

**Connecting Through the Word**  
**“The Book of Remembrance”**  
**Malachi 1-4**

**Malachi 3:6-18**

<sup>6</sup> *“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.*

<sup>7</sup> *From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’*

<sup>8</sup> *Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.*

<sup>9</sup> *You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.*

<sup>10</sup> *Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.*

<sup>11</sup> *I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts.*

<sup>12</sup> *Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*

<sup>13</sup> *“Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’*

<sup>14</sup> *You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts?’*

<sup>15</sup> *And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”*

<sup>16</sup> *Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.*

<sup>17</sup> *“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day*

*when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.*

<sup>18</sup> *Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.*

**The Sins of God's People**  
**Malachi 1:1-2:16**

When a believer deliberately sins, it isn't just the disobedience of a servant to a master, or the rebellion of a subject against a king; it's the offense of a child against the loving Father. The sins we cherish and thing we get away with bring grief to the heart of God.

Malachi was called to perform a difficult and dangerous task. It was his responsibility to rebuke the people for the sins they were committing against God and against one another, and to call them to return to the Lord. Malachi took a wise approach: he anticipated the objections of the people and met them head-on.

**"This is what God says," declared the prophet, "but you say..." and then he would answer their complaints.**

The Old Testament prophets were often the only people in the community who had a grip on reality and saw things as they actually were, and that's what made them so unpopular.

In this book, we'll study what Malachi wrote concerning six of their sins. Unfortunately, these sins are with us in the church today.

Malachi confronts the people with their sin and they respond with an excuse.

“But you say....” A phrase that is used nine times in the book.

## 1. Doubting God's Love (Mal. 1:1-5)

### Malachi 1:2

<sup>2</sup> *"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob*

Like Nahum (1:1) and Habakkuk (1:1), Malachi called his message a "burden." The prophets were men who personally felt "the burden of the Lord" as God gave them insight into the hearts of the people and the problems of society. It wasn't easy for Malachi to strip the veneer off the piety of the priests and expose their hypocrisy, or to repeat to the people the complaints they were secretly voicing against the Lord, but that's what God called him to do.

'The task of a prophet," writes Eugene Peterson, "is not to smooth things over but to make things right."

### The first sin Malachi named was the people's lack of love

**for God.** That was the first sin Jesus mentioned when He wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2:4), and perhaps it's listed first because lack of love for God is the source of all other sin. For centuries, the Jews have recited "The Shema" as their daily prayer: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5). But the people Malachi preached to doubted that God even loved them, so why should they love Him?

The prophet presented several evidences of God's love for Israel.

### 1) God's clear statement of His love (Mal. 1:2a).

Malachi was probably referring to what the Lord said through Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy, particularly 7:6-11. When God gave the Law at Sinai, the emphasis was, "Obey My Law because I am a holy God." But when Moses reviewed the Law for the new generation, the emphasis was, "Obey the Lord

because He loves you and you love Him." Both motives are valid today.

### 2) The second evidence of God's love that Malachi presented was God's electing grace (Mal. 2b-3).

As the firstborn in the family, Esau should have inherited both the blessing and the birthright, but the Lord gave them to his younger brother Jacob (Gen. 25:21-23). The descendants of Esau had their land assigned to them, but God gave the Edomites no covenants of blessing as He did to Jacob's descendants.

The statement that God loved Jacob but hated Esau has troubled some people. Paul quoted it in Romans 9:10-13 to prove God's electing grace for both Israel and all who trust Jesus Christ for salvation. But the verb "hate" must not be defined as a positive expression of the wrath of God. God's love for Jacob was so great that, in comparison, His actions toward Esau looked like hatred. As an illustration, Jacob loved Rachel so much that his relationship to Leah seemed like hatred (Gen. 29:20, 30-31; see also Deut. 21:15-17). When Jesus called His disciples to "hate" their own family (Luke 14:26), He was using the word "hate" in a similar way. Our love for Christ may occasionally move us to do things that appear like hatred to those whom we love (see Matt. 12:46-50).

Someone said to Dr. Arno C. Gaebelin, the gifted Hebrew Christian leader of a generation ago, "I have a serious problem with Malachi 1:3, where God says, 'Esau I have hated.'" Dr. Gaebelin replied, "I have a greater problem with Malachi 1:2, where God says, 'Jacob, I have loved.'"

We certainly can't explain the love and grace of God, nor do we have to, but we can experience God's grace and love as trust Christ and walk with Him. The Lord is even willing to be "the God of Jacob."

### **3) Malachi's third evidence for God's love is God's evident blessing on the people of Israel (v. 4).**

#### **Malachi 1:4**

*If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.'"*

Like other nations in that area, Edom suffered during the Babylonian invasion of Israel, but the Lord didn't promise to restore their land as He promised the Jews. The proud Edomites boasted that they would quickly have their land in good shape, but God had other plans. He called Edom "The Wicked Land" (v. 4), but Israel He called "the holy land" (Zech. 2:12). Keep in mind that the Edomites were indeed an evil people (see Obad. 8-14) who deserved every judgment God sent their way. To the Jews, the Babylonian invasion was a chastening, but to Edom, it was a judgment.

Think of how God showed His love to the Jewish people. First, He spared the Jews who were in exile in Babylon (see Jer. 29). Then, He moved Cyrus to issue the decree that enabled the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the temple. He provided the leadership of Joshua the high priest, Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra, as well as the prophetic ministry of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Had His people obeyed the terms of the covenant, the Lord would have blessed them even more. Yes, they were a weak remnant, but the Lord was with them and promised to bless them.

Note that the name God uses in Malachi 1:4 is "Lord of hosts" ("Lord Almighty" in the NIV), that is, "the Lord of the armies," a name used 24 times in Malachi and nearly 300 times in the Old Testament. This is the "military" name of God, for "hosts" comes from a Hebrew word which means "to wage war." The Lord is the Commander of the hosts and heaven: the stars (Isa. 40:26;

Gen. 2:1), the angels (Ps. 103:20-21), the armies of Israel (Ex. 12:41), and all who trust in Him (Ps. 46:7, 11).

### **4) Malachi reminded the Jews of the great privilege God gave them to witness to the Gentiles (Mal. 1:5).**

#### **Malachi 1:5**

*Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!"*

During the reigns of David and Solomon, God manifested His glory through the nation of Israel so that the Gentiles came from distant lands to see what was happening in Israel. To a lesser degree, this also happened during the times of Josiah and Hezekiah. But the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple gave the Gentiles opportunity to ridicule Israel and laugh at their religion and their God (Pss. 74; 137; Jer. 18:13-17; Lam. 2:15-16).

When God brought His remnant back to the land, He wanted to bless them and once again manifest His glory through them, but they failed to trust Him and obey His law. Though they had been chastened by God and ruined by Babylon, and though they had lost the esteem of the Gentile nations around them, the Jews could have made a new beginning and witnessed to the Gentiles of the grace and mercy of God. Instead, they lapsed into the sins that Malachi attacks in his book, and they gave but a weak witness to the other nations. They missed their opportunity to glorify God.

But we need to remind ourselves that the trials we experience as individuals or congregations are also opportunities to glorify God before a watching world. That's how Paul viewed his imprisonment and possible death in Rome (Phil. 1:12-26), and that's the way we must look at the testings God sends our way. Every difficulty is an opportunity to demonstrate to others what the Lord can do for those who put their trust in Him.

## 2. Dishonoring God's Name (Mal. 1:6-2:9)

### Malachi 1:6

*"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. **But you say,** 'How have we despised your name?'"*

Now Malachi directs his message especially to the priests (1:6; 2:1, 7-8), who, instead of living exemplary lives, were guilty of breaking the very Law they were supposed to obey and teach. The way they were serving the Lord was a disgrace to His name.

**Eight times in this section you find the phrase "My name"** (1:6, 11, 14; 2:2, 5; see also 3:16 and 4:2), referring, of course, to God's character and reputation.

The priests who were supposed to honor God's name were disgracing it before the people and the Lord. The priests were supposed to be God's children, yet they weren't honoring their Father; they were called to be God's servants, yet they showed no respect for their Master. When Malachi confronted them, the priests arrogantly asked, "In what way have we despised Your name?" (1:6), so he told them.

To begin with, they were offering defiled sacrifices on the altar (vv. 6-14). The word "bread" means "food" and refers to the sacrifices provided in the Law of Moses (Lev. 1-7). These animals had to be perfect; nothing imperfect could be brought to the altar of God and accepted (Deut. 15:19-23; Lev. 22:17-33). After all, these sacrifices pointed to the Lamb of God who would one day die for the sins of the world (John 1:29; Heb. 10:1-14), and if they were imperfect, how could they typify the Perfect Sacrifice, the Son of God?

In short, the priests were permitting the people to bring God less than their best. If they had offered these defective beasts to

their governor, he would have rejected them, but the animals were good enough for the Lord. These priests had forgotten what was written in their own Law: "Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf (Lev. 22:20). What does this say to professed Christians who spend hundreds of dollars annually, perhaps thousands, on gifts for themselves, then-family, and their friends, but give God a dollar a week when the offering plate is passed?

Our offerings to God are an indication of what's in our hearts, for "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). People who claim to love the Lord and His work can easily prove it with their checkbooks!

Giving is a grace (2 Cor. 8:1, 6-9), and if we've experienced the grace of God, we'll have no problem giving generously to the Lord who has given so much to us. How can we ask God to be gracious to us and answer prayer (Mal. 1:9) if we've not practiced "grace giving" ourselves?

Malachi told these disobedience priests that it would be better to close the doors of the temple and stop the sacrifices altogether than to continue practicing such hypocrisy. Better there were no religion at all than a religion that fails to give God the very best. If our concept of God is so low that we think He's pleased with cheap halfhearted worship, then we don't know the God of the Bible. In fact, a God who encourages us to do less than our best is a God who isn't worthy of worship.

The day will come when the Gentiles will worship God and magnify His great name (v. 11). Malachi looked ahead to the time when the message of salvation would be taken to all nations, and beyond that, he saw the establishing of the kingdom on earth when the Gentiles would "flow into it" (Isa. 2:2; see also 11:3-4, 9; 45:22-25; 49:5-7). God's call to Abraham involved the Jews becoming a blessing to the whole earth (Gen.

12:1-3), just as His call to the church involves taking the Gospel to all nations (Mark 16:15).

The priests even allowed the people to cheat on their vows (Mal. 1:13-14). If a man promised God a sacrifice but brought an animal that was sick or blemished, the priest would accept it, even though the man had a perfect animal back home. In the Mosaic Law, vows were purely voluntary, but once they were made, they were binding (Lev. 27; Num. 30; Deut. 23:21-23). If the governor wouldn't accept cheap offerings (Mal. 1:8), would a great king accept cheap substitutes? (v. 14) God is a great King and He deserves the best we can bring Him. What we promise, we must perform.

Why did the priests deliberately disobey their own law, pollute the altar of the Lord, and encourage the people to worship God in a cheap, careless manner?

For one thing, the priests themselves weren't giving God their best, so why make greater demands on the people? "Like people, like priests" (Hosea 4:9; Jer. 5:30-31), for no ministry rises any higher than its leaders.

But there was another reason why blemished sacrifices were acceptable: the priests and their families were fed from the meat off the altar, and the priests wanted to be sure they had food on the table. After all, the economy was bad, taxes were high, and money was scarce, and only the most devoted Israelite would bring a perfect animal to the Lord. So the priests settled for less than the best and encouraged the people to bring whatever was available. A sick animal would die anyway, and crippled animals were useless, so the people might as well give them to the Lord! They forgot that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:16-17; Micah 6:6-8; Mark 12:28-34).

The priests dishonored God's name in another way: they despised the very privilege of being priests (Mal. 2:1-5). They were taking for granted the high calling God had given them and

treating the temple ministry with contempt. Serving at the altar was a job, not a ministry, and they did it to please themselves, not to please and glorify the Lord. Unfortunately, that same attitude is in the church today.

God warned them that He would "curse their [Israel's] blessings" if they didn't start "doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6) and giving Him their best. In fact, their crops had already been ruined by devouring insects (Mal. 3:11; see Hag. 1:3-11), but things could get worse. God warned that He could curse the very seed that was planted so that it would never germinate and produce a harvest. Since the Law gave the priests and Levites a tithe of the produce, ruined crops would mean empty tables.

It's possible that the word "seed" in Malachi 2:3 may refer to their children. It was important that the Jews have children in order to perpetuate the nation, but God could prevent even the human seed from being productive. Another way of looking at it is that God would turn their children, who should be a blessing (Ps. 127), into a burden and a curse. It would be painful not to have children, but it would also be painful to have children who daily broke your heart and created grief in the home.

The refuse from the sacrifices was taken outside the camp and burned (Ex. 29:14), but God would humiliate the priests and "wipe their noses" in the dung of the sacrifices! This would make the priests unclean so that they would have to leave the camp. In short, God was saying, "You're treating Me with disrespect, so I'll treat you like garbage! You don't value the priestly ministry, so why should you be in office?"

The priests took their privileges for granted and forgot the gracious covenant God had made with them through Aaron (Mal. 2:4; Ex. 29) and Aaron's grandson Phinehas (Num. 25:1-13). It was a great privilege to be a priest, to serve at the altar, to minister in the temple, and to teach the Law to the people.

But the priests had no fear of God; they treated the sacred things as if they were common things because their hearts weren't right with God (Ezek. 44:23). The Scottish novelist George Macdonald said, "Nothing is so deadening to the divine as an habitual dealing with the outside of spiritual things." What the priests were doing wasn't ministry; it was only ritual, empty religious formality that disgusted the Lord.

### **They turned away from God's Law (Mal. 2:6-9).**

Verses 6-7 describe the perfect servants of God: truth on their lips, obedience in their walk, fellowship with God, a burden to bring others to the Lord, and a passion to share God's Word with those who need to hear it. But the priests weren't following this pattern; they were following their own ways. "They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your Law" (Deut. 33:10), but the priests weren't even obeying the Law themselves. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?" (Jer. 5:31)

It was bad enough that the priests were disobeying the Law, but they were causing others to stumble as well (Mal. 2:8). Like the Pharisees Jesus described, the priests were "toxic" and defiled everything and everybody they touched (Matt. 23:15; 25-28). A false minister is an awful weapon in the hands of Satan. "One sinner destroys much good" (Eccl. 9:18). Because they showed partiality in the way they applied God's truth (Mal. 2:9), they disobeyed God and harmed His people. (See Lev. 19:15; Deut. 24:17; 1 Tim. 5:21.)

Over the years, I've participated in many ordination examinations, and I've looked for four characteristics in each candidate: a personal experience of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ; a sense of calling from the Lord; a love for and knowledge of the Word of God; and a high respect for the work of the ministry. Whenever we've examined a candidate who was flippant about ministry, who saw it as a job and not a divine

calling, he didn't get my vote. Whether as a pastor, missionary, teacher, choir member, or usher, being a servant of God is a serious thing, and it deserves the very best that we can give.

God caused these hypocritical priests to be "despised and humiliated before all the people" (Matt. 2:9). The priests wanted to be popular, and even twisted the Law to gain friends, but the people had no respect for them. Leaders with integrity and character will have their enemies, but they will still gain the respect of the people. The religious television scandals in America have proved that unsaved people expect church leaders to practice what they preach.

### **3. Profaning God's Covenant (Mal. 2:10-16)**

#### **Malachi 2:13-14**

*And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.*

**But you say,** "Why does he not?" *Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.*

Having dealt with the sins of the priests, Malachi now turns to the nation as a whole and confronts the men who divorced their wives to marry pagan women.

**Treachery (Mal. 2:10-11, 14).** The men loving pagan women wasn't a new problem in the Jewish nation. When the Jews left Egypt, there was a "mixed multitude" that left with them (Ex. 12:38), which suggests that some Jews had married Egyptian spouses (Lev. 24:10; Num. 11:4). The Jews sinned greatly when they mixed with the women of Midian at Baal Peor (Num. 25), and God judged them severely. Ezra (Ezra 9:1-4) and Nehemiah (Neh. 13:23-31) had to contend with this problem,

and it's not totally absent from the church today (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

In divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying pagan women, the men were committing several sins. To begin with, it was treachery as they broke their vows to God and to their wives.

**They were profaning God's covenant and treating it as nothing.** Not only had the Lord given specific requirements for marriage in His Law (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:3-4), but the covenant of marriage was built into creation. "Have we not all one father?" (Mal. 2:10) refers to God as the Father of all humans, the Creator (Acts. 17:28). God made man and women for each other and established marriage for the good of the human family. So, what these men did was contrary to what God had written into nature and in His covenant.

**Hypocrisy (Mal. 2:12-13).** After committing these sins, the men then brought offerings to the Lord and wept at the altar (vv. 12-13), seeking His help and blessing. Perhaps they had the idea that they could sin blatantly with the intention of coming to God for forgiveness. But if they were truly repentant, they would have forsaken their heathen wives and taken their true wives back, which is what Ezra made them do (Ezra 9-10). These men were guilty of hypocritical worship that had nothing to do with a changed heart. Instead of forgiving them, God was ready to "cut them off."

In matters of ethics and morals, there are many things in society that are legal but are not biblical. Brides and grooms must remember that God is an unseen witness at every wedding (Mal. 2:14), and He also witnesses those who live together who aren't married. One day there will come a terrible harvest from the seeds being planted today by those who despise God's laws and the principles He has built into nature.

**Purity (Mal. 2:15).** In the entire Book of Malachi, this is recognized as the most difficult verse to translate and interpret. I

think the best translation is given by Dr. Gleason Archer: "But no one has done so who has a residue of the Spirit. And what does that one seek for? A godly offspring! Therefore take heed to your spirit [as a true believer under the covenant] and let none of you deal faithlessly with the wife of his youth."

Here Malachi commended the faithful husbands who obeyed the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Unlike the men who took pagan wives just to satisfy their sexual hunger, these faithful men wanted to father children who would be a godly seed, devoted Jews, and not idol worshipers. The basic issue was not race, for humans are humans whether they are Jews or Midianites. The basic issue was loyalty to the God of Israel and the maintaining of a godly home.

God called Israel to be the channel for bringing the Messiah into the world, and anything that corrupted that stream would work against His great plan of salvation. God commanded the Jews to be a separate people, not because they were better than any other nation, but because He had a very special task for them to perform. Anything that broke down that wall of separation would play into the hands of the evil one who did all he could to keep the Messiah from being born.

**Hostility (Mal 2:16).** "I hate divorce!" is about as clear a statement as God can make. Those who want to please God certainly wouldn't want to do anything that God so abhors, but would do everything possible to heal the marriage. God gave Adam one wife, not many, and He declared that the two were one flesh (Gen. 2:21-25). Divorce pulls apart that which God put together, and Jesus warned us not to do that (Matt. 19:6). It's like an act of violence in an area where there ought to be tenderness.

Why does Malachi mention a "garment" and "violence?" In modern Western society, a man puts an engagement ring on a

woman's finger to propose marriage, but in ancient Israel, he placed a corner of his garment over her (Ezek. 16:8; Ruth 3:9). If a man divorces his wife, instead of having a garment that symbolized love, he had a garment that symbolized violence. He wrenched apart that which God said is one; by his infidelity, he made the marriage bed a place of violence.

In spite of a difficult text and differing interpretations, the main lessons of this passage are clear. In marriage, a man and a woman become one flesh, and God is a partner in that union. Through marriage, the Lord is seeking a godly seed that will carry on His work on earth. Marriage is a physical union ("one flesh") and can be broken by physical causes: death (Rom. 7:1-3), sexual sin (Matt. 19:9), or desertion (1 Cor. 7:12-16). God's original intent was that one man and one woman be devoted to each other in marriage for one lifetime. Divorce for reasons other than those given in Scripture, even though legal, would grieve the heart of God.

Strong families begin with strong marriages, a man and a woman who love each other and want to live each for the other and both for the Lord. Anything less than that is less than God's will.

As Malachi continued his message, the people continued their resistance to God's truth.

**They had already argued with him about God's love (1:2), God's name (v. 6), and God's teaching about marriage and divorce (2:14), and now they would argue about three other matters: the justice of God, giving to God, and serving God.**

People who argue with God rarely receive blessings from God. It's when our mouth is stopped and we submit to His will that we can experience the grace of God (Rom. 3:19).

But Malachi didn't stop preaching; he went on to deal with these "sins of the saints."

#### **4. Questioning God's Justice (Mal. 2:17-3:6)**

##### **Malachi 2:17**

*You have wearied the LORD with your words. **But you say,** "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"*

"You have wearied the Lord with your words," the prophet said; and they replied, "How have we wearied Him?" (2:17) Of course, God never gets weary in a physical sense because God doesn't have a body (Isa. 40:28), but He does grow weary of some of the things His people say and do. The hypocritical people in Israel wearied God with their iniquities (43:24), and the Jewish remnant in Malachi's day wearied Him with their words.

Their words were cynical and skeptical. "We came back to the land, rebuilt the temple, and restored the worship," they said, "and look at the difficulties we're experiencing! Why isn't God keeping his promise? Where are all the blessings He promised through His prophets?" It was the age-old problem of "Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?" Job and his friends wrestled with it, and so did Asaph (Ps. 73), Jeremiah (Jer. 12), and Habakkuk.

But these skeptical Jews had forgotten the terms of the covenant and the conditions laid down by the prophets: if the people obeyed God's law, God would bless them with all they needed. But they were divorcing their wives, marrying pagan women, offering defiled sacrifices, robbing God of tithes and offerings, and complaining about having to serve the Lord! For God to bless people like that would mean approving of their sins. The Jews didn't need justice; they needed mercy!

Malachi answered their question "Where is the God of justice?" by speaking about two messengers.

**"My messenger"—John the Baptist (Mal. 3:1a).**

As we've seen, the name Malachi means "my messenger"; and the messenger referred to in this statement we know as John the Baptist. Speaking of John the Baptist, Jesus said, "For this is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face who will prepare Your way before You'" (Matt. 11:10, nkjv; see Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27).

While Malachi was the last of the writing prophets, John the Baptist was the last and the greatest of the Old Covenant prophets. To John was given the unique privilege of ministering at the close of the old dispensation and the beginning of the new, and it was John who presented Jesus to Israel (John 1:29-31). Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, John was born into a priestly family but was called of God to be a prophet. He was also a martyr, for he gave his life in the work God called him to do (Matt. 14:1-12).

The prophet Isaiah had also written about John's ministry (Isa. 40:3-5; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). The image is that of people preparing a way for the king to come, leveling the roads and removing the obstacles so that the king might enjoy an easy and comfortable trip. John prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus by preaching the Word to the crowds, urging them to repent of their sins, baptizing them, and then introducing them to Jesus.

But how does this answer the question, "Where is God's justice for His people?" When Jesus Christ came and died on the cross, He completely satisfied the justice of God. He paid the penalty for the sins of the world and vindicated the holiness of God. Nobody can ever truthfully say, "God isn't just!" The cross of Christ is proof that the same God who ordained "the law of

sin and death" (Gen. 2:15-17; Rom. 6:23; 8:2-4) also "took His own medicine" (to quote Dorothy Sayers) and willingly died for sinners. Because of Calvary, God is both "just and justifier" of all who trust Jesus Christ (3:26).

***The messenger of the covenant"—Jesus Christ***

**(Mal. 3:1b-6).** The first prophecy refers to our Lord's first coming in grace and mercy, but this prophecy speaks of His second coming in judgment. When He comes, He will prove that God is just by purifying His people and judging rebellious sinners. Jesus Christ is the "Messenger of the Covenant" in that He fulfilled all the demands of the covenant in His life, suffered the penalties in His death, and rose from the dead to usher in a New Covenant of grace (Jer. 31:31-40; Matt. 26:26-30; Heb. 8:6-13). All the covenants in Old Testament history unite in pointing to Jesus Christ and His marvelous work of redemption.

***An unannounced coming (Mal. 3:3).*** Messiah's second coming will be sudden and unexpected, and its purpose will be the judging of sinners and the establishing of His kingdom on earth. "But of that day and hour, no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matt. 24:36, nkjv). "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman" (1 Thes. 5:3).

***Are unprepared people (Mal. 3:1).*** The phrase "whom you delight in" suggests that the Jews in Malachi's day were hoping that "the Day of the Lord" would come soon, not realizing what a terrible day it would be for the whole earth. His listeners were like the people in the days of Amos the prophet who had the same false confidence that they were ready for the promised "Day of the Lord." Amos warned them, "Woe to you who long for the Day of the Lord! Why do you long for the Day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light" (see Amos 5:18-20).

When the Jewish remnant of that day read the prophets, they saw only the promises of blessing and not the warnings of judgment. They rejoiced in the prophecies of the coming King and His glorious kingdom, but they overlooked the prophecies that described worldwide terror when the wrath of God is poured out on sinners. These Israelites were not unlike some Christians today who talk about the coming of the Lord as though seeing Him will be more like beholding a visiting celebrity and basking in his or her glory. Standing at the judgment seat of Christ will be an awesome experience, even though we know that we have a place reserved for us in heaven.

***An unclean nation (Mal. 3:2b-4).*** Malachi asked, "But who may abide in the day of His coming?" and then described what Messiah would do when he came: He would purify the Jewish nation, especially the priests, and bring swift judgment to the sinners who arrogantly disobeyed His Law.

In the Law of Moses, God provided three ways for people and things to be cleansed and made acceptable to God: water, fire, and blood. There is no mention here of blood because Jesus Christ died for sinners at His first coming. But he would wash the unclean nation like a launderer washes dirty clothes. He would purify the tribe of Levi the way a jeweler purifies precious metal in his furnace. "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1).

Once the nation is cleansed, and the priests are purified, then they can become an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord (Mal. 3:4), and He will be pleased with them. The priests in Malachi's time were offering sacrifices that were unacceptable (1:7-8), and the priests themselves were unacceptable, but in that great day, God's Messenger would make His people "living sacrifices" that would be acceptable to the Lord (Rom. 12:1).

***An unsparing judgment (Mal. 3:5).*** This list of sinners gives us some idea of the kind of practices that were going on in Malachi's time and will be going on in the end times. All of them are contrary to God's Law. Sorcery is forbidden because it means trafficking with demons (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:14). The "satanic revival" that's going on today indicates that many people aren't heeding God's warnings as they dabble in witchcraft and other demonic practices. In fact, witchcraft is a legal religion in many places.

"False swearers" describes people who commit perjury by lying while under oath. Perjury violates the third commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (v. 7), and the ninth commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (v. 16). Trust is the "cement" that holds society together, and when that cement crumbles, society falls apart. If we can't trust one another's words and promises, then how can we live and work together safely?

The oppressing of the poor and needy is a sin that the prophets condemned with vehemence, and it needs to be condemned today. God has a special concern for widows and orphans who are exploited and laborers who don't receive their wages (Ex. 22:22-24; Lev. 19:10; Deut. 10:17-19; 24:14-15, 19-22; 27:19; Ps. 68:5; Isa. 1:17, 23; Jer. 7:6; James 5:1-8).

***An unchanging God (Mal 3:6).*** What was the reason for these social abuses? The people who committed them had no fear of the Lord. They thought that God was like themselves, that He would close His eyes to their sins and not judge them for breaking His law. "You thought that I was altogether like you, but I will reprove you" (Ps. 50:21).

The Jews should have been grateful that God was unchanging in His nature, His purposes, and His promises, for, if He were not, He would have consumed them for their sins. Twice Moses used this truth about God as his argument when he interceded for the nation (Ex. 33:12-23; Num. 14:11-21). The same principle applies to believers today, for 1 John 1:9 states that

God is "faithful and just to forgive our sins." God is faithful to His promises and just toward His Son who died for our sins that we might be forgiven. (See also Num. 23:19; Deut. 4:31; and James 1:17.)

Malachi has proved that God is just. Now he discusses the fact that the people are unjust in the way they've robbed God of what rightfully belongs to Him.

## **5. Robbing God's Storehouse (Mal. 3:7-12)**

### **Malachi 3:7**

*From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. **But you say**, 'How shall we return?'*

If "like people, like priest" (Hosea 4:9) applied to the spiritual leaders of the nation, then "like father, like son" (or "like mother, like daughter") applied to everybody else. From the days of the patriarchs until Malachi's time, the nation frequently disobeyed God's Word, and God had to send prophets to call them to repent and return.

When the people heard Malachi call them to return to the Lord, instead of obeying that call, they began to argue with God's servant. They remind me of those people who evade the issue by saying, "Define your terms! What do you mean by 'return'?"

**But Malachi didn't hesitate to tell them how to start returning to God: "Bring God the tithes and offerings that are rightfully His!"**

Theirs was the sin of robbery in at least three different areas.

### **1) They were robbing God (Mal. 3:7-8).**

#### **Malachi 3:8**

*Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. **But you say**, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions.*

The needs of the priests and Levites were met from the sacrifices and also from the tithes and offerings brought to the temple by the people. The word "tithe" comes from a Hebrew word that means "ten." A tithe is 10 percent of one's grain, fruit, animals, or money (Lev. 27:30-34; Neh. 13:5). There were special storage rooms in the temple for keeping the grain, produce, and money that the people brought to the Lord in obedience to His Law. If people didn't want to carry heavy produce all the way to the temple, they could convert it into cash, but they had to add 20 percent to it just to make sure they weren't making a profit and robbing God (Lev. 27:31).

The annual tithe was given to the Levites (Num. 18:21-24), who in turn gave a tithe of that income to the priests (vv. 25-32). When a worshiper brought his tithe to the temple, he could use part of it to enjoy a special meal with his family and the Levites (Deut. 12:6-7, 17-19). Every third year a tithe was to be brought to the leaders locally to be used for the poor (14:28-29).

Tithing as an act of worship is as old as Abraham, who gave tithes to Melchizedek, acknowledging that Melchizedek was the representative of the Most High God (Gen. 14:20; Heb. 7). Jacob vowed to God that he would tithe (Gen. 28:22), so tithing antedates the Law of Moses. However, tithing was officially incorporated into the Law of Moses as a part of Israel's worship. In bringing the tithes and offerings, the people were not only supporting the ministry of the temple, but they were also giving thanks to God for His bountiful provision for their own needs.

Over the centuries, many of the Jews committed two errors with regard to the tithe: (1) the legalists obeyed the Law so scrupulously that, like the Pharisees, they even tithed the minute garden herbs (Matt. 23:23-24), all the while thinking that their obedience would earn them righteousness before God; (2) the irreligious neglected the tithe and by disobeying God deprived the temple ministry of what it needed to keep going.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, the temple storerooms were empty of produce and many of the priests and Levites had abandoned their service to go back home and work their fields in order to care for their families (Neh. 13:10). The people had vowed to bring their tithes (10:34-39), but they hadn't kept their vow.

Since God made and owns everything, He doesn't need anything that we can bring Him (Acts 17:25). But when we obey His Word and bring our gifts as an act of worship with grateful hearts, it pleases him. While 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 suggests proportionate giving ("as God has prospered him"), there is no express command to tithe given to the church in the New Testament. Paul teaches "grace giving" in 2 Corinthians 8-9, which is certainly beyond 10 percent. Many Christians feel that if believers under the Old Covenant brought their tithes, how could Christians under the New Covenant begin with anything less?

## **2) They were robbing themselves (Mal. 3:9-11).**

### **Malachi 3:9-11**

*You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts.*

In robbing God, the people were not fulfilling the covenant they had made with the Lord; therefore, God couldn't fulfill His promise and bless them (Lev. 26:3ff). "The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land" (Deut. 28:8).

Insects had invaded the land ("the devourer," Mal. 3:11) and the grain and fruit were not maturing.

Whenever we rob God, we always rob ourselves.

To begin with, we rob ourselves of the spiritual blessings that always accompany obedience and faithful giving (2 Cor. 9:6-15). But even more, the money that rightfully belongs to God that we keep for ourselves never stays with us. It ends up going to the doctor, the auto body shop, or the tax collector. "You have sown much, and bring in little... and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes" (Hag. 1:6). If we don't trust God to care for us, whatever we do trust will prove futile. People who lovingly give tithes and offerings to God find that whatever is left over goes much farther and brings much greater blessing.

Yes, giving is an act of faith, but God rewards that faith in every way. That isn't the reason we give, because that kind of motivation would be selfish. "If you give because it pays, it won't pay!" said industrialist R.G. LeTourneau, and he was right. We give because we love God and want to obey Him, and because He's very generous to us. When we lay up treasures in heaven, they pay rich dividends for all eternity.

The promise in Malachi 3:10 was linked to the covenant the Israelites had made with the Lord (Deut. 28:1-14), so if they faithfully obeyed Him, He would faithfully keep His promises. But the spiritual principle behind this promise is echoed in Luke 6:38 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, so believers today can lay hold of it. For some Christians in America, a tithe would be much too small an amount, but each believer must be fully persuaded in his or her heart what the Lord wants him or her to do.

## **3) They were robbing others (Mal. 3:12).**

### **Malachi 3:12**

*Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*

The remnant that returned to Judah after the exile had a great opportunity to trust God and bear witness to the other nations that their God was the true and living God. Had the Jews trusted the Lord, He would have done great things for them and they would have been a testimony to others. As it was, they floundered in their faith and nobody could look at them and call them blessed.

God's promise was, "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. Then all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you" (Deut. 28:9-10). The Gentiles would have come to Jerusalem to learn about this great and wonderful God who could take a group of refugees and turn them into a blessed nation.

## **6. Despising God's Service (Mal. 3:13-4:6)**

### **Malachi 3:13**

*"Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. **But you say,** 'How have we spoken against you?'"*

This is the sixth and last of Malachi's accusations: "'You have said harsh things against Me,' says the Lord" (3:13).

**As he closes his book, he points out four different groups of people and what they said and did.**

### ***The complainers (Mal. 3:13-15).***

These people were guilty of saying "harsh things" against the Lord. For one thing, they felt that serving the Lord was drudgery; it was "futile" to be His servants. The priests may have been the leaders in this complaining, but the common people were just as guilty. "We're not getting anything out of it!" was their grievance. "Things just keep getting worse."

I hear this complaint from some believers about their churches. "We're not getting anything out of it!" But a church is like a bank or a home: you don't get anything out of it unless you put something into it. We serve God because it's the right thing to do, not because we're rewarded for our service. (We shall be rewarded, but that's not our main motive.)

**But they had a second complaint: the pagan peoples around them who didn't know the Lord were in better shape than the people of Judah!** The wicked were prospering while the godly were suffering. Of course, it would have been difficult for the Jews to prove that they were "godly," because they were guilty of disobeying the Lord. God would have blessed them if they had yielded themselves to Him, but they preferred to have their own way and then complain about what didn't happen.

It's a serious thing to serve the Lord, and we're commanded to "serve the Lord with gladness" (Ps. 100:2). It's a sad thing when a servant of God is a drudge, merely doing a job because that's what he or she has to do or for what they get out of it. Philippians 2:1-12 is God's portrait of Christ, God's ideal Servant, and His example is the one that we should follow.

***The believers (Mal 3:16-18).*** There was a group of true believers in this remnant, and they remained faithful to the Lord. They feared the Lord, which means they held Him in awe and worshiped Him as the Lord Almighty. They met together, not to complain but to encourage and edify each other. They spoke about the Lord and they weren't afraid for Him to hear what they were saying!

Their assembly probably wasn't a large one, and they may have thought that very little was happening because they met and worshiped, but God was paying attention and keeping a record of their words. Their neighbors may have laughed at them, but

God was pleased with them. They weren't wasting their time because they were investing in eternity.

God claimed them as His own, and God promised to spare them in the future judgment when everybody would see that there is a difference between the righteous and the wicked and that this difference is important.

One of the sins of the priests was that they failed to make the distinction between the way of holiness and the way of sin. To them, one sacrifice was just as good as another, yet they were supposed to teach the people "the difference between the holy and the common, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezek. 44:23).

Many of God's faithful servants become discouraged because the times are difficult, the crowds are small, and their work seems to be unappreciated. People who aren't really walking with the Lord seem to be getting more attention than are the faithful servants. But the day will come when God will reveal "His jewels" ("treasured possession," see Ex. 19:5; Deut. 7:6), and then the faithful will receive their reward. Every discouraged servant of God needs to read and ponder 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

***The evildoers (Mal. 4:1-3).*** Once again, Malachi returns to the theme of the coming Day of the Lord when God will punish all evildoers. Sinners will be burned up the way fire eats up the stubble; they will become like ashes under the feet of the saints! But the true believers will see the dawning of a new day as the "Sun of righteousness" rises (Luke 1:78-79). Then Jesus will reign as King of Kings and His people will frolic like calves let out of their stalls!

***The preachers (Mal. 4:4-6).*** Malachi has been faithful as God's messenger, and he closes his book by reminding the people of two other faithful prophets, Moses and Elijah. The Law of Moses

was still God's rule of life for the Jews, and if they obeyed, God would bless them. Of course, believers today aren't under the Law (Rom. 6:15; Gal. 5:1-4), but they still practice the righteousness of the Law through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God (Rom. 8:1-4).

The promise in Malachi 4:5 was often discussed and debated by the Jewish rabbis who asked, "Who is the Elijah whom the Lord will send?" The Jewish leaders interrogated John the Baptist about it (John 1:19-21) and Peter, James, and John asked Jesus about it (Matt. 17:10).

The prophet Elijah is mentioned at least thirty times in the New Testament, and ten of those references relate him to John the Baptist. But John the Baptist said plainly that he was no Elijah (John 1:21, 25). He did come in the "spirit and power" of Elijah and turn the hearts of fathers and children (Luke 1:16-17). Like Elijah, John was a courageous man, a man of prayer empowered by the Spirit, a man who lived alone in the wilderness, and a servant who turned many people back to the Lord, but he was not Elijah returned to earth.

However, for those who believed on Christ during His earthly ministry, John the Baptist performed the work of Elijah in their lives: he prepared them to meet the Lord. "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come" (Matt. 11:14, niv). "Elijah is come already," said Jesus, "and they know him not." The disciples understood Jesus to mean John the Baptist who came in the spirit and power of Elijah (17:10-13).

But Malachi 4:5 promises that Elijah himself will come, and that his coming is related to the "Day of the Lord" that will burn the wicked like stubble (v. 1). That's why Jesus said, "Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things" (Matt. 17:11).

Many students believe that Elijah is one of the two witnesses whose ministries are described in Revelation 11:3-12. (They believe the other is Moses.) It's worth noting that both Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3), which explains why the three apostles asked about Elijah.

Inasmuch as "the great and terrible Day of the Lord" did not occur in New Testament times, we have to believe that John the Baptist was not the promised Elijah, even though he ministered like Elijah. Therefore, this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. It may well be that Elijah will return to earth as one of the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3-12), for the signs that these two men will perform remind us of the miracles of Elijah. After the ministry of the witnesses, the Lord will pour out His wrath upon the earth (v. 18; 16:1ff) and the Day of the Lord will burst upon the world in its fury.

It seems odd that the Old Testament Scriptures should end with the word "curse." When we get near the end of the New Testament, we read, "And there shall be no more curse" (Rev. 22:3). All of creation is eagerly awaiting the return of the Savior, expecting Him to deliver creation from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-23). We too should be expecting Him and, while we're waiting, witness of Him to others. For when the Sun of righteousness arises, it will mean either burning or blessing (Mal. 4:1-2): blessing to those who have trusted Him, burning to those who have rejected Him.

Nobody can afford to argue with God the way the Israelites did when they heard Malachi, because God will always have the last word.

For you, will that last word be salvation or judgment?

### **Malachi 1:2**

<sup>2</sup> "I have loved you," says the LORD. **But you say**, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob"

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### **Malachi 1:6**

<sup>6</sup> "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. **But you say**, 'How have we despised your name?'

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### **Malachi 1:7**

<sup>7</sup> By offering polluted food upon my altar. **But you say**, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised.

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### **Malachi 1:12**

<sup>12</sup> But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised.

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### **Malachi 1:13**

<sup>13</sup> **But you say**, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD.

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### **Malachi 2:14**

<sup>14</sup> **But you say**, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

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### **Malachi 2:17**

<sup>17</sup> You have wearied the LORD with your words. **But you say**, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does

evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.”  
Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

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**Malachi 3:7**

<sup>7</sup> From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. **But you say**, ‘How shall we return?’

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**Malachi 3:8**

<sup>8</sup> Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. **But you say**, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.

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**Malachi 3:13**

<sup>13</sup> “Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. **But you say**, ‘How have we spoken against you?’