
COVENANT FAITHFULNESS **in** MALACHI

a seven-week study

COVENANT FAITHFULNESS in MALACHI

a seven-week study

By Kyle Donn
Prepared for Peninsula Bible Fellowship Men's Ministry
Copyright © 2022 by Kyle Donn

Table of Contents

WEEK 1

Introduction	6
Context	8

WEEK 2

Dispute #1 – (1:2-5)	20
----------------------	----

WEEK 3

Dispute #2 – (1:6-2:9)	26
------------------------	----

WEEK 4

Dispute #3 – (2:10-16)	36
------------------------	----

WEEK 5

Dispute #4 – (2:17-3:5)	42
-------------------------	----

WEEK 6

Dispute #5 – (3:6-12)	48
-----------------------	----

WEEK 7

Dispute #6 – (3:13-4:3)	52
Conclusion – (4:4-6)	56

WEEK 1 - Introduction

My best friend during my early teenage years lived on several acres of forestland. Many of our summers were spent running between enormous pines and colossal cedars playing games we'd made up. Like any normal forest-urchins we decided to build our very own private cabin. And so, using wood from his dad's scrap-pile, we marched boards and beams deep into the woods and, picking a perfect cluster of firs, began to build the treehouse we'd imagined. We conspired like timeworn architects about how to make this structure something of a marvel. After several hours and with no small amount of sweat and jerry-rigging we had the makings of a prominent forest-hovel.

The next day, still sticky with sap, we returned to our construction-site where we discovered a crime scene: our grand shack had been torn down. Intentionally. Heartlessly. Ruthlessly. Nonetheless we restarted the work. But again, we returned the third day to the same dreadful crime scene. This time, however, a note hung from one of the nails we'd pounded deep into the meat of a tree: "Stop building on my land... – Your Neighbor."

We'd already suffered some devastation (the initial deconstruction of our treehouse) because of our unwitting breach of property-laws, but now our guilt was clear. We were solemnly warned that continued breaches would be met with more of the same intentional, heartless, ruthless afflicting of our endeavors. Similarly, the book of Malachi is an invitation to the people of Israel to return to building a

beautiful existence with God – one of “peace and uprightness” (2:6) within the intended boundaries of the covenant-law. Malachi includes a catalogue of grave warnings which promised more devastation for continued covenant violations.

In the days of Malachi, Israel’s attempts to gain God’s favor appeared futile. It didn’t matter what they did, it seemed God had no regard for them. Rather, it seemed, He regarded “evildoers” who “not only prospered but put God to the test and escaped” (3:15). That it came as any surprise to Israel that *they* were actually the ones to blame for their plight is evidence that, if one were to personify Israel in the days of Malachi, they were more like reckless teenage boys romping all over someone else’s lawn than they were seasoned-covenant-people. Furthermore, that Israel could react so apathetically and defensively when confronted with their mistakes only confirms the teenager-analogy. It’s this defensive apathy towards their own covenant failures and God’s invitation for them to return to covenant faithfulness that this study will explore in detail.

The theme of *Covenant Faithfulness* is the theme which, as we will see, weaves every verse in Malachi together. To write about ‘covenant faithfulness’ in Malachi is, simply put, to write about the message of Malachi.

Our study will follow the author’s format. Malachi is organized into six “disputes;” six arguments between God and Israel. This first week, we’ll explore the context of Malachi, but then we’ll focus on one dispute per week after that.

Context

The Mosaic Covenant in Malachi

When we talk about 'covenant' faithfulness in Malachi, the 'covenant' we're referring to is, of course, the *Mosaic Covenant*. 4:4 confirms it – "Remember the law of my servant *Moses*, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel." Gentry comments, "the main concern of the prophets is Israel's relationship to Yahweh as defined by the Mosaic Covenant."¹

The term "covenant," used seven times in Malachi, is *berîṭ* (Strong's #1285). *Berîṭ* is used in every major covenant in the Bible including the Noahic (Gen 6:18), Abrahamic (Gen 15:18, 17:2,4,7), Mosaic (Ex 19:5), Levitical (Num 25:11), and Davidic (2 Sam 23:5) covenants.

A *berîṭ* is an agreement between two parties. And the Mosaic Covenant was itself a solemn and binding agreement between God and Israel in which Israel could expect God's blessing and favor as a result of their obedience to His laws outlined in the covenant. The Mosaic agreement was struck in Exodus 19:5 and ratified in Exodus 24:7 when the people of Israel declared, "All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" Should Israel obey the covenant, they would experience life and blessing near the very presence of God.

On the other hand, should they fail the covenant, they were subject to its *curses*. The term used for "the curse" in Malachi 2:2 and 3:9 is *m^e ʿērāh*, and it's only used

¹ Gentry, Peter. *How to Read & Understand the Biblical Prophets*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017: 16.

five times in the Bible (Strongs #3994). The most notable use of *m^e 'ērāh*, however, is in Deuteronomy 28 – the passage of the Torah best known for describing in detail the terrible consequences and curses for covenant unfaithfulness. Loss in battle, captivity, slavery, starvation, infertility, international humiliation, cannibalism of infants, disease, and death are just a handful of the promised curses.

Audience and Narrative Context of Malachi

The people Malachi addresses were Israelites whose parents and grandparents had just returned from a harsh exile less than a century earlier. For almost 1,000 years after the people agreed to the terms of the covenant, Israel had been in a nearly constant state of disobedience. So, after nearly a millennium of patience, God made good on His promise to curse their disobedience and failure by allowing the world's superpower at the time, Babylon, to breach their city and destroy their Temple (2 Kings 25:1-17).

As promised, God had vomited them out of the land (Lev 20:22) and into Babylonian captivity starting in 586^{BC}. Israel spent 48 years in Babylonian exile and 70 years without a Temple. It was a period of tremendous disorientation and grief. They'd lost the center of their religious, political, social, and economic life: the Temple. Commentator Robby Gallaty expresses this well:

"It is very difficult for modern Christians to comprehend the force of this event in Israel's history. It would be roughly similar to God saying, 'Shut the

*doors to every church in the world. No more church. No more meetings. It's over.' But that analogy doesn't really convey the whole picture, because the Israelites were dependent upon the temple for everything – for their sacrifices, for the forgiveness of their sins, and for their festivals, feast days, and offerings. The temple was even the center of national banking and Jewish political power. Without the temple the nation would cease to function.'*²

However, as He promised (Jer. 29:10), God miraculously brought Israel back to their homeland by decree of the Cyrus the Great in 538^{BC}. Israel returned to their homeland in three major waves between 538 and 444^{BC}. However, what they returned to was a shadow of their former eminence. The Jews featured in Malachi were blessed to have a rebuilt temple - a project funded by King Cyrus and managed by Zerubbabel in 515^{BC}. But this Second Temple was a sad version of its former self (Ezra 3:12). The Ark of The Covenant was gone and the shekinah glory of Yahweh no longer filled the Temple (expressed in Mal 3:1). Furthermore, Israel was no longer an autonomous nation. They were a meager district of Persia called "Yehud" with a governor (1:8) who reported directly to officials back east.

If that weren't difficult enough, in the days of King Xerxes (486-465^{BC}) Persian financial support of the Temple in Yehud was officially withdrawn.³ The small, humiliated,

² Gallaty, Robby. *Exalting Jesus in Malachi*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015, 217.

³ Walton, 2000: 811.

Persian-controlled state was on their own to maintain their gimpy shekinah-less temple. In these days, Israel was "an insignificant territory of about 20 x 25 miles inhabited by a population of perhaps 150,000."⁴ When Xerxes pulled financial support of Yehud's Temple, the people's priorities began to show and many of the priests working in the Temple abandoned their duties because they were not being paid and fed (Neh 13:10-11). The people were taking shortcuts in their commitment to the temple in order to save money now that foreign aid could not be depended on. If the people weren't backsliding already, their various struggles in the homeland were pushing them towards the edge. Some scholars suggest this financial blow propelled and exacerbated several sins like: sacrificing blemished animals,⁵ not tithing fully,² and intermarrying with established, prestigious, and wealthy foreign families in order to get a leg up in a harsh new landscape.⁶

In the days of Malachi, Israel was *just* beginning to feel the curses of their covenantal relapse (2:2, 3:9). Through Malachi, God promised more serious curses if they continued breaching their covenant agreement. Should Israel repeat their ancestors' failures, they too would experience the full weight of the curse.

This explanation gets us closer to both *how* and *why* Israel was failing the covenant, but not quite all the way. The book of Malachi accuses Israel of at least 19 distinct covenant violations:

⁴ Hugenberger, Gordon P. *New Bible Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994, 883.

⁵ Walton, John H. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2000, 810.

⁶ Gallyat, 2015: 234.

Chart 1⁷

Command	Ref.	Torah References
Failure to remember God's goodness and covenant	1:2, 4:4	Deut.4:9,23; 5:15; 6:12; 7:18; 8:2,11,14,18,19; 9:7; 15:15; 16:3,12; 24:9,18,22; 25:17,19; 32:7
Dishonoring Father	1:6	Ex. 20:12
Not fearing God	1:6, 3:5	Deut. 6:2, 6:13, 10:12
Offering blemished sacrifices	1:7-14	Lev. 22:17-33; Deut. 15:21
Offering stolen sacrifices	1:13	Ex. 20:15; Lev. 19:11
Priests failing to teach the Mosaic Law	2:8	Lev. 10:11; Deut. 33:10
Priests judging partially	2:1-9	Deut. 17:9
Idolatry	2:11	Ex. 20:3-4; Deut. 4:26-27, 6:14-15
Intermarriage with foreigners	2:11	Ex. 34:15-16; Deut. 7:3-4
Adultery	2:14, 3:5	Ex. 20:14; Lev. 18:20; Deut. 22:22
Divorce	2:16	Malachi. 2:16
YHWH's name in vain	1:6, 2:6,17	Ex. 20:7
Sorcery	3:5	Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:10-13
Lying	3:5	Ex. 20:16, 23:1; Lev. 19:11
Oppressing widows and orphans	3:5	Ex. 22:22; Deut. 24:17; 27:19
Oppressing hired workers in their wages	3:5	Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15
Lack of hospitality to sojourners	3:5	Ex.22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 24:17
Not tithing	3:8	Deuteronomy 14:22-23
Testing God	3:15	Deuteronomy 6:16.

⁷ This chart is my own.

These covenant violations were evidence of a complete relapse in covenantal sobriety. Despite all God's goodness and a millennia of patience (followed by a relatively brief 70-year period of judgement) – Israel was back at it again, egging on the covenant curses, including exile (2:2-3). God had in fact taken it easy on Israel. Deuteronomy 28 entitled God to much more cursing than He had unleashed.

Date of Malachi

It's in this economic-wasteland, during or just after the aid-revoking reign of King Xerxes that I propose Malachi was written. That is, *in the 460's BC* – after the first wave of exiles had returned and rebuilt the temple, and just before the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah. The major details that help us place Malachi here are:

- Malachi's use of the term "Governor" (*peha*) in 1:8 strongly suggests that Malachi was written *after* return from exile in 538^{BC} (in those days Israel had Governors rather than Kings).
- Malachi's presupposition of the Second Temple must place it sometime *after* 515^{BC}.
- The conditions of priestly decay Malachi addresses likely places it *near* the time of Ezra and Nehemiah who returned in 444^{BC}.
- Because of the soft-hearted reaction of Israelites towards Ezra's ministry of spiritual reformation

(Ezra 10), it is very likely that Malachi was written before Ezra's return to Yehud in 458^{BC}.⁸

So why had Israel been unfaithful during this period? Isn't it enough to chalk their failure up to the sense of national self-pity? No. Of course not. Both *Malachi's structure* and *the place of Malachi in the grand narrative of scripture* give us a far better diagnosis of Israel's covenantal malfunction.

First, the *structure of Malachi* gives us some indication of what was happening: at Israel's core-level, they had forgotten to remember both how good God had been to them, and how the covenant with God functioned. Look at the first line of Chart 1 on the previous page – it reveals that Malachi opens (1:2) and closes (4:4) with a diagnosis and a prescription. 1:2 gives the diagnoses: "Israel has failed to remember that God loves them." 4:4 gives the Prescription: "Remember and obey the covenant laws." This kind of mirrored writing in Hebrew literature is a dead giveaway to the pulp of the message.

Second, as we consider *Malachi's place in the grand narrative of scripture*, we can see clearly that their hearts were hard and had not yet been softened by the coming of the promised Messiah who would "give [them] a new heart and put a new spirit in [them]" and would "remove the heart of stone... and give [them] a heart of flesh" (Ez. 36:26).

We know today that the story God was writing was one in which, for 2,000 years, He proved the wickedness and immovability of the human heart before coming to

⁸ Baldwin, Joyce G. *Malachi*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1972, 213.

enliven humans with soft and responsive hearts through the death of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Author of Malachi

Thus far, we have left out our Author, and not distastefully! Readers can know neither who Malachi was nor whether that was truly his name. The meaning of the title *Malachi* adds great benefit to our exploration. Malachi (*Māl' ākī*) means "My messenger" or "My Angel." And in his book, whether human or angelic, whether proper name or common title, this *Māl' ākī* is just one of 4 *Māl' āks*:

1. 1:1 – The author of the book: *Māl' ākī*.
2. 2:7 – The priests who were meant to be God's covenant *māl' āks* to the people.
3. 3:1a – A *māl' ākī* who is a forerunner to the Messiah; a herald.
4. 3:1b – The great and long-awaited *māl' ākī* of the new covenant; the covenant judge.

Why is this helpful at all to understanding covenant faithfulness in Malachi? Because Malachi is a book of Covenant Messengers. A book written by a *māl' ākī* about the *māl' āks* who have failed to lead the people in covenant faithfulness and have "corrupted the covenant" (2:7-8), and the *Great Māl' ākī* who is coming to both judge and purify those failed *māl' āks* (3:1b-3a) in order to bring about covenant faithfulness and covenant blessings (3:3b-4). The coming of the *Great Māl' ākī* will be preceded by

another *māl' āk* who will prepare Israel for his coming (3:1a, 4:5-6). This is the *message* of the *messenger* we call "Malachi."

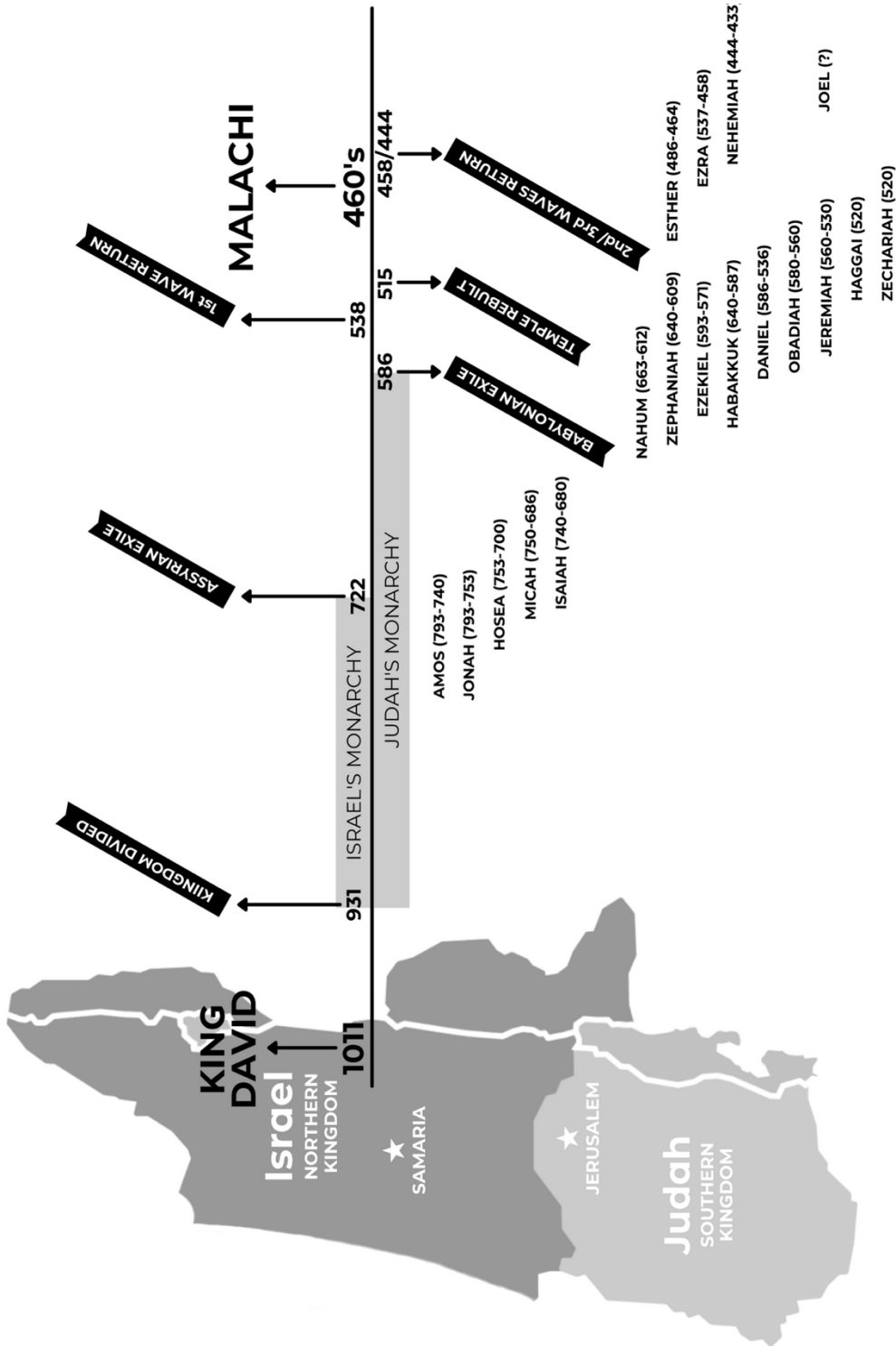
But *how* did Malachi get this message across? That is, how does *Māl' āki* convey his *māl' ākūt*? Malachi uses a distinct style which examines Israel like a kind of *legal trial*.

This trial employs what Baldwin calls a "disputation method."⁹ This method has three-parts. (1) God makes a declarative statement, (2) Israel objects, and (3) God answers back. This pattern repeats six times, and scholars have taken to calling these different pericopes "disputes."

Some other Old Testament authors used this method,¹⁰ but Malachi alone uses it as the framework of his entire book. So, what's the point? Israel is on trial, as it were. The charge: 19 distinct and ongoing covenant violations. The cross-examiner: Yahweh Himself. The Judge and Prosecutor: The Great *Māl' āk*. The punishment if convicted: A litany of covenant curses. This disputation method is a type of surgical interrogation that gets to the heart of each accusation quickly. How humbling to consider that it is God incarnate who takes the fall for every time we have violated His covenant. "*Christ redeemed us... by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'*" *Galatians 3:13*.

⁹ Baldwin, 1972: 214.

¹⁰ Westermann, Claus. *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1967.



Week 1 Questions

1.) What do you hope to get out of this study?

2.) Israel was in a period of "covenantal relapse" during the days of Malachi. How do you think they got there?

3.) In what life-circumstances are you most tempted to relax your walk with God? Why?

4.) When life is difficult and God seems distant, how easy is it for you to remind yourself of the Gospel? Why?

Week 2 – Dispute #1 (1:2-5)

Israel disbelieves God's unmerited covenantal love.

The first "Dispute" spans 1:2-5. Its beginning is marked by the three-part sequence outlined on page 16. And, as we'll see with all six disputes, the giveaway is the term "*māh*" (literally "what") used by Israel after each accusation God makes. In verse 2 God says, "I have loved you." The word used in verse 2 for "love" is *'āhab* – and it's used 32 times in the Old Testament to refer to God's *covenantal love*.¹¹ God says, "I have loved you," and Israel responds: "*bā māh* have you loved us?" Literally "*in what* have you loved us?" The term *māh* is brusque, brisk, and its used in each dispute defensively. It's as though Israel is responding: "Yeah right, how have you ever loved us?"

This failure to remember and hold to God's covenantal love is more than sad, though indeed it is that. How Israel could forget all God's love – His goodness and faithfulness – boggles the mind, and yet has an eerie familiarity for anyone who knows the story of Judges and Kings. Again, this failure is more than sad, it is an express covenant violation. Remembering the LORD's good and redeeming works was an explicit command of the Torah. Deuteronomy repeats the commands "do not forget" and "remember" a whopping 21 times (see chart 1 on page 12). Israel shouldn't be asking "*In what* have you loved us?" but rather, "*Why* have you loved us?" If they had perhaps stopped to take inventory, they'd have seen exactly how

¹¹ Gallaty, 2015: 206

even their present circumstance was an ode to the enduring covenant love of God. He had mercifully sustained a remnant during exile and brought them back to their land - complete with a temple and a wall paid for by foreign kings. And if that weren't enough, He was still mercifully speaking to them through prophets like Malachi! God was not at all the monster they had made Him out to be.

In response to Israel's challenge, God gives *just one* example of His covenant love for Israel. But this little example is a microcosm of God's 1,500-year relationship with Israel. The example is of *Israel's common ancestor, Jacob, and his brother Esau.*

Consider the character traits of these two men - first, Esau. Esau's name means "hairy" (Gen. 25:25). He was an outdoorsman and a daddy's boy (Gen. 25:27-28). He lacked maturity and discernment and made a handful of stupid decisions including marrying idolatrous women (Gen. 36:2-3) and selling his birthright for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:29-34). He was, as they say, "young and dumb" (and hairy).¹²

Now consider Jacob, his brother. His name literally means "heal grabber" (Strong's #3290) or, in other words, "supplanter" or "cheat!" Jacob was an opportunist (Gen. 25:29-31), a deceiver and thief (Gen 27), as well as a coward (Gen. 28:1-5, 32:1-21. Jacob's relationship with God was one-sided for much of his life (Gen. 28:20-22). He was a

¹² Rabbi Yoḥanan bar Napaḥa – an influential third-century rabbi and primary contributor to the text of the Talmud – taught that Esau committed five sins. Baba Batra 16b 13 says: "Rabbi Yoḥanan says: That wicked Esau committed five transgressions on that day that Abraham died: He engaged in sexual intercourse with a betrothed maiden, he killed a person, he denied the principle of God's existence, he denied resurrection of the dead, and he despised the birthright." However, Rabbi Yoḥanan's historic understanding of Esau has no bearing in the historical Genesis.

polygamist (Gen. 29) and slept with his wives' servants (Gen. 30:1-13). And, Jacob played favorites with his sons (Gen. 37:3). His sons were sexuality (Gen. 35:22, 38:1-30), anger and jealousy (Gen. 34:13-29; Gen 37:12-36) were out of control. His sons' anger and jealousy were out of control. His sons were liars, like him (Gen. 37:31-35).

Jacob is the perfect analogy for Israel in the days of Malachi. Like Jacob, God accuses some Israelites of being "cheats" (1:14). Like Jacob, the priests were playing favorites in judging with partiality (2:9). Like Jacob, Israel had an opportunistic one-way relationship with God (3:14). Like Jacob and his sons, Israel's marriage and sexuality habits were twisted (2:10-16). If I were God, I'd have given a laundry-list-rebuttal. An enumeration of ways I'd provided for Israel in order to deeply shame them, but God only needs one: Jacob. He loved Jacob.

"I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated," says the LORD (1:2). It's clear this is less about God's *feeling* of love for Israel or a *feeling* of hatred for Edom. This is more about God's *actions* towards these two brothers. Without taking into account merit or worthiness, God *chose* Jacob and *did not choose* Esau.

If God had made a decision based on *feelings* of love or hate then He'd have *loved/chosen* neither of these men – especially not that cheating, crooked, entitled, self-interested, younger con-artist, Jacob. No. This is covenant activity (like Romans 9:10-12 makes so clear). Likewise, the covenant that God has extended to Christians has nothing to do with our merit, but His *choosing* and His *loving*. If only Israel would open their eyes, they would see God's

covenant love and be amazed, and say "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel" (1:5).

Rather than destroying Israel for their Jacob-like behavior, God had preserved them even through a time of exile in Babylon. Edom on the other hand, did not receive the same kind of mercy. God promises to make their country an uninhabitable waste for jackals. Little is known about the ruin of Edom. According to Walton, the region appears to have been attacked by Babylon's last King, Nabonidus and was fully conquered by the Nabateans in the third century BC.¹³

But Israel has overlooked this covenant love, absorbed completely by the discomfort they feel in the present – and blaming it all on God. This failure to remember God's love is really the root of all their subsequent failures. It's no wonder that Malachi starts here. What terrible things happen in the lives of believers who fail to remember the multiplicity of ways in which God has unconditionally loved them. Superseding any excuse that could be offered, Israel failed because of the corrupt hearts that blinded them from seeing the covenantal goodness of God right in front of them. And so, they invoke the curses of covenant-failure.

The Torah's curse for those who forget God's goodness says as much: "And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish" (Deut. 8:19).

¹³ Walton, 2000: 811.

Week 2 Questions

1.) What kind of life situations might lead someone to conclude that God doesn't love them?

2.) After Israel says, "how have you loved us?" why doesn't God give a laundry list of ways He has shown them love?

3.) How would you respond as a parent if your child asked, "How have you loved me?"

4.) How does this passage in Malachi communicate hope? How can the realization that God loves you affect a hopeless situation in your life?

Week 3 – Dispute #2 (1:6-2:9)

The priests allow God's Name, Covenant, and Temple to be profaned

Consider that Israel's priests were supposed to be upholders and 'messengers' (*māl'āks*) of the covenant (2:7). They were supposed to lead the people into the blessings of the covenant via obedience. Yet in Malachi's day they are accused of despising the very name of God – *Yahweh* (1:6), and they're causing others to do the same (2:8).

This is the *first element* of the disputation – an accusation: "You, priests, despise my name." The *second disputation element* is the the priests' response, which again employs that brusque and defensive term: *māh*. They say, "*bă māh* have we despised your name?" Their response, devoid of humility, is: "Yeah right, prove it. How have we ever despised your name?" Then the *third disputation element* comes. God's response to their defense is an indictment with no less than *six covenant violations by the priests*:

1. Failure to honor their True Father (1:6a).
2. Failure to fear God (1:6b).
3. The offering of blemished animals (1:7-14).
4. The offering of animals that have been stolen (1:13).
5. Failure to teach the Mosaic Law correctly (2:8).
6. Failure to judge impartially (2:9).

At the end of verse 6, the priests seem genuinely stunned that God would accuse them of despising His Holy Name. It may come as a surprise to modern readers that many clergy today could easily be accused of these same violations. Why? Because the form that these sins took in Malachi appeared unassuming, innocent and easily-justified: shortcuts and lazy-heart-attitudes.

Today's pastors never take short-cuts in ministry, do they? They never decrease the missions budget but then ask for raises, do they? They never preach half-baked sermons, do they? They never condone "small" sins, do they? They never show partiality to their favorite congregants, do they? As a pastor, I'm going to confess to you – we do, too often.

The form that the priests' dishonor of God took was especially twisted when it came to their sacrifice-duties. God says that they dishonored His Name by offering 'polluted food' on His altar (1:7). At some point since their return from Babylon, they'd relaxed regulations on the quality of sacrificial animals. After all, healthy unblemished animals were more expensive. No big deal. Right?

The problem is that *these regulations were not the priests' to relax*. God's the only one who can dictate what is and isn't acceptable – something He made clear at great length in the Mosaic Covenant. The priests were, to put it bluntly, changing the terms of the Covenant – and they thought God wouldn't mind.

God's personal name – YHWH – is meant to be "great" (2x in 1:11), "feared" (1:14), and "stood in awe of" (2:5). But the priests, by allowing defiled meat to be presented

to God, have made it abundantly clear to all: "YHWH is not that great! You don't need to be too afraid of Him! He's nothing to stand in awe of!"

God's *name* is, in fact, the central concern of this dispute. God speaks in defense of His name 7 times¹⁴ in this passage. He also uses the name "Lord of Hosts" for Himself 11 times¹⁵ and once calls Himself "a great King."¹⁶ Why is God concerned with the priest's behavior? Answer: because it makes His name appear less great than it is. God cares about the Israelites behavior because they were to be His representatives to the nations – He had promised Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:3). His ultimate vision for blessing the nations is that they would see His name as "great" (1:11a and 1:11b) and "fear" His name (1:14).

Human beings were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Put another way, *we are God's image on earth*. We're supposed show the world what He's like. In fact, the word "image" (Hebrew *selem*) is the same word used in the 2nd of the 10 commandments: You shall not make for yourself a carved *image*..." God doesn't need us to make carved images because He has already made something in His own image: us.

But these priests weren't reflecting God's image. Instead, through their behavior they were despising His name. Through their behavior they were taking God's name in vain – violating the third commandment "*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for*

¹⁴ 1:6, 1:11 (3x), 1:14, 2:2, 5:5.

¹⁵ 1:6, 1:8, 1:9, 1:10, 1:11, 1:13, 1:14, 2:2, 2:4, 2:7, 2:8.

¹⁶ 1:14.

the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex. 20:7).

God's personal Name, YHWH, is so glorious, that to fail to 'image' God well is a tragedy that deeply concerns God because it makes His name – His very character and identity – appear paltry, insignificant, despicable, and worthless to the nations.

We'll explore the 7 core attributes embedded in God's name on week 5 (the fourth dispute). But for now, consider that the *Lord of Hosts* is getting less honor than the district governor: God says, "put that second-rate meat in front of your governor and see what he thinks" (1:8 paraphrase). The governor won't accept it, and neither will The Holy One of Israel. But the priests, rather than humbling themselves, become annoyed, saying: "what weariness this is." They even "snort" at God's accusation. The word "weariness" could also be translated "nuisance."¹⁷ The priests think that being fully committed to God's law is a "nuisance."

In Leviticus 22:20 God says that blemished offerings "shall not be acceptable for you." When we settle for less than what God demands, we often end up thinking He's willing to settle too.

In 1:14 God says, "Cursed be the **cheat** who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished." Notice the word "cheat." This word – Hebrew *nāḳal* – is only used 4 times in the Bible.¹⁸ It can be also translated "beguiler" or "knave," and has been

¹⁷ Gallaty, 2015: 218.

¹⁸ Strong's #5230 – used in Genesis 37:18, Numbers 25:18, Psalms 105:25, Malachi 1:14.

translated elsewhere as “deceiver” (KJV) or “swindler” (NASB). Remind you of anyone? Jacob was a “heel-grabber.” His name means “cheat!” He swindled his brother and deceived his father. Though this Hebrew word is never used in the Old Testament for Jacob, Malachi seems to be creating a profound parallel. In the days of Malachi, Israel is as unworthy of blessing and as worthy of cursing as their common ancestor, Israel (remember, Jacob was renamed *Israel*).

By treating the Lord's table lightly, Israel was acting *Jacobic* – like a bunch of heel-grabbing cheats. Thinking they could pull the wool over God's eyes like Jacob pulled did to Isaac.

However, Israel's sin in this second dispute of polluting the Lord's table isn't just something that Old Testament saints were tempted to commit. Even though we don't offer burnt offerings on the altar, it's all too easy for Christians to *'defile the Lord's Table'* too.

The reference to “The LORD's Table” here in Malachi is the only one in the Old Testament.¹⁹ In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church's habit of neglecting poor brothers during the “Lord's Supper” (what Christians commonly call “The Lord's Table”). As he rebukes them, he accuses them of “**despising** the church of God” (1 Cor 11:22). That word *'despised'* seems to suggest that Paul had Malachi in mind. In the early church, God was less concerned about people despising the *altar* and more concerned about them despising their *poor brothers*. Concern for the poor brother *is* concern for The Lord's

¹⁹ Walton, 2000: 810.

Table. The food God desires is to humbly treat people like they're made in His image (Mic. 6:8; Is. 1:12-17; Ps. 51:17).

We fail in the exact same way as these priests every time we fail to care for our poor brothers. If this practice of offering blemished animals was so despicable to God that He says, "I wish someone would just shut the doors and cease all Temple operations" (1:10 paraphrase), then I wonder what Jesus would say to modern churches that take The Lord's Table lightly? In Malachi, God promises to send a curse of utter shame for this behavior: "I will rebuke your offspring and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it" (2:1-3). Ringing in the ears of the reader would've been the curse of Deuteronomy 28:37 – *"And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away."*

The word 'command' in 2:1 – "And now, O priests, this **command** is for you" – is *miṣwāh*. Merrill points out that "this technical term would be profoundly meaningful to them, for it is the most common term used to describe the statutes of Moses."²⁰ It's clear – failing these commands is a failure of the covenant and puts the priests in the crosshairs of God's judgement.

At this point, God turns to two more priestly covenant-failures: the failure to teach Israel the Mosaic Law (2:8) and the failure to judge impartially (2:9). In His covenant with Moses, God weaved in many expectations for future priests. Among His expectations on them to perform

²⁰ Merrill, Eugene H. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel-Malachi*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008, 851.

Temple-duties (like sacrifice, purification rituals, changing out the showbread, etc.) were expectations on them as *Torah Instructors* (Lev. 10:8-11; Deut. 33:8-11) and *Judges* (Deut. 17:8-13). Malachi 2:8 expresses that the priests had failed to *torah* (verb) the *Torah* (noun). They had also failed to be impartial in their *torah* (verb).

This second failure has legal connotations – they had failed their duty as *judges*. What's devastating is that God had told the people to trust the instruction and judgments of the priests. Deuteronomy 17:8-13 tells the people to direct their most difficult legal cases (including murder) to the Levitical priests. Once they've consulted their priest they are to trust their verdict –

"According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left.¹² The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.¹³ And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again." Deuteronomy 17:11.

The priests weren't purging the evil from Israel, they were propelling and personifying the evil in Israel. God had put his reputation on the line when He made a covenant with Levi. He was saying to Israel, "You can trust these people – they're my chosen judges and teachers." But in

the days of Malachi, the Levites were making God look like a fool – despising His name, polluting His altar, rendering unjustly lax verdicts, and failing to teach the Law.

And so, the priests had failed on virtually every level. They were meant to be *māl'āks* ('messengers') of the covenant (2:7), but now they were unfit to be priests at all. They had failed in their sacrificial duties, teaching duties, and judging duties. They despised God's Name and were causing many of the people to despise God's name as well (2:8). Now God threatens to make them as outwardly unfit as they are inwardly unfit by *spreading dung on their faces* (2:3) and by making **them** despised in return (2:9).

It's sobering to think that *all Christians are priests*. When Christ died, the temple curtain separating humanity from God's presence was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51-53). Then, 50 days later, God's Spirit came (Acts 2:1-4), not back to the temple, but rather He came to dwell upon and within believers. This is why Paul says that we *are* God's temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and why Revelation 5:9-10 calls every believer "priests."

And if we're all priests, then we're all capable of compromising like Israel's priests. Their compromise started in the heart – they didn't fear or honor the Lord's Name (1:6). Eventually their inward condition made its way outward – offering God rotten food. Eventually, our inward heart-posture will manifest outwardly as well. Israel's priests probably had a lot of "good" excuses for their disgraceful behavior (e.g. the cost of goods since Xerxes removed temple funding), but all excuses fall short when

you're trying to excuse willful dishonor of the Lord of Hosts (2:2).

Israel needed a better *Māl' 'āḱ* if they ever wanted to experience God's covenant blessings. 1:11 is the first hint of spiritual reform: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name *will* be great among the nations." And a great spiritual reform will need a great Spiritual Reformer. Greater than Josiah or Ezra. Coming soon is "The *Māl' 'āḱ* of the covenant in whom you delight" (3:1). The Messenger who will reform the spirituality of the people and usher in the New Covenant promised by Jeremiah (31:31-34). This new "Malachi" will succeed where priests have failed.

Week 3 Questions

1.) How does cultural Christianity today resemble Israel's defective worship in Malachi's day?

2.) If worship is just a matter of the heart, then why did it matter what Israel brought for their worship?

3.) Who are some other leaders who have led many people astray? What did they teach? How did they live?

4.) How does the coming of Christ empower meaningful worship greater than was possible in the Old Testament?

Week 4 – Dispute #3 (2:10-16)

Judah has been faithless to God

Though I deal with each dispute along their traditionally held verse-dividing-lines, this third dispute has a complicated starting point. Complicated, most commentators agree that 2:10 is the first verse of dispute #3. However, this should be challenged for three reasons: First, the disputation-pattern does not restart until verse 13. Second, the content of verses 10-12 are in perfect topical alignment with the second dispute. Third, the use of specific words only used in 1:6-2:12 are of particular note.

First, the 3-part disputation-pattern does not restart until verse 13 with the introduction of an accusation ("He no longer regards [your] offering..."), the normative objection ("ā/ māh does he not?" that is, literally: "*on what*, does he not?"), and then the proceeding answer from God. This alone seems to be reason enough to rethink the traditional dividing line between disputes 2 and 3.

Second, verses 10-12 are in seamless alignment with the content of the second dispute (1:6-2:9). "But wait," you might say, "the second dispute is with the priests and the third dispute is with the people." This, I believe is what has led to the false dividing line. The second dispute is about how the temple (it's altar and sacrifices) have been "polluted" "defiled" and "profaned." The message of 2:10-12 (traditionally put into the third dispute) is that the people too have "profaned the sanctuary of the LORD." *The point of the second dispute is not the offending party (the*

priests), but the offended party (God and His Temple). The priests are not alone in "corrupting the covenant" (2:8) because the people too have "profaned the covenant" (2:10). The priests are not alone in "polluting YHWH's table" (1:7, 12) because the people too have "profaned the sanctuary of YHWH" (2:11).

Third, there is one key word that is used only in the second dispute (1:6-2:9) and in 2:10-12 (which I am proposing should be a part of the second dispute). That key term is '*hālāl*' which is translated in the ESV as "profane." It is used only three times in Malachi, once in 1:12 (dispute #2), a second time in 2:10, and a third time in 2:11.

- 1:12 – They have *profaned* the name of YHWH.
- 2:10 – They have *profaned* the Mosaic covenant.
- 2:11 – They have *profaned* the sanctuary of YHWH.

This seems to suggest that the sin disputed in dispute #2 is Judah's *corporate sin of profaning God identity and God's space* – with a special emphasis on the bad priests who have allowed this outrageous behavior to happen.

Verses 10-12 simply introduces the reader to a different way in which God, His Temple, and His covenant have been desecrated. How's that? The priests have been allowing *intermarriage with unbelievers* (2:11) as well as *idolatry* (2:11-12).

Intermarriage was a violation of express Torah commands (Ex. 34:15-16 and Deut.7:3-4) while idolatry was of course the breach of the first and second commandments (Ex 20:3-4). Because of these sins, in 2:12 Malachi invokes the covenant curse that God would "cut off the descendant of people who do this." This hearkens

the reader to Deuteronomy's curse for idolatry *"You will soon utterly perish from the land... You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you"* (Deut. 4:26-27). This seems to be the appropriate place for Malachi to tie off his second dispute and begin a third in verse 13.

The next section, 2:13-16 – just 4 verses, constitutes what I would propose is the entirety of Dispute #3. Here the disputation-pattern begins again, and more covenant violations are revealed: adultery (2:14) and divorce (2:16).

It's odd that divorce is listed as an offense against God because divorce wasn't presented in the Torah as a covenant violation. Moses actually allowed divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-3). While adultery was clearly a violation of the seventh commandment (Ex 20:14) and its punishment was death (Lev 20:10), divorce was permitted. And yet Malachi here condemns it as a breach of God's design (2:15) and adds to it his own curse of violence upon those who divorce their spouse (2:16). And so Malachi 2:16 seems *be* the command about divorce in the Old Testament. Malachi exposes what Jesus confirms in Matthew 19:8 about the Law of Moses: divorce is a violation of God's covenant. Their faithlessness to one another (cheating and divorcing each other) was just a mirror of their faithlessness to God.

Verse 16's curse ("the man who... divorces... **covers** his garment with violence") is tied together with the initial

accusation in verse 13 ("You **cover** the LORD's altar with tears") and communicates: "You may be **covering** my altar in tears, but you are *covering* yourselves in violence." No matter how commonplace, casual, and uncomplicated divorce had become in the days of Malachi,²¹ Malachi makes it plain that a broken covenant with one's spouse is a broken covenant with God.

²¹ Walton, 2000: 810.

Week 4 Questions

1.) What does it mean to 'profane God's sanctuary'? What are some specific ways we can offend God in this way, even without a Temple?

2.) How might marrying an unbeliever tempt someone to compromise or devalue the Gospel?

3.) How should we respond to divorce in the culture? In the Church?

4.) What are some of God's precepts that you tend to take lightly? How does this reflect your posture towards God?

Week 5 – Dispute #4 (2:17-3:5)

Israel mislabels God as unjust

Malachi's fourth dispute is often taken by commentators to be "The Problem of Evil;" that is, the problem of how an all-good and all-powerful God can allow evil in the world. And while this may have some validity, it doesn't seem to be the real focus of this dispute (as it is in Jer. 12:1, Hab. 1:2-4²², and Ps. 73:1-3). The problem with taking this dispute to be "The Problem of Evil" is that God is not on trial in this passage, Israel is. So the dispute isn't "The Problem of Evil," but "The Problem of People" - people who have mislabeled God.

In Exodus 33:19, YHWH decided that He would "proclaim [His] name" to Moses. Then, in Exodus 34:5-7, that's what He does:

⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord.⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of

²² Baldwin, 1972: 24. Baldwin is one such commentator who sees Dispute #4 as raising the question of the problem of evil, and she likens the passage to the references provided from Jeremiah and Habakkuk.

the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

YHWH says that His identity can be summed up in seven attributes: (1) mercy, (2) graciousness, (3) slowness to anger, (4) steadfast love, (5) faithfulness, (6) forgiveness, and (7) *justice*.

Now, in Malachi, Israel doesn't believe that YHWH is who He said He is – who He revealed Himself to Moses to be. As a product, YHWH has been oversold and has underperformed. The people are leaving one-star-reviews of YHWH's seventh attribute on Yelp. They've checked "no" on the "would you recommend YHWH to a friend in need of *justice*?" box.

The chatter on Yehud's radio day-after-day is that *God is unjust and loves evildoers* (2:17). YHWH is "weary" of being mislabeled and misunderstood. The word *wearied* could also be translated *annoyed*, *agitated*, or *aggravated*.²³ If you recall, Israel's priests were *annoyed* by YHWH's words in the second dispute (1:13), and now YHWH says, "you weary [annoy] me with *your* words!"

Not only have the people accused YHWH of not living up to His just name revealed throughout the Torah (Esp. Ex 34:6-7 and Deut 32:4), but they're now suggesting that their conduct should be altered to match their bad theology: "If God loves evildoers, then let's do evil and find favor in God's sight" (2:17).

This attitude, says Dr. Gerry Breshears, is what is meant by the third commandment "You shall not take the

²³ Gallaty, 2015: 242.

name of YHWH your God in vain" (Ex 20:7); for which the penalty is death (Lev 24:16). Dr. Breshears says, "Taking His name in vain is more about our *conduct*. Since we bear His Name as His representatives among the nations, we honor His name by our conduct being consistent with His character. We take God's Name in vain and dishonor it when *our* conduct is inconsistent with *His* character. His character is expressed by us when we are obedient to His commands, because His commands are consistent with His character."²⁴

Remember, the third part of each dispute in Malachi is God's answer to Israel's objection. The answer God gives to the dispute raised here is more wonderful and terrifying than any of the others. YHWH's reaction to being called "unjust" is a proclamation that He will send two different *māl' āk*s (*messengers*) who will unleash His justice in a way the world has never seen.

The first *māl' āk* will prepare the way for the second and much greater *Māl' āk*. It is after this first *māl' āk* prepares the way that YHWH will unexpectedly and "suddenly and come to his temple" (3:1) – which has sat dormant, shekinah-less for over 100 years. Presumably, this sudden return of YHWH to the Temple coincides with the coming of the second, greater, judging *Māl' āk*. Could it be that this Great *Māl' āk*, the judge who will right all wrongs and purify the failed *māl' āk*s of Levi (3:3), is actually YHWH Himself? Indeed! It's not hard to see that YHWH Himself, the Son of Man with authority to Judge (Dan. 7), and the

Greater "*Mǎl 'āḱ* of the covenant" from Malachi 3:1b all come together in Jesus Christ.

The people ask for justice in 2:17 and God gives it to them in 3:1-4. But the justice will not be dished out on those they think. If Israel had been wise they'd have cried out for *mercy*, not *justice*! They want God to judge the evildoers, but they don't realize that *they are the evildoers*! So first, God's justice will visit His disobedient covenant-breaking people – even (especially) the priests won't be let off the hook. Then, He will come and scrub the impure, defiled, covenant-breaking hearts of his people (3:2-3a). It will be caustic, like fuller's soap. It will be painful, like having impurities torched in a refinery. But the result will be glorious: the pure and acceptable and pleasing offerings of His people once again (3:3-4). Covenant faithfulness restored.

After this painful refining judgement upon the priests, YHWH's Great *Mǎl 'āḱ* will turn towards people who practice all sorts of evil (3:5). Having done all this, He disproves their allegation of Him – He proves to be inarguably just.

Week 5 Questions

1.) Have you ever looked around and thought that the wicked were prospering and the righteous were being mistreated? How did you respond?

2.) Do you think you've ever 'wearied' the Lord with your sin? How does this passage warn us?

3.) How is it comforting to know that God will come to judge the world?

4.) Why do you think the Lord starts by judging the priests before moving to the other people?

Week 6 – Dispute #5 (3:6-12)

Israel has been robbing God

Dispute #5 is phrased like an invitation. God invites the people back into a faithful covenant relationship with Him: "return to me, and I will return to you" (3:7). When we read their response, "How shall we return?" We must read this in the same defensive and apathetic tone as the objections of the first four disputes. They say, once again, "*bă māh* shall we return?" This is yet another brisk, bristly, and self-righteous defense that says, essentially: "Return? How would you like us to do that? We never left! *You're* the one who left!" God says the way to return, if they'd like, is to stop *robbing* Him and "bring the full tithe into the storehouse" (3:8-10).

When we total up every offering commanded in the Torah, God's people were commanded to give about 23% of their wealth each year to maintain the Temple and support the priests.²⁵ Tithing is commanded in Deuteronomy 14:22-23, and its corresponding curse for those who fail is named by Malachi in verses 9 and 11 of this dispute – *their land would not yield*. God says in effect, "If you won't give me what's mine, then I will take it... and more." The financial burden that came with Xerxes' recent removal of temple-funding may have been severe,²⁶ yet God still expected His people to trust and obey Him faithfully with their finances.

²⁵ Gallaty, 2015: 252.

²⁶ Walton, 2000: 811.

This dispute started with God saying – “The only reason I haven’t consumed you, Israel, is because *I do not change!*” (3:6 paraphrase). The *change* to which God is referring is His covenant loyalty to Israel. In their current state Israel has not stopped to think about how tremendously blessed they are that God has not changed His mind about the covenant. Given their catalogue of sins they should be awe-struck (like Levi in 2:5).

This tenacity to perpetually be Himself is a core part of God’s character. It’s His *’emet*. Commonly translated “faithfulness,” *’emet* is God’s integrity and commitment to be true to His own character at all times throughout all ages. How blessed is Israel to have God as their God? He is a God tenaciously committed to His own character of mercy and grace! Unfaithful Israel has blessedly fallen into the hands of God’s faithfulness.

The invitation to “return” in the fifth dispute is both spiritual and physical – the word *return* is *šûb* which literally means to “turn back.” It means to “make a linear motion back to a point previously departed” (Strongs #7725). When God invites His people to return to Him, He expects a tangible change in both attitude and actions.

Week 6 Questions

1.) Sometimes people assume they're right with God when they're not. What kinds of things (other than Christ) do we often claim to be evidence that we are Christians?

2.) How do our spending habits and our hearts relate? What do your spending habits say about your heart?

3.) How do you think New Testament Christians should think about tithing?

4.) God is tenaciously committed to being Himself – to being unchanging (3:6). Why is this a relief to sinners?

Week 7 – Dispute #6 (3:13-4:3)

Israel thinks the covenant with God has no benefit

This final dispute opens with an interesting statement, God says to Israel, "Your words have been hard against me" (3:16). As a book of prophetic rebuke, Malachi is filled with God's "hard words" against Israel. Yet more offensive than anything God has said to Israel, are the things Israel has said to God right along. While Israel has been saying harsh *untruths* meant to malign Him, God has been saying harsh *truths* meant to restore them. It's as though God is saying, "remember who is at fault here, and the pointedness of all the lies you've said against me."

Indeed, Israel had said some "hard" untruths:

- *God doesn't love us. (1:2)*
- *It's okay to defile God's altar by offering blemished sacrifices. (1:7)*
- *God loves evil people and hates good people. (2:17, 3:15)*
- *God is not just. (2:17)*
- *God's covenant is worthless – it doesn't benefit us. (3:14)*

Here again, however, Israel won't humble themselves. Their response is, once again, "*māh*." As spite-filled and self-righteous as every other *māh* in Malachi.

"Māh have we spoken against you?" God reminds them of the most offensive thing that they've said thus far:

"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? Now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

Malachi 3:14-15

In their reply, Israel is communicating: "There's no use in being your people, no benefit to being your friends, and no use in repenting humbly before the God of Heaven's Armies. We see that the best way forward is to do the things you hate. To put you to the test!" This is the point in the relationship where, tears welling up, the Husband asks his hate-filled Bride, "so... you want to leave me?"

In the previous dispute, God had made an unprecedented exception to the covenant-law "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut 6:16). It's an exception He's happy to make:

*"Bring the full tithe into the storehouses, 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."*

Malachi 3:10 (emphasis mine)

But here in the sixth dispute Israel says: "Why would we tithe? There's no benefit!" and "Put God to the test? Sure! We'll put Him to the test – with our evil deeds! And we'll escape because He's unjust!"

It is here that suddenly, in a surprising turn, we're introduced to a different kind of Israelite (3:16). One the reader wasn't sure existed until just now: A group of God-fearing Israelites ready to take God up on His invitation to *return* (*šûb*) – in both attitude and action. They're not like their hard-hearted kinsmen, but instead they actually "esteem his name" (attitude) and "serve Him" (action). As a result, God has their names were written in a "book of remembrance," makes them His "treasured possession," and spares them His wrath like a father spares a good son (3:17). 3:16 says these God-fearers spoke to another and that "the LORD paid attention" and "heard what they were saying..." What do you think they said? Can you imagine?

On the other hand, the ones who have stone-walled their own hearts dispute-after-dispute, refusing to humble themselves, will suffer the curse of putting God to the test: "They will be thrust out of the land" (Deut 6:16-18). Malachi 4:1 adds to this one last reminder about the coming day of the *Great Măl' āk* - for those whose arrogance continues to flap in the face of The Holy God, the *Măl' āk* will turn them to "stubble" and set them on fire so that nothing is left.

Still, God can't help Himself. He puts the attention back on the faithful ones who fear Him. He adds a little bit more whip on the pie in 4:2-3 for those humble God-fearing-and-serving folk. He says that for them, "The sun shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping

like calves from a stall." How foolish the person who thinks "it is vain to serve God" (3:14) and how blessed and satisfied is the person who fears and serves God! It may be difficult for them now – but a brand new day is coming for the one who fears and serves God – rising with restoration in its wings. Blessed is the person who keeps the covenant.

Conclusion (4:4-6)

⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

After the sixth dispute, Malachi gives one last charge and one more piece of commentary. The *charge* is, naturally: “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (4:4). It’s the prescription for that dreadful-looking diagnosis in 1:2 – that is, Israel’s failure to remember that God loves them. Malachi has now brought his treatise full circle: “Don’t forget the covenant! Don’t forget how deeply God has loved you!”

Israel’s failure to remember the Jacob-choosing, Esau-rejecting covenant love of God was the root-failure that metastasized into all their subsequent failures – infecting both pious priests and poor peasants in Yehud. Every failure and every compromise flowed directly from their inability to grasp that they were loved by God. If they would only remember and re-engage with the covenant,

they could begin to experience the blessing and the presence of their loving God again.

With that, the author gives one final booming *piece of commentary* to Israel: a reminder that “the great and awesome day” is coming on the heels of the heralding-*māl ’āḳ* - someone who will help turn many hearts around. Israel (and all people) would do well to watch for him. To not miss him. To listen to him when he comes preparing the way, and to not say “*māh*” like so many had before. To, quite literally, turn the page and remember how much God loves His people.

This ending to the book of Malachi is clearly a reiteration of the God’s justice-plan laid out in the fourth dispute (3:1-5) – except this time, the heralding *māl ’āḳ* of 3:1a is defined more precisely: this herald is “*Elijah the prophet*” (4:5).

Of course, the Synoptics confirm that this *Elijah* was *John the Baptist* (Mt 11:4, 17:11; Mk 9:13) who had the “*spirit of Elijah*” (Lk 1:5-25). The similarities between Elijah and John the Baptist are not difficult to see. Both John and Elijah:

- Preached a message of repentance (1 Kings 18:21; Matt 3:1-2).
- Wore the same type of clothing (2 Kings 1:7-8; Matt 3:4).
- Had similar/obscure wilderness-diets (1 Kings 17:2-4; Matt 3:4b).
- Lived on the margins of Jewish society (1 Kings 17:1a; Matt 3:1).

- Preached against evil Kings (1 Kings 18:18; Matt 14:3-4).
- Suffered from depression and doubt (1 Kings 19:4; Matt 11:2-3).
- Had their lives sought by evil Queens (1 Kings 19:2; Matt 14:8-11).

The sentiment should not be lost on the reader that the Old Testament closes with the anticipation of an Elijah-esque herald-*māl' āk*, and the New Testament opens (3 chapters later) with the his arrival in John. John the Baptizer's place in the Gospels is not out of mere necessity – whipped up by clever Christian authors to fit their freshly devised messianic-narrative neatly within the paradigm of Israel's prophetic hopes.

John's ministry, while undeniably Elijah-esque, is far more human than anyone would've expected. The coming Elijah-esque herald-*māl' āk* would be expected to perform Elijah-esque miracles (i.e. fire from heaven). But not John. John performed ritual washings in the murky waters of the Jordan. His reputation was not as a miracle-worker at all, but as a semi-obscure rabbi from the wilderness. Elijah ascended to heaven on fiery chariots (2 Kings 2:11), but John is unexpectedly and tragically beheaded (Matt 14:10-12). None of this takes away from John's fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy, but fulfills it in ways most would've found flat-out offensive.

John's message was like Malachi's – a gracious invitation to repent and return to covenant relationship with God before “the great and awesome day of the

LORD" (Mal. 4:5; Matt 3:2). Malachi and John both gave believers a chance to wash themselves of covenant-apathy, failure, compromise, hypocrisy, and laziness by returning to God, Whose coming was at hand.

As a *historical book*, Malachi is invaluable. In its pages we get a uniquely clear look into the life of post-exilic early-second-Temple-era residents of Yehud. Malachi highlights the tragedy of both national and individual compromise at virtually every level of society. The reader sees exactly what happens when compromise seeps into the cracks of disillusionment. Israel was a stifled and browbeaten as a nation. They had more-or-less lost their identity as a contender on the world-stage. But rather than allowing their discouragement and identity-loss to catapult them *towards* God, their discouragement became a catalyst for *cynicism and compromise*.

As a *prophetic book*, Malachi is a jewel in the canon. It positively drips with the hopes (and judgments) of a coming *Māl'āḱ* who will set things right. The way Malachi's prophecies see fulfillment so rapidly, specifically, and colorfully in the opening pages of the New Testament is unrivaled by any other prophetic book.

However, it's Malachi's ability to speak to the heart of modern Christian compromise that is uniquely relevant and urgent for today's readers. It evokes wonder and hope in our great *Māl'āḱ*. It hearkens us to return to covenant faithfulness and to live in trust-filled obedience even during times of disillusionment. It urges the Christian to root their identity in the Great *Māl'āḱ* alone, and to

60

leverage seasons of despair as opportunities to develop greater faith.

Week 7 Questions

1.) In what sense is the law *not* a burden to God's people? How can it be burdensome?

2.) Where do you see the error of moral license in your own life? In the larger culture? What about the error of legalism?

3.) How would you explain the 'fear of the Lord' to an unbeliever?

4.) If you're a Christian, think about the day you responded to the Gospel. Discuss the joy you felt upon being spiritually "healed" by Christ.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, Joyce G. *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1972.
- Blaising, Craig, John F Walvoord, and Roy B Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1985.
- Breshears, Gerry. "Applied Integrative Biblical Literature: Genesis to Song of Solomon." *BL591*. Portland, OR: Class Lecture at Western Seminary, October 2, 2020.
- Gallaty, Robby. *Exalting Jesus in Malachi*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015.
- Gentry, Peter J. *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.
- Hugenberger, Gordon P. *New Bible Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
- Imes, Carmen. *Taking God's Name in Vain?* . Bible Project Podcast, Other Episodes & Interviews, Episode 9: Portland, WA, March 19, 2020.
- Merrill, Eugene H. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel-Malachi*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.
- Walton, John H, Victor H Matthews, and Mark W Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2000.
- Westermann, Claus. *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1967.

* Discussion Questions for Weeks 2-7 come from Gallaty, 2015.

* All scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

