

Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for we can have confidence in You. You have our best interests at heart, even though we do not fully understand how and why our lives unfold as they do. Give us the courage to hand our problems over to You, O Lord, and trust that all things will work together for good; and when we cannot see how this can possibly be so, surprise us by the miracles of Your grace and compassion. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for Your care: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As you meet different people during your day, say a prayer of blessing for them, especially your enemies!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you know** *Pray for the elderly people you know and for the various problems they face as they grow older*
- *Give thanks for the opportunities we have to share our faith*
- *Pray for the countries of North Africa and their problems with drought*

Meditation

When everything happens around me all too fast,
Lord Jesus, slow me down.

When everything I see appears in chaos and disorder,
Lord Jesus, bring me peace.

When everything challenges what I think to the core,
Lord Jesus, grant me perspective.

When everything I come across is incomprehensible,
Lord Jesus, give me understanding.

When everything around appears to be out of control,
Lord Jesus, keep my faith secure.

When everything I do meets opposition from others,
Lord Jesus, give me courage.

When everything in this world denies all that I believe,
Lord Jesus, show me love.

For You are the Master of all things, the great organiser,
Lord Jesus, we place our hope in You.

Bible passage - Malachi 1:6-14

⁶ 'A son honours his father and a servant his master. Now, if I am a father, where is my honour? If I am a Lord, where is my respect? The Lord of Hosts says this to you, you priests who despise my name!'

'But you say, "How have we despised Your name?" ⁷ In offering defiled food upon my altar! Then you ask, "How have we defiled You?" In your declaring that the Lord's table is being defiled!'

⁸ Is it not wrong for you to offer a blind animal for sacrifice? Is it not wrong to offer what is lame or sick? Present this to your governor! Will He be pleased with you or accept you? ⁹ So plead for the favour of God on us! Will He be accept us when this is happening by your hand?' says the Lord of Hosts.

¹⁰ 'Who from amongst you would shut the Temple doors so that you would not light up my altars in vain? I take no pleasure in you,' says the Lord of Hosts, 'I will not accept an offering from your hands! ¹¹ From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations. In every place incense and a pure gift will be offered to my name, for my name is great among the nations,' says the Lord of Hosts.

¹² 'But you are profaning it when you declare that the Lord's table is defiled and what comes from it (its food) is defiled!' ¹³ But you say, 'How troublesome this is,' and you sneer at it,' says the LORD of hosts. 'You bring what has been stolen or lame or sick, and you bring this as your offering! Shall I accept this from your hand?' says the LORD. ¹⁴ 'Cursed is the cheat who has a male in his flock, and promises to offer it, and yet sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord; for I am a great King,' says the LORD of hosts, 'and my name is to be feared among the nations.'

Bible Study

Review

In this remarkable passage, we find ourselves thrust into the Malachi's most heartfelt concerns about the worship of God's people. As we read, we are thrust into the arcane world of sacrificial worship, which is an area of the Old Testament that many Christians avoid because it is so far removed from our worship today. Nevertheless, we can easily perceive that the problem with this worship was that the priests had begun to treat their duties with contempt and the worship performed was far from what the Lord expected of His people. Although the ancient laws of sacrificial worship are hard to comprehend, they can help us with our faith today; for example, they can help us appreciate more fully the meaning of Christ's death on the Cross (as in Hebrews 9). As far as this passage is concerned, our study of it will help us gain insight into some valuable spiritual lessons about the worship of God, even today.

What we have read is an anguished call from God, the 'Lord of Hosts', disputing the negative attitudes and practices of the priests in Jerusalem during the fifth century BC, after the Exile and the rebuilding of the Temple (see yesterday's study). People were poor, and Jerusalem was a shadow of its former self. Malachi's prophecy reads like an argument between God and priests, who stood accused of having a slack attitude towards worship because they were 'defiling' the altars in the Temple and the 'table of the Lord' (1:7,12). Their attitude towards God was wrong (1:6,7), because they not only offered 'defiled food' on the altar, they also told others that the quality of sacrifice did not matter (1:7). Leviticus tells us (see 1:3,10, 3:1,6 etc) that the only animals acceptable for sacrificial worship were perfect males, and from the point of view of both breeding and eating, these were the most valuable specimens. The idea was that only the best was appropriate for the worship of God; but instead of helping the people sustain this proper attitude to worship during difficult times, the priests changed the rules!

The Lord's anger at this downgrading of worship was considerable; was he of less worth than an earthly master (1:8)? More than this, however, Malachi's prophecy said something far more significant; defiled and impure offerings were not just an insult to God, they were unacceptable to Him! If Israel would not offer the Lord proper worship, then He would prefer that the doors of the Temple be shut (1:10)! Moreover, He would accept worship from whosoever offered it amongst the nations (1:11)! It is here that we read the famous words; 'From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations.' These words have been passed down in Christian tradition in the form found in Psalm 113:3; 'From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is greatly to be praised.' Malachi's vision may have come from the Psalm, or the Psalm come from Malachi's vision, but it expresses superbly the authority and majesty of God.

We should not fail to appreciate the importance of this text. God's rejection of inappropriate worship was not a matter of His not being sensitive to the circumstances of His people, but of the people's unwillingness to honour the Lord as truly God. Second class worship of God is not good enough, irrespective of life's circumstances. Even if life is tough, it is still possible to show true faith and give one's best to God. Offering the best does not mean 'doing things perfectly', but it does mean being disciplined enough to do things well because we worship God who is our Creator and Redeemer. Christian worship must surely reflect a pure heart of love, devotion, service and care according to the revelation of Christ in God's Word, throughout history and in our own lives. Poor standards of worship are an insult to God today just as much in Malachi's day; for example, in sermons that show little dedication to God's Word, or in shabbily organised services of worship that are incomprehensible to those to whom we witness (see 1 Cor. 14). Together with Malachi, we must show spiritual discernment in matters of worship.

Going Deeper

If we are to understand this passage properly, then we must work our way through the 'to and fro' comments of this prophecy because these reflect what the priests were saying about sacrifices and worship, and God's responses. As we do this, we will find that the prophecy links with other Old Testament prophecies that are Messianic in nature, and look forward to the New Testament.

Notes on the text and translation

- V7** *'how have we defiled you?'* You will find that some Bible versions have 'how have we defiled it?' with the implication that what they are talking about is the defiling of the altar. However, the Hebrew Bible clearly has '... defiled you' and the argument here is between the Lord and the priests. The confusion has arisen because the ancient Septuagint translation (see dictionary) has 'it' instead of 'you', just because the translators could not make the sentence work properly in Greek!
- V8** *'... accept you'* The Hebrew text says 'lift up your face', but this must mean some form of acceptance, as a colloquial expression.
- V10** *'who from among you would shut the Temple doors'* The word 'temple' is not in the Hebrew text, though it can hardly be anywhere else. Most translators include the word 'Temple' simply to make the verse comprehensible to an English reader.
- V11** *'and what comes from it ...'* The Hebrew word here is 'fruit'. Here, then, the 'fruit of the Lord's table' means the food that has been offered upon it and is now available for eating. For the full meaning of this, see the study.
- V13** *How troublesome this is, and you sneer at it,* The word 'troublesome' is difficult. It is a form of a word meaning 'weariness' or 'burden' and the emphasis is upon the appearance of problems and trouble. Also the word for 'sneer' means something like 'blowing out' or 'snorting with displeasure'.

Going Deeper

At the very beginning of our passage, we realise that we are listening to a speech by God reported by Malachi. I have separate out the different sections of the speech so that the reader can more easily appreciate each phase of what 'the Lord of Hosts says', even though everything is clearly connected within one speech. Most Bibles place the whole passage in one paragraph, but this means that few can appreciate what is being said at a first reading. Forcing the passage apart to smaller paragraphs helps us follow what is being said with more ease.

Respecting God (1:6-7)

The beginning of the passage uses a typical image of the relationship of God and Israel as like father and son (see also Exodus 4:22, Deuteronomy 32:6, Isaiah 63:16, Jeremiah 3:4,19, Hosea 11:1). This bond was close in ancient times, and a son was expected to give absolute respect to his father, as is indicated by the fifth commandment 'You shall love you father and mother ...' (Ex 20:12) which also links respect of child for parent as a condition of 'living long in the land'. The piercing question God put to the priests was whether they wished to sustain this relationship, because if they did not, they would live no longer in the land than their predecessors who sinned and were taken into Exile!

The trouble that afflicted God's people was due to a broken relationship with God, and in verse 6, God challenged the priests by telling them directly 'you despise my name'. In answer to this challenge, the priests retorted 'how have we despised Your name?' (1:6). Either they had lost the art of spiritual discernment and did not know how, or they knew what they were doing and thought nothing of it! So the Lord was forced to answer by telling them that they had contravened one of the essential laws they were required to fulfil in performance of the sacrificial system of worship; they had offered 'defiled food upon my altar ...!' At this point it is not yet said what 'defiled food' meant, but another important point arises.

In verse 7 the priests responded not by responding to the charge, but by pressing home their own defence. In truth, they were fully aware that they had broken Moses' laws about sacrifice, but they demanded to know why this affected God and insisted; 'how have we defiled You?' (1:7) They did not perceive why their actions were an affront to God, because they felt that they had the right to set out the requirement of worship according to the needs of the people (see introduction). However, the very fact that they asked this question illustrated the nature of the break that had occurred between them, and as soon as we hear this question from the priests we know there is no longer a 'father and son' relationship between God and His people. The priests had set themselves up as religious authorities on what God wanted, and had departed from their proper role as intermediaries between God and His people.

The true job of a priest (1:8-9)

Naturally, therefore, the response of the Lord was to give the priests a small lecture about their duties as priests, and this is found in verse 8 and 9. Here, Malachi reports the basic requirement of the law that sick, lame and blind animals were not to be slaughtered for sacrifice (Lev 22:18-25, Deuteronomy 15:21). The logic of God's argument here is simple; no such animal would be acceptable fare for the preparation of a meal for any earthly master (here called a 'governor', meaning some form of ruler).

More than this, however, the Lord presented the priests with a challenge that went further, and pressed home the perilous nature of what they were doing that God knew all about. It was the job of a priest to offer sacrifices for a number of reasons, including intercession for the people. Now today we think of intercession as rather like responding to events as they happen; so when someone is ill, we circulate their name on a prayer list of those who will pray for that person in intercession. However, in ancient times, although the priests did indeed have functions to help people when life was difficult or discern illness and pray (e.g. instructions for leprosy, Leviticus 13), their intercession was generally quite different. Their job was to offer continual worship to the Lord in order to secure His favour on the people for the future (e.g. the 'day of atonement' – Exodus 30:10f. and Leviticus 16, 23:28).

In the light of this, God's challenge in verse 9 becomes clear. If the priests do not do their job of interceding for the people properly, how will they expect the Lord's protection when troubles come in the future? It is a little difficult to read verse 9 and work out who is saying what and why, but it is essentially all God's speech though He is cynical because of the failure of the priests to do their work properly!

The Lord rejects false worship and accepts pure worship (1:10-11)

Then, the Lord issued an extraordinary call; 'Who from amongst you would shut the Temple doors so that you would not light up my altars in vain?' This was a call for the total shut down of worship in the Temple! It sounds extraordinary, but we must remember that during the exile, in the living memory for most Israelites of that day, the Temple had indeed been 'shut' because it had been destroyed by the Babylonians. All Malachi was doing was reminding the people of what the great prophet Jeremiah had said so many years ago whilst the people were in exile in Babylon. He prophesied that God laws would be 'written on the hearts' of the people (Jeremiah 31:33) when they ceased to present sacrifices in the Temple. Indeed, of the prophets who spoke about sacrifice it is hard to find one who had a good word to say about the system because of the way it was constantly abused (see Amos 4:4, Hosea 9:4, Isaiah 1:11 and many more). If all the returning exiles wanted to do in Jerusalem was to sacrifice to God in what was merely 'pretend' worship, then the Lord God, said Malachi, would rather shut the Temple doors; He said 'I take no pleasure in you ... I will not accept an offering from your hands!' Little wonder that by the end of Malachi, he was prophesying the days prior to the coming of the Messiah and a complete change on God's world order (4:1-6)!

Astonishing, however, Malachi gave what many today call a 'picture', which is very similar to Psalm 113:3,4. For ease of comparison, I have placed these two side by side below:

'From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations' (1:11).

'From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised. The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.' (Psalm 113:3,4)

It is quite impossible to know which came first, Malachi's prophecy or Psalm 113! It may be that Psalm 113, one of the great 'Hallel' psalms, was written after Malachi's prophecy was known and understood ('Hallel', means 'praise', and comes from the last word of the Psalm). It may be that Malachi perceived the truth of Psalm 113 as God brought it graphically to his mind. The manner of the inspiration is not the point, but the message is, and it is clearly the same. The Lord was taking His eyes off His own wayward people and looking towards the day when all people from every nation would give Him praise and worship!

It is not always accepted sufficiently that most of the major prophets and many of the psalms look forward to the day when Israel's task is fulfilled and the Lord's name is 'lifted up' in the whole world. Here in this passage, Malachi observes what would have been almost unthinkable to many an orthodox Israelite; the pure praise of God given Him by people of the 'nations', the Old Testament name for what the New Testament calls 'Gentiles'.

The curse of God on defiling worship (1:12-14)

In the last section of the passage today, the subject of the prophecy returns to the problem of defiled offerings and a defiled 'altar'. You will probably have noticed that in verse 7 and in verse 12, we read the expression 'the Lord's table' when we are expecting to read 'the altar'! This, of course, is the expression many Christians use for the table set at the front of a church building on which the meal of the 'Lord's Supper' is set. In some denominations, this is called an 'altar', but many others reject the idea of an altar because it does not figure in New Testament descriptions of worship and the celebration of the Communion or the Lord's Supper (e.g. 1 Cor 11:23f.).

What is this table? It is a difficult question to answer, because this is the only place in the whole Bible where this expression exists! The term the 'table' was used generally to refer to the table of the 'Bread of the Presence' in the Temple sanctuary (Exodus 25:23f.), on which was placed a symbolic loaf of bread. The Table here in Malachi is not this table, however, because it is used as an altar (see 1:13). The most likely explanation for it can be found in Ezekiel 41:22 and 44:16, where in describing the building of the new Temple, Ezekiel indicated that a table should be placed near to the doorway of a Temple courtyard, and used in placing sacrifices. It is an entirely general description, and beyond this, we can find no other reference in Scripture to help us. It may be best to think of this table as a general place for putting sacrifices, because Malachi was not interested in the details of the sacrifices or what was done with them, merely in what was brought for sacrifice, and whether it was appropriate or not.

It is shattering to report, but it lies at the heart of our text today. The priests in Malachi's day had so lost touch with the spiritual truths of what they were required to do that they regarded it as a chore to perform! This is the only interpretation we can give to verse 13, where the Lord is aghast at the casual and lazy attitude of the priests; to them the whole sacrifice system had become troublesome and the object of their scorn. What an insult!

In response to this, the Lord placed a curse on those who had much to offer but who refrained from offering it (1:14). The principle is clear to us, but where our translation has 'promise', the Hebrew word indicates something quite specific. In Malachi's day, as in most of the Old Testament times, it was usual for people to make a promise or a vow to God that they would perform some special act of worship or thanksgiving (perhaps a sacrifice) if they were successful in some venture, or they travelled safely. Psalm 107 gives a number of good examples of where people offered promises of thanksgiving for such outcomes, mentioning journeys, recovery from sickness, survival of drought, amongst other things. Many ordinary Israelites brought sacrifices to fulfil vows or promises as a form of thanksgiving to God. Here in our text, the Lord God curses those who have promised such thanksgiving but fail to deliver it! What do people think they are doing, that they 'play' with the King of all the world and the author of all Creation?

What we do not easily recall because it is not part of our own understanding of things, is that the Old Testament regards a 'curse' of God as something that leads to death, but the blessing of God leads to life (see Deuteronomy 30). This is why God's name is truly to be 'feared' amongst the nations! He has power over life and death!

Application

This extraordinary passage of scripture reminds us of many things and all are important for God's people today, despite the fact that much of it is about sacrificial worship. I doubt if you have read this study and not been prompted by the Spirit to make some connections with the worship of God's people today!

Amongst the most important of these is the basic problem reflected in this passage of Malachi. A true relationship of trust and communication had broken down between God and the priests (representing the people). For whatever reason, the priests were now making the rules for worship as they went along, but people could not determine the worship of God; they could not then, and they cannot now! Worship happens when people are obedient to their God and faithfully do what He says! This is something of a challenge to us today, because we tend to think of worship as like a 'freewill offering' in which we can do what we want providing we feel that it expresses our own sense of what we want to do for God, perhaps to say 'thanks'. There is great merit in people's genuine desire to worship the Lord from the heart, but both the New Testament and the Old indicate that worship starts with our placing ourselves before the Lord God in abject submission; we are people and He is God. There is no place for self assertion or enjoyment before God; only complete self-effacing honesty and reality. Much more flows from this, but you will see that in Malachi's prophecy, God required the priests to accept His authority as Father and Lord. Without this attitude of heart and mind on the part of people and priest, there was no worship that God would accept.

Other themes to do with worship and our relationship with God follow on from this, but I will not pursue them unnecessarily. There is material in this passage for a good discussion about what it means to offer only the best to God (1:8,9,12,13). The passage affords us the opportunity to consider that our worship is an essential part of our testimony to God within the world, rather than an experience like a private party (1:10-12,14); and more.

Whatever theme we choose to look at, there is no doubt that by speaking about worship Malachi put his finger on the heart of the true relationship between God and His people.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do Christians not respect God today? What can we do to try and ensure that our worship does not become 'false'?
2. Discuss what is the equivalent today of offering blemished animals to God in worship.
3. What does this passage have to say about the responsibility of Christian leaders in the life of the Christian community today?

Personal comments by author

I have attended many acts of worship in different settings, and I fear that too many people appear to need certain personal needs to be fulfilled in what they do to worship, but this is just the opposite of what real worship is. I have in the past been sorely taxed by this myself, because I have been to church Sunday by Sunday and felt uninspired to worship, wishing that I might perhaps move church and find something better. Each time I have felt this, the Lord has had to remind me that my worship of Him is something far deeper, and whether I remain in this or that fellowship may be something I need to consider, but not on the basis of whether I like or dislike the worship!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through this passage several times, and check out your own response to what it says about worship, now that you have read the whole study. Ask yourself, what 'worship' is to you, and what should you do to worship God?*
- *Pray for those who are not taught that God is to be worshipped in obedience and subjection, and thereby succumb to being dominated by 'feelings' about worship rather than the real life changing presence of God found in true worship, whatever the setting. Pray that the Lord will move His people to learn more about true worship.*

Final Prayer

Bring us to that place of contentment, Lord God, where all that happens to us begins to make sense, and we can perceive Your hand at work within our lives. Even if we only catch a glimpse of all You are doing, may we rejoice to know You have included us in Your eternal plan. Thank You, Lord God: AMEN
