

## Prayer

Keep us safe, Lord God, keep our tongues away from wicked words. May we never use words that harm, words that accuse, words that cause trouble or words that abuse. Give us a true strength of spirit to stand against these evils, and when people say such things to us, may we have the ability to resist the temptation to throw them back. May all our words be guided by Your love; we earnestly seek this blessing from You, O Lord our God: AMEN.

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*What can you achieve in the coming year? Think about this carefully, and submit it to the Lord in prayer*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you know** *Pray for friends with whom you have lost contact in recent years. Thank God for them and bless them*
- *Pray for the country of Japan, its people, culture and economy*
- *Give thanks for the opportunities we have to share our faith*

## Meditation

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

You are firm when we need to be guided;  
You are gentle when we need to be loved.  
You are direct when we need to hear instructions;  
You are silent when we need to make our decisions.  
You are challenging when we need to be confronted;  
You are encouraging when we need to be affirmed.  
You are heartening when we need to be courageous and act.  
You are cautious when we need to take care of ourselves.  
You are critical when we need to know our mistakes;  
You are accepting when we need to know Your care.

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

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## Bible passage - Malachi 2:1-9

<sup>1</sup> And now, this instruction is for you O priests. <sup>2</sup> If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; moreover, I have already cursed them and you do not take it to heart. <sup>3</sup> Look, I will rebuke your descendants! I have spread offal on your faces, the offal of your festival sacrifices, and you will be removed with it!

<sup>4</sup> You will then know that I have sent this instruction to you so that my covenant with Levi may continue, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>5</sup> My covenant was with him for life and peace; I gave it to him as something to fear, and he revered me and stood in awe of it before my name. <sup>6</sup> Truthful instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in contentment and uprightness, and he turned many away from iniquity. <sup>7</sup> For the lips of a priest should keep watch over knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

<sup>8</sup> But you have turned aside from the way; through your teaching you have made many stumble; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>9</sup> Therefore I have made you contemptible and have humiliated you in front of all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

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# Bible Study

## Review

Here, Malachi turns his prophecy against the priests, who stood accused by God of leading a general rebellion against Him as illustrated by their slack attitude to worship (as in yesterday's study). The prophecy clearly indicates specific action taken against the priests by the Lord in the form of a curse (2:2) a rebuke (2:3) and also a general fall from grace in the eyes of the rest of the people of Israel (2:9). But although the tone of the passage is clearly sad and almost angry at times, the remarkable thing about all these verses is that it tells us more about the priesthood in Israel than we can find in many other parts of the Bible. The central section, verses 4 to 7, for example, describe the relationship between God and the Levitical priests as a covenant relationship, and nowhere else in the Bible does it describe a 'covenant with Levi' (2:4).

The main theme of our passage today is failure of the spiritual leadership of the Levites as the priests of Israel, and the penalty they bore for their erroneous instruction and guidance of the people. But if we are to understand what Malachi was saying and where his prophecy was leading, then we must seek to understand some more about the Levites and their relationship with God. In particular, we must explore the meaning of the 'covenant' in verse 4 and 5. Now, we know that the relationship between God and His people in the Old Testament is frequently described as a 'Covenant'. This Covenant was first established between God and Abraham (Gen 12,13,15,17) and was clarified by the giving of the Law through Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20, 24:3-13). It was later focussed on the leadership of David and his ancestors (see 2 Sam 23:5, 1 Kings 8:24 etc.). Today, Christians think of Jesus' descent from David as enabling us to talk about a 'New Covenant' of His saving grace, which is the final and complete expression of God's love for His people, who are now the Church of God. So where does this 'covenant with Levi' (2:4) fit in with this picture?

We will look at the details later, but the tribe of Levi was set aside from the other tribes of Israel to serve God and act as priests representing God to the people and the people to God. It is true that out of the Levites a particular 'class' of priests arose who formed the 'high priestly' families (descended from Aaron, and later, Abiathar and Zadok); but by virtue of their priesthood, the Levites did not so much have their own covenant with God, but they represented the general Covenant between God and His people. It was therefore important that although the Levites had failed in their tasks, it was God's express intent that the Covenant itself should not fail (2:4,5). When the prophecy of Malachi dwells on this fact in verses 4 to 7, it speaks in a wonderfully positive way about the original task of a true priest of God, a perfect 'Levi'. Surely, these words are like a vision of the Messiah, of Christ Himself;

*'truthful instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in contentment and uprightness, and he turned many away from iniquity.'* (2:6)

Of course, Malachi does not speak directly about the Messiah here, but in the context of the whole of Malachi's prophecy and its final anticipation of God's coming in judgement (3:1f. 4:1f.), we cannot fail to spot the significance of this description of 'perfect' priesthood.

So, on the one hand, this passage tells us the sad news of God's rejection of Levi and his descendants, using a number of rather awful pictures of judgement including being spattered by offal (2:3) and being humiliated (2:9). On the other hand, it also picks up a strong theme of the role of a good priest, and although we can learn a great deal about good leadership from this, there is a hint that Malachi's prophecy may ultimately have more to say to us than this!

### **Going Deeper**

We will now spend the further stages of our study looking at two things; firstly, the accusations made against the Levites and the punishment they were given. We will find that this is not a mere whim on the part of God, but the fulfilment of long established prophecies. Secondly, we will study the perfect picture of Levitical priesthood given here, and see what it teaches us not just about Christ, but about the spiritual leadership of God's people today.

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V1 'this instruction'**

*Most Bible versions have 'commandment' or 'command'. The Hebrew word used here is 'mizwah', which means an authoritative word of God; for example, God spoke the world into being with 'mizwah'. The same is true for the same word in verse 4. I have chosen the translation 'instruction' to emphasise the specific nature of the command in this context.*

- V2** **'moreover, I have already cursed them ...'**  
*The Hebrew reads 'I have already cursed it', but this must be a grammatical error because the subject of the sentence is already clearly plural, that is, the blessings. For this reason, all translators say 'them', not 'it'. There is just one possibility, which is that the singular could mean that the writer was thinking about the 'covenant' (see study).*
- V3** **'I will rebuke your descendants!'**  
*Some Bible versions have 'I will cut off your descendants', and others use the word 'offspring' rather than descendants. The word rebuke is the one usually used for the Lord's rebuke of nations other than Israel. For this reason, ancient scholars who translated the 'Septuagint' (see dictionary) changed this to 'cut off'. For our purposes, the original is powerful enough!*
- V3** **'offal'**  
*This is clearly what the Hebrew word means, and it refers to the inner organs of animals removed and thrown away before sacrifice.*
- V3** **'and you will be removed with it!'**  
*Every translator struggles to make sense of this phrase, which in Hebrew says this: "he lifts you up against it (or on account of it)." When faced with some expression like this, the translator must accept that the phrase must have meaning in the context of the Scriptures at this point, and it is therefore right to assume that it refers to the throwing out of the offal before a sacrifice.*
- V4** **'that my covenant with Levi may continue'**  
*The last word in this sentence is a way of trying to translate a Hebrew word that means 'to the happening of ...' or 'for the existence of ...'. Because it is not immediately clear what this may mean, some have suggested over the centuries that this word has been copied incorrectly and should rather be a word that means 'ceased'. There are some translations that use this suggestion, but this is not worth considering because nowhere in the Old Testament does the Lord ever break a covenant. It is only ever broken by people. It is highly unlikely therefore that this passage says that God will break or stop a covenant that He has entered!*
- V5** **'I gave it to him as something to fear, and he revered me and stood in awe of it before my name.'**  
*This part of the sentence is rather complex, but each part of it says something important about why Levi was given this covenant (see study).*
- V6** **'contentment'**  
*The Hebrew word here is 'shalom', which means wholeness or completeness, and I have interpreted it as referring to a contented relationship.*
- V9** **'have shown partiality in your instruction.'**  
*The Hebrew says 'you have lifted up the face in your instruction'. This therefore means looking favourably towards certain people, and hence 'partiality' as we understand it. It is a strange expression, but fortunately very clear and agreed by all scholars.*

## Going Deeper

### **Rejection by the Lord (2:1-3)**

Malachi knew what he was doing, and as with all the great prophecies of the Old Testament, the origins of what he said are to be found earlier within the Old Testament. When Malachi said 'I will send the curse on you ...' he was referring to one specific curse, and all who knew the Law knew what this was. In Deuteronomy 27 and 28, Moses told the Israelites that upon entry into the Promised Land they should go to Mounts Ebal and Gerazim to hear His 'blessings' and 'curses'. These related to their obedience or disobedience to Him whilst they lived in the land He had given them. If we read these texts we will understand the importance of remaining obedient to God Almighty!

In summary, these blessings extend those first given when the Lord first created the Covenant relationship between Himself and Abraham's descendants (Gen 12 etc.). The curses are the largely the removal of those blessings, specifically by the intervention of other nations in Israel's affairs. In our passage you will read the rather strange comment 'I will curse your blessings; moreover, I have already cursed them and you do not take it to heart' (2:2). The point Malachi made is that Israel had already received the curses placed on them because of their sins, and the blessing of occupying the Promised Land had already been taken from them. This became a 'curse' when they were invaded by Babylon, but they survived this, and yet the Levites still did not 'take to heart' the lesson of obedience to God found in the Law! They did not even bring the proper sacrifices to God (1:6-10)!

The last part of this text sounds very strange to us. If you read Malachi 2:3 in most Bibles today, it sounds even more strange, because it speaks of spreading 'dung' on people's faces (see notes above). When sacrifices were prepared after slaughter and before presentation on the altar, the inner organs were removed (as in any butchery process – see most of the early chapters of Leviticus) including the intestines and stomach and its contents. These were disposed of at what was called the 'dung gate' in Jerusalem. It was about the most dreadful offense possible for God to say to the Levites that their future descendants were to Him indistinguishable from the offal of festal sacrifices thrown out on the 'dung-heap'! This sounds profoundly anti-Semitic; but this passage is part of Jewish Scripture, and not even part of the New Testament.

### ***The covenant with Levi (2:4,5)***

There is only one place in Scripture where a 'Covenant' is mentioned in connection with Levi, and this is found in Deuteronomy 33:8-11. This describes the blessing of Levi given by Moses near to his death, and all of this is highly relevant to our passage today:

*And of Levi he said: Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your loyal one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you contended at the waters of Meribah; who said of his father and mother, 'I regard them not'; he ignored his kin, and did not acknowledge his children. For they observed your word, and kept your covenant. They teach Jacob your ordinances, and Israel your law; they place incense before you, and whole burnt offerings on your altar. Bless, O LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; (Deuteronomy 33:8-11)*

This passage confirms that the tribe of Levi are Israel's priests, because of the reference to the 'Urim and Thummim' (objects used by priests for determining God's will – see Exodus 28:30, Lev 8:8 etc.). The section saying 'he ignored his kin' refers to the terrible events when all Israel had begun to worship a golden calf set up by Aaron in the wilderness, and Moses called all who loved the Lord to take their stand with him. The tribe of Levi backed Moses (because Moses was a Levite) and they fought with the rest of Israel. The Levites and Moses won the ensuing battle at the cost of many lives (Exodus 32:26-29). It is a dreadful event in the life of the Israel, but on that day, the Covenant of God with His people was defended solely by the Levites, and consequently, Moses set them aside for priesthood (Ex 32:29).

If you read the rest of the quote from Deuteronomy above, you will find that it speaks about Levi's responsibility to do several things; to teach God's ways according to the Laws of Moses, and to offer 'incense' and 'whole burnt offerings'. The connection with our passage is clear. The responsibilities of a priest were to offer proper worship to God and to teach the people God's ways (2:6f.). Other passages of Scripture expand on this understanding of priesthood, and include the concept of intercession for people within the notion of worship, for example (Deut 9:20, Psalm 106:30); but this text crystallises the priestly call. It was a high calling, and one to be 'feared'. The Covenant was supposed to bring a secure and whole relationship to God and His people (2:5), and there was a time when Levitical priests in Israel performed the role to which they were called. Despite the experience of the exile, it seemed that no lessons had been learned.

### ***The ideal priest (2:6,7)***

In a quite extraordinary change of emphasis, the prophecy of Malachi now diverts to describe the real duties of a priest, offering 'truthful instruction ... and no wrong was found on his lips ...' (2:6). One could say that Malachi said this simply to explain to the priests what they should be doing, but there is more to it than this. His prophecy has already stated that the curses of failure have begun and could not be held back (2:2,3). It is more likely however that the reason for this change of direction was to describe the true role of a priest from the past, but looking forward to a future when it would be fulfilled in a new way. Malachi did not identify the Messiah, but we can see why later generations saw this prophecy as being about the Messiah! Whether or not we can see in these words a description of the Messiah, it is nevertheless easy for us to find in them a good description of spiritual leadership, especially for today.

Honesty, truthfulness, proper and faithful instruction, uprightness, turning people away from 'iniquity' (2:6); all these qualities found in verse 6 sounds as if they have come from a letter of Paul describing the qualities of a good leader! They would fit well in 1 or 2 Timothy, or Titus, for example! The connectedness of scripture is an important issue, and in this case, it confirms our belief that this prophecy in Malachi can help us appreciate the true functions of leadership amongst God's people, even today. The spiritual nature of these qualities is demonstrated by the fact that they remain constant throughout Scripture, and they are also true of Jesus, who fulfilled every one of these qualities to perfection.

In verse 7, Malachi's prophecy adds, as if by emphasis, the important requirement for a priest or spiritual leader to be someone who is familiar with 'knowledge' about faith in God, and who can be consulted by the people for instruction. In my view, this is an essential aspect of spiritual leadership, because the study of God's Word is of great importance for all who wish to exercise a ministry amongst God's people. There are

many natural leaders who have the potential to do the job, but those who are allowed to do it should be prepared to study in order to fulfil these requirements of this Scripture; and such a one must be a 'messenger of the Lord of hosts' (1:7). Note that the word 'messenger' (Hebrew 'Malach') in this verse is virtually the same as the name of 'Malachi' (which means 'my messenger'). Is this a hint that Malachi was a priest, and deeply aware of what a priest should be? Did he make connections between this and his own name? We do not know, but it is possible.

### ***The failed priest (2:8,9)***

In contrast to the perfect picture of priesthood just presented, the rest of our passage is a description of failure; it tells us about priests (leaders) who have 'turned aside from the way' (1:8), and having lost touch with the true things of God, make others 'stumble' because they do not know the truth of God's Word! Some of the harshest words of Jesus are reserved for those who make others stumble (see Matthew 16:23, 18:8,9, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2), but the clear implication of this text is that spiritual leaders cause stumbling when they lose touch with 'the way' and are consequently unable to teach. This 'losing touch' is not just a matter of failure to study and know the things of God, but of losing touch with spiritual reality for example, through lack of prayer and personal contact with God. This is what corrupts the 'covenant' (2:8).

One other small phrase indicates the nature of failed leadership, and it occurs in the last verse; the phrase is 'partiality in your instruction', and refers to the giving of favours within the advice they offered. It is not necessarily obvious to us what this might mean, but Malachi knew that priests were excusing people the strict demands of sacrificial worship, hence the criticisms in chapter 1 (1:12f.). In this way, the priests were currying favour with people and showing partiality, and this was unacceptable to God, for whom the Law was to be applied to all, equally. Likewise, in the New Testament, Paul insists throughout his own writing that God is not a God of partiality; for Him there is 'no partiality' (Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25).

In the last verse, Malachi describes the contempt and humiliation of those who fail in spiritual leadership, for because of the nature of leadership, their failure is public. Having spent time with individuals who have failed in ministry, I can assure you that what Malachi says here is accurate, because the sense of personal humiliation and degree of public contempt thrown at those who have failed can be extraordinary. In the New Covenant of grace, those who fail have a route back to their Saviour through repentance. However, as we have already seen (2:3), where priesthood is hereditary, failure has catastrophic consequences for future generations. By the time Jesus came, the gulf between God's will and the leadership of the people under the Pharisees was huge, and Jesus painfully exposed this. For this reason and for many others, this prophecy of Malachi heralds the Messiah.

## Application

There are some awesome passages within our text today that speak to us about appropriate spiritual leadership within God's Church. The worst thing that has happened in the training of leaders for churches today is that in many places the Bible is taught less. Consequently, people do not have the chance to engage with texts such as these with any kind of depth or meaning. I recall too many colleagues in ministry who have told me quite openly that they do not read the Bible at all apart from preparing for preaching, and for that, they only use the New Testament! I wish I was joking, but I am astonished! It is only because I had the opportunity to do a theology degree instead of the usual ministerial training programme in the 1980's that I had the privilege of learning Greek and Hebrew at University. This led me to extend my love of Scripture and to explore texts such as this, which have developed my understanding of Christian ministry and spiritual leadership. I have witnessed too much training for ministry that has been based on a loose understanding of the gifts of the Spirit combined with theories from the world of management training. This will not do, when we have at our disposal the whole of God's Word, which is packed with advice about spiritual leadership.

As is said in the rest of Scripture, those who lead God's people are expected to know God's Word and teach it (see for example Hosea 4:4-6, which is remarkably similar to today's passage from Malachi). Leaders are not just people with new ideas, but those who can apply their gifts and talents to the sustenance and advocacy of the Church, which is God's Covenant people, particularly through teaching and the leadership of worship. Moreover, there are enough warnings in both Old and New Testament about 'partiality' and causing people to stumble surely, for the leaders of God's people to make sure that they act in the interests of the Kingdom of God at all times, rather than the interests of individuals or any sectional interests in church or society that exclude others.

Once we have spotted the connections we can make with this text, it becomes relatively easy to see how important the whole passage can be for the church today.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Read through some of Deuteronomy 27-29 and check out the curses and blessings mentioned there. What do they teach us today?
2. What advice from this text can help us identify the good qualities of a leader, and what are these qualities?
3. How should the church deal with the failure of Christian ministry?

### **Personal comments by author**

*It is so tempting for the leaders of God's people today to look in any direction they can for advice about how to make the Gospel relevant to today, and the one place where people will often not look is the Bible, because they suggest that its 'culture' bears no resemblance to our own. Oh dear! Human nature does not change! There will always be new things that the Spirit will reveal to us about the world in which we live today, but we need to be based not just in historic truth but in God's historic truth, which has stood the tests of time.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *After reading this passage, write down a list of leadership issues that concern you, and if possible, make an appointment to see a minister or church leader and discuss this with them.*
- *Pray for those who are aspiring to leadership within the church of God, and pray for those who teach them. May they use God's Words to the full.*

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## Final Prayer

Jesus, the very fact that we can talk to You is a miracle of Your grace. Thank You for being able to hear all the prayers of those who love You, and for being able to care for each one of us individually. It is beyond our understanding, and Your love is very real! Thank You, Lord Jesus; AMEN

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