

# MALACHI

## Vincent Cheung

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## PREFACE

Many Christians tend to underestimate the relevance of the Old Testament. One reason for this is that they have misunderstood the nature of the New Covenant, that it is an abolition of the Old Covenant instead of its fulfillment. They should be reminded that the Old Testament is just as much the word of God as the New Testament, and the word of God can only be fulfilled, not abolished. To say it another way, the word of God may "come to pass," but can never "pass away."

The apostle Paul writes that, "*All scripture* is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). There is an essential continuity and unity among the two testaments – that is, the Bible is a progressive revelation of redemptive history, and the two testaments are unified in Christ as their central theme. No part of Scripture, therefore, can be safely ignored by Christians.

The following exposition of Malachi will demonstrate to the reader the relevance of the Old Testament text. One will see that the God of the Old Covenant is the same as the New Covenant – he exercises the same love toward his elect, and requires the same reverence from his people. It will also be clear that human nature, when not having been transformed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, has remained the same throughout history – Christians are often guilty of the same sins concerning which Malachi rebuked his contemporaries.

Nevertheless, in the following chapters, I will not limit my exposition to Malachi, but will take the opportunities afforded by the passages to address various topics that are highly relevant to modern Christians. Such topics include divine election, history, marriage, tithing, godly fear, Christian ministry, and the final judgment.

## INTRODUCTION

Before we discuss the text of the book of Malachi, it would help us immensely to first establish the historical and literary context of the book. Specifically, this includes a brief examination of its authorship, date of composition, and literary form.

Whether the word *Malachi*, meaning "my messenger," should be understood as a proper name or as a title has been a matter of dispute among scholars. One implication of the latter view is that the book may be relegated to an anonymous composition. However, even then the authenticity and authority of the book may not necessarily be diminished.

Some contend for the latter view due to the unusual superscription of 1:1, where there contains no biographical or other information concerning the prophet. But this observation as an argument is hardly persuasive since, "While most other prophetic superscription provide one or more of these points of information, Malachi's simple naming of the prophet is not unprecedented."<sup>1</sup>

In connection with this latter view, some identify Malachi with "my messenger" in 3:1. But the passage indicates that this "messenger" in Malachi 3 is one who would come in the future, and therefore the term may not be considered as referring to the same person as 1:1.

Some suggest that even if "my messenger" functions as a title rather than a proper name, it needs not render the book to the status of an anonymous composition, since it may be a title of a specified individual. For example, "the targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel...added to Malachi 1:1 the explanatory phrase, 'whose name is called Ezra the Scribe.'"<sup>2</sup>

Calvin seems to have shared a version of this view, saying, "I am more disposed to grant what some have said, that he was Ezra, and that Malachi was his surname, for God had called him to do great and remarkable things."<sup>3</sup> He also argued against the view that the object designated by the word could have been an angel (as Origen had held), for the reason that it carries an ending that was usual for proper names, and therefore should be considered as the name of a man.<sup>4</sup>

Harrison argues that, although attributing the book to Ezra was a "tradition accepted by Jerome, it is actually no more valuable than similar ones associated with Nehemiah and

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman II, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 438.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1999; p. 958.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. XV; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1998; p. 459.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

Zerubbabel."<sup>5</sup> His position on the matter is that, "While the historical period and the general interest of the composition might suggest any one of these individuals as the author, there appears to be some legitimacy for the view that regards the work as an anonymous composition."<sup>6</sup> Other scholars contend that the book is in fact the concluding section of Zechariah.<sup>7</sup>

Professor Robert L. Alden helps put the debate in perspective when he writes, "On the positive side...If a man named Malachi did not write the book bearing this name, he would be the only exception. Moreover, Malachi is neither an unlikely nor an unsuitable one for the author of this last book of the prophets."<sup>8</sup>

My own position reflects that of Joyce Baldwin: "While there is no evidence that Malachi is to be identified with Ezra the tradition is strong that Malachi is a personal name, and in the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary it is logical to accept that the prophet was called Malachi."<sup>9</sup> One must note that this is by no means a unique belief in Old Testament scholarship, seeing that it is also "the conclusion reached by Chary...and he cites A. van Hoonacker, H. Junker and A. Deissler as being of the same opinion."<sup>10</sup>

Pieter A. Verhoef offers the same conclusion, maintaining that, "In the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary it is logical to accept that the prophet was called Malachi," and that, "According to G. A. Smith 'it is true that neither in form nor in meaning is there any insuperable obstacle to our understanding *mal'akhi* as the name of a person."<sup>11</sup>

W. J. Deane also convincingly argues for this position. He points out that the author of this book could not have been Ezra due to the marked differences in literary style, and "it is hardly possible that the authorship of so distinguished a man should have been forgotten when the canon was arranged."<sup>12</sup>

However, just because the author could not have been Ezra does not mean that it must have been a prophet named Malachi. The answer to this is that "to all the prophetic books the writer's own name is prefixed. The use of a pseudonym or a symbolical name is unknown; and the authenticity of the contents of the prophecy is always testified by the naming of the author as one known to his contemporaries and approved by God."<sup>13</sup> Thus,

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<sup>5</sup> Harrison, p. 958.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 958.

<sup>7</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985; p. 702.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 702.

<sup>9</sup> Joyce G. Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 24; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1972; p. 212.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>11</sup> Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers; "Malachi," p. iii.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. iii-iv.

*Malachi* in 1:1 is intended to be understood as the name of the prophet, whose divine utterances follow, and not a title or office.

It seems that the remaining reason for questioning the authorship of this book is the aforementioned unusual superscription; that is, the beginning of this book contains no biographical or other information relevant to the prophet himself. But such an exception should not in itself deny authorship to one named Malachi, especially "when the same omission occurs in the case of Obadiah and Habakkuk, of whose personality no doubt has ever arisen."<sup>14</sup> Based on these and other reasons, I conclude with Deane that "Malachi, therefore, is certainly a real person."<sup>15</sup>

Several lines of arguments based on internal evidence yield an approximate date to Malachi's ministry, on which most scholars are in agreement. The fact that the temple had been rebuilt (1:13; 3:1, 10) indicates that the book is post-exilic, meaning that its composition occurred after the Jews had returned from their captivity to Babylon.<sup>16</sup> This also places the ministry of Malachi after that of Haggai and Zechariah, the two prophets immediately preceding Malachi in the Old Testament canonical arrangement.

Since the temple was completed in about 515 B.C., Malachi's ministry must have been after this date. In addition, we know that the temple worship had been in place long enough for the people to have grown weary of it (1:13). As Verhoef points out, Haggai and Zechariah had "stirred up the returned exiles to rebuild the temple, which was completed in 515 B.C. (Ezra 5-6). As far as Malachi was concerned, this event already belonged to the past. The book assumes the existence of the temple (1:10; 3:1, 8), and presupposes a (long!) time of spiritual decline, because the temple worship had already deteriorated to such an extent that the priests and people had to be reproved by the prophet with regard to their malpractices (1:6-14; 2:1-9; 3:6-12)."<sup>17</sup> The word used for "governor" in 1:8 "is a technical term from the Persian period,"<sup>18</sup> and places the prophecies before "the death of Nehemiah, who was the last civil ruler."<sup>19</sup>

Malachi addressed precisely the issues corrected during Nehemiah's second term in Jerusalem, which places him prior to 445 B.C., and thus limiting the prophecies in the book to some time after 515 B.C., but before 445 B.C..

If Malachi had ministered after Ezra's arrival to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., it narrows the date to somewhere between 458-445 B.C.. Despite a small number of difficulties, most scholars are in agreement that the composition of Malachi occurred around 450 B.C.. Although some place Malachi before Ezra, that is, prior to 458 B.C., the fact that he must have prophesied long after the completion of the Second Temple (after 515 B.C.) is certainly not in dispute.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

<sup>16</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1986; p. 230.

<sup>17</sup> Verhoef, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Dillard, p. 439.

<sup>19</sup> Boice, p. 230.

Malachi addresses his audience in the form of disputations, where the prophet attributes to the people challenges to God's initial assertions, whereupon God would answer their objections through Malachi, often followed by certain promises or predictions.

Although some may consider such an approach unique,<sup>20</sup> others think that the method was not entirely novel,<sup>21</sup> seeing that one may find the semblance of disputations in passages such as Amos 5:18-20 and Micah 2:6-11; "and Jeremiah frequently refers to exchanges with his contemporaries,"<sup>22</sup> as do Isaiah and Ezekiel. Nevertheless, some maintain that Malachi was at least "an early example of an extended use of the question-and-answer method," which later became "the usual format for rabbis and scribes."<sup>23</sup>

In any case, the significance to this is that, "Malachi reveals the same sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of his contemporaries as did his predecessors."<sup>24</sup> He was aware of the people's objections to God's ways, and by divine inspiration, was able to provide authoritative responses to them.

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<sup>20</sup> Dillard, p. 439.

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213-214.

<sup>23</sup> *Expositor's*, Vol. 7; p. 704.

<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, p. 214.

## 1. THE BURDEN OF THE LORD

The book of Malachi begins with these words: "The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi" (1:1). We have already discussed the issues surrounding the word *Malachi*, and have come to the conclusion that it is the name of a distinct individual, whose prophecies are recorded in the rest of this book. We now direct our attention to the rest of the verse.

Many accept the view saying that the word "burden," when used in a prophetic context, does not simply refer to prophecy in general, but specifically to the pronouncement of judgment. Calvin says that, "whenever this word is expressed, there is ever to be understood some judgment of God."<sup>1</sup> Verhoef elaborates on this point, saying, "We may concede to the opinion that in prophecy the word...generally acquires an ominous sense linked up with the catastrophic nature of many prophecies. In this sense the word usually denotes a pronouncement of utmost importance, a prophecy of judgment."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in Jeremiah 23, we read that the word had become a way for the ungodly to deride the prophets, who at times brought them messages concerning God's impending judgment due to their sins. Jeremiah 23:33-34 says, "And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What is the burden of the LORD? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? I will even forsake you, saith the LORD. And as for the prophet, and the priest, and the people, that shall say, The burden of the LORD, I will even punish that man and his house."

It is better, as Feinberg argues,<sup>3</sup> to translate "What burden?" in verse 33 to "You are the burden!" as in, "What a burden (you are)!" Due to their sins, God's prophets had been bringing words of judgment to the people, prefacing them with "The burden of the Lord." But instead of repenting of their sins, the hearers had grown to find such messages *burdensome*. Thus, they had begun using this term in their derogatory challenges to the prophets, saying, "What is the *burden* of the Lord this time?"

Likewise, we find many nowadays who find the requirements of God burdensome. To them, the commandments of God limit their liberty and seem to be outdated relative to the culture. Those who would preach biblical principles without compromise or dilution are often accused as inflexible, placing unreasonable demands on the people. Yet, the apostle John reminds us that to love God is to obey his commandments, which should not seem burdensome to us: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3, NIV).

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin's, Vol. XV; p. 461.

<sup>2</sup> Verhoef, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986; p. 526.

The rebellious nature of the human heart has not changed since the day of Jeremiah. Even then, the people had grown weary of the constant warnings and urgings of the prophets. Or, as some would say nowadays, it seems that some ministers are always preaching sermons of "doom and gloom," of sin and judgment. They say such things often without realizing that there may be good reasons for preaching such messages.

The people considered God's word to be burdensome, and would say to the prophets, "What is the burden of the Lord now?" God's reply to such irreverence was, "It's you! You are the burden!" Thus, there is a play on words here in Jeremiah; whereas in one instance the burden refers to the message of prophecy, the next refers to the people as a troublesome group in God's eyes. And he proceeds to note that this is one burden God would soon unload from his shoulders: "I will even forsake you, saith the LORD."

However, not only unbelievers make such complaints against God. Christians everywhere find it difficult to live the Christian life, and they would often complain against biblical requirements, and the restrictions that God has placed upon them. They enjoy calling attention to the "sacrifices" that they have already made, and how it would be unreasonable to ask them for more. And such Christians form what may be the greatest burden of the Church.

It is strange how the ungodly and carnal tend to blame the godly and obedient for their problems. This is not unlike how, when Ahab met Elijah, said to the prophet, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17). But Elijah answered him, "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim" (v. 18). It is those who "have forsaken the commandments of the Lord" that are the troublemakers of society, not those who follow God faithfully.

Often, family divisions are blamed on those who have converted to Christianity, or those who have finally decided to take their faith seriously. Conflicts of such nature may be observed between parent and child, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, or among friends. Christians should let their accusers know that, "It is you, not me, who is causing trouble in this relationship. It is you who is rebelling against the Lord, and therefore it is you who must change."

Christians who are following the Lord are not responsible for family divisions or breakdowns of relationships. No one has the right to compromise truth in order to maintain a false unity. It is those who are in opposition to the Scripture that God will hold responsible for the problems of society and human relationships. Unbelievers and disobedient Christians are the problems of society.

Every Christian should examine himself as to whether in any area he considers God's word to be burdensome, and whether he questions God's justice or wisdom in any way. Do we find it a burden to study the Scripture or to pray? Do we complain that our relationships suffer due to God's claims on our lives? Do we bemoan the fact that biblical standards at times prevent us from profiting financially? If so, these are indications of a

mind not fully renewed, and whose attitudes are not in subjection to God's word. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible for those of us who are in Christ to come into submission to God's word, and take delight at his commands.

## 2. THE WORD OF THE LORD

Malachi says that he is delivering "the word of the LORD" (1:1) to the people, thus claiming divine origin for his prophecies. "Everywhere in the OT the expression 'the word of the Lord' denotes the divine revelation."<sup>1</sup> Many also find significance in the fact that this expression is usually connected with the name of *Yahweh* (thus, the capitalized "LORD") instead of *El* or *Elohim*. It may be true as Vriezen asserts, that *Yahweh* is used in connection with the *revelatio specialis*, or God's special revelation to his people, and *El* is used more often in connection with the *revelatio generalis*, or general revelation.<sup>2</sup> Exegesis of the relevant verses in support of such a claim and the question of how far one may apply this distinction belong to a discussion beyond the intent of this present volume. In any case, we can be satisfied that Malachi's use of the expression, "the word of the LORD" is his affirmation that what follows have its origin in the mind of God, and that his prophecies consist not merely in human thoughts and words.

The apostle Peter reminds us that, "the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). Martin Luther comments, "Now what is found written and foretold in the prophets says Peter, that men have not discovered nor invented; but holy and pious men have spoken it from the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> To say that a message is from "the LORD," then, brings one attention first to its origin; that is, the content of the speech or writing does not come from the speaker or writer, but from God himself.

That a message has its origin in God immediately yields at least two vital implications, namely, any word from God is both morally binding and historically decisive. This means that whatever God says carries divine and absolute authority, and this in turn places an inescapable obligation upon the audience to obey its demands. Also, any word from God possesses total control over historical events.

God, as creator of all that exists, has the authority to dictate the thoughts and behavior of his creatures. Since God has revealed his moral requirements through the Scripture, biblical ethics is then based on the authority of God himself. As he delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, God began by a declaration of his divinity: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). He proceeded immediately to eliminate the worship of all other so-called gods, saying, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (v. 3). It is only after he had established himself as the sole object of Israel's worship did he then proclaimed moral laws that one must observe in his life on earth and in his relationship with other human

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<sup>1</sup> Verhoef, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*; Wageningen: Veenman; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970; p. 345.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1990; p. 249.

beings, such as, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (v. 14). Thus, he asserts his divine status as the "peg" on which all of his commandments hang.

If there are no moral laws, or if the moral laws do not rely on divine authority, who is to say that it is wrong to murder? On what basis other than preference will another human being persuade me against pilfering from a moral perspective? *Why* is it wrong to commit adultery? *Who* says that I should not commit perjury even when it seems to be the most convenient course of action? Mere opinion or pragmatic concerns place no moral obligation on me to concede to another person's moral standard, for I could most likely assert an opposite standard on the same grounds.

So then, those who are without a creator God have no basis for any ethical principles, while those with a system of ethics based on the authority of God have an absolutely binding moral code. Ultimately, these are the only two options. However, if the latter exists, that is, if a creator God has prescribed an absolute and universal moral code, then the first is not in fact a "live" option. In other words, if a creator God exists who has also given moral laws to his creatures, then there is only one legitimate system of ethics, and all other alternatives merely exist as examples of defiance against the Master. And this is in fact the case: the God of theism undeniably exists, and his moral laws are recorded in the Christian Scripture.

The Scripture guarantees that what God says will occur exactly as declared. Jeremiah says that "there is nothing too hard for [God]" (32:17), and Numbers 23:19 adds the affirmation that God is truthful, and therefore whatever he says, whether in the form of promise or prediction, will be fully carried out by his power: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?"

Isaiah relates God as saying, "I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me," in that only he can declare "the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (46:9-10). Surely, "no plan of [his] can be thwarted" (Job 42:2, NIV).

Since God's declarations pertaining to future events are recorded in Scripture, this means that what the Bible says will happen, will happen. The immediate application of this in our present study is that all the predictions of Malachi, having their origin in the mind of God, would certainly come true.

When relating the above to contemporary preaching, the implication is that our messages must be "the word of the Lord" in order to be authoritative and relevant. Speaking from the Scripture means that no one may accuse us of merely expressing our personal opinion, or that what we say are not moral binding, or if our messages are eschatological in nature, that what we say will come to nothing. Rather, when we base our preaching on the explicit teaching of the Bible and necessary deductions from it, our messages will be authoritative, universally applicable and binding, and historically accurate, even when addressing events yet to come.

Realizing the importance of speaking the word of God faithfully, the apostle Peter declares to his readers that, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Jesus himself was the highest fulfillment of such a ministry: "For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him" (John 3:34). And both Jesus and the apostle James warned their audience, lest any should teach things that are inconsistent with what God has revealed in his word: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19); "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1, NIV).<sup>4</sup>

Being aware that death was near, the apostle Paul gave a solemn charge to Timothy, and prefaced it with an appeal to the divine witness: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1). And this all-important charge is nothing other than for Timothy to "Preach the word" (v. 2).

But Paul elaborates on this a little more. He says that Timothy must "be prepared in season and out of season" (v. 2, NIV) in carrying out his task, or as the NLT has it, "Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or not." And this ministry of preaching requires Timothy to "Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching" (v. 2, NLT).

The preacher must be persistent and prepared, since "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). What an accurate depiction this is of many modern Christians, who prefer preaching that tickles their ears and encourages their lusts over that which is faithful to the words of Scripture. But such widespread apostasy is precisely the reason why we must also accept Paul's charge to "Preach the word." "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16) and therefore possesses the authority of God. Only by promoting the words of the Bible, then, can we rightly transform society as well as to bring a much needed reformation to the Church.

Since what God says carries ultimate authority, when we base our preaching and writing efforts on the Scripture, we can be confident that what we say are both morally binding and historically decisive. It is morally binding in the sense that the people must obey God's commands, and historically decisive in that what we preach from the Scripture concerning the final judgment, Christ's second coming, the resurrection of the dead, and heaven and hell will all occur without fail. With complete accuracy, those who speak according to the word of God can predict the final destiny of mankind and history. "Every time the true prophets spoke...by the word of the Lord...things would

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<sup>4</sup> In James 3:1, the word translated "masters" in the KJV is *didaskalos* – rightly rendered as "teachers" in the NIV and other translations.

happen... 'according to the word of the Lord.'"<sup>5</sup> Such can be the power and scope of our preaching ministry.

In other words, when our messages faithfully relate the words of God, we are not simply expressing our preference, but we are relating God's own declaration to the people. We can be certain that the messages contain God's will for the audience, and can urge them to submit to its contents with both exhortations and severe warnings. On the other hand, we have no right to threaten or judge others for merely disagreeing with our opinion. Anyone may differ with us on matters of preference, but no one has the right to disagree with God.

Assuming that what we preach is indeed God's word, a moral obligation then comes on the people to believe and obey what is said. Those who submit and obey are right in the sight of God, but those who resist sin against him. In this way, the word of God is indeed "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). A biblical sermon can quickly divide the righteous and the wicked in the audience – something that may be made apparent if their inner reactions can be noted. But God knows all of our thoughts, and knows our attitudes concerning him. The desire of a true Christian is, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

If God has called you to a position of ministry, you must realize that what you say from the pulpit can be morally binding and historically decisive if you speak from the basis of Scripture; otherwise, your messages will be void of authority and relevance. Sadly, many Christians have already grown accustomed to this latter type of preaching and writing.

That "the word of the Lord" is here being delivered "by Malachi" (literally: "by the hand of Malachi")<sup>6</sup> is also significant. Calvin comments, "The word *hand*, as we have observed elsewhere, means ministrations. The meaning then is, that this doctrine proceeded from God, but that a minister, even Malachi, was employed as an instrument; so that he brought nothing as his own, but only related faithfully what had been committed to him by God from whom it came."<sup>7</sup>

Although God is capable of speaking directly to his creatures from heaven, he chooses to reveal his thoughts through human instruments, such as his prophets. And to establish the New Covenant, he sent his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2; Matthew 26:26-28). After his words have been committed to writing, he entrusts the Scripture to ministers whom he has selected to, as their exclusive vocation, promote his word through preaching and writing. In addition, every Christian has been given the honor and responsibility to promote the knowledge of God through their finances, labor, speech, and other available means.

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<sup>5</sup> Verhoef, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 462.

Being a representative of Christ is a duty and privilege not to be underestimated. As the apostle Paul exclaims, "who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16, NIV). But then he answers, "our competence comes from God" (3:5, NIV). Let us then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaim the authoritative word of God to our generation by preaching the words of Scripture.

### 3. ELECTION OF INDIVIDUALS

Having asserted the divine inspiration of his message, Malachi proceeds to prophesy: "I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever. And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel" (1:2-5).

Before explaining the significance of this passage, it may be necessary to account for the words, "I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau" (NASB). Such words often seem to perplex the general reader, perhaps much more than it should. Understanding this statement properly will help us appreciate the force of the passage.

Undoubtedly, the statement brings up the subject of election. A popular explanation is that Malachi is here referring to God's election of nations, that God had not chosen Jacob the *individual* over Esau, but rather the nations that they represented, namely, Israel and Edom. Even before I construct a refutation to this interpretation, or more precisely, an implication created by this interpretation, readers should note that if individual election seems problematic, national election is similarly problematic, even if less so.

My objection to the explanation based on God's election of nations is that it fails to account for the fact that Jacob and Esau existed as individuals, and God had indeed chosen Jacob over Esau. In fact, for God's election of Israel over Edom to make any sense at all, his election of the individual Jacob over Esau must be presupposed. So, one who says that the passage intends to convey national election cannot, without contradiction, deny individual election. It is precisely because God had chosen Jacob the individual that the nation arisen from him, Israel, was preferred over Edom.

Paul quotes these words from Malachi in Romans 9:13: "As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." If it can be demonstrated that Paul here speaks of God's election of individuals, then the fact that Malachi's focus may have been on national election does not nullify the doctrine of individual election. And instead of using national election to explain away these words in Malachi, we must accept that God had chosen Jacob over Esau.

The account of the twin's birth is recorded in Genesis 25:21-24: "And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived. And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said

unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb."

Note that both the passage from Malachi and the one from Genesis mention the nations that would arise from the twins. But the question at the present is whether God's election of individuals may be derived from the biblical account of Jacob and Esau. For this, we turn to Romans 9 and examine Paul's use of the words, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."

The relevant passage reads as follows: "And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (v. 10-16).

Paul excludes mention of the two nations in the passage, but quotes the words of God as saying, "The elder shall serve the younger." Not that the elder nation would serve the younger, but the elder brother, Esau, would serve the younger Jacob. And this prediction was made to Rebecca while "the *children* (not nations) being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to *election* might stand."

So, we are speaking of the subject of *election*, which is God's purposing of the *children* (not nations) *before* they were born, and *before* they had "done any good or evil." Here, I anticipate the claim that although God does not base his election on past works of good or evil, perhaps his election is based on his "foreknowledge"<sup>1</sup> of the individuals' future actions and decisions. But Paul's point is that election is "not of works" at all, whether it be past, present, or future, but that it is "of *him* that calleth" – that is, God.

Paul's view is that God's election is "not of him that *willeth*, nor of him that *runneth*, but of *God that sheweth mercy*" (v. 16). The NASB has this verse as, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy," and the NIV translates the verse into, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." The NLT is painfully explicit for those who hold the opposite view: "So receiving God's promise is not up to us. We can't get it by choosing it or working hard for it. God will show mercy to anyone he chooses."

Election depends on God's mercy, not man's will or work. Neither can the past, present, and future choice or labor of man influence to whom God will show his mercy, since he

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<sup>1</sup> The word is placed within quotation marks since, at this point, I am mainly using the meaning of *prescience* as the definition of *God's* foreknowledge, a view that will be contested later in the chapter.

had said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Who will receive God's mercy does not depend on the person's desire or merit, but on God's will alone.

Interpretations contradictory to the above are impossible. Those who attempt to explain away individual election by saying that the passage refers to national election, have once again avoided my argument. That is, even if granted that national election may be in view, this does not nullify the fact that God had favored Jacob as an individual, else why is he not the God of "Abraham, Isaac, and Esau"? The opposition fails to answer my contention that the election of Israel and the reprobation of Edom presupposes the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau.

If one were to appeal to God's foreknowledge of Jacob's merits and Esau's lack of such, then besides pointing out the numerous faults of Jacob, we would only have to read Paul's statement again, that God's election is not based on man's will or works *at all*, but on his mercy alone. And the object of his mercy is solely determined by his will, and nothing else. In fact, one of Paul's main points in this passage is that, even within an elected family or nation, God's individual election still occurs.

The biblical teaching is that election is not based on foreknown faith or good works; rather, faith and good works are granted to those whom God has elected by his grace. It is not because of foreknown faith and good works that one becomes God's elect, but it is because one has been elected that God produces faith and good works in him. Faith, then, is "the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8), and good works are produced by "God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phillippians 2:13). However, since this specific aspect of God's work in us is not our current topic, a more detailed explanation must be reserved for another setting.

In any case, as William Barclay observes, "Paul argues that there is more to Jewishness than descent from Abraham, that the chosen people were not simply the entire sum of all the physical descendants of Abraham, that within that family there was a process of election all through history...there *was* election within the family of Abraham's physical descendants."<sup>2</sup> And, "He makes the further point that that selection had nothing to do with deeds and merits. The proof is that Jacob was chosen and Esau was rejected, *before either of them was born*. The choice was made while they were still in their mother's womb...Everything is of God; behind everything is his action; even the things which seem arbitrary and haphazard go back to him. Nothing in this world moves with aimless feet."<sup>3</sup>

Douglas J. Moo also argues for our position, saying, "for all its strong points, I think that a corporate and salvation-historical interpretation of vv. 10-13 does not ultimately satisfy the data of the text...Paul suggests that he is thinking of Jacob and Esau as individuals in vv. 10b-11a when he mentions their conception, birth, and 'works' – language that is not

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (The Daily Study Bible Series); Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975; p. 128-129.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

easily applied to nations...a description here of how God calls nations to participate in the historical manifestation of his salvific acts runs counter to Paul's purpose in this paragraph. In order to justify his assertion in v. 6b that not all those who belong to 'physical' Israel belong also to 'spiritual' Israel, and thus to vindicate God's faithfulness (v. 6a), he must show that the OT justifies a discrimination within physical Israel in terms of the enjoyment of salvation. An assertion in these verses to the effect that God has 'chosen' Israel rather than Edom for a positive role in the unfolding of the plan of salvation would not contribute to this argument at all...For these reasons I believe that Paul is thinking mainly of Jacob and Esau as individuals rather than as nations and in terms of their own personal relationship to the promise of God rather than of their roles in carrying out God's plan. The nations denoted by these names, we must remember, have come into existence in and through the individuals who first bore those names...What does Paul mean by asserting that God 'loved' Jacob but 'hated' Esau?...If God's love of Jacob consists in his choosing Jacob to be the 'seed' who would inherit the blessings promised to Abraham, then God's hatred of Esau is best understood to refer to God's decision not to bestow this privilege on Esau. It might best be translated 'reject.'"<sup>4</sup>

In his *The Epistle to the Romans*, Professor John Murray writes, "The thesis that Paul is dealing merely with the election of Israel collectively and applying the clause in question only to this feature of redemptive history would not meet the precise situation. The question posed for the apostle is: how can the covenant promise of God be regarded as inviolate when the mass of those who belong to Israel...have remained in unbelief and come short of the covenant promises? His answer would fail if it were simply an appeal to the collective, inclusive, theocratic election of Israel. Such a reply would be...no more than a statement of the fact which, in view of their unbelief, created the problem. Paul's answer is not the collective election of Israel but rather 'they are not all Israel, who are of Israel.' And this means, in terms of the stage of discussion at which we have now arrived, 'they are not all elect, who are of elect Israel.'"<sup>5</sup>

In other words, not every *individual* within an elected *nation* has been chosen for salvation. And so, "the interpretation which regards the election as the collective, theocratic election of Israel as a people must be rejected and 'the purpose of God according to election' will have to be understood as the electing purpose that is determinative of and unto salvation..."<sup>6</sup>

Thomas R. Schreiner also understands the passage as one that addresses the election of individuals to salvation. He says, "Verse 13 introduces a scriptural citation...that confirms and elaborates on the scriptural promise enunciated in verse 12. The citation 'I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau'...is an exact rendition of the LXX (and MT) of Mal. 1:2-3, except that the object...now precedes the verb, perhaps to emphasize that Jacob was the object of God's choice...the point of the text is that God set his affectionate love upon

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996; p. 585-587.

<sup>5</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997; p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Jacob and withheld it from Esau...What Rom. 9:13 adds to the promise of verse 12 is that the submission of the older to the younger is based on God's choice of Jacob and his rejection of Esau...Does the text suggest double predestination? Apparently it does."<sup>7</sup> The view saying "that this passage does not relate to individual salvation but only to the temporal destiny of nations since Jacob and Esau represent two peoples (Gen. 25:23) and their historical destiny...ignores the fact that the issue in the context of Rom. 9 relates to the salvation of the Jews, and a discussion of historical destiny apart from salvation is irrelevant to the issue that called forth this discussion."<sup>8</sup>

Concerning verses 15-16, Marvin R. Vincent comments, "*Have mercy* therefore contemplates, not merely the sentiment in itself, but the determination of those who should be its objects. The words were spoken to Moses in connection with his prayer for a *general* forgiveness of the people, which was refused, and his request to behold God's glory, which was granted. With reference to the latter, God asserts that His gift is of His own free grace, without any recognition of Moses' right to claim it on the ground of merit or service...God is laid under no obligation by a human *will* or a human *work*."<sup>9</sup> And Kenneth S. Wuest says, "This emphasizes the absolute sovereignty of God in the disposition of His mercy...A participation in God's mercy is dependent upon God's sovereign will alone."<sup>10</sup>

John Piper also concurs with the interpretation of this passage as I have set forth earlier in the chapter, that "God's decision to treat Esau and Jacob differently is not merely *prior* to their good or evil deeds but is also completely *independent* of them...This rules out the notion...that election is based on God's foreknowledge of men's good works."<sup>11</sup>

Remember that as I have mentioned earlier, verse 16 does not only say that election is not "of him that *runneth*," but it is not even "of him that *willeth*." This means that not only is election independent of foreknown works, but it is also independent of foreknown decisions, that is, even faith. Thus, Piper says, "Paul never grounds the 'electing purpose of God' in man's faith. The counterpart to works in conjunction with election (as opposed to justification) is always God's own call (Rom 9:12b) or his own grace (Rom 11:6). The predestination and call of God precede justification (Rom 8:29f) and have no ground in any human act, not even faith. This is why Paul explicitly says in Rom 9:16 that God's bestowal of mercy on whomever he wills is based neither on human *willing* (which would include faith) nor on human *running* (which would include all activity). So far then we may say that the prediction of Rom 9:12c ('the elder will serve the younger') is an expression of God's predetermination of...the destinies of Jacob and Esau. Moreover this predetermination is not *based on* any actual or foreknown distinctives of the brothers. It

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998; p. 500-501.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 501-502.

<sup>9</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. III; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers; p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973; p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> John Piper, *The Justification of God*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993; p. 52.

is based solely on *God* who calls...God's purpose is to be free from all human influences in the election he performs."<sup>12</sup>

We have faith *because* God has chosen us; God did not choose us because he knew we would have faith. The apostle John says that, "We love him, *because* he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Since the faith and love in us have been produced or caused by God, it makes no sense to say that his election are based on these, as if his election of us was a reaction (whether logical or chronological) to these qualities in us. To say that God's choice is based on his knowledge of our future faith or good works, then, would be the same as saying that he chooses whom he wills, since he produces faith, love, and good works in whom he wills. Even repentance has to be granted by God: "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25). No one can even repent of their sins unless it is granted by God.

Verses 15-16 are in fact Paul's answer to a question stated in verse 14. If individual election to salvation occurs, and if God's choice is completely independent of any prior knowledge of faith and works, then, some may ask, "Is there unrighteousness with God?" (v. 14). Barclay comments on Paul's answer (v. 15-16) as follows, "Man has no claim on God whatever. The created has no claim on the Creator. Whenever justice enters into it, the answer is that from God man deserves nothing and can claim nothing. In God's dealings with men, the essential things are his will and his mercy."<sup>13</sup>

This introduces Paul's additional arguments in verses 17-24, which we will only take time to quote at this point without further explanation: "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"

So far, this chapter has demonstrated that God elects not only nations, but also individuals, and that for the purpose of salvation. Numerous other witnesses are available, but since more elaborate arguments are called for later in the chapter, I must be allowed to proceed. And so we conclude this section with Calvin, "Let us then feel assured that the salvation of those whom God is pleased to save, is thus ascribed to his mercy, that nothing may remain to the contrivance of man."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Barclay, p. 130-131.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin's, Vol. XIX; p. 358.

During the process of the above argumentation, we have already eliminated the view that God's election is based on his "foreknowledge" of future human choices and actions. Even so, there are those who insist that God's election is based on the foreknown faith, good works, and other merits of individuals, and they derive such claims from passages such as Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2. Since many readers may not see through their serious misuse of these passages, we must take time to examine them in some detail.

Romans 8:29-30 says, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." It seems to some that the words "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate" would indicate that God's election of individual for salvation is based on his knowledge of the future faith or good works of people. When understood this way, the words "foreknow" or "foreknowledge" would refer to God's knowledge of future decisions or actions of human beings.

That is, the "knowledge" here would mean God's cognitive awareness of decisions not yet made, actions not yet performed, and events not yet occurred. And it is on the basis of such knowledge of the future that God elects individuals to salvation. To put it simply, a person is elected if God looks into the future and foresees that he would accept Christ. It is based on this foreknown faith that God chooses this individual as one of the elect. In this case, foreknowledge means *prescience* (knowledge of something before it happens). It is against this position that I will argue in this section.

Note that, in the previous section, we have already presented several arguments as to why it is biblically and logically impossible for God to base election on foreknown faith. Readers should keep those arguments in mind as we present an even more detailed case against this position. Also, the following will serve to demonstrate that no biblical passage contradicts our position, even if some seem to do so at first, especially when expounded by the opposition.

The position saying that election is based on prescience is commonly called *Arminianism*, while the view presented by the present author is generally recognized as *Calvinism*. However, I would like to emphasize that the correct view is in fact the *biblical* view, regardless of with which personality it may be associated, whether John Calvin or Jacob Arminius.

As Jonathan Edwards says in his *Freedom of the Will*, "Nevertheless, at first, I had thoughts of carefully avoiding the use of the appellation *Arminian* in this treatise. But I soon found I should be put to great difficulty by it; and that my discourse would be so encumbered with an often-repeated circumlocution, instead of a name, which would express the thing intended as well and better, that I altered my purpose...However, the term *Calvinistic* is, in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term *Arminian*, yet I should not take it at all amiss to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake; though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I

hold, because he believed and taught them..."<sup>15</sup> And so, for convenience, and "for distinction's sake," I will be using these two terms to represent the opposing views in this discussion, with Calvinism being the position that I hold.

Provided that one approaches the text with a general knowledge of the New Testament, it is possible to refute the Arminian interpretation using the information available from this passage. This is accomplished through the construction of a dilemma whose alternatives exclude Arminianism. But before we present the dilemma, let us read the passage in question once more: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30).

This passage describes the "order of salvation" (*ordo salutis*), or "the process by which Christ's work of salvation is made manifest in the life of the redeemed man."<sup>16</sup> It is important to notice that one who goes through any point of this process has also been through the previous ones, and will surely go through the ones that come after. That is, "whom he did predestinate...he also called," and "whom he called...he also justified." In other words, one who has been *predestined* by God will also be *called*, who will then also be *justified*. There is no one who is predestined who will not be called, and there is no one who is called who will not also be justified.

However, the process begins with God's foreknowledge, which means that those whom God foreknows will also be predestined, called, and justified. Now, if the Arminian defines foreknowledge as prescience, then God must foreknow every individual in history, since there is nothing, even in the future, that God does not know. But if this is the case, then it would mean that this passage teaches universal salvation; that is, every person in history is saved, or "justified" before God.

We know that God knows all things: past, present, and future. If foreknowledge refers to God's cognitive awareness of individuals, then there is no one whom he does not know. And if he foreknows everyone, then everyone is predestined; if everyone is predestined, everyone is called; and if everyone is called, everyone will be justified – which means that everyone will be saved. This is a conclusion that even the Arminian will not accept.

But if one were to be consistent with his definition of foreknowledge as prescience, and thereby accepts the doctrine of universal salvation, once he leaves this passage and reads the rest of the Bible, he will be confronted with a whole host of biblical verses that teach otherwise.

Of course, the Arminian is *not* saying that God's foreknowledge in this passage refers to his cognitive awareness of the *existence* of individuals, but that he foreknows the future *faith* of those who would accept Christ. However, this is precisely the problem with the

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*; Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996; p. viii-ix.

<sup>16</sup> Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1; Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1994; p. 503.

Arminian interpretation of this verse. Romans 8:29 says, "For *whom* he did foreknow, he also did predestinate..." The apostle Paul is relating God's foreknowledge with *persons* rather than their *faith*. He does not say, "For whom he did foreknow *would believe*," or any such thing. There is no mention of the person's faith or good works. This is also consistent with the way the rest of the passage is constructed. That is, the *person* whom God foreknows, he also predestines; the *person* whom God predestines, he also calls; and the *person* whom God calls, he also justifies. The Arminian adds to the text based on what he thinks it *should* say, rather than what it actually says.

The dilemma constructed is this: the Arminian must either accept the doctrine of universal salvation, or he must concede that foreknowledge refers to something other than prescience, or foreknown faith. If God knows all future contingencies, and everyone whom he "foreknows" will be saved, but if at the same time universal salvation is an anti-biblical doctrine, it can only mean that God's foreknowledge cannot refer to his cognitive awareness of the future existence, faith, or good works of individuals.

Lest the Arminian says that this avoids the obvious meaning of the passage, we need only to remind him that, given his definition of foreknowledge, the most obvious meaning of Romans 8:29-30 is that everyone in history would be "justified," or saved. So, once again, God's foreknowledge in the context of salvation does not refer to his knowledge of the future concerning who would accept Christ; thus, neither is his act of election dependent on such knowledge. The Arminian's interpretation fails.

We must now provide the proper definition for God's foreknowledge. Although God certainly maintains an intellectual knowledge concerning future persons and events, the word *foreknowledge* (Greek: *proginosko*, *prognosis*) is often used in the sense of preelection or foreordination.

The act of "knowing" in these cases would often involve what may be conveyed by the Hebrew *yada*, as referring to a personal relationship, and it speaks of an act of God's will rather than a passive reception of information. That is, the type of knowing involved in the biblical concept of God's foreknowledge is personal besides being cognitive, and since all future events are rooted in God, he knows what he wills. He does not foreknow anything that he does not will. Thus, knowledge does not "happen" to God as an addition to his divine mind, but since contingent events are subject to God's will, and he knows himself, he also knows all future contingent events, because he knows what he wills.

That God's knowledge is to be seen as personal and not only cognitive when applied in a salvific context can be seen in Jesus' rejection of false prophets and disciples in Matthew 7. He says, "And then will I profess unto them, I never *knew* you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (v. 23). It is not possible that the knowledge Jesus denies in "I never knew you" refers to cognitive knowledge of the people's existence, thoughts, and works, since he is obviously aware of their wickedness in the cognitive sense, saying, "depart from me, ye that *work iniquity*." Thus, we conclude that the knowledge denied in "I never *knew* you" pertains mainly to a personal and salvific relationship, rather than cognitive awareness alone.

Such concept of knowledge is also common in other passages. For example, God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed thee in the belly I *knew* thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). God *knew* Jeremiah before he *formed* him. God was the one who formed Jeremiah, and he *knew* Jeremiah before this occurred. Indeed, it would be impossible for God to not know a person (in the sense of prescience) whom he himself intends to create. This illustrates that God knows what he wills. In addition, the type of knowing here also carries the idea of choosing. The main sense is that God had chosen Jeremiah before he was conceived.

God's foreknowledge as election in this verse is even clearer if one were to note the parallelism in this passage. When a verse is expressed in the form of a parallelism, one part expands on or clarifies the meaning of the other part. For example, "For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods" (Psalm 24:2) does not necessarily mean that in addition to having "founded it upon the seas," he also "established it upon the floods." Rather, "established it upon the floods" carries a similar meaning, and helps to clarify "founded it upon the seas."

An even better example may be found in the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus says, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13). Again, not that we are to ask God to "deliver us from evil" in addition to "lead us not into temptation," but that "deliver us from evil" gives the meaning of "lead us not into temptation."

With this in mind, it seems that God's call to Jeremiah was phrased in such a parallelism as to render the meaning of "I knew thee" quite clear: "Before I formed you in the womb *I knew you*, before you were born *I set you apart*; *I appointed you* as a prophet to the nations" (v. 5, NIV). For God to *know* Jeremiah in the sense of this passage is to *appoint* him and set him apart.

S. M. Baugh also employs this passage as an illustration of the biblical concept of God's foreknowledge: "Another remarkable example of divine foreknowledge is expressed in Jeremiah 1:5, where God says to Jeremiah: '*I knew you* before I formed you in the womb, *I consecrated you* before you emerged from the womb; *I have given you* as a prophet to the nations.' The first two lines are closely parallel in the number of syllables and word order...But how can God have known Jeremiah before he was even conceived? Because he personally fashioned his prophet, just as he had fashioned Adam from the dust (Gen. 2:7), and just as he fashions all people (Ps. 139:13-16; Isa. 44:24). God foreknew not only the possibility of Jeremiah's existence – he knows all possibilities indeed – but God foreknew Jeremiah by name before he was conceived, because he knew how he would shape and mold his existence. Given this Old Testament background, we can understand why in the New Testament we have no extended discussion on the nature of God's foreknowledge. There was no need."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware, ed., *Still Sovereign*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000; p. 186.

J. A. Thompson translates the verse as, "Before I formed you in the womb I *knew you intimately*; Before you were born I set you apart," commenting that, "The verb, *yada*, 'know,' often carried considerable depth of meaning in the OT, for it reached beyond mere intellectual knowledge to personal commitment. For this reason it is used of the intimate relations between a man and his wife (Gen. 4:1)."<sup>18</sup> And even more clearly, Huey writes, "Here it involves a choosing relationship (Gen 18:19; Deut 34:10). The Lord was thinking about Jeremiah before he was born. At that time God had already designated Jeremiah to be a prophet."<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, a personal relationship cannot occur without intellectual knowledge; otherwise, one would not even know with whom he is having a relationship. However, the point at issue is that God's foreknowledge refers to a personal relationship originated by his initiative and election in addition to his cognitive knowledge. And as mentioned, his cognitive knowledge of the future would also be rooted in his will, since nothing occurs apart from it. As Jesus says in Matthew 10:29, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from *the will* of your Father" (NIV).

Based on the above and a number of other biblical passages, scholars have concluded that the concept of foreknowledge in the Bible undoubtedly carries the meaning of God's election of individuals. For God to foreknow someone is to set his affection on the person, even before he was born. It is this meaning of election and special favor that Romans 8:29 seeks to convey.

But there is more. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says that, "In the case of God, to know, being an act of will, means to make an object of concern and thus carries the nuance 'to elect.'"<sup>20</sup> The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says, "God's foreknowledge stands related to his will and power. What he knows, he does not know merely as information. He is no mere spectator. What he foreknows he ordains. He wills it."<sup>21</sup>

J. M. Gundry-Volf writes in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, "Rather than referring to speculative or neutral knowledge (i.e., knowledge of who will believe), the Pauline notion of divine foreknowledge is understood by many interpreters as a knowing in the Semitic sense of acknowledging, inclining toward someone, knowledge which expresses a movement of the will reaching out to personal relationship with someone...This kind of knowing is illustrated by the meaning of the Hebrew *yada*, 'to know,' in texts such as Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; and Jeremiah 1:5...In Paul's use of *proginosko* the aspect of pretemporality is added to the Hebrew sense of 'know' as 'have

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980; p. 143-145.

<sup>19</sup> F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah & Lamentations* (The New American Commentary); Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1993; p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985; "*ginosko, gnosis, epiginosko, epignosis*," p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984; "Foreknowledge," p. 420.

regard for' or 'set favor on.' The result is a verb which refers to God's eternal loving election."<sup>22</sup>

We will quote *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* at even greater length, since its article on this subject helps to reinforce several points already discussed above. Note that "Reformation theology" refers to the Calvinistic system of theology: "Arminian theology, in all its variant forms, contends that God's foreknowledge is simply a prescient knowledge, a knowing in advance whether a given person will believe in Christ or reject him. God's election, therefore, is said to be simply God's choice unto salvation of those whom He knows in advance will choose to believe in Christ. God foresees the contingent free action of faith and, foreseeing who will believe in Christ, elects those because they do. But this is destructive of the biblical view of election. In biblical thought election means that God elects people, not that people elect God. In Scripture it is God who in Christ decides for us – not we who, by making a decision for Christ, decide for God.

"Reformation theology has contended that the divine foreknowledge contains the ingredient of divine determination. The Reformers claimed that God indeed foreknows who will believe, because believing in Christ is not a human achievement, but a divine gift imparted to men by God's grace and Spirit. Thus God's foreknowledge is not merely prescience, but a knowledge that itself determines the event. That is, in Reformation thought what God foreknows He foreordains...

"There are...scriptural passages in which foreknowledge quite explicitly carries the meaning of foreordination. In Peter's speeches in Acts, what Peter says about the predestination of the crucifixion of Christ in 4:28 is almost identical with the meaning of *prognosis* in 2:23. What happened to Jesus, says Peter, took place according to 'the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.' Foreknowledge here echoes the idea of God's counsel or plan in 4:28, reflecting that foreknowledge is an ingredient of that determination which made the death of Christ certain. God foreknows the death of Christ because the crucifixion was His planned determination...

"That God's foreknowledge contains the idea of divine determination does not rest merely on a few biblical texts but reflects a truth about God that comes to expression in a variety of biblical concepts descriptive of the unique and mysterious character of God's actions. God's foreknowledge is itself a form of determination which accounts for the reality of that which is divinely foreknown...As in God's foreknowledge, all of these divine actions are reality-imparting, blessing-bestowing divine actions, which as such predetermine. He who creates (or recreates) by that very fact determines in advance...

"God's foreknowledge is far from mere prevision or prior intellectual awareness; even its ingredient of determination is a expression of blessing. In biblical usage God's foreknowledge does not relate to whatsoever comes to pass, to an all-comprehensive divine will. Foreknowledge relates to matters beneficent and salvific...The Bible uses the words 'foreknow' and 'predestinate' in a salvific context and with a salvific meaning...

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<sup>22</sup> *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993; "Foreknowledge, Divine," p. 310-311.

"In biblical thought, divine foreknowledge includes the idea of foreordination to salvation and we may not enlarge the meaning of either term to include 'whatsoever comes to pass.' To give it a large coverage is to include those whom the Bible describes as those whom God does not know, as in Jesus' disclaimer, 'I never knew you' (Mt. 7:23)."<sup>23</sup>

The Arminian definition of foreknowledge is false since it contradicts biblical usage; it is also logically impossible if one rejects universal salvation. But now that we have clarified the meaning of foreknowledge, we must apply the definition to the passage in dispute, which I will quote once more: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30).

Baugh writes, "The classic Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:29, that God's foreknowledge of faith is in view, is clearly reading one's theology into the text. Paul does not say: 'whose faith he foreknew,' but 'whom he foreknew.' He foreknew us...in Romans 8:29, predestination is not dependent on faith; rather, God predestines us on the basis of his gracious commitment to us before the world was...Perhaps another rendering better expresses the concept behind Romans 8:29: 'Those to whom he was previously devoted...' This again, is not to say that God's foreknowledge is devoid of intellectual cognition; to have a personal relation with someone, such as a marriage relation, includes knowledge about that person...God has foreknown us because he fashioned each of us personally and intimately according to his plan...That Paul refers to this concept of a committed relationship with the phrase *whom he foreknew* in Romans 8:29 is confirmed by the context...Further confirmation of 'foreknowledge' in Romans 8:29 as referring to a previous commitment is found in a nearby passage, Romans 11:1-2, where *proginosko* can have only this meaning: 'God has not rejected his people, has he? No way! For I also am an Israelite...God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.' As in Romans 8:29, the objects of foreknowledge are people themselves rather than historical events or a particular person's faith...The Arminian notion of 'foreseen faith' is impossible as an interpretation of God's foreknowledge in Romans 11:1-2, and, consequently, in the earlier passage, Romans 8:29, as well. The latter explains that God initiated a committed relationship from eternity with certain individuals whom he predestined for grace."<sup>24</sup>

On this verse, Calvin says, "But the foreknowledge of God, which Paul mentions, is not a bare prescience, as some unwise persons absurdly imagine, but the adoption by which he had always distinguished his children from the reprobate...he foreknew nothing out of himself, in adopting those whom he was pleased to adopt; but only marked out those whom he had purposed to elect."<sup>25</sup> F. F. Bruce agrees, saying that, "God's foreknowledge here connotes that electing grace which is frequently implied by the verb 'to know' in the

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<sup>23</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982; "Foreknowledge," p. 336-337.

<sup>24</sup> *Still Sovereign*, p. 194-195.

<sup>25</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XIX; p. 317-318.

Old Testament. When God takes knowledge of people in this special way, he sets his choice on them."<sup>26</sup>

John Murray explains that, "It needs to be emphasized that the rejection of this [Arminian] interpretation is not dictated by a predestinarian interest. Even if it were granted that 'foreknew' means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. For it is certainly true that God foresees faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates...The interest, therefore, is simply one of interpretation as it should be applied to this passage. On exegetical grounds we shall have to reject the view that 'foreknew' refers to the foresight of faith...Many times in Scripture 'know' has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with 'love,' to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action...There is no reason why this import of the word 'know' should not be applied to 'foreknow' in this passage, as also in 11:2 where it also occurs in the same kind of construction and where the thought of election is patently present...It means 'whom he set regard upon' or 'whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight' and is virtually equivalent to 'whom he foreloved.'"<sup>27</sup>

Thomas R. Schreiner holds the same view: "Some have argued that...God predestined to salvation those whom he saw in advance would choose to be part of his redeemed community...According to this understanding predestination is not ultimately based on God's decision to save some. Instead, God has predestined to save those whom he foresaw would choose him...It is quite unlikely, however, that it accurately represents the meaning...in Rom. 8:29 the point is that God has predestined those upon whom he has set his covenantal affection. Note that the object of the verb...is personal, 'those whom'...God set his affection upon."<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, Douglas Moo argues for this position: "In [Arminianism] the human response of faith is made the object of God's 'foreknowledge'; and this foreknowledge, in turn, is the basis for predestination: for 'whom he foreknew, he predestined.' But I consider it unlikely that this is the correct interpretation...The NT usage of the verb and its cognate noun does not conform to the general pattern of usage...the three others besides the occurrence in this text, all of which have God as their subject, mean not 'know before' – in the sense of intellectual knowledge, or cognition – but 'enter into relationship with before' or 'choose, or determine, before' (Rom. 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:2)...That the verb here contains this peculiarly biblical sense of 'know' is suggested by the fact that it has a simple personal object. Paul does not say that God knew anything *about* us but that he knew *us*, and this is reminiscent of the OT sense of 'know.'...Moreover, it is only *some* individuals...who are the objects of this activity; and this shows that an action applicable only to Christians must be denoted by the verb. If,

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<sup>26</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), Revised Edition; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985; p. 166.

<sup>27</sup> Murray; *Romans*, Vol. 1; p. 316-317.

<sup>28</sup> Schreiner; *Romans*, p. 452.

then, the word means 'know intimately,' 'have regard for,' this must be a knowledge or love that is unique to believers...This being the case, the difference between 'know or love beforehand' and 'choose beforehand' virtually ceases to exist."<sup>29</sup>

So, as the *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says, "In Romans 8:29 and 11:2, the apostle Paul's use of the word foreknew means 'to choose' or 'to set special affection on.' The electing love of God, not foresight of human action, is the basis of His predestination and salvation."<sup>30</sup> But if this is so, that is, if foreknowledge does not mean prescience but foreordination, then why does Romans 8:29 say, "whom he did foreknow, *he also did predestinate*"? If "foreknow" means what the Calvinist says it means, does not the reference to predestination then becomes redundant?

As Godet says in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, "Some have given to the word *foreknow* the meaning of *elect, choose, destine beforehand*...but what is still more decidedly opposed to this meaning is what follows: *He also did predestine*."<sup>31</sup> According to some Arminians, if the idea of predestination were to be used after "foreknow," then foreknowledge cannot possibly refer to God's sovereign election of individuals.

It seems to me that this is a desperate attempt to escape the conclusion we have so firmly established, for it is difficult to believe that anyone would be so foolish as to make such an argument after having examined the passage with care, or even just having read verse 29 to the end. The entire verse reads, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be conformed to the image of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." Assuming that the Calvinistic definition of "foreknow" is correct, then Paul is simply telling us that whom God has elected for salvation, he has also predestined the same people "to be conformed to the image of his Son." *Foreknowledge* in this verse refers to God's election of individuals to salvation, while *predestination* reveals the specific purpose or end that God has designed for his elect.

And so Gundry-Volf writes, "Paul distinguishes between divine foreknowledge and divine predestination in Romans 8:29: 'those whom he foreknew, he also predestined.' While foreknowledge denotes the exercise of God's will to establish a special relationship with those whom God graciously elect before all time, predestination expresses God's appointing of them to a specific goal before all time...In Romans 8:29 this goal is conformity with the image of the Son, a reference to the final salvation of the elect...Foreknowledge as divine choice is thus the basis of predestination to glorification with Christ...Foreknowledge does not have to be understood as foresight of faith in order to be distinguished from predestination."<sup>32</sup>

For the above and other reasons, I maintain that a Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 8:29 is necessary. Recognizing the fact that foreknowledge in this verse refers to God's

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<sup>29</sup> Moo, p. 532-533.

<sup>30</sup> *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986; "Foreknowledge."

<sup>31</sup> As quoted in: Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986; p. 183.

<sup>32</sup> *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 311.

election of individuals, Wuest produces a translation of verses 29-30 that reads as follows: "Because, those whom He *foreordained* He also *marked out beforehand* as those who were to be conformed to the derived image of His Son, with the result that He is firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, those whom He thus marked out beforehand, these He also summoned. And those whom He summoned, these He also justified. Moreover, those whom He justified, these He also glorified."<sup>33</sup> The word "foreordained" here corresponds to foreknowledge, while "marked out beforehand" refers to predestination.

Similarly, the GNT translation says, "Those whom God had *already chosen* he also *set apart* to become like his Son, so that the Son would be the first among many believers. And so those whom God set apart, he called; and those he called, he put right with himself, and he shared his glory with them."

Without further evidence, I believe that any Arminian arguments based on 1 Peter 1:2 have also been destroyed. The verse says that we are, "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." Of course we are. No additional comment should be required.

The above theological viewpoint remains repugnant to Christians in certain circles, but anyone who disagrees with it must contend with and refute the arguments presented in this chapter in order to remain intellectually and morally honest in their approach to the Scripture. In addition, the reader should keep in mind that there are numerous other biblical passages in support of individual election to salvation besides those already presented here.

This lengthy discussion on election began for the purpose of preventing one from using the reference in Malachi 1:2-5 to the national election of Israel as an implicit denial of the individual election of Jacob. Now that this is settled, we may return to our study of this passage in the next chapter.

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

#### 4. ELECTION OF NATIONS

Malachi begins his message to Israel by asserting God's love for the nation. Establishing such a claim is important, since the rest of the book contains God's rebuke to the people and prophecies of judgment. By reminding his hearers of God's special love toward them, Malachi is saying that although the sins of the nation must be bluntly confronted, God has always acted in the best interest of his elect. In contrast, Israel has not been faithful or obedient toward him. Given God's supreme status, his favor toward this nation, and his special relationship with it, the apostasy of the people is thus inexcusable. As mentioned, the prophet arranges his materials in the form of disputations between God and the people. And so, the audience responds by challenging this initial assertion of God's love: "I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us?" (1:2). The rest of this chapter deals with God's answer and its implications.

God's statement concerning his love for Israel is not accepted without question, but the people say, "Wherein hast thou loved us?" They demand to know in what way God has shown his love to Israel. Malachi then gives an argument from history: "Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever" (v. 2-4).

It is established in the previous chapter that although Malachi here contrasts God's treatment of Israel with Edom, it does not mean that "I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau" cannot refer to his election of individuals. In fact, Paul's use of these same words in Romans 9 shows that God had chosen Jacob as an individual and rejected Esau before they were even born, not on the basis of works or merits, but on the basis of God's will alone, "that the purpose of God according to election might stand" (Romans 9:11).

The reason Jacob and Esau are mentioned here is to remind the audience of their different treatments by God regardless of their similarities. Not only were they brothers, but they were twins. If one were to have the advantage over another, Esau should have been the privileged one, since he was the firstborn. Yet, God had chosen Jacob over Esau, demonstrating that God's love is not given to one who is more worthy of it, but it is offered to whom he wills. As he had said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Romans 9:15). God had elected Jacob because it was his will to do so, not because of any goodness inherent in Jacob. Any genuine merit in Jacob came from his divine election, and did not at all cause it.

A nation may also be similarly chosen by God for his special purpose. Israel had arisen from Jacob, and thus its election presupposes his. As Moses says to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6-8, "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

This passage confirms that God indeed elects nations, seeing how he has "chosen [Israel] to be a special people unto himself." His choice was not based on the merits of the people but on his electing love and his faithfulness to carry out the promises made to their ancestors. This latter point also confirms that his election of this nation presupposes his election of Jacob from whom it had arisen: "And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel. And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land" (Genesis 35:10-12).

Moses had warned the people of Israel that if they failed to obey the Law, God would punish them greatly, and then "if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, but walk contrary unto me...I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste" (Leviticus 26:27, 33). God would eject the people from the land if they would continually defy him. But he also said that he would bring them back to the land if they would repent of their sins: "If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land" (v. 40-42).

This is what occurred prior to the time of Malachi. The people of Israel had sinned and were eventually thrown out of the land. Even the great temple of Solomon was destroyed. Later, God allowed them to go back and rebuild the land. By the time of Malachi's ministry, the temple had been rebuilt, although the new temple was apparently inferior to the former one: "But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice" (Ezra 3:12); "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" (Haggai 2:3).

Amidst these painful circumstances in their recent history, some Israelites had become cynical, and began to question the foundation of God's relationship with the nation, namely, his electing love and special favor toward it. And so they say to God, "How have you shown your love for us?" – What love? What special favor? Malachi answers by reminding them that God had treated Israel and Edom differently.

Although Edom had arisen from Jacob's twin brother, Esau, it had not been friendly at all to Israel. When Jerusalem was under attack by Babylon, the Edomites "were on the side of the invader, acting as informants."<sup>1</sup> They also looted the people of Israel, and attacked those who were trying to escape. Obadiah writes concerning Edom, "On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune, nor rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction, nor boast so much in the day of their trouble. You should not march through the gates of my people in the day of their disaster, nor look down on them in their calamity in the day of their disaster, nor seize their wealth in the day of their disaster. You should not wait at the crossroads to cut down their fugitives, nor hand over their survivors in the day of their trouble" (v. 11-14, NIV).

The "Edomites moved into Judah's vacated territory and apparently had the better of their enemies."<sup>2</sup> But later, they were invaded and driven out by the Nabateans.<sup>3</sup> By the time of Malachi, the Israelites had returned to their land. The temple had been rebuilt, and had been in service for a number of decades. Edom also wanted to rebuild, saying, "We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places" (v. 4). But God says through Malachi that, "They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever" (v. 4).

Both nations had sinned against God, and both were demolished as divine punishments. Yet, God had chosen to allow Israel to rebuild, while he prevented Edom from doing the same. Malachi reminds the people of his nation, that "the LORD's great power reaches far beyond our borders!" (v. 5, NLT), and Edom could have rebuilt if it had been permitted by God to do so. Since God has exact control over the nations, their opposite fates indicate his differing treatments toward them. Thus, Malachi argues convincingly from historical facts, demonstrating God's love toward his elect.

To say that the power and rule of God extend beyond his elect nation is significant. The gods of other nations, which were not gods at all, were often territorial. For example, the Syrians, having lost a battle against the Israelites, said, "The gods of Israel are mountain gods, and that is why the Israelites defeated us. But we will certainly defeat them if we fight them in the plains" (1 Kings 20:23, GNT). However, throughout the Scripture, and now in Malachi, we are presented with the view that our God possesses absolute sovereignty over every person and nation at all times. He is master over history itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

Throughout all ages, the wicked have been attempting to overthrow the rule of God over their lives. As it is written in Psalm 2, "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (v. 1-3). The commands of the Lord are as chains and fetters (v. 3, NIV) to them, restricting their freedom to live as they wish. Thus, from the Tower of Babel on, the ungodly had plotted against God, his Christ, and his people.

But no one can overturn what God has decided: "For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27). And so, the Psalm continues, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure" (v. 4-5). The wicked devices of men do not threaten God's control over the nations; it is impossible to eliminate divine sovereignty through human legislation. God's people can be assured that his plans will be accomplished despite extreme human and demonic opposition.

Since all authority has been given to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18), who also "shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1), the only intelligent course of action is to dedicate ourselves to serve his purpose and obey his commands. So, the Psalm admonishes the people, "Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him" (v. 10-12).

Not only does God control history, but he has entered history personally through Jesus Christ. The apostle John bears witness that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14; NIV). Jesus, who had existed as God through eternity, took on human nature (but with his divinity intact) and lived on the earth like one of us. He lived a perfect human life, and although he was "in all points tempted like as we are" (Hebrews 4:15), he did not sin.

The doctrine of Christ's incarnation had become one of the important tests for orthodoxy early in the Church: "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world" (1 John 4:2-3, NIV). Those who deny the physical incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is of the "spirit of the antichrist." But Christians must believe in God's personal participation in history, and so we affirm that in Christ "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9), so that now "there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

Concerning the relationship between Christianity and history, Professor Ronald Nash writes, "Christianity has always had a special interest in history. Not only does Christianity teach that God is Lord over history (in the sense that history began in his act of creation, is governed by his providence, and will end at his judgment), it also holds that through Christ, God actually entered into human history. In an important sense, Christianity is grounded upon certain revelatory events (such as the Crucifixion and the Resurrection) that took place in the real world of space and time."<sup>4</sup>

Nash's statements are meaningful and accurate when understood correctly, especially regarding the final sentence in the above quotation. That Christianity is "grounded upon certain revelatory events" does not imply, as some believe, that those events alone constitute God's revelation to mankind while the Scripture is only a written record of them without being God's revelation in itself. The correct perspective is that although a number of special revelatory events had occurred in the past, from the Exodus to the Resurrection, the record of these events are themselves inspired by God, and therefore must also be considered revelatory and as possessing ultimate authority. In fact, the significance of past revelatory events in the Christian religion are conveyed to us through the Scripture, and it is through the words written in it that we come into contact with, and are influenced by these events.

Let no one, therefore, consider any revelatory event as somehow more authoritative than the Scripture, since the words written in the Book "came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). And as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." The Bible is not merely a human record of divine revelation, but it is in itself God's verbal revelation to mankind.

In addition, we should probably understand Nash's "the real world of space and time" to say, not that the spiritual realm is unreal, but that he wishes to emphasize the historical element, events involving space and time, in the Christian faith.

Seeing the importance of history to the central claims of Christianity, it is the responsibility of the Christian apologist to contend for the historical accuracy of the Bible. We need to show that what the Scripture claims to have happened, actually happened in history, that the Bible does not contradict any known historical fact, and that many major historical events have been correctly foretold by the Scripture. This task belongs to the field of historical apologetics, a discussion that we must reserve for another setting.

Nevertheless, those who have done such a study have conclusively demonstrated that historical evidence supports the biblical documents, whereas the claims of other religions either contradict known historical facts, or it can be proven that they had altered their

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History*; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998; p. 18.

documents in order to avoid embarrassment. More than a few had removed failed prophecies from their sacred or historical texts.

Some religions make claims that are, or attempt to be, completely independent of history. The significant events of their faith lack correspondence to any known facts. In that case, besides criticizing that very fact, philosophical or scientific assaults against them are possible, and internal contradictions are usually abundant in their writings. It is questionable whether a meaningful religion is possible that ignores history completely, since the creation of the universe itself is historical in nature, and an adequate religious system should be able to explain its occurrence.

The fact that God controls all of history carries strong implications for the historian. That is, if the God of theism exists, and he has revealed himself exclusively through the Christian religion, then only Christians can provide an ultimately accurate account of historical events. Plainly stated, atheists, agnostics, and those belonging to non-Christian religions can never be good historians. They will always fail to factor in the ultimate cause of history, neglecting the first principle (Christian Theism) that is required to interpret historical events. They must limit themselves to explaining significant decisions, wars, and other occurrences by economic, political, and religious factors, and the last of which only on a human level.

Naturalistic accounts of history do not allow for divine control, just as naturalistic science does not acknowledge a divine being as the ultimate cause of all things, although all signs point to one, having illegitimately (and unscientifically) assumed the universe to be a closed system involving only natural causes and effects. But if there is a God who controls history, then historical studies is worse than incomplete if he is ignored in one's investigations.

Any account of history without Christian Theism as its first principle must at best be a superficial account of what happened in the past, since it would be ignoring the ultimate cause of every historical event. For example, a version of Israel's history completely void of God's involvement and verbal communication with mankind, when such in fact had occurred, would constitute a severely distorted view of what had happened in this nation. The brilliant historical summation in Acts 7 by Stephen serves as an example of how history should be done. If God is involved, then he must be mentioned in any accurate account of history.

As Beliles and McDowell say in their *America's Providential History*, "Since God is the author of history and He is carrying out His plan in the earth through history, any view of the history of America, or any country, that ignores God is not true history. He is Sovereign over His creation and 'His Story' in the earth, and is at work in significant, and seemingly insignificant, events to accomplish His purposes for mankind."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Beliles and Stephen K. McDowell, *America's Providential History*; Charlottesville, Virginia: Providence Foundation, 1996; p. vii.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:29 that not even one sparrow will "fall on the ground without your Father." The word translated "without" in the KJV is *aneu*, defined by Thayer as, "without one's will or intervention," and so it appears as "apart from the will of your Father" in the NIV. Such is the extent and precision of God's sovereign power over individuals, nations, and all of history. This and other verses communicate to us God's total control over every part of the universe.

However, such a view of history is not widely taught. Christian ministers should take time to construct an adequate biblical philosophy of history and promote it to their people, while parents should teach it to their children, so that Christians may interpret historical events correctly, keeping in mind the sovereignty of God over all of creation.

Returning our attention to the passage in Malachi, God asserts his love for Israel based on his election and providential care of this nation. But he has also elected those of us who are Christians. Knowing that we are among those who are "called according to his purpose," we can be confident that "all things work together" for our good (Romans 8:28). "If even a sparrow cannot be caught without heaven's bidding, how much more safe [is] the life of a son of man."<sup>6</sup>

It is in the process of reflecting on God's special favor toward his elect that the apostle Paul exclaims, "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). We can be assured that nothing can separate us from the electing love of God, that in all things "we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (v. 37). However, this is not true for the wicked, as the Scripture says, "The LORD preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy" (Psalm 145:20). God has chosen to show us favor. The proper response to his electing love consists of worship, thanksgiving, obedience, and unshakable confidence in him.

"In sum, the Lord's love for his covenant people has been called in question by Israel, has been proven by God in the respective histories and destinies of Israel and Edom, and had to be acknowledged by Israel. God has demonstrated to us his unquestionable love in...his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ...and our duty and privilege would be to acknowledge and proclaim this Good News."<sup>7</sup>

Similar to the people of Israel, many Christians today tend to doubt God's love. One of the best responses is here provided by Malachi, namely, God's election and special favor toward his people should provide us with the assurance that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

However, we should believe in God's sovereignty not only on the individual level; rather, Christians should know that his "great power reaches far beyond [the] borders" (Malachi

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<sup>6</sup> Vincent, *Word Studies*, Vol. I; p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Verhoef, p. 207.

1:5, NLT) of our church, and extends to every pagan society, political party, business corporation, and even the fate of every false religion rests in his hands.

## 5. THE COVENANT OF FAITH

The proper response to God's love toward us in election consists of worship, thanksgiving, obedience, and confidence in him. But the people at the time of Malachi did not have these qualities in their lives; rather, they had broken their covenants with God and one another. And so, Malachi begins to confront them regarding their sins.

Let us first read in its entirety the portion from Malachi that this chapter will cover. It is a long passage, so we will not take time to analyze every phrase, but we will only discuss some of the main points presented. The passage reads as follows:

"A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.

"And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons? saith the LORD of hosts. Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the LORD a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen.

"And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it. And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with

me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law" (Malachi 1:6-2:9).

Malachi directs his accusations against the priests of that day, who according to him, were guilty of several major sins. Just as a father deserves honor, and a master must be feared, God is both the father and master of Israel, and as such should be honored and feared. Yet, God says that the priests "despise my name" (1:6). To accuse the priests of despising God, of course, is a serious charge, since one would expect them to honor God the most among the people.

The argument of Malachi seems simple, but it is indeed compelling. The premise, "A son honoureth his father," is taken for granted in their culture, since even the Ten Commandments include the words, "Honour thy father and thy mother" (Exodus 20:12). The fear due to one's master is also assumed, since a servant belongs to his master by right of purchase. And so, God says, "If then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear?" (v. 6). If a person would honor his earthly father and fear his human master, should one not show the same, or even greater, honor and fear toward the divine father and master? Thus, this initial point may be considered a type of *a fortiori* argument.

However, instead of admitting their guilt, the priests say, "Wherein have we despised thy name?" (v. 6). If they have done wrong, the priests seem to be saying, their fault remains a mystery to them. God answers that they "offer polluted bread upon mine altar" (v. 7). But such clarification does not seem to remind them of any wrongdoing, for they question once more, "Wherein have we polluted thee?" (v. 7). First, God replies, "Ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible" (v. 7), and then, "ye offer the blind for sacrifice...and...ye offer the lame and sick" (v. 8). And he says of such behavior, "Is it not evil?" (v. 8).

The Lord had long ago set forth the requirements for any sacrifice offered to him: "Ye shall offer at your own will a male without blemish, of the beeves, of the sheep, or of the goats. But whatsoever hath a blemish, that shall ye not offer: for it shall not be acceptable for you. And whosoever offereth a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the LORD to accomplish his vow, or a freewill offering in beeves or sheep, it shall be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no blemish therein. Blind, or broken, or maimed, or having a wen, or scurvy, or scabbed, ye shall not offer these unto the LORD, nor make an offering by fire of them upon the altar unto the LORD" (Leviticus 22:19-22). In general, any sacrifice offered to God must be "without blemish." Animals that are "blind, or broken, or maimed," are to be considered unfit as sacrifices.

However, these are precisely the types of animals the priests were offering to God: "And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not

evil?" (v. 8). Lest the priests think that there was nothing wrong with this, God asks if they had offered the defective animals "unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person?" (v. 8). The truth is that anyone would have given the best animals to secure the governor's favor, but they offered to God what was useless to themselves.

Verhoef thinks it best to translate the words "is it not evil" (v. 8) as "there is nothing wrong," thus reflecting the attitude of the priests: "When you bring a blind animal for sacrifice, there is nothing wrong, or when you offer crippled or diseased animals, there is nothing wrong. Do offer them to your governor!"<sup>1</sup> And Paul Redditt writes, "God himself supplied the clinching argument: if they were to say such an offering showed no disrespect, they should try giving it to their...governor."<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the people wanted blessings from God, but gave him what was useless to themselves. They would not have offered the animals with defect as gifts to the governor; yet, they did not think it was wrong to give these to God. Some cower under men of authority, but dare to spit in God's face. Many professing Christians behave the same way today.

One reason for such deterioration in ministry is that the priests were saying, "The table of the LORD is contemptible." The NLT renders verse 7 as, "Then you ask, 'How have we defiled the sacrifices?' You defiled them by saying the altar of the LORD deserves no respect." Remember that in these disputations, Malachi relates God's message to the people, while answering their objections by including challenges fitting to their attitudes and behavior, and so "it was unlikely that these words were uttered"<sup>3</sup> explicitly by the priests themselves. But "Malachi is trying to bring to the surface subconscious attitudes by drawing out the implications of unworthy actions,"<sup>4</sup> that is, "they have said it to themselves, that these words reflected their subconscious attitudes."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the NRSV translates, "By *thinking* that the LORD's table may be despised." That they hold their priestly duties and God himself in contempt are seen in the fact that they were willing to offer defective sacrifices to God, and apparently thought little of it.

The priests consider their service to God "a weariness," saying, "How tired we are of all this!" (v. 13, GNT). Although Leviticus 22:23 says that "a bullock or a lamb that hath any thing superfluous or lacking in his parts...shall not be accepted...for a vow," the people attempted to play the "deceiver" (v. 14) with God by sacrificing to him "blemished" (v. 14, NRSV) animals to fulfill their vows. In response, God brings a curse on them: "A curse on the cheater who sacrifices a worthless animal to me, when he has in his flock a good animal that he promised to give me!" (v. 14, GNT); or, "Cursed is the cheat who promises to give a fine ram from his flock but then sacrifices a defective one to the Lord" (NLT). One who attempts to cheat God will only invite a curse upon himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Verhoef, p. 208-209.

<sup>2</sup> Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (The New Century Bible Commentary); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995; p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> Verhoef, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> Baldwin, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> Verhoef, p. 216.

Although God is "a great King," they were weary of worshipping him in the prescribed manner, and brought to him "that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick" (v. 13). This is because "For them the holy service of God had become a bore, a labor of duty rather than of love, a yoke around their necks," and "The very men who were the mediators between God and his people (Exod 28:1, 43), the teachers of Israel (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; 2 Chron 15:3), and the court of appeal (Deut 19:17-19) were, by their own choice, profaning their office and bringing shame on the name of Yahweh."<sup>6</sup>

The word translated "torn" (*gazul*) in the KJV refers to something stolen or obtained through violence and robbery,<sup>7</sup> and so in the NLT: "Think of it! Animals that are *stolen* and mutilated, crippled and sick – presented as offerings!" Surely, God rejects this type of "worship," and so he says, "I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand" (v. 10). In fact, God detests such feigned worship to the extent that he exclaims, "Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain!" (v. 10, NRSV).

In contrast to these priests, God recalls the fidelity of Levi, who "feared me, and was afraid before my name" (2:5). He says that, "the law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity" (v. 6). It is with him that God had made a "covenant...of life and peace" (v. 5). But the priests in Malachi's day had "departed out of the way," having "caused many to stumble at the law," and "corrupted the covenant of Levi" (v. 8). Therefore, God sent a curse upon them (v. 2), and made them "contemptible and base before all the people" (v. 9).

Malachi 1:11 is understood by many as a prophecy concerning the messianic age, in which believers will worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). That is when "his majesty shall be recognized throughout the wide world, and pure worship shall be offered to him from every nation under heaven"; "There is a general consensus of commentators in referring the time to the Messianic future," and "there can be little doubt that a prophecy is intended."<sup>8</sup>

God had said through Hosea that, "I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God" (Hosea 2:23). He would call those who were once not his people as his very own people. As Jesus says in Matthew 8:11, "And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." The elect in Christ would know to worship God in truth and sincerity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Expositor's*, Vol. 7; p. 713.

<sup>7</sup> Verhoef: "Some interpreters assume that *gazul* is an animal that has been taken by violence, that has been caught and mutilated by a wild animal...This interpretation is indeed possible...However, the meaning 'stolen' seems preferable..." (p. 233).

<sup>8</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 3-4.

What Malachi says concerning the priests may be applied to Christian ministers, since "Then a professional clergy existed, and today one also exists."<sup>9</sup> From among his people, God has chosen some to serve him in special ways, and this is true concerning both the Old and New Testaments. Many misinformed Christians believe that, although there was a group of individuals specifically called to the ministry in the Old Testament, every believer under the New Testament is called to the ministry in the same sense, and that no one has any ministerial authority over another. Any authority one has within a church is purely given due to functional or pragmatic concerns, but all are "equal" under God.

Proponents of this view often cite as support 1 Peter 2:9, which says, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." It is argued that, although not all were priests under the Old Testament, every Christian is now a priest in Christ, and therefore there should be no professional clergy that carries special authority in the church.

However, this is a misleading use of the text, since Peter is in fact quoting from an Old Testament passage, which in its original context, is directed at the people of Israel: "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:6). God calls "the children of Israel" a "kingdom of priests," just as Peter calls Christians "a royal priesthood." Thus, to say that every Christian is in some sense a "priest" does not eliminate the possibility of a professional clergy. In other words, if 1 Peter 2:9 destroys the distinction between clergy and laity, then Exodus 19:6 should have done the same under the Old Testament.

On the other hand, the Bible says that Christ, after his ascension, "gave gifts unto men...And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:8, 11-12). Then, in another place, Paul denies that everyone are called to these offices (1 Corinthians 12:28-30).

Evidently, even though every Christian is a priest in some sense, God has selected a number of individuals to carry special responsibility over the governance of the Church, and with it, special authority. The author of Hebrews says to his readers, that they should "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

However, let no one misunderstand this to mean that Christian ministers are mediators between God and his people in the sense that "ordinary" Christians cannot approach God directly. The Scripture says that there is "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). One who has believed in Christ, therefore, needs no other mediator for such activities as prayer and the confession of sins.

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<sup>9</sup> Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Tithing and Dominion*; Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1979; p. 13.

Edmund Clowney writes on this subject, "In addition to the inspired apostles and prophets, Christ also gives to his church evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Such men are called to preach the Word with authority. They do not share with the apostles in the inspiration that first delivered Christ's gospel, but they do share in the stewardship that ministers it.

"The steward of biblical times was an overseer among the servants. He carried the keys to his master's house and bore responsibility for its administration. He was a servant among fellow-servants, but with authority...

"God does call workmen in the Word with deepened insights to perceive the outlines of sound words and with anointed lips to declare them. There are men made 'mighty in the Scripture' (Acts 18:24). A stewardship of the gospel is committed to such men...

"As they are obliged to preach, so others are obliged to hear. Their message must be received as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13); those who by faith receive their witness will rejoice in the day of Christ's return, while those that obey not the gospel will know the judgment of God's vengeance (2 Thess. 1:8-10).

"The congregation must respect the authority of ministers of the Word as those 'over them in the Lord' (1 Thess. 5:12) to be esteemed highly in love for their work's sake."<sup>10</sup>

Another way to express this is that Christians are equal as *children* of God in Christ, but they do not possess equal authority or qualifications as *ministers* of Christ. They have equal access to God, but not equal power or anointing in ministry.

Such a distinction between the clergy and laity is repugnant to many Christians, who often oppose this design of God on pragmatic grounds or for reason of preference. Although there are those who claim to oppose our distinction based on biblical data, we have already demonstrated, albeit on an elementary level, that the Scripture prescribes such a distinction, that there are ministers such as pastors and teachers who possess spiritual gifts and authority that other Christians do not have, and that not all are called to these ministries.

However, the true motivation for opposing this distinction is often the desire to usurp the authority that rightly belongs to God's chosen ministers. Such thinking is, as expected, more common among Western democratic societies.

In addition, there is the tendency to cheat ministers of their salaries – if a professional clergy does not exist, then one who *functions* as a pastor needs not be paid a salary for his Christian services, but must obtain his income from a secular job. But this is robbing a worker of his rightful wages, and God has expressed his wrath against such behavior throughout the Scripture (see Leviticus 19:13, Jeremiah 22:13, Malachi 3:5, Colossians

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<sup>10</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry*; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964; p. 45, 50-51.

4:1). Such wickedness has no place in the kingdom of God. The Church must correct its members on this sin as a matter of urgency.

Christians today are cheating preachers of their pay – many are underpaid or even not paid at all for their services. What money these people have saved in this manner will cry out against them, and testify to their sin (James 5:4). God will not hold such people guiltless. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:11, "If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you?" (NASB).

Certainly, I do not approve of every form of the clergy/laity distinction, yet *some* distinction is made necessary by the teaching of Scripture.

But I digress – we are discussing the sins of the priests, and how Christian ministers should learn from what is said concerning the priesthood in the Old Testament (besides, of course, relevant passages in the New Testament), since it was the professional clergy at the time.

Many Christian ministers are offering defective sacrifices to the Lord. Like the priests in Malachi's day, they hold their ministerial offices in contempt, saying that it is wearisome and unprofitable to serve God. As a result, they relax the strict standards of ministry God has set forth in the Scripture, and offer to him the worthless portions of their lives. This is evidenced by their spiritual, theological, and moral compromises.

Spiritually, they neglect their private life with God. They are called, first and foremost, to serve God with worship, prayer, and the study of God's word. Their unfaithfulness toward the Scripture is reflected in their theological distortion – failing to understand what it says, they misdirect those who hear them with inaccurate teachings. Theological compromise naturally leads to moral laxity, where adultery, homosexuality, abortions, blasphemies, and negligence of the Scriptures are not reprimanded with the full force of the authority given to them. Such behavior is nothing short of a betrayal of their ministerial office, not unlike the priests, who "corrupted the covenant of Levi" (Malachi 2:8).

Since every facet of Christian thought and activity is meant to be governed by the Scripture, theological distortion is perhaps the root of all spiritual evil, since it misrepresents or defies the will of God explicitly stated in the Bible, with destructive consequences that permeate all of life.

God says in Malachi 2:5 that his covenant with Levi "called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name." This description stands in stark opposition to the priests whom Malachi confronts, seeing that they despise God and his ordinances. A fear and love of God is essential in a minister, and without these a person should be automatically disqualified for the ministry.

Pastor James Montgomery Boice says, "If God's ministers are godly, the people of God will tend to be godly also and even the ungodly will have some cause for honoring the

Lord's name. If ministers are unfaithful – if they suggest by their conduct that God is contemptible and His service a burden – then the people will not be edified, their lives will not exhibit the excellencies of God's character, and God will be despised among the heathen for their sake."<sup>11</sup>

If a person is called by God to be a minister, and if he truly fears and loves the Lord, he cannot remain in ignorance of the Scripture very long. Godly men "find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord, and they study it day and night" (Psalm 1:2, GNT). To such a person, "The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb" (Psalm 19:9-10, NIV). If each must live "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4), how much more must the minister "Be diligent" (2 Timothy 2:15, NASB), so that he may become one who "correctly handles the word of truth" (v. 15, NIV)?

Thus, not only did faithful Levi fear God, but "True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips." And "He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin" (Malachi 2:6, NIV). The proper moral influence can only result from theological precision, since without it, God's moral requirements remain undefined in the minds of the minister and his audience, and any talk on such matters may degenerate into nothing more than a reflection of the current culture or one's preference.

God goes on to say through Malachi, "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 2:7, NIV). The fact that many people evaluate a ministry based on its political correctness instead of theological correctness is an indication of how far their thinking has departed from God's word. Malachi says to the priests that, "By your teaching [you] have caused many to stumble" (v. 8, NIV). Let no one say that sound doctrine and theological orthodoxy are unimportant.

In connection with this, Boice says, "I am particularly concerned about the sermons many preachers offer to God on Sunday mornings. Years ago a distinguished preacher who had spent a summer listening to others preach told me, 'It was all pretty thin gruel.' This is my judgment too, if indeed my own assessment is not worse. Where are the great themes of Scripture? You do not find them in the majority of sermon topics listed in the Saturday edition of most city newspapers. Where is the effort that is necessary to make a sermon say something worth crossing town or even crossing the street to hear? God can no doubt rightly say of many ministers today, 'It is you, O priests, who despise my name...You place defiled food on my altar.'"<sup>12</sup>

Our passage for this chapter, then, clearly sets forth personal piety and theological soundness as the two basic requirements for a minister. The apostle Paul is in agreement with this conclusion – when instructing Timothy on being a "good minister of Jesus

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<sup>11</sup> Boice, p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

Christ" (1 Timothy 4:6), he says to him, "Watch your *life* and *doctrine* closely" (v. 16, NIV). But these are the two things that many are least concerned about, and such is the sinful state of the Christian clergy.

However, let us not think the people to be blameless. It is easy for many to fault the preachers entirely. In the first place, the people of Israel had a history of rejecting godly priests and murdering true prophets. Often, false ministries are allowed to continue simply because, as God says through Jeremiah, "The prophets prophesy falsely...and my people love to have it so" (Jeremiah 5:31). Paul predicts in 2 Timothy 4:3 that, "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires" (NRSV). Certainly, Christians should bear part of the responsibility for the existence of false teachers and prophets. They are the ones who continue to finance them and attend their gatherings. In fact, sometimes Christians turn against their ministers for warning them of false teachers and their doctrines, a reaction that reveals their wickedness and lack of love for the truth.

We should note that, even in Malachi's day, the defective sacrifices were brought to the priests by the people, even though the priests had the ultimate responsibility in examining the sacrifices and rejecting the inappropriate ones. But the people could certainly be blamed for bringing the blemished animals in the first place, against the explicit teaching of Scripture.

Rather than tolerating the people's rebellion against God, faithful ministers must boldly "Preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2), that is, to "speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority," and "Let no man despise" (Titus 2:15) them. We must "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3) regardless of pressure and opposition. Those who are truly serving the Lord need not be frightened or discouraged in the midst of difficulties, but we can be confident that God has reserved for himself a remnant, who are developing in personal devotion and biblical understanding, and will at the appointed time exert a positive influence on the earth in accordance with God's plan.

As for those Christians who long for genuine revival, they should begin to consider those who are good "ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3) and "mighty in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24) as the Church's greatest assets, and treat them accordingly. As the apostle Paul says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17, NIV).

Those who labor well in "preaching and teaching" are indeed rare. It would be wise for the Church to provide the necessary resources to these individuals so that they may live peaceful lives, develop their spiritual gifts, and impart their knowledge and competence "to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). A "good minister" (1 Timothy 4:6) is one who demonstrates personal piety and sound theology, and who is able to impart these to those who hear him.

## 6. THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

Once a person breaks his commitment to God, his relationship with other human beings also suffers. The existence and commandments of God form the only sufficient basis for a meaningful system of ethics, and in turn, one's loyalty to him is the only appropriate basis for being faithful in his personal relationships. This is not to say that unless one is faithful to God, he cannot be faithful to his wife or his friends, but that he would have no ultimately binding reason to do so. If one's primary concern is not God, then it may not be difficult to find a higher priority that overrules the ethical standard one has adopted. But if God holds the ultimate position of authority over a person's life, then the only thing that can cause him to disown a code of ethics is his prior repudiation of God.

Although one who does not believe in God may *act* ethically, he has no basis from which to determine what is ethical, and his system of ethics may alter at any time since there is no unchangeable factor to which he is ultimately committed. The Bible says, "the love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14, NASB), something that is not possible if Christ does not exist, or if he lacks any binding authority, or if we do not believe in him.

The above helps us understand the passage we will deal with in this chapter: "Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously" (Malachi 2:10-16).

Why indeed, did the Israelites "deal treacherously every man against his brother"? As we have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the people of the nation are in a state of spiritual apostasy, with the priests being responsible for much of the damage. Having departed from their commitment to God, their human relationships are no longer being regulated by God's commandments directed toward their personal character. The fact that the people had "one father" and "one God" who made them was no longer morally relevant in their actions and relationships. In the next several verses, Malachi deals with

the ramifications to the people's marital decisions resulting from their unfaithfulness to God.

Verse 11 says that they had committed "an abomination" by having "married the daughter of a strange god." That is, they were marrying women who worshipped gods other than the God of Israel. Baldwin argues that the issue is not one of interracial marriages, but one of interfaith marriages. She writes, "There was no objection on racial grounds to intermarriage. A mixed multitude went out of Egypt with the Israelites (Ex. 12:38), but by submitting to circumcision and keeping the passover they committed themselves to the God of Israel (Ex. 12:48; Nu. 9:14). Boaz married Ruth the Moabitess, but she had forsaken Chemosh for Israel's God (Ru. 1:16)."<sup>1</sup> The problem is that these Israelites were marrying women who remained devoted to the gods of their respective nations. Such marriages "assumed a compromise between the God and Father of Israel and...pagan [idols]."<sup>2</sup> Their eagerness to marry women of other faiths signifies their lack of commitment to God and his commandments.

Malachi says that the Lord should "remove from the community of Israel" (v. 12, GNT) those who "married women who worship foreign gods" (v. 11, GNT). The issue, then, should be handled with extreme seriousness. As Professor Alden observes, "Malachi said there would be no exception to the rule: Intermarriage meant excommunication (v. 12)."<sup>3</sup>

The prophet then turns to another sin that Israel had committed, over which the Lord had ceased accepting their offerings: "And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand" (2:13). When asked why God had rejected their offerings, Malachi answers that it was because they had "dealt treacherously" against "the wife of thy youth" (v. 14), that they had "broken your promise to the wife you married" (v. 14, GNT). The NIV indicates that they had violated the "marriage covenant" (v. 14).

Although some have rejected the interpretation from verse 14 that renders marriage a covenant between the man and the woman, suggesting that the words in question merely means that "the wife too belonged to a covenant with God,"<sup>4</sup> it has been more competently argued<sup>5</sup> that an exchange of marriage vows form a covenant between the couple, and therefore is even more binding than a signed contract.<sup>6</sup> The men were divorcing their wives, and thereby breaking the covenant between them. Malachi views such divorces as "disloyal" (v. 14, NLT) and "cruel" (v. 16, GNT), and concludes the subject by citing God as saying, "I hate divorce!" (v. 16, NLT).

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> Verhoef, p. 270.

<sup>3</sup> *Expositor's*, Vol. 7; p. 717.

<sup>4</sup> Redditt, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> One example of a thorough treatment on this passage, defending the view that marriage is a covenant, can be found in Gordon P. Hugenberger's *Marriage as a Covenant*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, p. 239.

When applying the current passage to Christians, we must first examine the nature of marriage. Malachi refers to the relationship as a "marriage covenant" (v. 14, NIV). As mentioned, some oppose this interpretation, preferring to see verse 14 as saying that the men had been disloyal to their wives, who were also members of God's covenant with Israel. However, this interpretation contradicts the grammar and context of the verse. As Hugenberger argues, "Perhaps the most significant of these arguments was the observation that this interpretation overlooks the opposing evidence of the four nominal syntagms...attested in Biblical Hebrew which parallel the disputed expression...In each case the mentioned covenant exists between the person(s) indicated by the *nomen regens* and the person referred to by the pronominal suffix or additional construct, exactly as is being argued for 'your wife by covenant...' in Mal. 2:14."<sup>7</sup>

Further, the concept of the marriage covenant is not unique to Malachi, given passages such as Genesis 31:50 and Proverbs 2:16-17: "If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me" (NIV); "...the adulteress...has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God" (NIV). In marriage, though no one else may be present, God acts as a witness, as Malachi also indicates in 2:14: "the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth." The relationship between marriage partners, therefore, is one formed based on a "covenant...made before God."

Jay Adams explains that the marriage relationship is a "covenant of companionship," and "forsaking the companion of one's youth is paralleled with forgetting the covenant of God (Prov. 2:17)...In Malachi 2:14...God denounces husbands who are faithless to their companions. These companions are further described as those who are wives by covenant (NASB)."<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the motives and reasons for maintaining that Malachi 2:14 does not specify a marriage covenant, it does. Other biblical passages indicate the same – the marriage relationship is a covenant between a man and a woman.

The implication of marriage being a covenant relationship, and thus the theological importance for establishing such, is that it becomes even more binding than "a legal contract to be drawn up with the appropriate documents."<sup>9</sup> It is not merely a man of authority who stands as a witness in this union, but God himself. This renders disloyalty to the marriage partner especially despicable, such that God "regardeth not the offering any more" (v. 13) of one who "deal[s] treacherously against the wife of his youth" (v. 15).

Another significant implication is that since God is the presiding witness to a marriage, putting the two together and making them one, the fate of the marriage is *not* solely up to the couple to decide, but a divorce can only occur on God's terms. As Jesus says in Matthew 19:6, "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Since God is the one who puts together a

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<sup>7</sup> Hugenberger, p. 340.

<sup>8</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980; p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, p. 239.

marriage, to destroy it without his explicit permission and under his prescribed conditions would be to attack a work of God. Man has no right to dismantle what God has constructed. It is not up to the husband and the wife to divorce, even though they be agreed on the matter.

Such a covenant relationship is not possible between a Christian and a non-Christian. As the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'" Since religious commitment is such that it ought to permeate all of life, there can be no fellowship between believers and unbelievers beyond the superficial level.

The Scripture, therefore, forbids Christians to marry atheists, agnostics, non-Christians, or those whose Christian commitments are highly questionable. Members of religions that sometimes claim to be compatible with Christianity but in fact are not must also be excluded as marriage partners. In other words, a Christian may only marry a person who is also a Christian in the biblical sense.

Malachi says that God has made two people one in marriage, "Because he was seeking godly offspring" (2:15, NIV). If one reason for marriage is to bring up godly children, then it follows that the parents' having conflicting spiritual concerns would experience severe difficulty in accomplishing this goal. While the Christian parent may emphasize theology, spirituality, integrity, and humility, the other may put great importance on accomplishments, wealth, competitiveness, and a relativistic approach to ethics. "The family was intended to be the school in which God's way of life was practiced and learned (Ex. 20:12; Dt. 11:19)."<sup>10</sup> It is impossible to provide such an environment unless both parents are Christians, and ones that are fully committed to the teaching of Scripture.

Marriage is a topic deserving of extensive study. Careful exegesis of relevant biblical passages such as Genesis 2:23-24, Deuteronomy 24:1-5, Malachi 2:13-16, Matthew 5:31-32, Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, Ephesians 5:22-33, 1 Timothy 3:2, Hebrews 13:4, and several others is required to form a theologically informed set of guidelines for marriage, divorce, and remarriage. But for now, the reader will have to be satisfied with the following:

Marriage consists of the union of a man and a woman, whose covenant relationship is witnessed and officiated by God himself. The Christian is only permitted to marry another Christian. If one is converted after marriage, one is not to divorce the spouse. But if the non-Christian spouse desires to sever the relationship, the Christian cannot force him or her to remain. Once within a marriage relationship, one must remain faithful, and not to divorce another, except when the other is found to be unfaithful. Even then,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 240-241.

divorce is not necessary, but only permitted. One who divorces the spouse illegitimately is a covenant-breaker, and incurs God's judgment. Remarriage is generally allowed, and is encouraged or discouraged under different conditions. But again, it must only occur between two Christians.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Some scholars have derived and ably defended even stricter guidelines from Scripture concerning divorce and remarriage.

## 7. REFORMATION IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

The first verse of our text for this chapter alludes to a common objection against God's nature and rule: "Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?" (Malachi 2:17). The prophet cites the people as bringing a challenge against God's justice, in that evil men prospered, so much so that they charge God as regarding evil as good.

The anthropomorphic "wearied"<sup>1</sup> is used in connection with the accusation of the people against God, namely, that he delights in evil men. And, "Where is the God of judgment?" is taken by some as a question that is "tantamount to doubting His existence,"<sup>2</sup> although others more correctly maintain that it is a challenge to the way that God dispenses justice. Such cynicism and doubt were generated by the lack of prosperity among the people, and especially the absence of God's glory in the temple. Further, it seemed to them that God favored the evil men, seeing how they were prospering rather than destroyed.

God responds through Malachi, saying, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1-5).

The reference to "my messenger" predicts the arrival of one who "shall prepare the way." This is fulfilled in John the Baptist, who introduced "the messenger of the covenant." The book of Malachi, then, partly consists of a *messenger* of God (1:1) delivering to the *messengers* of God (2:7) a prophecy concerning the *Messenger* of God, who is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. As Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds."

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<sup>1</sup> Verhoef: "Here the perfect tense has the meaning of a present tense, and indicates that the conduct of the people was not only a fact of history but continued until the present day" (p. 285).

<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, p. 242.

The people demanded justice. Specifically, they asked for the *God* who dispenses justice. Malachi's response is that "the Lord" himself will "suddenly come to his temple." Although it seems that he tarries, the prophet asserts that he will surely come. And when he does, he will indeed bring justice: "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." Contrary to the accusation of the people, when the Lord comes he will be "like a refiner's fire...and purifier of silver." Instead of tolerating or even delighting in wickedness, he will thoroughly purge evil from among his people.

The rhetorical questions, "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?" suggest that no one will stand as righteous. "The interrogative pronoun which is repeated for the sake of emphasis refers to people and therefore alludes to the speakers of 2:17,"<sup>3</sup> thus giving a clue as to the objects of the Lord's judgment, made explicit in the following verses.

Probably to their astonishment, the primary objects of purification and judgment are not those whom they regarded as evil; rather, the Lord "shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness" (v. 3). As mentioned in our discussion of the previous passages, a positive change in the spiritual condition of the nation ought to begin with the spiritual leaders, for it was their corrupt theology and practices that brought increasing apostasy. "An offering in righteousness" (GNT: "the right kinds of offerings") likely refers to the correct manner and objects of sacrifice (contra Baldwin)<sup>4</sup>; that is, the priests would once again minister "in perfect accord with the demands of the law," as opposed to their deviant conduct as reprimanded by the prophet verses earlier.

However, offering sacrifices in the prescribed manner presupposes a change of heart in the Levites, since it was their inner rebellion and irreverence that were manifested in their contempt for the temple rituals in the first place. So, although the text does not directly indicate it, by logical necessity we must conclude that when the Lord's purification has resulted in the priests' presentation of acceptable sacrifices, it must also mean that they would be "offered in the right spirit."<sup>5</sup>

After the purification of the priests, "*Then* shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years" (v. 4). Spiritual reformation among the people occurs after the appropriate changes have been made in the clergy. Nevertheless, Calvin rightly observes that, as in all cases of salvific relationships, "he meant to confine to the elect what ought not to have been extended to all, for there were among the people, as we have seen and shall again presently see, many who were reprobates, nay, the greater part had fallen away."<sup>6</sup> It remains that only the elect individuals would respond to such purification, whether clergy or not.

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<sup>3</sup> Verhoef, p. 290.

<sup>4</sup> Verhoef, p. 291; Baldwin, p. 243-244; Redditt, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 575.

God further responds to the Israelites' call for the "God of judgment," and says, "And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts" (v. 5). He would come indeed, only not to judge those whom the people had considered as evil, but instead, he says, "I will come *near to you* to judgment."

Accordingly, C. F. Keil writes, "The refining which the Lord will perform at His coming will not limit itself to the priests, but become a judgment upon all sinners. This judgment is threatened against those who wanted the judgment of God to come, according to ch. 2:17. To these the Lord will draw near to judgment, and rise up as a swift witness against all the wicked who do not fear him."<sup>7</sup> Being the spiritually backward people that they are, their demand for justice has backfired on them.

The people spoke falsely of God, saying "that he hid himself from them and looked at a distance on what was taking place in the world, as though the people he had chosen were not the objects of his care...when they denied that he was the God of judgment, because he did not immediately, or soon enough, resist their enemies...His answer is, 'I will not forget my judgment when I come to you, but I shall come in a way contrary to what you expect.'"<sup>8</sup>

Malachi then lists several sins for which God's judgment will arrive (v. 5). Sorcery was rampant among the post-exilic Jews,<sup>9</sup> and the relevance of other transgressions is evident in part from what we have discussed in previous chapters. God condemns both their spiritual and social sins. That they "fear not me" (v. 5) reveals "the source from which all these sins flowed, and refer to all the sinners mentioned before."<sup>10</sup>

Having examined the text of 2:17-3:5, let us proceed to treat the topics raised by the passage briefly. This text is important for us today, seeing how it addresses issues such as God's justice, the deity of Christ, and the relationship between the ministry and the spiritual condition of the general public.

Challenges against God's justice (2:17), as Boice says, are "distressingly frequent."<sup>11</sup> Even Christians are easily swayed by feeble arguments and adverse circumstances on this matter. At the slightest sign of trouble, they would question the love and justice of God. Although Luke 12:15 says that, "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth," they persist in measuring God's favor on such terms as wealth,

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<sup>7</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 10; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001; p. 658.

<sup>8</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 576.

<sup>9</sup> Keil: "On sorcerers and adulterers see Ex. 22:17, Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22. That sorcery was very common among the Jews after the captivity, is evident from such passages as Acts 8:9; 13:6, and from Josephus, *Ant.* xx. 6, *de bell. Jud.* ii. 12, 23..." (p. 658).

<sup>10</sup> Keil, p. 658.

<sup>11</sup> Boice, p. 248.

health, and social popularity. On the other hand, we must also be opposed to teachings saying that the lack of such things indicates divine favor.

In John 15:15, Jesus says to his disciples, "I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." One measure of God's favor and friendship is the understanding that one has of God's ways, and whether one is "rich in faith" (James 2:5). The prophet Jeremiah says, "Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD."

Material wealth, wisdom concerning secular subjects, natural strength, and political influence are nothing to boast about. That most modern Christians admire, or are even intimidated by, wealthy, educated, or influential non-Christians speaks volumes concerning the apostasy of the Church. A man does not profit at all, Jesus says, who gains the whole world but loses his own soul (Mark 8:36). Such a man is to be scorned for his folly, not admired for his short-lived riches.

The apostle Paul tells his readers not to be "conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). The emphasis is on not thinking like the world, or prizing what it holds dear, since he continues to say, "But be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (v. 2). What the world deems good, acceptable, and perfect often does not agree with God's standards. To think as the world thinks is to adopt a mindset that esteems dung as pure gold (Philippians 3:8). What foolishness! As the Scripture says, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:22).

On the other hand, God says, "let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me." Do we know God? Do we understand him? If not, we have nothing to boast or be glad about, regardless of how wealthy, educated, or popular we are. But if we have arrived at an intellectual comprehension and full volitional assent that God is one who exercises and delights in "lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness," and if we have assurance by the Spirit that we have come to know him in a salvific relationship, then that is something to boast about. The only type of person who has the right to boast is one who knows God. Knowledge of God is ultimate, and anything else is child's play in comparison. So, let not the Christian boast about other things, and let him not be intimidated by any boasting from the heathen.

The people accuse God of being unjust, or failing to dispense justice. Why does God not judge the wicked swiftly? We may answer this with a number of biblical passages, such as Psalm 37, Psalm 92, 1 Timothy 5:24-25, and others. However, it may be that no rational or scriptural answer will satisfy one who does not know God, since he is one who questions for the sake of excusing his own lack of spiritual commitment, and so is mentally predisposed against God. The so-called "problem of evil" and the prosperity of the wicked distress many because, at least at the time of such mental disturbance, their

soul is not close to the Lord. As Psalm 73:16-17 says, "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (NIV). When he drawn close to God, then he understood.

But let me remind the reader that, although the Scripture addresses our questions quite exhaustively, God does not owe us an explanation for evil, or for anything at all. Any revelation such as what we have in the Scripture must be received with gratitude, as a precious gift of knowledge. The hostility of the heathen against the Bible is one thing, but a disdain for theological understanding among Christians is astoundingly wicked and unnatural to say the least. As Christians, let us inquire of God concerning what puzzles us not with an accusatory attitude, but with fear and trembling, combined with an assumption of God's goodness and justice (Romans 9:20).

The surprising answer that Malachi gives is that the God of justice will himself come to his temple. Malachi 3:1 is correctly perceived as a messianic prophecy, and as such, it indicates that the Messiah would be deity and not a mere man. This is, of course, in accord with other predictions concerning him. As Isaiah says, the Messiah would be called "mighty God" and "The everlasting Father" (9:6).

Psalm 110:1 says concerning the Messiah, "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." But the Messiah must also be David's descendent, and so Jesus asked his opponents, "If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?" (Matthew 22:45) – only if the Messiah is in fact the pre-existent Son of God, who having taken on human nature, yet with his divine nature intact, "dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Here, Malachi identifies "the Lord" with "the messenger of the covenant," who would "suddenly come to his temple," and thereby asserts the divine nature of the Messiah to come.

But he comes only to bring an additional surprise in that he will come to judge his own people. Calvin explains, "They expected God to be to them like a hired soldier, ready at hand to help them in any adversity, and to come armed at their nod or pleasure to fight with their enemies: this they expected; but God declares what is of a contrary character – that he would come for judgment; and he alludes to that impious slander, when they denied that he was the God of judgment, because he did not immediately, or soon enough, resist their enemies...They indeed wished God to put on arms for their advantage, but God declares, that he would be an enemy to them..."<sup>12</sup>

God would indeed dispense justice. But if he comes to judge sinners, and if "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17), then the sins of Israel must also be punished. As Jesus says to those who think themselves to be righteous, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). There is indeed a righteousness that can escape God's wrath, but it is not available except through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). And those who accuse God of being unjust can hardly be righteous. So then, "let us ever fear lest our haste should prove our ruin, for he has no respect of persons, so as to favour our unfaithfulness and to be rigid toward those who are hostile to

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<sup>12</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 576.

us. Let us take heed that while we look for the presence of God, we present ourselves before his tribunal with a pure and upright conscience."<sup>13</sup>

Malachi proceeds to list some of the sins for which the Lord will punish his people, "And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts" (3:5). Alas, these are also the sins most common among professing Christians today.<sup>14</sup>

Many seem to have forgotten that all occult practices are "grievous sins in the eye of the law"<sup>15</sup> deserving of the death penalty. Living under the New Covenant does not mean that what is sin in the Old suddenly becomes acceptable or morally neutral in the New. Divination and all like practices are still abominations in the sight of God: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

Occult materials, or the sacred texts of non-Christians religions, are not to be studied for personal interest or application, but they are books to be either criticized with extreme prejudice, or burned: "And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed" (Acts 19:18-20).

Adultery (v. 5) is also a common sin among those who call themselves Christians. As explained above, it is a sin that breaks the marriage covenant, rendering the violator particularly reprehensible. When a thief is caught, "he shall give all the substance of his house" (Proverbs 6:31) as restitution, but how can one repay the man whose wife he has defiled? "He will not regard any ransom; neither will he rest content, though thou givest many gifts" (v. 35). The sin of adultery is something that cannot be undone, and "So he that goeth in to his neighbour's wife; whosoever toucheth her shall not be innocent" (v. 29). May Christians learn to think soberly on this matter, and remember the words of Proverbs 5:21-23, written in connection with adultery: "For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings. His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins. He shall die without instruction; and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray."

"False swearers" (Malachi 3:5) commit the sin of perjury, but the Scripture commands us to tell the truth even under less serious circumstances. Paul says that, "putting away

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 577.

<sup>14</sup> I say "professing," since not all who call themselves Christians are in fact Christians. Those who truly belong to Christ, though may at times stumble, will never fall completely, whose basic disposition has been transformed through regeneration by the Spirit of God.

<sup>15</sup> Keil, p. 658.

lying," we should "speak every man truth with his neighbour" (Ephesians 4:25). He indicates the reason we should "Lie not one to another" is that we have "put off the old man with his deeds" (Colossians 3:9). One who is regenerated by the Spirit of God, therefore, has the obligation as well as the ability to cease his former sinful conduct, seeing that our inner dispositions have altered toward a godly direction.

The phrase, "those that oppress the hireling in his wages," besides its obvious referents, applies also to those who cheat God's servants by underpaying, or even not paying, preachers for their spiritual work. Oppressing "the widow, and the fatherless" is also sinful in God's sight, since "pure religion," according to James, does not ignore social issues such as the needs of the community (James 1:27).

If I were to give this chapter a christological focus, it could be appropriately titled, "The Messenger of the Covenant." While such an emphasis is entirely suitable to the passage at hand, I am compelled to direct our attention to the relation between the spiritual condition of the clergy and the sins of the people.

Our passage indicates that when the ministers have once again learned to bring "an offering in righteousness," *then* the offering of the people will become "pleasant unto the Lord" (3:5). Preachers are called to "feed the flock of God," and be "ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). When the spiritual leaders backslide in their Christian commitment, many of the people will naturally follow.

Speaking of the "sons of Levi" (3:3), Keil comments that, "Since they, the supporters and promoters of the religious life of the nation, were quite corrupt, the renovation of the national life must begin with their purification."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, W. J. Deane writes, "Thus judgment should begin at the house of God... We may call to mind Christ's purging of the temple, and his denunciations of the teaching body among the Jews, and see herein his way of trying his ministers in all ages, that they may shine like lights in the world, and adorn the doctrine of God in all things... When the purification has taken place, and the priests offer pure worship, then the sacrifices of the whole nation will be acceptable."<sup>17</sup> Verhoef agrees that the ministers were "responsible for the religious decline of the people. Thus the purification of the people has to start with them," although "the people themselves were also included in this act of purification."<sup>18</sup>

So, a spiritual reformation should usually occur through the purification of the ministers. And the two items mentioned earlier remain the most important aspects of the process; that is, good ministers are evidenced by their personal piety and sound theology, without which they cannot properly lead the people.

At the core of a lack of these two things is spiritual blindness. Jesus' criticism against the ministers of his day was that they were "blind leaders of the blind." And "if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14). This is not to say that the people

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 657.

<sup>17</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Verhoef, p. 291.

were better, for they were also said to be blind in the analogy. But God has chosen preachers to open their eyes (Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4), which makes spiritual blindness a fatal disease to the Christian ministry, since both will be lost if the one who leads the blind cannot himself see clearly. Preachers must be those whose eyes God has opened, and as a result are able to lead others to see the truth also (Ephesians 1:17-18).

Psalm 119:18 says to the Lord, "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." And Jesus, while walking with his disciples, "opened...their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Without spiritual sight, a sound theology cannot be derived from the Scripture, since man's mind, though having understanding of the words, will distort their meaning and implications, which in turn will lead "unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

One primary requirement for the ministry is therefore spiritual sight, defined as clarity of mind when dealing with spiritual matters. Only when a person sees clearly will his diligence make him one who can correctly handle the word of God (2 Timothy 2:15). Reasoning from the proper first principles, this person is able to derive a sound system of theology from the Scripture, which in turn functions to direct his conduct in a godly and biblical fashion. And by sharing his wisdom with others, he will "turn many away from iniquity" (Malachi 2:6). Earlier, Malachi has said concerning the priests, "you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble" (2:8). People do not live godly lives because their leaders have poisoned their spiritual diet with false theology. It is because of faulty *teaching* that they stumble in their spiritual walk. And it is partly due to our aversion to formal theological studies that people fail to discern this as the cause to a multitude of spiritual problems.

Even when speaking of adultery, the Bible says one who commits this sin "lacketh *understanding*" (Proverbs 6:32). The Revised English Bible says that he is "a senseless fool" – not that he is especially romantic, that he has experienced too much pressure at work, or that his wife does not satisfy him. Although there may be other factors involved, ultimately an adulterer is one who fails to understand the spiritual, moral, and social implications of breaking the marriage covenant – something that a pastor should have explained to him, perhaps through a sermon or individual counseling.

But what if the pastor endorses adultery? Recall that the sins listed above include sorcery, adultery, perjury, and social injustice. Of these, perhaps only the final item receives sufficient attention from preachers in their sermons and books, and that mostly from the wrong basis, seeing that their system of ethics proceeds from humanistic principles instead of theistic ones. Instead of resisting occult influences, many pastors are even teaching occult practices to their people, saying that they are spiritually and morally neutral when the Bible explicitly condemns such.

To make certain practices acceptable to the general Christian public, there must first be constructed a theology that allows such practices. In our day, such theologies have been produced that permit divination, adultery, perjury, and all things evil. Spiritual reformation, therefore, must begin with the Christian ministers and scholars, whose

sermons and writings direct the life and thought of those they influence. As a remnant of those who hold to sound doctrine gathers, a spiritual resistance toward the kingdom of darkness is thus possible, through Spirit-inspired and Scripture-informed argumentation: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Spiritual *sight* determines a person's *theology*, which in turn governs his *conduct*. May we then pray that God will grant Christian leaders sight to "see wonderful things" (Psalm 119:18) from the Book, and be bold to preach these insights to this generation, so that our lives and thoughts may become pleasing to the Lord. Christians, and especially ministers, desperately need to heed the admonition of Paul: "Be careful in your life and in your teaching. If you continue to live and teach rightly, you will save both yourself and those who listen to you" (1 Timothy 4:16, NCV).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Or, "Keep a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching. Don't be diverted. Just keep at it. Both you and those who hear you will experience salvation" (*The Message*, Copyright by Eugene Peterson, 1993, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group).

## 8. REFORMATION IN CHRISTIAN DEVOTION

The spiritual condition of the clergy is often reflected in the general population. Those who hold to sound theology and practice godly conduct give clear direction to the people, who can then apply biblical doctrine to their life and thought, resulting in godly living. Although biblical teaching without personal examples should be sufficient to command obedience in the people (Matthew 23:2-3), the minister's godly conduct provides additional incentive for them to follow scriptural commands, not to mention that it would be hypocritical for him to deny what he preaches by his own actions (Titus 1:16).

In other words, one who desires to obey God should not require a personal example to model after, but only knowledge of what he commands; however, it remains a minister's duty to be an example of godly living (1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Corinthians 9:27). And without personal examples, some might find it difficult to apply God's word to their lives. Nevertheless, contrary to some, I emphasize that even when there is no one who may serve as an example of godly living, a Christian should still be able to model after Christ based on information available from the Scripture alone (1 Corinthians 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; John 10:4-5; Hebrews 12:2).

However, the fact that ministers carry this responsibility of teaching and obeying the word of God (Matthew 5:19) does not mean that the rest of the people are without blame when spiritual decline occurs. The Bible notes that even when there is nothing wrong with the ministers, the people may rebel against the Lord: "But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted" (Ezekiel 3:7); "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Since apostasy cannot be blamed solely on the clergy, Malachi turns to address the people, and reprimands them for their lack of devotion to the Lord. The passage that we will study in this chapter reads as follows: "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD

of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:6-12).

The words "I am the Lord, I change not" (v. 6) remind the audience of God's immutability – that is, God remains the same in his own being, character, and knowledge. His self-existence means that he is not subject to influence by external forces, and his eternality means that, having no before or after, his being remains the same. His omniscience implies that there is no succession of thoughts in him, and therefore he does not change his mind. The knowledge and decisions he makes exist in his mind eternally, and are not subject to alteration. Neither can God gain knowledge, or be surprised by anything. Since he is comprehensively perfect, positive change is impossible, and any change must then be a change for the worse. But if he does not experience change at all, then neither is change for the worse possible.

However, Malachi's emphasis in this verse is not the ontological immutability of God, but his unchanging love toward his elect, and so he says, "therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (v. 6).<sup>1</sup> That is, even though Israel had rebelled against the laws of God throughout the generations (v. 7), it had never been completely extinguished under God's judgment. This echoes Malachi's earlier argument in 1:2-5 – whereas Edom had been destroyed and was not allowed to rebuild, Israel had also come under God's judgment, but was allowed to rebuild their nation due to supernatural providence.

The people of Israel as portrayed in this prophetic book had accused God of being unjust to his own people, and that he was even kind to those who did evil. They charged him for being unfaithful to his promises toward Abraham and Israel, seeing how the nation was not prospering as they had expected. God answers that he had not changed, but that Israel had "gone away from mine ordinances" (v. 7). In fact, it was precisely due to his unchanging love toward his elect that they were "not consumed" (v. 6).

God then calls to them, saying, "Return unto me," to which they once again retort, "Wherein shall we return?" (v. 7). Keil writes, "From time immemorial they have transgressed the commandments of God...And yet they regard themselves as righteous. They reply to the call to repentance by saying...wherein, i.e., in what particular, shall we turn?"<sup>2</sup> They are like the adulteress described in Proverbs: "she eats and wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong'" (Proverbs 30:20, NASB).

On God's call to "return," Calvin says, "...it would be account of their sins, which, as Isaiah says, hinder the course of that beneficence to which he is of his own self inclined...And he bids them to return. Hence the Papists very foolishly conclude, that

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew verb rendered "are not consumed" may also be translated "have not ceased" (REB). The latter would imply that just as God had been consistent in his faithfulness and love, so did Israel remain the same in their defiance against his laws (Baldwin, p. 245). This work, following Verhoef (p. 299-300) and others, assumes the first interpretation; that is, it is because of God's unchanging love toward his elect people that Israel had not been destroyed, even though they had sinned greatly throughout the generations. However, Baldwin and others are not in error in the sense that both the wording and the context make their interpretation a possible one.

<sup>2</sup> Keil, p. 659.

repentance is in the power of man's free-will. But God requires what is above our strength; and yet there is no reason why we should complain that there is a too heavy burden laid on us; for he regards not what we can, or what our ability admits, but what we owe to him and what our duty requires. Though then no one can of his own self turn to God, he is not on this account excusable, because we must consider whence comes the defect; and how much soever, as I have already said, a man may pretend his own impotency, he cannot yet escape from being bound to God, though more is required of him than he of himself can perform."<sup>3</sup> Beyond this, we must defer the discussion of the economy of God and man in the process of sanctification for another occasion.

Hugenberger points out that the verse may contain a reference to Jacob "in order to highlight the people's sin. After Jacob's exile in Paddan Aram, when he 'returned' both to the promised land and to the Lord, he built an altar at Bethel, and he offered a tithe to the Lord according to his vow in Gn. 28:20-22 (*cf.* also Gn. 35:1-7). When Jacob's descendants similarly returned from their exile, they rebuilt the altar at Jerusalem, but they were grossly negligent in offering their tithes (*cf.* also Ne. 13:10-13)."<sup>4</sup>

In reply to their challenge, Malachi mentions what seems to be an impossible transgression against the Almighty: "Will a man rob God?" The word for "rob," used also in Proverbs 22:23, carries the idea of "plunder" or "take by violence." Although the LXX favors a translation that renders the word "to deceive," thus creating a pun on the name of Jacob, it seems that the Hebrew, supported by the Vulgate, should be preferred.<sup>5</sup> That is, the question is posed as to whether a man may seize by violence what belongs to God. This meaning is also well established in the Talmudic literature.<sup>6</sup> But the idea of deception or "to circumvent" may not be far off,<sup>7</sup> and should not be completely dismissed.

Either way, how is it possible for a human being to rob God, or even to defraud him? One would be foolish even to try; yet, Malachi says that this is what Israel has attempted to do. Just as we may expect by now, Israel responds, "Wherein have we robbed thee?" (v. 8). And the answer is that they have robbed God "in tithes and offerings" (v. 8).

The tithe refers to giving a tenth of one's possessions and income to God, usually accepted by his chosen representatives. This had been practiced by Abraham (Genesis 14:20), Jacob (Genesis 28:22), and was later given the status of compulsory legislation under Moses. Besides neglecting to offer their tithes, they had also robbed God of "offerings," which "was partly a voluntary and partly a compulsory contribution."<sup>8</sup> J. M. P. Smith observes that the tithes and offerings "together constituted a large element in the

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<sup>3</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 583.

<sup>4</sup> *New Bible Commentary*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000; p. 888.

<sup>5</sup> Verhoef, p. 302-303; Baldwin, p. 245-246.

<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> Keil: "The prophet thereupon shows them their sin: they do what no man should presume to attempt – they try to defraud God in the tithe and heave-offering, namely, by either not paying them at all, or not paying them as they should into the house of God" (p. 659).

<sup>8</sup> Verhoef, p. 305.

maintenance of the temple staff of priests and Levites."<sup>9</sup> Israel's unfaithfulness in this area, therefore, implies financial hardship for those who must attend to the religious activities of the nation.

In verse 9, God says that since the entire nation has robbed him, he has released a curse against it, so that "the punishment mentioned in 2:2 would be visited upon the guilty nation as a whole."<sup>10</sup> Verses 10 and 11 indicate that the curse consists in failure of crops, resulting from adverse weather conditions and pestilence. It seems that the nation had used their economic difficulties as an excuse to withhold from God what belongs to him, while it was precisely their disobedience to the law that placed them under the divine curse. As Hugenberger observes, "This negligence may have seemed justified because of crop failure, drought and pestilence (10-11), which would have been more than enough to deter such complacent worshippers. The Lord reveals, however, that these natural disasters were the result, and not the cause, of the nation's disobedience (8; cf. Hg. 1:6, 9-11; 2:16-19)."<sup>11</sup>

The nation had also been under a curse formerly, under the ministry of the prophet Haggai. The reason was similar in category, that they were focused on building their own houses, while the temple of God was far from complete: "Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:3-6). Surely, God speaks the truth when he says, "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (Malachi 3:7). The message of Haggai was also similar in kind, that they were to render to God what he required, and to honor him: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD" (Haggai 1:7-8).

God proceeds to prescribe one of the steps that the nation needed to take in order to repair the broken relationship between them, namely, the people are to once again bring "all the tithes into the storehouse" (v. 10). The Hebrew verb here expresses a command, meaning that God's laws are not to be obeyed or ignored based on one's preference. "All the tithe," followed by a determinate genitive in the Hebrew, means the entirety, and may also be rendered as "the whole tithe" (NIV) or "all the tithes" (NLT). Israel's negligence was in that they did not bring in the entirety of the tithe or that not everyone was tithing, with the former interpretation preferred, since the "whole nation" is said to be guilty of robbing God. Keil writes, "In v. 10a the emphasis lies upon *kol*: the *whole* of the tithe they are to bring, and not merely a portion of it, and so defraud the Lord; for the tithe was paid to Jehovah for His servants the Levites (Numbers 18:24)."<sup>12</sup> The tithes are to be brought

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Verhoef, p. 305.

<sup>10</sup> *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*; The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1962; p. 918.

<sup>11</sup> *New Bible Commentary*, p. 888.

<sup>12</sup> Keil, p. 659.

"into the storehouse," which was a "repository for the tithes attached to the temple and presided over by the Levites (1 Chr. 9:26, 29)."<sup>13</sup>

If the people would return to him through bringing in all their tithes, God promises that he would "open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field" (v. 10-11). Opening the "windows of heaven" corresponds to the nation's need for rain,<sup>14</sup> and "there shall not be room enough to receive it" denotes an "overflowing blessing" (NRSV).<sup>15</sup> And thus, "Without omitting the need for holiness (*cf.* 2:13; 3:3-4), God promises in vs 10-12 that as soon as his people become faithful in presenting their full tithes, the desperately needed rain will come (10), pestilence and crop failure will cease (11)..."<sup>16</sup>

The result of such a blessing is that "all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land" (v. 12). That is, "Israel will then once again take up its central and unique position as 'the favored people' (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 61:9; Zech. 8:13)...The same nations who have ridiculed and oppressed the returning exiles will be obliged to proclaim them a nation which is being blessed by God."<sup>17</sup>

Similar to the situation recorded in Malachi, spiritual restoration in our day does not entail only a reformation of Christian ministry, but also a reformation in Christian devotion. The latter is not strictly a revival of tithing, but a return to God's "ordinances" (v. 7). It means a revival of the study of Scripture and a renewed commitment to do what it commands. In the context of this chapter, the question becomes for us whether tithing is an "ordinance" binding on the Christian. If not, a return to God's word will not necessarily demand a return to tithing as well.

The case *against* Christian tithing is weak. We will begin with Verhoef's example. He admits it "cannot be denied" that, between the Old and New Testaments, "there is continuity in connection with both our obligation to fulfill our stewardship and the promises of God's blessing in our lives." But then he adds, "it must be clear that [tithing] belonged, in conjunction with the whole system of giving and offering, to the

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<sup>13</sup> *New International Bible Commentary*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979; p. 993.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin: "It is the first thing as to fertility that the heavens should water the earth, according to what Scripture declares: and hence God threatens in the law that the heaven would be iron and the earth brass, (Deut. xxviii. 23,) for there is a mutual connection between the heaven and the earth...for when it is dry and as it were famished, it calls on the heavens, but if rain be denied, the heavens seem to reject its prayer...We hence see that God is not only in one way bountiful to us, but he also intends by various processes to render us sensible of his kindness: he rains from heaven to soften the earth, that it may in its bosom nourish the corn, and then send it forth from its bowels, as though it extends its breast to us; and further, God adds his blessing, so as to render the rain useful" (Vol. XV; p. 590-591). Keil: "Opening the sluices of heaven is a figure, denoting the most copious supply of blessing, so that it flows down from heaven like a pouring rain (as in 2 Kings 7:2)...till there is no more need, i.e., in superabundance" (p. 659).

<sup>15</sup> Vulgate: "*usque ad abundantiam*"; Septuagint: "until it suffice"; Syriac: "until ye say, It is enough."

<sup>16</sup> *New Bible Commentary*, p. 888.

<sup>17</sup> Verhoef, p. 309.

dispensation of shadows, and that it therefore had lost its significance as an obligation of giving under the new dispensation. The continuity consists in the principle of giving, in the continued obligation to be worthy stewards of our possessions, and the discontinuity in the manner in which we fulfill our obligations."<sup>18</sup> Right away, certain systematic theologians may find trouble with his statements, but what he says may still sound sensible to many Christians.

To determine the illegitimacy of his view, we should examine the reasons for his conclusion on Christian tithing: "The law declares one day out of seven to be holy unto the Lord, the Spirit sanctifies all seven of them. The law sets apart one tribe out of twelve to be priests, the Spirit declares that the whole congregation has to fulfill the priestly office (1 Pet. 2:9). The law demands a tenth part of his people's possessions, the Spirit translates us to become God's possession with all that we have. Everything belongs to him. We are but stewards who will have to give account of all we possess."<sup>19</sup> In agreement with Rushdoony, the above seems to me an astoundingly ill-reasoned argument, especially coming from what otherwise appears to be a first-rate Old Testament professor. Let us demonstrate to the reader the flaws in his assertions.

First, he says that, "The law declares one day out of seven to be holy unto the Lord, the Spirit sanctifies all seven of them." Does he mean then, that the law does not declare the other six days as "holy"? But it is the law that says to Israel, "Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Unless God is holy only on the Sabbath, his people are required to be holy all seven days of the week. And it is precisely because all seven days belong to God that he demands of his people, "keep my sabbaths" (v. 3). The New Testament has not "improved" on this, for Peter writes, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; *Because* it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16). He cites *the law* as the reason for *the Christian* to be holy "in *all* manner of conversation."

Rushdoony writes, "*All* our lives, days, and activities are required to be holy in *all* of Scripture: there is no difference here between the Old and New Testaments. One day in seven is to be set aside for *rest*, but all seven must be given over to holiness, all are sanctified unto the Lord and by His Spirit. Verhoef confuses the ideas of *rest* and *holiness*; they are related, but clearly separate. Not only rest but work also must be holy."<sup>20</sup>

Next, Verhoef says, "The law sets apart one tribe out of twelve to be priests, the Spirit declares that the whole congregation has to fulfill the priestly office (1 Pet. 2:9)." The verse to which he refers reads, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>20</sup> Rushdoony, *Tithing*; p. 12.

But even here, Peter is quoting from the Old Testament: "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a *kingdom of priests*, and an *holy nation*. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:5-6); "But the LORD hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day" (Deuteronomy 4:20). "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath *chosen* thee to be a *peculiar people* unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth" (Deuteronomy 14:2); "And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken" (Deuteronomy 26:18-19).

It appears that in 1 Peter 2:9, Peter merely summarizes the above passages as declared to Israel, and applies them to the Christians: "But ye are a *chosen generation*, a *royal priesthood*, an *holy nation*, a *peculiar people*; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

As mentioned in a previous chapter, one cannot use 1 Peter 2:9 to eliminate the distinction between clergy and laity, saying that under the New Testament, every Christian is a "priest," unlike the way it was in the Old. Even that verse is a quotation from Old Testament passages, which in their original contexts, refer to Israel as "a kingdom of priests," a "holy nation," and a "peculiar people," just as Peter says concerning the Christians in 1 Peter 2:9. And so, even though God calls Israel "a kingdom of priests," he had chosen from among them the Levites to function as the professional clergy, which contradicts Verhoef, that the Spirit has chosen every Christian to be priests in the sense that the Levites were chosen to be priests. If at that time, a professional clergy existed even though the entire nation was called "a kingdom of priests," how can Verhoef then use 1 Peter 2:9 to say that all are priests, thus eliminating a distinction similar in kind to the one that had existed between the Levites and the other Israelites under the Old Testament?

Concerning this second example, Rushdoony writes, "This is an amazing statement, amazing in its dishonesty and falsity. Surely Verhoef knows that here too Peter is citing the law!...To be a *holy people* means to be a separated people, a dedicated or a priestly people. This the Old Testament was, and this the New Israel of God now is. Then a professional clergy existed, and today one also exists. What Ex. 19:6 says, 1 Peter 2:9 repeats."<sup>21</sup>

Then, Verhoef applies the former examples, with their legitimacy now demolished, to tithing: "The law demands a tenth part of his people's possessions, the Spirit translates us to become God's possession with all that we have. Everything belongs to him. We are but stewards who will have to give account of all we possess." This implies that, aside from the tenth, what Old Testament believers had belonged to themselves, while all of our

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

possessions belong to God under the New Covenant. Besides being false, the trouble with this statement is that it does not explain *why* New Testament believers may cease to tithe, rather than giving the entirety of their income to the Lord.

In other words, if Verhoef is saying that we *only* give to the ministry what belongs to God, and the rest belongs to us, then by saying that all our possessions belong to God can only mean that compulsory giving has increased from ten percent to a hundred percent under the New Testament. There is no reason to suppose that we may give less because more of what we possess belong to God. It would seem, unless the Bible explicitly states otherwise, that when more belongs to God, more should be given to him.

Verhoef's reasoning, therefore, is that Old Testament believers give one day out of seven to God because one day out of seven belongs to him, and the other six to themselves. Under the New Testament, all seven days of the week belong to God, so we give him *none*. Under the Old Testament, a tenth of one's possession belongs to God, and so the tithe. But since everything that we have belongs to God under the New Testament, we are obligated to give him *nothing*.

The truth is that everything belongs to God under *both* the Old and New Testaments, and the tithe represents God's total ownership of all things. God could demand more, since all belongs to him, but he has established the tithe so that his people may render to him honor and thanksgiving, as well as to supply for his ministers.

As Rushdoony says, "Surely a professor of Old Testament should know that the first-fruits and the tithe represent the dedication of *all* the harvest and of *all* our income, persons, and lives to the Lord. The whole point of giving of the first-fruits, the firstlings of the flock, and the *tenth*, not the left-over but the first portion to the Lord, means the dedication of all to the Lord...We have already seen that Deut. 4:20 speaks of Israel as God's inheritance or possession, Deut. 14:2, as a unique or peculiar people unto the Lord, i.e., as His own, and so on. In *every* age, God's elect are His possession in the fullest sense of the word...The refusal to tithe is turned into a virtue, as a sign that somehow, by withholding our tithe, we are giving the Lord everything!"<sup>22</sup> It is impossible to justify such foolishness.

Rushdoony then concludes his criticism of Verhoef, saying, "At one point, Verhoef is right: we are 'God's possessions with all that we have for one hundred percent. Everything belongs to Him. We are but stewards, who will have to give account of every dime we possess.' Precisely, and this is why God requires the tithe of us, our first-fruits. His claim on us is prior and total. We acknowledge that claim by giving God the tithe He requires of us by law. If we give Him priority in our lives, time, work, and income, then we have indeed manifested thereby that we are truly His possessions. If we deny Him His tithe, then our professions are indeed empty ones."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

Perhaps the following illustration from John Piper may serve to clarify the point for the confused reader: "[God] knows there is something wrong with the husband who answers his wife's complaint that he doesn't give her any time by saying, 'What do you mean, I don't give you my time? ALL my time is yours. I work all day long for you and the children.' That has a very hollow ring to it if he doesn't give her any 'especially time.' Giving her some evenings together and some dates does not deny that all his time is for her, it proves it. This is why God declares one day in seven especially God's. They are all his, and making one special proves it. And this is the way it is with our money and God. Giving God a tenth of our income does not deny that all our money is God's, it proves that we believe it. Tithing is like a constant offering of the first fruits of the whole thing. The tenth is yours, O, Lord, in a *special* way, because all of it is yours in an *ordinary* way."<sup>24</sup>

Another objection to Christian tithing comes from Hebrews 7, where it says that Jesus is a greater high priest than Aaron: "This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means 'king of righteousness'; then also, 'king of Salem' means 'king of peace.' Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever. Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor" (Hebrews 7:1-10, NIV).

The Aaronic priesthood is inferior to the Melchizedekian priesthood for several reasons. First, Abraham, the ancestor of Aaron and the Levites, paid tithe to Melchizedek, who in turn blessed him, "And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater" (v. 7). Second, the former is administered by mortal beings, while the latter has as its basis "the power of an indestructible life" (v. 16). Third, the Levites were priests due to their ancestry, while Christ is our high priest by a personal oath of God: "For it is declared: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'" (v. 17; Psalm 110:4). One must admit that the Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to the Aaronic priesthood. Since God has made Jesus a priest in the order of Melchizedek, it follows that he is greater than Aaron.

However, what this implies is another matter. *Why* does the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood imply the abolition of the tithe? Being under the administration of a superior priesthood does not automatically mean that one does not

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<sup>24</sup> John Piper, *Toward the Tithe and Beyond: How God Funds His Work*; Bethlehem Baptist Church, September 10, 1995.

need to tithe. Perhaps one may point to verse 12, which says, "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law." But once again, that does not automatically settle the issue. Why does "a change of the law" necessarily entail that the tithe is no longer enforced? The law says, "Thou shalt not murder." Does it mean we may murder under the new priesthood, seeing that there is "a change of the law"?

On this, Albert Barnes writes, "The connexion requires us to understand it *only* of the law *so far as it was connected with the Levitical priesthood*. This could not apply to the ten commandments – for they were given *before* the institution of the priesthood; nor could it apply to any other part of the moral law, for that was not dependent on the appointment of the Levitical priests. But the meaning is, that since a large number of laws – constituting a code of considerable extent and importance – was given for the regulation of the priesthood, and in reference to the rites of religion, which they were to observe or superintend, it followed that when their office was superseded *by one of a wholly different order*, the law which had regulated *them* vanished also, or ceased to be binding. This is a very important point in the introduction of Christianity, and hence it is that it is so often insisted on in the writings of Paul."<sup>25</sup>

Without arguing over the details of the passage, we can be certain that the change of priesthood from that of the order of Aaron to Melchizedek does not automatically eliminate the tithe. The question should be whether the Melchizedekian priesthood is *one that receives tithes*. And we find that it is, since the passage refers to the Genesis account where Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. Any difference between the Old and New Testaments that one desires to construe cannot change the fact that Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, which is an order of priesthood that receives tithes.

A thorough refutation of all the objections against tithing is beyond the scope and purpose of this book, and we can only offer the above specific examples. For the rest of this chapter, we will briefly provide several other observations that indicate the need for Christians to tithe.

Jesus rebukes the hypocritical Pharisees in Matthew 23:23, saying that they appear to be faithful in paying their tithes, yet neglecting the even more important matters of the law: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." He indeed says here that inward character such as judgment, mercy, and faith are "weightier" than tithing, but he does not in any way abolish tithing in this or other passages.

As Piper observes, Jesus never said, "You have heard that it was said to you, Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse! But I say to you, Five percent will do, or even two."<sup>26</sup> Rather, he says, "*these ought ye to have done*, and not to leave the other undone." That is, they should *both* uphold inward character (faith, love, justice, etc.) and outward obedience, such as tithing.

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<sup>25</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Inc.; p. 1277.

<sup>26</sup> John Piper, *You will be a Land of Delight*; Bethlehem Baptist Church, December 6, 1987.

Some have taught that the apostle Paul himself did not receive monetary compensation for his preaching, and that he even taught against it. But nothing could be further from the truth. Although he worked to support himself on occasions, it was because he did not want to hinder the message of the gospel from reaching those who have never heard. As he writes in 1 Corinthians 9:12, "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (NIV). On other occasions, he did accept financial support from Christians (Philippians 4:15-16).<sup>27</sup>

However, for *Christians* – those who have *already* believed on the Lord Jesus – to deny financial support to gospel ministers, is to cheat them of their rightful wages. To make matters even worse, they are God's chosen spokesman, and so to defraud preachers is to rob God.

Paul reasons, "Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?...Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (v. 6-11, 13-14; NIV).

That on occasions he has not taken advantage of the right to receive financial support (v. 15) does not mean that such right does not exist. In fact, if this right does not belong to Christian ministers, Paul's argument would be meaningless. His point is that he has not taken what was *rightfully* his, not that he has not taken what did not belong to him in the first place. Such a right to receive financial support, then, is for the *preacher* to temporarily relinquish whenever appropriate, and it is not for the Christian to deny it him.

As for those who tend to think that the tithe is an Old Testament ordinance abolished in the New, note that Paul establishes the Christian minister's right to financial support by twice appealing to the Old Testament law: "For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it about oxen that God is concerned?...Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?" (v. 9, 13). Then comes the point of such an appeal to the law: "*In the same way*, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel"

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<sup>27</sup> NLT: "As you know, you Philippians were the only ones who gave me financial help when I brought you the Good News and then traveled on from Macedonia. No other church did this. Even when I was in Thessalonica you sent help more than once."

(v. 14). *In the same way* that Old Testament priests were cared for by the people's offerings to God, New Testament preachers are to receive their financial support from their hearers.

In fact, Paul goes as far as to say that, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17, NIV). This verse must be referring to a salary for Christian ministers, since the next verse says, "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages'" (v. 18, NIV).

"The worker deserves his *wages*" – financial support to a minister is as wages to any worker; that is, it is a sum of money *owed* to the person, and not just given as a gift. To deprive him of it would be as cheating any worker of his pay, an act that is both illegal and immoral. Verse 17 in the GNT reads, "The elders who do good work as leaders should be considered worthy of receiving double pay, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." If a person does well in preaching and teaching, pay him! And pay him double!

One who performs a service for you also has the right to receive financial compensation, although he may for his own reasons give up this right, and so does the work without charge. But for you to deny him his wages after he has done the work is a gross injustice, something that God explicitly condemns throughout Scripture. Christians who pay their ministers well are not to be seen as especially generous or honorable, but only fulfilling their obligations, whereas those who deny ministers of their pay are no better than robbers and thieves.

Now, what we have established above is that the New Testament does not abolish the tithe. Moreover, it renews the instruction that a worker is to be paid for his labor, including preachers. In the light of this, the contemporary aversion to tithing, or even the mention of giving by the minister, is not a reflection of a biblically transformed mind, but a heart bound by deep covetousness and defiance against God. But as Jesus tells us, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24, NIV).

R. Paul Stevens asks his readers, "Does the disbursement of monies represented by our checkbook or credit-card invoices reflect God's priorities for everyday life?"<sup>28</sup> If I were to evaluate your spirituality by examining how you spend your money, what would I think about you? "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21, NIV). It is clear where the hearts of most Christians are today.

Then, there are those who, failing to resist our biblical arguments, claim that preachers are generally greedy, and any talk of money from them is only a reflection of this fact. For support, they cite the examples of those who had been exposed as frauds, those who

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<sup>28</sup> *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997; p. 965.

had mishandled or even embezzled large sums of money, and those who are living especially extravagant lives.

But surely this is a Red Herring. It is like the pro-choicer who argues for the universal right of women to abortion from examples such as pregnancies resulting from rape and incest. How many women considering abortion were raped? Even if we grant all rape victims the choice to abort, how would that even approach solving the abortion debate, seeing that the majority of them are not pregnant due to forced sexual intercourse?

Similarly, for every greedy or dishonest preacher, there are hundreds, or perhaps even thousands, of stingy and covetous professing Christians. And why should the counterfeit silence the genuine? Should not the true and faithful ministers of God speak all the louder and bolder, so that the true word from God may be heard? And should not true Christians encourage such, rather than suppress it? The truth is that those who oppose sermons or books encouraging Christian generosity do so in the attempt to hide their covetousness and defiance, and also to suppress their tormented conscience.

"Every time you give a tithe, you must deal with the desire for what you might have bought for yourself. To give is not to buy...We must fight covetousness almost everyday. And God has appointed an antidote: giving. He tests us again and again: what do we desire most – the advancement of his name or 10% more security and comfort and fun? As Jesus says, You know where your heart is by where your treasure is. Tithing is one of God's great antidotes to covetousness."<sup>29</sup>

I propose that we alter our attitude on the matter, and expose the complaint against sermons on giving for what it is – a glimpse into one whose heart is ensnared by the love of money. *They* are the covetous ones, and not necessarily the preachers. Ministers should "rebuke with all authority" (Titus 2:15) such Mammon worship, and "Let no man despise thee" (v. 15).

It is not my intention in this chapter to establish Christian tithing as a compulsory legislation, whether that is the New Testament teaching or not. My aim is to show that many objections against Christian tithing fail, and some of the passages examined in fact seem to endorse Christian tithing. What we have established for certain is that it is a minister's right to obtain financial support from those who hear him, and failure to provide for the preacher God has sent to you is tantamount to robbing or cheating God. Even with the tithing question set aside, this point alone should be sufficient to demand repentance and a change of conduct from most Christians.

A conclusive statement on Christian tithing is ultimately a matter of biblical exegesis, something that will not be done here. That said, I do maintain that tithing is a good practice for the Christian, *regardless* of whether the New Testament requires it. Tithing is a systematic way of giving that enables one to make substantial contribution to Christian ministries, and it increases according to one's income. As the Lord blesses them, some may even choose to give beyond ten percent of their income.

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<sup>29</sup> Piper, *Toward the Tithe*.

For those who are not convinced that the tithe is a requirement, the relevance may be only superficial in practice (though certain not in theology), since as Boice says, "it is generally the case that in the New Testament the obligations of the Old Testament legislation are heightened rather than lessened. That is, the law is interpreted in the fullest measure...Under reasonable circumstances any true believer in Christ should give more than the tenth, for all we have is the Lord's."<sup>30</sup>

He is correct in what he says. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (v. 20-22, 27-28).

Not that God was not concerned with people's inward condition in the Old Testament,<sup>31</sup> but in the New, "the law is interpreted in the fullest measure" – the concept of murder had always included the idea of hate, and adultery, lust. Under the New Testament, the meanings of these words are brought out and enforced rather than abolished. And so "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10). Having the Spirit of Christ, it is possible for Christians to walk in obedience to God's laws. As he said through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people...I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me" (Jeremiah 31:33, 32:40; NIV).

Through the prophet Ezekiel, he said, "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God...And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:27; NIV). These passages are cited by the New Testament writers as applicable to the Christian (2 Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 10:16).

John Piper adds, "The task [Jesus] gave us is so immense and requires such a stupendous investment of commitment and money that the thought of settling the issue of what we give by a fixed percentage (like a tenth) is simply out of the question. My own conviction is that most middle and upper class Americans who merely tithe are robbing God. In a world where 10,000 people a day starve to death and many more than that are perishing in unbelief the question is not, what percentage must I give?, but how much dare I spend

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<sup>30</sup> Boice, p. 255.

<sup>31</sup> Genesis 6:5; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 94:11; Psalm 139:23; Isaiah 29:13, 55:7, etc.

on myself?"<sup>32</sup> The standard proposed by myself in this chapter is rather mild in comparison. The Christian who resists tithing would perhaps prefer Piper's perspective? Or is he still bound to the idea of his minister working a full time job outside of the church to earn his own income, and still be a perfect pastor?

Having established that a salary is owed to the preacher by Christians who benefit from his labor, the question arises as to the appropriate amount of compensation that should be allotted to him.

Since what is owed is rightly considered a *salary*, the amount should be *at least* comparable to the average wage of the population. And it should be *at least* sufficient to free him from having to earn his income from work unrelated to his ministerial responsibilities.

2 Chronicles 31:4 says that Hezekiah "ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the LORD" (NIV). In Nehemiah's day, he "learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, 'Why is the house of God neglected?' Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts" (Nehemiah 13:10-11, NIV).

In other words, the people are not to provide an amount only to *supplement* the minister's income obtained elsewhere, but they are to provide an amount sufficient to free him from secular work altogether. Failure to do this is tantamount to neglecting the house of God.

However, that is merely the minimum. 1 Timothy 5:17 says that those church leaders "who do their work well should be *paid well*" (NLT), and not just with an amount enough to live on. The GNT says that he is "worthy of receiving *double pay*." And this applies especially to the doctrinal ministers – those who preach and teach.

Even in the secular arena, one's salary is often determined, among other things, by the difficulty and worth of his work. The minister has a task that is unparalleled in both of these areas. He has to soften hardened hearts, convince skeptics, encourage the downcast, teach the ignorant, and bring the elect to maturity – all through handling the word of God faithfully. If done well, the effects of his accomplishments are far-reaching, their worth eternal.

If their work involves providing the people of God with biblical instructions, then how we treat our ministers reflects our estimation of the value of God's word. One who robs ministers of their pay cannot rightly say that he loves God. Therefore, besides the aforementioned issues, when considering a minister's salary we should ask ourselves how much his work is worth to us. The answer will demonstrate whether we treasure God's word "more than gold" (Psalm 19:10), or whether we will trample his wisdom under our feet, and then turn to abuse the one who delivers it to us (Matthew 7:6).

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<sup>32</sup> John Piper, *I Seek Not What Is Yours But You*; Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 24, 1982.

In calling God's people to return from apostasy, we must not only encourage a reformation in Christian ministry, but also demand a reformation in Christian devotion. And surely no such reformation has occurred until Christians begin to embrace the Scripture once again and obey it through supporting the work of God's kingdom with their financial contribution. A spiritual revival would of course mean more than an increase in giving or a return to tithing, but it cannot mean anything less.

## 9. THE FEAR OF THE LORD

In Malachi 3:13-18, the prophet contrasts the thoughts and words of the wicked with that of the righteous. He also provides the definitive answer to those who accuse God of overlooking evil deeds. The subject at hand reflects what has already been discussed through this prophetic book, especially the section 2:17-3:5. But this time, the issue is examined "on a more profound level."<sup>1</sup>

Before we discuss the passage in detail, let us first read it in its entirety: "Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered. Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not."<sup>2</sup>

The exchange begins with God, through Malachi, addressing a group of murmurers (v. 13). "Stout" from the Hebrew is "hard"<sup>3</sup> (REB), or perhaps clearer in English as "harsh" (NRSV); thus, "You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD" (NRSV). The attitude is more antagonistic than 2:17. Jude 15-16 refers to the "hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him," saying that God will "execute judgment" upon these "murmurers [and] complainers."

As before, the people deny the charge and say, "What have we spoken so much against thee? (v. 13). Deane reads "have we spoken" as having the idea of "together," and so to mean, "What have we said against thee in our conversations with one another?"<sup>4</sup> *Jamieson* supports this, saying, "The niph'al form of the verb implies that these things were said, not directly *to* God, but *of* God, to one another," adding that the Hebrew for "have we spoken" indicates a case of habitual mode of accusing him.<sup>5</sup> Verhoef concurs, pointing out that some "ancient versions neglected the reciprocal sense of the Niph'al (*nidbarnu*, 'have we spoken ourselves'), but this is evidently the meaning here...The

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<sup>1</sup> Verhoef, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> The usual division is 3:13 to 4:3, but I do not follow this here to separate the topics being dealt with in this chapter and the next.

<sup>3</sup> *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961; p. 874.

<sup>4</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> *Jamieson*, p. 874.

people were busy with malicious gossip, which was directed against the Lord."<sup>6</sup> And so he translates, "What have we spoken among ourselves against you?"<sup>7</sup>

The content of such "malicious gossip" is set forth in verses 14-15: "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered."

The people complain that it is "futile" (NIV) to have "kept his ordinance." It is also without "profit," they say, to "go about dirty or black, either with their faces and clothes unwashed, or wrapped in black mourning costume (*saq*) [as a] sign of mourning, here of fasting, as mourning for sin...from awe of Jehovah. The fasting, and that in its external form, they bring into prominence as a special sign of their piety, as an act of penitence, through which they make reparation for certain sins against God..."<sup>8</sup>

The problem is that, as demonstrated by the prophet Malachi and discussed in the previous chapters, the people had *not* "kept his ordinance" – not even superficially. Offering defective sacrifices and violating the marriage covenant were externally recognizable acts; yet, they claim to have obeyed God. And so Keil writes, "What is reprehensible in the state of mind expressing itself in these words, is not so much the complaint that their piety brings them no gain...as the delusion that their merely outward worship, which was bad enough according to what has already been affirmed, is the genuine worship which God must acknowledge and reward."<sup>9</sup> They claim to obey God but do not, and when their desires do not materialize, they accuse God of having failed to treat them in accordance with their piety.

The "profit" which they fail to obtain, and so their complaint, is that "the righteous have no advantage over sinners."<sup>10</sup> In fact, those they perceive as wicked seem to prosper, and so they "call the proud happy," or "blessed." Those who "work wickedness" are "set up" – to gain wealth and stability, and "leave a name behind them."<sup>11</sup> Those who "test God's patience with their evil deeds" are permitted to "get away with it" (GNT), and they are "delivered when they fall into misfortune."<sup>12</sup>

Verse 16 then contrasts this group with the thought and speech of "they that feared the Lord." The latter "spake often one to another" (v. 16). The word "then" (v. 16) indicates that their words are occasioned by the former blasphemous talk against the Lord, and Deane suspects that, "They may have argued with these impious talkers, and warned others against them."<sup>13</sup> We are reminded here that in every age, God has always reserved for himself a remnant of true believers who are prepared to counteract the wicked. The

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<sup>6</sup> Verhoef, p. 315.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>8</sup> Keil, p. 660.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 660.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 660.

<sup>11</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Keil, p. 660.

<sup>13</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 42.

verse indicates that the Lord listens to the thoughts and words of the righteous, and "a book of remembrance" (v. 16) is written concerning them.

To these, God promises to "spare them" on "that day...as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (v. 17). What the righteous shall be spared from is described later, but one significance of "that day" is that it will be a time to "discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not" (v. 18). The Lord will separate the righteous and the wicked to their respective fate.

Verse 17 is rendered in the NRSV as, "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them." The righteous shall be God's "special possession" (NIV: "treasured possession") on that day. Verhoef translates "the day that I will *make*"<sup>14</sup> rather than "the day when I *act*," while in accordance with the Septuagint and Vulgate, Deane prefers, "They shall be to me, saith the Lord of hosts, in the day which I am *preparing*, a peculiar treasure."<sup>15</sup> This day is the day of the Lord's "unexpected appearance."<sup>16</sup> It will be a day of judgment, in which God will "spare" those who fear him (LXX: "I will choose them").

It will be apparent on the day of judgment that God treats the righteous and wicked differently (v. 18), with the former defined as one that "serveth God," and the latter one that "serveth him not" (v. 18). This addresses what is brought up in 2:17 and 3:15: "Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?...And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered."

Baldwin thinks the fact that the righteous is "spared" (v. 17) indicates that he "had nothing to his credit."<sup>17</sup> The Scripture says, "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Romans 9:18). And "whom he called, them he also justified" (Romans 8:30). As he wills, God reserves a remnant of people who will remain faithful to him, and to whom he will show his mercy (1 Kings 19:18; Romans 9:23).

The NIV is preferred in verse 18: "And you will *again* see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."<sup>18</sup> The "again" (per Keil, et al.)<sup>19</sup> indicates that such distinction between the righteous and the wicked have been demonstrated previously, perhaps with Exodus as one good example

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<sup>14</sup> Verhoef, p. 312. Also Keil, p. 661.

<sup>15</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Verhoef, p. 322.

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin, p. 249.

<sup>18</sup> Also NASB: "So you will again"; Keil, p. 661; Verhoef, p. 312.

<sup>19</sup> Keil, p. 661-662.

(Exodus 11:7). And such a distinction will be made on "the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (4:5) – a subject we will reserve for the next chapter.

Our passage indicates that those whom God will "spare" (v. 17) are "they that feared the Lord" (v. 16), and these are in turn identified with "the righteous." Therefore, to better understand the difference between the righteous and the wicked, there needs to be an explanation of what it means to fear God. Before interacting with other sources, it is possible to derive much of the needed information by examining Malachi's description of the two groups.

God says concerning the wicked, or those who do not fear him, that they are ones who have "gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (3:7); that is, they disobey the instructions of God's word. In this case, this includes offering blemished sacrifices, perverting sound doctrine, and breaking the marriage covenant. Additionally, the wicked have leveled charges of injustice toward God throughout this prophetic book, giving us a glimpse to the nature and direction of their speech and thought.

For example, they say, "Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them" (2:17), while this obviously contradicts the character of God as revealed in the Scripture. Moreover, they judge God to be unjust, or that he has failed to dispense justice, based on their experience and circumstances. And so they say, "Where is the God of justice?" (v. 17, NIV).

They also say that, "And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered" (3:15), indicating that it is a hopeless endeavor to expect God to deal correctly with humanity. The righteous and the wicked receive the opposite of what they deserve. This is a fact of life and God, they say, is to be blamed for it.

This kind of talk reminds us of the murmuring Israelites whom God had brought out of Egypt through Moses: "And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread" (Numbers 21:5). They have tested God's patience many times with such words, reminding us of the same charge that God directs toward the people in Malachi's day: "Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD" (3:13).

The people complain that, "It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?" (3:14). But they have *not* "kept his ordinance," as the earlier portion of Malachi has shown. God says to them, "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (3:7).

That they had "walked mournfully" before God is likely to be a reference to some sort of voluntary religious humiliation, such as fasting or other rites.<sup>20</sup> However, such is done as an superficial outward act to gain God's favor, without which they would turn against him, signifying their lack of sincerity from the very beginning. As mentioned, they have used harsh words against God, but even when their speech seem to honor him, it is as Isaiah says, "Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). Their thoughts do not correspond to anything positive that they say about him. Or, to repeat Keil, "What is reprehensible in the state of mind expressing itself in these words, is not so much the complaint that their piety brings them no gain...as the delusion that their merely outward worship, which was bad enough according to what has already been affirmed, is the genuine worship which God must acknowledge and reward."<sup>21</sup>

The reason for worship is connected with gain in their minds. Rather than affirming God's intrinsic worth as the reason for true worship, their motivation for serving him depends on practical benefit, or "profit" (v. 14), without which they begin to "call the proud happy" (v. 15). In other words, righteousness is not to be maintained for its own (or God's) sake, but for the sake of expected gain. Such is the picture of those who do not fear God. One would hardly think that these are believers in the God of Israel, but some of them are even priests.

Calvin remarks, "They thought that they worshipped God perfectly; and this was their false principle; for hypocrites ever lay claim to complete holiness, and cannot bear to confess their own evils; even when their conscience goads them, they deceive themselves with vain flatteries, and always endeavour to draw over them some veil that their disgrace may not appear before men. Hence hypocrites seek to deceive themselves, God, angels, and men; and when they are inflated with the confidence that they worship God purely, rightly, and without any defect, and that they are without any blame, they will betray the virulence which lies within, whenever God does not help them as they wish, whenever he submits not to their will: for when they are prosperous, God is vauntingly blessed by them; but as soon as he withdraws his hand and begins to prove their patience, they will then show, as I have said, what sort of worshippers of God they are. But in the service of God the chief thing is this – that men deny themselves and give themselves up to be ruled by God, and never raise a clamour when he humbles them."<sup>22</sup>

They are people who, upon their profession of Christ, seem to worship him with great joy and enthusiasm, but upon some slight pressure or misfortune, they remove themselves from the service of God, and some even deny him. Their complaint is that they have served him faithfully, yet they do not receive the benefit they expect. But this betrays their initial motive, and exposes the fact that they have never served him sincerely in the first place. One who says, "I have served God, but it was of no use," never really served him at all.

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<sup>20</sup> Verhoef: "They have voluntarily submitted themselves to the rites in connection with mourning and penitence to please the Lord, but according to them it all was of no avail" (p. 317).

<sup>21</sup> Keil, p. 660.

<sup>22</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 597-598.

These are those who, as Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sower, "received the seed that fell on rocky places...and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21, NIV). Theologians refer to this reception of God's word as a "temporary faith," called such because "it is not permanent and fails to maintain itself in days of trial and persecution...They who possess this faith usually believe that they have the true faith. It might better be called an imaginary faith, seemingly genuine, but evanescent in character...It is a faith that does not spring from the root implanted in regeneration, and therefore is not an expression of the new life that is embedded in the depths of the soul. In general it may be said that temporal faith is grounded in the emotional life and seeks personal enjoyment rather than the glory of God."<sup>23</sup>

This is precisely the type of religious commitment we are describing – one that "is grounded in the emotional life and seeks personal enjoyment rather than the glory of God." Once personal enjoyment deteriorates and the emotions suffer, a person who only possesses temporary faith "quickly falls away." Initially, the faith and excitement may resemble that of a genuine believer, but time and circumstances will expose the heart of such individuals.

The Church presently contains a large number of these professing but unregenerate (nominal) "Christians." Many of them will forsake Christ in their lifetimes,<sup>24</sup> perhaps due to their inability to endure sound doctrine (John 6:53-69)<sup>25</sup> or adverse circumstances (Matthew 13:20-21).

True and false believers will be clearly distinguished on the day of judgment – no "Christian" will be saved who is one merely in name but not in substance: "The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 13:38-43).

Those who have genuine faith in Christ need not worry, however, since "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34), and only a regenerate soul is able to pass the test of time, hardship, and the preaching of the word. "For the word of

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<sup>23</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938; p. 502.

<sup>24</sup> By this, I mean an outward abandoning of their outward commitment. Inwardly, they have never truly believed on Christ. So, it is not that true faith can be lost, but that they never had it in the first place. Their entire religion is superficial.

<sup>25</sup> Especially verses 60 and 65-66.

God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a *discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12). One who is skillful "in the word of righteousness" (Hebrews 5:13) can often penetrate through the farce of outward godliness, and expose the unregenerate heart within.

Let us make sure of our "calling and election" (2 Peter 1:10), and see that we are truly "in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5). Once made certain, we can be confident that our salvation is forever secured, for God is "able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).

In contrast with the wicked, the righteous are those who fear the Lord (Malachi 3:16). Their trust in him is not dependent on emotional satisfaction or material benefits and comfort, but they worship God because he is intrinsically worthy of it. They serve God because he *is* God; they do what is right because it *is* right. They perceive the knowledge of God as its own worthy end. Their commitment does not slacken due to pressure or adverse circumstances, but their stability comes from God. And since he is immutable in both his being and attributes, their worship and trust toward him does not change.

Those who fear God are those who "thought upon his name" (3:16). The GNT has "respected him," while the REB renders the phrase, "had respect for his name." Verhoef's "kept his name in mind"<sup>26</sup> and "loved to think about him" in the NLT are better.<sup>27</sup> In any case, the righteous love to think about God, and their thoughts about him are most respectful and full of thanksgiving, without any complaints or resentment. "Doubtless this is a rare virtue," Calvin says, "...he who remembers God has made much progress in his religious course..."<sup>28</sup> Throughout the book of Malachi, we have caught glimpses of the wicked thoughts within the minds of those who fear not the Lord, and the thoughts of the righteous stand in stark contrast to the reprobate, who "glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21). But for those who fear the Lord, "My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the LORD" (Psalm 104:34).

Also, the righteous "spake often one to another" (v. 16). Again, this must be in opposition to the harsh words that wicked men have spoken against God. Jesus says in Matthew 12:34, "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." Out of an evil heart proceeds hate, blasphemy, and murmuring, but out of a pure heart flows thanksgiving, praise, wisdom, and encouragement. Doubtless the righteous spoke well of the Lord. They "exhort one another daily" (Hebrews 3:13), encouraging one another "unto love and to good works" (Hebrews 10:24). The prayer of the righteous is, "May the words of my mouth and the

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<sup>26</sup> Verhoef, p. 312.

<sup>27</sup> The Hebrew verb *chesheb* means to reckon, count, or think. Thus, to recognize the meaning and authority of God's name would be a correct understanding; nevertheless, that remains an activity belonging to the category of thought, or something in the attitude of mind. And so, a translation of "love to think about him" may arguably be less accurate in wording, but more expressive in meaning. "Love to think about him with reverence" may be even better, though perhaps awkward as a translation.

<sup>28</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 604.

thoughts of my mind be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer!" (Psalm 19:14; GNT: "my words and my thoughts").

From the text of Malachi itself, then, we discern that the fear of God involves having a proper mental concept of God and religion, reflected in a proper attitude and speech concerning him. It is tested to be genuine through pressure, adverse circumstances, and authoritative preaching of the Scripture. Let us now attempt to arrive at a more detailed definition.

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says, "A healthy fear is reverence or respect. The Bible teaches that children are to respect their parents (Lev. 19:3), wives are to respect their husbands (Eph. 5:33), and slaves are to respect their masters (Eph. 6:5). The Scriptures also declare that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge' (Prov. 1:7) as well as 'the beginning of wisdom' (Prov. 16:16)."<sup>29</sup> This definition is typical, but unsatisfactory.

The examples used here seem to indicate a sense of reverence that implies obedience more than mere "respect." Wuest translates Ephesians 5:33 using the words, "with deference and reverential obedience."<sup>30</sup> Richmond Lattimore, being a scholar of classical Greek, and so (supposedly) carries no theological bias on this point, translates the verse with, "the wife should be in awe of her husband."<sup>31</sup> This is to say that, at least when applied to God, and often not only him, the concept of "healthy fear" in the Bible does not merely mean respect, but *at least* reverence.

Lawrence Richards provides another typical definition of what it means to fear God: "Such fear is reverence for God. We who fear God recognize him as the ultimate reality, and we respond to him."<sup>32</sup> Common to most definitions of the fear of God are the concepts of reverence, awe, and respect. I might add that when "respect" is applied to God, it must imply one that is of the most profound level, and which may not be directed at any mortal being. Any lower concept of "respect" for God is woefully inadequate.

Nevertheless, when referring to God, the element of dread is mostly ignored or denied. As Earle writes, "It should be obvious that 'the fear of the Lord' does not mean being afraid of God."<sup>33</sup> But this is *not* obvious at all. It seems that such a misconception, although a popular one even among some theologians, results from a prior presupposition of what our concept of God and relationship to him should be, rather than what the biblical evidence suggests that they are supposed to be. The examples that Earle gives,<sup>34</sup> which supposedly make his conclusion "obvious," do not eliminate the element of dread at all, but simply describe several aspects or implications of fearing God.

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<sup>29</sup> *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986.

<sup>30</sup> Wuest, *The New Testament*.

<sup>31</sup> Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; Bryn Mawr Trust Company, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991; p. 272.

<sup>33</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 409.

<sup>34</sup> Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 14:27, 15:33, 8:13, 10:27, 14:26, 19:23, and 22:4.

On the other hand, G. A. Lee correctly includes the element of "terror" in his definition of the fear of God. He says, "God does inspire human beings to be in dread of him, sometimes unintentionally (in contexts of revelation or theophany, e.g., Ex. 3:6), sometimes intentionally. Thus He may rebuke the people for not fearing (*yr*) or trembling (*hil*) before Him (Jer. 5:22), and the psalmist exhorts: 'Serve the Lord with fear [*yira*], with trembling [*rada*] kiss his feet' (2:11f.)."<sup>35</sup>

But then he brings out another point that we must address, namely, "To the believers this fear of God may become a problem. Since they (presumably) have been delivered by God from judgment, they should not have to experience the dread and terror that are usually associated with divine judgment. One solution to this problem is to regard this terror as a chastisement rather than a judgment."<sup>36</sup>

In other words, if true Christians are guaranteed deliverance from divine punishment, then there should not be anything over which they are afraid about. Lee suggests that the "terror" element in the believer's fear of God is the fear of receiving God's chastisement.

However, this is inadequate. Jesus is described as one who feared God during his earthly walk (Isaiah 11:2); yet, if he knew within himself that he would not sin, this would eliminate the possibility of divine chastisement. But if the object of godly fear is chastisement, it would be difficult to imagine how Jesus could have the fear of God, knowing that he would not sin.

The problem as presented by Lee, as well as his proposed solution, assume that one must only have fear *about* something, which is not necessarily true when referring to spiritual states of mind. For example, the joy that a believer experiences may not be a joy *about* something, especially not regarding one's natural welfare, but one that is produced and energized by the Holy Spirit through a believer's renewed mind. Such joy is independent of circumstances.

So, I would argue that a better solution than being afraid of chastisement would be that the element of dread is present in the believer's "fear of God" due to an unambiguous perception of God's nature. Specifically, we are referring to God's transcendence as intrinsically capable of inducing such terror in a person, even one who seems to have nothing to be fearful about. Nevertheless, this "terror" is not to be understood as one that produces bondage, but one that causes profound reverence toward God, godly conduct, and confidence that results in having been freed from self-preservation (Proverbs 14:26).

Claude F. Mariottini lacks precision where the previously quoted scholars are accurate, and he makes several unnecessary appeals to "mysteries," but he rightly includes God's transcendence as part of his definition for the fear of God: "When God appears to a person, the person experiences the reality of God's holiness. This self-disclosure of God points to the vast distinction between humans and God, to the mysterious characteristic of God that at the same time attracts and repels. There is a mystery in divine holiness that

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<sup>35</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2; p. 290.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

causes individuals to become overwhelmed with a sense of awe and fear. They respond by falling down or kneeling in reverence and worship, confessing sin, and seeking God's will (Isa. 6)."<sup>37</sup>

While this is excellent as far as it goes, I should point out that the term under examination, "the fear of the Lord," refers to a state of consciousness and conduct that exists at all times, and not only when one has a special experience with the divine. In other words, the fear of God is present in the righteous constantly, and not only upon God's special revelation of himself. However, Mariottini's observations on what happens in divine encounters are still applicable; that is, a recognition of God's transcendent nature induces awe and fear in man beyond what can be described as mere "respect."

Mariottini continues to say, "The God of Israel is an awe-producing God because of His majesty, His power, His works, His transcendence, and His holiness. Yahweh is a 'great and terrible God' (Neh. 1:15); He is 'fearful in praises, doing wonders' (Ex. 15:11); His name is 'fearful' (Deut. 28:58) and 'terrible' (Ps. 99:3)...God's works, His power, majesty, and holiness evoke fear and demand acknowledgment."<sup>38</sup>

The point I am making is that the fear of God must include an element of terror, that it is more than what many would mean by reverence or respect, although it includes these. Also, this terror is not necessarily due to the possibility of punishment, but a perception of God's nature, which demands such a reaction in the soul. As the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says, "This fear would subsist in a pious soul were there no punishment of sin."<sup>39</sup> Further, the fear of God in the righteous elect is not mainly a product of divine encounter or experience, but one of knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:2-5; 15:33). Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding."

It is often said that such fear is eliminated under the New Covenant. Besides having derived this conclusion from false distinctions made between the two Covenants, this view does not accurately reflect the data found in the New Testament passages themselves. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 10:28 that we should fear God rather than men. In the writings of Paul, "fear or reverence of God or Christ is foundational for the Christian's relations to God and humanity."<sup>40</sup> Philippians 2:12 says to its readers, "put into action God's saving work in your lives, obeying God with deep reverence and fear" (NLT).<sup>41</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:11 says, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men."

Other New Testament writings also teach this concept. Acts 9:31 says that the early believers were "walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost."

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<sup>37</sup> *Holman Bible Dictionary*; Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991; p. 481.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*; Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1988.

<sup>40</sup> *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 292.

<sup>41</sup> Wuest: "carry to its ultimate conclusion...your own salvation with a wholesome, serious caution and trembling..." (*The New Testament*).

The element of dread is also retained, as implied in Hebrews 10:31 and other places: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

S. E. Porter writes that, "The fear of God is the most important motivating factor for Christian conduct...and it is what distinguishes Christian behavior from that of others...It is to a large extent the distinguishing mark of believers...that they fear God...For example, Peter says in Acts 10:35 that God accepts people from all nations who fear him, and similarly 1 Peter 1:17 implores its readers to live lives of fear before the God who judges. This God is one into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall (Heb 10:27, 31)."<sup>42</sup>

But does 1 John 4:18 not say that the Christian should have no fear? The verse says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." How then are we justified in saying that the fear of the Lord contains an element of terror even in the New Testament believer?

As with any verse in the Bible, we must read these words in context, so as not to misconstrue their meaning. Verses 16-17 read as follows: "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world." Verse 17 is more clear in the NLT: "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world."<sup>43</sup>

The fear that our love "casteth out" is that which causes one to "be afraid on the day of judgment." But we have already mentioned that the fear of the Lord does not refer to the fear of punishment, since the possibility of damnation has been eliminated with one's justification through faith in Christ. It is true that when one walks in the fullness of God's love, he is confident that he has been delivered from his wrath, and that he can have "boldness in the day of judgment." This does not contradict the aforementioned concept of fearing God at all. The KJV rendering of "fear hath torment" is unclear to many. The NLT translates that, *in the context* of this passage, "If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment" (v. 18).

To summarize, the fear of the Lord is *extreme* reverence toward him with an element of dread or terror. It is produced by a knowledge and recognition of God's transcendence, and not due to the fear of punishment. The fear of God results in appropriate and ordered thoughts and speech concerning him, as well as godly conduct.

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<sup>42</sup> *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997; p. 371-372.

<sup>43</sup> As a translation, the NLT may not be precise enough in this verse. In particular, "our love grows more perfect" is unacceptable, since perfection in usual English language cannot be increased, as it is impossible to be "more unique" than something else. The NIV rendering of "love is made complete among us" may be better.

The people in Malachi's day complain that God favors the evildoers and have forsaken the righteous. The prophet answers that *both* these evildoers and the murmurers fail to fear the Lord, and that both groups are subject to God's wrath. However, God will show mercy on the day of judgment to those who fear him – that is, those who reverence him in the manner described in this chapter. Malachi's answer to the people echoes the words of Proverbs 23:17: "Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long." Let us, then, "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28).

## 10. THE DAY OF THE LORD

We have made several references in the previous chapter to the "day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5). This is a time of judgment when the righteous and the wicked will be clearly distinguished. While the former will be rewarded, the latter will be punished for their sins. The righteous remnant are identified by Malachi as those who "feared the Lord" (4:16), and so the previous chapter focuses its discussion on what it means to fear God.

But now, we will proceed to give a more detailed look at the concept of the "day of the Lord," and the final judgment. Our text will be the final verses of Malachi: "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts. Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto 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 shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (v. 1-6).

Verses 1-3 are usually seen as a continuation of the previous verses (3:13-18), belonging to the same disputation. We are not contesting this here, but these two chapters divide the verses into 3:13-18 and 4:1-6<sup>1</sup> simply for the purpose of adapting the divisions to our thematic focuses. Nevertheless, in examining 4:1-3, the reader should not lose sight of 3:13-18.

In reply to those who make accusations challenging God's justice (2:17, 3:15), Malachi speaks of a "day" when the righteous and the wicked will be distinguished (3:18), and that only those who "feared the Lord" (v. 16) would be spared (v. 17). Having explained what fearing the Lord entails, thus enabling us to more easily recognize the righteous among the wicked majority, we may now proceed to examine what Malachi says will happen on that "day." Malachi 3:18 in fact speaks of what results from the day of the Lord as described in 4:1-3.

The *day* in "the day cometh" (4:1) refers to the Day of the Lord as mentioned in 3:2, 3:17, and 4:5. The Hebrew expression *hinneh...ba*, or "behold (the day) is coming," indicates a future time, yet implying the imminence of what is predicted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That is, instead of dividing the passages into 3:13-4:3 and 4:4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Verhoef, p. 324.

That this day will "burn as an oven" (v. 1) indicates the heat of severe and destructive judgment, as opposed to the "refiner's fire" in 3:2. The main purpose of this burning, then, is not to refine or purify, but to destroy. The object of this destruction includes "All the arrogant and every evildoer," thus signifying a comprehensive procedure. This day, in other words, will be one of severe punishment for the wicked, and none of them will escape. "Those who are called blessed by the murmuring nation will be consumed by fire, as stubble is burned up, and indeed *all* who do wickedness, and therefore the murmurers themselves."<sup>3</sup>

The extent of the destruction is indicated in that the wicked "shall be stubble" (v. 1) and that the day will "burn them up" (v. 1), so that "it shall leave them neither root nor branch" (v. 1). Not only will God's judgment be comprehensive in scope, but its thoroughness will inflict permanent destruction to the wicked, after which "there will be nothing left of them" (v. 1, GNT). Job 18:16-17 gives us an idea as to what happens to one who is left with neither root nor branch: "His roots shall be dried up beneath, and above shall his branch be cut off. His remembrance shall perish from the earth, and he shall have no name in the street." In other words, Malachi predicts comprehensive and permanent destruction for the wicked, with no hope for recovery. "Contrary to the public suggestion that evildoers prosper, that they put God to the test and get away with it (3:15), they will all perish on that day!"<sup>4</sup>

However, God has different plans for the righteous. "But unto you" (v. 2) signals a transition from predicting the fate of the wicked to what is in store for the righteous. God says that for those who "fear my name" (v. 2) will "the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" (v. 2).

The word "righteousness" is to receive the focus, with "sun" as an indication of the manner that it will be manifested. On that day, righteousness will become apparent and dominant, as the sun shining forth in its full strength and brightness. A similar concept of righteousness shining forth as the sun may be found in Psalm 37:6 and Isaiah 58:8: "And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday...Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward."

This "sun of righteousness" will bring "healing in his wings" (v. 3). Within the context of the metaphor itself, the "wings" proceed from the impersonal "sun," and thus should be "healing in *its* wings" (NIV; NASB). The wings, then, would be the rays of light coming from the sun.

Various figurative interpretation have been attached to the "wings" of the sun, from the wings of a bird, to Luther's unlikely "symbol of protection with reference to a hen and her chickens,"<sup>5</sup> to Reinke's interpretation of swift movement. C. van Gelderen offers an

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<sup>3</sup> Keil, p. 662.

<sup>4</sup> Verhoef, p. 326.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

interesting alternative in saying that the "wings" may refer to the fold of a Jewish person's garment where valuables are stored, and thus "healing" would be what is brought about by the sun's wings. In any case, there is nothing preventing the more straightforward understanding of the sun's rays shining forth, bringing healing to the righteous, while the same heat will burn up the wicked as straw, leaving them neither root nor branch.

Another issue of debate connected to this "exegetical labyrinth"<sup>6</sup> of a verse is whether the "sun of righteous" refers to Christ, perhaps even as a messianic title, or whether it is simply representing righteousness as the sun.

Calvin, in agreement with the general consensus of the Church fathers and early commentators, writes, "There is indeed no doubt but that Malachi calls Christ the Sun of righteousness,"<sup>7</sup> saying that it is "a most suitable term"<sup>8</sup> for the Messiah.

In his *Dictionary of Bible Types*, Walter L. Wilson concedes to this interpretation, saying that, "This beautiful type represents the Lord Jesus when He shall return to this earth in power to heal all human woes, and to remove all curses from the earth."<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, Keil, acknowledging that the messianic interpretation "is founded upon a truth, viz., that the coming of Christ brings justice and salvation," nevertheless finds that "the context does not sustain the personal view, but simply the idea that righteousness itself is regarded as a sun."<sup>10</sup> Alden adds, "'Sun' is capitalized in the KJV... This capitalization has sustained the idea that the figure is a messianic one. No use is made of this figure, however, in the NT. For that reason most translations have not capitalized 'sun.'"<sup>11</sup>

I doubt, however, that *every* true messianic type in the Old Testament *must* be directly recognized in the New Testament for it to be legitimate, and it is questionable that Bible translators do not capitalize "sun" as a denial of its messianic implications *simply* because it is not used as a messianic designation in the NT. In other words, if one were to say that the "sun of righteousness" does not refer to Christ, he must do so on grounds other than that the New Testament does not repeat this imagery in reference to Christ. Alden, therefore, is at best imprecise on this point, whereas Keil's argument from context, if established, is much more credible.

In addition, one must not ignore the possible allusion to the winged sun disk pictured in a number of Eastern cultures. But even if the sun disk is used as a type, its meaning must

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>7</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 617.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 617.

<sup>9</sup> Walter L. Wilson, *A Dictionary of Bible Types*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., p. 1999; p. 402.

<sup>10</sup> Keil, p. 662.

<sup>11</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985; p. 702.

be ascertained from the context of our passage, since even in the ancient cultures and religions, the symbol represents different and often contradictory concepts.<sup>12</sup>

Without taking time to resolve the issue conclusively, let us point out that the above options need not conflict. It may be that a common imagery taken from the cultures is here used to, in the context of the passage, represent righteousness as the sun, and which figuratively points to Christ. In him is the ultimate fulfillment of judgment against the wicked and healing for the righteous. The consensus for a christological understanding of the image is strong, while the other viewpoints need not contradict, but simply add meaning and background to it. Nevertheless, any figurative interpretation should not deny the apparent meaning, that righteousness is here depicted as the sun.

Whereas on that day God will destroy the wicked forever, he will uphold the righteous. And so "the sun of righteousness" comes with "*healing* in its wings" (4:2). God will heal the wounds inflicted by the wicked upon those who fear the Lord. The semantic domain of the Hebrew word implies a healing in the most comprehensive sense; that is, it refers not only to the opposite of disease, but also of disaster and trouble. It is the basis of an abundance of peace and life.<sup>13</sup> "See then in what way he meant there would be healing in the wings of Christ; for the darkness would be dissipated, and the heavens would be free from clouds, so as to exhilarate the minds of the godly."<sup>14</sup>

The coming of the Lord and the dawning of righteous at its full strength would produce effects represented by two imageries. First, the righteous "shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall" (4:2). This is to say that as calves are "freed from their stall in the spring and allowed for the first time to leap about and exercise their legs,"<sup>15</sup> that *day* would be a time of great liberty and joy for those who fear the Lord.

Verse 3 continues to address the righteous, saying, "And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts." Not only will the state of existence of the righteous be changed drastically for the better, but their relationship with the wicked will also undergo an "amazing reversal."<sup>16</sup> The wicked, having been made into "ashes" under the heat of God's judgment, shall be trampled upon by the righteous, which is an image taken from the custom of war, where the victor puts his foot on the neck of the conquered.<sup>17</sup> Paul writes, "And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20, NASB). Stepping on one's enemy as representative of triumph is a "symbol familiar, probably, in

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<sup>12</sup> Verhoef: "The sun-god Shamash was the god of righteousness and the protector of the poor...The sun disk of the Assyrians and Persians was a symbol of dominion and therefore a sign of violence and destruction. Under the wings of Malachi's sun no violence or destruction will be found, but healing, redemption, everlasting life, and peace" (p. 331). Verhoef is correct here only if the activity of the sun does not apply to 4:1; otherwise, the same sun that scorches and destroys the wicked is the same sun that heals the righteous with its rays.

<sup>13</sup> Verhoef, p. 330.

<sup>14</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 620.

<sup>15</sup> Redditt, p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> Baldwin, p. 250.

<sup>17</sup> See Joshua 10:24; 2 Samuel 22:41; Psalm 91:13; Psalm 110:1.

all languages to express not only the completeness of the defeat, but the abject humility of the conquered."<sup>18</sup>

Verse 4 begins the final section of Malachi – a passage which, in its canonical order, also concludes the Old Testament in the Greek and Latin versions.<sup>19</sup> "Remember" is used thirteen times in Deuteronomy to bring Israel's attention to God's works of deliverance.<sup>20</sup> Here, the object of such remembrance is the "law of Moses" (v. 4). The word in this context refers to both an intellectual recollection of the Law and obedience to it. They are to observe what is written in the law of Moses, with mentally bringing its words to mind as its necessary prerequisite.

"Horeb" (v. 4) is synonymous with Sinai, where Moses received the Law as given by God. The specific usage may arguably contain some theological and textual significance, which we will not discuss. Some modern versions (e.g. NLT and GNT) simply translate the word as "Mount Sinai." The covenant includes "decrees and ordinances" (v. 4),<sup>21</sup> and was made with "all Israel" (v. 4), rendering conformity to it by the whole people compulsory.

A thorough discussion of the Law's role in the Christian life is beyond the purpose of this book. For now, let it suffice to say that even the Pentecostal scholar Donald C. Stamps writes, "Faith in God always includes an attitude of obedience to the Lord from the heart. Believers in Christ are still required to follow the moral demands of the OT law as well as the commands of Christ."<sup>22</sup>

I will add to this that Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The New Testament *fulfills* the Old, but does not *abolish* the word of God. Paul writes that, "love is the *fulfilling* of the law" (Romans 13:10), and not the *replacing* of it. Walking in love does not mean that one *violates* the law, but that one *fulfills* it. And the principle behind Malachi 4:4, as well as the words of Jesus in John 14:15, demand that Christians obey the entirety of Scripture today. Many misunderstand the role of law in the Christian life, and often result in a theology of Antinomianism, or lawlessness. But further clarification on this must await another setting.

The important instruction in verse 4 serves as a strong warning to prepare for the Day of the Lord, when the wicked will be destroyed. The prophet, in other words, urges his hearers to "return" (3:7) to God's "ordinances" (3:7), so that they would not suffer ultimate loss on the day of judgment that will surely come. This day is said to be "great and dreadful" (v. 5).<sup>23</sup> The reason it is so described does not need to be further explained, as our study so far has shown us that it will be a time of judgment for the wicked, those who live in defiance of God.

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<sup>18</sup> Jamieson, p. 1183.

<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew version places the Writings at the end, not the Prophets.

<sup>20</sup> Baldwin, p. 251.

<sup>21</sup> Verhoef, p. 337.

<sup>22</sup> *The Full Life Study Bible* (NIV); Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House; Life Publishers International, 1992; p. 1395.

<sup>23</sup> See also Joel 2:31.

Verses 5-6 also tell us that, before the Day of the Lord arrives, God would send "Elijah the prophet" (v. 5). That Elijah is an appropriate choice as a type of the coming prophet is seen in that he "served as a moral catalyst to the nation. No other prophet so dramatically changed the attitude of his contemporaries, nor so influenced the destiny of the nation."<sup>24</sup> He was a spiritual reformer whom God had given power and boldness to challenge the apostasy of his time.

It is noteworthy that he represents a type of minister almost exactly opposite to what many in our current culture would welcome as from God. From contemporary perspective, Elijah was narrow-minded, intolerant, judgmental, violent, and fanatical. Rather than trying to "learn" from other religions, he challenged the false prophets to a supernatural duel (1 Kings 18). He had no respect for those who do not worship Israel's God. In matters of religion, he upholds the law of non-contradiction, that two contradictory belief systems cannot both be true. And so he said, "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

Likewise, the apostle Paul understood that Christ and Belial are opposed to each other, just as light has no communion with darkness, and righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). The exclusive claims of Christianity cannot be made compatible to any other religion. If we can establish that Christianity is true, then all other religions must be false, and such has been conclusively established by Christian apologists. And if the Christian Scripture is the sole source of religious truth, which in turn governs all other categories of thought and science, then complete obedience is owed to what it says. Such is the spirit of Elijah.

But even many self-proclaimed "Christian" ministers today do not follow after Elijah and Paul. Rather, they conform to the current ideologies of this world, something which the apostle explicitly prohibits (Romans 12:2). These are false prophets and traitors of the faith; they are subject to the same judgment that the wicked will receive on the Day of the Lord.

The prediction of Elijah's arrival as the Lord's forerunner was fulfilled in John the Baptist. The angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19) announced to Zechariah that he would have a son, who would turn many back to the Lord, "And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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 1:17). Note that these words contain a clear reference to Malachi 4:5-6, signaling that the ministry of John is the fulfillment of the former prophet's prediction.

John 1:21 may cause some confusion for certain readers. In it, it seems that John the Baptist denies that he was Elijah: "Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not." However, right after this, he answers that he is to be identified with the person prophesied by Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as

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<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, p. 252.

said the prophet Esaias" (v. 23). Since the forerunner, or he who prepares the way of the Lord, has always been understood to be Elijah, John's words constitute an admission that he was indeed Elijah. In John 1:21, he is denying that he was the *historical* Elijah; that is, he denied that he was the same Elijah who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire having returned to the earth. As Gabriel has said earlier, John's ministry was to be one exhibiting the "*spirit and power of Elijah*," and not that he was to be the historical Elijah returned in person.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus, along with his disciples, also recognized John the Baptist as fulfilling the prophecy concerning Elijah: "But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist" (Matthew 17:12-13). There should be no question, then, but that John the Baptist fulfilled Malachi's prediction in Malachi 4:5-6.

Malachi also predicted that this Elijah would "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Gabriel repeats this to Zechariah, although he omits "the heart of the children to their fathers," but replacing that with the explanatory words, "the disobedient to the wisdom of the just" (Luke 1:17).

The task described here is not simply one of "bridging the generation gap."<sup>26</sup> But "the fathers are rather the ancestors of the Israelitish nation, the patriarchs, and generally the pious forefathers, such as David and the godly men of his time. The sons or children are the degenerate descendants of Malachi's own time and the succeeding ages...This chasm between them Elijah is to fill up...so that they will be like-minded with the pious fathers."<sup>27</sup>

And John the Baptist did fulfill such a ministry: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand...Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6). His task was to make preparation for the coming of Christ, and to "make his paths straight" (v. 3).<sup>28</sup>

In addition, John's prediction of the one who would come after him corresponds to Malachi's description of the "messenger of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1) whom he said would follow God's "messenger" (v. 1). For example, corresponding to Malachi 3:1-3 and 3:16-4:6, John says in Luke 3:16-17, "one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat

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<sup>25</sup> See also Matthew 14:1-2, 16:13-16.

<sup>26</sup> Baldwin, p. 252.

<sup>27</sup> Keil, p. 664-665.

<sup>28</sup> Unless God sends Elijah to perform the foretold ministry, he would "come and smite the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). "Elijah will thereby prepare the way of the Lord to His people, that at His coming He may not smite the land with the ban. The ban involves extermination" (Keil, p. 665).

into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable." Then, he says that his words are to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth: "John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me" (John 1:29-30).

There is only one more issue requiring an explanation, namely, the cataclysmic events in Malachi did not seem to have occurred during the ministry of Jesus, at least not in their entirety. This is accounted for by realizing that there are two comings of the Lord Jesus, and although we must maintain that the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies had *begun* in his first coming, the ultimate fulfillment of all messianic and eschatological expectations will occur at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In other words, "The day of the Lord, which they announce as the day of judgment, commenced with the appearance on earth of Christ, the incarnate Logos; and Christ Himself declared that He had come into the world for judgment (John 9:39, cf. 3:19 and 12:40), viz., for the judgment of separating the believing from the ungodly, to give eternal life to those who believe on His name, and to bring death and condemnation to unbelievers...And just as the judgment commenced at that time so far as Israel was concerned, so does it also begin in relation to all peoples and kingdoms of this earth with the first preaching of Christ among them, and will continue throughout all the centuries during which the kingdom spreads upon earth, until it shall be ultimately completed in the universal judgment at the visible second coming of the Lord at the last day."<sup>29</sup>

During the above exegetical process, we have provided a thorough exposition of our passage, along with its implications for the Christian. Therefore, a lengthy topical treatment is not necessary; rather, we will conclude by providing a brief summary of the various issues brought up in this book, and relate them to the topic of this chapter.

The book of Malachi exhibits wonderful unity and coherence. "It is creative in its form, clear in its message, and compelling in its argumentation."<sup>30</sup> It begins with an affirmation of its divine origin, that what follows is "the word of the LORD" (1:1).

It proceeds to show that God's people have a relationship with him based on his divine election. Not only is he sovereign over individuals, but he also possesses exact control over all historical events and the destiny of every nation. Having been chosen by him to be recipients of his mercy, our response should be one of gratitude and extreme reverence.

The people's relationship with God is hindered when the spiritual leadership fails to carry out their duties faithfully, with unsound theology as particularly destructive to a people's spiritual health.

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<sup>29</sup> Keil, p. 666.

<sup>30</sup> Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*; p. 441.

When our relationship with God is not right, our relationship and integrity in human relationships also suffer. Ethics and marriage vows become less meaningful, or even altogether meaningless, unless they have their foundation in God's being and nature.

The restoration of our relationship with God and the prosperity of the Church first require a reformation among the clergy. When sound theology and godly conduct become the norm in Christian ministry, many of God's people will follow accordingly. But a full restoration of the Church also requires the people's return to God's ordinances, with one important area being their financial contribution to the ministry through the tithe.

Throughout the book of Malachi, the wicked have leveled charges of injustice and unfaithfulness against God. Although the Scripture contains answers to such challenges from various perspectives, Malachi gives one that is eschatological in nature, or one that is rooted at the end of human history as we now know it. At the present, it may seem that the evil often prosper, and the righteous are not always treated with grace, but Malachi says that all things will be made right and full justice will be rendered when the Day of the Lord comes.

As Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:24-25, "Remember that some people lead sinful lives, and everyone knows they will be judged. But there are others whose sin will not be revealed until later. In the same way, everyone knows how much good some people do, but there are others whose good works won't be known until later" (NLT). Exact justice may not always be rendered in this life, but God's ultimate answer to this is that all will be made right and every account will be settled at the final judgment.

And "the seriousness of the day of judgment will not only be the unexpectedness of its coming, but also the surprising manner in which it will expose every reckless word and faithless deed. All the resentment of the 'speakers' will be wiped away, and all the insolent questions – Wherein? Whereby? In what manner? – will finally be answered."<sup>31</sup>

On that day, there will be a clear distinction between the wicked and the righteous. "The fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" (Revelation 21:8). As for one who fears God's name (Malachi 4:2), he says that he will spare him "as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (3:17).

Calvin explains well as to what it means to fear the *name* of God: "This fear is what peculiarly belongs to true religion, so that men submit to God, though he is invisible, though he does not address them face to face...When therefore men of their own accord reverence the glory of God, and acknowledge that the world is governed by him, and that they are under his authority, this is a real evidence of true religion: and this is what the Prophet means by *name*. Hence they who fear the name of God, desire not to draw him down from heaven, nor seek manifest signs of his presence, but suffer their faith to be thus tried, so that they adore and worship God, though they see him not face to face..."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Verhoef, p. 326-327.

<sup>32</sup> *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 620-621.

One who fears God does not require him to "openly show his hand armed with scourges"<sup>33</sup> before he submits, but will obey what he has set forth in the Scripture without defiance or conditions.

To those who will serve him faithfully in this manner, who will fear him and obey his word without doubt, murmuring, or resentment, he promises that, "I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Revelation 21:7). And so, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.