

Prayer

Almighty God, may we always be ready for the release of Your power through the Gospel. Give us a longing to see You at work in our midst, and an expectation that great things will be done! Give us a desire to join with You in the work of salvation and deliverance by which Your Kingdom comes on earth. We rejoice to work together with each other and with You in this great task. Thank You, Almighty God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think over the things that have happened in the last 24 hours. Commit them to the Lord in prayer

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people of other faiths** Pray that Christians will find ways to tell people of other faiths about Jesus in a clear and loving way
- Give thanks for the good work done by the church in the world
- Pray for the country of Japan, its people, culture and economy

Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;
And keep the enemy away from my thoughts and feelings.

When life is routine, Lord, give me the concentration I need
To attend to the detail of what I do, and honour You in my work.

When life becomes difficult, Lord, save me from panic;
Help me to focus on You, and trust Your spiritual guidance.

When life is horrendous, Lord, draw me ever closer to You;
To gain the spiritual energy I need to find my way through trouble.

When life is easier, Lord, may I not forget You or Your love;
But remember Your faithfulness through good times and bad.

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with all that is good;
Keep me alert, and prepare me for all that is yet to come.

Bible passage – Malachi 2:10-17

¹⁰ Do we not all have one father? Were we not created by one God? Why then does a man break faith with his brother, profaning the covenant of our forefathers? ¹¹ Judah has broken faith, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has defiled the holiness of the LORD, and he has loved and married the daughter of a foreign god.

¹² May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob anyone who does this (travellers or residents), who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts.

¹³ And you do this as well: You cover the LORD'S altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because He no longer pays attention to the offering or willingly accepts it from your hand! ¹⁴ You ask, 'Why?' Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, and you have broken faith with her, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did He not make them one, and give them a portion of the Spirit? And what oneness does He desire? Godly offspring. So guard your spirits, and do not let anyone break faith with the wife of his youth. ¹⁶ For the LORD, the God of Israel, says that He hates divorce, and the hiding of the violence used to send a woman away, says the LORD of hosts. So guard your spirits, and do not break faith.

Bible Study

Review

There is nothing like this passage elsewhere in Scripture! As we read it, we might wonder how such outspoken comments have come to be a part of the sacred text! Here, the Lord disputes with His people because they had committed the 'abomination' of marrying foreign women (2:11). Moreover, not only had such impure marriages taken place but Israelite women had been divorced; the Lord abhorred this and threatened to cut off His inheritance from all involved (2:12). His opposition to inter-racial marriage and to divorce is clear cut (2:14-16). Israelite society had broken down and family life with it, and the Lord spoke through His prophet Malachi to denounce what was happening!

We must be careful, however, for it would be unwise to presume that this Scripture bans all divorce or marriage between races. It deals with a specific problem, and we cannot generalise its message unless we understand the background. What had happened in Israel was this; some mostly wealthy families had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple after the exile (as in Ezra 1-6). They found the city in a state of poverty and disrepair and were not able to live as they were accustomed. Other peoples had taken the land that their families once owned and many Israelites were reduced to poverty. Hence the poor quality of sacrifices brought to the Temple (see 1:6-10). Some men found a way of restoring their fortunes however, for if they divorced their wives and married the daughters of local landowners, they were able to lay claim again to lands once owned by Israel, and this could yield both food and income. This was clearly happening when Ezra and Nehemiah instituted their reforms (Ezra 7:1f. and Nehemiah).

Malachi was shocked, as were Ezra and Nehemiah, later. Through his prophecy he denounced those who did such things as 'breaking faith', not just with the Israelite women who were their first love (see 2:14-16), but with their fellow Israelites. Indeed, they also broke their covenant with God! This is what Malachi meant when he said he was appalled at the 'abomination ... committed in Israel and Jerusalem' (2:11). Marriage outside the Covenant people of God had always been allowed in Israel (e.g. the marriage of Boaz to the Moabite Ruth), but in such cases, the non-Israelite party was required to accept the God of Israel. But marriage for convenience outside the covenant laws was forbidden, because it would lead to a breakdown of what it meant to be God's people (2:10-12).

It was no use complaining that God did not accept their worship when the people had broken His laws (2:13)! Verse 14 and 15 reflect the profound importance to God of the marriage union. Marriage itself was regarded as a covenant relationship, and the union of a man and a woman was regarded as being a reflection of the very 'image' of God (see Genesis 1:27). In addition, marriage was the means used by God to create future generations. The people of Israel could not expect God's blessings to flow from their worship when they flagrantly abused this beautiful gift. The Lord could not stand by and see the union of man and woman treated so casually, and he was repulsed by the hidden violence of the way that women were rejected in order for men to remarry (2:16).

Some in the church say that this scripture forbids divorce, and some churches therefore refuse to re-marry people who are divorced. Frankly, this is an appalling overreaction to what is said here. God hates divorce where men discard women like a mere possession, and that does not change. But what this text says about marriage is primarily for the strengthening of God's people and the building up of faith, and the idea that God rejects divorced people who have been in abusive relationships is scandalous. Our text, properly translated, shows God's love for such people (2:16). This prophecy is not primarily about outlawing divorce. The breakup of marriage is a tragic symptom of godlessness in the world, but the Lord has so much more for those who are obedient to Him.

Going Deeper

This is no ordinary passage of scripture, and I have written more about what this passage means to us today in the 'application' section of this study. In 'going deeper', we will explore some of the extraordinary comments made by the Lord in this prophecy, and you will see from the translation notes that the meaning of this powerful text is understandable, but it is not at all straightforward!

Notes on the text and translation

V10 *'Why then does a man break faith with his brother'* The Hebrew verb 'bagad' means to act treacherously, or to 'break faith'. The translation I have given is literal, which in my opinion is perfectly understandable. Nearly all Bible versions prefer to avoid the references to man and brother, and

translate 'why then do we break faith with each other'. This is a good paraphrase, but it remains a paraphrase.

- V11** **'for Judah has defiled the holiness of the LORD'** This passage is notoriously difficult to translate because no-one knows what 'the holiness of the Lord might mean here. It is either the Temple, the people or the land, and you will find that most translations suggest one or other of these. I have left the translation as it is in the Hebrew, and left the discussion of what it means to our study.
- V11** **'... and he has loved and married ...'** It is quite unclear where the verb 'he loved' should be placed, and most translations attach it to the previous clause, giving 'Judah had defiled the holiness of the Lord that he loves, and has married ...'. However, this involves changing the tense of the Hebrew verb, which is clearly in the past tense; 'loved', and the translation I have given here makes more sense (see study).
- V12** **'travellers or residents'** Every version of the Bible has a different expression here, because the two Hebrew words are virtually untranslatable! The general meaning of the text is that this is a brief phrase, probably a colloquialism designed to be inclusive of anyone in Israel. The first word could be related to the idea of activity and the second could indicate response; so some translations have 'awake and alert' for example, and others have 'witness and advocate'. I have preferred to see these words as indicating the major division in Israel at the time between those Israelites who remained active in the wider world, and those who chose to respond to the call to come and life in Jerusalem. Today we might say 'ex-patriots and residents', but this would stretch the Hebrew too far, and the expression I have used is sufficient.
- V13** **'And you do this as well.'** The Hebrew says 'this second you do ...' but it simple means something additional.
- V15** **'Did He not make them one, and give them a portion of the Spirit?'** This is an extraordinarily difficult passage to translate. The Hebrew appears to say 'did He not make one and a residue of spirit was for it?' You will find all kinds of translations of this in different Bible versions, but I feel that this translation best reflects the general meaning of the Hebrew here and the general meaning of the relationship of man and woman as given in Genesis 1 and 2.
- V15** **'And what oneness is He seeking? Godly offspring. So guard your spirits...'** Again, this is profoundly complex Hebrew, giving roughly 'what is the one seeking, seed of God, so you must guard over your spirits'. I have taken 'the one' in this sentence to refer to the unity of marriage which is the general subject of the sentence. Many Bible versions take an alternative view and believe this refers to God as 'the One', leading to some highly confusing translations.
- V16** **'and the hiding of the violence used to send a woman away.'** You will not find this in any of the other Bible Translations, most of which say something like this: 'covering one's garment with violence'. On further inspection of the text, I found that the word normally translated 'garment', is used elsewhere in scripture in a colloquial expression for sending a woman away in divorce. In addition, the particular form of the verb here can mean 'hide' rather than 'cover' (as in most translations). It is not a verse that is easy to translate, but the translation I have given fits very well with the passage.

Going Deeper

Breaking faith (2:10)

Verse 10 is like an introduction to this section, telling us that real problems happen in the life of God's people when they 'break faith'. Throughout this passage, the word 'break faith' occurs frequently, mostly when talking about marriage and divorce, but also when describing the covenant relationship between God and His people, as in this verse.

The verse begins, however, with a powerful pair of phrases; 'Do we not all have one father? Were we not created by one God?' This is a powerful way of describing the covenant relationship of God with His people, because the 'one father' is Abraham, from whom all Israel was descended, and the 'one God' was the Creator of the world who had chosen to reveal Himself to Abraham and his descendants. There are other places in scripture where similar comments are made about 'one God' and 'one father' of Israel (Deut 32:6, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8). Surely this unity, said the prophet, grounded both in God and in the earthly lineage and ancestry of a nation, was not something to be broken just because of the prevailing social conditions.

Contrary to what many believe, the covenant relationship between God and His people did not exclude people of other nations. An Israelite was free to marry a non-Israelite providing they accepted the God of Israel. There are a number of such mixed marriages recorded in the Old Testament, and the non Israelite partner had to accept circumcision (if male), and join the ritual of the Passover celebration (see Exodus

12:48, Numbers 9:14, Ruth 1:16) to signify their assimilation into the Covenant of Israel with God. Ruth, of course, is the most famous story of a woman who married into Israel in this way, and her story warns us not to allow ourselves to believe that Israel's exclusivism implied an inherent racialism within God's laws and commands.

Intermarriage in Israel (2:11)

However, the Old Testament gives testimony to a prevailing sin of the kings of Israel and Judah, which caused untold trouble and eventually led directly to the downfall of both Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). This was the sin of a marriage in which a wife was taken from the surrounding nations but was not required to 'convert'. King Solomon was the first to practice this and he did it on a large scale, frequently marrying women to secure international treaties, and moreover, allowing them to bring their own gods and also worship them in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 11:1-8,9). Another classic example of this pollution of the Israelite inheritance was the marriage of King Ahab to the Sidonian princess Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31f.). This marriage led to the whole scale introduction of the worship of Ba'al in northern Israel, and despite the extraordinary feats of Elijah (1 Kings 17-19), the influence of Jezebel was extensive and exceeded her death. One of her daughters, Athaliah, married into the line of David and usurped the throne to reign as queen in Jerusalem during one of the most awful periods of Judean history (2 Kings 11:1f.).

In our passage Malachi was amazed to discover that the people of Israel who had returned from exile were returning to these same sins that their forefathers had committed. Now, in verse 11, we read the following; 'Judah has defiled the holiness of the Lord, and he has loved and married the daughter of a foreign god.' Many scholars have attempted to work out what the 'holiness of the Lord' might be, and they suggest it might mean the Temple, or perhaps the people of Israel, both of which are described in other places as 'holy' to the Lord. If you read different translations, you will see that most of them assume that the phrase refer to the Temple. However, I am not convinced this is the best way to understand this phrase, because at this point, the prophecy is not about the Temple. For this reason, I believe that Malachi means exactly what this passage says in my translation, which is close to the Hebrew text. Judah has defiled God's own holiness, because by marrying foreign women who worshipped other gods, not the Lord, they compromised God's holy Covenant plan to bring salvation into the world by means of His own people. Surely the passage means this and no more.

Sin and despondency in Israel (2:12,13)

It is no wonder, therefore, that Malachi calls for all who have contravened God's holiness to be cut off from 'the tents of Jacob' (2:12). This was a poetic way of speaking about the people of Israel in its widest sense, and in the fifth and sixth centuries BC, the Israelites had communities throughout the far flung Empire of Persia. Nevertheless, what happened to those in Jerusalem was essential to the survival of all Israel.

The people in Jerusalem were a proud people struggling with hard times, and perhaps they knew their sin. Those who lived in Jerusalem could not do so unless they were well connected with farms and villages in the lands around Jerusalem that supplied the crops and the cattle for food in the city. In the past, lands rights were held within Judah, but after the Babylonian exile, all these legalities disappeared. It is hard to imagine that people put away their wives and families in order to marry into property and attempt to secure inheritance rights for a land the people believed was theirs by right. It is not hard to imagine that this situation meant that many tears were shed. Verse 13 indicates that these tears were shed along with 'weeping and groaning' so as to 'cover the Lord's altar!' However, no lay person was allowed near the courtyard where the altar of sacrifice stood, and only priests were able to go there! Either the social troubles including intermarriage affected priests as well as other people, or the Temple was abused by ordinary Israelites invading the inner courtyards of the Temple!

God's desire for marriage (2:14-16)

It is easy to understand that the people of Israel asked 'why?' They may have felt they were doing the right thing for the future of the Covenant relationship with God, but they were not. Malachi provided the answer to the question by stating in the clearest possible terms the Lord's view of marriage.

Verse 14 describes the marriage covenant as being a reflection of the covenant relationship between God and His people. It is as if the marriage covenant is as precious to God as His covenant with His people, and the more we think about it, the more we realise that this must be so. When God first introduced the covenant to Abraham (Gen 12), Abraham had to learn over many years that this it was reflected in his own life and his relationship with Sarah, his wife. In fact, the covenant with God depended upon their marriage covenant and their ability to produce son!

True marriage is something God creates and bears witness to, and it is based on a pure love, described here by this phrase; 'between you and the wife of your youth ... your companion and your wife by covenant' (2:14). This is surely a relationship of complete inter-dependency and love, in which one man and one woman become 'one flesh' (Gen 2:24) and together reflect the 'image of God ... male and female' (Gen 1:27). This

is marriage that the world cannot give witness to, and without God, it may be experienced, but not fully appreciated for what it is; the highest ideal of God for men and women.

Verse 15 confirms this view; 'did He not make them one, and give them a portion of the spirit?' This is a most wonderful comment on the meaning of marriage and is so close to what Jesus says in Matthew 19:5! I must tell you that unfortunately, many translations of Malachi do not say this; but I can confirm that my translation keeps as close to the original Hebrew text as possible (see notes above). The reasons why some translators do not feel able to translate this directly may be varied, but I fear that some do not feel comfortable with the plain text and the explicit idea that God's 'Spirit' is responsible for Godly marriage. For example, this is what the New Revised Standard Versions gives for this same text (quoted at the beginning of this paragraph) after making some changes to the original Hebrew it feels appropriate: 'Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his.'

A problem in verse 16

The famous verse 16 begins with a well known phrase; 'for the Lord ... hates divorce'. Please note that I have not translated 'I hate divorce, says the Lord ...' as most translations say. It is not that these translations are wrong, but the emphasis is not as categorical in the Hebrew as it is sounds in English, and I have attempted to follow what the Hebrew says more closely. Clearly, the Lord hates divorce that breaks the high ideal of marriage just announced, and this is why most Bible versions make this comment very blunt. It was utterly offensive to God for Israelite men in normal and good marriages to break them in order to achieve what they thought was best for their own long term security (see above).

However, the next phrase adds an interesting insight that needs to be heard. I have explained the reason for my translation in the notes above, but the idea that it exposes is that the Lord God hated the divorce proceedings used by men in an offensive way to vulnerable women. Women and children were effectively abused by the violence of such divorce, and we catch a glimpse here of God's passion and concern for the victim of divorce. It is vital that we tell people today that God cares passionately for the victims of abusive marriages and the victims of divorce. It is my prayer that a translation such as I have given will help church leaders stand back from treating people who are divorced as if they have a stigma of godlessness. The fact that thousands of church leaders have been taught for centuries that divorce is a sin that warrants something close to excommunication is an appalling slur on those who have been the victims of abusive marriages. A high view of marriage must mean a high view of the love, care and compassion required for those whose marriages have failed.

Both verses 15 and 16 conclude with these words; 'so guard your spirits, and do not break faith.' The phrase in verse 15 has a little more added, but the repetition of the phrase is fascinating. It is God's final advice to those who seek to do God's will in marriage. We must guard each other's spirits, so that we do not break faith, either with each other, or with the Lord who is the 'witness' to all true marriage.

Application

I have always believed that marriage is a high calling and is a perfect gift of God, perhaps the most perfect gift God gives to many people. It is not listed as a 'gift of the spirit' like 'prophecy' or 'healing', for example, because marriage is a different kind of gift. Marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman, and it is designed by Him to reflect His relationship with His people, as perceived by John, who in his revelations saw the 'marriage supper of the Lamb' (Rev 19:9). It is therefore obvious that God intends Christian marriage to be a sharing of love and interdependence, and a single 'spirit' (2:15). This does not just happen automatically when a man and a woman make promises and sign a register, and it is an insult to the natural processes of life and the reality of human relationships to suggest that the mere 'act' of marriage confers all the blessings of what a Godly marriage is intended by the Lord to be. Many who have been married for years and know the love of one another and of God intimately, will confess that their unity has grown over the years.

Unquestionably, God hates divorce, especially the actions of men for dubious and presumptive reasons, when they abandon women and children for their own perceived good. In fairness, we must add that God also hates divorce in which women leave men because of their abuse of a husband. I write about divorce in this way because I know of no divorce that is truly 'amicable', as people sometimes like to pretend today. From a worldly point of view, the psychology, sexuality and spirituality of divorce is barely understood. Yet the Word of God is clear; it is an offense. However, the Bible is not so callous as to bury its head in the sand about the reality of what happens when a marriage breaks down. People are left hurt and devastated, and the Lord seeks to show His love for such people, as should all His servants; indeed, if marriage is a priority to God, I believe that dealing with the after-effects of divorce should be a priority. I write in this way because the history of the use of this text in Malachi within the church is not good, especially 2:16. I urge all in the

church to find out what it means to reject divorce in principle and to deal with real human relationships in practice.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways do God's people 'break faith' with each other and with their God today?
2. To what extent is marriage and divorce an issue in the life of the church, and how can God's people deal with these issues for the best?
3. How can the Church minister to the victims of abusive marriages, and also make a stand against divorce?

Personal comments by author

There is a delicate balance to be made between insisting upon a view of marriage that has no place for divorce, and yet also offering the best pastoral care and counsel possible for those who have suffered the trials of divorce and separation. Personally, I feel that church leaders need to discuss and review this issue, because there can be great misunderstanding between clergy and church members for example, over this. It is best to have these discussion out in the open.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Has your own attitude towards divorce been affected by your own experience, or by what the Bible says? Consider this carefully, and pray about this before God. If necessary, discuss it with someone you trust.*
- *Pray for those who are going through divorce at this time, Pray that they will be blessed with the help and care that Christians should give each other at such times. Pray that God's people who are married be helped to stand firm in marriage through all trials.*

Final Prayer

Stay with us, Lord, through all the dangers and perils of this day. Hold on to us as we hold on to You. Give us such a firm grasp of You that we do not let you down, and hold on to us with all the strength of Your love, we pray. Then, when our trials are over, and we can take our rest, restore us by Your Spirit, we pray: AMEN
