

STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 12

Malachi 4:4-6

April 6, 2003

This is the twelfth and last of our studies in this short book, the last book of the OT both in the order of the books in the English Bible and in the chronology of the writing of the OT. Every Jew in Jesus' day knew that there had not been a prophet in Israel since Malachi. We have considered the bulk of the prophecy which is contained in *six disputations*, conversations between the Lord speaking through his prophet and the people of Israel. In each case some sin of the people has been exposed, from doubting God's love, justice, and faithfulness, to corrupting his worship, to cheating on tithes, to marrying outside of the faith and obtaining improper divorces. In each case the Lord has given an answer to the unbelief of the people that lies at the bottom of each specific act of disobedience. As always, it is the want of faith that leads to disobedience, just as it is faith, true faith, that will lead surely and invariably to a life of obedience to God.

We come now to the conclusion of the letter. It is characterized in the commentaries as a "summary challenge." It sums up the contents of the entire letter and repeats them in a general way. Remember the law of Moses, in v. 4, summarizes the first three disputations, and remember the Day of the Lord in vv. 5-6 summarizes the last three. We also have Moses and Elijah here together, as they will appear together with the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3). The Law and the Prophets, and the message of each, is summed up in these two great men.

v.4 When we began our study of Malachi we pointed out that there were many affinities between this prophecy and the Book of Deuteronomy. Here is another one. Horeb is Deuteronomy's name for Sinai. The name Horeb appears three times in Exodus but Sinai appears 14 times. Contrarily, in Deuteronomy, Sinai appears but once and Horeb nine times. When you have "law" in the first place, and then "statutes" and "commandments" or, in the NIV "decrees" and "laws" we are being reminded that the entire law in all its provisions is to be obeyed.

One thing worth noting is that the law of God had been given almost a thousand years before Malachi and yet it is that law, that ancient law, that God's people must obey. The world had changed in many ways, the situation of God's people was very different, but the law remained the same. And so it is today. The will of God lies behind us in the once-for-all revelation of the Word of God. It governs our lives today in this modern world of ours as surely as it did believers a thousand years ago or two thousand and it will govern the life of God's people and be the standard of the judgment of the world until the end of time. In an ever-changing world it is well for us to remember that some things do *not* change. And the law of God is among them.

To "remember" in the OT always means much more than simply to recollect something. "Remember" is used often in Deuteronomy and always involves action. When God does not remember someone (Ps. 88:4) that person falls into the pit. When he remembers them (Ps. 106:4) he shows them his favor. So when Israel remembers the law of God,

she will remember where that law came from and how she came to have it and then she will obey it in faith and love for God.

- v.5 This promise of the coming of Elijah *before* the day of the Lord parallels 3:1 where a messenger is promised who will precede the coming of the Lord.

Now, some questions immediately rise in the mind.

1. Is this a prophecy that Elijah himself, the figure of OT history, would return in person? Apparently many in the Lord's day thought that it would be the very same Elijah who would be the forerunner of the Messiah, perhaps especially because Elijah never died, but went bodily to heaven. You remember that the Lord's disciples were expecting Elijah himself and had to be convinced that this text actually referred to John the Baptist. As a matter of fact, however, using the name of a historic figure for a coming one is not unprecedented. On several occasions in the prophets the promised Messiah is identified not as a descendant of David, or the son of David, or the heir of David, but simply as "my servant David," or "David their king." We, today, might say, the Messiah would be "another" David or the forerunner would be "another" Elijah. But to call him simply Elijah is faithful to a biblical way of identifying the nature and the function of the person who was to come. The name is being used metaphorically, not literally.
2. A second question is why Elijah? Why not Moses or Abraham or some other prophet? We probably cannot say with certainty, though the appearance of Elijah with Moses at the Lord's transfiguration certainly suggests that Elijah was chosen because of his place in the OT as the quintessential prophet. It was Elijah who both stood at the headwaters of the great tradition of OT prophets who confronted a disobedient and unbelieving people of God, and who showed us the sort of ministry a prophet would have. Elijah isn't the first prophet, of course. Think of Nathan in the days of King David. But he is the first great and representative figure. Who better to characterize the one who would come to the people of God, in advance of the appearance of the Messiah, to warn them of his coming, to call them to repentance, and to prepare the way for the fulfillment of all the prophets had predicted? And, of course, that was precisely John the Baptist's ministry: he came, like Elijah and in the spirit and power of Elijah, preaching repentance as the forerunner of the Messiah. When, in John 1:21, John the Baptist denies that he is Elijah, we should understand him denying the literal understanding of the prophecy that was abroad in Judaism of that day and the literal understanding of what the forerunner would do. He would not be a miracle worker as Elijah was, or raise the dead as Elijah did. He was another Elijah, to be sure, but with a different ministry.

In any case, in Matthew 17 we have the Lord own interpretation of this text. When asked "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" He replied that Elijah had already come and they understood that he was talking about John the Baptist. And, even more explicitly, in Matt. 11:10 the Lord identified the messenger of Malachi 3:1 as John the Baptist. John himself seemed to understand the

identification of himself with Elijah, wearing, as he did, the same distinctive clothing of Elijah: garments of camel's hair and a leather belt (2 Kgs 1:8; Matt. 3:4).

It is interesting that Elijah still plays a role in Jewish prayers. He is mentioned in a prayer said after meals: "May God in his mercy send us the prophet Elijah." [WBC, 55]

- v.6 The sense of the verse is not merely that when the Messiah and the Day of the Lord comes, it will usher in a new harmony in family relationships. "Parents and children" is a figure, that is, the two groups stand for everybody. You find this often enough in the OT. For example, in Jer. 13:14, in the midst of an oracle of judgment, we read, "I will smash them one against the other, fathers and sons alike, declares the Lord." And here the idea is not simply family closeness, but that when the day of the Lord comes, he will turn everyone back to faithfulness to the covenant. We have here, in other words, a promise of great revival. Perhaps the thought is also that the believing fathers, Abraham and Moses, will no longer be ashamed of their unbelieving offspring Israel, because the people of God too will love and serve the Lord. [Godet, *Luke*, 49-50] But for those who do not repent and believe and obey, there will be judgment and destruction. Malachi closes on that solemn note, a note that has been well-sounded throughout the prophecy.

Now I had an interesting conversation with some of you after the service last Lord's Day evening. It concerned the fact, for fact it is, that according to 4:1-2, in the Judgment the Lord will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked according to the choices made by responsible human beings. Men choose either to do evil or to revere the Lord, and those choices will be the basis of his judgment of people's lives. Where is the sovereignty of God in all of that? Where is divine election? Where is the new birth as a recreative work of the Holy Spirit? Where is Christ redeeming his people and giving life to them? Throughout the letter there seems to be a great deal more human responsibility and free will than irresistible grace, unconditional election, and particular redemption. What are we to make of that?

Now, my answer, as you might expect, as often as you have heard me on this subject, is that we must let the Bible speak as it chooses to speak and hear all that it says to us. If it says that we are responsible for our choices, if it summons us to faith and repentance, if it suspends the outcome of our lives on the choices we make, if it warns us that we must believe and obey or else, then we have no choice but to believe all of that and act accordingly. And, to be sure, the Bible does say that on almost every page.

In the same way, when the Bible in no uncertain terms teaches us that those who will be saved are those who were chosen by God the Father for salvation before the foundation of the world, are those who were given by the Father to Jesus Christ to redeem, are those who were redeemed by him so that their eternal life is certain, are those in whom the Holy Spirit effects a new birth and of whom he makes a new creation, well, we must believe that also and love, and give thanks, and worship, and respond accordingly.

I say without reservation that the best Christian theology through the ages has always been that theology that has shown less interest in figuring out how both these emphases can be served at

one and the same time than it has shown in making sure that both emphases are set before us in their biblical shape and character.

Most of the time in the Bible these two themes, these two strains of biblical teaching about salvation are set side by side. You have naked divine sovereignty in Romans 9 and a similarly naked human responsibility in Rom. 10. And, what is more, you have no effort to explain the interplay of these two realities, indeed, usually hardly any sense that there is anything to explain. In Romans 9, and, so far as I know, only in that single passage, the Bible raises the questions that people will have about sovereign grace, about the doctrine that the salvation of any human being is the gift and the work and the decision of God. You remember what Paul says there, how sovereign grace seems to make God unfair, treating as he does some people with mercy and some with judgment; and how it seems to nullify the human will, as it is God's will and God's choice that is finally absolutely accomplished – but his answers are hardly comprehensive explanations. As to God's seeming injustice or unfairness he says simply that it is grace we are talking about and not justice, so there is no unfairness in God showing grace to some and not to others. As to the effect that a total sovereignty has on the exercise of the human will, he says simply that it is impertinent for us to question the wisdom of God's ways.

Now Paul knew very well the psychology of the human mind and heart. He could predict precisely what objections people would have to his doctrine of *sola gratia* – and they are the two objections that people have always raised and still raise today. He knew how and why people would stew over the seeming impossibility of reconciling a message that salvation from first to last, in all links of the chain, is God's gift and God's doing with a message that human beings were absolutely accountable to God for giving answer to God's summons and that those who believed and obeyed would be saved and those who did not would not and that those who did not believe had no one to blame but themselves for failing to obtain salvation. Paul understood the problem very well. By raising the objections in Romans 9 he tells us that he knows what we will think and how and why we will struggle at this point. Still, he did not, for that reason, provide, as he might have done, a lengthy explanation. He did not even say, as we might have expected him to say, that we simply had to believe both things because our minds are not capacious enough to hold this entire reality together at once. He simply went right on from saying that God shows mercy to whom he shows mercy and hardens whom he hardens, to say that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved and how can they call on whom they have not heard and how will they hear unless someone preaches the good news to them and how will they preach unless they are sent.

There have always been a lot of people who solve the problem by taking up the Bible's message of human freedom and personal responsibility and then just ignoring, denying, or working around all the passages that say so clearly that salvation is God's gift and God's work and that God decides who will be saved and who will not. And there have always been some, a much smaller number, who have solved this problem by latching on to the Bible's message of sovereign grace and then ignoring, denying, or working around all the passages that lay the issue of salvation at the feet of responsible human beings. You read the representatives of either of these groups and you realize that they are fighting with the Bible, they are struggling against Holy Scripture. There is a good deal that the Bible says that they do not wish to believe and are, therefore, sure that the Bible couldn't mean. But I don't want to fight with or against the Word

of God. I want rather to give up my heart and mind to believe whatever is taught in Holy Scripture. If I cannot fully reconcile its teaching, if I cannot fully harmonize in my own mind all its emphases, well, then, who am I to suppose that my puny mind could contain all the truth of God?

Ordinarily, as I said, the truths just lie side by side on the pages of Holy Scripture. Now divine grace and the working of God's almighty power to save his chosen people in Christ, now the promise of God's favor to those who believe and now threats of his judgment against those who will not. Now, "all those who were appointed to eternal life believed;" now, "whosoever will may come."

But sometimes, we have the two strains mixed together. And so here in 4:4-5. *He* will turn the hearts of the fathers and the children..." Who is *he*? Well, it is Elijah, the Lord's servant and the Messiah's forerunner. He is appointed by God to bring in this day of salvation that the Lord has promised. And, then, if we compare this prophecy to that in 3:1-4, we learn that the messenger and the Messiah together, will bring about a purification of the Lord's people. The Lord is saying *ahead of time, in advance* what *he* will do! We know where revivals come from! We know where the salvation of sinners comes from! They come from the powerful working of the God in the hearts of men and women. The Spirit blows where he wills...

But, we also have both here in 4:6 and in 3:5 the promised judgment of the Lord for those who will not return to him in faith and obedience. So even when the emphasis falls on what the Lord will do and bring to pass, the responsibility of human beings is not forgotten.

This text is not unlike Philippians 2:12-13:

"...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

In that text, as in our text this evening, we come face to face with a great mystery. Now, I will not take us beyond the mystery, we cannot get past it. It is everywhere in the Bible and the Bible does not provide us with anything more than the constant assertion of both facts: divine sovereign grace and responsible manhood. But, from the mystery we may learn things of great practical importance and benefit. Let me set one such lesson before you tonight.

Think of it this way. I speak now to Christians, to those who are the living objects of God's saving work in Christ, by the Holy Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit within us to work and to will God's good pleasure. But how does that happen? We hardly know. Much goes on deep within us that we not aware of. Think of the foundations of our natural life. Suppose that you had to order your heart to beat every time, that without your active superintendence of your heart and your lungs and all the other processes of your body you would falter and die. But if you had to look after the functioning of every one of your organs there would be no time left for anything. Life would be taken up with the constant vigil and oversight that your own personal survival required. There would be nothing left for living and working in the world. You couldn't dare fall asleep or your heart would stop!

Well, so it is with the foundations of your spiritual life. They are deep and are largely unrecognized. What is more, they are often mostly unaffected by what goes on at the surface. Our lives are something like the ocean. There may be a great deal of disturbance at the surface, waves and wind and spray, while not many feet down and then all the way down to the bottom all is calm and unmoved. So the Lord carries on his work in us. At the surface there may be a storm, but down below all is calm and the Lord is superintending our spiritual lives, our souls, producing and growing faith, and preserving us in faith and love, in ways we cannot understand or even trace. Just as we do not know how our heart beats or our lungs breathe but moment by moment for years upon years they sustain our lives, so we do not know how it is that God is within us both to will and to work, but his doing so makes us and keeps us Christians until we are finally in heaven.

On the surface there is all this activity: this willing and loving, this falling and rising, this choosing of evil and good, this repenting and obeying, this believing and struggling to believe. How that intersects with what lies below, in the depths where the Holy Spirit works, creates, directs, sustains, we cannot know. Drop something into the sea and for several feet you can see it slowly descending into the darkness, but soon it is gone from sight into depths our sight cannot penetrate. We only know that the Spirit is down there and at work because things happen at the surface that would not happen otherwise. We only know our heart continues to beat because we continue to breathe and live.

Now that should be a great comfort. We worry about this doubt that flits through our mind, this particular stumble into sin, this dejected feeling that comes over us. We wonder if each and every one of these things by itself is an index of our real state before God. I have spoken with many of you about just these concerns. But you cannot see what the Holy Spirit is doing down in the depths of your heart. Only from time to time does his working within you produce some notable disturbance on the surface: when you are tested and find you have faith to remain loyal to the Lord; when you are dejected and despondent and find, in a way unexplained and unexplainable, that you are absolutely certain that underneath you are everlasting arms; when you are giving way to sin and find yourself suddenly sure that you cannot do this anymore because you belong to Jesus Christ. It is the Lord's glory "to conceal a matter," and he has hidden away much of what he does for us and in us. How different our lives would be if we could always detect the constant presence and working of the Holy Spirit? But he has chosen to work in and through our personality, our humanity, our character, our life experiences. He has chosen to work through our own wills, our own choices, our own thoughts and actions. On the surface that we can see, it is all promise and faith, command and obedience, hope and fulfillment, sin and repentance, falling and rising. And we are involved in it up to our necks and our believing and our obeying is the means of all that happens. But down deep it is another story.

I cannot tell you where those two realities intersect or how the interplay between them is to be understood. I only know that we are to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, but not to do so without realizing all the while that God is in us to will and to work according to his good pleasure. Does that take our questions away? Not at all. Does that make life easy and simple? Certainly not. But, does it give us hope and strength to undertake both to believe and to obey in ways we know full well we could never do in our own strength? Absolutely! And does it keep

us from ever supposing that by the exercise of our will we have somehow *earned* God's favor? Absolutely. And does it confirm in us the expectation that for all our weaknesses and all our shortcomings and all our miserable failures to live worthy of the grace we have received, we will triumph in Christ at the end of the day and greet the great and terrible Day of the Lord with aplomb and great joy. Absolutely! Absolutely! Absolutely!