

## **Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation The importance of affirming God's purposes**

**Intro:** This is our fourth lesson on Malachi and we have been seen that God addressed Israel during a time of spiritual stagnation and malaise. We can learn a lot from listening in on the dialogue between God and His people. First we can see the causes of this condition. Second we can see how to prevent or overcome it. That information can be useful to us, since we too may face the same challenge.

**In the first dialogue we see that Israel had lost their sense of God's love and thus began to question their special relationship to God.**

**In the second dialogue we saw that priests had lost their sense of God's greatness and the sense of privilege they had in serving in God's house and in being His messengers to the people.**

**Now let's consider the third dialogue (2:10-16)**

### **The third dialogue (addressed to Israel's men)**

*"Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers? Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord which He loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. As for the man who does this, may the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the Lord of hosts.*

*And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously." (Mal. 2:10-16)*

### **Thinking through the conversation**

**This is a very challenging and complex text. It is difficult to translate from Hebrew, since it appears that at least in some places the ancient Hebrew text might have been corrupted in transmission at v. 15-16. That is why you will see various readings in different versions as the translators seek to determine the reading that best fits the context and flow of thought. Because of the difficulties in the Hebrew, some**

**translators have resorted to amending the text before making their translation.**

**This time God's message is addressed specifically to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Malachi addresses Israel's wrong in the strongest terms:**

They have dealt "treacherously."

An "abomination" has been committed in Israel.

..."profaned the covenant" (lit. profaned the holiness of the Lord that He loves")

**But what exactly has Judah done that is so offensive to God?**

"Judah has married the daughter of a foreign god."

Some commentators have understood this figuratively as an statement of the practice of idolatry. Others that this is a reference to marriage to women who worship false gods. I prefer the latter. God had explicitly warned about this problem: *"Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, lest it become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim—for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God—lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they play the harlot with their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invite you to eat of his sacrifice; and you take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods, and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods. (Ex. 34:12-16)*

Ironically, if we assume a later date for Malachi, the people had returned to a practice that had been strongly rebuked and corrected under the leadership of Nehemiah (Cf. 13:23-27).

Moreover these Jewish men had apparently divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry these foreign women.

The act itself was considered by God to be an act of treachery against "the wife of their youth," one who their wife "by covenant."

There was no justification for the way these women had been treated.

What the Israelite men were doing was just an extension of what Malachi has already revealed.

They had lost sight of their calling as God's chosen people who He loves.

They have seen the priests disregard the privilege of worshipping God and teaching His word.

If there is nothing special about God's people and their relationship with Him, then why worry about bringing into the nation women who are idolaters?

**What did God find so offensive about Judah's actions?**

First it violated the unity of the God's people as descendants of Abraham!

*Do we not all have one father?*

This is not "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man;" but a reminder of the unique place Israel had as the people of God; and how each Israelite should be considered a brother or sister.

It ignored the brotherly love that should characterize the people of God because of their common heritage and faith.

*Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother...?*

How can you so treat someone who is a part of the family of God (Abraham)?

It violated the covenant to honor one God who brought the nation into existence as His people.

*Has not one God created us?*

Again the reference is not merely to the original creation of all mankind; but the special creation of Israel as a people. By marrying idolatrous women, the Israelite men were showing disregard for the special relationship they had with God as a people created by Him for His glory.

*"and thus profane the sanctuary of the Lord"*

Idolatry was of course a source of defilement to the people of Israel and would defile God's temple.

It challenged the divine purposes to preserve a holy people in order to carry out His purposes through them.

Though v. 15 is difficult to understand, the reference to a "godly offspring" is consonant with the general tenor of the text.

### **What else did God find so offensive about Judah's behavior?**

While engaging in these ungodly behaviors contrary to His commands, they continue to bring their sacrifices to the Lord as if they want to honor Him!

*As for the man who does this, may the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the LORD of hosts.*

As for God, there was no defense for this practice. It was blatantly sinful and a profanation of His sanctuary. He would not allow those who married the unclean to come into His holy place with their offerings and accept them.

And when God didn't answer their prayers or accept their worship they simply plead with tears as if they can't understand why God would reject them.

*"And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He*

*no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.*

(Some suggest that the tears were those of the wives who cry out to God for justice due to their treacherous treatment.) However, it seems that those who weep are those who make the unaccepted sacrifices. It is superb example of hypocrisy to violate God's will, offer a sacrifice, and then cry because God won't accept it.

### **What did God expect them to do about it?**

To take heed to their spirit

Their whole disposition toward God and toward their wives was wrong. It is as if there is not even a modicum of feeling in them toward the women they have cruelly put away.

Thus God urges them to "take heed" to their spirit so that they would recognize

...how their actions profaned the covenant of God

...the grave sin of treachery they were committing against their wives.

...the great hypocrisy being manifested in their sacrifices and tears.

...how they had departed from God's view of marriage.

(The expression "I hate divorce" cannot be translated without amending the text by adding an additional letter.)

To not deal treacherously (i.e. to bring to an end this unholy practice against their wives)

**And so we can see that failing to appreciate God's love and their special role as His people, and failing to appreciate God's greatness and the privilege of being His people, the men of Israel destroy God's intentions for a holy people who worship and serve Him alone.**

### **Learning from the conversation**

**What God revealed through Malachi makes clear God's will about divorce; and is only strengthened by the words of the Lord in the NT.**

**The more fundamental issue in Malachi's discussion is the preservation of a holy people. Likewise we cannot be too concerned about that as well. As Christians we should seek relationships that will enable us to preserve our faith and identity as God's people.**

In the NT many became Christians after being married. Paul taught them that those marriage were not a source of defilement to them and that they should not put their unbelieving spouses away (1 Cor. 7).

Yet, it makes sense for believers in our world to think soberly about the impact of their marriages upon their faith and choose spouses that will help them in that direction.

**And we should also learn from Malachi's discussion that worship can never become a substitute for righteous living. Instead our worship should be the outward expression of our desire to obey God all the time.**

**Conclusion: If we are to meet the challenges of spiritual stagnation, we must not only keep affirming God's love for us, reflecting upon His greatness and the privilege of serving Him, but also recognizing that we possess the instruction of our great king and we possess the sacred duty to share His word with others.**

**This week remember that priestly role; and how you may be the messenger of God that speaks to someone who needs to hear the truth.**