

## **STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 9**

**Malachi 3:6-12**

**March 16, 2003**

We come now to the fifth of Malachi's six disputations. When I introduced the outline of this book I pointed out that there is a chiastic structure to the six disputations and that, as a result, disputation two is linked both stylistically and thematically to disputation five. Only in these two disputations do we find *two* questions put by the people instead of just one. And the subject in both disputations is broadly the same, Israel's begrudging offerings, though in the second disputation the emphasis fell on the priests' failure and here it falls on the people's, in fact the priests are not mentioned. What is more – though I won't take time to demonstrate this to you – there are very similar things said in both disputations and similar arguments used.

- v.6    The immutability of God rests upon his perfect nature. As A.W. Pink once put it: "He cannot change for the better, for he is already perfect; and, being perfect, he cannot change for the worse." [Attributes of God, 37]
- v.7    It is God's immutability that explains why Israel, though she violated God's covenant with her generation after generation, has not been destroyed. The Lord is a merciful God, faithful to his covenant and to the promises he made to be Israel's God. Israel's present unfaithfulness is simply the continuation of a long-established pattern of covenant breaking. But, still, the Lord stands patiently ready to forgive his people if only they will repent and return to him.

The Hebrew verb translated "return" is a major theological term in the OT. The idea of "turning" is perhaps the chief way the Bible defines repentance: not simply a change of mind or the utterance of some approved words, but a real turning of one's life, away from sin and toward the Lord with all that such a turning implies for a change of living as well as of thinking. Of course, when the Lord says, "if you return *I will return to you...*" he is saying that *he has left them*. The reason that the people are doing so poorly in different ways is because the Lord is not with them and he will not be with them unless they return to him. In v. 9 he will say explicitly that the entire nation is under a curse because of their sin.

It is, of course, a fact of biblical revelation and of the observation of human life that the knowledge of God's withdrawing from his people is the knowledge of faith only. There are many people in the world today from whom the Lord has withdrawn himself who are quite sure that God is on their side. Their view of the world and of true faith is so corrupted that they cannot tell the difference between a world with and a world without God. [Stuart, 1366] There are many people who are suffering all sorts of deprivations and difficulties but who never attribute those troubles to their having been unfaithful to God. And, to be sure, sometimes the most faithful of all God's people can have troubles, even very great troubles, that are in no way a reflection of God's displeasure with them. Job is one example, Jesus is another, Paul is another.

- v.8 How did not paying a tithe amount to robbing God? Well, the answer is that since Israel was taught early and often that everything she had belonged to the Lord and that she possesses what she has only temporarily, and since God had stated clearly that he expected the tithe to be given to him at appropriate times, to withhold it from him, to withhold his own property, is robbery. [Stuart, 1267] “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” Psalm 24:1 He told his people in Leviticus that “all the earth is mine” and “all the land is mine.” The firstborn, the firstfruits he tells them “belong to me.” Exod. 13:2. In Lev. 27:30 we read: “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.”

“Tithes and offerings” probably should be taken as a reference to the requirement to give a 10<sup>th</sup> of one’s income to the Lord – the tithe – and offerings in general, i.e. all the other offerings required in the law. Faithfulness in the covenant required Israel to bring those tithes and offerings and she was not. *Of course, this principle is carried over into the NT.* Even the principle of proportionate giving, the principle of the tithe, is carried over: we are to give as the Lord has prospered us. It is never said in so many words that we are to give 10% in the NT, though it is worth pointing out that the tithe was not original to Moses and the Mosaic law. It is found early in the life of God’s people. Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek in Gen. 14, if you remember. There is some case there for arguing that the tithe is basic to human life as God ordered it. But, if you are not persuaded of that, remember that if the 10<sup>th</sup> is not our rule any longer, surely in the NT we are not going to argue that we should give *less!* We are not going to argue that having seen the Lord on the cross, having witnessed the resurrection, knowing as we now do what price was paid for our redemption, we should give *less* than they did in the OT? Surely not. Jesus, remember, makes a point of calling attention to the generous gift of a poor woman when she was worshipping at the temple and Paul makes a good deal of the sacrificial financial stewardship required of Christian believers. Now, perhaps we like the tithe after all!

By the way, this failure to be faithful in tithing is a major emphasis in Nehemiah as well. Here Malachi seems to be preparing the way for the reforms that would take place a few years later under Nehemiah.

- v.9 We learn in vv. 10-11 that the curse consisted of a failure of crops as a result of drought and pests.
- v.10 The storehouse was that part of the temple complex in which the gifts that were brought were stored. The *whole tithe* is specified either because people were holding back part of what they owed, or because only some of the people were bringing a tithe at all. In other words, the tithes were not voluntary guidelines; they were laws to be obeyed. “That there may be food in my house,” refers to the fact that the tithes were the allotment of the priests and Levites, the food they were to live on. They could devote themselves to leading worship in God’s house because their physical needs were provided for by the tithes. In Neh. 13 we learn that some of the priests and Levites and temple singers had left the temple to go home and work the fields because the tithes were not faithfully provided. The worship of the temple suffered because the tithes were not being paid.

[By the way, this verse is the basis for the concept of “storehouse” tithing, that is, the view that all tithing must be given to the church. All your gifts must be brought here and placed in our offering. Then they can be distributed wisely by elders. You shouldn’t be giving individually to various Christian ministries, unless, as some say, those are your offerings above and beyond the tithe. Now, given the fact that we are embarking on a major building project, I’m tempted to think that storehouse tithing is a very biblical idea. But, I don’t really see it. It certainly cannot be argued from this text. If you built the concept on this text all our money would have to go to Atlanta first, the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church in America. But, then, why Atlanta? There are better reasons to give to the church, the various reasons supplied by the Bible itself: the requirement of both Testaments that ministers be paid, the example of early Christians giving their gifts to the elders, and so on. But there is no evidence whatsoever that the apostolic church sent all its money to Jerusalem. Most of it stayed in local congregations and was used there. It was an unusual thing, a special project, when Paul gathered a collection from the Gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem. But that special giving was also an appropriate destination for the gifts of Christians.]

The tribe of Levi was roughly 1/12 of the nation’s population and so required 8.3% of the nation’s income for full support. In addition the costs of operating and maintaining the temple must be covered. In all, approximately 10% of the nation’s income was required to maintain Israel’s worship of God as that worship had been appointed in the law of Moses. To give less than the tithe – by definition one cannot give a partial tithe, a tithe is 10% -- was to starve the nation’s worship.

On several other occasions in the OT God invites his people to test him, a way of encouraging their weak faith. But, there are also instances in which God’s people seek sinfully to put God to the test, as the Jewish religious leadership did so often to the Lord Jesus. “For God to invite investigation or action that will confirm his promises is a gateway to blessing; for people to demand that God prove himself true is a door to sin.” [Stuart, 1370]

The “floodgates of heaven” is a reference to rain, of course, the lack of which had blighted Israel’s crops. In the Bible when the sky is “shut” there is no rain and when God opens “the windows of heaven” it rains. The lack of rain is one of the curses threatened in Leviticus and Deuteronomy for unfaithfulness to God’s covenant.

- v.11 But, here, of course, as the verse makes clear, rain is a symbol of all manner of blessing, the idea of Paul’s “beyond what we ask or think.” Agricultural abundance, remember, is one of the images frequently employed by the prophets to describe the blessing of the new age.
- v.12 That the nations of the world will see Israel’s prosperity and call her “blessed” is the outcome promised if only Israel will remain faithful to the Lord.

Now texts like this frequently worry us. Nowadays we can think that Malachi sounds like some television evangelist who is promising us that if we just give our money to the Lord's work – usually his particular ministry – we'll get all kinds of blessings in return. Usually the blessings are similarly physical: if not rain for crops, a new car, a new house, a new job, a promotion, a wad of money suddenly appearing in our mailbox, and so on.

What is worse, any number of commentators who ought to know better, can treat Malachi's text here as if that is how we ought to understand him, though, of course, now, in the NT, we have got beyond that rather grubby, childish preoccupation with things and with worldly prosperity. The problem with the television evangelist, they seem to say, is that he is thinking like someone who lived in the epoch of Moses instead of someone who belongs to the epoch of Christ.

One Reformed commentator handles these ceremonial regulations of tithes and offerings, Malachi's demand that they be brought and promise of reward if they are, by reminding us that Malachi lived in the times of the shadows, that this way of thinking is but a shadow of what would be revealed in Christ. According to him, the discontinuity between the OT and the NT relates to the OT's "outward scheme of things, regarding both the obligations and the promises." This is what he writes:

"The law declares one day out of seven to be holy unto the Lord, the Spirit sanctifies all seven of them. The law sets apart one tribe out of twelve to be priests, the Spirit declares that the whole congregation has to fulfill the priestly office (1 Pet. 2:9). The law demands a tenth part of his people's possessions, the Spirit translates us to become God's possession with all that we have. Everything belongs to him. We are but stewards who will have to give account of all we possess." [Verhoef, 311]

You hear such things said so often that you can come to believe them true. But think a moment. The law set out one tribe to be priests, but the Spirit makes us all priests? As many times as I have heard that said, I have scratched my head. The text cited is 1 Peter 2:9 where we Christians are said to be a kingdom of priests. But that text is citing Exodus 19:6 in which God, speaking at Mt. Sinai, calls Israel his kingdom of priests. The notion that there is some difference on this point between the OT and the NT is a prejudice pure and simple; it is not the teaching of any line of God's Word.

Or, take the notion that the law demands a tenth but in the new epoch everything we have belongs to God. That everything belonged to God was a truism of OT teaching. That all that we had was from him and to him and for him, every pious Israelite both understood and accepted as the principle of his management of his possessions. He was a steward only and what he had, God had given him. In Leviticus 25:23 we read: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants." It is in 1 Chron. 29:14 that we read David say, in a context of stewardship and giving to God, "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."

It is God's kindness that he asks only for a small portion of the entire blessing he has lavished on his people and that he permits them to retain so much of it. And there is no difference in this respect between the OT and the NT.

In fact, what commentators who repeat these mantras about the OT being a more earthly and materialistic and juvenile dispensation always fail to point out is that the NT also promises material reward for faithfulness to the Lord. Jesus says that those who have given up houses and fields for his sake will receive a hundred times as much in this world – and then, less we miss the point, mentions houses and fields – and Paul says that children who are obedient to their parents will live a long life in the world.

The fact is, it was plainly understood by faithful people in the OT that God was not promising riches to the pious, not, at least, in this world. They knew, as the NT explicitly teaches, that they were pilgrims in this world. They knew, as the OT explicitly teaches, that God had many reasons to visit his people with want and that the struggles that came from sickness and famine were not always punishments for his people's sins. They struggled, as we do today, with the obvious fact that often we find wicked people richer than very godly folk. The author of Psalm 73 saw that as did many others in his day and the Bible often addresses that reality. At the end of that wonderful psalm it is as clear as day that he no more thought that his prosperity required becoming a real estate mogul or a wealthy merchant than did the apostles to whom the Lord had promised a hundred times the number of houses and fields.

So, precisely how ought we to understand this connection between faithfulness and earthly prosperity that seems to be taught here.

1. *First, we cannot and must not deny that there is often a connection between these two things, even if the measure of that prosperity is always left for God to decide.*

God does sometimes punish his people for their sins by visiting upon them curses of a decidedly earthly and material and physical nature. It isn't only that laziness leads to poverty and sexual promiscuity to venereal disease, but the Bible teaches us that God will withdraw his hand from his people when they are unfaithful and all manner of things will begin to go wrong and little will go right.

You cannot read the Bible without acknowledging that, whether or not you can say this for sure in any particular case, marriages go sour, sickness takes hold of a body, jobs are lost, relationships are broken because God is punishing one of his children for unfaithfulness. David's family fell apart, David's character began to disintegrate, as a consequence of his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah her husband. Israel collapsed spiritually partially as punishment for Hezekiah's sins after his life was spared. When Jesus met the same man at the temple later in the day, the man whom he had healed at the pool after 38 years of paralysis, he told him, "Stop sinning or something worse will happen to you." All of this reminds us of the moral character of God's dealings with his people. You see it on the larger scale of nations and civilizations. Is there a case in all of human history where a nation suffered destruction or an entire civilization disintegrated whose destruction or disintegration was not directly related to its sins? I don't know of one.

To say, as we must say, as we are taught to say many times in the Bible, that troubles are not *invariably* punishments, is not to say that they are not *often* punishments. I certainly know people who have been raised as Christians or who have lived as Christians, who then turned away from the Lord, and whose lives became but a pale shadow of what they might have been and should have been, their joys were cut down to something very small and petty, their satisfactions minor, the deeper experiences of life taken from them.

It remains true today as in Malachi's day both that in keeping the commandments of God there is a great reward *and* that the way of the transgressor is hard; and there is a particular sense in which that is true of those who belong, even just outwardly, to the covenant people of God.

I can think of a former minister of this Presbytery who, while in the ministry, sinned against God, against his congregation, and against his wife and, predictably, lost his ministry and his marriage. That much is perhaps too predictable to be significant. But it was the psychological disintegration in the years that followed that really demonstrated the departure of the Lord from his life and the curse that rested upon it. He went through two marriages unhappily thereafter, though he was a man of extraordinary gifts he went from one thing to another without real success or fulfillment. Now he is an older man, alone, looking back on a life that should have been, could have been so rich, so fruitful, and will now be remembered by no one with any pleasure.

I think of another PCA minister who sinned against the covenant for a long time. His sin was undiscovered but God knew. That man died in the prime of his life by his own hand. Is that not the Lord cursing this man's blessings and shutting up heaven against him? I do not say that he was an unsaved man; I think he was saved. But that he paid a price for his sins, that he failed to enjoy the blessings of God, and did so in great measure, of this there can be no doubt.

So, from the OT and the NT we take the teaching that God does connect our obedience and faithfulness to him to the prosperity of our lives. He does sometimes visit troubles upon us because we have been unfaithful. He does reward us with prosperity in some degree and some times when we are faithful to him. This is not some formula, clearly enough. It is not the teaching the health and wealth preachers make of it. But, in reacting to that false teaching we must not deny what the Bible plainly teaches.

I tell you, if troubles are resting on your life and you cannot seem to rid yourself of them, I cannot at all say that the Lord has withdrawn from you. But, I would certainly say you should consider your ways and be sure that you are not harboring some infidelity to the covenant in your life. Rather, repent of it, put on new obedience, and ask again for the blessings of the Lord your God. Return to the Lord and he will return to you. Test him in that, as he invites us to do and see if there will not be blessing beyond your containing it.

2. *Second, the connection between the people's obedience to the law of the covenant and the Lord's prospering of them is made in the full realization of the faith in God required.*

Take note of what God was actually saying. The economy was depressed. There was a drought; apparently for several years the harvests had been very poor, pests were eating what little was growing. The people of God were scratching out a living. No doubt, for most people who were not bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse, their reasoning was very simple: I cannot afford to give a 10<sup>th</sup> of what I have earned or grown or raised. I can hardly live on what I have, how can I give away what is necessary for my family's well-being. Perhaps they also said, when the economy turns, when prosperity comes again I will be happy to give my 10<sup>th</sup>, and it will be a much larger amount. A 10<sup>th</sup> of a great harvest, after all is much more than a 10<sup>th</sup> of a puny one.

But the Lord will have none of it. In fact, he puts the shoe on the other foot. He says that the economic doldrums, the poor harvests, so far from being a just cause for failing to tithe, are *the result of the people's failure* to tithe. Therefore, the economy, the harvests are not going to improve until the people begin being faithful at tithing again. But, of course, that requires trusting the Lord. That requires believing that he will keep his word. That requires being sure that our faithfulness will bring his blessing.

This is our bottom line as Christians. We worship a sovereign God. We worship a God who does not change. He is faithful to his covenant and always shall be. Believing this, it is ours to trust and obey, always, no matter what the circumstances, no matter how we might calculate the costs and likely benefits. God often makes us trust him *before* he will show us his blessing.

Dr. Waltke tells of a conversation he had once with a man who had a job that a Christian shouldn't have. "You've got to give up that job," Dr. Waltke told him. "I've got to eat," the man replied. "No, you don't," Dr. Waltke told him, "you've only got to obey."

That is where we must stand. In fact, we should be willing to say, I would rather starve to death obeying the Lord than eat in disobedience. And Christians have said that and died a martyr's death. But, usually we don't have to say anything like that. The Lord is always faithful. "Test me in this," he says. "I know the weakness of your faith. Trust me to keep my word to you. You will find your faith rewarded." How he will reward your faith and in what measure, I cannot say; but *that* he will reward it, I do not doubt. I cannot doubt. No Christian can doubt. He has poured out some such blessing for me and Florence just recently. It makes me ashamed that I do not ask for more and that I do not ask with greater confidence and expectation.

There should be much more of this in our lives all the time. "Lord, you have invited me to test you in this. Purify my heart and life. I pledge myself to live in obedience before you. Help me to do so. And then pour out from heaven the blessings that I need." In small things and large things, all the time. Keep short accounts with the Lord your God. Notice when your blessings are small or have disappeared altogether. And be always returning to the Lord that he may return to you.