heard that you said this', or you heard them say this, and they have retorted to you, 'Well, what's all the fuss about?'. Do you know why it's so much more difficult to face our words? Because it's hard to forget, at times, actions which have been done unto you and you have done to others; but it's so easy, isn't it, to forget our words that we speak. They are spoken and they are gone, and often in a 24-hour space of time they're forgotten - but the earth-shattering teaching of Malachi to his hearers, and his modern message to our hearers tonight is that he teaches that God records all our words! He records the bad words, He records the good words; to such an extent that God could come to any of us and all of us and say: 'You said this, this is what you said, this is when you said it, this is where you said it, this is how you said it, this is why you said it'. God records our words.

We're so familiar with Psalm 139, but do we ever let the import and sentiment of it all, of the omnipresence of God and the omniscience of God, grip our heart? David says that, among the many things that display the attributes of God in that regard, 'There is not a word in my tongue; but lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether'. When we go into the New Testament, we find that the message is no different. If you turn with me to James 3, that famous passage on the tongue - I commend it to your study - but we look just at verses 5 and 6: 'Even so the tongue is a little member', one of the smallest members of the body, 'and boasteth great things', it is what we communicate our desires with, 'Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and

setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell'.

Now here is a perennial teaching from God's word that passes every dispensation and covers every age, epoch and era. It is simply this: the tongue of every child of God must be guarded. That's why the man of God cried: 'Lord, put Thou a watch upon my mouth', because God takes the sins of our speech extremely seriously - much more seriously than we do. To the extent that the Lord Jesus taught in Matthew 12: 'I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment' - every idle word! Many believers live as if God was deaf to their conversation, blind to their actions - but the fact of what Malachi teaches us is that God catches everything, He records every word and every deed. The book of Hebrews tells us that the word of God is as a sharp two-edged sword, 'piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do'. If there's a modern message in Malachi for all of us tonight, as children of God in his age or our age in the church, it is this: so many believers need to repent of what they have spoken foolishly, and especially of that which they have spoken foolishly against God, against God's ways, against God's workers and God's work.

What were their accusations to the Lord? Well, here's the first one, if you look down at it with me, they said: 'We serve God for nothing'. Verse 14: 'Ye have said, It is vain to serve God'. The first thing they put to God is: 'Serving You is a waste of time'. Now after the list of sins that have been exposed already in Malachi regarding their service, one would wonder how they saw themselves as truly serving God in any capacity. But nevertheless, what they say here is true - not generically that it's always a waste of time to serve God, but for them it was a vain thing in their service. Because, like the Pharisees in the Lord Jesus' day, Malachi is saying to them: 'In vain you worship God, you draw near with your lips but your hearts are far from me'. In fact, I believe that Judaism at this particular point in time is the forerunner to what we find in the New Testament Gospels of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They probably inherited the ways and thoughts and the doctrinal system of these people, these Jews and priests in Malachi's day. The Sadducees, you probably know, didn't believe in the supernatural, the realities of the resurrection and the eternal state. The Pharisees, they sought recompense now, they had an outward religion and they sought the praise and the fame of men, and they sought the same currency of reward of men - their god, so often, was that of mammon.

That's why, in the Sermon on the Mount, you will remember in Matthew chapter 6 the Lord Jesus spoke to them in those first couple of verses: 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward' - Pharisees! If you seek the recompense of men, the glory of men, doing these things outwardly, you will get your reward; but you'll have no reward of heaven. Then He goes on to say: if you give your alms in secret, if you pray in secret, if you fast in secret, what you do in secret will be rewarded by God - now 'openly' isn't there in the original, and the sense could be that you may never be rewarded in this time, but one day in glory you will have your reward.

The Sadducees didn't believe in the supernatural, the Pharisees sought the recompense of the world and the currency of the world. Now we may not be liberal Sadducees or legalistic Pharisees, but the fact of the matter is: we can fall into this trap that they fell into...you can judge the service of God with the world's values. You can judge the service of God with the world's values! 'Serving God is a waste of time!', they say, 'Serving God doesn't pay!'. Though you believe in the supernatural, though you're not wanting the praise of men, many a man gets weary of serving God because they get nowhere in the eyes of this world. Do we judge the service of the Lord in worldly value? Do pastors go to churches for a bigger car, a bigger house? Do we choose jobs in the Lord's work according to the pay packet, according to the revenue, according to the future pension? When things get tough do we decide that we're going to go out, we're going to leave? Do we leave

the Lord's work because we're not appreciated, or we don't get the praise of men? I'm not talking about so-called 'full-time workers' now, I'm talking about everybody in the Lord's work. Could it be that we're judging the work of God by worldly values? When you read what the apostles suffered, you come to the conclusion that these men - apart from what they said from the very example of their lives - were not living for earth, they were living for heaven, and that's why many of them were martyred! That's why Paul said: 'If Christ is not raised, if there is no resurrection, then we're of all men most miserable'. They were living for the resurrection, they were living for eternity - are you? Even in the Lord's work, are you living for time? The praise, the pennies, the prosperity?

Then the second accusation - after saying, 'Serving God is a waste of time' - was they said: 'The way to real success is wickedness'. They have already expressed this to the Lord, but now they do it again - verse 15: 'Yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered', and at the beginning, 'Now we call the proud happy'. They blindly estimated things by the standard of worldly prosperity. They compared their pay packet to the people in the world, their future, their materials to the people in the world - and they thought to themselves: 'This doesn't pay, and the wicked are prosperous!'. Literally it could be translated at the beginning of verse 15: 'From henceforth we are going to pronounce the presumptuous ones' - i.e. those who defy God - 'to be the happy ones'. Now you might say, 'This is ridiculous' - is it really? Do we not fall into the trap today of saying that those in the world are the really happy ones, those who have the possessions, those who are not bearing the reproach of Christ - they are really satisfied, they are really enjoying their life? Is there even a time when we look out of the corner of our eye at those who are enjoying the things of the world - especially you young people - do you never think like this at times? 'They are enjoying themselves, I'm not! I'm lumbered and laboured with all this Christian stuff!' - and the reason why we ever conclude like that is because we have begun a Christian faith living, not with eternity's values in view, but with the earthly values in view!

Can I ask you: do you sometimes watch family and friends around you, and verbally they deny God - they're not Christians, they don't have a testimony - maybe they even live, we could say 'wicked lives'; but they seem to receive greater blessing than other believers and especially you. You would never say it, you would never verbalise it, but you cynically think it in your heart and mind: 'What profit is there in serving God? It doesn't pay!'. Now, here's the message of Malachi: God records everything, the God who changes not not only records our foolish words that these priests were speaking, and the people were speaking, but we must remember that God keeps record of all that we do and say in His name - and one day, hallelujah, payday is coming! Do you believe that?

It was Asaph in Psalm 73, I mentioned him on Thursday night at our prayer meeting, that like many of the Psalmists, David included, he was looking at the prosperity of the wicked and was thinking: 'What's this all about? It's a waste of time serving God! The wicked are prospering and succeeding' - like we could almost think today. Asaph had his questions, and he faced the questions honestly, but he took his questions - the Bible says in Psalm 73:17 - into the sanctuary of God. They were painful for him, but he took them before God and it says this: 'Then understood I their end'. 'Then understood I their end' - what he was really saying was: 'When I brought my questions into the house of God, there I got the answers, and the answers were these: you must keep eternity's values in view, because in the end we will win!'. Man has his puny innings today, but we will have our recompense on that day.

Well, the judges were well answered. They accused God, 'It's a waste of time to serve You, and the way to success is wickedness' - and He has answered both those accusations. Now we come to the jewels, the second group of people. The first group of people were the judges, and now the second are the jewels in verses 16 through to verse 18. He calls these people 'jewels', God's jewels, 'My jewels - they shall be mine', verse 17. He gives this beautiful name of beauty, priceless, 'jewels' to those who, in an age of compromise, an age of worldly values, an age of lukewarmness, apathy, indifference, even among God's

people; and an age of apostasy, falling away and backsliding among the community of God's people - those who talk about the Lord, those who fear the Lord, He calls 'His jewels'.

I think these are some of the most beautiful verses in all of Scripture. God says in verse 16: 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him'. God says: 'There is a remnant people, true to me' - and there always is, right throughout all of time. We talk about, in history, the Dark Ages - especially in the history of the church - those years when there was no alternative to dark Roman Catholicism in the mediaeval times, but yet there was a remnant. There was a people of God in the mountains of Rome and in parts of Europe, and throughout Italy. They were serving God in spirit and in truth.

Now I want you to note that both of these people - those who were the judges and those who are the jewels - both of them claimed to be among God's people. But what I want you to see are the characteristics that contrast between Jehovah's judges and Jehovah's jewels. Here's the difference with the jewels: one, they feared the Lord - do you see it? Verse 16 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another'. What does the book of Proverbs say? 'To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. These were people who, in the midst of all that was going on around them, revered God and submitted and bowed to God's authority and no one else's. These were a people who always put the Lord before them in their thoughts, in their words. Do you remember Malachi reminded his people of their ancestors - Levi and Phinehas - in chapter 2, turn back to it, and verses 5-7. Look at the great characteristics that they exhibited, chapter 2 verse 5: 'My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts'.

What does the Bible say? 'The fear of man bringeth a snare, but the righteous' - those that fear God - 'are as bold as a lion'. Thessalonians says: 'Even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God which trieth our hearts'. I think it was said of John Knox that he feared no man because he feared the Lord. Do we fear the Lord? It's not a very fashionable term that - 'fearing the Lord'. What prevails in modern Christendom today is a buddy-buddy attitude, a pally-pally conversation with God that is devoid of any fear, of any reverence, of any majesty, of any dignity. Sometimes in our very demeanour as we come to worship the Lord there is an absence of fear. Matthew Henry has said: 'The worse others are in the world, the better we should be. When vice is daring, let not virtue be sneaking'. Isn't that nice? 'When vice is daring, let not virtue be sneaking'. How many of us sneak around in this world, because we fear men rather than fear God? But the apostles that turned the world upside down said: 'We must obey God rather than men'!

The Lord calls those who fear Him His jewels. The second characteristic about these jewels was that they thought upon His name. Verse 16: 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened...they thought upon his name', at the end of the verse, 'for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name'. Their meditation of Him was sweet! Now the only way you can think upon God's name is to go to the only place where God has categorically and perfectly declared Himself, and that is the Holy Scriptures. Through studying the Scriptures this remnant, when there was a famine of the word of God, when the preaching of the word of God wasn't popular, this remnant was feeding on the Scriptures - and their meditation of Him was sweet. They thought on the name of the Lord, that means they thought about His Majesty, they chewed upon His attributes, they assimilated and digested into their being everything concerning the person of God. Do you know what happens when you do that? It caused them to fear God all the more!

Do you think about His name? They began to fear God more and fear others less. They feared the Lord, they thought upon His name, and then they spoke often about Him. verse 16: 'they spake often of Him one to another', and the progression is obvious here: if you fear Him, and you think about Him, you certainly will talk about Him - because, as the Lord Jesus taught, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh! Here's the question out of Malachi's modern message for all of us tonight: what do your lips portray about your heart, for they will portray something? Do you talk often one to another about Him? Oh, there's another lesson in this for us all, because in this cold apathetic day when iniquity was abounding, the remnant kept company together - they encouraged one another, they preserved and promoted love and faith in each heart. They were not forsaking the assembling of themselves together, as the manner of some is, as they saw the Day approaching. They kept company with those who were talking about the Lord, those who were thinking on His name, those who feared the Lord. Can I give you a bit of advice: keep company, not only in the assembly, but in your personal private company, with those who talk about the Lord - not about other Christians!

Now you might say, as those in Malachi's day said: 'What does it matter? All this is well and good, but what does it matter, if serving God is a waste of time or not, if the wicked succeed? What does it matter if I fear God, or if I think upon His name, or if I speak about Him often one with another?'. Here's the reason why it matters: the Lord hears it all! Oh, that this would be burned upon all our hearts tonight - it says in verse 16: 'the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name'. God has a book of remembrance! He has opened it. literally verse 16, the second half, could be translated: 'He pricked up His ears, and He listened for those who were talking about Him, those who were caught up with Him in such an awful day of apostasy - He was listening for anyone that would name worthily His name'.

Suppose you talked for one day - that's not hard for some of you - and everything you said was taken down verbatim: how much of it could be entered into God's book? Conversations after church, before church, around the dinner table, your Sunday evening socialising - how much of it would you be happy being recorded in that book? Now it's being recorded whether it's good or bad, but there's a special book! Now, of course, prophetically this is a reference to the remnant in Israel in the future day, and we don't want to miss that. During the tribulation there will be a group of Jews who will come together, and they will be a remnant, and they will take that gospel - but the fact of the matter is: to us, can we not learn the lesson tonight, whatever will be in the prophetic future, should we as a people of God today in our modern age not seek to follow the practice of this godly people? Is our age not the same? An age of darkness, an age of despair, an age of apostasy and compromise, indifference and apathy - should we not fear the Lord? Should we not think often about Him? Should we not speak of Him one to another? May we not have the same sweet communion that they had? I say to you tonight: a thousand times 'Yes!' We should have, and we can have!

I have made the application of how Malachi's book is so like the Laodicean church in Revelation 3 - we'll not take time to read it, but you remember they were self-deluded in the same age, and I think possibly we're in the spirit of that age today certainly in the West. They thought they were rich, increased with goods, they had need of nothing. The Lord came in His risen judicial form and showed them that they were blind, they were naked, they were pitiful, they needed Him more than ever - but they felt they had need of nothing. He said: 'I'm going to spew you out of my mouth because you're neither hot nor cold, you're lukewarm' - but here is the invitation that is given, that Christ says to that church: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man' - not any church - 'any man hear my voice', any remnant hear my voice, 'I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me'.

The Bible says there's a book for our tears, the Bible says in Revelation there's a book that will be opened, and all the iniquitous works of men will be judged out of those books. Then there's the book of the Lamb's Book of Life, and those that are not found in it will be cast into the lake of fire - but this is the book of

remembrance. Now God doesn't need to keep books, God knows all things and doesn't forget anything - but what this is is an encouragement to all our hearts, it's an assurance to the godly. 'What is it?', you say. 'You remember me', God says, 'You remember me, and I'll never forget you'.

Matthew Henry put it: 'Never was any good word spoken of God, or for God, from an honest heart; but it was registered that it might be recompensed in the resurrection of the just, and in no wise lose reward'. Am I speaking to someone tonight, and you're struggling in the Lord's work in His service - you're almost ready to quit. Maybe you're even attracted by the rewards of the world; maybe people, even Christians are dissuading you from going all out for God? Do you remember those two on the road to Emmaus? All their heart's desires were downcast, their hopes and dreams had been shattered, Christ had died - and as they were walking down that road to Emmaus, it says: 'It came to pass that while they communed together', what were they communing about? I don't know, but I reckon it was something to do with what was going on, and what was going on concerned Christ. Now it might have been a negative conversation, but they were talking about Christ - and as they communed together and reasoned together, Jesus Himself drew near and went with them!

Israel was a royal diadem in the crown of Jehovah. From their election in grace they were a peculiar treasure, and there's a coming day when He will gather all His jewels when He comes to judge the world, and He will put them in His jewel house and take them out of all the dirt of the earth wherewith they've been scattered, and He will pluck them from the four corners of this earth - and He says: 'They shall be mine'. But that privilege is not unique to Israel, for all believers in 1 Peter 2:9 are called 'a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people'. God treasured them, just as a father his son, verse 17. God treasures them, verse 18, and protects them. As the 103rd Psalm says, some of you Presbyterians sing it well: 'Such pity as a father hath, unto his children dear; like pity shows the Lord to such as worship Him in fear'.

God honours the righteous, He says: 'Them that honour me, I will honour'. My friend, you're precious in His sight, you're purchased by His blood, you've been polished through trials and testings, and one day in glory you will be perfect and you will shine in beauty and majesty and splendour unto the perfect day. What a comfort! What an encouragement for those who are tried and tested in the work and ways of God! What an exhortation for those who value the fellowship of the Lord above everything else in the world - and thank God there's still a few people like that! People who can say 'Take the world, but give me Jesus; all its joys are but a name, but His love abideth ever, through eternal years the same'.

The message of Malachi is: God knows - whether your words are bad or good, whether you're a judge or whether you're a jewel - God knows, God cares; and if you remember God, especially in the days of your youth, God will never forget you. I implore you tonight: don't ever forget that, and don't forget Him.

Can I read a portion of Scripture with you as we finish - Matthew 19, here it is from the words of the Lord Jesus as He spoke to Peter, Matthew 19:27, and with this we close: 'Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first'.

Majoring On The Minors: Malachi's Modern Message - Chapter 8

"Message On The Future"

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We're turning to Malachi chapter 4, Malachi 4, and our subject tonight is 'Malachi's Message on the Future'. We have dealt with, if you've been with us over these studies, 'Malachi's Message on Love' in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1, in verses 6 to 14 of the same chapter his 'Message on Service', then in chapter 2 verses 1 to 9 his 'Message on Discipline', then in verses 10 to 16 of the same chapter his 'Message on Marriage', verse 17 of the end of chapter 2 to verse 6 of chapter 3 his 'Message on Messiah', in chapter 3 verses 7 to 12 his 'Message on Stewardship' - and last week we considered chapter 3 verses 13 to 18, his 'Message on Faithfulness'. His final message tonight that is for our consideration, verses 1 to 6 of chapter 4, 'Malachi's Message on the Future'.

So we begin to read at verse 1: "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts. Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse".

Malachi gives us in chapter 4 and verses 1 to 6 not only his last message, but the last Old Testament description of judgment - the judgment that God will bring upon this earth in what is, for us, yet a future day. It is the last vision in the Old Testament that we are given of the day of apocalypse. Sir George Adam Smith claims that it is an unequalled description of the day of judgment in all of Scripture. I don't know whether that's the case or not, but certainly it is a very graphic description of what it will be like in the Day of the Lord, when the Lord Jesus Christ will come to judge this world. George Adam Smith describes it like this: 'The apocalypse of this judgment is one of the grandest in all Scripture. To the wicked it shall be a terrible fire, root and branch shall be burned out; but to the righteous a fair morning of God, as when dawn comes to those who have been sick and sleepless through the black night, and its beams bring healing - even according to the popular belief of Israel, that the rays of the morning sun distil the dew. They break into life and energy like young calves leaping from the dark pen into the early sunshine, and to this morning landscape another grim figure is added: they, the children of God, shall tread down the wicked and the arrogant like ashes beneath their feet'. It describes the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as being the rising of the Sun of righteousness with healing in His wings.

What a description! There's no other metaphor like it in the whole of Scripture, describing the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ as the 'Sun of righteousness with healing in His wings'. Matthew Henry, the great puritan commentator, says: 'This figure of speech is like the pillar of cloud and fire to the Old Testament people of God as they exit Egypt. For the pillar of cloud and fire has a dark side that was turned toward the Egyptians, the enemies of God that fought against Him, yet it also had a bright side that was towards the faithful, to the people of Israel who followed Him'. That is exactly the same as this figure of speech concerning the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He will be the Sun of righteousness with healing

in His wings; and that is a message, a savour of death, to those who do not believe, and yet it is a savour of life to those who can call themselves His children.

I'm sure that you know that light can be a benefit, and it also can be to our detriment. If you can take one of the purest forms of light, which is a laser, you know that it can be used to destroy or it can be used to heal - and some of you have been party to that in a medical sense. In the same way, when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again as the Sun of righteousness, He will come not just to smite but to heal - but He will come to smite! He will come to judge the nations, the enemies of God, the enemies of God's people - with a rod of iron He shall smash His enemies as a potter's vessel. What a message Malachi's final message to us is this evening, the message of the future! He says: 'The day of the Lord cometh'.

Look at that verse, the import of it, verse 1: 'For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven'. You could almost read that: 'Behold the Lord cometh', for the day of the Lord speaks of how the Lord will come, and what a day that will be! We as believers are so familiar with singing 'What a day that will be, when my Jesus I will see...', and it will be a wonderful day for those who are saved - but what will that day be for those who are lost? You remember Judah asked the question in this book: 'Where is the God of justice? The righteous seem to be downtrodden, the wicked seem to be exalted and blessed, perhaps', they said, 'even by God Himself! Perhaps God is pleased to bless the wicked, and it seems', they say, 'that the proud are those that are happy' - but here we have the answer. Where is the God of justice? 'Behold, the day cometh, saith the Lord!' Their sarcastic scepticism is answered: 'Behold, the day of the Lord comes, and it shall burn as an oven'.

I want to speak to you tonight from Malachi's message on the future on this day, the Day of the Lord, and what we can learn from it. Here's the first thing: it will be a day of burning. 'Behold, the day cometh, the day of the Lord', Malachi says, 'and it shall be a day of burning'. Verse 1: 'it shall burn as an oven'. It is the day of God's wrath, it is the day of His indignation, His fiery indignation. It was foretold as being Messiah's day in Psalm 21 verse 9: 'Thou shalt make them as a fiery oven in the time of thine anger: the LORD shall swallow them up in his wrath, and the fire shall devour them'. An oven! That's what the Day of the Lord is going to be like for some! Albert Barnes, in his commentary, states of the ovens in Malachi's day that it was a large hole that was dug in the ground, in the earth, and the sides of that hole in the ground would be plastered. Then a very fierce fire and furnace would be made at the bottom of that hole in the ground, and grass, thorns, twigs, you could call it 'stubble', would be placed there and lit. After the embers had flamed, they would be taken out and that oven would just be left, and flat cakes of bread would be stuck against the plastered sides of the oven, and very very quickly they would cook. That oven is the picture that Malachi is giving us tonight of the fierce heat, the swift destruction that God will bring upon the earth in the Day of the Lord. The specific figure is the materials that are used at the bottom of this earthen oven, the stubble and the sticks, as they are quickly consumed so will the unrighteous be in the Day of the Lord.

Now you will know if you're familiar with the Old and New Testament that divine judgment is frequently represented by the figure of fire or the figure of burning. I'll give you a couple of examples: Isaiah 4 and verse 4 'When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning'. God judges by a spirit of burning! We know from the New Testament that our God is a consuming fire. Isaiah 47:14: 'Behold, they shall be as stubble', the unrighteous wicked, 'the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame' - it will be impossible for the unrighteous to escape the Day of the Lord, the day of His fiery indignation.

Hellfire and brimstone preaching is not popular today, but this fire that is spoken of concerning the judgment of God's wrath is a greater fire than ever consumed Nero's Rome, it's a greater fire than consumed and destroyed London town, it's greater even than the fire that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah, it's greater

than the atomic fire that consumed Hiroshima or Nagasaki - this is a fire that is second to none! The Bible says 'Jehovah will roar out of Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem with this fire'. So fierce and terrible it is, that Isaiah in his day urged people, in light of that day, to flee. If you turn with me for a moment to Isaiah chapter 2, just to show you the fearful picture that is conjured up by these Old Testament prophets concerning the Day of the Lord. Isaiah 2, beginning to read at verse 10, Isaiah exhorts them to flee: 'Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low'. Verse 19: 'And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth'.

It will be an awful day! Revelation says that the kings of the earth, the great men, the chief captains will cry for the rocks and the mountains to hide them from the wrath, the fiery indignation, of the Lord. It is the day of the Lord's vengeance, the year of recompense for the controversy of Zion, the scripture says. The stars of heaven will be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up, Isaiah says in chapter 34, like a scroll - what a vision! What a day this is! No wonder Malachi tells us, exhorts us, captivates us to 'Behold!' - such a day is coming, and will be unleashed upon the face of this earth. What a vision. Can you imagine what it would have been for Malachi to have seen it? One expositor put it like this: 'There is something very forcible in these abrupt exclamations of Malachi, as if the prophet was elevated on some mount of vision and actually beheld this terrible power come rolling off the distant skies on a reddening pathway of fire and blood'. Can you see it? Behold, the day is coming! Can you hear the cries of those who are without Christ in this day of burning? Oh! What it would be if we could see, if we could get a glimpse, a vision tonight of what the Day of the Lord will be like!

There are some questions we must ask about this day. The first is: against whom is such wrath directed on this day? Who is God venting His fiery indignation against? Well, it is those who, we have learned in previous weeks, spoke stout words against the Lord. Specifically those who have been rebellious to the Lord even in Malachi, but right throughout Judah's and Israel's history - indeed, all the sinners of the earth that have rebelled and shook their puny fists against the face of Almighty God, those who are proud in themselves. Those that we find in New Testament context who say: 'We will not have this Man, or this God to reign over us!'. We read of them in the book of Jude, you don't need to turn to it, I'll read it to you: 'Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him'. God comes on the Day of the Lord, in Christ, to judge the ungodly! Malachi says in verse 1 that He will burn them up in this oven of His wrath just like stubble!

We have seen the figure of the oven, what it means, the fiery heat of God's wrath - but what does this figure of 'stubble' mean? Well, you know what stubble is, that dried-up hay or grass, and stubble burns easily doesn't it? A little spark and it is completely consumed. Malachi is saying: those, who right throughout all of time have accused God, who have stood against God's word and God's ways, those who have spoken stout words, given ungodly speeches down through all the eras of time; God easily, on this last day, will wipe them out. What a sobering thought. As the stubble is easily consumed, so will the wicked on this day. But there is another thought, because stubble is utterly consumed, nothing is left, not even ashes. On this day there will be an utter consuming of the wicked, none will be left! You might think that this is something very unjust or callous with God, but the fact of the matter is: it is their fault! They made themselves stubble, they stood against God, we see it right throughout this book - the sinful nature of even those who called themselves God's people. They accused God, they questioned God, they asked God to prove Himself in His attributes and in His ways. Because of their wilful sinfulness against Him, He will consume them easily and

utterly as stubble - and if you read verse 1 it says that 'neither root nor branch will remain'. We use this now as a modern expression: 'root and branch', to describe completeness - an utter cutting off! The wicked, the ungodly who have rebelled against God, who have been proud against God, there will be an easy, utter, complete, root and branch judgment of them on the Day of the Lord.

You remember that the people of Judah said that they were coming to the place where they were now going to call the proud happy - where are those now on this day, who call the proud happy? Where are God's accusers? God has righteously judged them, so that every mouth is stopped, every guilty sinner is dumb in their guilt as God judges them! Those who called the proud happy are now made completely miserable, as the fire of God's jealousy burns against them, as Zephaniah 1:18 describes. It doesn't matter who they are or what they have, 'Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land'. What a day, what an awful position to be in, to be counted among the unrighteous and the ungodly when Christ appears.

Then a second question is not just against whom is this wrath directed, but when will this Day of the Lord take place? I'm not going to go into a lengthy prophetic discourse, but save to say that this will be the time when God directly intervenes in human history. You could call the period that we are in now 'man's day', the day when man seems to think that he controls his own affairs politically, and even to an extent religiously; but there's a day coming when Christ comes, when God is going to intervene visibly. Of course, as the book of Esther teaches us, God is behind all the affairs, even though He may not be mentioned at times - but God is going to actively stride onto the stage of man's affairs. This Day of the Lord will take place and, as we were singing at the beginning of our meeting, the church of Jesus Christ will be raptured, be taken home to be with the Lord in heaven, to the Judgment Seat, to the Marriage of the Lamb. Then, on this earth for seven years - if you want to read about what will take place, read Revelation chapters 6 through to chapter 19 - the awful things that will transpire in what the Bible calls 'The Great Tribulation', 'The Day of Jacob's Trouble'.

We thought about it briefly last night in our Gospel meeting, when Paul to the Thessalonians described this day in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, this is the day of our Lord Jesus Christ when He shall come: 'when He shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power'. What a day! Seven years of God's wrath and indignation!

Now let me just say, before I expound this day any more, that this verse in Malachi and the verses I have just read in 2 Thessalonians are held by a certain section of theologians as proving the doctrine of annihilation. 'What is that?', you say. Well, some people believe that you do not live after the judgment, that when God judges sinners, if you're unrighteous you will be sent to hellfire and you will be exterminated - your existence will be puffed out, you will cease to exist. They believe that the figure and the metaphor of fire and fiery wrath and indignation here speaks to us that we will be blotted out, as it were, our life will be puffed out as a flame. But this is the mistake that they make: Malachi and 2 Thessalonians, and all of these other passages, are speaking of a physical judgment that will take place upon the earth - the Great Tribulation period, seven years upon the earth. This is a physical judgment that will take place upon men's bodies, but those bodies will die and those bodies will either be consumed or buried, and there is a day coming when all of those bodies will rise again, and the spirits and the souls of those men will come again together with the bodies; and Revelation chapter 20 teaches us that the dead, small and great, from land and sea, will come and stand before God and will be judged. Malachi and Thessalonians are talking about physically what will happen to people in their bodies in the Tribulation period, but they will not be exterminated. They will stand on another day, as Revelation 20 teaches us - John says: 'I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the

dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire' - a conscious torment forever and forever!

Believe you me, I would love to be able to get round theologically, intellectually, reasonably and conscientiously the doctrine of eternal punishment - but I cannot. It is in the Scriptures, taught by none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. It is an awful reality that there is the Day of the Lord, and for those who are found guilty on that day, they will consciously, eternally suffer torment and torture throughout the ages of eternity! As we rejoice in the prospect of the Lord Jesus coming again, and we ought to rejoice, we must remember what it will be for those who are lost. When the Sun of righteousness appears, though He will have healing in His wings for some, there will be judgment in His wings for others; and they will be scorched by His holy, fiery indignation. Do you know what that means practically? It means, because these words in Malachi are spoken specifically to the nation of Judah and Israel, we need to pray for Israel. Paul tells us in Romans chapter 11 that blindness in part has happened to the nation of Israel because of their rejection of Messiah. We need to pray for them! Thank God there's a remnant that are believing today, but there will be many judged because of their rejection of the Lord Jesus. Not only do we need to pray for Israel who are blind, but for the world around us who is blind - our friends, our loved ones, our neighbours, our work colleagues - this is what faces them! While we're singing the songs of Zion about the Lord coming so soon, rejoice, again I say rejoice, but remember: remember what is ahead for those who do not have Christ, for a world whom the god of this world has blinded that they believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them and they should be saved. Pray for them, pray for Israel, pray for those who will not see.

Can I give you, tonight, an illustration of the blindness that prevails not only in Israel, but right across the world? I speak specifically of the Jews in this regard, because in their exposition of Malachi and various other books of the Old Testament and the prophets they engineer God's word to suit their theological bent. Now what am I talking about? Well, because the word of God is uncomfortable to them in this issue of judgment - and I refer you to the fact that the last word in the Old Testament in the English translation is the word 'curse', of course Malachi is not the last book in the Jewish Scriptures - but in our English Scriptures there is the word 'curse' at the very end, almost as God's declaration and conclusion of all Israelite history, that they're still in their sins, they're in a curse. What do the Jews do when they come to these Scriptures? Well, if you look in Malachi at that last verse that I have been referring to, look at it please, verse 6 at the end: 'lest I come and smite the earth with a curse'. Jewish scholars say that what you should do is, after you read verses 5 and 6, you should go back to verse 5 and read verse 5 all over again so that Malachi, in chapter 4, ends: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD'. It ends on a positive note, the day of anticipation, that the Jews can still look for Elijah coming to herald the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

If you look at another book of Scripture, look at Isaiah, look at the last chapter of it with me, Isaiah chapter 66, they encourage the same biblical somersaults. Verse 24, the last verse again is a verse of curse: 'And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh'. That doesn't bode well to the Jewish mind, to contemplate that God's last word has been judgment, so they say you should read verse 23 after verse 24: 'And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD' - much more positive, isn't it? They encourage this in another two books, the book of Lamentations - Lamentations, Ezekiel, if you can find Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel - and the last chapter, verse 22, it ends with this note of judgment:

'But thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wrath against us'. You can't have a book ending like that, so read verse 21 after 22: 'Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old'.

Then finally, just to prove this to you, turn to Ecclesiastes - Proverbs, Ecclesiastes...Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes - chapter 12. Ecclesiastes, again, ends on this note of judgment, verse 14: 'For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil'. The Jewish theologian says, 'No, we can't leave it there, read verse 13 again': 'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man'. Do you see it? The utter blindness, not only of the Jew, but that is symptomatic of sinful nature that cannot accept that they will be judged for their sins, yea are already under condemnation for their rejection of the gospel. That's why Paul said: if our gospel is hid, if our gospel is hid, it's hid from those that are lost.

Are you starting to behold the Day of the Lord? It is a day of burning against those who are ungodly, those who have stood stout and proud - oh, God forbid that any of you should be found in that number. When will it take place? Well, we don't know specifically, because what we are waiting on is the rapture of the church that could happen imminently, at any time, and then the wrath - my friend without Christ - will start for you!

Not only is it a day of burning, but verses 2 and 3 tell us it's a day of healing: 'But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall'. It is a day for healing - 'a day for healing for whom?', you say. Well, verse 2 in the beginning shows us: 'You that fear my name'. Those that fear God, the remnant in a day of apostasy and indifference who are following the Lord, it is those of chapter 3 verse 16 that we looked at last week: 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name'. Those who are His jewels, who are written in His book, who fear His name, who think upon His name, who speak about His name. Thank God there will be a remnant of Jewish people, when the Lord Jesus' feet touch the Mount of Olives. Though men's hearts, as Jesus told Judah, men's hearts will be failing them for fear of this great wrath and tribulation coming upon the earth, He says to some: 'When you see these things begin to come to pass, then look up, lift up your heads for your redemption draweth nigh'. The Sun of righteousness that is coming as a burning fire to some, is coming with healing in His wings to others.

As the Psalmist said: 'The LORD is a sun and a shield', and the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back as a Sun to the righteous remnant. Just as in Genesis 1:16, when the sun was created, I believe it was one of the first types of the Lord Jesus Christ that is introduced into Scripture, 'ere Malachi at the end of the Old Testament - at least in our English canon - 'ere he finishes, he reverts back to this type of the Lord Jesus like the sun, the Sun of righteousness, and he presents the same glorious person! Is it not true that our Lord Jesus Christ to His people, whether it be His people of Judah or His people in the church, is like the Sun to our galaxy and our solar system? He is the centre of all things, He is the source of all life. John 1 tells us in verse 4 that in Him was life, and that life was the light of men - He is life, He is light, He is the source of our existence. Praise God, though the Day of the Lord will be a day of burning for the lost, it will be a day of blessing for a saved remnant of Jewish people who'll look unto Him as their Messiah, and say 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord'.

Who is that remnant? Well, if you turn with me to Zechariah chapter 14 please, just turn a page or two back from Malachi, the book before Malachi. We see this Day of the Lord mentioned in chapter 14 verse 1: 'Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east,

and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south'. Then look at verse 12: 'And this shall be the plague wherewith the LORD will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth', and verse 14, 'And Judah also shall fight at Jerusalem'.

One moment, in verses 1 to 3, Jerusalem is surrounded by the nations of the world that the Lord has allowed to come against them in order to bring them in sorrow to repentance; and when they're surrounded, at the end of their tether, on their last legs, they will cry out to their Messiah who they've rejected. Chapter 12 of Zechariah says: 'They shall look on him who they have pierced', they shall be forgiven in a moment, Israel shall be saved, her enemies shall be confounded, consumed; and Judah will fight with their Messiah. What does the Sun arising with healing in His wings mean? What it means to the unrighteous is that they will be consumed in judgment, but what it means to a remnant of righteous Jews that cry upon God as the Lord Jesus comes is that they shall be saved!

Now what does that mean to us? Well, as the church of Jesus Christ, He is not specifically the Sun of righteousness, He is the Bright and Morning Star referred to in Revelation 2 and Revelation 22. For us He will appear when the hour is darkness, like a star in the night He will come to take His people home in the depths of darkness, and the Morning Star is the herald of the dawn, the Star comes before the Sun rises! He will come for His church before this disaster comes upon the world, to take us home to be with Himself. What healing will be in His rays or His beams, which are the wings of the Sun of course! The Jew has a saying: 'As the sun riseth infirmities decrease'. As the sun rises all life comes into view, but germs can be killed as well. In the Jewish mind Christ, their Messiah, would come as the Great Physician to heal their diseases, spiritual and physical. He would come as the balm of Gilead, and He would be the physician there. You see this in the Lord's earthly ministry as He went around healing the sick, and even the woman with the issue of blood for twelve years - you remember when she touched the hem of His garment, He felt that virtue had gone out of Him. But here is the greatest demonstration of virtue going out of the Lord Jesus Christ, as He comes as the Sun of righteousness with healing in His rays and beams to heal the world, to rid it of sin and unrighteousness, disease. He will come to purge and perfect His work of creation and His work of redemption, and what an affect this healing will have. It will give His people vigour: 'You shall go forth', He says, if you look at Malachi and verse 3, 'ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet'. So great will be the excitement and the ecstasy when the Lord Jesus comes, that God's remnant people Judah will dance and amble like the calves skipping as they're released from the stalls to go out into the pasture of early morning. What a scene! Like a liberated animal in the delight of its freedom, frolicking; so, in righteous pleasure, God's people, liberated from the darkness of sin and nature's night, the dread of suffering and anxiety, will be free - healed in His wings.

What's the message to us tonight? The message is that the wicked will be trodden down, the message is that the best is yet to be, the message is that God's day of justice is ahead, the message is that the wicked of this world will get their comeuppance, and there will be a day of rest for God's righteous people who will shine more and more unto that perfect day. But here is the present message that I want to give you tonight from Malachi in verses 4 to 6: the Day of the Lord will be a day of burning for the unrighteous; the Day of the Lord will be a day of healing for the righteous; but Malachi finishes off with this message: today is a day for obeying! Malachi points out in verse 4: 'Remember ye the law of Moses my servant', he points them back to the law. He commands Israel to obey. He's asking them to be prepared for what God is going to do in this future day, and then he points to the ministry of Elijah - which was fulfilled spiritually in the person of John the Baptist, and may be fulfilled literally if Elijah is one of the two witnesses in Revelation chapter 11 - but he's telling them to be prepared. Whilst we could spend a lot of time conjecturing about who Elijah was and is and will be - and I have my own views on that - I don't want us to miss the point tonight, what is Malachi's

message? Be ready, the Lord is coming! Let's get the message! The message is unchanged today, what is his modern message to us? Well, should it not be a more forceful message when we consider that the Jews, though in darkness, will one day come to Christ - but we are Christ's own, we have believed the message, we hold the gospel! Surely out of all the peoples of the world, is Malachi's message not most poignant and pertinent to us? The Lord is coming, be ready!

The Old Testament in our English version ends with this word 'curse'. But praise God, we are children not of darkness, but the children of the light, the children of the New Testament - and the end of the New Testament, the book of Revelation 22 verse 3 says: 'And there shall be no more curse'. What makes the difference? Genesis shows us how the curse entered into the human race, through Adam and Eve in the garden. At the end of the Old Testament Malachi indicates to us that the curse still threatens. Four hundred years passes in the inter-testamental period, and we begin Matthew's gospel - the genealogy is given of the son of David, the son of Abraham, Jesus Christ who went to the cross and was made a curse for us, that we who are under the curse might be blessed with all the blessings of God. This is the message that Israel needs to hear today - oh, they'll hear it one day, but it's a message they need to hear today from us, it's a message the world needs to hear - all the more reason why we should proclaim it, for the Day of the Lord is coming!

Here's an added modern message as we close this series: because we have the Gospel there is all the more reason in the light of the Lord's return that we should be in a fit spiritual state to proclaim it. Judgment, Peter says, must begin in the house of the Lord - have we heard His message as His people? His message on love, His message on service, His message on discipline, marriage, on the Messiah, on stewardship, on faithfulness, on the future? 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning', have we learnt? What is the lesson? These things will take place, the Lord is not slack, Peter says in 2:3, concerning His promises. Though others say 'Where is the promise of His coming?', He will come. Peter says in chapter 3 verse 11: 'Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be'?

Oh, if there's a modern message it's that we who have the Gospel need to be prepared for His coming, but we need to be in a fit spiritual state to proclaim that gospel of hope. For 400 years after this word 'curse', God did not speak. The next time He spoke was through John the Baptist, but He spoke the same message - He is the same God, 'I am the LORD that changes not', Malachi says. The message was 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand', and His message hasn't changed! Are you ready, child of God? Are you proclaiming His message? For the night comes when no man shall work.

Queen Victoria was a much loved monarch of our nation, and when she used to be in residence in Scotland, occasionally she would take a stroll in the countryside. Often it was her practice to make unexpected calls on farm folk who lived in the cottages nearby. Really any day for them might be a royal day, any day the Queen might have called in! So, in anticipation, the Scots in those homes had a chair always ready, vacant, prepared for her visit; and their houses would be always kept spick and span, spotless. They were a clean people and a wholesome people anyway, but her unannounced visits caused them to have an added joy in keeping their homes lovely and ready for the Queen coming. The old people who remembered her visit in their youth would charm visitors after Victoria's death by the expression they used in those residences in Deeside. They would say: 'Perhaps today she'll come my way'. Perhaps today He'll come my way:

'Perhaps today the clouds will part asunder,
Reveal a glory brighter than the sun,
And we shall view with transport, joy and wonder,
The Hope of earth and Heaven's Beloved One'.

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