

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Malachi - The Dangers of Spiritual Blindness: Misplaced values (Malachi 2:17-3:12)

Today we continue our series on “Malachi, the dangers of spiritual blindness” with talk number T1058 entitled “Misplaced Values” on Malachi 2:17-3:12. So far, we’ve considered:

- “The danger of doubting God’s love” from Malachi 1:1-5;
- “The danger of despising God’s name” from Malachi 1:6-2:9; and
- “The dangers arising from problems in the family” from Malachi 2:10-16.

Let’s begin today by reading today’s section of Malachi, Malachi 2:17-3:12, from the English Standard Version:

“You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, ‘How have we wearied him?’ By saying, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’ Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me”, says the LORD of hosts. “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you”, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 2:17-3:12).

If you’ve heard the first three talks in this series, you’ll be familiar by now with the distinctive style of Malachi’s prophecy. It’s a kind of “state-of-the-nation” speech, or an oracle, or burden, given by the prophet. In it, He summarises the spiritual condition of Israel some sixty years, or so, following the return of the Jewish remnant from Babylonian captivity. His burden is that each of the ten issue statements the LORD makes is arrogantly questioned by his fellow Jews as to its verity. But nothing quite prepares us for God’s pronouncement in Malachi 2:17: “*You have wearied [Me] with your words.*” Can it be the case that mere mortal man can cause the Almighty to be so despondent? It can’t ever be that He’s weary because He’s tired. No, He’s the all-powerful God, who possesses endless energy! So, we mustn’t think He’s weary in the same way as we humans grow weary when overburdened with a task which proves too difficult to accomplish. Rather, it was that Israel’s obstinacy had brought His long-suffering of their arrogance to a point where He saw that they weren’t ever going to change. And their next four hundred years of history proved Him to be correct. For when Jesus came as their Messiah, He received the same treatment himself. “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... I would have gathered your children together [but]...you were not willing!*” is how He ended His seven-woe denouncement of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-36. See Matthew 23:37

Most commentators focus on the empty words of ritual worship which had become a feature of Malachi’s generation’s formal relationship with Jehovah. But I think that’s secondary compared with Malachi’s main burden. You’ll see what I mean by my reading of all their other sayings recorded by Malachi:

- “*‘I have loved you’, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have you loved us?’” (Malachi 1:2).*

- *“A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear?” says the LORD of hosts to you, ‘O priests, who despise my name.’ But you say, “How have we despised your name?” By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, “How have we polluted you?” By saying that the LORD’s table may be despised” (Malachi 1:6-7).*
- *“You profane [my Name] when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. But you say, “What a weariness this is”, and you snort at it’, says the LORD of hosts. ‘You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand?’ says the LORD” (Malachi 1:12-13).*
- *“You cover the LORD’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand. But you say, ‘Why does he not?’ Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Malachi 2:13-14).*
- *“Return to me, and I will return to you’, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’” (Malachi 3:7-8).*
- *“Your words have been hard against me’, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts?’” (Malachi 3:13-14).*

I don’t particularly go in for the popular response used these days to surprise, or spectacular situations, but Malachi 2:17 is certainly a “Wow” point in this prophecy! It beggars belief that any human being would dare talk back to God. It’s beyond belief that Malachi’s fellow-Jews were so arrogant as to speak against the LORD, who had singled their nation out for such special blessings. But I wonder if today’s Christian believers could, and do, exhibit the same kind of attitude to God. Our words reflect our behaviour and the challenge is for us to reverence the God who has saved us. Through the death of His Son upon the Cross, He has reconciled us from our dire position of being alienated from Him. He’s blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ in the heavenly realms (see Ephesians 1:3). Let’s beware of becoming complacent about these and consequently lapse into a lack of respect for our holy Father!

The LORD graciously addressed their question in Malachi 2:17, *“How have we wearied [you]?”* He answered, *“[When you say], ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.’”* And so, to the title of this talk, “Misplaced Values”. They didn’t value the unique love that Jehovah had for Israel. They didn’t value the special revelation of His Name made known to them in Exodus 3:14, *“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’ ... ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”* Their values were evidenced in the way they profaned His table with polluted offerings and then had the audacity to complain that He wouldn’t accept these sacrifices! They also despised the covenant in their loose marriage and divorce practices.

Malachi wasn’t raising new issues with them. For example, their practice of establishing their own moral values and then assessing Jehovah by these had been going on since, at least, Isaiah’s day: *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”* (Isaiah 5:20). Sadly, they didn’t repent, and these attitudes were still prevalent amongst the Jews during Jesus’ lifetime. They wrongly attributed His good works in casting out demons to Beelzebub (Luke 11:20). The Lord Jesus strongly condemned the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees: *“He said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. ... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!’ ... ‘thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do”* (Mark 7:6-9, 13).

But again, we must challenge ourselves and question ourselves as to our morality and our professed practice of the Christian religion. Do we downgrade the high moral standards of the word of God to make them compatible with the world’s values? Do we thereby call evil good and good evil? Is our righteousness any better than the Pharisees? Jesus said in Matthew 5:20, *“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Are we in any way hypocrites as they were? Are we apathetic towards God? Is there any degree of boredom in our worship of Him? Do we use unholy or profane methods in this worship?

Malachi 3 starts with the word, *“Behold”* as the prophet draws Israel’s attention to the consequences of their total indifference to their actions and words. Judgement will most surely come upon the nation, but not immediately. The name “Malachi” means “My messenger” but Malachi 3:1 prophecies that a future *“My messenger”* would come to prior to Lord Himself. Both Mark (Mark 1:2) and Luke (Luke 1:76) identified John the Baptist to be this messenger. And Jesus himself verified this fact (Matthew 11:20 and Luke 7:27). According to Malachi 3:5, John the Baptist would

prepare the way for the Lord to come near to Israel in judgment. But God was so gracious to the nation that He actually sent John to preach a baptism of repentance with warnings of judgments to follow, if they did not. John 1:6-9 states that John was a witness to the true Light, a testimony designed so that all people might believe in the Light and be saved from judgment. However, in general, the nation of Israel did not receive the Lord Jesus as the long-promised Messiah even though Malachi said they were seeking Him!

Malachi's prophecy that *"the Lord ... will suddenly come to his temple"* was fulfilled on several occasions during the Jesus' lifetime. Perhaps the most poignant was after His kingly procession into Jerusalem on an ass, when He cleansed the temple. *"He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve"* (Mark 11:11). He expected to be *"blessed out of the house of the LORD"* (see Psalm 118:26) but He wasn't! Later that week He lamented, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'"* (Matthew 23:37-39). The ensuing razing of the temple in AD 70 by the Romans brought to pass this judgment.

In Malachi 3:1, Malachi also calls the Lord Jesus *"the messenger of the covenant"* - the long-awaited Prophet who Moses had prophesied would come to fulfil the covenant promises (see Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Before and until He came, the nation *"delighted in Him"*, or placed their hope in Him, because they anticipated a mighty Deliverer. But when He came in lowly grace, they rejected Him because He didn't fit into their schemes. This was a repeat of Israel's reaction to Him, after He had brought them out of Egypt and into Canaan: *"Behold, I send my angel before thy face, that he may keep thee in the way, that he may bring thee into the land which I have prepared for thee. Take heed to thyself and hearken to him, and disobey him not; for he will not give way to thee, for my name is on him"* (Exodus 23:20-21, Brenton).

However, Malachi continued his prophecy: *"Behold, he is coming", says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"* (Malachi 3:1c-2a). So, the real thrust of the prophecy is the Second Coming of Christ in glory. It's then that He will come near to Israel in judgment (Malachi 3:5a). Swift judgment will fall upon all gross sinners: sorcerers, the sexual immoral, those who took false oaths and all oppressors. But, especially those who perpetuate the insolent attitudes of Malachi's fellow Jews (Malachi 3:5b). That is, those who have misplaced values of, and no reverence for, God. Messiah will thoroughly and completely purge repentant Israel of their sins, just like a refiner's furnace removes impurities from precious metals and caustic cleanses dirt and filth. Israel will be inwardly and outwardly purified and restored to a correct covenant relationship with Jehovah. And their Levites will righteously conduct temple worship once more to be acceptable to Him (Malachi 3:3-4).

Why, we might ask, didn't God sort out Israel during Malachi's lifetime or even when the Lord Jesus came to them at His incarnation? Malachi 3:6 provides the answer: *"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."* Jehovah's constant character is Israel's guarantee of His constant grace to them. It can be traced back to their patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, His servants, *"to whom [He] swore by [His] own self, and said to them, 'All this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever'"* (Exodus 32:13b). And He declared the meaning of His name to Moses when He said, *"I ... will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD'. And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy"* (Exodus 33:19).

In Malachi 3:7, God continued His disputes with His erring people. Malachi 3:1-6 are an interruption, an interjection of a prophecy of judgment, which Malachi provided as a kind of early warning (no doubt in the hope that Israel would repent). The LORD highlighted in Malachi 3:7 that His constancy prevails against the background of Israel's constant refusal to live by His law and value, guard, keep His statutes. He graciously appealed to them: *"Return to me, and I will return to you"* (Malachi 3:7b). But they immediately retorted, *"How shall we return?"* (Malachi 3:7c).

It was obvious to the LORD that they were so arrogant in their self-righteousness that they saw no need to repent; and that they'd no intention of doing so! So, He made a further accusation that they'd actually robbed Him (Malachi 3:8). The dialogue at this stage of the dispute is very terse:

- *"Return to me, and I will return to you"* - *"How shall we return?"* (Malachi 3:7);
- *"You are robbing me."* - *"How have we robbed you?"* - *"In your tithes and contributions"* (Malachi 3:8).

Jehovah's conclusion was equally stark: *"You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you."* Their crops were being eaten by locusts (Malachi 3:11) but and worse they were experiencing spiritual poverty.

However, the LORD is longsuffering and offered Israel another opportunity of repentance and recovery. The Jews were short-changing Him by disobeying the injunctions of the Law to give the first of their animals, harvest etc. as tithes to the Levites (see, Deuteronomy 18:3-8). Again, the LORD wanted to bless them and invited them to bring the full tithe

into the temple storehouse so that the temple worship could function properly. The invitation was not a command of law but a gracious suggestion for them to prove His unchanging nature and character. *“Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need”* (Malachi 3:10b). If they’d done so, the nations surrounding them would have recognised from the abundance of their harvests that they’d been blessed by God (Malachi 3:12). Alas, in all their spiritual blindness they didn’t respond to the LORD in the right manner. And so, even today, their neighbours are hostile to them rather than in right relationship to them. But this prophecy will be fulfilled in the millennial reign of their Messiah. The promise remains, *“You will be a land of delight”, says the LORD of hosts* (Malachi 3:12b). The LORD also made this promise in the *“I wills”* of Ezekiel 34. It’s part of His covenant of peace: *“I will make them and the places all around [Zion] a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing”* (Ezekiel 34:26). And this is the main lesson from today’s talk - there are blessings for us if we heed God’s word. El Nathan’s hymn states:

*“There shall be showers of blessing”:
This is the promise of love:
There shall be seasons refreshing,
Sent from the Saviour above.*

*“There shall be showers of blessing”
Precious reviving again;
Over the hills and the valleys,
Sound of abundance of rain.*

*“There shall be showers of blessing”
Send them upon us, O Lord!
Grant to us now a refreshing;
Come, and now honour Thy word.*

*“There shall be showers of blessing”;
Oh, that today they might fall,
Now as to God we’re confessing,
Now as on Jesus we call!*

*Showers of blessing,
Showers of blessing we need;
Mercy drops round us are falling,
But for the showers we plead.*

Thank you for listening to the *Truth for Today* talk, “Misplaced Values”.

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