

## MALACHI

### Introduction

This last book of the Old Testament canon concludes the dispensation called by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews the time in which God spoke... “through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” It is God’s last Word to His children before the Incarnation. It was followed by a divine silence which spanned approximately four centuries. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes: “The Exile left its ineffaceable stamp on Judaism as well as on the Jews. Their return to the land of their fathers was marked by the last rays of the declining sun of prophecy. With Malachi it set.” This sentence is interesting if put in contrast with the last words with which the prophet introduces the centuries of silence, announcing the coming of a new Spring time upon God’s creation: “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”<sup>1</sup>

J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Exploring the Book*, opens the chapter about Malachi with: “MALACHI calling! – the last call of the Old Testament before the voice of prophecy dies into a silence of four hundred years. One great phase of Divine revelation is now to close. The last spokesman utters his soul, and retires behind the misty curtain of the past. A peculiar solemnity clings about him.... Our first step toward appreciating the message of Malachi is to see him amid his own times. He does not date his prophecy, but there are pointers to the approximate time of it. All agree that it is post-exilic, and later than the other two post-exilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. The likelihood is that it was written *a little later than the days of Nehemiah*. It is well to fix in mind the main dates and events relating to the Jewish Remnant, from the time of the return, down to the ministry of Malachi.

They are as follows:

- B.C. 536. At the decree of Cyrus, the 50,000 return to Judea, under Zerubbabel (Ezra i. and ii.).
  - 534. The foundations of the new temple are laid (Ezra iii.) – but the rebuilding is held back.
  - 520. Ministry of prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Temple rebuilding resumed (Ezra v.; Hag. i:15).
  - 516. Restoration Temple completed (Ezra vi. 15), just twenty years after return of the 50,000.
  - 457. Return of the further 1,800 (plus wives, daughters and servants) under Ezra (Ezra vii.).
  - 445. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem by royal edict, as governor, to rebuild *the city* (Neh. ii).
  - 430. (approx.) Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after absence on visit to Artaxerxes (Neh. xiii. 6.7).
- Malachi prophesies sometime after this.”

### Name of the Book

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* notes: “Nothing is known of the person of Malachi. Because his name does not occur elsewhere, some scholars indeed doubt whether ‘Malachi’ is intended to be the personal name of the prophet. But none of the other prophetic books of the Old Testament is anonymous. The form mal’akhi, signifies ‘my messenger’; it occurs again in Mal 3:1; compare 2:7. But this form of itself would hardly be appropriate as a proper name without some additional syllable such as Yah, whence mal’akhiah, i.e. ‘messenger of Yahweh.’ Haggai, in fact, is expressly designated ‘messenger of Yahweh’ (Hag 1:13). Besides, the superscriptions prefixed to the book, in both the Septuagint and the Vulgate, warrant the supposition that Malachi’s full name ended with the syllable -yah. At the same time the Septuagint translates the last clause of Mal 1:1, ‘by the hand of his messenger,’ and the Targum reads, ‘by the hand of my angel, whose name is called Ezra the scribe.’ Jerome likewise testifies that the Jews of his day ascribed this last book of prophecy to Ezra. ... But if Ezra’s name was originally associated with the book, it would hardly have been dropped by the collectors of the prophetic Canon who, lived only a century or two subsequent to Ezra’s time. Certain traditions ascribe the book to Zerubbabel and Nehemiah; others, still, to Malachi, whom they designate as a Levite and a member of the ‘Great Synagogue.’ Certain modern scholars, however, on the basis of the similarity of the title (1:1) to Zech 9:1; 12:1, declare it to be anonymous; but this is a rash conclusion without any substantial proof other than supposition. The best explanation is that of Professor G.G. Cameron, who suggests that the termination of the word ‘Malachi’ is adjectival, and equivalent to the Latin angelicus, signifying ‘one charged with a message or mission’ (a missionary). The term would thus be an official title; and the thought would not be unsuitable to one whose message closed the prophetic Canon of the Old Testament, and whose mission in behalf of the church was so sacred in character.”

<sup>1</sup> Mal. 4:2

*The Pulpit Commentary* introduces the Book of Malachi with: "The reformation effected by Nehemiah in the earlier part of his administration had been maintained by his own personal influence and political authority; and when the strong hand of the governor was for a time removed, old abuses revived, and even some new laxities and transgressions were added. In the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (B.C.433-2) Nehemiah had been recalled to Babylon or Susa, either because his furlough had expired, or because he had to make further arrangements for the prolongation of his command, or simply, as was the Persian custom, to give account of his actions, which had been unfavorably represented at court. On his return at the end of two or three years (Neh. xiii. 6), he found great cause for sorrow and anxiety. Advantage of his absence had been taken by the latitudinarian party in the commonwealth to return to those evil practices and that open disregard of the Law which he had so severely reprobated twelve years before. Ezra was probably dead, as no further mention is made of him after Nehemiah's second return from the Persian court; and, losing the support of this wise and single-hearted scribe, Nehemiah would have had to stem the torrent of laxity and profaneness alone, had not God raised up the Prophet Malachi at this crisis.... A prophet was indeed needed at this moment. The spirit of Pharisaism and Sadduceeism, which in after-years worked such ineradicable mischief, had already begun to exhibit its evil propensities."

### Division of the Book

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* gives the following division of the book:

I.	The Privilege of the Nation	1:1-5
II.	The Pollution of the Nation	1:6--3:15
	A. The Sin of the Priests of Israel	1:6--2:9
	1. The Priests Despise the Name of the Lord	1:6-14
	2. The Lord Curses the Priests	2:1-9
	B. The Sin of the People of Israel	2:10--3:15
	1. The People Commit Idolatry	2:10-12
	2. The People Divorce	2:13-16
	3. The Lord Will Judge at His Coming	2:17--3:7
	4. The People Rob God	3:8-12
	5. The People Doubt the Character of God	3:13-15
III.	The Promises to the Nation	3:16--4:6
	A. The Rewards of the Book of Remembrance	3:16-18
	B. The Rewards of the Coming of Christ	4:1-3
	C. The Prophecy of the Coming of Elijah	4:4-6

*The Pulpit Commentary* also arranges the book in three sections but it draws the lines at different places:

Part I.	Reproof of the priests for neglect of the divine service	1:1-2:9
Part II.	Condemnation of priests and people for alien marriages and for divorces.	2:10-16
Part III.	The day of the Lord	2:17-4:6

We will stick to Nelson's division in our study.

### I. The Privilege of the Nation 1:1-5

**1** *An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.*

**2** *"I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob,*

**3** *but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."*

**4** *Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD.*

**5** *You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD-even beyond the borders of Israel!'*

The NIV calls Malachi's prophecy an "oracle." The Hebrew word is *massa'* which literally means "a burden." It is the same word that is found in the verse: "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you

fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.”<sup>2</sup> The Interlinear Bible reads “The burden of the Word of the Lord.” The older translation all adhere to the word “burden.” But even the newer rendering “oracle” implies the heaviness of the message that is spoken.

Some commentators intimate that the burden is on the shoulder of the preacher who brings the Word of God. In one of his sermons, Spurgeon says: “The prophets of old were no triflers. They did not run about as idle tellers of tales, but they carried a burden. Those who at this time speak in the name of the Lord, if they are indeed sent of God, dare not sport with their ministry or play with their message. They have a burden to bear- ‘The burden of the word of the Lord’ Zech 9:1; 12:1 Mal 1:1; and this burden puts it out of their power to indulge in levity of life. I am often astounded at the way in which some who profess to be the servants of God make light of their work: they jest about their sermons as if they were so many comedies or farces.” We ought to understand though that the burden that is laid upon the messenger is the burden of the Lord. It is heavy on God’s heart more than on the shoulder of man. The one who faithfully preaches the Word of God often has the experience that he is dealing with things that are too heavy for human beings to bear. As with prayer, the Apostle Paul says: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”<sup>3</sup> In the Book of Malachi, God answers Israel’s questions with a heavy heart.

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes: “[The first] four verses form neither an independent address, nor merely the first member of the following address, but the introduction and foundation of the whole book. The love which God has shown to Israel ought to form the motive and model for the conduct of Israel towards its God. ‘aahab denotes love in its expression or practical manifestation. The question asked by the people, ‘Wherein hast Thou shown us love?’ may be explained from the peculiarities of Malachi’s style, and is the turn he regularly gives to his address, by way of introducing the discussion of the matter in hand, so that we are not to see in it any intention to disclose the hypocrisy of the people. The prophet proves the love of Jehovah towards Israel, from the attitude of God towards Israel and towards Edom. Jacob and Esau, the tribe-fathers of both nations, were twin brothers.”

Someone has said that in the Book of Malachi, the people of Israel asked God seven questions that displeased Him. It is not only that Israel asks questions of the Lord but they also question the Lord, that is, they doubt His statements. Every question is preceded by a statement which is then doubted by the people. This attitude of suspicion about the validity of the Word of God and about God’s motives is not new. It is as old as humanity. It is true that Satan tempted Eve with the question: “Did God really say...? But if Eve had not doubted the truth of God’s Word, she would never have fallen. During the desert crossing, Israel accused God of sadistic motives in bringing them out of Egypt. Immediately after leaving Egypt, they said to Moses: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?”<sup>4</sup> And when Moses said to God: “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’ ”<sup>5</sup> he, probably voiced an opinion that was prevalent among the nation of Israel also. The same attitude is expressed by people who say: “If God is love...”

#### **a. The First Question** 1:2

“I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ ” From our New Testament perspective, the question is the most blasphemous one that can be asked by man. It is true that Israel did not have the proof of God’s love we have. They didn’t know that: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”<sup>6</sup> And: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, our more complete knowledge of God’s revelation of Himself does not keep us saying to God: “Proof it!”

Before judging Israel’s reaction to God’s declaration of His love, we should remember what Israel had gone through in the preceding century of their history. The nation has spent 70 years in captivity and,

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 23:5

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 8:26,27

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 14:11

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 32:12

<sup>6</sup> John 3:16

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 5:8

in spite of their miraculous return, their homecoming was far from a glorious experience. They came back to a ruined city and to a burned out sanctuary. The reminders of God's Shekinah were a pile of rubble. Rebuilding of the temple and the city wall had been painfully difficult. God's chosen people had become a remnant of paupers. To believe in God's love under such circumstances did require an act of faith. Like Jeremiah, they had to look beyond their outward condition and confess: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."<sup>8</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes pointedly: "In painful contrast to the tearful tenderness of God's love stands their insolent challenge. The root of their sin was insensibility to God's love, and to their own wickedness. Having had their full prosperity taken from them ever since their nation was taken away to Babylon, they imply they have no tokens of God's love; they look at what God had taken, not at what God had left. They forget how graciously God has restored them from Babylon to their own land, and enabled them, though a weak and small remnant, to set up again the temple service and the Jewish polity. God's love is often least acknowledged where it is most manifested."

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* makes the following insightful observation: "Some read their question, Wherefore hast thou loved us? as if they did indeed own that he had loved them, but withal insinuate that there was a reason for it-that he loved them because their father Abraham had loved him, so that it was not a free love, but a love of debt, to which he replies, 'Was not Esau as near akin to Abraham as you are? Was he not Jacob's own brother, his elder brother? And therefore, if there were any right to a recompense for Abraham's love, Esau had it, and yet I hated Esau and loved Jacob.' "

God's answer baffles us. Knowing God as the God who loves the world, we would think that the word "hate" in relation to Esau is out of place. We have to understand, however, that the prophet uses the word hate in the context of a comparison. Jesus did not speak about hatred, as we know it, when He said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-yes, even his own life-he cannot be my disciple,"<sup>9</sup> He contrasted the love of God with what we call love in our human relationships. God's love for Jacob, for Israel is so immense that it makes all else seem late hate.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "Let it be remembered, 1. That there is not a word spoken here concerning the eternal state of either Jacob or Esau. 2. That what is spoken concerns merely their earthly possessions. And, 3. That it does not concern the two brothers at all, but the posterity of each."

The people of Israel must have understood clearly the meaning of these words. To them these words did not evoke images of eternity in heaven or in hell. They were used to conceive of blessing in terms of material benefits. God had favored them throughout the ages with much greater blessing than Esau had ever had. At the time of Malachi's prophecy, Edom was no longer a nation of any importance. They may have had hopes of recovery which would have meant a threat to the safety of Israel but God promises Israel that their hopes will be crushed. But *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* makes a note that is worth paying attention to: "The verbs 'aaheeb . . . , to love, and saanee' . . . , to hate, must not be weakened down into loving more and loving less, to avoid the danger of falling into the doctrine of predestination. Saanee' . . . , to hate, is the opposite of love. And this meaning must be retained here; only we must bear in mind, that with God anything arbitrary is inconceivable, and that no explanation is given here of the reasons which determined the actions of God. Malachi does not expressly state in what the love of God to Jacob (i.e., Israel) showed itself; but this is indirectly indicated in what is stated concerning the hatred towards Edom. The complete desolation of the Edomitish territory is quoted as a proof of this hatred."

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* notes: "**I hated Esau.** Rom 9:10ff. suggests that the 'hating' consisted of God's perpetuating the line of the Chosen People through Jacob rather than through Esau, and giving Esau a position subordinate to that of his brother (cf. Gen 27:37-40). On the other hand, both Esau and his descendants led profane, sinful lives (Gen 26:34; 27:41; Obad 10-14). A holy God cannot but be set against sin and unrepentant sinners. **Laid his mountains and his heritage waste.** The fury of the Chaldean forces, responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., may also have been felt by Edom (cf. Jer 25:9,21); and later the Nabatean Arabs drove the Edomites permanently from their land. Dragons. Rather, jackals. Esau's heritage became a desert place, the home of jackals."

<sup>8</sup> Lam. 3:22,23

<sup>9</sup> Luke 14:26

Paul's words have caused some confusion, particularly among those who hold to a doctrine of predestination to eternal salvation or eternal condemnation. We read in Romans: "Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad-in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls-she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" <sup>10</sup> The confusion stems from the fact that the Apostle seems to fuse the two quotes from Genesis and Malachi into one, although in time they are separated by almost two millennia. When Rebekah consulted God during her pregnancy, He answered her: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." There is no mention of hate or love in this prophecy, merely a reversal of priorities. The firstborn would have to take the second place. The point was the line of promise of the Messiah. The Savior was to be born through Jacob, not Esau. God did not predetermine that Esau was to lead an immoral life. When he did, it was by his own choice not on the basis of God's predestination. When God says to Israel by the mouth of Malachi, "Esau I have hated" He had a history of cruelty and immorality of over 1500 to base His hatred on. Esau's guilt in his relationship to his twin-brother is the best illustration in the exclamation in Psalm 137: "Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!'" <sup>11</sup>

It is still strange, as was mentioned above, that the proof of God's love for Jacob is given in negative terms in the hatred for Esau. The lesson is that, but for the grace of God, nothing would have kept Jacob or any of us from going the way Esau went: a way of immorality and godlessness. The greatest proof of God's love for us is in the fact that He did not allow us to be lost like the rest of humanity. Why was I not born in a land and a community where the light of the Gospel does not shine? Why did I not starve to death like many of third-world children? I find no answer to these questions apart from the love of God.

The reference to finality of Edom's destruction also served to boost Israel's sense of security. But the main emphasis of Malachi's message here seems to be that God's election of Israel to be the guardians of His revelation in this world was the ultimate proof of God's love for them. God had chosen Jacob, not Esau, for this task. The Apostle Paul defines God's election of Israel with the words: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."<sup>12</sup> In asking the question: "How have you loved us?" Israel showed a complete lack of understanding about their position in the history of salvation of this world. They did no longer consider themselves "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."<sup>13</sup> They had completely lost the sense of their mission. God's love is best demonstrated in those who serve Him and who know their place in God's redemptive plan. Israel had come to the point where they saw themselves as all the other nations of the world, as one like the others with a certain territory to occupy and a local deity to worship. YHWH was in their eyes not different from any of the other territorial deities. God wanted them to recognize the fact that "Great is the LORD-even beyond the borders of Israel!" He is the creator of heaven and earth and Israel's priesthood was to link the whole world population to the throne of God.

## **II. The Pollution of the Nation** 1:6--3:15

### **A. The Sin of the Priests of Israel** 1:6--2:9

#### **1. The Priests Despise the Name of the Lord** 1:6-14

*6 "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. "But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'"*

*7 "You place defiled food on my altar. "But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' "By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible.*

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 9:10-13

<sup>11</sup> Ps. 137:7

<sup>12</sup> Rom. 9:4,5

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 19:6

*8 When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.*

*9 "Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?"- says the LORD Almighty.*

*10 "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands.*

*11 My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.*

*12 "But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.'*

*13 And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD.*

*14 "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations.*

**b. Second and Third Question: 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' How have we defiled you?**

This second section zooms in to those who bear the greatest responsibility for the spiritual health of the nation: the priests. The whole argument, of course, has to be seen in the framework of the Old Testament ceremonial law. Israel as a whole was called to be a kingdom of priests. God had said to the nation on Mount Sinai: "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."<sup>14</sup> Although it was God's ultimate intention that the whole nation of Israel would be a priesthood, the actual function was narrowed down to Aaron and his sons. We have to bear in mind, however, that God's condemnation of the priests affects the whole nation of Israel. Corruption of those who are in power tends to act upon those that are represented. When, for instance, Hitler came to power in Germany and began to carry out his evil program of extermination of Jews, Germany as a whole became guilty. When God poured out His wrath over the priests, He did not let the average citizen off the hook. But in God's justice, those who are primarily responsible will receive a more severe punishment.

We may assume that the attitude of the priests represented the feeling of the nation. Most of the Israelites had reduced the service of God to a meaningless ritual. The only safeguard against getting into a spiritual rut is to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."<sup>15</sup> If our sacrifices and our service are not backed up by genuine love, they become a meaningless pretext for our own evil devices. There is no middle-of-the-road between good and evil. We walk on either one path or the other. Even when we think we serve ourselves only, we actually sacrifice on the altar of Satan.

In the previous verses the question pertained to love; God's love that the people had spurned. In this section it is honor as a basic principle upon which human intercourse is based. From love to honor is one step down. Genuine love implies honor but honor does not always involve love.

A child honors his parents, a servant his master. The NKJV expresses in a better way the more coarse Hebrew by putting the words that are not in the original in italics. When we leave the italicized words out, the text reads: "A son honors father, and a servant master. If then I am the Father, where My honor? And if I a Master, where My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts." Honoring parents is one of the commands of the Ten Commandments. The fifth commandment reads: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."<sup>16</sup> By denying God the honor and fear that is due to Him, man puts God on a lower level than his fellowmen. This means that man

<sup>14</sup> Ex. 19:5,6

<sup>15</sup> Deut. 6:5

<sup>16</sup> Ex. 20:12

actually considers himself to be higher than God. The priest does things to God that he would not think of doing to his fellowmen.

*Barnes' Notes* incorporates in its commentary a note by Jerome: "Although, before ye were born, I began to love you in Jacob as sons, yet choose by what title ye will name Me: I am either your Father or your Lord. If a Father, render me the honor due to a father, and offer the piety worthy of a parent. If a Lord, why despise ye Me? Why fear ye not your Lord?"

The reference to the relationship between a father and his son appeals to the law of natural affection. Affection only turns to indifference or, sometimes, hatred if the normal process of development of a relationship is interfered with. Under normal circumstances, a child will react to the love of the father who protects him with a return of affection. Israel's rejection of God's love was unnatural.

In the reverence of a slave to his master, the principle is one of self-interest. It is in the interest of a slave to honor his master who has the power of life or death over him. A lack of honor in such a relationship is self-destructive. Israel harmed herself by denying God the honor that is due to Him. The image of the slave does not appeal to our western mind but this should not keep us from getting the point. The Israel of Malachi's day surely knew what was meant.

It is, of course, not literally true that the priests were saying: "The LORD's table is contemptible." Their actions expressed what their words did not say. Our acts always speak louder than our mouth. The priests who, of all people ought to know better, used religion for their own benefit. They served themselves under the pretext of serving the Lord. Unknowingly, they served Satan. As we have seen above, there ultimately is no such thing as living for oneself. Both the priest and the layman would keep the best of the flock for themselves and give to the Lord what they couldn't use for themselves. It all comes down to the great commandment: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."<sup>17</sup> Anyone who departs from this first love is called "a cheat" by God. We read in vs. 14 – "Cursed is the *cheat* who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord." The idea that man would be able to deceive God, as if the Omniscient would not know, is more than preposterous. The person who tries to deceive God is mostly deceiving himself.

The reason a sacrificial animal had to be without any defect was because it portrayed the person of Jesus Christ. Peter called Him: "a lamb without blemish or defect."<sup>18</sup> The Levitical law clearly forbade the bringing of blemished animals. We read in Leviticus: "You must present a male without defect from the cattle, sheep or goats in order that it may be accepted on your behalf. Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf. When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable. Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as an offering made to the LORD by fire. You may, however, present as a freewill offering an ox or a sheep that is deformed or stunted, but it will not be accepted in fulfillment of a vow. You must not offer to the LORD an animal whose testicles are bruised, crushed, torn or cut. You must not do this in your own land, and you must not accept such animals from the hand of a foreigner and offer them as the food of your God. They will not be accepted on your behalf, because they are deformed and have defects."<sup>19</sup> The priests, of all people, knew this law. They may not have understood the doctrinal implications of it but the practical inference was clear to them. In human relations, giving a present of inferior quality was considered an insult. The Lord said: "Try offering them to your governor!" The Israelites would not think of insulting their governor but they had no problem in insulting the Lord.

Ultimately, the issue in this matter of cheating is man's feeling of inferiority. Sin has made us lose the realization of being bearers of the image of God. Adam's sense of nakedness after he sinned was due to the discovery that the glory had departed from his life. He could no longer relate to God in the glorious fellowship of basic equality with the Creator. It is this fundamental feeling of worthlessness that makes us think that we can win God's approval by cheating. Some people graduate from high school or college by cheating on their exams. We can never repair the damage of falling short of the glory of God by cheating.

It is also the basic misunderstanding of what the meaning a sacrifice is. We are all condemned to death because of sin. Every one of us is on death row. In God's grace, the execution of the punishment is

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<sup>17</sup> Deut. 6:5

<sup>18</sup> I Pet. 1:19

<sup>19</sup> Lev. 22:19-25

inflicted upon a third party, another creature that takes man's place. The sacrificial animal died in the place of man. The offerer had to put his hand on the head of the animal before it was killed in a gesture of identification. He and the animal became one. Offering a blemished animal denigrates the one who brings the sacrifice more than it insults the one who receives it. In cheating God, man cheats himself more.

The point of God's reproach to the priests is, basically, a plea not to debase themselves. God values us so much more than we do ourselves. He loves us with a jealousy that is incomparably stronger than any form of self-love we may exhibit. As far as God is concerned we are a treasure in a field and a pearl of great value.<sup>20</sup>

Vs. 10 is one of the most tragic verses in this book. God wants the temple to be closed rather than the service to be a caricature of what it is supposed to be. We have to see this statement in its historical perspective. The temple built by King Solomon had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar during Israel's captivity. As far as Israel was concerned, there was no longer a place on earth where the Shekinah was present. The passion of the people who returned from captivity had been to rebuild the temple; to have again a monument of God's presence in this world. The temple was rebuilt. There was again an altar where sacrifices were brought. Now God says to close it all up. But He says this in the context of world evangelization. The key is in vs. 11 – “My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty.”

In His conversation with the Samaritan woman Jesus declared: “A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”<sup>21</sup>

The temple in Jerusalem was not only the place where the people of Israel brought their sacrifices to the Lord, it was the place where God called the world population to Himself. The open doors of the temple were an invitation for all of humanity. The way the Israelite priests carried out their ministry was an important factor in this invitation. The pagan who went up to Jerusalem and who saw the parody of true worship the priests carried on could hardly be expected to be drawn to God. For this reason, Jesus twice cleaned the temple court. The Gospels tell us that Jesus said at one occasion: “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.”<sup>22</sup> In John's Gospel Jesus says in principle the same as what is said in Malachi's prophecy. “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar!” equals Jesus invitation: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”<sup>23</sup> The doors of the temple were shut and reopened in the death and resurrection of our Lord. Thus God's Name becomes great among the nations.

The problem in man's relationship with God has always been one of priorities. Even the pioneers who returned from captivity to rebuild the temple were sidetracked and started to give priority to their own needs. The prophet Haggai said: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.’ ’ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’ ”<sup>24</sup> The man who thought he could cheat God by keeping the good specimen of the herd for himself and give the inferior one to be sacrificed had lost sight of the priorities. God will take care of our priorities if we are mindful of His. Jesus says: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, it is a priority of love. If we love God more than ourselves, we will not keep the best for ourselves.

By contrasting the puny, selfish behavior of the priests and the Israelites with the glory of God that will be manifested worldwide, it becomes obvious what the stakes are. God is bent on the salvation of mankind. And here are some small and insignificant individuals who are only interested in making a little profit for themselves. Place the phrase “My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” next to “the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to

<sup>20</sup> See Matt. 13:44-46

<sup>21</sup> John 4:21-24

<sup>22</sup> Matt. 21:13

<sup>23</sup> John 2:19

<sup>24</sup> Hag. 1:2-4

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 6:33



give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord” and you see things in their right perspective: the salvation of the world and a man who switches animals!

Seeing this perspective, how can we keep ourselves from crying out: “Here am I. Send me!” I don’t want to be found in the stable, switching animals while the sun goes up over a world that is filled with the glory of God.

Malachi is one of the most evangelistic books in the whole Bible. It is living proof of the fact that God loves the world. It says God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”<sup>26</sup> And it says that God is “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”<sup>27</sup>

This prophecy also foretells what Jesus taught in the parable of “The Tenants of the Vineyard” which He concluded with the words: “I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”<sup>28</sup>

The verses 12 and 13 do, again, not represent what the priests are saying in so many words, but this is what the Lord reads in their attitude and action. In the sacrifices they brought, and in the way they brought them, they demonstrated their contempt. The KJV follows the Hebrew text closely and renders vs. 12 with: “The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks about this: “The ‘fruit’ is the produce of the altar, on which the priests subsisted. They did not literally say, The Lord’s table is contemptible; but their act virtually said so. They did not act so as to lead the people to reverence it, and to offer their best to the Lord on it. The table of the Lord was indeed polluted; but the fault of its being so rested with the priests themselves in a great measure. The people were poor, and put off God with the worst offerings. The priests let them do so, for fear of offending the people, and so losing all gains from them.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* explains the term “you sniff at it contemptuously,” as: “A metaphor taken from cattle which do not like their fodder. They blow strongly through their nose upon it; and after this neither they nor any other cattle will eat it.”

It would have been in the interest of the priests to keep “the table of the Lord” pure. They lived off the sacrifices that were brought by the people. The image is in fact one of animals who pollute their own fodder. Their attitude is expressed clearly in Ezekiel’s prophecy against the shepherds of Israel and against some of the sheep: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?”<sup>29</sup>

In *Barnes’ Notes*, the commentator comments on the phrase “What a burden!”: “What an onerous service it is! The service of God is its own reward. If not, it becomes a greater toil, with less reward from this earth, than the things of this earth. Our only choice is between love and weariness.” This reminds us of what the Apostle John wrote in his epistle: “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world.”<sup>30</sup> It is the love of God which makes the difference in the way we go about serving him. God is no hard taskmaster. Jesus says: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>31</sup> From Jesus’ invitation we learn that it is His humility that makes our burden light. The contrary is also true that our pride makes our burden heavy. This was the problem the priests were struggling with. Their lack of vision of God’s glory gave them an inflated opinion about themselves and their position. In a way they were infinitely more important than they could ever conceive themselves to be. God had entrusted to them the elements of His revelation in this world. Their importance consisted in the fact that they had been condemned to death because of their sin and that the punishment had been executed in the death of the sacrificial animal that had taken their place. They were, in God’s eyes, people who had been dead and who were now alive. They had never understood the most basic facts. They believed that God had made them guardians of His revelation because of their own worth and importance.

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<sup>26</sup> I Tim. 2:4

<sup>27</sup> II Pet. 3:9

<sup>28</sup> Matt. 21:44

<sup>29</sup> Ezek. 34:18,19

<sup>30</sup> I John 5:3,4

<sup>31</sup> Matt. 11:28-30

They tried to carry the burden of revelation by themselves and they found it to be extremely heavy. Consequently, they resorted to cheating.

The nations, they despised, their own people about which they said: "This mob that knows nothing of the law-there is a curse on them,"<sup>32</sup> were the ones who would accept God's glorious revelation.

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<sup>32</sup> See John 7:49

## CHAPTER TWO

## 2. The Lord Curses the Priests

2:1-9

*1 “And now this admonition is for you, O priests.*

*2 If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,” says the LORD Almighty, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me.*

*3 “Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.*

*4 And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the LORD Almighty.*

*5 “My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.*

*6 True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.*

*7 “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty.*

*8 But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty.*

*9 “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”*

Reading God’s condemnation of the priests in the days of Malachi, one is tempted to see in them the picture of a liberal theologian. These people clung to the title and the office without having regard to that which gave value and meaning to their ministry. In the previous section, the point of contention was the sacrificial animal. The priests violated the basic principle of atonement in bringing blemished sacrifices. They degraded that value of the blood that was shed for their sins. The severe warning in the Epistle to the Hebrews applies to them: “How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?”<sup>33</sup> This reminds us of the remark a Dutch liberal theologian made about the blood of Christ: “Give my share to pooch!”

In this section the priestly blessing comes under God’s fire. Without the foundation of the blood of the sacrifice there is no blessing. Any blessing that is not founded upon the blood of Jesus is devoid of meaning, or worse, it turns into a curse. That is the topic of these verses.

*Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states about vs. 2: “When temporal blessings are not the means of leading us to God and heaven, they will infallibly lead us to hell. In speaking of the abuse of temporal blessings, one of our old poets, in his homely phrase, expresses himself thus:

*Thus, God’s best gifts, usurped by wicked ones,  
To poison turn by their contagions.”*

The prophet paints a very vivid and repulsive picture of what will happen to the priests who go through the motions without having reverence for God. The NIV reads: “Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.” TLB is even more explicit with: “Take note that I will rebuke your children; I will spread on your faces the manure of these animals you offer me and throw you out like dung.”

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Behold I will corrupt your seed.” The word translated “descendants” or “children” is *zera`* which can mean “seed” as well as “posterity.” Some commentators suspect a corrupt reading and want to render the word with “arm.” The idea would be that as the priests lift up their arms to God, holding up their sacrifices, God throws it back in their faces. But before any sacrifice was presented before the Lord the offal had been disposed of and the intestines had been washed with water.

The reference may be to the requirement that the carcasses of some of the sacrificial animals together with their offal be burned outside the camp. We read, for instance, about the animals that were killed on the Day of Atonement: “The bull and the goat for the sin offerings, whose blood was brought into

<sup>33</sup> Heb. 10:29,30

the Most Holy Place to make atonement, must be taken outside the camp; their hides, flesh and offal are to be burned up.”<sup>34</sup> God told the priests that He would dispose of them on the garbage dump.

Jesus paints this picture in vivid colors in Mark’s Gospel. Putting a child in the center, He said: “And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”<sup>35</sup> The word translated with “hell” is *gehennah*. It was the valley of Hinnom where the garbage of the city of Jerusalem was dumped and burnt.

The admonition of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives new meaning to the above. We read: “The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.” When Jesus bore the sins of the world on the cross, God threw the dung of our sins back in His face and completely rejected Him. Ultimately, it was Jesus who bore the curse that was pronounced upon the priests in Malachi’s prophecy.

In *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, the qualifications of Levi are summed up as follows:

1. ‘He feared me’; he was my sincere worshipper.
2. ‘He was afraid’; he acted as in the presence of a just and holy God, and acted conscientiously in all that he did.
3. ‘My law of truth was ever in his mouth’; by this he directed his own conduct and that of others.
4. ‘No iniquity’; nothing contrary to justice and equity ever proceeded ‘from his lips.’
5. ‘He walked with me in peace’; he lived in such a way as to keep up union with me.
6. ‘He did turn many away from iniquity’; by his upright administration, faithful exhortations, and pious walk, he became the instrument of converting many sinners.”

This is the way in which God’s covenant with Levi would continue. The words in the verses 5 and 6 apply, in the first place, to our Lord Jesus Christ. The noteworthy part in these verses is that God consistently speaks of one single person, not of a family of priests. All the perfections mentioned apply to a single individual: Jesus Christ. The Levitical priest is called in vs. 7 “the messenger of the LORD Almighty.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes about this expression: “In a number of OT passages, the expression apparently refers to a messenger who himself is very God (see Ex 3:2,4; Judg 6:12-14). No higher honor could have been given the priest than that similar words should be applied to him.”

The covenant with Levi was, in first instance, God’s election of the tribe, particularly of Aaron and his family, to be the priests of the nation.<sup>36</sup> There never was a covenant with the original Levi, the son of Jacob. On his deathbed, Jacob linked Simeon and Levi together and put a curse on them because of the genocide they had committed.<sup>37</sup> God’s election of Levi was mainly based upon the intimate fellowship Moses, Aaron’s brother, enjoyed with God. Very little of what we read in the verses 5 and 6 about the members of the tribe of Levi can be applied to actual members of the tribe. It is true that the covenant God made with them was “a covenant of life and peace.” But “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin” applies more to the person of Jesus Christ than to anyone else. He is set as an example of what true priesthood is all about.

The point of verses 4-6 is that God holds up a mirror before the priests in which they can see what they ought to be. Awareness of sin always comes by way of comparison. Jesus used this method of judgment by comparing his generation to the inhabitants of Nineveh. He said: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”<sup>38</sup> Isaiah condemned himself when he heard the song of the seraphs and saw the glory of God. He cried out: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I

<sup>34</sup> Lev. 16:27

<sup>35</sup> Mark 9:42-48

<sup>36</sup> See Ex. ch. 28,29

<sup>37</sup> See Gen. 49:5-7

<sup>38</sup> Matt. 12:41

live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”<sup>39</sup> Paul defines sin as “coming short of the glory of God.”<sup>40</sup> Judgment for each of us will ultimately consist in our being compared to the man Jesus Christ, of whom John said: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>41</sup>

In this way God places the priests, so to speak, next to the great High Priest Jesus Christ in order to make them realize how far they strayed from the glory of the office God had entrusted to them. It is true that they did not know Jesus Christ. But they knew the Scriptures in which God’s holiness was set forth sufficiently for them to understand that what they did was wrong.

It seems that Malachi’s reference to the covenant God made with Levi refers primarily to God’s promise to Phinehas who killed Zimri son of Salu and Cozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family, thus appeasing the wrath of God over Israel after their idolatrous involvement with Midian. We read in Numbers that God said to Moses: “Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.”<sup>42</sup>

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* observes: “What is here said of the covenant of priesthood is true of the covenant of grace made with all believers, as spiritual priests; it is a covenant of life and peace; it assures all believers of life and peace, everlasting peace, everlasting life, all happiness both in this world and in that to come.”

Vs. 7 emphasizes another part of the priestly duty: instruction. The sequence of rebuke is that the priests were deficient in the bringing of the sacrifices and as a result their blessings turned into a curse. Now the Lord scrutinizes their teaching and find it lacking. It is important to see the connection. As we said above, without the sacrifice for sin there can be no blessing. Now it is clear that the sacrifice is also the basis for sound doctrine. The cross of Jesus Christ ought to be the center of all preaching. Sermons that are not focused on the cross are not sermons in the prophetic manner in which Paul defines the proclamation of the Word of God: “One who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.”<sup>43</sup> And elsewhere Paul writes: “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”<sup>44</sup> People who preach the cross of Christ are never humiliated. And God says to these priests: “I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people.”

The priests may have been eloquent public speakers. God does not condemn them because of their lack of eloquence but because they do not fulfill their prophetic ministry. Nowhere in the Bible is it spelled out that priests had to be, at the same time, prophets. But when we take the message of the Bible as a whole, we understand that the prophetic office was implied in the priesthood. *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about the duty of the priests and Levites: “In addition to instructing in the Law year by year, they were also responsible for reading the Law at the Feast of Tabernacles every seventh year (Deut 31:9-13). By their example, the priests also taught the people how to ‘distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean’ (Lev 10:10). Living in cities scattered throughout the nation of Israel, the priests were in a good position to fulfill this function (Josh 21). In addition, the priests served as judges, acting as a kind of supreme court for Israel (Deut 17:8-13). In special cases, the high priests declared the will or judgment of God through the Urim and Thummim, the medium through which God sometimes communicated His divine will (Ex 28:30; Lev 8:8; Deut 33:8).” We conclude from this that the appearance of the Old Testament prophet was God’s way of resolving emergencies, conditions in which the priests did not function as they should have.

*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* observes about the Old Testament prophets: “God has used people in every age to fill the prophetic role of proclaiming His word. Noah was a ‘preacher of righteousness’ to his generation (2 Peter 2:5). Abraham was considered a prophet (Gen 20:7). So was his son Isaac (Ps 105:9,14-15) and his grandson Jacob (Gen 49). Moses was eulogized as the greatest prophet

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<sup>39</sup> Isa. 6:5

<sup>40</sup> See Rom. 3:23

<sup>41</sup> John 1:14

<sup>42</sup> Num. 25:10-13

<sup>43</sup> I Cor. 14:3 (NASU)

<sup>44</sup> I Cor. 2:1,2

of all, due to his major accomplishments as well as his many writings (Deut 34:10-12). His successor, Joshua, received the commission to continue Moses' work and so assumed the prophetic role also (Deut 34:9; Josh 1:1,5)."

The prophet took over where the priest failed to perform his duty as a teacher of the law. I, therefore, disagree with the statement in *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*: "Their function differed from that of the priests, the latter approaching God in behalf of men by means of sacrifice, the former coming to men as ambassadors from God, beseeching them to turn from their evil ways and live." If the priests had been consistently faithful in their ministry to the people there probably would never have been a separate ministry of prophets in Israel. The greatest prophet of all times, our Lord Jesus Christ, appeared when the priesthood had fallen to its lowest point in history. When Jesus was crucified, it was the priesthood that was put to shame. When Jesus hung naked on the cross, He "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."<sup>45</sup> God mocked the dignity and power of the Israelite priesthood and of the demonic power that backed them. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."<sup>46</sup>

When priests do no longer function as prophets, as God intended them to do, the world of human values and criteria is turned upside-down. What man considers to be wise and strong turns out to be foolishness and utterly impotent.

## **B. The Sin of the People of Israel** **2:10--3:15**

### **1. The People Commit Idolatry** 2:10-12

*10 Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?*

*11 Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god.*

*12 As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty.*

The question in vs. 10 is not one of the questions the people ask in defiance of God but the heart-cry of Malachi himself. The actual topic is divorce and intermarriage with people who did not recognize the sovereignty of God. Marriage with members of other nations was never explicitly forbidden. Rahab and Ruth are examples of the fact that there was no objection to marriage with women who had accepted the God of Israel as their God. Rahab had said: "The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."<sup>47</sup> And Ruth's words have rung through the ages: "Your people will be my people and your God my God."<sup>48</sup> What mattered was whether the girl of pagan descent recognized the sovereignty of YHWH. God had issued strong warnings against inter-racial marriages because of the implication of idolatry. In Exodus we read: "And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same."<sup>49</sup> The same thought is expressed in Deuteronomy: "Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you."<sup>50</sup>

Marriage is meant to express a spiritual reality. Paul says about the physical union of husband and wife: "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."<sup>51</sup> This principle applies to marriage from its earliest inception, both in the Old Testament and the New. The marriages of the Israelites were also physical expressions of their spiritual fellowship with God. If one of the members of this unity would not acknowledge the Lord, but would bow to the enemy, the marriage became polluted.

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<sup>45</sup> Col. 2:15

<sup>46</sup> I Cor. 1:25

<sup>47</sup> Josh. 2:11

<sup>48</sup> Ruth 1:16

<sup>49</sup> Ex. 34:16

<sup>50</sup> Deut. 7:3,4

<sup>51</sup> Eph. 5:32

Marriages in Israel were even more sacred because of the promise of the coming Messiah. Every Israelite was supposed to enter into the bond of marriage with the hope that the promised savior would be the child of this union.

Some commentators miss the connection between the theme in these verses and the previous section. It should be obvious, however, that the infidelity of the priests and Levites in their ministry would affect the whole population. The family is the basis of the church, but the corruption of the church will always result in the breaking up of families. For this reason, I consider the following observation from *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* to be wrong: "This section does not stand in any close connection with the preceding one. It does not furnish an example of the stumbling upon the law mentioned in v. 8; nor is the violation of the covenant of the fathers (v. 10) or of the marriage covenant (v. 14) appended to the neutralizing of the covenant of Levi on the part of the priests (vv. 8 and 4). For there is no indication in vv. 10-16 that the priests gave any impulse through their bad teaching to the breaches of the law which are here condemned; and the violation of the covenant of the fathers and of the marriage covenant forms no more a thought by which the whole is ruled, than the violation of the covenant with Levi in the previous section (Koehler). The prophet rather passes over with v. 10 to a perfectly new object, namely, the condemnation of marriages with heathen women (vv. 10-20, and of the frivolous dissolution of marriages with Israelish women, which was the natural consequence of the former (vv. 13-16). This sin the priests have only so far participated in, that they set a bad example to the people in their own unprincipled treatment of the law, which might easily lead to contempt of the divine ordinance of marriage." This, otherwise excellent commentary, loses sight of the unified field of truth.

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* cuts to the core of the matter by saying: "Corrupt practices are the genuine fruit and product of corrupt principles; and the badness of men's hearts and lives is owing to some loose atheistic notions which they have got and which they govern themselves by. Now, in these verses, we have an instance of this; we here find men dealing falsely with one another, and it is because they think falsely of their God. Observe, Judah has married the daughter of a strange god. The harm was not so much that she was the daughter of a strange nation (God has made all nations of men, and is himself King of nations), but that she was the daughter of a strange god, trained up in the service and worship of false gods, at their disposal, as a daughter at her father's disposal, and having a dependence upon them; hence some of the rabbis... say, He that marries a heathen woman is as if he made himself son-in-law to an idol."

This paragraph sets out of the fatherhood of God. That God is meant in the question: "Have we not all one Father?" Is obvious from the parallel statement that follows it: "Did not one God create us?" Yet, some of the most brilliant minds in Scripture interpretation, like Jerome and Calvin have suggested that the reference here is to Abraham. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* is, therefore, correct in stating: "The idea that the expression 'one father' refers to Abraham as the ancestor of the nation (Jerome, Calvin, and others), is precluded by the fact, that not only the Israelites, but also the Ishmaelites and Edomites were descended from Abraham; and there is no ground whatever for thinking of Jacob, because, although he had indeed given his name to Israel, he is never singled out as its ancestor."

Although the transition is less abrupt that is suggested by *Barnes' Notes*, the commentary points out, correctly, that it is the fatherhood of God that is intended by the prophet here.

"Malachi turns abruptly to another offence, in which also the priests set an evil example, the capricious dismissal of their Hebrew wives and taking other women in their stead. Here, as before, he lays down, at the outset, a general moral principle, which he applies. 'The one Father' (it appears from the parallel), is manifestly Almighty God, as the Jews said to our Lord (John 8:41), 'We have one Father, even God.' He created them, not only as He did all mankind, but by the spiritual relationship with Himself, into which He brought them. So Isaiah speaks (Isa 43:1,7,21, add Isa 44:2,21,24), 'Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel. Every one that is called by My Name; I have created Him for My glory; I have formed him; yea I have made him. This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise.' "

It seems strange to find an appeal to the fatherhood of God in a section that condemns interracial marriages. If we understand, however, that there is no injunction against marriage with a person who recognizes the fatherhood of God, whatever his or her racial origin may be, the statement places the problem of intermarriages in its right perspective. Opposites of character often make strong marriage relationships and different cultural or racial backgrounds are, not necessarily, obstacles against a good union. The only point where oneness is absolutely necessary is in the relationship of spouses with God. If either of the two partners has not surrendered his or her body to be a temple of the Holy Spirit, the temple is

desecrated. This truth proves anew that the transition from the temple of the Lord in which the priests and Levites served to the temple of the body is no great leap of thought.

What Malachi condemns is most clearly illustrated in the life of King Solomon. Solomon was one of the wisest men who ever lived, one of the most brilliant minds of Israel, but he made marriage into a caricature. We read about him: "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter-Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, 'You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.' Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites."<sup>52</sup> The Scripture's condemnation of Solomon seems, however, mild in comparison with what Malachi wants to the Lord to do with people who sin in that way: "As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob-even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty."

Malachi's condemnation was not only directed to the common man but also to the priests and leaders of the nation. Ezra and Nehemiah testify to the fact that the leaders of the people set the trend in this matter. Ezra reports: "After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, 'The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.'"<sup>53</sup>

Nehemiah reacted violently against the people who had committed this sin, both priests and laymen. We read: "Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: 'You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?' One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me. Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites. So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task."<sup>54</sup> In comparison to Nehemiah's violent reaction, Malachi's condemnation seems moderate.

## 2. The People Divorce

2:13-16

**13** *Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands.*

**14** *You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.*

**15** *Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.*

<sup>52</sup> I Kings 11:1-7

<sup>53</sup> Ezra 9:1,2

<sup>54</sup> Neh. 13:23-30



**16 "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.**

The following topic does not really need a separate section. Evidently, the people who married interracially divorced their first Israelites wives. It seems that the practice of polygamy which was not uncommon before the Babylonian captivity, had been abandoned. *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* states: "Monogamy superseded polygamy subsequently to the return from Babylon."

The prophet links the sad condition of Israelite family life to the service in the temple. He says: "Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands." On the question whose tears are meant, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* believes that they are "shed by your unoffending wives, repudiated by you that ye might take foreign wives." The Commentary then states: "Calvin makes the tears to be those of all the people, on perceiving their sacrifices to be sternly rejected by God. I prefer the former view." In this respect, I would rather be a Calvinist. The Lord would certainly not disregard the sacrifices of wives who had been rejected by their husbands in favor of another woman.

Especially for men, there is a direct link between a marriage relationship and a relationship with God. Peter establishes this clearly when he writes: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."<sup>55</sup> Our prayers are hindered when, as husbands we do not love and respect our wives. Although the Bible does not state this directly, the same would seem to apply to wives and their relationship with their husbands.

The prophet does not explain how the people know that God no longer pays any attention to their offerings. Cain understood that the Lord rejected the offering he brought. We read: "The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor."<sup>56</sup> If, as the Apostle Paul says: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children,"<sup>57</sup> our spirit will also tell us when there is something wrong in our relationship with God.

If we substitute the word "wife" for "brother" in Jesus' admonition, we read: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your *wife* has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your *wife*; then come and offer your gift." Such substitution does not violate the message and it brings out clearly what Malachi is saying.

It is difficult to see in vs. 15 anything else but the perfect unity of spouses in being "one flesh." Yet, *Adam Clarke's Commentary* sees here a reference to the creation of human being as one pair as over against a simultaneous creation of a multitude of human beings. We read: "[And did not he make one?] ONE of each kind, Adam and Eve. Yet had he the residue of the Spirit; he could have made millions of pairs, and inspired them all with living souls. Then therefore one? He made one pair from whom all the rest might proceed, that he might have a holy offspring; that children being a marked property of one man and one woman, proper care might be taken that they should be brought up in the discipline of the Lord."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes about this verse: "Maurer and Hengstenberg explain the verse thus: The Jews had defended their conduct by the precedent of Abraham, who had taken Hagar, to the injury of Sarah, his lawful wife. To this Malachi says now, 'No one (ever) did so in whom there was a residue of intelligence (discriminating between good and evil): and what did the one (Abraham, to whom you appeal for support) do, seeking a godly seed?' His object (namely, not to gratify passion, but to obtain the seed promised by God) makes the case wholly inapplicable to defend your position. Moore (from Fairbairn) better explains, in accordance with Mal 2:10, 'Did not He make (us, Israelites) one?' Yet He had the residue of the Spirit (i.e., His isolating us from other nations was not because there was no residue of the Spirit left for the rest of the world)."

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, probably, zooms in best on the core of the matter by commenting: "And did not he make one? He refers to 'Lord' (v. 14). The topic being treated is the validity of God-prescribed monogamy. Jesus, treating the same subject, taught that God in creation indissolubly joined together man and woman as 'one flesh' (Mark 10:2-9). Similarly, Malachi may be saying, 'And did not God in creation make one pair to live together as one despite the fact that his control of the spirit of life

<sup>55</sup> I Pet. 3:7

<sup>56</sup> Gen. 4:4,5<sup>a</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Rom. 8:16

could have been apportioned otherwise? And why did he make man and woman to be one flesh? It was to the end that his purposes for a godly seed, a covenant people of pure religion, might be realized.' Divorce could only defeat God's creative purpose. Let none deal treacherously. The call to repentance is obvious."

The phrase "he was seeking godly offspring" does, probably, contain a reference to the expected birth of the Messiah. The Hebrew word for "offspring," *zera`*, is the same as in the first verse in the Bible that foretells the coming of the Messiah: "And I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."<sup>58</sup>

But there is another general lesson to be drawn here that is more applicable to our time. No spiritually healthy young generation can be expected to come into the world when marriages break apart and children are sacrificed to "marital bliss." God's plan for each family is the same He had for Abraham about whom God Himself said: "Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."<sup>59</sup> When we get married and have children we are involved in things that are far beyond our comprehension. It is the calling of every married couple to go through the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in our children, as the Apostle Paul experienced in his relationship with his spiritual children in Galatia.<sup>60</sup>

Then there is the matter of tenderness, as opposed to violence, in conjugal relations. The phrase: "I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says more than a superficial glance would reveal. *Barnes' Notes* observes about this: "It was, as it were, an outer garment of violence, as Asaph says (Ps 73:6), 'violence covereth them as a garment;' or David (Ps 109:18), 'he clothed himself with cursing as with a garment.' It was like a garment with 'fretting leprosy,' unclean and making unclean, to be burned with fire. (Lev 13:47-58.) Contrariwise, the redeemed saints had (Rev 7:14) 'washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb.' Having declared God's hatred of this their doing, he sums up in the same words, but more briefly; 'and this being so, ye shall take heed to your spirit, and not deal treacherously.' "

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states about the garment: "The garment is the symbol of conjugal faith and protection (see Deut 22:30; Ruth 3:9; Ezek 16:8)." But *Matthew Henry's Commentary* sees in the garment a figure of speech that indicates a cover-up of evil. We read: "In all this they covered violence with their garment; they abused their wives, and were vexatious to them, and yet, in the sight of others, they pretended to be very loving to them and tender of them, and to cast a skirt over them. It is common for those who do violence to advance some specious pretence or other wherewith to cover it as with a garment."

The national crisis of marriage of Israelite men with women of heathen nations, as described by Ezra and Nehemiah, was, undoubtedly, accompanied by a great deal of domestic violence. Marriage, which is supposed to model God's intimate relationship with the people He loves, had been made into a caricature by the behavior of the priest, the Levites, and the common man. Few people in this world understand what the meaning is of the role they are playing in their marriage relations. Men who are violent toward their wives, and wives who are vicious toward their husbands are not open to God's expression of tenderness and love to themselves. People who do not feel loved are often hard. But the fruit of the Holy Spirit is kindness.

The last words of this verse: "So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith" indicate that, for the Israelites, marriage was a covenant. Evidently, marriage vows were exchanged during the ceremony and the breaking up of a marriage meant the breaking of a promise.

It appears that renegeing on a pledge was considered a most serious crime in Old Testament days, as well as in the early centuries of the Christian era. People rather committed murder rather than break a vow. We read about Jephthah: "And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.'... When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, 'Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have

<sup>58</sup> Gen. 3:15

<sup>59</sup> Gen. 18:18,19 (NKJV)

<sup>60</sup> Gal. 4:19

made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.’<sup>61</sup> Even the evil King Herod would rather kill than be accused of breaking an oath. We read: “On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.’ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison.”<sup>62</sup> In our time also, many marriages could be saved if spouses remembered their vows and “being as good as your word” were considered a virtue.

### 3. The Lord Will Judge at His Coming

2:17 – 3:7

***17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"***

There is little reason not to see this last verse of the chapter as a continuation of the previous section. “You have wearied the LORD with your words” can be linked with the breaking faith in the preceding verse. Throughout the ages, mankind has suffered from a devaluation of language. Originally, the word was the most powerful instrument in God’s creation. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”<sup>63</sup> David understood this when he wrote: “Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”<sup>64</sup> Initially, man’s word had some of the same value. We read in the Genesis record of creation: “Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.”<sup>65</sup> But when man began to doubt the Word of God, at the instigation of the devil, he dropped the gold standard and words became meaningless.

Relativism robs life of its meaning. It blurs the distinction between good and evil. What Malachi is saying here is not that, in the mind of the people there is no difference between God and Satan, but that God is so good that evil does not matter to Him. A liberal concept of the goodness of God deprives God’s character of its absolute nature. If God is perfect in His goodness (which is what He is), then any deviation from His absolute goodness meets with His hate. In a previous verse, Malachi had emphasized God’s hatred by saying: “I hate divorce... and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence.” In this verse the people insinuate that God is so good and loving that their divorce and violence does not bother Him. This tampering with God’s goodness is demonic. It is to Satan’s advantage when the distinction between good and evil is blurred and the chasm between heaven and hell is bridged. It also gives man an excuse to sin as he pleases.

Nobody, of course, verbalized the things Malachi is saying here. As in the previous chapter, no one said the words “The Lord’s table is defiled and its food is contemptible.”<sup>66</sup> Those unspoken words were what their attitude proclaimed. So here, people had the attitude that there would be no day of judgment and that no one would be held accountable for his actions.

People do not realize that a lack of accountability demeans man. By manipulating God’s goodness, as the people in Malachi’s day did, they hurt their own humanity. Without divine justice there can be no human dignity.

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<sup>61</sup> Judg. 11:30,31,34,35

<sup>62</sup> Matt. 14:6-10

<sup>63</sup> Gen. 1:3

<sup>64</sup> Ps. 33:8,9

<sup>65</sup> Gen. 2:19,20

<sup>66</sup> See ch 1:12,13

## CHAPTER THREE

## 3. The Lord Will Judge at His Coming

3:1-7

**1** "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

**2** But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

**3** He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,

**4** and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

**5** "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

**6** "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

**7** Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* remarks about this section: "The first words of this chapter seem a direct answer to the profane atheistic demand of the scoffers of those days which closed the foregoing chapter: Where is the God of judgment? To which it is readily answered, 'Here he is; he is just at the door; the long-expected Messiah is ready to appear; and he says, For judgment have I come into this world, for that judgment which you have so impudently bid defiance to.' One of the rabbis says that the meaning of this is, That God will raise up a righteous King, to set things in order, even the king Messiah. And the beginning of the gospel of Christ is expressly said to be the accomplishment of this promise, with which the Old Testament concludes, Mark 1:1-2. So that by this the two Testaments are, as it were, tacked together, and made to answer one another."

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes: "The announcement of this messenger therefore implied, that the nation in its existing moral condition was not yet prepared for the reception of the Lord, and therefore had no ground for murmuring at the delay of the manifestation of the divine glory, but ought rather to murmur at its own sin and estrangement from God. When the way shall have been prepared, the Lord will suddenly come. pit'om ..., not statim, immediately (Jerome), but unexpectedly. 'This suddenness is repeated in all the acts and judgments of the Lord. The Lord of glory always comes as a thief in the night to those who sleep in their sins' (Schmieder). 'The Lord' (hâ'âdoon) is God; this is evident both from the fact that He comes to His temple, i.e., the temple of Jehovah, and also from the relative clause 'whom ye seek,' which points back to the question, "Where is the God of judgment?" (Mal 2:17). The Lord comes to His temple (heekhâl, lit., palace) as the God-king of Israel, to dwell therein for ever (cf. Ezek 43:7; 37:26-27)."

There is an interesting play on words in the opening statement: "See, I will send my messenger." The Hebrew word here is *Mal'aakiy* which is the name of the prophet who wrote this book. The literal meaning of the word is "a messenger," someone who is sent. The word is sometimes translated with "angel." The essential part of this message is the announcement of the coming of the Lord to His temple. But this coming is preceded by the appearance of a messenger. What Malachi is saying is that the real Malachi is coming. Most commentators see in this messenger John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. Malachi's words are, evidently based upon Isaiah's prophecy: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'"<sup>67</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "This passage of Malachi evidently rests on that of Isaiah his predecessor (Isa 40:3-5). Perhaps, also, as Hengstenberg thinks, 'messenger' includes the long line of prophets headed by Elijah (whence his name is put, in Mal 4:5, as a representative

<sup>67</sup> Isaiah 40:3-5

name), and terminating in John, the last and greatest of the prophets (Matt 11:9-11). John, as the representative prophet (the forerunner of Messiah, the representative God-man) gathered in himself all the scattered lineaments of previous prophecy (hence, Christ terms him 'much more than a prophet,' Luke 7:26), reproducing all its awful and yet inspiring utterances: his coarse garb, like that of the old prophets, being a visible exhortation to repentance; the wilderness in which he preached symbolizing the lifeless, barren state of the Jews at that time, politically and spiritually; his topics, sin, repentance, and salvation, presenting for the last time the condensed epitome of all previous teachings of God by His prophets; so that he is called preeminently God's 'messenger.' Hence, the oldest and true reading of Mark 1:2 is, 'as it is written in Isaiah the prophet;' the difficulty of which is, how can the prophecy of Malachi be referred to Isaiah? The explanation is, the passage in Malachi rests on that in Isa 40:3, and therefore the original source of the prophecy is referred to, in order to mark this dependency and connection."

In a way, we can say that "Elijah" is the main topic of this book. His name is mentioned specifically in the last chapter: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."<sup>68</sup> But the whole message of the Book of Malachi is meant to prepare the nation for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus clearly identified John the Baptist as the Elijah whose coming Malachi announces. We read: "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.... But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished."<sup>69</sup>

The ark of the covenant was no longer in the temple. When the temple was rebuilt under Zerubabel, the glory of the Lord never came down upon it as it had upon the tabernacle and upon Solomon's temple. Israel was to expect the return of the Shekinah in the person of the Messiah. This prophecy was fulfilled for the first time when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We read: "Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.' ' The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them."<sup>70</sup> The significance of the moment was lost on the leaders of the Jewish nation. The priests and scribes asked for Jesus' identification papers, to which Jesus answered by linking His authority with the coming of John the Baptist.<sup>71</sup> The awesomeness of that moment is often lost on us because all that happened during that last week is overshadowed by the crucifixion and resurrection. It was, obviously, lost on the Jews of Jesus' day also. Jesus was the only man who understood what was happening.

The coming of the Lord to His temple will occur "suddenly." The Hebrew word is *pith'owm* which means "instantly." The same word is used in the verse: "Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced at what God had brought about for his people, because it was done *so quickly*."<sup>72</sup> And in "All *at once* he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter."<sup>73</sup> It seems to be related to the Greek word *euthus*, "at once" which is used consistently by Mark in describing the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The events of Palm Sunday were, probably, not the only and final fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. We can expect a fuller and more complete fulfillment at the Second Coming when Christ will return to restore the real temple of which the building in Jerusalem was a mere shadow. In Paul's words: "We eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."<sup>74</sup>

Jesus' entering into the temple on Palm Sunday was not in order to pass judgment, although He did chase the merchants out of the temple court. Jesus drew a clear line between His ministry during His first advent and the judgment He would meet out at His second coming. While in the synagogue of

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<sup>68</sup> Ch. 4:5,6

<sup>69</sup> Matt.11:13-15; 17:12

<sup>70</sup> Matt. 21:12-14

<sup>71</sup> See Matt. 21:23-27

<sup>72</sup> II Chr. 29:36

<sup>73</sup> Prov. 7:22

<sup>74</sup> Phil. 3:20,21

Nazareth, He read the scroll with Isaiah's words: "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God."<sup>75</sup> But He stopped after reading, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" before reading the last words of judgment. We read: "Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down."<sup>76</sup> In Malachi's prophecy the two events are telescopically fused into one. His coming to the temple in vs. 1 is not the same event as "the day of His coming" in vs. 2. We know now that the two have already been separated by several centuries.

*Barnes' Notes* comments here: "Malachi seems to blend, as Joel, the first and second coming of our Lord. The first coming too was a time of sifting and severance, according as those, to whom He came, did or did not receive Him. The severance was not final, because there was yet space for repentance; but it was real, an earnest of the final judgment."

The events at "the day of his coming" are described as a means of moral cleansing and purification. The images used are of a goldsmith who purifies precious metal with fire and of a launderer who cleans clothes. In spite of the fact that Malachi announces the coming judgment as a thing to be dreaded, the results of the judgment are positive. Judgment and condemnation are not identical. The launderer's soap does not kill anyone and the fire is meant to refine, not to consume.

The images used are borrowed from other prophets. Isaiah said: "The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire."<sup>77</sup> And in Zechariah we read that Lord promises: "I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'" <sup>78</sup> Peter puts it in the present tense by saying: "Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."<sup>79</sup>

The Apostle Paul uses the image of purification by fire in the context of the day of judgment. Writing to the church in Corinth, he says: "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."<sup>80</sup>

Perfect holiness is often expressed in terms of clean clothing. At the moment of His transfiguration, Mark describes Jesus with the words: "His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them."<sup>81</sup> And the holiness of the believers is described by the Apostle John with the words: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."<sup>82</sup>

Malachi's two images speak about the outward appearance and inner purity. Man, as God created him, did not wear any clothes. The fact that, in heaven, the saints are pictured as wearing white robes will be an eternal reminder of the fall and of the atonement God provided for man. Here on earth our clothes are given as a means to cover our shame. In heaven they will be an expression of God's grace that imparts His holiness to us.

Seen through Malachi's telescope, present and future judgment blend into one. The practical application of this principle for us is that we are, constantly, being judged by the Spirit of God while we are alive in this world so that we would not perish on the great day of judgment. Paul advises us, therefore, to judge ourselves. He says: "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."<sup>83</sup> On the

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<sup>75</sup> Isa. 61:2

<sup>76</sup> Luke 4:19,20

<sup>77</sup> Isa. 4:4,5

<sup>78</sup> Zech. 13:9

<sup>79</sup> I Peter 1:6,7

<sup>80</sup> I Cor. 3:11-15

<sup>81</sup> Mark 9:2-3

<sup>82</sup> Rev. 7:14<sup>b</sup>

<sup>83</sup> I Cor 11:31,32

other hand, Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."<sup>84</sup>

In the light of the above, we can say that Malachi's question: "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?" has quite a different meaning than appears on the surface. It is our sinful nature that will not be able to endure and stand before the judgment seat of Christ but God's judgment, ultimately, means our salvation.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes about the two pictures: "He shall be like a refiner's fire, which separates between the gold and the dross by melting the ore, or like fuller's soap, which with much rubbing fetches the spots out of the cloth. Christ came to discover men, that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed (Luke 2:35), to distinguish men, to separate between the precious and the vile, for his fan in his hand (Matt 3:12), to send fire on the earth, not peace, but rather division (Luke 12:49,51), to shake heaven and earth, that the wicked might be shaken out (Job 38:13) and that the things which cannot be shaken might remain, Heb 12:27. See what the effect of the trial will be that shall be made by the gospel. The gospel shall work good upon those that are disposed to be good, to them it shall be a savor of life unto life (v. 3): He shall sit as a refiner. Christ by his gospel shall purify and reform his church, and by his Spirit working with it shall regenerate and cleanse particular souls; for to this end he gave himself for the church, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word (Eph 5:26) and purify to himself a peculiar people, Titus 2:14. Christ is the great refiner. Observe, who they are that he will purify—the sons of Levi, all those that are devoted to his praise and employed in his service, as the tribe of Levi was, and whom he designs to make unto our God spiritual priests (Rev 1:6), a holy priesthood, 1 Peter 2:5. Note, All true Christians are sons of Levi, set apart for God, to do the service of his sanctuary, and to war the good warfare."

Malachi prophesies that, when the Lord is finished with His work of cleansing and purification, "the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years." This almost sounds like someone reminiscing about "the good old days" that never were. There never was a time in world history when men served God in a way that was acceptable. The seeming contradiction in the use of the words "the days gone by" is emphasized even more in vs. 7, where God says: "Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them."

The only acceptable part is in the offering. When a man lays his hands upon a sacrificial animal and identifies himself with that animal, he confesses that what happens to the animal ought to happen to him. He condemns himself to death in the death of the animal. He agrees with God's death sentence over his life. This is the only way in which he is acceptable to God. The unpardonable sin of Israel was that they tampered with the sacrifice. They brought defective animals, rejects, to God's altar. And in their marriage with women of other nations, they linked themselves to demons to which they offered their unblemished animals. In this way they, not only, "treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified [them], and... insulted the Spirit of grace"<sup>85</sup> but they also made a caricature of "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"<sup>86</sup> of which every sacrificial animal was an image.

In a sense, "the days gone by" and "the former years" still lie in the future for Malachi's generation. "The days gone by" may refer to the prophecy of Jeremiah in the time previous to the captivity. God spoke through His prophet: " 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ' 'Know the LORD,' ' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.' "<sup>87</sup>

The real difference between the present and the past in Malachi's prophecy is in the way God approaches His people. For Malachi, the present was a time of judgment. The relationship between God and His people had lost its first-love quality. It had become like a marriage in which one of the partners had committed adultery. God had not changed but the people had practiced sorcery, adultery, perjury, and injustice. Each of those vices in itself were sufficient to ruin intimacy with God. In a marriage, problems are often due to the faults of both partners. In the relationship with God, all the blame always falls on man alone. God, emphatically, states: "I the LORD do not change."

<sup>84</sup> John 5:24

<sup>85</sup> See Heb. 10:29

<sup>86</sup> John 1:29

<sup>87</sup> Jer. 31:33,34

Malachi's prophecy here is, actually, a prophecy about our Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus appeared to John in Revelation, He was dressed as a Levite. John says: "Among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest."<sup>88</sup> The sins of Levi, as representative of the whole nation of Israel and ultimately of the whole world, were atoned for in the person of Jesus Christ when He died on the cross.

There is a lot of Gospel in the words: "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." The fact that God calls the people of Israel "descendants of Jacob" is significant. Jacob was the deceiver, the one who tripped people. Israel was the name given to him after his struggle with God and with himself, in which he was victorious because he pleaded for grace. The God who extended His grace to Jacob has not changed; He still offers the same grace to Jacob's descendants. The very fact that Israel still exists as a nation is proof of this grace.

God's grace, in these verses, comes in the form of an invitation to return and it is centered around the rehabilitation of the Levites. In the previous verses, God guaranteed the sanctification of the Levites, in the next section, He calls Israel back to their responsibility in the support of the tribe of Levi and of the priesthood. Levi's ministry was crucial for the survival of the nation. Without priesthood there would be no relationship to God. Israel was in grave danger because they did not recognize the importance of the priests who were in their midst. This is the rationale behind God's invitation to repentance.

In the New Testament, we see how the messenger, whose coming Malachi announced in this chapter, as well as the Lord who came to His temple, take up this call to repentance. The message of John the Baptist was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."<sup>89</sup> After John was put in prison, we read that Jesus Himself took up the call. Matthew reports: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'<sup>90</sup>

#### 4. The People Rob God

3:8-12

**8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings.**

**9 You are under a curse-the whole nation of you-because you are robbing me.**

**10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.**

**11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty.**

**12 "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.**

The next question is "How do we rob you?" This section deals with more than only the matter of tithing. It is representative of man's attitude towards God. The best illustration is found in Jesus' parable of the tenants of the vineyard.<sup>91</sup> In that story the farmers act as if they own the place and they refuse to pay their dues to the Lord of vineyard. They ultimately crucify the Son of the owner. Unless we recognize that "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it,"<sup>92</sup> we rob God.

The first thing that strikes us in these verses is the fact that God identifies Himself with the priests and Levites. Those that worked at the temple were grossly underpaid. Some priests and Levites had probably gone home because they couldn't make ends meet with the support they received from the people. The Mosaic law provided in great detail for the sustenance of the priests and Levites.

God takes the neglect of the people personally, as He does every thing that is done to His servants. To Paul, on the road to Damascus, He revealed Himself with the words: " 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'<sup>93</sup> In the parable of the separation between the sheep and the goats, Jesus lets the King say: "I tell you the truth,

<sup>88</sup> Rev 1:13

<sup>89</sup> Matt. 3:2

<sup>90</sup> Matt. 4:17

<sup>91</sup> See Matt. 21:33-41

<sup>92</sup> Ps. 24:1

<sup>93</sup> Acts 9:4<sup>b</sup>,5<sup>a</sup>



whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” And: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”<sup>94</sup> Here, God identifies Himself with those He had condemned so severely for their lack of commitment. God may judge the priests but He does not want to people to withdraw their support by way of judgment.

But the people’s sin in not tithing was probably more a sign of their selfishness than of judgment upon the priest and Levites. Most people tend to counter their sense of insecurity by surrounding themselves with possessions. Greed is a form of defense. We feel unprotected without some reserves of money. Jesus warned against this when He said: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>95</sup> Our problem with money is, usually, that we do not own it but it owns us. That is why Jesus says: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”<sup>96</sup> What we consider to be our protection turns out to be our master. And our master is a slave driver who imparts to us a vision of the meager years that are ahead. He whispers to us that God will let us down when we need Him most.

There is a fine line between a lack of responsibility and a life of faith. The two border on each other although they are worlds apart. Jesus does not advocate irresponsibility when He says: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”<sup>97</sup>

Responsibility is a matter of priority. If we put our security above the kingdom and God’s righteousness, we are irresponsible. The writer to the Hebrews sums it all up by saying: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”<sup>98</sup>

Apparently, fear kept the people of Israel from tithing. They were afraid of what would happen to them when their crops failed. Fear is the first fruit of sin. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, fear entered their lives. When God called them, Adam answered: “I was afraid....”<sup>99</sup> Greed and fear are twin-brothers. This is the reason the writer of Hebrews links love of money with fear of man. He counter this with the assurance that God is utterly trustworthy.

The way Israel deals with money will be a testimony to the rest of the world. If they give priority to the Kingdom of God, the nations of the world will call them blessed. God says: “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land.” Sadly enough, this is not the universal picture the world sees about the Jew’s financial dealings. Without making generalizations, we can say that the fact that many Jews are heavily involved in the world money market has not given them a reputation that draws people to God. Ultimately, the man who robs God, robs himself and his neighbor.

God says to His people: “Test Me.” This is one of the most amazing statements in the Bible. God invites man to put Him to the test to see if His promises are genuine. Behind our tendency to store up nest eggs is the mistaken thought that we are in charge in this life. If we don’t provide and protect, we think we will perish. In the expression “Putting number one first” we put ourselves in the center with the thought that

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<sup>94</sup> Matt. 25:40, 45

<sup>95</sup> Matt. 6:19-21

<sup>96</sup> Matt. 6:24

<sup>97</sup> Matt. 6:25-34

<sup>98</sup> Heb. 13:5,6

<sup>99</sup> Gen. 3:10

we are ultimately responsible to keep ourselves alive. The principle of the Kingdom of Heaven is that only those who lose their lives will find it. Jesus says: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."<sup>100</sup>

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is an excellent illustration of this principle. During the famine in the days of King Ahab, Elijah went to Zarephath and asked a widow for bread. She answered that she had just enough for the last meal for her son and herself after which she would starve to death. We read: "Elijah said to her, 'Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'the jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.' She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah."<sup>101</sup> The lady and her son would have died of starvation if she had not given priority to the Lord. But it sounds so risky! God invites us to take risks and He assures us that what we risk with Him is perfectly safe.

A more contemporary illustration comes from the mission field of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, where we worked. When the missionary, Gordon Larsen brought the Gospel to the Dani tribes people in the Ilaga valley, they hesitated to burn fetishes for fear that their sweet potato crops would fail and their people would die. The neighboring Damal tribe had accepted the Gospel and had denounced their former practices. Their gardens kept on producing and, for one whole year, there were no deaths in the whole valley. This convinced the Dani tribe and they took the same step as their neighbors had done.

God, usually, does not give us proof of His existence just because we ask for it. But if we are desperate enough to lay our lives on the line and promise full obedience, He assures us that we will not be put to shame. Jesus says: "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out..."<sup>102</sup>

As we said above, these verses are about more than tithing and finances but in the way we handle our money, we can give a clear testimony of our trust in God. Tithing is not a New Testament requirement. Our salvation does not depend upon it. But if love and compassion are absent from the life of a believer, this casts a shadow of doubt upon the very foundation of his faith. In the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, Jesus puts a crook up as an example and commands him for acting "shrewdly." And He says: "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."<sup>103</sup> As a general rule, people who give generously to the Lord's work do not suffer. After all, whose money are they giving? Some people we thank us in heaven because we gave money to the people who brought them the Gospel. God says: "All the nations will call you blessed."

## 5. The People Doubt the Character of God

3:13-15

**13**"You have said harsh things against me," says the LORD. "Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'"

**14**"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?"

**15**But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.' "

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes here: "Some think that an interval of time separates this from the last section, and that meanwhile they had made some efforts at improvement, expecting, however, immediate results in added blessing; and as these did not come as quickly as they hoped, they relapsed into their old distrust."

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes correctly: "Here it is made evident that not all the covenant people had lifted their voices against God to charge him with injustice. The righteous, God-fearing people would find in the Day of the Lord deliverance, victory, and rich blessing."

<sup>100</sup> Matt. 16:25

<sup>101</sup> 1 Kings 17:9

<sup>102</sup> John 7:17

<sup>103</sup> Luke 16:8<sup>b</sup>,9

*Barnes' Notes* comments here: "The people who returned from Babylon seemed to have a knowledge of God, and to observe the law, and to understand their sin, and to offer sacrifices for sin; to pay tithes, to observe the sabbath, and the rest, commanded in the law of God, and seeing all the nations around them abounding in all things, and that they themselves were in penury, hunger and misery, was scandalized and said, 'What does it benefit me, that I worship the One True God, abominate idols, and, pricked with the consciousness of sin, walk mournfully before God?' A topic, which is pursued more largely in Ps 73. Only the Psalmist relates his temptations to God, and God's deliverance of him from them; these adopted them and spoke them against God. They claim, for their partial and meager service, to have fulfilled God's law, taking to themselves God's words of Abraham, 'he kept My charge' "

God says to them: "You have said harsh things against me," to which the people respond with: "What have we said against you?" *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* brings out the difference between the Hebrew terms used here: "chaazaq ... with `al ..., to be strong over any one, does not mean to be harsh or burdensome, but to do violence to a person, to overpower him (cf. Ex 12:33; 2 Sam 24:4, etc.). The niph'al nidbar has a reciprocal meaning, to converse with one another (cf. Ezek 33:30)."

It is hard for us to conceive of the fact that we can hurt the Almighty by what we say to Him or about Him. Paul writes to the believers in Ephesus: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."<sup>104</sup> Although we are created in the image of God, we are still amazed to see that God reacts in the same manner and with the same emotions as we do. We often do not understand that our feelings of sadness or hurt are derived from the character of the One who created us.

Another thing that is evident from this verse is that man underestimates the power of words to hurt. When God says: "You hurt Me," man responds with: "What did we say?" Words can be sharp weapons. Someone has said: "The point of a rapid pen is the sharpest weapon I know." And James observes: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."<sup>105</sup> Jesus says: "I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."<sup>106</sup> David must have understood this when he prayed: "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips."<sup>107</sup>

It is obvious that nobody had voiced the words: "It is futile to serve God." God reveals here their innermost thoughts. Their acts spoke louder than their mouths. God knows what we think. As David says: "Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD." We can hurt the Holy Spirit also by what we do not say. As people who possess a sinful nature, our condition is rather desperate.

The underlying thought in these verses is that godliness should make us reap material benefits. Paul speaks of men "who think that godliness is a means to financial gain." And he says: "But godliness with contentment *is* great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."<sup>108</sup> If our basic attitude in our relationship with God is not contentment, we get ourselves in serious trouble.

This philosophy of life is an indication of shortsightedness. We tend to think that if punishment for sin is not instantaneous it is nonexistent. The Bible teaches that, even if there is judgment in this life, it is not the final judgment. We conclude this from Jesus' words: "I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town."<sup>109</sup> Although Sodom and Gomorrah had been completely destroyed in an instant, their final judgment is yet to come. The only way to escape judgment is to put our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Eph. 4:30

<sup>105</sup> James 3:9,10

<sup>106</sup> Matt. 12:36

<sup>107</sup> Ps. 141:3

<sup>108</sup> I Tim. 6:5-10

<sup>109</sup> Matt. 10:15

<sup>110</sup> John 5:24

It seems that, in vs. 15, Malachi changes from prophet to commentator. When he says: "But now we call the arrogant blessed," he puts himself among those who hear God's Word and react to it. He says to his contemporaries: "See how far we have come. We have turned all moral values upside-down." It is true that, in the Old Testament, blessing was often expressed in terms of material and physical well-being. This passage reveals that, without moral values, health and riches are meaningless. The frightening conclusion is that the symbols of blessing can turn against us and become a curse. The nineteenth century Scottish author George MacDonald once asked the question: "Do you believe that God can punish people by making them rich?" He answered his question with: "Yes, I do!"

**III. The Promises to the Nation** 3:16--4:6  
**A. The Rewards of the Book of Remembrance** 3:16-18

*16 Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.*

*17 "They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.*

*18 And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.*

Again, Malachi interrupts his prophetic ministry to turn into a reporter of events. The reaction of "those that feared the LORD" is, obviously, in response to Malachi's prophecy. The scroll that is mentioned was a document composed by those who responded to the Word of God. It was a manifesto of faith, a statement against the moral decline of the times and a call to repentance, echoing the warnings of the prophet. TLB renders vs. 16 with: "And he had a Book of Remembrance drawn up in which he recorded the names of those who feared him and loved to think about him." Such a paraphrase seems to do injustice to the meaning of the text.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes here: "With these impious murmurers the prophet contrasts those who fear God, as above (ch. ii. 5-7) he set the picture of the true priest in opposition to his delineation of the evil ministers. **Then.** When the impious made the above infidel remarks, the pious **spake often**, conversed together. What they said is not repeated, but it was language well-pleasing unto God, who deigned to listen to their words, and to console them by announcing the future destiny of the good and the evil. They may have argued with these impious talkers, and warned others against them; or they may have expostulated as Jer. xii,1, but yet with full faith that what God does is always good; and this sentiment was all the harder to cherish because they lived under a system of temporal rewards and punishments. The Septuagint and Syriac have, 'These things spake they that feared the Lord,' as if the two preceding verses reported the words of the pious. Some Fathers and commentators have taken the same view. But it is difficult to conceive such words coming from the mouth of those who fear God, unless they are so called ironically. But this is inadmissible, as we see that in the present verse they are represented in their true character, and such a sudden change from irony to actuality is unnatural and quite opposed to the prophet's usual manner."

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* adds: "There were a few godly in the land, who, hearing the language and seeing the profligacy of the rebels above, concluded that some signal mark of God's vengeance must fall upon them; they, therefore, as the corruption increased, cleaved the closer to their Maker. There are three characteristics given of this people, namely:

1. They feared the Lord. They had that reverence for Yahweh that caused them to depart from evil, and to keep his ordinances.

2. They spake often one to another. They kept up the communion of saints. By mutual exhortation they strengthened each other's hands in the Lord.

3. They thought on his name. His name was sacred to them; it was a fruitful source of profound and edifying meditation. The name of God is God himself in the plenitude of his power, omniscience, justice, goodness, mercy, and truth. What a source for thinking and contemplation! See how God treats such persons: The Lord hearkened to their conversation, heard the meditations of their hearts; and so approved of the whole that a book of remembrance was written before the Lord—all their names were carefully registered in heaven. Here is an allusion to records kept by kings, Est 6:1, of such as had performed signal services, and who should be the first to be rewarded."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks: “Calvin makes the fearers of God to be those awakened from among the ungodly mass (before described) to true repentance; the writing of the book thus will imply that some were reclaimable among the blasphemers, and that godly should be assured that, though no hope appeared, there would be a door of penitence opened for them before God. But there is nothing in the context to support this view.”

I see no reason to disregard Calvin’s interpretation. It is logical to suppose that Malachi’s prophecy found response in at least some hearts. But the context does not seem to warrant that the book mentioned here is the Book of Life in which the names of the faithful were recorded. It rather seems to be a document drawn up by those who wanted the register their commitment to God and to their fellow believers. That the names of those who turned to the Lord were written in God’s Book of Life, is true but that fact does not seem to enter into this text.

To this, Malachi responds with another prophetic utterance. God answers the commitment of the faithful. He calls them “my treasured possession” the gathering up of which is put in the future. In the light of the New Testament revelation, this verse acquires an unearthly beauty. The sparing of the son by the man who has compassion refers to those who accepted the Word of God by the mouth of Malachi, as well as to the church of Jesus Christ. Paul speaks about the Son in a different way when he says: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all...”<sup>111</sup> The key of God’s compassion which allows Him to spare them and us, is hidden from view at that point in Scripture. We know that it is not our commitment that saves us but God’s sacrifice in our behalf.

God’s reaction to man’s repentance is wonderfully expressed in the two parables Jesus used to describe God’s dealing with this world. We read: “He sold all he had and bought that field” and “he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”<sup>112</sup> The ones who turn to God in repentance are to God “like treasure hidden in a field” and a pearl of great value. “The day when I make up my treasured possession” is the day Jesus died on the cross.

Vs. 18 –“And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” also reflects a truth that is found in one of Jesus’ parables. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, the two grow up together and one can hardly be distinguished from the other. In Jesus’ story the servants ask their master: “Do you want us to go and pull them up?” but he answers “No, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”<sup>113</sup>

Both Malachi’s prophecy and Jesus’ parable emphasize the fact that it is not up to us to judge one another. The distinction between the righteous and the wicked is not always as clear as we would like it to be. We can mistake weeds for wheat or the other way around. Between the extremes of white and black, there is a rather large gray area, which is only clear to God. Our limited understanding, as well as our own condition should be enough to keep us from throwing the first stone. In Jesus’ parable, the sowing of the weeds was the work of an enemy. We can hold the Evil One responsible for the gray area, and our trying to sort things out in our present condition may very well find us working to his advantage. The Apostle Paul warns us, saying: “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”<sup>114</sup>

Our sole responsibility is in making sure that we are among the righteous and that we are serving the Lord. The basis of our living for the Lord and serving Him is the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says: “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

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<sup>111</sup> Rom. 8:32

<sup>112</sup> Matt. 13:44-46

<sup>113</sup> See Matt. 13:24-30

<sup>114</sup> Rom. 14:4,13

## CHAPTER FOUR

<b>III. The Promises to the Nation</b>	3:16--4:6
<b>B. The Rewards of the Coming of Christ</b>	4:1-3

*1 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them.*

*2 But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.*

*3 Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.*

This last chapter contains the most beautiful poetry of this book both in the pictures of destruction as in those that depict restoration and healing.

Several commentators see in the opening verse of this chapter a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. It is obvious, however, that the prediction goes well beyond one single incident however catastrophic it may have been. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* refers to II Peter 3:7 and observes: "Primarily is meant the judgment coming on Jerusalem; but as this will not exhaust the meaning, without supposing, what is inadmissible in Scripture, exaggeration, the final and full accomplishment, of which the former was the earnest, is the day of general judgment. This principle of interpretation is not double, but successive fulfillment. The language is abrupt, 'Behold, the day cometh! It burns like a furnace!' The abruptness imparts terrible reality to the picture, as if it suddenly burst on the prophet's view."

The reference to Second Peter is quite appropriate. Peter clearly speaks of the day of judgment and the end of the world. "By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." Paul mentions another fire in his letter to the Corinthians. His is also a fire of judgment but with a purifying, not a destructive, result. We read: "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." Malachi's fire, like Peter's is the one in which people perish.

The reference to the root and the branch speaks of the finality of the judgment. Job had said: "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail."<sup>115</sup> When God cuts down the arrogant and evil doers there will be no sprouts and shoots. This does not imply that evil man will be annihilated but that his fate is irreversible. There is for all men a point of no return. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* refers to the Chaldee paraphrase that gives instead of the words "root nor branch," "neither son nor nephew." The same Commentary points out that the prophecy may encompass more than the end of the world. We read: "The day cometh, that is, the Lord cometh, the day of the Lord; and it has reference both to the first and to the second coming of Jesus Christ; the day of both was fixed, and should answer the character here given of it."

This prophecy of Malachi is used by John the Baptist as the core of his message of repentance: "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."<sup>116</sup> It should not amaze us that John borrows from Malachi. He had probably identified himself already with the prophet Elijah whose coming is predicted in the same chapter.

But what a glorious picture is drawn for those who revere the Name of God! Man's journey through life is like a nighttime experience. The righteous travels toward dawn but his path is still in the dark. Solomon said: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the

<sup>115</sup> Job 14:7

<sup>116</sup> Matt. 3:10-12

full light of day.”<sup>117</sup> Malachi makes us experience the ultimate sunrise. “The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” These are some of the most magnificent words in all of Scripture. They were spoken to a people who were survivors of the Babylonian holocaust. They had returned to a Promised Land in ruins, to a temple that was burnt down, and to a city of Jerusalem in rubble. The scars of the nightmare that the prophet Habakkuk had foretold<sup>118</sup> were deeply imbedded on their souls. For them this sunrise brings ultimate healing. The Apostle John draws the final picture in Revelation with the promise: “He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”<sup>119</sup>

There can be no doubt about it but that “the sun of righteousness” refers to the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah called Jesus “a great light.”<sup>120</sup> Jesus must have recognized Himself in Isaiah’s prophecy because He let Himself be led by his words in choosing His living quarters. Matthew, quoting Isaiah, records: “Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali- to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’ ”<sup>121</sup>

Malachi’s word picture of the rising of the sun of righteousness is a rather complicated one. The reference to “wings” compares the sun to a bird that is flying up in the sky. But these wings bring healing. We could accuse Malachi of mixing his metaphors but in this case it enhances the beauty. The link between righteousness and healing point in the direction of the reason for man’s suffering. *Shalom* can only flourish in a soil of righteousness. Injustice knocks the basis away from under man’s life. We speak of “falling in sin.” When we sin, we fall and we hurt ourselves. We need healing because we are sinners and we live in a sinful world. Sin has steeped this world in darkness. Righteousness, therefore, is like a sunrise, the dawn of a new day.

The added feature of the wings is especially expressive. It adds a divine touch to this sunrise. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* reads: “The word ‘wing’ appears 109 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, with particular concentration in the description of the 2 cherubim of wood in Solomon’s temple and in Ezekiel’s vision of the ‘creatures,’ or cherubim. Elsewhere the Bible speaks of ‘wings’ of the cherubim Ex 25:20; 37:9 and of the seraphim Isa 6:2.”

This sunrise awakens in us the deep desire to fly with it. We feel ourselves lifted up above our common plane of existence to higher heights that, normally, would be inaccessible. The ultimate healing is victory over death, the resurrection of our body.

Our reaction to this Good News is depicted in a vivid manner. “And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” If we ever witness the opening of a barn door on the first day of Spring and see the calves that had been kept inside during the cold winter days leap out into the green meadow, we cannot but break out in joyful laughter. In the Song of Solomon, the girl repeats the words of her lover: “My lover spoke and said to me, ‘Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.’ ”<sup>122</sup> For those who know themselves loved by the Lord, the return of Jesus Christ will be like a youthful jumping around in the most gorgeous Spring Time this world has ever seen. We will be healed to the point where we will be able to hop and leap like the calves, like the bride with the bridegroom. “The winter is past.”

The transition between the verses 2 and 3 seems strange to us: the leaping of the calves turns into the trampling down of the wicked. The exuberance of our joy becomes a judgment to others. Judgment is a spiritual phenomenon which is often depicted in terms of physical carnage. John paints for us a gruesome scene in Revelation of a battlefield filled with dead bodies that have become the prey of vultures. We read: “And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come,

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<sup>117</sup> Prov. 4:18

<sup>118</sup> See Hab. 1:1-17

<sup>119</sup> Rev. 7:15-17

<sup>120</sup> Isa. 9:1,2

<sup>121</sup> Matt. 4:13-16

<sup>122</sup> Song 2:10-13

gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.' Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."<sup>123</sup> We have to remind ourselves of the fact that the killing is not a physical slaughter but a spiritual one. The scene is preceded by a description of the Lord Jesus of whom John says: "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations." The sword that defeated the kings of the earth and their armies is the Word of God. God paints this horrible picture of us to make us realize that spiritual death is worse than any carnage we know on earth.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."<sup>124</sup> Our joy in the Lord will, first of all, become a condemnation of the Evil One. It will also bring conviction to humans who have rejected fellowship with God. Paul says elsewhere: "We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."<sup>125</sup>

### C. The Prophecy of the Coming of Elijah 4:4-6

**4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.  
5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.  
6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."**

Malachi concludes his prophecy by going back to the beginning of Scripture and by reaching forward to the coming of the Messiah. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Thus the last of the prophets set his seal to the Pentateuch, on obedience to which depended, as of old (see Lev. xxvi.; Deut. xxviii.), so now, the most abundant blessings." Moses and Elijah are the two characters that dominate these concluding words. The Messiah Himself is not mentioned specifically, but He is the unspoken fulfillment of all expectation.

The mention of Moses is not hard to understand; he represents the written word of God. But why Elijah? It seems that both embody the expression Jesus used of "Moses and the prophets." In the story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus," Father Abraham says to the rich man who wanted Lazarus to be sent to his brothers on earth in order to warn them: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."<sup>126</sup>

The announcement of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah regarding the birth of John the Baptist seems to point to John as the one who fulfilled this prophecy about the coming of Elijah. We read: "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."<sup>127</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* adopts a literal interpretation of this prophecy about the coming of Elijah. We read: "This is not the same personage as the 'messenger' in ch. iii. 1; for the latter comes before the first advent of the Lord, the former appears before the day of judgment; one comes to prepare the way of the Lord, and is followed immediately by Messiah's coming to his temple; the other is sent to convert the chosen people, lest the land be smitten with a curse. There seems to be no valid reason for not holding the literal sense of the words, and seeing in them a promise that Elijah the prophet, who was taken alive from the earth, shall at the last day come again to carry out God's wise purposes. That this was the view adopted by the Jews in all ages we see by the version of the LXX., who have here, 'Elijah the Tishbite;' by allusion in Ecclus. xlviii. 10; and by the question of our Lord's disciples in Matt xvii. 10, 'Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come,' Christ himself confirms this opinion by answering, 'Elias truly shall first come,

<sup>123</sup> Rev. 19:17-21

<sup>124</sup> Rom. 16:20

<sup>125</sup> II Cor. 2:15,16

<sup>126</sup> Luke 16:29,31

<sup>127</sup> Luke 1:17



and restore all things.’ He cannot be referring here to John the Baptist, because he uses the future tense; and then he goes on to say that Elias is come already,’ he is referring to what was past, and he himself explains that he means John, who was announced to come in the spirit and power of Elias (Luke i.17), but of whom it could not be said that he ‘restored all things.’ The same opinion is found in the Revelation (xi. 3,6), where one of the witnesses is very commonly supposed to be Elijah. It is argued by Keil, Reinke, and others, that, as the promise of King David in such passages as Jer. xxx.9; Ezek. xxxiv.23; Hos. iii.5, etc., cannot imply the resurrection of David and his return to earth, so we cannot think of an actual reappearance of Elijah himself, but only of the coming of some prophet with his spirit and power. But, as Knabenbauer points out, for the attribution of the name David to Messiah, long and careful preparation had been made; e.g. by his being called ‘the rod of Jesse,’ the occupant of David’s throne, etc.; and all who heard the expression would at once understand the symbolical application, especially as David was known to have died and been buried. But when they found Malachi speaking of the re-appearance of ‘Elijah *the prophet*,’ who, as they were well aware, had never died, of whose connection with the coming Messenger they had never heard, they could not avoid the conclusion to which they came, viz. that before the great day of judgment Elias should again visit the earth in person. This prophecy concerns the very last days, and intimates that before the final consummation, when iniquity shall abound, God will send this great and faithful preacher of repentance, whose mission shall have such effects that the purpose of God for the salvation of Israel shall be accomplished. We may therefore assume that in the gospel the appellation ‘Elias’ stands both for John and for Elijah himself; for the messenger who prepared the way for Christ’s first advent, and for the prophet who was to convert the Israelites before the judgment day; for him who came in spirit and power, and him who shall come in bodily presence.”

*Barnes’ Notes* agrees with the above with: “Our Lord’s words, ‘Elias truly shall first come and restore all things,’ seem to me to leave no question, that, as John the Immerser came, in the spirit and power of Elias, before His first coming, so, before the second coming, Elijah should come in person, as Jews and Christians have alike expected. This has been the Christian expectation from the first. Justin Martyr asked his opponent... ‘Shall we not conceive that the Word of God has proclaimed Elias to be the forerunner of the great and terrible day of His second Coming?’ ‘Certainly,’ was Trypho’s reply. Justin continues, ‘Our Lord Himself taught us in His own teaching that this very thing shall be, when he said that ‘Elias also shall come;’ ’ and we know that this shall be fulfilled, when He is about to come from heaven in glory. Tertullian says... ‘Elias is to come again, not after a departure from life, but after a translation; not to be restored to the body, from which he was never taken; but to be restored to the world, from which he was translated; not by way of restoration to life, but for the completion of prophecy; one and the same in name and in person.’... ‘Enoch and Elias were translated, and their death is not recorded, as being deferred; but they are reserved as to die, that they may vanquish Antichrist by their blood.’ ”

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* also concurs with this interpretation, first of all by focusing on the personal testimony of John the Baptist. We read: “[The prophet]-emphatic: not ‘the Tishbite:’ for it is in his official, not his personal capacity, that his coming is here predicted. In this sense, John the Baptist was an Elijah in spirit (Luke 1:16-17), but not the literal Elijah; whence, when asked, ‘Art thou Elias?’ (John 1:21), he answered, ‘I am not. Art thou that prophet? No.’ This implies that John, though knowing from the angel’s announcement to his father that he was referred to by Mal 4:5 (Luke 1:17), whence he wore the costume of Elijah, yet knew by inspiration that he did not exhaustively fulfill all that is included in this prophecy; that there is a further fulfillment (cf. note, Mal 3:1). As Moses in Mal 4:4 represents the law, so Elijah represents the prophets. The Jews always understood it of the literal Elijah. Their saying is, ‘Messiah must be anointed by Elijah.’ As there is another consummating advent of Messiah Himself, so also of His forerunner Elijah: perhaps in person, as at the transfiguration (Matt 17:3: cf. Matt 17:11, ‘Elias truly SHALL first come, and restore all things:’ cf. Acts 3:21, ‘the times of restitution of all things,’ which proves that the time of the second coming is referred to).”

It is not easy to come to a definite conclusion about the real meaning of Malachi’s announcement and the sequence of events. John’s denial can be used as a proof, as *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* does, that John did not meet all the requirements to fulfill the prophecy. But it can also be seen as a proof of his deep humility. After all, Jesus also said about John: “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished.”<sup>128</sup> Jesus spoke those mysterious words immediately after Elijah had

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<sup>128</sup> Matt. 17:11,12

appeared with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. He linked the fact of His rejection by the people He had come to save with the failure of Israel to recognize John as the prophet Elijah.

*The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes about the literal interpretation of Elijah's return, as compared to David's resurrection: "The prophetic calling... was not hereditary in the prophet's house, but rested solely upon divine choice and endowment with the Spirit of God; and consequently by Elijah we are not to understand a lineal descendant of the Tishbite, but simply a prophet in whom the spirit and power of Elijah are revived, as Ephr. Syr., Luther, Calvin, and most of the Protestant commentators have maintained." We are, obviously, in good company when we put question marks behind the expectation of a literal return of Elijah.

*The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* notes the following interesting detail of Elijah's legacy: "Rome's barefooted Carmelites have many absurd traditions as to the derivation of their order from Elijah himself, and as to the 'cloud out of the sea' typifying the Virgin Mary, to whom a chapel is dedicated on the imaginary site of Elijah's seeing the cloud!" This is a pointer to how far the human mind can go astray in its effort to interpret Biblical truth. Orthodox Jews still faithfully reserve an empty chair for Elijah at their Passover celebrations.

The law of Moses had never been able to bring about a change of heart in man. The coming of Elijah promises to have the effect of turning "the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." Whatever interpretation we may give to the mention of the names of Moses and Elijah, the obvious lesson is that God wants to operate a change of heart in those who remember the law of Moses. The question, however, is whether such a change of heart will be the inevitable result of Elijah's coming. In announcing the birth of John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel had said to Zechariah: "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The crucifixion of the Lord of glory hardly indicates that John was successful in the accomplishment of his mission, or was he? It seems that even on the last day of world history man will still have the awesome power to reject the grace of God and bring upon himself a total destruction. But John's failure, as well as Jesus' apparent failure in His death on the cross has shown itself to be God's greatest victory over sin and death ever recorded in this universe. In Paul's words: "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."<sup>129</sup> God's foolishness may still surprise us on the Last Day.

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<sup>129</sup> I Cor. 1:25