

# MALACHI: THINK UPON HIS NAME

by Ray C. Stedman

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Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, is separated from the book of Matthew by a silent period of more than 400 years, and yet, these two books tie together in a remarkable way. Historically, there was a long, long time when no voice spoke for God, no prophet came to Israel. There were no scriptures being written. There was no encouragement from God. The heavens were silent. Still, history was going on, and remarkable things were taking place in Israel and among the Jews. New institutions were being formed that appear in the opening of the New Testament, but none of this is recorded for us in the sacred history. Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets and the last prophetic voice to speak to Israel.

The last three books of the Old Testament -- Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi -- were all written after the return of the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon. The people did not come back from Babylon in one great big happy throng. There was a straggling return in two or three groups, the first one beginning in about 535 B.C. At that time, a handful of Jews fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that the captivity would last for 70 years and they came back to the desolated, stricken city of Jerusalem. There they began to lay the foundations of the temple and it was Haggai's ministry fifteen years later to stir them up to continue that work and carry it through. The temple was completed during Zechariah's ministry and Ezra the priest then led another group back from Babylon.

The people had changed their entire way of life by that time. While they were in Israel before the captivity, they had been sheep keepers, for the most part. But in Babylon they learned to be shopkeepers, and they have been merchants and shopkeepers ever since. So Ezra led this group back and again they had difficulties which are recorded in the historical book of Ezra.

Finally, the last return was accomplished under Nehemiah who in 445 B.C. led a group back to begin the laying of the walls of Jerusalem. The fascinating book of Nehemiah records the exciting experience of building the walls once again. Shortly after Nehemiah finished this task, Malachi appears, and it is interesting to compare the book of Nehemiah with the book of Malachi. Nehemiah is the conclusion of the historical section of the Old Testament which begins with Genesis. That is all history. Following Nehemiah are the poetic books, and then the prophetic books; in Malachi we come into the same period as is covered by Nehemiah.

This prophecy of Malachi was given by a man whose name means "my messenger." It is most suggestive that this last book of our Old Testament centers around the theme of a messenger of God and a prediction of the coming of another messenger. In this, therefore, we have a direct tie between Malachi and the New Testament. Chapter 3, for instance, begins with this prophecy:

**"Behold, I send my messenger [in Hebrew that would be "Behold, I send Malachi"] to prepare the way before me, ..." {Mal 3:1a RSV}**

And as you discover in the book of Matthew, that messenger was John the Baptist. He came to prepare the way of the Lord and to announce the coming of the second messenger from God. That second messenger is here in this prophecy in the next phrase:

**"... and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant ..." {Mal 3:1b RSV}**

It was the work of the Lord Jesus on the closing night of his ministry to take wine and bread with his disciples and holding the cup up to say, "This is my blood of the [new] covenant." (Matt. 26:28) The messenger of the covenant is the Lord Jesus himself.

**"... 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. [That is, 'he burns and he cleanses.'] 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, till they present right offerings to the LORD." {Mal 3:1c-3 RSV}**

Now that was the trouble with the people in Malachi's day. They had forgotten the great and central message of God and, as we go back to the start of the book, we see that the prophet opens on that note (chapter 1, verse 1):

**The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. "I have loved you," says the Lord. {Mal 1:1-2a RSV}**

And that is always the message of God's prophets. "I have loved you," says the Lord. But the amazing thing is that these people answer the prophet with the words, "How hast thou loved us?" This entire book is a series of responses on the part of the people to the challenges of God. Seven times you will find them saying, "How? How does this happen? Prove it." As we go through them you can see how they reveal the state of this people's heart. Here is an outgoing God -- and God is always this way, pouring out love -- but here is a callous people who have become so indifferent and so unresponsive to God that in perfect sincerity they can say, "We don't see this. What do you mean? Why do you say these things to us?" Throughout the book, this is the theme.

Now God's answer to their question, "How have you loved us?" is to remind them that he loved them even back in the beginning of the race with Jacob and Esau. He says, "Take a look at the whole race. Esau's history has been one of continual disturbance and disaster and trouble because," he says, "I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau. If you want to understand my love, look at one who has not been enjoying my love. Look at Esau and see how different his story is from yours, even though Jacob and Esau were twin brothers." Verses 2, 3:

**"Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" says the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau;" {Mal 1:2c-3a RSV}**

That troubles many people, but you find the explanation in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. There we are told that Esau was a despiser of his birthright and therefore was one who placed no value on spiritual matters. (Heb. 12:16) He treated God with utter indifference. He viewed the things that God regarded as valuable as if they were trivial, and he treated them that way. It is because of Esau's attitude that God says, "I have loved Jacob but I hated Esau."

If you had known these two men, you would probably have loved Esau and hated Jacob. Jacob was the schemer, the big time operator, the supplanter, the usurper, the untrustworthy rascal. Esau was the big outdoor man, hearty, open, frank, strong, boasting in his exploits as a hunter and as a man of the out-of-doors. Of the two, he appears much the better man, but God says, "I loved Jacob because in the heart of Jacob is the hunger after the deeper things of life; Jacob wants something more than what is on the surface." That always draws out the heart of God. And this is characteristic of the nation as well.

God goes on to charge the Israelites with specific problems and each time their response is, "What do you mean?" (verse 6):

**"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name." {Mal 1:6a RSV}**

That is God's charge. You despise my name. They said, "How have we despised your name? We don't see this. What do you mean?" And the Lord answers (verse 7):

**"By offering polluted food upon my altar." {Mal 1:7a RSV}**

"Your attitude and your actions toward me are shoddy. You are content to give me just the trash, the defiled things." But they pursue it further:

**'How have we polluted it?' {Mal 1:7c RSV}**

And again God makes it very clear. Whenever you ask God how, he will tell you. God says (verse 8):

**"When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that no evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that no evil? Present that to your governor; ..." {Mal 1:8a RSV}**

"Will you get by with that?" God says, "You people that are content to be shoddy about your religious experience, try living that way in your business life and see if you get by with it. And yet you say you are honoring my name. You are claiming to worship me and to be my people." The God of reality always cuts right through all the excuses and all the flimflam of hypocrisy right down to the real issue.

You see it again in the charges that he lays against them concerning their attitudes in worship. They were being professional about their worship. They were utterly bored (verse 13):

**""What a weariness this is,' you say, and you sniff at me, 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!" {Mal 1:13a RSV}**

Now what is wrong here? Where has all the excitement gone? Well, these are always the symptoms of a people who think God will be content with something less than love. The great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...and your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:37-39) Nothing else will satisfy God. But here is a people who have been surrounded by God's love and the recipients of his grace for centuries and yet their hearts have become so blinded that they cannot even see how they are offending him and insulting him with what they do. The reason this is so is that their own love for him has died. The death of love is always reflected in a callous attitude and this is what you see here.

As you continue, you see that they were being hypocritical. God lays that charge against them in chapter 2 and says that their hypocrisy was actually malignant. Their influence was turning others astray (verse 8):

**"But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction, ..." {Mal 2:8a RSV}**

"You are telling them things that are wrong because you do not even know that they are wrong." This is the horrible aspect of this kind of living.

Then God charges them with having failed in their moral standards. They had begun to intermarry with the tribes around them and forgot that God had called them to be a special people. Divorce was prevalent throughout the land (verse 13):

**And this again you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards ... or accepts [the offering] with favor. {Mal 2:13a RSV}**

And they ask, "Why does he not accept this?" Verses 14, 15:

**Because the LORD was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. "For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel." {Mal 2:14b-16a RSV}**

Sounds modern, doesn't it? Malachi had to minister to a nation in which divorce was widespread, and more than that, to a society in which moral confusion and cynicism was rampant. The prophet says (verse 17):

**You have wearied the Lord with your words. {Mal 2:17a RSV}**

They are amazed at this charge. They say (verse 17):

**"How have we wearied him?" {Mal 2:17c RSV}**

The answer comes right from the shoulder:

**By saying, "Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD," {Mal 2:17d RSV}**

Just recently I picked up an article that suggested that obscenity, pornography, the free expression of toilet language and filthy words (and so on) is good to have out in the open, that it is wrong to suppress this kind of language or to censure it in our literature. Another article said that parental discipline is an evil thing. that it does harm to children and destroys their incentive, and takes away their ability to develop properly.

All this sort of thing clearly reflects the moral confusion of our own day. And this is always the result when people offer anything less than a fervent love for God, when they think that ritual and religious hocus pocus is going to satisfy the heart of the Eternal. These people were asking (verse 17):

**"Where is the God of justice?" {Mal 2:17f RSV}**

Where is the God of judgment? Why, anybody can get by with anything ! What do you mean? There aren't any standards. Everything is relative. There is no God of justice who says what is right and wrong. You see, we think all this is new, but even four hundred years before Christ, it was already old.

Then comes the great prophecy we have already looked at. Malachi lifts his eyes and sees that the heart of these people was so hardened that they could not be awakened even by these charges from God. They were utterly unaware that these things were happening. They had nothing to measure them against. So the prophet, looking across what turned out to be four hundred years, says, "The Lord will take care of this. He will send one to you who will wake you up, one who will tell you the truth. He will be a refiner's fire; he will burn through all the hypocrisy and the outward perfunctoriness of your religion and cut right through to the very heart of it. He will be like fullers' soap to those who are willing. He will cleanse them and set things right. You will be able to recognize him because a messenger will go before him to prepare the way, and then he will suddenly come to his temple." And of course, all of this is beautifully fulfilled in the New Testament.

Then comes another series of charges in which the Lord speaks again about their lives. He says to them (verse 7):

**"Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts." {Mal 3:7b RSV}**

And the people say, "How shall we return? We haven't gone anywhere. What do you mean return? We are serving you in your temple; we are bringing the proper sacrifices and offerings and we are going through the ritual, just as you outlined it. What do you mean, return to you?" In this response, they indicate the utter blindness of their heart. They did not realize that though the outward form is right, the heart is far from God.

Then God said, "You are robbing me." They said, "How are we robbing you?" God's answer was, "In your tithes and offerings. The whole nation of you is robbing me. You are using the money that I had blessed you with for your own purposes. Bring the tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house." Now that verse is often wrenched from this Old Testament scripture and used to establish a legalistic pattern of bringing in all the offerings into the church as the storehouse. Well, that is a distortion. This verse is addressed to Israel, within the limits of the system under which Israel lived in the Old Testament, and yet the principle is exactly true of the church. We should never take all that God has blessed us with and use it for our own advancement.

And God says, "When you do that, you are robbing me. You are robbing me of my right to use you to

advance my cause." That is what man is here for. It is quite possible for all of us as Christians to be quite perfunctory about fulfilling our religious obligations within the church and yet to live our lives out fulfilling nothing but our own self-centered goals. We may even achieve them and rise to the very top, but someday we will have to stand before the one who says, "All your life you have robbed me of my right to be myself in you." That is why the appeal of the New Testament is to present your bodies as a living sacrifice unto God; that is what we are here for. That is what we are called for, and anything less is robbing him of his inheritance in the saints.

He goes on to charge them with still other offenses (verses 13, 14):

**"Your words have been stout against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, 'How have we spoken against thee?'" {Mal 3:13 RSV}**

The answer comes:

**"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God.'" {Mal 3:14a RSV}**

"What is the use of serving God? He does not do anything for me. I do not get anything out of this. What is the good of keeping his charge or of walking in mourning before the LORD of hosts?" This sounds familiar, doesn't it? "Why, I have been trying to serve God; I have been a Christian now for ten years and I haven't gotten anything out of it." This betrays the philosophy that God exists for man, not man for God, which is really blasphemy. Now that is one side of the picture.

But beginning with verse 16 of chapter 3 there is a wonderful little spotlight turned on a remnant, a group within, who were pleasing God. Thank God these are always there and God's searchlight can always find them. They are described this way (verses 16-18):

**Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another; the LORD heeded and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and thought on his name. {Mal 3:16 RSV}**

Then this beautiful verse:

**"They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him." {Mal 3:17-18 RSV}**

Notice the two things that mark those who are faithful in the day of apostasy. First, they spoke with one another. This does not mean that they just talked to each other. It means that they opened up to each other. They shared with one another. They encouraged each other. They confessed their weak points and prayed for one another. They let others see what they were like. Ah, yes, but that was on the horizontal level, wasn't it? But there was also the vertical: they thought on his name. That is always the great resource of the people of God.

The name of God stands for all that he is, just as your name stands for all that you are. You sign a check and all that you are is laid on the line to the amount of that check because of your name. They thought on his name. There is not a week that goes by that there is not a flood of propaganda crossing my desk, telling me what is wrong with the church, analyzing its weakness, and presenting some gadget or gimmick that will take all the blood and sweat and tears out of living as a Christian. We are being assaulted today with solutions for the problems of the weakness of the church that are not solutions at all.

Here is the answer to the weakness of the church -- "to think upon his name," to reckon on the resources of God. You can take away all the props of the church, its buildings, its visual aids, its committees, its programs and everything else, and if you have a people who have learned to reckon on the name of God, you have not lost a thing. That is what this age needs to hear again.

Someone suggested recently that if we would introduce some of the electronic marvels that are available to businesses today, the job of preaching the gospel could be done electronically, and in just a few short years the whole world could be converted and our job would be done, electronically. I have also heard the suggestion that what we need to do is to take the words of the hymns and put them to popular, or rock music, and that is what the church needs. Now I know that many people would agree with this approach. They say we need to capture the spirit of the age and move with it and get modern -- that is the missing element. Oh! No. God is the missing element. We are to think on his name, reckon on his power. The church is never so strong as when in utter weakness it casts itself back upon the resources of God and moves in dependence upon him.

Now the prophet lifts up his eyes again to see the day that is coming, not only the day 400 years later when the Lord Jesus will stand on the earth, but beyond that, across the great reaches of the centuries to the second coming of Christ, when all of God's program will be fulfilled (chapter 4, verse 1, 2):

**"For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." {Mal 4:1-2a RSV}**

Now that is one cause with two effects. The Son of Righteousness shall rise. And for those who refuse him, there is a burning. But toward those who receive him, there is a healing. It is the same Son. (Verses 2-6):

**"You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. {Mal 4:2b-3 RSV}**

**"Remember the law of my servant Moses, ... {Mal 4:4a RSV}**

**"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." {Mal 4:5-6 RSV}**

You will recall that it was the last verse that was troublesome to the disciples and they said to the Lord, "How is it that the prophecy says that Elijah the prophet must first come?" And the Lord's answer was, "Elijah has already come and you did not recognize him." He saw the look of astonishment on their faces and he made it clear that it was John the Baptist who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17) and fulfilled his ministry in the initial coming. But he put it in such a way as to leave the clear inference that Elijah the prophet would still come before the second coming. (Matt. 17:10-13) Many identify the two witnesses in the eleventh chapter of Revelation as Elijah and Moses. How true this is, I will leave to you to decide. But at least there is the suggestion here that in some remarkable way, God intends to supply a ministry like Elijah's before the second return of the Lord Jesus.

Now notice this last thing. It is not without significance that at the end of all the literature of the Old Testament, the last word is "curse." It is not a definite prediction, however, but a warning. This prophecy begins "Behold, I have loved you, says the Lord," and it ends with the warning that if the message of love is not received, the result is a curse. Now compare that with the last word of the New Testament. Leaving out the final salutation, it is the name of Jesus, the Lord Jesus. "Come, Lord Jesus!"

That is God's answer to the curse, isn't it, his answer to the curse of the law? He has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us. Thus the full answer of God is grace and love that pours out even more blessing, bringing us into the light and the knowledge of Christ. All the blessing that is wrapped up in that name is to be ours, and that is why the task of a Christian is to learn to think upon his name.

### **Prayer:**

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this reminder of the evil of being perfunctory about faith, of being shoddy and hypocritical and bored with our faith. Lord, help us to know that your heart of love is never content until it obtains a response of love from us; may we love the Lord

our God. May we love him in purity; may we love in joy and in sincerity, and remember that your name is our adequate resource in every situation. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.

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