

## A Passion for His Fatherhood

### Malachi 1

It was not the worst pickle in which the nation of Judah had ever found itself when Malachi arrived on the scene. Years earlier, Babylonian forces had destroyed Jerusalem. Those inhabitants who were not killed in the conflict were carried away into captivity. This was God's divine judgment against His people for their recurring descent into wickedness and idol worship.

Seventy years passed. In the meantime, Babylon fell to the Persians. The Persian king Cyrus allowed a contingent of Jews to return to Jerusalem. Under the direction of Ezra, the temple was rebuilt. A few years later, Nehemiah, a cupbearer to another Persian king, yearned to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and make it a safer place. King Artaxerxes allowed Nehemiah to join the expatriates. He oversaw the building of the walls and became the governor in behalf of Persia.

Never again would the Jews bow to pagan idols or set up high places of worship or engage in the lewd worship rituals of the heathens surrounding them. The only God they would worship was JEHOVAH. The only temple where they would worship was in Jerusalem. The only rituals they would engage in were ones spelled out by Moses. At first glance, one might wonder why it was necessary for God to send a final messenger, Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets.

Still, as improved as the spiritual condition of the nation seemed to be, the people were living with a new issue. For these repatriates in Jerusalem, the initial surge of enthusiasm for a renewed city and temple had faded. Religious zeal for JEHOVAH had degenerated into religious motions. They were not giving God His rightful due, and the doors of blessing from heaven seemed tightly shut.

Let us think on these things against the backdrop of our own lives and against the backdrop of our lives together. Are we experiencing all the blessing, glory and peace that God desires to pour out on His people? Our time in *Malachi* could be a powerful adventure, but it will call each of us to gritty self-examination. Are your own lives and our lives together marked by religious zeal or religious motion? Are we living passionate lives for God? That is an uncomfortable question. Malachi does not deal with the most heinous sins people can possibly engage in. It is about whether we are giving God His rightful due? It is about searching ourselves to see if we are living with a passion for God.

<sup>1</sup>An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

We know nothing of Malachi but that his name means "a herald of the LORD." The audience is "Israel," not meaning that half of the divided kingdom that ceased to exist two centuries earlier, but all the descendants of Israel, the name God gave to Jacob, the nation's founder. An "oracle" is a word from God through a prophet. This one begins with a reminder of God's love for His people.

### I. God Has Uniquely Favored His Children (2-5)

<sup>2</sup>"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, <sup>3</sup>but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD - even beyond the borders of Israel!'"

## **A. God Traces His Favor of Israel to the Very Birth of the Nation**

One literary pattern recurs throughout Malachi. God will make a statement of truth, and the people will respond in protest. In most of these occurrences, God accuses the people of some act of unfaithfulness only for them to protest as though they don't know what He's talking about. For instance, when he says, "you show contempt for my name," they answer, "How have we done that?" When He says, "You have robbed me," they protest, "How have we robbed you?"

God's first statement, however, is not an accusation but a simple declaration of his historical love for them. Amazingly, they protest even that: "How have you loved us?" There was an attitude present that God was not "for" them, at least not like He had been in the old days. Blessings were meager. They were far removed from the national glory of Solomon's day. So, to restore their perspective, God directs their attention to the plight of an old nemesis, the Edomites.

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's (or Israel's) twin brother. God says that he hated Esau and loved Jacob, simply meaning that He chose Jacob's line for a blessing and for a purpose even though Esau was the older brother, the natural choice for birthrights and legacies. God covenanted Himself to Israel and, from a "big picture" perspective His hand had been with Israel. The Edomites had endured many of the same enemies as Israel and had never bounced back. They had attempted to rebuild their nation and had not made any progress.

God would have been justified in utterly destroying both nations. They were all sinners. It was not by merit but by sovereign grace that God chose to love Israel. The first lesson of Malachi was to ask God's people if they really understood the import of that designation, "God's people."

## **B. It Is Significant to Be Known as God's People**

We are God's people, the new Israel. Has the significance of that grown old? We walked in darkness and were enemies of God, vessels destined for destruction, lost in our sins. Now we are the church, God's called-out people. It is right to remember that this calling is a really big deal.

I ran across three newspaper stories of 911 dispatchers that seemed to have lost touch with the seriousness of their calling. In two stories out of Maryland, dispatchers fell asleep. One is actually recorded snoring during a call. That must have been reassuring. A Texas dispatcher must have thought that the woman calling about her out-of-control child was inappropriate. He asked her, "Do you want us to come over to shoot her?" I thought it was kind of funny, but then again, I have not been called to that career, and the powers that be in Texas took it pretty seriously.

Our status as God's people demands appropriate responses. This is a basic theme of Malachi and one that is effortlessly applied to the modern believer. Are you passionate for God? Whether or not the significance of being God's child is lost on me or is everything to me will directly bear on how I respond to everything else Malachi addresses. If I am passionate for the God Who saved me, I will be passionate for how I worship Him, how I sacrifice materially for Him, how I serve Him, how I imitate His faithfulness in my relationships and how I work for social justice. These things will mean much to me if being known as God's redeemed child means much to me.

## II. Our Father's Favor Warrants Our Honor of Him (6-14)

<sup>6</sup> "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?'

The spiritual course of a nation and of a church is set by its leaders, so Malachi first addresses the priests. God is feeling disrespected. He accuses them of showing contempt for His name, which means they have treated it with indifference. They, of course, respond, "We don't know what You're talking about, Lord!" and, maybe they don't. It is possible that they have been steeped in mechanical worship without heart engagement for so long that their indifference has rendered them numb to matters of authentic worship. So, God spells things out for them.

### A. Honor God with Sacrificial Sacrifices verses 7, 8a

<sup>7</sup> "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>8</sup>When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?"

Moses taught that animal sacrifices were to be male, healthy and whole. The people figured that fire burned it all up anyway, so what difference should it make? Worshipers began to give to God those animals that would not sell at prime rates in the marketplace. This became such a matter of course that the people didn't even think about it, and the priests ceased to question it.

But why should Moses need to spell out in law that God deserves our best? We are His children, the flock under His care, a people He has rescued and restored to Himself. Should it not be obvious that if we are going to honor our Father with sacrifice, then gratitude demands some element of real "sacrifice" to the sacrifice and not merely that which we would never miss? The purpose of Moses was to teach the people that God was entitled to their best, but the human heart is deceitful. It tends to push the envelope and look for the minimum required of it.

What God really wants us to learn is that proper sacrifice is not a matter of legal requirement but rather, a reflection of our passion for Him, for His kingdom, for His purposes and for His ways. In the New Testament, Paul never expressed Himself in terms of legal requirements when it came to giving. He spoke of the opportunity to "prove our love" for God. He spoke of giving as a joyful response to the relationship we share with God. Christians are most responsive to the needs of a church and to the needs of those around them when they are passionate for God.

<sup>6</sup>Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. <sup>7</sup>Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. - 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7

### B. Honor God with Proper Reverence verses 8b, 9

... Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.

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

Under the Persian Empire, it was standard procedure for governors in occupied areas to collect livestock and other commodities, not as a harsh tribute, but simply for conducting state functions such as hosting dignitaries. The Persians were favorably disposed to the Jews, but they were no pushovers, which is why Malachi said, "Try offering them to your governor!"

That's a great verse! "Go ahead! Take that mangy, blind, scrawny three-legged goat – the one with the patches of missing fur that he gummed off because he has no teeth - that's right, the one you were planning to "sacrifice" to God - give it to the governor. Will he accept (or welcome) you?" In other words, will he extend his scepter toward you so that you can boldly enter his presence or will he not extend his scepter which will find you cautiously backing out of the room? It was a rhetorical question. The people knew better than to give the governor leftovers.

The lesson is obvious. In matters of worship and sacrifice, don't forget Who you are dealing with! God is greater than any governor, king, president or dignitary. If the high and mighty of this world are worthy of our decorum and the finest we have to offer, then is He Who is uniquely holy and Who rules high above every earthly throne somehow worthy of less? Is God any more likely to be pleased with sacrifice that costs little or nothing than an earthly ruler?

### **C. Honor God with Heartfelt Worship verses 10-14**

<sup>10</sup> "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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> "But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.' <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> "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.

God is not honored by religious disciplines that are not born of authentic hearts.

A cowboy walked into a Texas bar, ordered three bottles of beer, and began drinking a sip out of each one in turn. The bartender told the cowboy, "You know, a bottle goes flat after I open it. It would taste better if you bought one at a time."

The cowboy replied, "I have two brothers. One is in Australia, the other is in Dublin. When we left home, we promised we'd drink this way to remember the days we drank together, so I drink one for each of my brothers and one for myself."

The bartender admitted this was a nice custom and left it there.

The cowboy became a regular and always drank the same way. One day, he ordered only two bottles. The regulars noticed and feared that a condolence might be in order for the loss of one of the brothers, but the cowboy assured them, "Everybody's fine. "It's just that my wife and I joined the Baptist Church. I had to quit drinking, but that hasn't affected my brothers."

God says a remarkable thing. “I would rather that some priest have the courage to shut the temple down rather than cause me to endure worship that is not from the heart, with meager sacrifices and mindless rituals. But, this sentiment is not unique to *Malachi*. When King Saul was commanded to utterly destroy the Amalekites (the Edomites mentioned earlier) as well as everything belonging to them, Saul spared the king and the best animals. When he rationalized his disobedience, claiming that the animals were for sacrifices to God, the prophet Samuel said:

“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices  
as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?  
To obey is better than sacrifice,  
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” – 1 Samuel 15:22

Solomon adds: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong” (Ecclesiastes 5:1 ).

In verse 11, Malachi alludes to a time when God will be worshipped authentically throughout the world. He is speaking of the church age, but he is not speaking about everything that goes on in every church in the name of worship. He is talking about the same heart worship that Jesus was talking about when He was discussing with a Samaritan woman the merits of worshipping at Jerusalem or at the Samaritan alternative temple on Mount Gerazim:

... <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” – John 4:23, 24

Malachi returns to the attitude of the priests where reform must begin. Those to whom the temple rituals should have meant the most were criticizing those same rituals as unimportant. In some cases, they were criticizing the sacrifices the people brought even though they were the teachers of the people in these matters. Of course, it has always been easier to criticize the inadequacy of our fellow-worshippers than it is to examine ourselves. The worst development was that the priests were becoming bored with and disengaged from their holy vocation. What else are we to conclude from their lament, “What a burden!” If those who led the people in worship had lost their passion for God, what could the nation as a whole look forward to?

Here we are today, nearly 2500 years later, exploring an ancient document and having no difficulty whatsoever in figuring out how it still speaks to us. We lose our passion for God when we lose sight of the greatness of His salvation and the greatness of His Person. There are numerous practical issues to which this Old Testament prophet will continue to speak to us today – our integrity, our marriages, our stewardship, our obedience and our sense of fair play in an unfair world. But those issues will only mean a great deal to us if our God and His salvation means a great deal to us. Are we passionate for Him to the extent that we are living for Him?