

STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 4

Malachi 1:6-2:9

February 2, 2003

Review

Malachi, we have said, is a summons to repentance and revival. In six disputations, the prophet summons the people to forsake their spiritual doldrums and half-hearted commitment to the Lord and return to an active faith and the practice of devotion to God. We have said that Malachi is all about preparing ourselves for God's blessing by presenting to him the kind of hearts and lives he delights to bless. [Jack Collins] It is a six-fold wake-up call to renewed covenant fidelity.

[Hugenberger, 5]

We began last Sunday night with the first of the six disputations. In that one, 1:2-5, the prophet reminded the people of God's election of them, of his love – personal, specific, discriminating, and powerful – as the basis of their assurance that if they remain faithful to him, they will not be forsaken but will have, must have, his blessing. They were doubting God's love or were failing to be impressed by it because of the discouraging circumstances of their lives at that time.

Malachi begins by reminding them that, whatever appearances to the contrary, God long ago chose them as his own people, his treasured possession, chose them out of all the nations of the world to love and bless, and that if he is for them, no one can be against them. Therefore, they need to lift up their hearts and their eyes, stop worrying about their circumstances, and recommit themselves to their Lord. If God is for us, who can be against us!

Now we move to the second disputation, which, as we said, goes right through the ineptly placed chapter division. This disputation concerns the neglect of their duties on the part of Israel's priests. The people are complicit in this neglect, to be sure, as Malachi will say, but the priests are more responsible still. This is the longest disputation in the book and takes up 23 of a total of 55 verses.

Once again, as a demonstration that Malachi is not calling Israel to a new set of standards, but calling her back to the ancient covenant revealed to Moses, three texts from Numbers and Deuteronomy are woven through this disputation: Numbers 6:23, 27, the Aaronic Benediction; Numbers 25:12-13, the Levitical covenant of peace; and Deut. 33:8-11, Moses' blessing of the tribe of Levi and his enumeration of the responsibilities of the priests. It would take too long to demonstrate this but language taken from these texts is woven into Malachi's disputation in a way that any Israelite would have immediately recognized the ironic comparison that was being made. Just one example: in v. 8 at the end, the "Would he accept you?" is literally the same language as that used in the Aaronic benediction: "would he lift his countenance upon you?" An Israelite would have caught the irony immediately. That language was language the priest was using many times a day.

Text Comment

v.6 We are going to get a lot of "says the Lord Almighty" in this disputation. Malachi is attacking the priests, after all, who had official religious standing and absolute authority

in matters religious and liturgical. If there was any community in Israel that was likely to ignore or dismiss Malachi and his message it was the clergy. They would be almost certain to react badly to Malachi's criticism, so it was important for him to emphasize the fact that his message came directly from the Lord.

We can well imagine him preaching this message in the temple itself, where the largest number of priests would be found.

- v.8 What the priests were doing wrong, precisely, was violating the law that required God to receive the best. The law required that the best and the first of all the people's property belonged to God. The firstborn, the firstfruits, and the most excellent of one's property belonged to God. These best parts were to be given both as a tithe to the priests – these were their salary, if you will – and in the periodic offerings that worshippers would bring to the temple. It was always a test of faith because the best animals were, of course, the best breeding stock, and to give that stock away to God one had to believe oneself better off honoring the Lord than following the path of worldly prosperity.

Now we can ask: why would the priests receive defective animals if they were themselves the beneficiaries. The answer is that a blind animal tasted the same. The problem wasn't the meat it was its fitness as an *offering to God*. But why did the priests consent to let the people bring less than their best? Ignorance was certainly not the problem. The law was specific and emphatic on this point. Well, Malachi doesn't say. It may be that those priests were like many modern ministers, thinking that they needed to accommodate worship to the standards of the people lest they stop coming altogether. The nations round about didn't have nearly so high standards for their worship and that made it even more difficult to hold the line in Israel. The Canaanites and Philistines were content with almost any animal. That was what was happening in regard to marriage. The Israelites standards were high and the people didn't want to meet them and so were not required to do so. But, perhaps by making it easier to bring offerings, the priests got more and so were personally advantaged by the corruption of worship. Perhaps bribes greased the skids. We don't know. [Stuart, 1300-1301]

The behavior of the people and the priests is obviously corrupt and the proof is that they would never give to a human dignitary, such as the Persian governor, what they have been willingly giving to God. The governor would regard such offerings as an insult. Well, no less God. So, as always, unbelief is the real problem, the basic problem, not the disobedience itself. If they really believed, if they took seriously God's holiness and his presence at the sacrifices and offerings, they would never do what they have been doing.

- v.10 The "doors" here are those to the temple courtyard itself. The sacrifices were offered outside, of course, worship was an outdoor activity in the ancient world, at least worship at the temple.

We tend to think that lukewarm is better than cold and something is better than nothing. But God says that he would prefer that slovenly, hypocritical worship cease altogether. [Hugenberger] This is a common theme in the OT prophets. God doesn't want our

worship if we are giving it to him begrudgingly, half-heartedly, and only out of a sense of duty. He doesn't want our worship if it is not an *act of true faith*.

- v.11 The Lord is telling the priests that their behavior is utterly inconsistent with what will some day be the case: reverent and faithful worship offered to him all over the world. You may compare to this verse, verses such as Isaiah 19:19 and 66:19-21 where we read of altars being placed in other nations and of the men of other peoples being made priests and Levites. It is an ancient way of describing a time when the whole world will worship the Lord. Malachi, as we will see later, is very interested in the fulfillment of the plan of salvation in the future. Jesus makes a similar argument in Matthew 8:10-12, when he contrasts the unbelief of his contemporaries with the faith of a Roman centurion *and the expectation of his worship by the nations eventually*.

By the way, for centuries this text, v. 11, was taken by the Roman Catholic church as its principal proof-text for its doctrine of the mass. You see the verse says there will be pure offerings of a sacrificial type in the Gentile era. There will be, but they won't be the RC mass.

- v.13 It isn't only that the priests are offering defective animals. They are ministering to God in a spirit of boredom. They have no pleasure in their supreme privilege.
- v.14 Here the laity are addressed directly. The priests may be corrupt but the people love it that way.

"The Great King" is a common title in the Hittite covenant texts. The Great King is the King over all the other lesser kings, the Emperor, if you will. The Lord is the Great King who will enforce the penalties of his covenant upon those who betray its requirements.

By the way, the requirement of giving a male, while it certainly foreshadowed the greater sacrifice of Christ, who was a male, and while made necessary by the representative role of the male in society, was also a kindness on the Lord's part. The females were needed to give milk and bear young, only a few males were needed for breeding. So less was lost to the flock when males were sacrificed.

- v.2:1 Now come the curses that the Lord threatens to visit upon the priests for their unbelief and disobedience that has led to the profanation of his Name. We said before that all these curses come from the covenant material in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.
- v.2 Blessing was a priest's business. Right worship was to bring blessing. People went to the priests for blessing and God will now curse their blessing. He will make them futile. One class of curses was those of futility. Nothing would work. The priests would pronounce blessing, as with the Aaronic benediction, but the people would get curses instead.

- v.3 Probably better, “cut off” or “diminish” your descendants. That was a particularly heavy curse for the priest because it was only by hereditary right could a man become a priest. If descendants were cut-off, the family would lose the right to the sacred office.

The second curse in the verse is one of degradation and dishonor. Priests had to be cleaner than anyone else and here God himself is throwing dung in their faces. At the festivals there were many more sacrifices than normal, so much more waste.

- v.4 The text of that covenant is found in Numbers 25:11-13 and its language is spread by Malachi all through vv. 1-8. No Israelite would have missed the connection.
- v.7 Deut. 33:8-11 is Moses’ blessing of Levi with an account of his responsibilities as a minister of the Word and a superintendent of Israel’s worship. The language of that passage is scattered through these verses.
- v.8 The people have stumbled because of the spiritual indifference and disobedience of the priesthood. No doubt the sins that Malachi will later accuse the people of are occurring in large part because the priests are either positively teaching disobedience or winking at it.
- v.9 The law was up for sale in other words. We are probably to read the “I have caused you to be despised...” as a threat of more of the same troubles Israel is already experiencing. The entire section, after all, begins with “If you do not listen...” (2:1) The entire judgment hasn’t yet fallen, but it will if there is no repentance. Of course, Ezra and Nehemiah, following upon Malachi’s preaching apparently, cleaned house in the Israelite priesthood.

Matthew Henry wrote: “Nothing profanes the name of God more than the misconduct of those whose business it is to do honour to it.”

Like it or not – and many contemporary American evangelicals do not like it – the Lord has made the priesthood, the ministry essential to the welfare and spiritual prosperity of his people. That point is made a hundred times in the Bible, positively and negatively. If you ask Jeremiah, or the other prophets, why Israel and Judah sank into unbelief and apostasy, they will tell you that it was the treachery of the priests and the prophets, the people’s spiritual directors. They turned from the Lord first and led the people away with them. This did not excuse the people, as Malachi makes clear here as well, but it would not have happened had the priests remained faithful and devout themselves and continued to preach the Word of God faithfully and clearly to the church.

Now there is much to say on this topic and I want to spend another Sunday night dealing with it. After all, it is Malachi’s longest disputation; almost half the entire book.

But, tonight, I want simply to make this point and to make it as the Bible does. People depend upon a faithful ministry, upon priests or ministers who remain faithful to the Lord and to their calling as the ministers of his Word and worship.

[Remember, by the way, there is nothing wrong with calling a minister in our day a priest. The English word, “priest” is simply a transliteration of the Greek word “presbyter” or “elder.” A priest in the OT did what ministers do today: he preached the Word (both in public and private) and he superintended the worship of God’s house. Paul says that he was a priest, even though he wasn’t from the tribe of Levi, because he was a preacher of the gospel. We tend to think we shouldn’t use the term because it suggests Roman Catholic ideas. But there never was the idea or concept of a priest like a Roman Catholic priest – not in the OT and not in the NT. We let the Roman Catholics and Orthodox co-opt a perfectly good word when we allow them the exclusive use of “priest” as if it somehow belonged to them alone. We know there is nothing wrong with the word. We speak happily of the “priesthood of all believers” or general priesthood, which was, of course, like the special priesthood, a feature of the OT as it was of the NT.]

So to make Malachi’s point let me give you two examples. The first from the Bible itself, from 2 Chronicles 24 where we read of the reign of the reforming king Joash. What is emphasized in that narrative is that Joash was a good king so long as he had Jehoiada the priest to direct him. It was Jehoiada who put Joash on the throne, who made a covenant on the king’s behalf that he would serve the Lord; it was Jehoiada who chose the king’s wives for him and who directed the king’s reforming government. Then, still more striking, we read, at the beginning of that narrative, in 24:2 that “Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the years of Jehoiada the priest.” And lest we miss the importance of that notice, later, in v. 17 we read, “After the death of Jehoiada the priest, the officials of Judah came and paid homage to the king, and he listened to them. They abandoned the temple of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and worshipped Asherah poles and idols.”

Jehoiada was a faithful priest and a commanding presence in Israel. We read that after his death “he was buried with the kings in the City of David, because of the good he had done in Israel for God and his temple.” [Many of you remember Jo DeYoung who, when she died, was our eldest member. Her father had been the pastor of the Christian Reformed Church in Lynden, WA when the services were still in Dutch. After his death he was buried in the cemetery in Lynden and his grave stone reads as Jehoiada’s: “He hath done much good in Israel, both for God and for the temple.” But, when Jehoiada was no more, Joash fell apart.

That would not be the last time. Listen to this history from Philip Hallie’s wonderful book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. It is an account of a Reformed church and village, Le Chambon, in France that, at great risk to herself, hid Jews during the Second World War. Under the influence of a faithful pastor the people of that town saved hundreds of lives from all over Europe counting their own lives as not worth being compared to the service of the love of Christ. But this is early in the book, when Hallie is introducing the hero of the story, later the minister of Le Chambon during the war, André Trocmé. Trocmé had been a minister first in a town near the Belgian border, Sin-le-Noble. It was a coal-mining town, dank and dirty. It was in the homes and especially the kitchens of the poor miners of that town that Trocmé carried on his ministry. And there was an awakening there under his ministry.

“One of the small groups that Trocmé worked with was called the Men’s Circle. It was made up entirely of poor people, some of whom were struggling with one of the cruellest enemies of their class, alcoholism. One evening, sitting in a worker’s kitchen with the

Men's Circle, Trocmé was discussing a book that was very influential at the time, a book that tried to prove that Jesus was a myth invented by Saint Paul. He found himself mustering the arguments and facts he had learned at the University of Paris, but while he was doing so, and, in the process, successfully refuting the book, he also found himself asking the question: "If Jesus really walked upon this earth, why do we keep treating him as if he were a disembodied, impossibly idealistic ethical theory? If he were a real man, then the Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth; and if he existed, God has shown us in flesh and blood what goodness is for flesh and blood people."

All of this he said calmly to the ten men who were present. He had not planned to say these things, nor had he planned to take any particular action after their talk, but suddenly they found themselves on their knees together. Each made a confession to God of his own weaknesses...and they all stood up. They found themselves looking at each other with new eyes, without defensiveness, shyness, or pride. They all felt the Spirit of God in them and decided to go right home to bring that extraordinary new awareness to their wives and children.

This was the beginning of what came to be called the "awakening at Sin-le-Noble." In its full intensity it lasted for more than three months, and in the course of it, all the divisions and disputes in the parish disappeared. People became as dear to each other as Jesus was to them. For Trocmé it was "a spiritual springtime. All those things that had formerly been vague, colorless, seen from the outside...became suddenly for me living, interesting, inspiring. Each man became inestimably precious in my eyes." [67-68]

But, there was a story within that wonderful story of that wonderful time of the Spirit's presence and power. It concerned a man named Célisse.

One night the roving squad of the Men's Circle found a man dead drunk, lying in a ditch. The man was Flemish (Sin-le-Noble is only a few miles from Belgium), with a big, square head, the neck of a bull, and vast hands. The circle knew him; like most of the alcoholics in that industrial community, he was destroying his mind and body and brutalizing his family. His wife's skin was gray from suffering, fear, and hunger; it was she above all others who felt the full force of his violent temper and of his cruel neglect. Piece by piece, he had sold almost all of their furniture for drink, and though they had a decent little house on the outskirts of Sin-le-Noble, when Trocmé and the squad entered it, they found the usual home of a drunkard: almost completely empty rooms, and children lying in a corner on a pile of rags, with terror in every line of their faces and bodies.

Under Trocmé's influence, Célisse stopped drinking, visited people, prayed with them, and labored to convince his fellow miners to take the...oath against drink. He became the single most effective force in the whole circle for saving people from the hell of drunkenness and anger and remorse. All the power in his mighty body and simple mind were turned toward saving people from destruction, and he blossomed during it all, like a great sunflower.

One day a group from the circle was singing hymns and passing out religious tracts to the miners as they left the pits on their way home for the evening. As was the custom, Trocmé started to make a little speech. Suddenly a small man in a cap joined the group... In a cutting voice he cried out, 'Hey! I know you – you scab! The priests pay you to tell lies. God? There's no God. If there were a God, he would strike me dead right now when I [curse] him. Shut your damned mouth.'

Slowly Célisse left his group of friends in the circle. He rolled as he walked, like an athlete, top-heavy with all that bone and muscle. As he walked toward him, the little man in the cap started retreating, yelling all the while. Trocmé had stopped talking, and they were all listening to Célisse and his thundering voice: 'What are you saying, you idiot? That there's no God? Repeat that one more time, if you dare, just one more time that there is no God. Have you seen Célisse, eh? Who stopped him from drinking? I'll show you if there's a God!' And Célisse dropped his coat on the road, while the cries of the little man were growing fainter and fainter under the onslaught. But though his cries were getting weaker, they still continued, and Trocmé and the others watched in horror as Célisse raised that fist of his to smite the little man. Only Trocmé's sudden leap saved the blasphemer from being struck to the ground.

"Let me do it," yelled Célisse. "I'll show him that there's a God. These bums, that's the only thing that'll convince them." Trocmé forbade him to strike, and Célisse, baffled, obeyed. On the way back from the exit of the mine, Trocmé tried to explain nonviolence to Célisse, but the pastor's explanation served only to confuse him. He could not understand how nonviolence could be effective. "With such bums there's no other way," he kept muttering all the way home."

At the end of six years in Sin-le-Noble, the Trocmé family left. Jean-Pierre, Jacques, and Daniel had been born there, and they had often been seriously ill in that damp and dirty air. Except for one Belgian family, every one of Trocmé's parishioners had been tubercular at one time or another, and the children were especially vulnerable.

The day in 1934 when the family of six left, Célisse, his wife, and his children appeared all washed and combed in the presbytery. That good-bye, so full of love and sadness, was one of the most memorable and heartbreaking events in Trocmé's life. And one of the reasons it was so painful to Trocmé was that shortly after the Trocmés left, Célisse started to drink again and committed suicide.

For Trocmé, that suicide, horrible as it was...was a statement of Célisse's integrity. With Trocmé gone, he could not restrain his desire to drink. God required him to stop drinking, and so did...Trocmé; but he could not stop without Trocmé near. The pastor had not been able to teach him to be nonviolent, but he had inspired him to obey God's commands uncompromisingly. To do this now, he had to leave this life... [69-71]

Stories like that, found in the Bible and in the history of the church in the world, could be multiplied a thousand times. And they are parables of the truth Malachi is emphasizing here. God has made his people to depend upon a faithful ministry in many and profound ways. Israel

was sinking into spiritual doldrums and, from there, might sink into open apostasy and spiritual death, in the first place because her ministry was not being faithful to its calling. It was not proclaiming the truth of God with earnestness and power, it was not confirming that message by the holy, devout living of the priests, and it was conspiring to sear the people's conscience by permitting them, even encouraging them to flaunt God's law. These stories of individuals who depended upon their priests teach us a lesson, a most fundamental lesson. What is true of the individual believer, such as Joash or Célisie, Malachi says, is true of the entire people of God, of the whole church. Our life depends upon a faithful ministry, in many more ways than we know.

We will elaborate Malachi's point in greater detail next Lord's Day. But we begin by accepting it as true.