

A BLAST AT PRIESTS AND PEOPLE
MALACHI'S MESSAGES

By

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1. THE ORACLE

¹An 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, ³but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

⁴Edom 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. ⁵You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD--even beyond the borders of Israel!' (Malachi 1:1-5).

An "oracle" is a form of God's word. Malachi is a name that means "messenger."

God's word always has a specific target. Here the message is sent "to Israel..."

God's word always has a chosen transmitter. God delivered these particular messages "through Malachi." However, the book was preserved as Scripture because sin and sinners in any period of history need the essential message of this little book of Malachi--including us.

1. The content of this oracle.

This oracle affirms and illustrates divine love: “I have loved you...” It addresses especially the priesthood but also the people and it thunders against specific sins that they had committed. Though they deserved to be abandoned by the Lord, his love for them prompted rebuke but not rejection; his love called them to repentance and promised them mercy. The love of God is greater than the sin of humankind.

This oracle also affirms and illustrates divine wrath: “the wrath of the Lord.” While the Lord will delay judgment in the interest of mercy, he knows when further delay would simply mean added rebellion and worsening evils. He fully intends to bring righteous judgment against unrighteous people. Divine wrath means that sin cannot be permanent. God never overlooks or excuses sin.

2. The lessons of this oracle.

We can learn from Malachi that God’s word may be defied but never defeated. Edom responded to his devastating judgment upon their land by boasting, “we will rebuild.” God replies, “I will demolish.” Wicked men will never have the last word in their controversy with God. The sinner’s empty boast will be silenced by further and final punishment from God.

We can also learn from Malachi that God’s sovereignty has no boundaries. “Even beyond the borders of Israel” his name will be exalted. Pagan gods had limited turfs, but the one, true living God of Israel is the creator, redeemer and judge of all the earth.

The divine oracle determines human destiny. If God decrees, “They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord,” no one and nothing will be able to keep that from

happening. All debate about what the Lord can do and will do is useless speculation. Wisdom dictates that we submit to the clear and awful warnings of his words.

The fulfilled oracle inspires reverent praise. It leads people to exclaim, "Great is the Lord..." He is "the Lord Almighty." Measured against him, there is no god or man who deserves to receive the praise, acclaim and obedience that should be rendered to him alone.

2. DISHONORED LORD, DOOMED PEOPLE

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. ⁸When 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. ¹¹My 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.

"But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.' ¹³And 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 (Malachi 1:6-14).

The character and behavior of Israel was largely determined by that of its priesthood. Every generation needs moral and spiritual leadership whose loyalty to God's word cannot be bought by offers of fame or fortune.

The man makes the office, not the office the man. Being a priest did not make any descendant of Levi a holy man. Unholy men should have been reprov'd and denied the duties and privileges that attended the priesthood. Character should trump all other considerations in the selection of leaders for the church of God.

1. A displeased God.

Through courageous Malachi God sends the message: "I am not pleased with you..." We can't please wicked men and a holy God at the same time. We can't please God without displeasing those who choose to be his enemies. There is no way to avoid conflict if we are pleasing God.

In Israel during Malachi's lifetime, the law was flouted and the lawgiver insulted. The life-codes that God gave to his people were

not suggestions but commands. We live by his word or we live under his wrath. A pat on the back from evil men is not worth being cast away by a holy God.

Israel's people and priests displeased God by offering diseased and deformed animals as sacrifices to him. The law demanded the best of the flocks and herds, but the best, when marketed, meant more money for their owners. God was displaced by Mammon, and his terrible wrath was incurred. Less than our best cannot be acceptable to the Lord.

2. A doomed people.

"Cursed is the cheat..." To be cursed by God is ultimate retribution. No measure of influence, no amount of money, is worth having at that great price.

Those who lie to God will die without God. Ultimately, we forfeit the God we choose to dishonor. The nation treated God with disrespect they dared not show earthly rulers or even earthly parents. In response, God refuses to accept their worship and bless their lives. Ruin is always ahead when worship becomes empty rituals.

We know from the New Testament that there is only one sacrifice that God accepts. We come to God by Jesus or we come in vain. He alone atones for our sins and unites us with our maker.

3. A BLAST AT THE PRIESTHOOD

"And now this admonition is for you, O priests. ²If 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. ⁴And 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. ⁶True 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. ⁸But 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" (Malachi 2:1-9).

Some wicked priests misled the people. God charged, "You...have caused many to stumble..."

Misled people despised the priests. God declared, “I have caused you to be despised...”

Priesthood was an awesome responsibility. It shaped the nation’s response to God and God’s actions for or against the nation.

1. The character of a true priest.

First and foremost “he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty.” It is his obligation to “preserve knowledge” and to dispense knowledge. His primary responsibility is not to offer sacrifices and to collect tithes, but to acquaint the people with the word of the Lord.

A true priest teaches the word of the Lord, not the speculations of men even if the men are philosophers and theologians. Levi was such a priest and the Lord says, “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips.” This is a pastor’s major responsibility in the church of Jesus Christ today.

By proclaiming the word of God and by instructing the people who sought to know God, the true priest turned the people to the Lord. Levi, a model of a true priest, “walked with [God] in peace and righteousness and turned many from sin.” His talk was not contradicted by his walk.

2. The judgment on a false priest.

To those priests who did not “set” their hearts to honor God’s name, he declares, “I will send a curse upon you and I will curse your blessings.” The false priest who dares to dishonor God and mislead the people incurs the wrath of the Lord Almighty. In an awful passage of threatened judgment the Lord says, “I will spread on your faces the offal from your festal sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.”

The false priest also loses the respect of the people. The Lord says, “I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people.” Eventually men will hate the leaders who lacked the moral courage to name their sins and call them to repentance.

Character counts for more than talent in the priesthood. This does not disparage wisdom and eloquence and persuasive personalities, for these are gifts from God. But one may be intellectually, religiously and socially capable while his heart is set on fame, fortune and followers instead of on God. A humble Bible-believing, Spirit-filled, people-loving priest or pastor is of far greater value than the gifted genius who exploits the church for his own advantage.

That being said, it is true that talent reinforces character in the priesthood. Those who combine scholarly depth and speaking skill with moral integrity put us all in debt to their ministries. We should thank God for them and follow them as they follow the Lord.

4. BREAKING FAITH

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. ¹²As 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.

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.

"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
(Malachi 2:10-16).

All humanity has life from God and will account for life to God. In this sense we all have “one Father.” One creator “gives all men life and breath and everything else.” That life-giver “will judge the world with justice,” demanding of every one an accounting for the gift of life.

All horizontal relationships should be grounded in this vertical one. You cannot be rightly related to people, even within the family circle, unless you are rightly related to God. If you honor him as your creator, redeemer and judge you will give people the honor and respect that should mark all social life.

1. The detestable sin of Israel.

Israel was not right with God. They “broke faith with God” by practicing idolatry. They married “the daughter of a foreign god,” and gave that pagan god a place in their temple and in their worship.

They did not cease from worshipping God, but they compromised the covenant and complicated their lives by worshipping other gods as well. They violated the first of the Ten Commandments, and that led to the violation of the other nine. All things go wrong when a nation or a person is not right with God.

God responded to idolatry and immorality by rejecting Israel’s worship. He is “a jealous God.” He will not share his glory with other gods. He is the God who made man; he will not give place to men who make gods. He refused to accept the offerings brought to him by his people, and through the prophet he called for the men who were guilty of idolatry to be “cut off from the tents of Jacob.”

2. The divorce-hating God of Israel.

God loved the house of worship that was built for him. Malachi called the temple “the sanctuary the Lord loves.” He honored the

place with his presence and the people with his blessings until they profaned the covenant and desecrated the temple.

Though he loved the place he hated the worship offered to him in that place. The people were “breaking faith with one another” and priests and people became co-conspirators in making the Father’s house “a den of thieves.”

Divorce was rampant because God was dishonored. The marriage covenants between husbands and wives were supposed to reflect the nation’s union with the God who had saved them and sustained them. Being true to God will keep us true to each other. Being unfaithful to God will falsify all relationships in life.

Our worship never pleases God if we are breaking faith with him and breaking faith with one another. He keeps covenant. He is ever faithful to his people. If they break faith with him, he will be faithful to punish them in order to bring them to repentance.

God declares that he hates divorce and violence. This generation is giving him lots to hate.

5. THE LORD IS COMING FOR JUDGMENT

2:17 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?"

3:1 "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 (Malachi 2:17-3:5).

The Lord comes to bring judgment. He warns Israel, “I will come near you for judgment.” He is just as faithful to his threats as he is to his promises. He keeps his word and holds us accountable for our lives.

1. The OT directive.

The judge is coming. People were asking, “Where is the God of justice?” He was present as a witness to all that was going on, and would be “quick to testify against” the wicked who did not fear him and defied his moral demands.

His judgment punishes the wicked. The “sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers... and those who “defraud laborers...oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice” will be the targets of his righteous wrath. In other words, no one finally gets away with wrongdoing.

His judgment vindicates the righteous. Those he refines will be able to “endure the day of his coming.” He comes to bless his friends and to banish his enemies.

2. The NT perspective.

The “messenger of the covenant” is identified in the gospels as John the Baptist, the prophet chosen by God to introduce Jesus Christ, the Lord of the covenant, to Israel.

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the covenant. He is the true king and messiah of Israel; indeed, he is the savior and sovereign of the world. It is he who refines priests and people, preparing them to be his people for all eternity.

The oracle of Malachi is being fulfilled by Jesus. His ministry of salvation is being carried out in our day. He is coming to judge the

world. His judgment begins with his people. We face the question: Can we “endure the day of his coming”? The answer is simple and serious: We can endure the day of his coming if we spend our days as his loving Lord. The daily life confirms or contradicts our profession of faith in Jesus as Lord.

6. THE UNCHANGED AND THE UNBLESSED

⁶"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷Ever 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?'

⁸"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. ⁹You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. ¹⁰Bring 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. ¹¹I 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 (Malachi 3:6-12).

Throughout Scripture, as throughout history, emphasis falls upon the relationship between God and people. This polemic from Malachi affirms that God does not change and explains why the people go unblessed.

1. The Unchanged God.

Why has the threatened judgment been so long postponed? Because God is unchanged in the patient love that offers the wicked time and opportunity to repent and be forgiven. He wants all to be saved. He says to the guilty, "Return to me and I will return to you."

Fools interpret the delay as cancellation. They decide that God is uncaring about the evils that poison their hearts and pollute their lives. They persist in rebellion against him, having convinced themselves that he will not bring the judgment of which Scripture so often speaks.

As the unchanged God he does not rush to judgment but he will surely fulfill his promise to punish sin and sinners if they refuse to repent.

2. The unblessed people.

They were not yet before the judge but they were "under a curse." They were charged with robbing God by withholding "the whole tithe" required by him. "The tithe is the Lord's." Tithing antedated the law. Tithing was a response of those who, like Abraham, were "justified by faith."

Jesus is a priest in the order, not of Levi, but of Melchizedek, who was a tithe-receiving priest/ king.

The curse would be lifted and the blessings made abundant only when the people brought the whole tithe to the storehouse of God. That would insure food in sufficient amount to care for all who had none.

Non-tithers will always forfeit the full blessings intended for them by the Lord. He allows himself to be robbed but he doesn't reward the robbers.

The unchanged God still demands the tithe as his own. The unblessed people still rob themselves by robbing him.

Because God is unchanged, his demands and promises are likewise unchanged. Cultures and customs change, but we never outgrow the word of God. He speaks the same messages to us that he spoke to Israel and the church centuries ago. He demands a like obedience from us, and promises a like mercy or judgment to us.

Repentance still brings his forgiveness. Rebellion still brings his retribution.

7. THE LISTENER

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

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. ¹⁸And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not (Malachi 3:13-18).*

To communicate in words is an immense privilege. The privilege can also become an immense peril. God hears all that is said and knows why it was said. That's good reason to guard our minds and our mouths.

1. The talk that God resents.

“You have said harsh things against me.” What we say about God, whether good or bad, he hears as clearly as he hears what we say to him. He doesn’t hear it as an eavesdropping spectator to our lives; he hears it as a very active participant in our lives. We will account to him as our judge for every word that we speak about him. Harsh words will be harshly judged.

The harsh words specified here charged God with indifference to character and behavior. Arrogant men, defiant of God and his laws, prospered. They daily “escaped” his judgment upon their slander of him and their exploitation of the people. Though “evildoers,” they prospered. In contrast, the people who obeyed God were often poor. From this a false conclusion was drawn: “It is futile to serve God.”

To serve God in order to prosper materially is an attempt to use God, to exploit his goodness for our gain. God is truly served only when we love him and trust him whatever our earthly lot.

In short, the “harsh things” said against God were judgmental; the speakers were judging the judge. They would one day be judged by him.

2. The talk God rewards.

“Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard.” While disappointed men slandered God for not having blessed them, faithful people encouraged one another to love him supremely and to serve him loyally.

The listening God entered their names upon an honor roll, and planned for them a gracious reward. “They will be mine,” he

declared. The day of judgment is coming when “the Lord Almighty” will distinguish between “those who serve God and those who do not.” On that day he will claim as his “son” and “servant” every person who “honored his name” when others were dragging it through the mud of their frustrated desires for fame and fortune.

Jesus spoke of finding the kingdom of God as a treasured possession. God speaks here of his loyal people as his “treasured possession.” He will “spare them” from the judgment that will befall those who spoke harshly against him.

Two kinds of speakers are in the text--those who speak to slander God and those who speak to honor God. There is one who hears all that is said, and he brings his final judgment accordingly. In that day, according to Jesus, “by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

8. THE COMING DAY

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. ²But 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. ³Then 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.

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. ⁶He 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 4:1-6).

Israel eagerly awaited the day of the Lord. It is coming, they believed, and when it comes we will be the richest, strongest and happiest nation on the face of the earth.

The prophets were sent to warn the people that the coming day would be darkness instead of light to all evildoers, especially those who had been chosen as God's precious treasure and had grieved him by their idolatry and immorality.

The phrases "I do," "I gave," and "I will," sum up the truth of this passage.

1. The Lord Almighty decides the end of our history.

Of that coming day, he says, “I do these things.” The end is not chosen or controlled by human legislatures or dictators. God decides when history shall end and therefore the chief issues of history are moral, not political. Arrogant evildoers will perish in the flames of his judgment. Nothing shall remain of evil, no root or branch. All will be stubble for the flames of righteous wrath.

That day will be the dawn of vindication for the righteous. A healing “sun of righteousness” will arise, bringing a capering joy to their hearts and lives.

2. The Lord Almighty decrees the laws by which we are to live.

The law of Moses was not the creation of Moses. God says, “I gave him” all the “decrees and laws” that were to govern “all Israel.” Defiance of those laws was not a rejection of Moses but of God.

Christians are not under the law of Moses; they are under the law of Christ--the law of all-inclusive love. Law was given to Israel in the context of grace, for God had saved them from Egyptian bondage. Grace is given to us with an inclusion of law. We are saved by grace not by works, but we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Christian faith is not lawless.

3. The Lord Almighty determines the future toward which we are moving.

Of the coming day of the Lord, he says, “I will send.” He sends the prophet Elijah to close a generation gap, to turn fathers and children to one another through their mutual faith in the Lord whom Elijah serves.

The New Testament identifies this prophecy with the ministry of John the Baptist who served as the forerunner of Jesus, the Lord in whom fathers and children are to trust for their salvation.

If the prophet's ministry goes unheeded, God says, "I will strike." He will come to smite the land with a curse. God's covenants carry two clear options, blessings or curses.

The day is coming. God has decreed it and nothing can derail it. He who came as savior is coming as judge. Will he find you among the wicked or among the righteous? Will that day bring darkness or light to you?