

WORSHIP AND HYPOCRICY

Malachi 1

Introduction: Since I have been a Christian, I have not ceased to be amazed at the absolute, point-blank frankness of the Bible. Where people (myself included) ever got the notion in their heads that the Bible is boring or irrelevant, I will never know. Because the Scriptures speak with such a straightforward openness about us--they do not beat around the bush! And they do not shrink from telling to us about our condition in exact terms. Maybe this is why men go to great ends to explain away the assertions and truths of the Bible. And this is surely why so many of the Old Testament prophets were chased around the country side, and in many cases executed for what they said. Thank God, that in His providence we can have their writings to day, the ones that He breathed!

Now the writings of Malachi are of exceptional application for today, and for Dartmouth Bible Church. The Old Testament has so many lessons, encouragements and warnings for us, and I hope that as we look at this last of the minor prophets, that you will be praying for the Lord's outfitting of these truths into your life!

Malachi is the last of the prophetic band under the old covenant. No other messenger from God was sent directly to Judah until John the Baptist, whose coming Malachi prophesied, started preaching around the year 25 A.D. The "Brief Old Testament Chart" which you should have before you, locates Malachi on the time-line. Israel has been restored to the land for some time (notice the return from Babylon which occurred in three stages, beginning about a century before Malachi was written). And, as so often happened in her history, Israel had grown cold to the Lord. The Malachites, like the Ephesians in the New Testament, were privy to much blessing of the Lord, and were warned against losing their early love of the Lord, lest His discipline would come upon them. It is clear that the Lord wants most of all our love of Him. He is not so interested in our being "religious" as He is in our taking delight in His Law. He is not so interested in fulfilling church duties as He is in whether we enjoy reading His word. He is not so interested in whether we give money regularly as He is in the attitude with which we give. He is not so interested in whether we award one another attendance pins and gold stars, as He is in whether we look forward to being together in His name, and whether we take the time to prepare ourselves for worship. He looks at your heart, dear ones, not at your clothes.

Malachi 1: 1-5: It is possible that the words "through Malachi" in 1:1 really should read, "through my messenger," which is their literal meaning. If this is the case, then Malachi was not the individual's name. It actually makes little difference however, since the writing is clearly inspired. So we will take the traditional route, and refer to the writer as Malachi.

It is interesting to note that Charles Spurgeon, the great English pastor of the last century, preached an entire sermon on just verse one of this chapter. It is a marvelous sermon, and I commend it to your reading sometime, on the burden ("oracle" in our versions) of preaching.

Now Israel was a privileged people at this point in their history, and it seems strange that God should have to defend His love for them. In fact

the notion of God defending Himself on any count, to man, seems pretty absurd. And yet, can you see that this shows God's patience with His people, and willingness to deal with them. The story of Lot is another example, particularly when Lot's uncle Abe (Abraham) pleaded with the Lord to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of a decreasing number of righteous folks (if he could find 50, then 45, then 40, then 30, then 20 and finally ten--even that number could not be found). But God was longsuffering! Now that story is in Genesis 18, near the beginning of revelation, and our story is in Malachi, near the end of the period of the old covenant. The need of the people of God is the same. They still need desperately for Him to be patient with them! Praise the Lord that He is not quick to speak, slow to hear and quick to anger as we often are!

So the Lord defends His love for His people...Would it not hurt you deeply, after ten or fifteen years, your little girl or boy should look up at you, after you tell them you love them, and says, " (snort),... how have you loved me?" This is the feeling the Lord must have felt. But He shows how He has kept the covenant He made with Jacob. The prophet appreciated that historical evidence is necessary to faith! Jacob was an insignificant man, but God delighted in loving Him! God's electing love is not a subject of the New Testament only (as is evident from a study of the O.T. word "h^esed", "loyal love.") Jacob is loved and Esau rejected--the rejection, by the way, ("but I have hated Esau"), is not human kind of hate, with resentment and animosity, but has to do with God's sovereign choice.

We should not forget though, the point which the Lord is demonstrating: He has loved Jacob (his name later was changed to Israel) not out of anything Jacob has done to deserve His love, but out of His mercy! The people of Edom, the traditional foes of Israel (cf. Obadiah, etc.) were under the judgement of Israel's God, even though in their own arrogance, they felt they would recover from it. Let Israel take note, and rejoice in her privileges, instead of feeling sorry for herself. When we turn inward and feel sorry for ourselves, the first thing that goes is our sense of spiritual perspective. Let us never forget the greatness of God's love for us in His chosen Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ! "You will see it with your own eyes and say, "Great is the Lord--even beyond the borders of Israel!" (1:5, NIV) Great is the Lord--even beyond the front door of Dartmouth Bible Church!

Malachi 1: 6-14; Malachi was a bold man to try to bring home to the elite priestly class the deficiencies of their service. After all, who was he to speak from Yhwh, when the priests were already His messengers, supposedly? So he zooms in on those supposedly set apart for God's service--to the "ordained ministry," if you will.

Notice that God does not refute or deny the idea that He is Israel's Father. And God IS OUR FATHER. He is not some distant being. He is not merely the Great Mover. He is not the male counterpart of Mother Nature, and He is by no means "The Force." He is the Sovereign God that never changes, who but speaks and worlds come into or go out of existence, and He has chosen in His covenant love to be Father of Israel, a people who once were not! He has chosen to carry out the nearness and the vicinity of a Father. But He is also a master. He is our Father, dear ones, but He is also the one we humbly serve as bond-slaves. And Malachi writes from God, "Why do you disregard your true station,

and pretend that I am not really whom you know that I am?" The Lord reasons with His children. He seeks to show them their fallen state of coldness towards Him. The Hebrew of verse 7 is ordered emphatically, "Upon MY ALTAR, you are presenting defiled food." Its as if the Lord is trying to shake them back to their senses. Why go through the process of offering sacrifices if you don't really believe it has any meaning. The sacrificial system was given by God as an avenue and a test of faith. It was given so that the men of Israel would have a visible means of putting their faith in Yhwh and His forgiveness.

But the priests somehow had begun to think that it didn't matter how you ran the system, as long as you ran it. The system called for unblemished animals, but hey, God isn't really concerned with trivialities right? I'll just keep the best for myself, and let Him have the leftovers, right? He's not concerned with the particulars of worship just whether I'm in the system generally...a little idolatry here, a little laziness there, God is big enough to overlook the little things, right? My friends, that is the kind of thinking that makes God angry. I have no intention of being a "fire and brimstone" preacher, but when a subject comes up in the Scriptures that enrages the Lord God of Hosts, let us fear that subject. God says, If I am a master, where is my respect (literally "fear")?"

And then with marvelous insight, and a tad of divine irony, the Lord suggests that the priests try this way of paying tribute out on the secular governor. And how about us? If we were to stand before the President, and He were to come into the room, would we really say, "Hey Ronnie, what's happenin'?" If President Reagan invited you to the Whitehouse, would you say, "Don't call me. I'll call you." Or if you went, even, would you wear a T-shirt and cutoffs?

The point is that when we just go through the motions of Christianity, we displease the Lord greatly. And it is a great disrespect. After all, the Sovereign God has come to meet you. When we just go through the mechanical duties of worship, it is as if we are saying, "God, you aren't really important enough for me to take this or that meeting seriously." And the Lord grieves...Keith Green has a song in which he says,

"Jesus rose from the dead, And you--you can't even get out of bed!"

I read to you a couple of weeks back what John Stott says, "Christians believe that true worship is the highest and noblest activity of which man, by the grace of God, is capable." Worship is giving back to God what is His. Verses 9 and 10 say something about motivation in worship. Do you come here to get something? I daresay if you are honest you will say yes. And that is not bad. We do make requests of the Lord in our worship. We depend on the fact that the Lord WANTS to be gracious to us. But is our attitude one of grudging? The Lord would rather have the doors of Dartmouth Bible Church shut permanently, than to watch us slide into just another religious meeting house. We may be the only Baptist-Bible church in Dartmouth history (which stretches back to 1664), but God has enough buildings where the people go through the motions thinking that that satisfies God. What an incredible insult to Him. Do you think that by doing your religious duty once or twice a week (some don't even do that), that the Creator God is appeased. Do you think that by giving an offering that amounts to 10.00000% of your gross, that God will be happy?

Why did Jesus pronounce the two widow's mites worth "more than all the contributors to the treasury?" Because the attitude with which we come to worship God (be it here, or on Wed. night, or whenever you do something for God), is the most important thing.

How graphic! Notice the attitude that the priests had fallen into; in their performance of the Table of the Lord (this is the sacrificial altar, not the Lord's Table of the New Covenant--although surely there are certain parallel applications), they had come to consider it a drag. "My, how tiresome it is!" "And you disdainfully sniff at it." Here the Hebrew means "to breath in contempt." Sort of like how you would sniff if someone walked by who did not smell too particularly pleasant. That is how the priests had come to regard the worship system and duties.

Also displeasing to the Lord is the idea of contributing money that is gotten dishonestly or dishonorably. Now you may say, "I would never put stolen money into the collection box--I would never steal money!" And I certainly hope not. But carry the ethic beyond the obvious, please. What about money or goods given that are gotten through cheating, or extortion or fudging a little on the old tax return, and then atoning for it by thinking, well, I'll just give some of that to the Lord...

Brethren, what the Lord wants is indicated in Hebrews 13:15:

"Through him (Christ) then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips that give thanks to His name."

And I think that is what we are trying to do. But let us remember that simply going through the motions of religious life is grievous to the Lord. Jesus often let the Pharisees have it for this. Do you remember the story of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18? The attitude of the publican is the desirable one, "God be merciful to me a sinner." This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

Some applications:

1. Realize that God loves you, if you are a Christian. Do not allow yourself to be blinded by selfishness, or by a cold heart. Keep your heart warm for God.
2. Realize that your best belongs to God (actually, that ALL THAT YOU HAVE is His). Give Him your best.
3. When it comes to time and money, give cheerfully, "for God loves a cheerful giver."
4. The cure for growing weary of Christian duty is repentance!

If you are not a Christian, if you have never met the Sovereign God as your Savior at the cross of Christ, then you really cannot worship Him. You can become His child and His true worshipper simply by receiving the gift of eternal life, and by asking Christ to save you. Then all the joys and peace and freedom of the Holy Spirit are yours. And then you can enjoy His presence in true worship.

THE PRIESTHOOD AND THE MINISTRY

Malachi 2: 1-9

Introduction: In the early 1800s, in Scotland there lived a little boy named Bobby Moffat. And one day Bobby was in church with his family, and the collection plate was being passed around the pews. When the plate got to Bobby he got up out of the pew and placed the plate on the ground, and then proceeded to step into the plate. Now in most situations like this the lad would then be taken outside and probably chastised within an inch of his life! But what little Bobby was saying was that he had no money, but he wanted to give his whole life to Jesus. And that is exactly what he did, for he later was to become a very famous missionary to Africa, translated the entire Bible into Bechuana, provided the natives with hymns and whole books in their language, and explored deep into Africa (at that time called the "Dark Continent," and later became the father-in-law to David Livingstone! His devotion to Christ began at an early age, and manifested itself for many years by extraordinary acts of ministerial zeal. A man like this was the other end of the spectrum from the post-exilic priests that God deals with in Malachi's day!

Several weeks back, I read a quote from Dr. John Stott, where he says, "Christians believe that true worship is the highest and noblest activity of which man, by the grace of God, is capable." I think that this is true. Worship is a privilege, and should be thought of as such, particularly with all the freedom we have in this dispensation in HOW we worship! But for the Malachite priests, it had become a bore. In chapter 1 and verse 13, God says that they "disdainfully sniff" at the table of the Lord's worship. The Hebrew word here means to "breathe in contempt" or, how you might react if somebody walked by you who didn't smell too good. That is the depth to which the official worship of God in Israel had fallen. Let's read now verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2.

Verses 1 through 3: Now the Lord zeros in on His own priests--the men who are supposedly set apart for His service, who are of all Israel to be the most exemplary of personal discipleship and being in love with Yhwh God. We should note here that ministers in this age are not priests! The idea of a clerical priesthood is a pagan one which crept into the church in the centuries after Constantine legalized Christianity. In fact the Bible says:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness and into His marvellous light." (I Peter 2:9)

"...He has made us to be a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (Rev. 1:6)

So let us never fall into the misconception that there is something in Malachi that only applies to the ordained ministry. It applies to all of us. And I think the implication here is that God's patience is coming to an end, and that His judgement is pending.

Note the premium that the Lord places on listening. Sometimes it is so easy for us to argue with the Lord. We say, "well, what about this Lord, what about that..." and we make great excuses. But the Lord says, "Just listen--and I'll tell you what's what." Now I think that we don't like

to hear that any more than the post-exilic priests. But sometimes we need to just shut-up before the Lord, and let Him do the talking. And then when we have heard Him, to take it to heart! The Christian life does have rules for us. The Lord wants us to live a certain way, and to try to live that way all the time! But when our hearts grow cold, I think He will withhold His blessing. He may do it through your job, and through the compensation you receive (that is the statement in verse 2), or He may withhold His blessing in other ways (your ministry, your family). This is because when He disciplines us it is to draw us back to Him--not to get back. Even when His covenant children grow cold and heartless to Him, the Lord still keeps His love for them--He still remembers His "h^es^ed"-love!

In the scarifices to God, there were three parts of the animal. There was the choice part which was to be given to the Lord. There were other acceptable portions which were to be given to the priests for their own sustenance, and then there was the offal, the entrails, the detestable part of the animal with all that goes with the entrails. This part was to be discarded and burned. But this is the part that the priests were offering up in sacrifices. They said, "God isn't concerned with the trivialities of worship--it doesn't matter HOW we worship, as long as the system is in operation." And this is what enraged the Lord. Verse 3 is rather a revolting idea, but it is how the Lord responded to their idea of worshipping Him.

How tragic it is today too, when a man stands up behind a pulpit as a spokesman of God, and doesn't give God's pure truth. What a sad age we live in, in this respect, that with more churches than the world has ever known, and most of them espousing man's wisdom, and neglecting God's! I cannot for the life of me understand why anyone would want to go to church at all, if he wasn't going to hear God's truth in the Scripture. So many preachers today are lukewarm, watering down the Word, disciples of the Great Happy Medium! And God says, "that makes Me sick!"

Verses 4 through 7: Now the Lord reminds them of the covenant He made with the tribe of Levi to be His priests. When judgement comes on them, and everything has gone wrong, they will remember what they were there for in the first place. God sends His discipline from time to time, when we need it, so that His promises will continue. God is not just interested in evening the score. When it comes to His children, He wants to draw them back. This is the beautiful thing about covenant theology. Long ago God made a promise to His people, that they would be His people. That promise does not extend to those who do not know Him. You have to be in the family! But for His children, even when His discipline comes, it is for a positive goal, "that my covenant may continue with Levi..."

In his book Men In Mid-Life Crisis, Jim Conway paints the typical picture of how we sometimes think of our God:

"The mid-life man pictures God leaning over the banister of Heaven, grinning fiendishly and pointing a long, bony finger as he says, 'You despicable, disgraceful Christian! You are the worst possible example of a mature man. You are selfish. You are filled with lust. You are lazy. You are so disgusting...' " (p. 67)

We need to remember that the Lord's designs for His people are positive! He does not intend for us to simply rot on the shelf. When we grow cold

in our devotion to Him--when coming to church, sharing our faith, loving the saints, honoring Him on the job, or in the home become chores for us, I think He's going to do something to shake us up a little. He might hold His blessing back on something you are doing. He might turn something a little sour. But its to get your attention. He'll say, "Hey, remember Me? I called you out of slavery in Egypt. I called you out of slavery to sin. Please love Me!"

Some of the Levitical priests in earlier years did love Him. Look at verses 5 through 7. This is what the Lord wanted in a man who would serve Him in the temple. Phinehas was just such a man. Let's look for a moment at Numbers 25, and read verses 1-13. The abiding thing was that Phinehas loved the law and word of God. The story is gruesome, but its greatest tragedy lies in the coldheartedness of Israel. The Lord wanted priests who would "walk with Him in peace and uprightness," and Phinehas was one like that. So was Jesus. Hebrews tells us that Jesus was the consummate priest. Oh, He didn't wear the dress of the priestly class, He didn't make daily sacrifices for the people, and He didnt have "Rev" in front of His name. But He made a lasting (and permanent, in fact) sacrifice on behalf of His people. And made an atonement for them that fully satisfied the holiness and the justice of God.

Notice also, that the ministry of God's people should include the preserve knowledge and instruction. Whenever I hear a Christian brother or sister say something like, "Don't give me doctrine, give me Jesus," I start to get nervous. Because its not like only a few of us are theologians, you know! Everyone is a theologian. Some are good, and some are sloppy--but everyone has their own theology. And those who take to themselves the office of teacher in the church had better have a right theology, based on truth, if they are going to try to be messengers of God. I start to shake in my boots when someone starts a church, or take to himself the authority of leadership, and does not concern himself with what is true and what is not true in theology. Of course its much easier to just go through the motions of worship and ministry. But the true priests in the Old Testament were those who diligently took their office seriously. New Testament priests, that's you guys--are under no less an obligation.

Teachers of the Word are also to be available for counseling and encouragement in applying Biblical truth to everyday life. They are not just to be ivory tower scholars, heads tucked into the clouds, and uninvolved with the people. Jesus' example of spending large amounts of time with the people, and with His disciples, speaks to this too. When you think about future leaders for our church, you should look for men who are already ministering, already helping folks to keep the Lord's ways.

Verses 8 and 9; Now Malachi comes back to the present and tells them again that apostasy from godliness and God's truth will result in shame and judgement. James says, "Let not many of you become teachers, for they shall incur the stricter judgement." This is because usually someone who people will listen too can often speak with authority or convincingly. All the more reason to be careful with the content of what we teach. These priests had caused many to stumble by their teaching, and it was very displeasing to the Lord.

Also, they had showed partiality in the execution of God's Law. This is an easy thing to fall into because we tend to show more mercy to those we care more about, or with whom we are personally involved. I was involved with counseling a teenaged girl in Virginia who it turned out later was addicted to drugs and selling her body to pay for it. The senior pastor told me this but I would not believe it. To date anyway, my efforts to rescue her have proved fruitless, and I wonder if it is in part due to my failure to come down harder on her when she was in the youth program I was running. I really liked her folks, and thought they should be the heavies. We cannot afford to be partial with the Word of God. It must apply the same to all. To the rich and to the poor. To leaders and to followers. To the young and to the old. That is the nature of truth--you cannot escape its grasp.

Paul, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, testified to his attempt (and success) to properly minister without partiality. Acts 20: 27, 31 tell us

"For I did not shrink from declaring unto you the whole purpose of God...Therefore be on the alert, remembering that day and night for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears."

We may not have the largest church or the largest church-budget. We may not always have happy-face buttons on, but brethren; Sunday School teachers, those among you who share your faith, deacons, let us remember that pleasing God is the only thing that really matters.

Do you remember Francis Havergal's hymn "Take My Life and Let It Be"?

Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord, to Thee.
 Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless
 praise.
 Take my voice and let me sing, always only for my King.
 Take my lips and let them be, filled with messages from
 Thee.
 Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.
 Take my intellect and use, every power as thou shalt
 choose.
 Take my will and make it thine, It shall be no longer mine.
 Take my heart, it is thine own; It shall be Thy royal
 throne.

GOD'S FAMILY REFLECTED IN YOUR FAMILY

Malachi 2: 10-16

Introduction: I have always considered it a real privilege to be an American. When you look at the world around you and realize all the abundance in goods, services and possessions we have-- not to mention the freedom to go, do, and worship as we please, you have to thank the Lord for the privilege of living in this land, in this century.

But our country is sick. Many have bought into the idea that as long as we strive for ethical goodness, as long as we try to recognize the universal rights of men to personal freedom, then our country will survive. It is sad to me to see people putting all their hope in "the American Way." Once again, don't get me wrong--I am a loyal American. But the prevalent notion today in our land seems to be that there are no absolutes. We hear on all sides-- "What's right for you may not be right for me, and vice versa." "I'm OK--You're OK." "Live and let live." The only problem with this thinking, as attractive as it may sometimes seem, is that there is a holy God who doesn't and hasn't changed. The God who spoke from the burning bush to Moses some 3,500 years ago, who spoke through Malachi some 2,400 years ago, who came to earth in the person of His Son Jesus some 2,000 years ago, who breathed out the Scriptures in that same generation--He hasn't changed in His wishes for mankind! This is something of a strange idea in our age of information and data transferral at incredible speeds--we somehow think that because men are learning at such an incredible speed in this century, well, God must be "evolving" too! Surely He doesn't still hold us to those silly laws he gave old Moses on the mountain does He? Preposterous! We are much more sophisticated today! After all, everyone knows all the Mosaic Law amounted to was some antiquated rules for temple worship and some silly shellfish ordinances, right? God couldn't still actually want us to heed all that could He? He doesn't really expect me to live my whole life with just one woman, does He? That would contradict my need to self-actualize!

But God does expect us to honor our marriage vows. He has not changed one iota since He said, "Let Us make man in our image..," and then, "It is not good for the man to be alone." This is the wrong thinking about God in our age--When He designed marriage, it wasn't part of the thinking of an immature God! He hasn't grown and He hasn't learned because He has always been perfect, all-knowing and all-sufficient. The trouble is really, that our sinful minds keep forgetting this. We tend to think in America today that every time we come up with a new way to rebel against God's Law, well, God is just going to have to adjust His thinking, that's all...and actually, all the "new-fangled" morality of our age isn't new at all--take the post-exilic priests in Israel for example: they had gotten this idea that divorce wasn't really all that bad, in fact. In fact, it's really not all that bad if we marry non-believers the second go-'round. And this is the subject of our exposition this morning.

Malachi 2: 10-12 This section opens up with the main "super-structure truth" of all of Israel's existence--God is the covenant-Father of all of the believing children of Jacob and Abraham. And He is therefore

vitaly interested in the practice of brotherly loyalty within the community of His people. Irresponsible behavior profaned the covenant that He had made with them. Already this truth has bearing on us. We do not usually call ourselves Israel, but we are God's people in this age by calling, name, and profession. His expectations on us are no less (but rather more, since we have the benefit of a fully written revelation in the Bible). There ought to be a deep sense of loyalty within the fellowship of the brethren--not what we too often find in today's churches: folks almost looking for a reason to leave one church and go to another! I was greatly encouraged by the comment made to me by another evangelical pastor in town, who said that he and his leadership team make it a practice to gently try to nudge any wayward (without just cause) folks from other churches back to their "home churches," out of loyalty to what the Lord is doing in that congregation. And this compelling sense of loyalty is to bind us to our wives for life too, brethren.

Notice that in verse 11 some rather extreme language is used--it gets our attention! What we will see is divorce, is called by God "treachery." That's how God views it. And the particular circumstance here is when a man deals in this way with his wife. The word in this verse translated "sanctuary" is the Hebrew word "qodesh" and it literally means "holiness." God views divorce by a man of his wife as a vile defilement of a holy, or perfect thing which He created and presided over. In our discussion this morning we are going to confine the idea to divorce among Christians, but the truth applies to all men. God grieves, I believe, even when non-Christians divorce, because marriage was given as a divine institution to all men, not just the church or Israel.

Since 1900 divorce has increased in America 700%. In 1975 there were over one million divorces or reported annulments involving approximately 1.2 million children, double the reported breakups in 1966 and nearly three times that of 1950. It is now estimated that four or five out of every ten children born in the 1970s will spend part of their childhood in a one-parent family. The results of a 1978 survey reveal that the main cause of loneliness in adults is the experience they had as children under six years of age whose parents divorced--and were by far the loneliest of adults (Human Nature magazine, Feb. 1979). And among the children of divorced parents, a University of Virginia professor concluded after a five year study that "small boys are the worst victims of divorce and their painful attempts to adjust often lead them into a mutually destructive conflict with their mothers" (Dads Only, Vol. 2, No. 9, Sept. 1979). There are a multitude of reasons why 2,400 years ago God warned Israel that those who went ahead with divorce for wicked reasons would be under a curse.

Malachi 2: 13,14 The problem in Israel in 440 B.C. was compounded when those doing these things didn't even see their wickedness. And remember this is WITHIN the camp of God's people--not a heathen blindness in those who had no word from God directly. They would go about their daily affairs as if nothing had changed. They would stop on by the temple to offer up a sacrifice or two, and then when they found that the quarter wouldn't go in the machine, they would cry and say "What's wrong??!" Excessive displays of emotion do not move God when not accompanied by Biblical repentance. Weeping and wailing would achieve nothing before God for these men of Israel, because their own moral wrong was hindering access to God Himself. The ancient Babylonian Law of Hammurabi decreed that marriage was a legal contract, but in Israel

it was a covenant to which God was a witness. It was a solemn promise that God (if nobody else) took seriously. So it remains today.

In verse 14 there are three phrases to describe the injured party in this indictment: "the wife of your youth," "your companion," and "your wife by covenant." The point is clear--God will listen to the petition of injured innocence before unwilling and feeble attempts to console Him. Or, as the commentator Thomas Moore put it,

The mute supplication of a sacrifice may rise to invoke a blessing on the offerer; but above it, and rising first to heaven, is the language of injured innocence that calls down a curse on the man who has wronged the helpless and confiding wife of his youth.
(page 133)

The verse tells Israel : "She whom you thus wronged was the companion of those earlier and brighter days, when in the bloom of her young beauty she left her father's house and shared your early struggles, and rejoiced in your later success; who walked arm in arm with you along the pilgrimage of life, cheering you in its trials by her gentle ministry; and now, when the bloom of her youth has faded and the friends of her youth have gone, when father and mother whom she left for you are in the grave, then you cruelly cast her out as a worn-out worthless thing, and insult her holiest affections by putting an idolator and a heathen in her place." (Moore, pp. 134, 135) This was a grave wickedness, for the anger of God is especially kindled at the oppression of the lowly and helpless!

Here is the point: God has a people in the world bound to Him by special relations--an everlasting promise, or covenant. By virtue of this fact those people of His are bound by special relations to each other. The violation of these relations is a violation of their relations to Him. The Church is still one family of God and bound before God to act thusly in all the dealings of its members with each other.

Also, the word "companion" in verse 14, is often used in the masculine of a close friend with whom interests, good and bad, are shared. The word is used only here in the Old Testament of a wife. Malachi is the quiet witness to a mutually satisfying relationship in marriage which, though begun in youth, does not become jaded with the passing of time.

Malachi 2: 15,16 The Hebrew of verse 15 is very difficult. The NASB translates it "Not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit." The NIV has it "Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His." This is a case where a simple change in the Hebrew pointing (the dots and dashes under the Hebrew letters) changes the words from "remnant" and "flesh". In any case, the idea comes across that only when both parents remain faithful to their marriage vows can the children be given the security which provides the basis for godly living. Malachi urged that for their own good, none should become faithless to the wife of his youth. Some might say today that this ethic is only for strong Jews, or Roman Catholics. But clearly it is for us who call ourselves by God's name.

In Texas there is a judge who refuses to grant divorces during the month of December. "I don't like playing Scrooge," he says. He doesn't like depriving kids of their parents, especially at that time of the year.

Verse 16 sums up the whole matter. Divorce is a complicated issue. When one does occur, there are so many questions to be answered, so many things to deal with. But the bottom-line about how God feels about it is in this verse. "For I hate divorce" says the Lord the God of Israel. The problem we face today was also faced in Israel 440 years before Christ came: a man takes a wife, marries her, lives with her, raises a family, and then puts her away from himself for a younger woman. It is sad--it is tragic...

But this morning we want to end on a happier note. I sincerely hope with all my heart and mind that this never becomes anything more than sermon material in Dartmouth Bible Church. Because I intend for us to have a continual emphasis on husband-wife relations. When you begin to feel your marriage slipping, get counsel, read good books on Christian marriage, go to marriage enrichment seminars, get on your knees and pour your heart out to God--do anything it takes to keep your marriage warm before God, and in the Holy Spirit. All of us should work on several things:

1. Keep the spiritual and emotional health of your family (starting with your relationship to your mate) on the very top of your priority list.
2. Become informed about the mid-life crises that both men and women have to face. The more you know about it, the easier it will be to be prepared when physical, emotional and mental changes begin to occur. The best weapon of course, is your own continued growth in grace. Jim Conway's book Men in Mid-Life Crisis, and the companion volume written by his wife are extremely helpful.
3. Make time for your wife, men. Make time for your husband, women! You may say "I can't afford the time, with my busy schedule..." You can't afford to NOT take the time!
4. Stay out of the way of tempting situations or relationships. Most affairs begin with casual acquaintances, then building to friendships. "Be sober. Be vigilant. Your adversary the devil stalks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may eat!"
5. Don't let your pride blind you. If you are struggling with a problem in your family (or any area of life) get good counsel. The man who is drowning, and goes under shouting "I can swim OK," has only his pride to go down with him.
6. As you work on your marriage, regardless of how you are wired temperamentally, you will gradually knit your heart to your mate's. For some it may take longer than others, but the Lord wills for you to be happy in marriage, not miserable. His Spirit will bless your efforts to honor and cherish your partner.

Finally, it is important to remember once again that the world around us right now seems to be going out of its way to tell us that marriage is an outdated concept. But let's also remember that when we obey the Lord in the marriage He has given us, the unchangeable Sovereign God is pleased, and gives us His applause!

"WHERE IS THE GOD OF JUSTICE?"

Malachi 2:17 - 3:6

Introduction It often seems that we are living in an age of disillusionment. Old clichés just don't seem to hold water any more, for some reason: "Everything works out OK in the end." "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." "God helps those who help themselves." "Power to the people--right on!!" "E Pluribus Unum." Even a saying like "God loves you," seems very overused and trite to some. And it is a national sickness, this cynicism that our country faces today. It is not unlike the feeling that was pervading in Israel in the fifth century before Christ. With all the treachery around us, one might be tempted to ask, "Where is the God of justice? I don't see Him reigning on earth! I don't see this supposed 'love of God' doing much around me or in my life!" And that is just what was being felt and said in Israel in the time of Malachi...

Malachi 2:17 Chapter three should really begin here because this verse is the question to which the next six verses are an answer. (Note: the chapter divisions of our English Bible are not inspired--they were not added until about the year 1228 A.D. The verse divisions didn't come along until around the year 1551 A.D.)

The question is asked, upon God's statement that He is growing weary of their sinful petitions, "How have we wearied Him?" You will remember from your history of the Old Testament that at this point decades had passed since the rebuilding of the Temple; but no supernatural event had marked the return of the Lord to Zion, as it had when He originally inhabited Solomon's Temple. God's delays on this were taken in Israel as an excuse for atheism. Not only were they essentially denying His existence with the question "Where is the God of justice?" but they were also guilty of blaspheming, when they went so far as to sarcastically suggest that, in fact, the Lord really gets a kick out of evil. This is what it means to blaspheme: to say something about God which is not true. And these people's faith had utterly failed them through the years, and they had fallen into a cynical state of disbelief. The skepticism of our age is not dissimilar, and the attitudes of Christians can fall prey to this kind of disbelief if we do not seek to keep our walks with Christ fresh and vital. God is not indifferent to human conduct--He is not unfeeling or unconcerned about the plight of the weak and helpless, as we shall see...

Malachi 3: 1-3 The Lord wanted it made clear that not only was He very much active, but in fact would be coming to the earth to His Temple. The language of verse 1 is reminiscent of Isaiah 40:3;

"A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God'."

The word "Behold" in the original text really says "Behold Me." He is saying "Look here, Israel! I'm going to send someone before Me--and he's going to get you ready!" I always like to look at it this way; when you are expecting a guest at your house whom you hold some respect for, how do you get ready? If you're like me you probably vacuum, pick up things

and put them away, dust the furniture, etc. Well, that's the same idea about getting ready for the Lord's coming. In Malachi's day they were looking for two comings of Messiah (although I am not too sure how many in Israel fully understood the idea of two comings). In our day we are looking for the second coming of Jesus Christ. And we ought to be getting ready!

Now the messenger in Malachi 3 is, I think, John the Baptizer, whom we meet just before the first coming of Messiah. His message to Israel was one of the need to repent, that is, to change their direction as far as the things of God were concerned. And here in verse 1, the Lord refers to Himself as "the Lord," and the "messenger of the covenant." It is God's intention all through the Bible to keep His promises to His people. But here He notes with irony that He is coming suddenly, the very one that they supposedly seek and in whom they supposedly delight. His coming might not be at all what they want or expect--because it would include discipline and judgement for them, not just seeming vindication of their wounds.

There is no study we can undertake more exciting than that of the coming of Yhwh God! He came in Christ--He is coming again in Christ! The very fact that the Sovereign, all-wise, personal God would even consider coming to earth is a thought too magnificent for many great thinkers! It boggles the mind to think of God being interested in the affairs of men, in being concerned enough, and loving mankind enough to call out for Himself a people of His own...He is the covenant God--the "b'rith" (covenant) keeper. And this section I think speaks of His second coming ("suddenly"). It will be a time of answering for the wrongs in our midst. For Christians there will be no final judgement since our sins have been paid for but if you are not a Christian, you have a rational and realistic reason to fear the wrath of God. Now it is popular today to believe that the idea of divine wrath is not necessary--such was not the case a couple of hundred years ago. But God is not only a loving God and a gracious God, and a merciful God; He is also a just and a holy God. Therefore His justice must be satisfied. And the judgement of God is given to Christ to perform:

"For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgement to the Son." (John 5:22)

Even (or we should say, especially) for Christians suffering is part of the divine plan to remove impurities of character. When everything is going easy--no problems, life is a "piece of cake"--isn't it easier to forget the Lord, to rely on yourself, and in a sense to grow fat and out of shape from a spiritual standpoint? The commentator Thomas Moore notes,

"Afflictions are God's refinings. The purer the gold, the hotter the fire; the whiter the garment, the harder the washing...The prayer that rises from the broken and contrite heart is often the sweetest offering to God. The incense must be put on the burning coals before it's fragrant smoke will ascend; the sandal wood must be crushed and bruised before it will give out it's sweetest odor."

The picture of a refiner is a persistent one in the prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are all fond of this figure. Another writer notes that

"The beauty of this picture is that the refiner looks into the open furnace, or pot, and knows that the process of purifying is complete

and the dross all burnt away, when he can see his image plainly reflected in the molten metal." (J. Neil, Everyday Life in the Holy Land, p.163.)

The purpose of divine discipline when it comes, is to draw us back to the fellowship we can and should have with the Lord. He does not take delight in bringing difficulties into the lives of His people, but He will do whatever it takes to bring you to the point that your worship is acceptable to Him again. Some of you grow exasperated in the attempt to get a child to not do one thing and to do another. If your child disobeys you, you don't take him out and shoot him! No! You discipline though enough times until he begins to get the idea of what pleases you. The same is true of God--the difference being that He always meters out the exact amount and kind of discipline, and is infinitely more patient than us.

Malachi 3: 4-6 The bottom-line of the Christian life is this: Does your life please God? Do you delight in doing what He wants--do you run through the motions, or are you concerned with the fact that God really enjoys your fellowship with Him in Christ? Think back to when you first became a Christian, and it was all so real to you! That's the way the Lord wants it to remain.

The sins listed in verse 5 are sins I think committed by those who already know the Lord. He is not here speaking of judgement on the heathen. These are things that Christians are quite capable of. Read the list. There will be no negotiating on these things--the word "swift" would be better translated "expert." Malachi is the faithful minister who is here facing his people with the possibility of ultimate rejection, but hopes all the time to win them. It isn't an easy task he has. I remember a friend of mine, a pastor in Virginia, took a church to become it's pastor, and the previous pastor had been there for forty years--and was a woman. And she remained in the church after he came. He told me that probably the only Christians in the church besides he and his wife, were some of the kids in the youth group. Every Sunday morning was a new experience for Larry. But in time he won quite a few for the Lord, and now the church is growing. The Lord has a special way to weed out the wickedness that lies still within the breast of His people.

Notice the basis of Israel's hope, even in light of pending judgement: "For I am the Lord. I do not change..." This is marvelous! Even if we change, He doesn't. He still loves us! He still maintains His covenant--affection for His people! This is part of why I believe that a Christian cannot lose his salvation; my hope is not laid up in the changableness of my feelings toward the Lord. He has saved me by His grace in the cross of Jesus Christ. That transaction doesn't change. If my sin has gone to Christ on Calvary, and His righteousness appropriated to me, then I can hope that the final contract has been signed. The Lord does not renig on the deal, and even though I might, Christ doesn't either. My salvation is dependent on how powerful the cross event was...not on how long I can stay on the cutting edge of the "Jesus movement."

But for us brethren, we need to be wary of growing cold in our hearts, which blurs our spiritual vision, and makes us think untrue thoughts

about God--a thing which deeply grieves Him. It is not enough to simply be taken up with the current wave of interest in eschatology. You musn't simply view the coming of the Lord as for what you can get out of it. Because He is coming as a judge, and as a righter of wrong. No small amount of evil has been accomplished in the world in the name of Christian religion. Dear ones, the attitude you and I need to have is to love His appearing, with no self-righteousness in our hearts and no wickedness in our hands. When we meet Jesus in the air, or at Mt. Zion, let us weep tears of joy that we are His by grace!

And for now, let us ward off any tendency to be cynical or to feel disallusioned about the Lord and His people. Let us worship together in gladness and sincerety of heart!

If you have never received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you can by simply asking Him to change your life and to save you from your sin, and from your sins. It is simple--and then you will be in the company of other saved sinners, whose total hope is bound to the power of His blood, and who look for His appearing!

THE LORD LONGS TO BLESS

Malachi 3:6-12

Introduction When you think of the Book of Malachi, what do you think of? The theme of this prophecy is really just impiety, which means the lack of duty and respect towards God. In other words, this book is on the theme of how not to do it! Malachi was writing to a bored generation of professing believers in Jehovah God of Israel. It is in essence a manual of the sort of things the Lord is displeased about. And the book covers a broad range of topics...and provides to the post-exilic generation in Israel real warnings. For us, in an age of free grace, it also is full of warnings, but it is also a guidebook, from a positive sense of the right way to govern our relationship with the Lord and with one another. Through this book especially, we can see how the Lord feels about the conduct of His children. If you think of God as a being without emotion, your thinking is stoic and unbiblical. Now God's feelings and emotions (those are probably vastly inferior words to describe Him), are not like ours. He is not fickle, flighty, capricious or inconsistent in His affections. He does not have "good days" and "bad days." He does not get depressed, in the way that we think of it, and He doesn't have feelings of ambivalence--that is, feelings of love and hate for the same object, the way we can. But on the other hand, He is not the unfeeling, deterministic, coldly calculating FORCE He has suffered the reputation of being (due to no acts on His part).

In the Bible we see a God who delights in blessing those who are His own children. It is true that He reserves judgement for those who reject Him, and that when Christ comes again to earth, He will come as the Just Righter of Wrong, which will be a terror to His enemies... But note that in Scripture the emphasis is not on this aspect of God. In a nutshell, the Bible is the story of God's calling out for Himself a people who, though they do not deserve to be called by His family name, nevertheless, He loves them and cares for their needs. Remember what God said to Israel in Malachi 3:6--"For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." You get the idea that though His people are up one day and down the next, in their love for Him-- up one generation and down the next-- God is still right there keeping His promises, and taking what love He can get from the objects of HIS sacrificial love. What a great God we worship, dear ones!

Malachi 3: 7a Now Malachi is far from idealizing past generations of Israelites and their devotion to God. While God consistently kept His promises, Israel seemed to weary regularly of keeping His statutes, the revealed will of God. In Zechariah 1 we have a similar appeal from God a generation earlier than Malachi;

"...This is what the Lord Almighty says, 'Return to Me,' declares the Lord Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty...Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices. But they would not listen or pay attention to Me...Then they repented and said, 'The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as He determined to do.' (Zech.1: 3-7) *NIV*

Is it not astonishing that the Creator-God is unchanging in His provision of opportunity for repentance?

The word for "return" here is the Hebrew word "shūb." It means to turn back from one course of action and onto the right one, and incorporates a change of mind. God calls to man to repent of his wicked ways ("bent" as C. S. Lewis calls it), and to return to Him. The Bible is rich in figures describing man's responsibility in the process of repentance;

"incline your heart unto the Lord your God" (Joshua 24:23)

"circumcise yourselves to the Lord" (Jer. 4:4)

"wash your heart from wickedness" (Jer. 4:14)

"break up your uncultivated ground" (Hosea 10:12)

All of these expressions are summarized in the word "shūb." It is the Christians duty to keep before himself his constant need to be repenting of sin, and I think that genuine repentance is the sign and result of Biblical preaching.

The great evangelical preacher George Whitfield in the eighteenth century mentioned in his journal that during his first voyage to Georgia, the ship's cook had a bad drinking problem. When he was reprovved of it, and other sins, he boasted that he would be wicked until the last two years of his life and then he would reform. Whitfield added that within six hours of the time the cook made his statement, he had died of an illness related to his drinking. The delay of changing his mind and actions cost the cook his life. The delay of repentance is always costly.

This word "return" in Malachi 3:7 is the twelfth most frequently used verb in the Old Testament, appearing over 1,050 times in various forms. It occurs 111 times in Jeremiah, 71 times in the Psalms, 68 times in Genesis, 62 times in Ezekiel and in I Kings, 61 times in II Chronicles 55 times in II Kings and 51 times in Isaiah. It is used roughly 164 times in specifically referring to the covenant community's need to return to God. The idea is illustrated most clearly, I think, in David's Psalm 51. The general idea of repentance is that sin is not an ineradicable stain; by turning a sinner can actually redirect his "destiny." So as you think of the Old Testament, do not think only of a God who pronounces "you are sinful." But think of Him as showing man his sin, and appealing for him to turn from it, and to RETURN to the peace and life of living for Jehovah God. The rest of this section of Malachi is an illustration of this point.

Malachi 3: 7b - 9 Here is another aspect of the worship of God in Israel that the people of God were miserably failing in. First, notice again that Israel seems totally unaware of their sin, and what they had fallen into, "But you say, 'How shall we return?' "

And then it is as if verse 8 is saying, "You wouldn't think that it would be possible to rob God, now would you? But that is what you are doing." And again they say, "Well how?" And God responds by telling them that they have ceased giving acceptable worship, and are withholding in their "tithes and offerings." Now a tithe, as most of you know I am sure, is a tenth of one's income. And the offering was the portion of the sacrifice that was set aside for the priests. When tithes went

unpaid the widow, the orphan and the sojourning stranger were among those who suffered. When no gifts of offerings were brought, the Levites had no option but to give up their ministry and earn their own living by farming, and such a thing was displeasing to the Lord, for the Levites you remember, had no inheritance in the land promises.

And the Lord then pronounced a curse (a fearsome thing) on the whole nation since it was the majority who were guilty of this. (vs.9).

What about for us who are Christians in the 20th century? Does God hold us to the legal obligation of tithing? Don't Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 14 apply to us too after all? Of course the whole Bible has binding power on us too. But the aspect of being under the Law of Moses has passed with Jesus' fulfillment of the Law. We are not commanded anywhere in the New Testament to pay tithes into the work of the church. And you would be surprised I think, at the number of Protestant churches that try to pass obligatory tithing off as a clear New Testament practice. The problem is that the concept is simply not in the New Testament. I invite you to investigate the sum total of New Testament passages which speak of tithing; Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42; Luke 18:12; Hebrews 7:7. I think that the idea of obligatory tithing is simply not there.

But that does not mean that the New Testament (or the Old Testament) are devoid of important principles on the subject of giving. On the contrary, the subject is dealt with quite fully by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. If you will study that section on your own I think you will see at least seven principles that apply to us:

1. Christians are to practice DEDICATED giving; that is, giving should come out of an attitude of one's whole life belonging to the Lord. (2 Cor. 8:5).

What you give to the Body of Christ should be dependent on how grateful you are to Christ. The attitude (which I do not think is prevalent around here at this point), "Keep your distance, church! Be grateful for what I give you. Don't get too demanding with me, and by the way, where is my receipt?" is not pleasing to the Lord. What the Lord has given us, with all due respect to the IRS, is not tax deductible.

2. Christians are to practice VOLUNTARY giving. (2 Cor. 8:3,12; 9:7) That is, we should be giving what WE decide to give--not what someone tells you too. Doesn't this cross the grain a little of the practices of some Christian groups and their fundraising techniques?

One writer put it this way: There are three kinds of givers--the flint, the sponge and the honeycomb. To get anything out of the flint you must hammer it and then you only get chips and sparks. To get water out of a sponge you must squeeze it, and the more you squeeze the more you get. But the honeycomb just overflows with its own sweetness.

3. Christians are to give SACRIFICIALLY. A pig and a chicken were walking down the street arguing about who made the biggest contribution to society, when they passed a sign which read "Ham and Eggs." The pig then said, "Now I've got you! You give out of your abundance, but with me its a real sacrifice." When we give sacrificially, the amount is not the important thing, how much it costs

you is! John Wesley is known for having determined his family's financial needs and then living at basically the same level of living for most of his life, even when his income went up substantially. The abundance went to the Lord's work.

4. Giving is to be PROPORTIONATE with what you have. (2 Cor.8:12). This is why it has always bothered me a little when some preacher or Christian organization tells us to pledge a certain amount, trusting God to supply. I am not sure this is advocating a totally responsible policy. I am all for trusting God to supply, and for personally committing oneself to supporting a missionary or good evangelical program. But I am not too sure we should put pressure on each other like that.

5. Giving is to be CHEERFUL. (2 Cor.9:7) What I think the Lord really delights in is the attitude which says, "Here Lord, please take this token of my love and gratitude for you." OR, "Lord, I am so excited about what you are doing in this or that ministry, that I would surely consider it a privilege if you would allow me by your provision and grace to help them out financially!" OR, "Lord, you have been so good to me--please let me help this person or family in need out!" Do you get a kick out of giving?

6. Giving is to be PRIVATE. (I Cor. 16:2). The private aspect of our offering box is good I think, although it does eliminate the corporate worship aspect of giving. Some churches have the deacons watch what goes into the collection plate. When someone puts in a dollar, the deacon says, "Amen." When someone puts in five dollars, the deacon says, "Hallelujah." And if someone puts in ten dollars, the deacon would then say, "Glory!" Well, such a practice may seem humorous, but I don't think it is too Biblical.

7. Giving is to be SYSTEMATIC. (I Cor 16:2). Here it was done on the first day of the week--regularly, and out of conviction (not just from the need of the moment).

Malachi 3: 10-12 These ideas are in line with what the Lord wanted from the hearts of the post-exilic Israelites. God's shovel is bigger than ours. He promised Israel (and us too) that if they honored Him first, and returned to Him what was His, He would bless them beyond what they could imagine. Their land would be blessed (vs.11) and their reputation would be blessed (vs.12).

East Berlin is communist controlled. West Berlin is free. One day some people in East Berlin took a truckload of garbage and dumped it over the Wall onto the Western side. The people of West Berlin could have done the same thing but instead, they took a truckload of canned goods, bread and milk and neatly stacked it on the East Berlin side of the Wall with a sign that read "EACH GIVES WHAT HE HAS." Its all in the attitudes, dear ones--all in the attitudes.

I think this church has an exceptional attitude generally about giving. But that does not mean we are immune from falling into wrong thinking and attitudes that make the Lord grieve...(in fact, I can't think of any sin that I consider myself immune from).

For Christians, our thinking about giving (whether it be in terms of money, or time, or attention to one another personally...) should be characterized by generosity and love and consistency and permanence-- in the same way that the Lord has dealt with you.

If you are not sure about whether you are a Christian or not, we would like you to not think about what you can give to the Church, but about the free gift you can receive. If you will repent from your old thinking about your standing before God, come to Him on His terms and trust Jesus Christ to be your sole hope in salvation, you will be freely given the peace that passes understanding, and the marvelous hope of eternal life.

THE END OF THE OLD COVENANT

Malachi 3:13-4:6

Introduction If you were the prophet Malachi, and you knew ahead of time that you were writing the last piece of inspired literature for a long time, what do you think you might write about? Would you chose to emphasize good and happy things? Or maybe you would prefer in your last few paragraphs to end on a strong doctrinal note--sort of a, "and don't forget this bit of theology, or that one..." Few of you (nor I) would probably think to write what this prophet wrote though! From early times attempts have been made to avoid the seemingly harsh ending that we have before us this morning. Some Greek manuscripts have intentionally placed verse 4 of chapter 4 AFTER verse 6. Hebrew liturgical use and still many Hebrew Bibles repeat verse 5 after verse 6. This simply goes to show that for some this ending of Malachi's prophecy was unpalatable. But we shall look at it this morning as it is in the text, and shall take our licks as they come.

As you will recall, Malachi was writing to a generation of Jews who had grown weary and bored with the worship of God, and the duties which go along with worshiping Him. They had neglected a number of areas in their devotion to Yhwh (Jehovah), and the Lord is telling them to get their acts together or He is going to bring about a judgement that will not soon be forgotten. But even amidst all the warning in this book there is the sweet alternative that God offers--their downfall does not HAVE to occur, if they turn back to Him, and begin again to be interested in His Law in their hearts. This, in all ages, is what the Lord wants from His people! He desires us to love Him, and to take delight in serving Him and seeking Him faithfully. He is not so interested I think in our ABILITY, as in our AVAILABILITY.

When Malachi put down his pen at the conclusion of this prophecy, no pen would again be taken up under Jehovah's prodding, until Mark would pen his Gospel (or possibly Paul would write Galatians). That is an interval of almost five centuries. It would be a long time before the culmination of the Old Covenant would come, when John the Baptist shows up on the scene and announces the coming of the Lamb of God! Note: the Roman Catholic Bible includes in it some 13 additional books, supposedly dating from this intertestamental period. They have been judged by many though to not be inspired of God (though not without value), and are rejected by the Hebrew Bible that most scholars use, the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.

One might speculate on why God remained silent for so long. But in fact He was not silent, having left His voice in the whole Old Testament, and wanting to see if Israel would develop a life of faith, what He wanted in them all along. In general, they did not, and the national religion degenerated greatly (and tragically) by the time of Jesus.

Malachi 3: 13-15 The purpose of this last section of Malachi is to exhort us to live in the light of the last day. Injustices and inequalities are to be seen in the light of final judgement. Then, the difference between the man who serves God and the man who does not will be eminently clear! Real innocence and real guilt will be exposed and the opportunity to repent will have passed. If you are bothered by the idea of final judgement; if you think that God is somehow going to

be casting into the lake of fire all these people who on the way in are crying, "I'm sorry! I see now! Please give me one more chance!"; well, it is not the case. No, but rather the attitude will be that illustrated in verse 13. There will be a bitter arrogance against God, even at the last moment. This is because it requires the residence of the Holy Spirit to repent. No man can turn to God and Christ except the Father draws him--and at the last day, the time of drawing will be over.

These Israelites had fallen again into a real kind of blasphemy as we see in verses 14 and 15. I think our modern society gives off this same odor in many quarters...Surely in the brief history of this country there has never been more cynicism, more open wickedness and more defiance of God. The attitude seems to be--there is no justice, everybody pretty much gets away with whatever he wants, well, if there is a God He must be supremely evil! And so it was in Malachi's time. And note here too that unguarded conversation seems to have spread throughout the land. What a little member the tongue is, and what great destruction it can wage! Sometimes too, remember, it is not just outright blasphemy that we too can fall into--but the communication of a less than sweet attitude. This is why it is all so important to the Body of Christ that we air our grievances, when we have them with one another.

Now I would ask you too, have you ever been tempted to grow disillusioned by the fact that you get no money for doing the work of the Lord? It is a total volunteer system--in fact, you actually end up putting money into the system! The Apostle Paul answers this question of compensation for labor in the ministry well; verse 14 asks the question-- and Paul in I Corinthians 15:58 answers it;

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

Malachi 3: 16-4:3 Notice here that the Lord pays attention to His children in a special way when they are speaking of Him. He listens in on our fellowship and takes great delight in our praising Him and exhorting one another to rely on His grace. This is sort of an early membership list here in this verse 16. It is a Biblical practice to mark out among ourselves those people who follow the Lord and love Him. This is not with a view towards creating some sort of "super-spiritual" club--since those most mature in Christ will be the humblest and meekest and least self-serving. But the most mature in the Body of Christ, those who "fear the Lord and esteem His name" will be recognized, if not officially, then by their ministry and reputation.

The idea that the Lord keeps a record of the names of His people occurs as early as the Exodus (cf. Ex. 32:32,33; Ps. 69:28; 87:6; Dan.12:1). But only Malachi calls it a "book of remembrance." The encouragement here is that not one believer will be forgotten by God--and isn't that really one of our greatest latent fears?

I have always considered it a sign of spiritual maturity when the things of Christ freely flow from a believer's lips--indeed, a sign of true regeneration! If an individual struggles with speaking about Christ, my heart sinks, even if they say with their mouth that they know Him. Even the naturally quiet will glow a little when you mention Jesus' name!

Is not verse 17 a sweet promise? The Lord considers us, if we are Christians, to be His "special treasure." Brethren, never let it be said in your hearing that the God of the Old Testament is a God of hate--simply remind them of this verse! God doesn't simply consent to save those who meet the condition, and then relegate them to some far corner of heaven--His elect, whether Jew or Greek, are His own special treasure. How would you respond if someone tried to take away from you your special treasure? You would fight with all that is in you! That is the attitude of the Sovereign-Creator God towards those who fear Him and love Him, and have trusted fully to HIS grace and righteousness!

Verse 18 offers us the reality of God's perspective--He does not struggle with blurred vision in the distinguishing of right and wrong. It is by no means unclear to Him who is righteous and who is wicked. He is not caught up as we are in this age in feeling that morality and ethics are really relative things. For Jehovah God, right is right and wrong is wrong--period. In the Lord's view, there are only two kinds of men on earth--He doesn't look at who's black and who's white. He doesn't look at who is upwardly mobile at their profession and who does the same job for forty years. And He simply doesn't judge "success" by the standards that we tend to. He simply records who fears Him and loves Him, and who rejects Him...

It is quite chic today in enlightened theological circles to simply find another meaning for this next verse! It surely cannot mean what it says--so, it must have some lesser meaning! But that is the thinking of the person who hasn't met the God who saves. For there to be a Savior, there must be something to be saved from! We do not know just how gracious the Lord will be on the day of judgement. We cannot calculate with much precision who will be there and who will not. I once heard a man say that when we get to heaven there will be three surprises--there will be some there who we thought for sure wouldn't get in--there will be some NOT there who we thought for sure would definitely be there. AND the biggest surprise will be that I AM THERE!

But we also can scarcely fathom the real terror of being found without Christ on that day! Brethren, let us live every minute in light of that fact that a day is coming when everything will be brought into the light. In chapter three, verse 2 the imagery was of a REFINING fire. Now the picture is of a fire which consumes and destroys--

AGAIN, if this bothers your sense of justice, remember that God did not invent wickedness. He would have had to send virtually none of this prophecy to Malachi if sin had not entered the world. He didn't start the world's woes;(He created a beautiful world in perfect balance and in perfect harmony and happiness)--but He will surely arrange for the END of the world's woes--and that is the destruction and separation from Himself of those not bathed in the imputed righteousness of His Son.

There is nothing but victory, and happiness and full healing for those who flee to Christ and cling to the cross of Calvary. The last day will be day of weeping and joy for the redeemed. It will be a day of fire and terror for the reprobate, who spurn God's offer of salvation.

Malachi 4: 4-6 From the beginning of Israel's history to the end of the Old Testament, the Lord was interested in one thing--faith in HIS system! "Remember the Law of Moses My servant..." Keep My Law on your hearts, Israel--it is best for you!, He is saying. What He told Abraham is the same thing that He wanted out of Saul, which was the same thing He wanted from Solomon, which is the same thing He reminds here that He wants--that we should be obedient to His will.

Elijah the prophet is promised, and this is confirmed by Jesus to have been John the Baptist--the voice of one crying in the wilderness! (Matthew 11: 10,14). His coming, and the opening of a new chapter in God's unfolding plan of redemption, will bridge the generation gap! That is the power of Christ. I have seen parents and their children, who were so far apart that you almost would not think they were relatives, come very close in Christ--and consummate in their relationships as brother and sister in Christ, what they have as parent and child.

Clearly John the Baptist was acquainted with and profoundly affected by Malachi's message. He say the end of the nation coming and at the same time, the coming of the Lamb of God. The Old Covenant (Testament) was passing into the New. When the New Testament age passes, dear ones, we will awake to find ourselves, if we have trusted Christ, in the blessed realm of Messiah Jesus Christ--King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Concluding Remarks on Malachi I hope that you will not simply let this series of messages pass simply as another Bible book you have heard preached... I hope you have caught something of the heart-beat of the Living God. He longs to bless His own. He longs for the fellowship and company of the Bride of His Son--the Church. He is fearsome as a Judge, but beautiful as a Bridegroom.

"The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the word;
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy Bride;
With His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation, One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food;
And to one hope she presses with every hope endued.