

Malachi's Appeal To Backsliders (Part Four)

Malachi 3:13 to 4:6

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Today, I am going to finish this four part series on the book of Malachi. The theme of Malachi is that sincerity, devotion toward God, and a holy manner of life are absolutely essential in the God's eyes, if His favor is to be bestowed upon the crops and the nation's economic welfare.

More importantly, since it is a prophecy, it relates to the end-time church as well. It is a warning that we should not fall into the pitfall of being backsliders or even lackadaisical in our relationship with God.

Israel must live up to her high calling as a holy nation and wait patiently for the coming of the Messiah, who by a ministry of healing as well as judgment, will lead the nation to a realization of all her fondest hopes.

God assures His people through Malachi that a time is coming when the immoral will be judged and those who fear Him will be blessed. The Day of the Lord will reveal that it is not "vain to serve God."

At the time of Malachi, there is little spiritual progress in Israel's history. Sin abounds, and the need for the coming Messiah is greater than ever. The question answered in Malachi 3:13-4:6, is this: does God make a distinction between the good and the wicked?

Malachi shows that God's elective love is vindicated in His judgment. The focus of Malachi 1:2-3 is on His people and those who are not His people. But the section we will cover today is on those of His own people who do and do not embrace the covenant.

As most of you know, the books of the Hebrew Bible do not have the same order as the Old Testament books and our English Bible. Our Bibles end with the Minor Prophets. The Hebrew Bible has the prophets in the middle, its order being: 1) the law, 2) the prophets, and 3) the writings. II Chronicles actually ends the Hebrew Old Testament.

On the other hand, we have the order of the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate versions, which is where the English order comes from. So the majority of all Bibles, whether measured by the number of languages into which the Bible has been translated, or merely the number of Bibles in existence, end with Malachi.

The problem is that Malachi, and therefore also the Old Testament in our English Bibles, does not end the way we might wish it did. The first problem is that the final words of Malachi are: "or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." The English Standard Version and other translations end with "utter destruction." A very negative ending in English Bibles.

Now this does not seem appropriate because we like upbeat endings. We think novels should end, "happily ever after." Is that not the kind of ending we expect to God's great plan of redemption to have? Why then does the English Old Testament end with the word "curse"?

The Masoretes, who have given us most of the copies of the Hebrew Old Testament we have today and who added the vowel points to the Hebrew text, were so bothered by this that they repeated the next to the last verse of Malachi, after the last verse. Similarly, the Septuagint reverses the last two verses, so the Old Testament ends, not with a curse, but with a blessing.

The second problem is different from the first, but it may be that it is a more basic reason why the ending of the Old Testament does not seem proper to us. The entire last portion of the book contains nothing that can really be called new material.

Granted, there are a few ideas that do not occur elsewhere, for example the “scroll,” or book of remembrance,” in which the names of the righteous remnant are recorded. And the image of the “sun of righteousness,” to give just two examples of things that are not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.

But basically the material of these verses is thought of as old news. It is a reminder of things said already, and we react to that the way a child reacts to a repeated warning: “I know Dad, you’ve already told me, I don’t need to hear it again.” That is the attitude the Israelites had when Malachi gave his message.

But that is one of the ways in which God teaches us and discipline us. He repeats things until we get it ingrained in our head.

Now God reminds us of at least five things in these concluding verses of Malachi. The first reminder of these concluding verses is that the people are still unchanged. This is the theme developed in the last chapter. It is a major theme of Malachi as a whole.

For hundreds of years God had put up with and dealt with the people. He had sent famine and plagues to discipline them and redirect their direction. Eventually he had sent armies from the surrounding nations to overthrow first the northern and then the southern kingdom. But there had been no basic changes.

Here at the last, the people are about the same as they had been from the beginning. This point is vividly made by the specific complaint of the people and God’s response to it recorded in Malachi 3.

Malachi 3:13-14 “Your words have been harsh against Me,” says the Lord “Yet you say, ‘What have we spoken against You?’ You have said, ‘it is useless to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts?’”

This sounds similar to what many people said when Worldwide broke up. People said, “What good was it to tithe and keep the holy days?” But those who were faithful continued along and knew what good it was.

The last name of God which the Old Testament gives us is “Lord of Hosts.” There is something unique attached to this title, namely, that it is only known in the general failure of God’s elect Israel. It is never found in the books of Moses, or in that of Joshua and Judges, nor in Job, in the Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes. It occurs only rarely in the books of Kings and the Chronicles, and not much more in the Psalms.

But in most of the prophets, especially in those who most intensely felt the failure of Israel in the Promised Land, the name shows up constantly. Nearly eighty times in Jeremiah, fourteen times in the two short chapters of Haggai, nearly fifty times in Zechariah, and twenty-five times in the brief concluding prophecy of Malachi. So the name “Lord of Hosts” really has some significant meaning.

Now this fact itself is significant, showing that the teaching or lesson which this name conveys belongs to a certain stage in the experience of God’s elect people. The higher relationships of God are only known as we advance in the appointed way, some of the most precious being learned out of our failure, and even through the judgments which it brings on us.

We see how even Gentiles have a knowledge of God, but we will know Him as the “Most High,” who has a priesthood far wider than that which we have first known, which is the priesthood of the election.

The name “God of ages,” is only learned through a more painful experience. Abraham and Moses did not know it until Abraham had seen how Hagar must be cast out. And Moses, that he could not lead Israel into Canaan, but must himself pass away before God’s elect could inherit the land beyond Jordan. This is the case with this last name of the Old Testament, “Lord of Hosts.”

It is not learned while we are slaves in Egypt, that is slaves to sin; or while we are still only experiencing the world. It is not even learned when we cross Jordan and are victorious in the Promised Land, that is when we first receive our place as risen with Christ, and stand upon His promise as more than conquerors over evil spirits.

It is when Israel has failed, not in Egypt or the wilderness only, but in the Land of Promise, that the name “Lord of Hosts” is first learned. And, it is not until Israel is divided and in danger of being led captive out of the land, that it becomes the name to which the prophets seem instinctively to turn for comfort and deliverance.

But though Israel fails, God constantly remains, and as the “Lord of Hosts” there is help in Him, especially when His elect have no other helper. Therefore, when all things shake, the psalmist says in Psalm 46,

Psalm 46:3 Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah

Psalm 46:7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

This name “Lord of Hosts,” reveals it all, that we may know what help is always near, in Him who gives His angels charge concerning us, to keep us in all our ways.

Psalm 91:11 For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.

The Lord of Hosts is “the Master of Angels.” The New Testament especially opens this ministry of angels of the heavenly host to God’s elect and they constantly appear whenever there is need to be supplied or danger to be averted.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, to Zechariah, to Mary, and to the shepherds, when there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying,

Luke 2:14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

In every instance they commenced their message with the words, “Fear not” or “Do not be afraid,” because the opening of the spirit-world, even if it is to bring us help, reveals the sense of our weakness. In our weak human state we are not equipped to deal directly with heavenly realities. Yet these heavenly hosts constantly wait on us on behalf of the Lord of Hosts.

Hebrews 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?

Now let us get back to this disputation here in Malachi 3.

Malachi 3:13-15 “Your words have been harsh against Me,” says the Lord, “Yet you say, ‘What have we spoken against You?’ You have said, ‘It is useless to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts? So now we call the proud blessed, for those who do wickedness are raised up; they even tempt God and go free.’”

Is that not how some people look at the world and all the affluence there is there, all the blessings that worldly people seem to get? Look at the most wealthy people on earth, we know that they have cheated, murdered, stole, and did whatever it took to get where they are, and yet it seems that they are blessed far beyond God’s people.

Questions concerning God's justice, because of the suffering of the apparent righteous and the seeming prosperity of the immoral, now reached a climax here in Malachi. Please turn to Zechariah 7.

It begins with Israel’s audacious and blasphemous complaint that it is useless to serve God. It looks like “kept His ordinance” and “walked as mourners” are parallel statements, which suggests that they refer to ceremonial or priestly requirements such as the ritual mourning about which Israel boasts about here in Zechariah 7.

Zechariah 7:4-5 Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, “Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?’”

Because of their hypocrisy, these acts had degenerated into meaningless formalities. They actually fasted to please themselves, so that they would feel good; to try to force God to do what they asked.

Malachi 3:13-15 contain the last of those seven complaints marked by the word “how” or “in what way,” that provided one possible outline of the book. Notice the first six of complaints and picture the attitude of the people here:

- 1) When God said, “I have loved you,” the people replied, “How have You loved us?” (Malachi 1:2)
- 2) When God said, “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for My name,” the priests answered, “How have we shown contempt for Your name?” (Malachi 1:6)
- 3) When God explained, “You place defiled food on My altar,” they defended themselves by retorting,

“How have we defiled You?” (Malachi 1:7)

4) When God told the nation, “You have wearied the Lord with your words,” the people responded,

“How have we wearied Him?” (Malachi 2:17)

5) When God declared, “Return to Me” and “You rob Me.” They said, “How are we to return?” and “How do we rob You?” (Malachi 3:7-8)

So basically, this was a complaint of the people about the difficulty of God's way. These statements and retorts reveal six very distinct transgressions: offensiveness, blasphemy, greed, weariness in service, calling evil good, and robbery.

The people were saying that God did not love them, that He was not worthy of the best sacrifices, that He was unjust, that He did not deserve a full tithe, and that He was unreasonable to call for repentance.

The seventh and last complaint summarizes their thoughts. The people are blind to the fact that among those who had been challenging God, they were themselves most guilty. But there is another way in which the situation had not changed, and this is the first encouraging note in what is otherwise a distressing picture. There was a remnant. As in all previously grim centuries there were some who actually revered the Lord, and God noted and remembered them.

Now we think of the faithful few during the days of the judges when the majority ignored God and did what was right in their own eyes. The judges were themselves a remnant and God remembered them. Or we think of the seven thousand of Elijah's day who, although unknown to Elijah, had not bowed down their knees to Baal. God took note of them also.

The people of Malachi's day, who considered God unjust and themselves innocent, lacked that extraordinary spirit of humility and repentance seen in those others seen through the centuries.

The remnant are those who fear the Lord and fellowship with each other, and revere Him, whom the Lord remembers. God is aware of what is going on in our lives, and He wants to encourage us to grow in grace and knowledge.

God wants us to know that He is not only judgmental. The materially successful people asked, “What good is it to be godly?” In reply, God gives them a promise in verse 16. However, He does not say that He would end the injustice right then. In sharp contrast to the fault-finding cynics, a second group is now mentioned, those who feared the Lord and esteemed His name.

Just as the Lord recounts the contemptuous blasphemies of the first group, so He overhears the faithful conversation of the second group—the remnant.

Malachi 3:16 Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. [Or you might say, who reverence Him by keeping Him in mind constantly.]

This instruction is intended for the end-time the church, to encourage those who are genuinely trying to be faithful to God, yet who feel frustrated and doubtful because of what they see going on around them.

So God replies with this encouragement in verse 16 to those who have the Word of God in their hearts and minds, and who are fellowshiping with one another, and who are appreciating their wonderful fellowship with God that they have been drawn into. They are including God in all areas of their lives.

God says He is making a book of remembrance, and He will reward these people for their faithfulness. These people are deeply thinking about and respectfully talking about God's name and all that it represents.

Esther 6:1-3 mentions a similar secular honor roll kept by King Xerxes, which recorded the long-unrewarded faithfulness of Mordecai. Also, Esther 2:23 mentions similar books of significant deeds that were kept by kings in the ancient world.

A book of remembrance is written in God's presence concerning these faithful believers. This image of God's record book, which appears throughout Scripture, indicates that God will rightly judge both the good deeds of the righteous and the evil deeds of the wicked.

The references to "book" or "books" in English translations number well over a hundred. The majority of these references are to either the book of the Law, also called the book of the Covenant, or to Old Testament court chronicles.

Beyond these references, the two most important and significant "books" in the Bible are symbolic spiritual books, in a sense they are literal in the spiritual sense. One is the heavenly record of the deeds of every living person. Another is the list of names of those who will dwell in the eternal city. In Revelation this book is called the Book of Life.

Revelation 20:15 And anyone not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

In the background is the practice, in biblical times, of keeping an official register of the names of citizens of a given town or kingdom. If citizenship was forfeited, the name would be blotted from the register.

The books of God's record of a person's deeds and His register of heavenly citizenship are intertwined, since a person's actions are the basis of judgment. This combination can be traced all the way back to Exodus 32, where Moses asks that his name be blotted out of God's book if God will not forgive Israel's sin.

Exodus 32:32 "Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written."

On the day of final judgment the book of deeds will be opened, and each person will be judged according to what he or she has done. But another book, the Book of Life written from the foundation of the world, will also be opened. Now let us go to Revelation 17.

Revelation 17:8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.

In a sense, those not written in the Book of Life are written in the book of the knowledge of good and evil.

Revelation 20:12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.

Jesus Christ will acknowledge before the Father and the angels those whose names are written there, in the Book of Life. But in the other book will be in a sense a book of condemnation.

Now everyone will be judged from the books of deeds, but those whose names appear in the Book of Life will enter the eternal city and those whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

A variation of the book of a person's life occurs in Psalm 139, where the events that are preordained to happen in a person's life are said to be written in God's book.

Psalm 139:16 Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.

So before David was born, God knew David and had already made plans for his life. Now the Amplified Bible words it this way:

Psalm 139:16 (AMP) Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were appointed for me, when as yet there was not one of them [even taking shape].

The New English Translation puts it this way:

Psalm 139:16 (NET) Your eyes saw me when I was inside the womb. All the days ordained for me were recorded in your scroll before one of them came into existence.

Luke 1:1 refers to a narrative of the account of the life of Christ. John 21:25 indicates that such an account would be so long that "even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

How long is God's book that contains a record of your life; the life of a faithful person? Does His book contain just names or is there description accompanying those names? Well, we wait patiently to someday find out.

Malachi 3:17-18 "They will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

So it appear there that God will pull out His books, whether they are spiritually in His mind, or wherever they are, and He will judge from them.

Now the second reminder of these concluding verses in Malachi is this: Just as the situation among the people had remained unchanged, so too God was unchanged. God had stated this explicitly in the verses shortly before this in Malachi 3:6, where He says, "I am the Lord, I do not change."

But these verses make the point again by bringing some of God's immutable attributes before us as the book closes. God is unchangeable in His knowledge—He knows the faithful and the faithless, the righteous and the immoral.

God is unchangeable in His holiness; His standard remains the righteousness that the law embodies. God is unchangeable in His judgments; though postponed, the reality of judgment still looms before the immoral. God is unchangeable in His promises; He still speaks of a day of blessing in which the hearts of the fathers will be turned to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, as mentioned in Malachi 4:6.

People want to create their God in their image. Men and women wish that they could get God to change rather than submitting to Him. They do not like Him for His godly attributes: sovereignty, holiness, omniscience, justice, and wrath, or even love, because it is a holy love.

Backsliders could endure these perfections of God if it were possible to think that given time God might change in some of them. That is what people are hopeful for, that God will eventually turn to their viewpoint.

They could endure omniscience if, given the passage of years God would forget. Backsliders could wait for Him to become senile. They could endure His justice, if with the passage of time it might become more of an abstract ideal than a reality. If God could just accept "relativism."

Backsliders could even endure His love, if it could cease to be the perfect and properly jealous love the Bible describes it to be. Love is the keeping of God's commandments; but people think "Oh! If He could just do away with them we could abide His love."

But God does not change. God is the same today as He has always been. He will be the same in what we would call billions of years from now. God will *always* be sovereign. He will *always* be holy. He will *always* be omniscient. He will *always* be just. He will *always* be loving. It is appropriate that we be reminded of this in the closing pages of the Old Testament and as we draw to the end of this age.

Now the third reminder of these concluding verses in Malachi is that, because God is unchanging in His holiness and justice, it follows that the inevitability of His judgment upon the immoral is unchanging also. The final chapter of Malachi virtually yells for us to see this, because it begins:

Malachi 4:1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," says the Lord of hosts, "that will leave them neither root nor branch."

The judgment of God may be postponed. For the most part, it has been postponed for the long years of human history, but not forgotten.

God warned Israel through Ezekiel, almost two hundred years before Malachi, that the false predictions of His judgment being so far off and therefore is not something to be concerned about now, is a very dangerous belief by which to live one's life.

Everyone, at some time or another in their lives, feel that they have more time and so they neglect, or put off overcoming their sin.

Ezekiel 12:25-28 For I am the Lord. I speak, and the word which I speak will come to pass; it will no more be postponed; for in your days, O rebellious house, I will say the word and perform it," says the Lord God.'" Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, look, the house of Israel is saying, 'The vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off.' Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "None of My words will be postponed any more, but the word which I speak will be done," says the Lord God.'"

Here, the tone is not so much the assumed failure of vision, as its supposed never-ending delay. But the God who gives the word will also bring it to pass, without fail. Delay is not elimination of punishment. Judgment will come!

In this third reminder, that God is unchanging in His Holiness and justice, I want to address an alleged discrepancy. Malachi 4:1 raises the question of the alleged discrepancy, claimed by some theologians, of whether all Israel will be saved, or only a portion will be saved and others condemned.

Malachi 4:1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. [Keep in mind that Malachi is addressing Israel here.] And the day which is coming shall burn them up," says the Lord of hosts, "that will leave them neither root nor branch."

So will all who do wickedly in Israel be condemned? Or, are all men and women of Israel going to be saved as Romans 11:26 seems to say? Let us read the scriptures involved with answering this question.

There are two categories in answering this question. The first category involves "all Israel will be saved."

Romans 11:26-27 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." [this is referring to the church]

The second category involves "only a portion of Israel will be saved."

Matthew 8:12 "But the sons of the kingdom[of Israel] will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

There are two main possibilities on Romans 11:26. First, is that this applies to a future national restoration of Israel to God's favor. Or second and primarily, it may be understood as referring to the spiritual Israel; the church, because he is a spiritual Jew which is one outwardly. All of the true Israel will be saved, while many of the physical will perish.

Now let us take a look at another set of scriptures involved with this question under two more categories: all men saved and some not saved.

Now under “all men saved” category, there are seven scriptural examples and they are: Acts 3:21; Romans 11:32; I Corinthians 15:22; I Timothy 2:3-4; I Timothy 4:10; Titus 2:11; II Peter 3:9.

Under the “some not saved” category are these scriptures: Psalm 9:17; Psalm 119:155; Isaiah 57:21; Malachi 4:1; Matthew 13:41-42; Revelation 21:8.

I am not going to turn to all of these scriptures because we can easily answer the discrepancy charge by looking at the first group of scriptures which seem to say all men are saved. Let us briefly examine the texts under “all men saved” and ascertain whether they teach the actual salvation of all mankind.

Acts 3:21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.

So the key there is the times of restoration of all things. The Greek noun translated restoration is only found here and it means to put something back to the way it should be, or to the way it was originally. For example, to set something right, like a broken arm or leg. The restoration of all things will bring things back to a state of natural order, purity, and happiness.

Now the Syriac gives the passage a different term, thus saying: “Until the completion of the times of those things which God has spoken.” The Arabic has: “Until the times which establish the perfection of completion of all the predictions of the Prophets.”

So obviously, neither the Arabic nor the Syriac implies the salvation of all men. So that verse just does not refer to that. Verse 32 of Romans 11 says:

Romans 11:32 For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.

So this verse brings to view God's act and not man's. The “all men” shut up under disobedience and the “all men” whom mercy is shown, lies in the fact that by some men this mercy is not accepted and so they become self-excluded from the salvation of God.

I Corinthians 15:22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

This refers to physical death and resurrection. As Adam began the physical death of all men, so Christ will affect the resurrection of all at the appointed time.

Now the next two scriptures can be linked together.

I Timothy 2:3-4 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

II Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

These scriptures emphasize the desire or “will” of God that all men would be saved. But this by no means proves that all will be saved, because some things which would be pleasing to God, agreeable to His will, do not take place. It is God’s will that we not sin, but we still do, because He has given us free will.

For example, He now commands all men everywhere to repent. Obviously, universal obedience to this command, though it would be agreeable to the divine will, does not exist. Therefore, the texts in question, while setting forth the benevolent desire or “will” of God, do not intimate that all men will comply with that “will.”

I Timothy 4:10 For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.

This verse terms God “the Savior of all men.” He certainly is, in that He preserves their lives, provides needs, and grants them the opportunity to accept His grace. Spiritually, salvation can only be attained through Christ, but there are certain conditions that are required: faith, obedience, repentance, reverence.

So as far as all men are concerned, He is the Savior of all men in that He provides all of our needs and will resurrect and give everyone an opportunity to live His way of life. But the Savior of all men, spiritually, is speaking only to the church.

Now the last scripture in this first section is in Titus 2.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

This verse certainly emphasizes that the grace of God offers salvation to all men, but does not imply that this salvation is forced upon them. It is clear that none of the previous texts, rightly interpreted, support the doctrine of universal salvation.

We know that the beast and false prophet are thrown into the Lake of Fire, and that is their final death. So we know that at least those two will not make it into God’s Kingdom.

Now getting back to Malachi 4:1 where it says that God is unchanging in His holiness and justice, it follows that the inevitability of His judgment upon the immoral is unchanging also. Matthew 13:30 speaks of the immoral being gathered into bundles to be burned.

Matthew 3:12 records John the Baptist’s warning to the Pharisees that they would be burned up as chaff if they did not repent. They are to be burned in a fire so hot that no amount of water could put it out because the flames would turn the water to steam.

When God punishes the immoral, the fire will be unquenchable. This does not mean, however, that it will not burn itself out when it has no more combustible materials to burn. An unquenchable fire cannot be put out, but it can burn itself out when it has consumed everything.

Malachi 4:1, 3 also speak of this fire, reporting the end of the immoral. They will disappear as smoke.

Psalms 37:20 But the wicked shall perish; and the enemies of the Lord, like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away.

Now for the arrogant and all evildoers it will be a day when they are burned up like stubble, but for those who fear God's name it will be a day when the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings, and they will subdue the immoral.

Malachi 4:2-3 But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this," says the Lord of hosts.

The term "My name" here implies honor, authority, and character. In other word it could be stated as, "You who honor My authority and attributes and revere My name."

The phrase the Sun of Righteousness appears only here in Scripture. The phrase seems to refer to a time immediately following the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord, which will be like a fire to the immoral, will in contrast be followed by a time like sunshine to God's people.

Just as the sun drives away darkness and clouds, bringing light and joy, so will the Sun of Righteousness will appear to dispel gloom, oppression, and injustice. The "righteousness" brought by this symbolic "sun" includes both judgment on evildoers and reward for those who are righteous in their deeds. Its wings are a poetic image for the rays of this sun, bringing healing to all who come under it.

The image of a furnace, used earlier in Malachi 3:2, reappears in this portrayal. Earlier the image was used to describe a future work of purging or purifying, as a result of which God would cleanse His people and establish a generation of those who would live righteously and worship Him in truth.

It is the kind of discipline Jesus spoke of through His use of the image of the vine and its branches. He spoke of trimming the branches, which is a blessing for God's people, though painful. He speaks of this here in John 15, where he says:

John 15:2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

However, the second use of the image of a furnace, in Malachi 4:1, is quite different. Here the object of the burning is not purification but rather the destruction of the immoral. Malachi 4:1 again.

Malachi 4:1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," says the Lord of hosts, "that will leave them neither root nor branch."

This is a judgment to be feared! But even in verse 2, we find the same encouraging note we saw when considering the unchanged character of the people. Most had remained unchanged in their arrogance, but among them were those mentioned in Malachi 3:16 who constituted a genuinely godly remnant.

Here, even in the midst of a terrible reminder of God's judgment, God nevertheless also speaks of those who fear and revere His name, upon whom the "Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings."

In the Kingdom, righteousness will pervade like the sun. Healing, restoration, and health in its wings or rays refers to the restorative powers of righteousness, which are like the healthful rays of the sun. God's people will be spiritually restored and renewed.

In Malachi 4:2, the righteous are described as “you who fear My name.” Fearing God contrasts with saying “harsh things” against God, as seen in Malachi 3:13.

The figure of calves enjoying open pasture after being cooped up in a pen or a stall expresses the future satisfaction and joy of the righteous who have been confined to the world under Satan's rule. Although citizens of heaven still, physically, citizens of the earth but not of the earth—in the world, not of the world.

Now the fourth reminder of these closing verses of the Old Testament is of God's law, which remains an inflexible standard. The people are unchanged. God is unchanged. God's judgment is unchanged. God's law remains unchanged because He is unchanged in His righteousness.

The expression of His righteousness in the law also remains unchanged from generation to generation. Not only does God's law remain unchanged, so also does our obligation to live by that standard. This is conveyed by the word “remember.”

Malachi 4:4 “Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.”

So we are commanded to remember the law of Moses, the statutes (which are the holy days), and the judgments. In Deuteronomy, “remember” is used 14 times to bring God's saving acts before the minds and consciences of God's people. The key verse from Deuteronomy is in chapter 5.

Deuteronomy 5:15 “And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

In Malachi the word “remember” is used of the law itself, as the people are admonished to remember all the decrees and laws God gave through Moses at Mount Horeb.

There are always people who try to keep the law apart from God's personal intervention in their lives. But there are others who try to use their emotional experience of God to supersede having to obey Him. They, thereby, neglect the weightier matters of the law, because they have not learned what they are and how to apply them, which is the very thing the principles of God's law reveal.

The God who acts is also the God who speaks. If you claim to have a relationship with God, then you must heed Malachi's warning: “Remember the law and do it!” Doing it shows that you remember the law.

Malachi 4:4-6 “Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

These verses remind us that just as the people, God, judgment, and the laws of God are unchanged, so also are the promises of God unchanged. It is as the apostle Paul says,

II Corinthians 1:17-20 Therefore, when I was planning this [his visit to them], did I do it lightly? Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh, that with me there should be Yes, Yes, and No, No? But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me, Silvanus, and Timothy—was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.

God's promises find their fulfillment in Christ, indicating that the Old Testament scriptures should be read as pointing to Christ.

Malachi reminds us of these promises when he repeats his prophecy of the coming of God's messenger who will prepare the way before Christ. This is said for the first time in Malachi 3:1-4 and it is repeated in Malachi 4:5-6, where the messenger is said to be, or be like, Elijah.

This little-understood prophecy refers to the time immediately before God's intervention in human affairs, prophetically called "the Day of the Lord." Jesus spoke about this prophecy in Matthew 17. He showed that the work of John the Baptist was a preliminary fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy.

Matthew 17:10-13 And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.

This is the second time Jesus declared John as Elijah; giving no indication that He expected another Elijah to appear. Verse 13 clearly establishes that the disciples understood He meant that John was the Elijah of Malachi 4:5-6.

"Restore all things" is a general statement and does not specifically refer to doctrine. Originally, Elijah straightened out, he brought back, he restored right conceptions about who God is because the Israelites had lost sight of Him.

Even as Elijah restored right conceptions about God in his day, John the Baptist restored right conceptions about the Messiah, Jesus Christ and God with us. Luke was also inspired to write about the work of John.

Luke 1:17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke said John was "in the spirit and power of Elijah," not that he was *literally* Elijah. Elijah had died centuries before, but John the Baptist was empowered by the same spirit which had guided the Elijah of old to point Israel's eyes to the true God, and for much the same purpose.

John the Baptist, like Elijah, also turned the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers. This includes having had a positive impact upon family life.

Because of his preaching God's way of life, turning hearts is a fruit; an effect which is produced by preparing a people to receive the Messiah. John's preaching of repentance, in anticipation of the Messiah's coming, led to and restored right relationships within human families and within the family of God.

What is lacking in the Bible by God's express design is a detailed review of all John preached. We know only that John was very effective in what he did. And although we do not know all that he restored, we understand that he restored everything necessary for the Messiah to be recognized and received.

In light of Malachi's appeal to backsliders, what are we to do in our present preparation for the present Passover and Christ's coming?

Because of the people's neglectful attitude toward the covenant and Malachi's concern for the people's covenant faithfulness and obedience, his concluding exhortation was appropriately direct and to the point. He told the people to remember the law and live by it.

The verb "remember," in Hebrew is *zakar*, which is used in Malachi 4:4. It is used in Deuteronomy as a command to Israel to keep God's law with His statutes and judgments. This command can refer to:

- 1) Mental acts of remembering or paying attention to something.
- 2) Mental acts combined with appropriate external actions. In other words, recalling and obeying.
- 3) Mental acts of reciting or repeating something verbally.

In light of Malachi's insistence on obedience, mental acts combined with appropriate actions seem to be the force of this command: "Recall it to mind and do it!"

The Lord of Hosts of Malachi 4:3, is the same God who powerfully displayed His judgments and His salvation at the time of the Exodus. He is the living God who gave the Ten Commandments to the people at Horeb, the ancient name for Mount Sinai.

The people in Malachi's time needed a renewed fear of God. They needed to repent and be faithful to God's covenant, but they had backslid so far they had become spiritually blind, naked, and poor. They could not even see that Malachi's call to repentance would cause them to benefit from, rather than suffer, in the coming day of the Lord.

The attitude of the people of Malachi's day is a mindset we must avoid, especially as we draw closer to the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread.

They were not examining themselves because they thought they were spiritually fine. They were not humble and repentant because they thought they knew a better way to live than God's. They did not fear God because they did not know Him since they no longer had a personal relationship with Him.

The book of Malachi's relationship to Haggai and Zechariah should be taken into consideration. The great prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah were not yet fulfilled in Malachi's time. The people of Israel became disillusioned and doubtful, they began to question God's providence as their faith imperceptibly degenerated into cynicism.

Internally, they wondered whether it was worth serving God after all. Externally, these attitudes surfaced in mechanical observances, empty worship, cheating on tithes and offerings, and crass indifference to God's moral law and ceremonial duties.

They were so spiritually insensitive that they wondered why they were not being blessed by God. These backsliders sounded like what we might imagine might be the problem of some in the church today.

The message of Malachi is an urgent exhortation directed at God's people using terse sentences and direct speech. In fact, 47 of the book's 55 verses are first-person addresses by God through His prophet Malachi.

Malachi contains disputations which contrast God's faithfulness with Israel's faithlessness. Malachi's message of disputations can be basically summarized with seven truths:

- 1) God loves His people.
- 2) The God of Israel desires honest worship.
- 3) God is the father of all Israelites, and He expects loyalty and faithfulness.
- 4) God wants honesty and justice, not only words, because He is truth and righteousness.
- 5) God is faithful to His Word and desires, and demands, genuine faithful worship.
- 6) The repetition of God's desire for honesty is blended with threat of judgment.
- 7) The closing of Malachi reminds the church of the legacy of genuine faith and true worship exemplified in the lives of Moses and Elijah.

The book of Malachi is the prelude to four hundred years of prophetic silence, broken finally by the words of the next prophet, John the Baptist in John 1.

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

There is an important spiritual principle commonly overlooked by many today. God meets with blessing the heart wholly devoted to Him. If we want God to open His storehouse of blessings, we must first open ours as living sacrifices.

We are counseled to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be spiritual food in God's house. In obedience to this exhortation they would find by practical tests that God would open the windows of heaven and pour out such blessing on them that there would not be room enough to contain it. The same promise holds true for us today.

The book of Malachi is an appeal to backsliders. The spiritual climate of the people had grown cold, and Malachi rebukes them for their religious and social compromise. Nevertheless, if they return to God with sincere hearts, they will be blessed. The lessons for us should be obvious.

God inspired the apostle Paul to write to the sincere hearts of His church, to us, these words of encouragement in II Thessalonians 1.

II Thessalonians 1:4-5 so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.

II Thessalonians 1:7-8 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

II Thessalonians 1:10-12 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must examine ourselves so we are prepared to walk worthy of God's calling, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in His knowledge.