

PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: MALACHI

Notes For Part One: Giving Our Hearts to God (Malachi 1 & 2)

Introduction to Malachi

The short book of Malachi was written to call God's people to examine the thoughts and motives with which they serve God. The struggle to resist "going through the motions" has been a part of believers' lives for as long as humans have called on God. The details of the situations that believers face may change from generation to generation, but the need for understanding, for genuine faith, remains constant.

Malachi was written in the late 5th century BC, around (or more likely just after) the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The most likely date is about 430 BC or 420 BC. Malachi thus wrote to the people after the major outward projects (such as the temple and the city walls) had been completed. Yet the people were still trying to learn all the lessons that God was teaching them. There were so many things to do in the years of rebuilding, so many tasks to perform, so many sins to be avoided, that at times it became very difficult for God's people to see God himself amongst all the activity. We have seen in the later chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah how the people continued to struggle with their spiritual perspective, even at times when they had enjoyed victory and blessing from God.

So too, in our lives there are so many needs, responsibilities and distractions that we find it very difficult to concentrate on God himself, to understand the reasons for what we do, and to appreciate the significance of what we do when we serve him. Thus Malachi's challenges are appropriate for the church today. As happened to the Jews in Malachi's day, we often are content with going through the motions and appearing outwardly to be religious. Malachi's challenge and call is that God wants the hearts of his people.

The book of Malachi is divided thematically into 6 main sections. The sections generally begin with a comment from God, immediately followed with an objection from his people, who think that God has judged them unfairly. But God then refutes their objection, and exhorts them to reform. The six key verses that divide the book into these sections are 1:2, 1:6, 2:10, 2:17, 3:6 and 3:13. If you take a look at these verses, you will quickly see the kinds of things God's people needed (and need) to understand more completely.

How Have You Loved Us? (Malachi 1:1-5)

The name "Malachi" means "my messenger", and this prophet was sent as a messenger to tell God's people about their spiritual needs and shortcomings. The messenger theme comes up again in 3:1, which the gospel writers tell us has Messianic significance. Whether Malachi is a literal name, or is (as some commentators have thought) a title for an otherwise anonymous prophet, the emphasis on the "messenger" is a deliberate indication that Malachi's message is one for God's people both then and now - Malachi is dealing with themes of lasting importance.

Malachi's first lesson is basic but vital. God assures his people that he loves them, only to hear his people challenge him: "How have you loved us?" Because of the discipline they have gone

through, they see God not as loving them, but as punishing them. From their flawed viewpoint, God's presence does not mean the loving assurance of care and comfort, but the frightening threat of punishment for sins. God's way of replying is curious - he reminds them of Jacob & Esau, the two brothers whose descendants became two nations. He tells them he loved Jacob (Israel) but hated Esau (Edom). He reminds the Jews that their contentious neighbors, Edom, have been totally destroyed (Babylon demolished Edom at the same time that they conquered Judah and Jerusalem). But Israel, while disciplined, has risen again, and in fact has many glorious days waiting in the future. Israel had been disciplined, but Edom had been destroyed.

Christians must learn to see this difference. Just as the Jews of Malachi's generation could not see God's blessings because of all the discipline they had endured, we also are sometimes so preoccupied with our own day-to-day lives that we fail to see any way God could love us apart from taking care of the largely trivial situations we find ourselves in each day. We blow things so much out of proportion that when God does not act as we wished, we feel devastated spiritually, because we question whether he loves us, refusing to see or consider that there may be far more important long-term purposes behind the disappointments, discipline and trials we must endure.

The reasons behind what happens in our lives, and especially the reasons behind the ways God disciplines us, are not the kind of lessons we are often looking for. God uses trials and struggles to teach spiritual principles and to reveal his character, whereas humans usually think in terms of some temporary, worldly blessing, or in terms of God trying to make them perform some specific task. When you undergo discipline, look for the lessons God is teaching you, instead of convincing yourself that you are now entitled to a blessing to make up for the discipline. And never forget that, no matter what else you may not know or understand, you can be certain that God loves you.

Honor Your Father (Malachi 1:6-14)

Next, Malachi addresses God's priests and says that they have shown contempt for God. They are shocked at this. Among all God's people, they have been the most zealously devoted to his ministry. They have offered all the sacrifices God called for, attended all the assemblies and festivals he ordained, and have diligently told the rest of the people all the things they should be doing. Thus they demand an explanation.

God begins by reprimanding them for the sacrifices they have been offering - they have offered every animal the law called for, but have completely failed to fulfill the spirit of selfless, faithful sacrifice that the law was intended to produce. They have offered to God things they would not have needed anyway - animals with defects that meant the priests would not get any personal use out of them. Their "sacrifices" to God were not real sacrifices at all, and thus they showed contempt for him, not honor, by their worship. Their problem was that they treated worshipping God as a game - they wanted to play the game as well as possible, but without damaging what they considered their real lives and interests. They did not think of God as living and reigning, but simply as a set of activities and rules that gave them something to succeed at. They wanted to "do well" at serving God, so that they could look good to others and feel good about themselves. But God himself was not very real to them.

Christians must never treat God the same way they would treat a hobby or a self-help course.

Christianity is not a way to evaluate ourselves or to compare ourselves with other humans, in an attempt to feel secure and significant. Activity alone, however zealous, is powerless to bring security, peace or salvation. Take care also not to fall into the error of those who give Christianity only the time they would give any other hobby - that is, as long as it is fun or interesting, they will keep up with their Christian "commitment". No matter how much our flesh wishes it were so, Christianity was not designed with entertainment as the object. There are many today who think so, and when they stop getting the good feelings they expected, Christianity fades into the background in favor of other hobbies. To honor God, we must each develop our own, genuine relationship with God, one that does not consist of outward activity only, and one that strong enough for us to sacrifice to God in ways that actually cost us.

A Covenant of Life (Malachi 2:1-6)

Here, Malachi is addressing the priests, as those responsible for establishing a relationship between God and his people. Since the New Testament teaches that all Christians are priests, Malachi's warnings and encouragements are of value for all of us. He has already told them that they show contempt for God by their insincerity, and their lack of genuine commitment in their "worship" of God. Now he will go further, explaining what they should learn and take to heart. His message is helpful to all who find it difficult to give their best to God, because Malachi does not stop at criticizing their behavior - he offers help in changing it.

The problem, Malachi explains, is that they have forgotten the covenant God made with them. They have gotten so caught up in the activities of worshiping God, and in comparing themselves to performance standards, that they have lost sight of the meaning behind their worship. They consider God an important part of their life, but they have forgotten that God is the one and only source of all real life. They think that pursuing religious activity will make them feel more spiritual, and will help them understand who they are, and who God is. But God wants them first to understand him, and understand who they are in relation to him, and to allow this to give meaning to what they do.

Likewise, our own insecurity can cause us to attempt to bypass understanding the foundations of faith. We see the inadequacies in ourselves and in our church, and we want them to change immediately. Thus, the lives of many Christians, and the histories of many congregations, are a futile cycle of ups and downs. Periods of frantic activity alternate with times of regress and frustration. But God has promised us that he "always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him" (2 Cor. 2:14). When a believer, or a congregation, constantly needs to be "recharged", this is a sign of a fundamental problem. Unless we truly permit God to reign over us, we have no real life, only whatever human energy we can summon up at a given time. God's covenant is one of life - life to the full. Without understanding this foundation of our ministry in Christ, the activities of ministry have not true meaning, and cannot give genuine help either to ourselves or to others.

Examples of Life (Malachi 2:7-9)

In this section of Malachi, God convicts his priests of showing contempt for him by valuing outward accomplishment over sincere faith. He reminds them of the covenant of life that should give meaning to their worship. And we Christian priests must keep always foremost in our minds the covenant that Jesus gave us through his blood. Malachi points out that not only is the

right focus essential to our own spiritual health, but also that our perspective has a dramatic effect, for good or ill, on those around us. These priests' inability to appreciate this effect was their greatest failing. So too, God is very concerned with the example that Christians set to the pagan world. When we fail to set the right example, it is quite obvious to most pagans, and it can render fruitless much of our evangelistic work. Many Christians express frustration that unbelievers think Christians are hypocritical (or unintelligent, or whatever), so why not do something about it? We should make sure not to give them any reasons to think negatively of Christians, and thus should live in such a way that they will praise God when they see our peace, security and joy.

God wants us to be examples of life. God is less concerned with our human zeal and activity than he is with our spiritual presence. We must develop enough security in Christ that we do not feel a need to defend our reputations or our opinions. Instead, we can live life to the full, as Jesus promised - free from anxiety, free from agendas, free from self-centeredness, and full of life. Therefore do not settle for a Christianity that is all outward activity and behavior evaluation. Instead put forth your best effort, in study, meditation, discussion, and prayer, to learn who God is, who you are, and what he has done for you. Do not substitute slogans for answers, or instructions for insights. In the short run, you may not change as quickly as you had hoped, but in the long run you will save not just yourself but many others.

Keep Faith With Each Other (Malachi 2:10-16)

Next, Malachi emphasizes the connection between being faithful to God and keeping faith with one another. He anticipates their (and our) claim, of belonging to the one true family of God, and turns it into a challenge to keep faith and to practice integrity in our relationships. John taught a similar lesson, when he said that anyone who does not love other believers, whom we can see, should not claim to love God, whom we cannot see.

Malachi specifically cites divorce as an example of the way that humans break faith with one another. Such things might be expected of pagans, who overtly enter into relationships strictly for selfish benefit. But Christians should learn to keep their word, whether it is a vow of marital faithfulness, or a simpler commitment to a friend, family member or co-worker. Further, Christians must not stop at fulfilling their spoken commitments. We have unspoken commitments to each other that we must also keep. We must protect, support, and encourage each other. Certainly, in the church we must warn against such obvious ways of breaking faith as divorce. But there are subtler, and thus more hazardous, ways in which believers often break faith with each other.

We must be careful not to fall into the habit of looking at other persons only in terms of what they can do for us. To keep faith in our relationships, we must learn to appreciate others for who they are, and to see the good things they do instead of their faults - because we know that we have just as many, and have just as deep a need for others to show grace to us. Only God is able to (or is meant to) meet your deepest spiritual needs. If we as believers accept this lesson, then we will keep faith with each other, because we will make allowances for our humanity while showing appreciation for the things we do for each other. But if instead we choose to make humans the center of the church, and put unreasonable expectations on them, we will not only be breaking faith with each other, we will be breaking faith with God.

Wearying God (Malachi 2:17)

Malachi now brings another unexpected charge. He tells the people that they have wearied God. When they argue, he reveals that they accuse God of not caring about them, and question whether God is present. They do not openly express these attitudes, or even consciously think them, but many of their thoughts and feelings are indicative of these beliefs. So too, many Christians, who would never openly question God's concern or presence, betray by other statements and actions that they doubt these very things.

There are many who call themselves Christians, yet who weary God by putting their best time and effort into acquiring things that will be valuable only in this world. In their hearts, they believe God to be absent. When we think that it is vital to build a successful career, or to have material things that the world will admire and envy, we might as well believe that God is dead. Anyone who finds it less exciting to sit down and pray or study God's Word, than to receive the praise and respect of hell-bound pagans, should not claim to follow Christ. To refuse to exert time and energy to understand God, who lives forever, but then to work hard to acquire useless or flashy material objects, which will be burnt to ashes on Judgment Day, is foolish behavior, and it will ultimately lead only to pain and frustration.

If we genuinely believe in God, we should make him, not ourselves, the center of our lives and worship. We can either trust and worship God, or we can focus lavish attention on our own lives, but not both. Let us not weary God by choosing the latter. Though much of what we do and think is indeed wearying to God, yet he keeps faith with us, although at times we break faith with him. Christ came because God understands our utter inability to direct our own lives in a godly way for even a short time. Our sin and false religion weary God, but when we show, by our acceptance of his grace, that we acknowledge him as the center of our lives, he is then deeply pleased by his relationship with us, and his boundless grace more than makes up for all of our mistakes and faults.

Sources & References

Most of the sources and references for Malachi are the same as those given in the notes for Haggai and Zechariah. See the notes on those two books for a selection of recommended commentaries on Malachi.

*- Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2001
(originally taught as week eleven of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)*

©2001 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: MALACHI

Notes For Part Two: The Timeless God & His Ways (Malachi 3 & 4)

The Messenger & The Lord (Malachi 3:1)

Malachi has repeatedly challenged his hearers to examine how they worship God, and to improve their understanding of what worship is really about. And he reveals the point of all their worship and service - the coming of Jesus Christ, who would bring salvation to all who respond to his grace. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote this verse, and confirm that it refers to the coming first of the messenger (John the Baptist), then of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many of God's people were so involved in the mechanics and rituals of following God that they missed the point of it all. When Jesus came, most did not recognize who he was, and many even opposed him. Malachi says that after the messenger arrives, the Lord will "suddenly" come to his temple. Even to some who were seeking him, his actual appearance would come as quite a surprise. Most were distracted, and perhaps not really expecting him at all, though many of them knew the numerous teachings and prophecies concerning Jesus in the Scriptures.

Likewise, many today are determined not to "miss out" on anything the world has to offer, yet they miss out on the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ, the most priceless thing a human can have. Even many in the church of Christ avidly seek the secondary benefits of being a Christian, but fail to appreciate or rejoice in the true blessings of Christ - grace, salvation and eternal security. Pagans waste years of their lives striving for glitzy trinkets destined to be destroyed on Judgment Day, while ignoring the needs of their souls. Similarly, we can eagerly desire for God to grant us relationships, material goods, entertaining worship, or popularity, and yet find little satisfaction in thinking or talking about grace, heaven, or forgiveness of sins.

For each human, there will come a day (and it will come suddenly) when it will be revealed whether the things each of us has sought after have been of any real value. Each of us has control only over our own decisions and motives. What others find important should never influence our own understanding. Each of us must hear for himself or herself Malachi's call to be prepared for the Lord to "come to his temple".

The Lord Refines & Purifies (Malachi 3:2-5)

Malachi has warned that the Lord will come suddenly, and he now warns of the completeness and severity of his coming. "Who can stand when he appears?" That is, when we truly come face-to-face with Jesus, we have no way of standing on our own, of defending ourselves, or of excusing our shortcomings. We naturally look forward with joy to Jesus' coming, but we must also look to it with a genuine sense of awe and respect. For he aims to refine and purify us, in outward behavior certainly, but even more in our thinking and feelings.

A Christian who has developed a full and mature relationship with God will both fear and love him. We should have a deep sense of God's absolute power, and of our dependence upon God's mercy for even the smallest things. At the same time, we should develop complete confidence in God's love, and his concern for his people. Most believers have great difficulty achieving this balance. We should not test to see how much God will permit us to do and acquire in this world,

believing in a God who is full of cheap grace and meaningless platitudes. Nor must we become impatient with discussions of God's grace and compassion, believing only in a taskmaster God. These and other spiritual disorders come from an inability to understand God's nature, character, plans, and priorities. God is not as simple as most humans are. There are many sides to him, and we must make the necessary efforts to understand him in all his glory, compassion, and complexity. Let him know you want to know all about him, and he will hear and honor your plea.

The Unchangeable God (Malachi 3:6-7)

God now reminds his people that he has not changed. If their relationship with him has deteriorated, it is because they have changed, not him. He reminds them of the ways the past proves his unchanging character. He calls them to return, but they can only respond "How are we to return?" So too, many believers today, feeling that they are no longer as close to God as they used to be, wonder how they can regain their former zeal and excitement. Many Christians who attempt to regain a feeling of enthusiasm for their relationship with God do so in misguided ways, trying to do it on their own power, or by thinking the solution lies in an innovative method or charismatic leader. While these and similar tactics may well succeed in producing a temporary sense of enthusiasm, or at least relief, they fail to deal with the real problems, and are not genuinely dealing with the believer's actual relationship with God.

God knows that our lives will be full of positives and negatives, and he wants us to develop roots that will keep us secure and joyful regardless of what happens, and even regardless of whether we are able always to carry out successfully his ministries. Roots that last cannot be based on anything that depends on us - our activity level, our circumstances, or our human relationships. Lasting, nourishing roots must be based on God himself - on a complete acceptance and dependence on his grace, his power and his Word. Therefore, learn from the past and build permanent roots, through prayer, study, and meditation, rather than trying to find something artificial that will merely be a temporary relief from your feelings of spiritual lethargy. Choosing the right direction is harder, is uncommon, and is more uncomfortable. It is also infinitely more rewarding.

Will A Person Rob God? (Malachi 3:8-9)

God now accuses his people of robbing him, and again they deny the charge. Though he has revealed numerous sins in their thinking, they obstinately cling to their view of themselves as spiritually complete. So God details the ways they have robbed him through their half-hearted giving of tithes and offerings. They were, for the most part, following the letter of the law, but without enthusiasm or appreciation. Thus they were robbing God of what he really wanted.

When God calls on us to sacrifice, to serve, or to give, the main benefit he himself derives is never the sacrifice or gift itself. It is the knowledge that we consider him important enough, and special enough, to make the sacrifice. He does not need to let us do his work, because he could perform any task better than any human. He has no need of our sacrifices themselves, because the things we sacrifice already belonged to him. What he wants is for us truly, deeply to acknowledge, to admit, and to understand our dependence on him and our relationship with him. That is why the smallest sacrifices that come from the heart are more pleasing to God than the largest sacrifices that are done without thought.

Therefore, we should not serve God solely to avoid guilt, to attain some advantage for ourselves, or to feel better about ourselves. Nor should we find it more exciting to discuss "what God has done through me" than to discuss God himself. Such perspectives revolve around self, and the fact that such thinking is so common even amongst believers only shows how persistent the flesh is in assuming that everything revolves around self. Let us instead allow God to be the center of our lives and ministries. Putting God, instead of self, at the center of our lives and thoughts is its own reward, because we are then freed from the chains that bind the self-centered. Those whose hearts long only for God himself already live in heaven, not on earth.

See What I'll Do (Malachi 3:10-12)

God, unlike a human judge, does not accuse his people in order to condemn them. Rather, his wish is that they turn back to him. He even tells them exactly how to make up for the ways they have robbed him. And he has an unusual way of calling them to give him what is due him. It would be justifiable if God were to command them to do something painful or tedious, which would have no positive value for themselves at all. And indeed many religious groups approach sin this way - when someone sins, the offender must say a set of prayers, or formally confess to some allegedly more spiritual person, or perform some other act of penitence, designed solely to remind them of their wretchedness.

But here, God simply reminds them of the love and care he is waiting to lavish upon them as soon as they give him what is due him. And he is quite lavish in his description of what he will do, speaking of "throwing open the floodgates of heaven". The promise here is beautiful, unreserved, and positive. It is a shame that some believers, with their eyes on this world and not the next, have ripped this verse and similar verses out of context and tried to make them a promise of crass, worldly rewards in exchange for spiritual acts performed solely in hopes of obtaining worldly treasure. God wants to give us real blessings, blessings that will last for an eternity, so let us not become fixated on perishable material goods and fleeting worldly popularity. God wants to deepen our faith, to prepare us for a glorious eternal home, to teach us to glory in the forgiveness of all our sins. He wants us to be free of craving for, and worrying about, the earthly things that the heathen are obsessed with. We can be sure that God will bless us in ways that are truly blessings. We can learn in our hearts what it is like to leave this world behind, even while our bodies must temporarily be confined to it.

Is The Godly Life Worth It? (Malachi 3:13-15)

This begins the climactic section of Malachi. God's final criticism of his people is at the root of many of the other disorders he has discussed. In their hearts, his people question whether it is really worthwhile to follow God and to live as he calls them to. Because of this, they have never really committed themselves to him. They may not have held back outwardly, but they have held back their hearts, suspecting that it is not really beneficial to serve God.

They have looked at the world and seen that there are many arrogant sinners who seem to be "getting away" with their sin. They see that the richest, most powerful, and most popular individuals often have no awareness of God, and no respect for his Word. Meanwhile, they look at their own lives, at the sacrifices they make, at the temptations they try to avoid, and see no obvious "reward". Thus they lose confidence in God's promises, because they are not proving

true in the ways they expected. Their problem is the same as the one many Christians have. There are many believers who know the promises of joy and blessing that God makes to the righteous, but who misinterpret these as assurances that they will get what they want if they just obey God. When they (in their eyes) obey God, and then things in their lives do not happen as they desired or expected, they are disappointed or angry with God. These people degrade God's beautiful and spiritual promises into a cynical tactic on God's part to keep us in line.

God does not promise us that obedience means we will get what we want. Our desires are not always spiritually beneficial, even if we think they would be. God will certainly give us our fair share of worldly blessings. He gives gifts to all his creatures, sinful or righteous, to show that he loves them all. But when God wants to give you a special blessing, he is much more likely to reward your obedience with a genuine blessing that will not perish when this world is burned up on the last day - such as more patience, deeper love for others, renewed zeal, or insight into his Word. If your obedience was for the right reasons, then you will consider such blessings priceless, and you will have no doubt that it is worthwhile to follow God.

Responding To God (Malachi 3:16-18)

God has finished instructing his people how they should change. It is now up to them to decide whether to do so. Some will shrug off God's criticisms, and others will immediately set out to learn and grow from what God has told them. Once God has told us what we need to hear, he gives us a genuine choice whether to heed his words. He does not attempt to pester or manipulate us, because God loves us and respects our free will, and he wants our decisions to be our own. Because of this, it is especially precious to him when we do follow and obey him for the right reasons. We have difficulty understanding this, because when we want something from another human, we often foolishly care only for getting what we want, and don't care whether they want to give it to us. But God is more concerned with our hearts. He considers it of little value to have our outward obedience without our inward devotion, yet highly values even the most ineffective efforts to serve him if they are given with sincere appreciation of him.

Too often, we do not feel any urgency in responding to God because of his compassionate and sincere approach. We get into the habit of putting off changes and difficult decisions, until some other human pesters us or threatens us enough that we decide that it would be less unpleasant to give the other person what he or she wants. Those who respond more quickly to human prodding than to God's Word are hardly building a healthy relationship with God. But when we do fear God (in the right sense of the word) and show him the consideration and admiration he deserves, our names are written on the "scroll of remembrance" that Malachi describes. God is ours, and we are God's. Our relationship with him will go far beyond a lifestyle or a set of activities, and we shall know what Jesus really means when he promises life to the full.

Into The Furnace (Malachi 4:1)

God winds up the book of Malachi with a passionate call to his people to develop a more eternal perspective on their lives and on their service to him. With graphic images, he reminds them of the disastrous fate of those who oppose him, the futility of worldly gain, and the glorious future for those who follow him. After doing this in verses 1-4, he will wind up the book with a prophetic exhortation looking ahead to Jesus' coming.

The first verse of chapter 4 calls his people to understand the fate of the ungodly and of all material things. The prophet presents the image of a furnace that burns to ashes everything thrown into it. Remember that he is speaking not to pagans, but to those of his own people who are tempted to become like those who live for this world. Before we can even begin effectively to lead others to Jesus, we must first ourselves attack that part of our hearts and our flesh that craves superfluous material items, mindless entertainment, and other valueless earthly debris. When this universe is burned on the Last Day, nothing will remain but our spirits and souls. Anything we have spent time and effort to gain will disappear unless it had spiritual value. Everything others have said about, thought about, and done to us will cease to have any meaning. All the things we envy the pagans for having will be burned until nothing remains. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them." Then we will see how foolish it was to have been worried what the pagans around us thought about us, nor will it then benefit them that they had a better career, a better home, or more popularity than we.

The New Testament writers are even bolder in speaking of Judgment. Whereas Malachi is speaking only in generalities, the New Testament speaks specifically about the Day when God will bring our physical universe to an end. God wants us to remember this, not to dishearten us, but to encourage us - to remind us that we are not "missing out" when we don't get all the things the pagans have, whether monetary or otherwise. We show true wisdom when we are more concerned with eternal and godly blessings.

The Healing Sun (Malachi 4:2-3)

God has reminded his people of the coming destruction of all that is worldly. He now reminds them of the other side of judgment, that is, that those who do follow him will be blessed beyond what they could ever have imagined. He refers to the "sun of righteousness" that will rise with "healing in its wings". He describes the feeling of his faithful people as that of a young calf that has been released from his cell for the first time. He wants to impress upon them that the feelings of deep and lasting satisfaction that the pagans hope for, but never achieve because they seek it from the wrong things, will be obtained in full by those who love him.

The wonderful feeling that Malachi describes is possible for the true believer not once, but twice. Anyone who makes a genuine decision to follow Jesus experiences two things: first, the tremendous relief from the weight of sin that has been removed, and second, the drastic change that has occurred in the direction of his or her life. The true convert knows at once a feeling of great release and joy. But the feeling that we get when we are converted to Jesus, however good and exciting, is nothing compared to the feelings of complete security and deliverance we will realize when we are able once for all to set aside our physical bodies and to leave this whole perishable world in which our bodies are now living. The day will come when all the limitations our world puts on us - physical, emotional, and spiritual - will be broken and never return. Meanwhile, as Romans 8 describes, we groan under the weight of this world's burdens. But at the same time we expect and anticipate the eternal glory and blessing that is to come.

Further, besides the promise of personal deliverance, God says that we ourselves, by our example of faithfulness and righteousness, help to convict Satan and those who follow him. Every human who remains faithful unto death is another proof that God is right in his plans and judgments, and is another proof that those who choose not to seek God are without excuse. The prophet thus wants us to see that we are a part of something much greater than ourselves.

He Will Turn The Hearts (Malachi 4:4-6)

These three verses close out Malachi, the prophetic books, and the Old Testament itself. So it is fitting that one more time the prophet looks ahead to the era when so many of God's plans will be revealed and fulfilled. The prophecy of Elijah's return was, of course, fulfilled by John the Baptist's ministry, which preceded and introduced that of Jesus. Luke 1:17 and similar references make clear that John was indeed the Elijah figure that Malachi describes.

The concept of the generations turning their hearts towards one another, and the book's ending with a look far into the future, both emphasize the continuity of God's plan. Part of what John, the Elijah figure, was meant to do was to remind God's people that the past generations were preparatory for the coming of Jesus, and to show that the generation when Jesus lived also owed its place to the work done by the faithful in past days. The image of fathers and sons both turning to each others' hearts is important in both a literal and a spiritual sense. Believers should never think that their own generation is of some unique spiritual significance, but should be aware both of generations gone by and of generations yet to come. Everything that happened in Malachi's Israel, all that happened in the days of Jesus and the apostles, and everything that has happened in church history since, is all part of an integrated plan by God.

For this reason, we must resist the temptation of wanting the church to be "more contemporary" (more popular, more trendy) at the expense of weakening essential spiritual teachings. The church is not out of touch with the 21st century - rather, every generation that does not turn to God is itself clueless and out of touch - out of touch with the truth and with the true and living God. At the same time, believers must also realize that God's plans are based on an essential core of themes and teachings, not on man-made outward forms. To cling desperately to familiar outward forms, just because those particular things happen to be present in one's own lifetime, is also to miss the point about the timeless nature of God's church.

Listen to the message of Malachi - see your life for what it is, not as 70 or so years to try to accumulate a pitiful pile of worldly distinctions and possessions, but as part of a drama that stretches over thousands of years, and which shows and proves the wisdom and love of our God.

*- Mark W. Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2001
(originally taught as week twelve of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)*

©2001 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.