

# MALACHI

or

## WILL A MAN ROB GOD?

by

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### CHAPTER FOUR

#### THE LORD GOD'S ENTREATY REFUSED

**“Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?”** (Malachi 3:7).

**“HIS COMPASSIONS FAIL NOT”** (Lamentations 3:22). The Record is replete with this wonderful truth. Here in our text it is especially appealing.

In spite of their persistent rebellion and multiplying indignities, the Lord God wanted His people back in fellowship with Him. Each spokesman for God was authorized and instructed to make this fact prominent in his pronouncements to the people. A greater proof of everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3) for His own is nowhere more clearly revealed.

- Amos urged a preparedness to meet God (Amos 4:12).
- Isaiah pleaded for the people to reason with the Lord (Isaiah 1:18).
- Jeremiah exhorted a halt, and an inquiry for the old paths and a return to the good way (Jeremiah 6:16).
- Ezekiel, as a watchman on a wall, was to warn the **“righteous man [that] doth turn from his righteousness”** (Ezekiel 3:20).
- Hosea appealed, **“Come, and let us return unto the Lord”** (Hosea 6:1).

This was the outreach of love to the rebellious. God kept the door open always for their return.

#### THE REACTION

**“Wherein shall we return?”** *they said* (3:7).

This is indifference and not innocence. It is rebellion and not ignorance. It betrays an unwillingness to obey and a desire for the status quo. It likewise denotes impenitence and persistence. But their question does not go unanswered.

Sincere or in sincere, desirous of an answer or not desirous there is a copious explanation.

Any sincere person who possesses spiritual life is or can become convictingly aware of sin in his life. One needs but glance at the high and holy standard of righteousness contained in the Bible.

The honest one will cry with Isaiah, “**Woe unto me, for I am undone!**” Or, with Job, “**I abhor myself.**” Or, with Paul, “**O wretched man that I am!**” Then with the desire of the helpless leper, one will appeal, “**Make me clean**” (Mark 1:40). The record states that this leper was cleansed. It is encouraging proof of what awaits those who will come to grips with God, acknowledge their need and trust Him for the cleansing.

But Malachi's people pretended to be unconscious of any need to return to the Lord.

It reminds of the weeping Indian boy who when asked if he was lost, said, “I'm not lost; the wigwam is lost.” The attitude of these people is about as senseless and immature. “**Wherein?**” they asked, or, in other words, “*Give us an example!*”

The reader will note that reasons had already been given. Following are a few:

## 1. DEPARTURE

“Ye are departed out of the way” (2:8).

Surely this is sufficient reason for a return. But a backslider seemingly can get so accustomed to his waywardness that it becomes the norm of his life. This is the chief danger in departure from God's way. It commences with a tendency, continues with carelessness and culminates in a habit (Hosea 11:7). The longer the return is delayed, the longer revival is refused, the more one is confirmed in his ill-chosen condition.

The serious feature about a backslidden state is that others are adversely affected thereby. “**Ye have caused many to stumble**” (2:8), the Lord sadly added to His already weighty indictment.

Here we return to the contrast which is cited between the Levitical priesthood and the present leadership. “**He [Aaron] walked with me in peace and equity**” (2:6). Now the priests depart out of the way (2:8). Aaron “**did turn many away from iniquity**” (2:6). Now they cause many to stumble (2:8).

Then the Lord reminds that:

- (1) “**the priest's lips should keep knowledge**” (2:7). That is, his Message should be orthodox, elevating, encouraging, profitable.
- (2) “**They should seek the law at his mouth**” (2:7b), indicating that he should be in high repute, that he should have an influence for God, that his message should be wanted by the sincere people.
- (3) “**He is the messenger of the Lord of hosts**” (2:7c), a spokesman for God. The New Testament description is most expressive: “**Now then we are ambassadors for Christ . . . we pray you in Christ's stead**” (II Corinthians 5:20).

**“The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips” (2:6a).**

This is the divine testimony regarding a faithful servant of another day. But times had changed. The enemy had been active—and effective. In Jeremiah's day, we read, **“The prophets prophesy falsely”** (Jeremiah 5:31). Then the people succumbed to this insidious thing: **“Behold, ye trust in lying words that cannot profit”** (Jeremiah 7:8), said the servant of God.

The situation became progressively worse until, it would seem, they had reached the point of no return in Malachi's day. **“Wherein shall we return?”** was their indifferent remark.

## **2. DISOBEDIENCE**

**“Ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law” (2:9).**

Here is another expressed need for a return.

God's ways are one; man's quite another, and those who do not keep God's ways are pursuing their own. This is transgression, and the way of the transgressor is hard. Most people must learn this from experience, and the sons of Jacob have already paid dearly for not keeping the ways of the Lord.

That they had **“been partial in the law”** (2:9) allows little room for speculation.

The facts plainly in view lay the whole picture before us. They had not repudiated the law. They did not disavow its existence, its sacredness, or its Author. They simply became self-opinionated concerning its precepts, superimposing their own interpretations and granting themselves leniency and latitude in applying it to their lives.

They found no sympathy with Jeremiah's confession that **“it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps”** (Jeremiah 10:23). When the Lord God said the animal for sacrifice must not be lame or blind or sick, they decided that this was not to be taken literally, so they brought the sickly, worthless creatures (1:8). This kind of attitude put a great difference and distance between them and the Lord.

**“Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people”** (2:9a) was a prediction which history has proved by their not-yet-ended sorrow.

In their dispersion, it was prophesied that they would become a proverb and a byword (jibe, taunt) universally (Deuteronomy 28:37, I Kings 9:7, II Chronicles 7:20). It is not commendable on the part of anyone to cast aspersions upon them, and certainly Christians should never thus be guilty, but the invectives have been heaped upon them. Even today anti-Semitism is rife. In Dachau, and perhaps in other concentration camps in Germany, their captors scarred their flesh by extinguishing cigarettes on them. Six million suffered and died under the heel of Hitler. Why? They kept not the ways of the Lord, yet saw no need to return.

### 3. TREACHERY

**“Why do we deal treacherously, every man against his brother?”** (2:10) the prophet inquired in his desire to help them. Although he himself was not guilty on this score, he speaks from the standpoint of the nation collectively.

The record is sadly discolored with treachery, and what they reap is what they sowed. What prophet was not reduced to bleak discouragement resultant from their maltreatment? Take Ezekiel, for instance. **“I send thee to the children of Israel,”** the Lord explained, **“to a rebellious nation . . . thou dost dwell among scorpions”** (Ezekiel 2:3, 6). They cast Jeremiah into prison. Isaiah, tradition has it, was sawed asunder. **“They were stoned . . . slain with the sword . . . afflicted, tormented”** (Hebrews 11:37).

It was these people who demanded the crucifixion of Christ, and stoned Stephen and beat Paul. This hideous record of treachery against their brethren was begun against Joseph. **“Come now therefore,”** the sons of Jacob said, **“and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit”** (Genesis 37:20). **“Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?”** asked Stephen in his blistering indictment of Jewish leaders as he himself was about to be martyred.

Malachi asks, **“Have we not all one father?”** (2:10).

Were they not all the descendants of Jacob? Were they not the covenant people of the Lord God? Why then such inhuman treatment of their own? The answer is given: **“By profaning the covenant of our fathers”** (2:10c).

Those who disesteem God's Word become susceptible to divers temptations. They walk in darkness and plunge into serious pitfalls. This accounts for their treachery, but they would not return.

### 4. PROFANATION

**“Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord”** (2:11).

When Judah is thus charged, it is indicative of the total depravity of the people. Israel, the northern kingdom, went into apostasy before Judah and thus suffered dispersion the sooner.

**“I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel,”** the Lord God had said some 300 years earlier, **“but I will have mercy upon the house of Judah”** (Hosea 1:6, 7).

Meanwhile, the southern kingdom (Judah) deteriorated spiritually and fell into the hands of the enemy. King Zedekiah had his eyes thrust out, and he and the people were carried into Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 52). Seventy years of trial, divine favor granted in restoring the remnant to the land, and the godly leadership of Nehemiah had little or no effect so far as their spiritual rehabilitation was concerned. They profaned God's holiness!

*To profane is to treat with sacrilege or irreverence—to prostitute.* This they had done, as people, concerning peace-offerings (Leviticus 19:8) Sabbaths (Ezekiel 22:8), the sanctuary (Ezekiel 25:3), and His holy name (Ezekiel 36:20). But to thus regard divine holiness is to literally touch God himself. He is the Holy One (Psalm 89:18) He is the thrice-holy One (Isaiah 6:3). Their manifest disobedience, rebellion and obstinacy had put them in this perilous condition. Yet they asked **“Wherein should we return?”**

## 5. IDOLATRY

**“Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god”** (2:11b).

Here is, statedly, a departure from their **“first love”**, an alienation of affection, a diversionary focus of devotion. It infers that there was a day when Judah was not merely enamored of the holiness, majesty, splendor and effulgent glory of the Lord God, but was devoutly attached to and thoroughly engrossed in the worship of the Most High extolling exultantly His glorious attributes. The song of Moses is an example in point.

He sang of God's right hand becoming glorious) in power and of the greatness of His excellency (Exodus 15:6, 7). Then in impressive doxology he exulted, **“Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?”** (Exodus 15:11). Now has this commendable emphasis suffered, suffered so grossly that this glorious holiness, the song of Seraphs' tongues, the anthem of the ancients, is being profaned—treated with disesteem.

Nor was this resultant from lack of instruction.

The voice of Moses, God's spokesman to His people, rang down the corridors of time, saying, **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one [plural unity] Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God .with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might”** (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5).

Love begets love. **“We love him because he first loved us”** (I John 4:19).

**“He that loveth not [God] knoweth not God”** (I John 4:8). These people questioned His love (1:2) and knew Him not (Jeremiah 4:22) and loved Him not.

They **“married the daughter of a strange god”** (2:11).

- This is displaced love.
- This is spiritual adultery (Hosea 7:4).
- This is complicity with evil.
- This was a ruthless violation of one of the Lord God's Strongest prohibitions: **“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”** (Exodus 20:3).

But what does the record show?

**“And they set them up images”** (II Kings 17:10).

Incredible? Seemingly. But unbelief pursues Furious courses. Those who become dissatisfied with the divine way will invariably find substitutions which appeal in their disobedient hearts.

- They procured images;
- They placed them on high hills;
- They proceeded to burn incense;
- They patterned their course after the heathen;
- They provoked the Lord to anger.

The Lord's eyes, too pure to behold evil, witnessed such pathetic sights as:

- His people dancing about a golden calf (Exodus 32:19),
- His people worshiping the queen of heaven, though non-existent (Jeremiah 7:18),
- The leaders gazing on and offering incense to the grotesque caricatures on the temple wall (Ezekiel 8:10, 11);
- The women weeping over Tammuz whom the heathen represented as the son of the queen of heaven (Ezekiel 8:14).

With unspeakable idolatry blemishing their history and making odious their present experience, they claim no need to return to the Lord (3:7).

## **6. AFFECTATION**

**“And this have ye done again [and again], covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out”** (2:13).

Tears may have a certain eloquence. They speak when words cannot be spoken. Depending upon their prompting, tears may be liquid love drops of sympathy, flowing sorrow, floods of jubilation. But not so here. They are dry tears out of parched souls. Empty tears out of empty hearts. They make imprints on the altar but no impression upon the Lord. They are unavailing.

- Tears without turning exhibit no tenderness.
- Tears without conviction only torment. They distill without dissipating the distress.
- Tears without contrition can never assuage anguish. There may be floods of grief without a vestige of relief.

Nor can this kind of tears ever merit heaven's approbation though shed again and again: **“He regardeth not the offering”** (2:13).

It is a profusion without profit.

It must also be remembered that tears speak of emotion, and emotion may be as empty as tears. Zeal without knowledge is also unacceptable. Those who veer from the paved highway of simple prescribed procedure may find themselves on crooked and rough bypaths, even in the wilderness of confusion. No, tears are not enough. If accompanied by repentance, they speak. If attended by compassion, they produce (Psalm 126: 6). If prompted by the joy of the Lord, then they register in heaven.

## 7. DECEPTION

The Lord **“hateth putting away; for one covereth violence with his garment”** (2:16). They had divorced themselves from true worship but used the cloak of outward observance to cover their insincerity.

Solomon spoke of seven things the Lord hates: **“a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that deviseth wicked migrations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness, and one who sows discord among the brethren”** (Proverbs 6:17, 19).

There are other things He hates as well, and none more intensely than the sinner attempting to conceal misdeeds. When quoting, **“Blessed is he whose sin is covered”** (Psalm 32:1), the late Pettingill always reminded, “Be careful who does the covering!”

There are such entries in the Record as these **“The land is full of bloody crimes; the city is full of violence. They have filled the land with violence”** (Ezekiel 7:23; 8:17).

The explanation for all of this is found in Zephaniah 3:4: **“Her prophets are light and treacherous [deceitful, unfaithful] persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary they have done violence to the law.”**

But to attempt to conceal their wrongdoing was not only unmitigated blindness, but a deliberate denial of divine omniscience. **“Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord”** (Jeremiah 23:24). **“He shall not be able to hide himself”** (Jeremiah 49:10). And man's deeds as well are open to infinite surveillance.

When we read that violence covereth them as a garment (2:6), we are directed to the offender. **“With his garment”** is metaphorical. Garments are symbols of conduct, and the inference is, can the wrongdoing and unbelief of God's people be covered by church attendance, by offerings, even by affected tears? The Lord only observes three kinds of garments on the part of men:

- **“fig leaves”** (Genesis 3:7), unrighteousness;
- **“filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6), self-righteousness; and
- **“fine linen”** (Rev. 19:8), Christ's righteousness.

**“Thine habitation is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know me, saith the Lord”** (Jeremiah 9:6).

Here it is admitted that God's people live in a world that is saturated with deception (see I John 5:19). But the Lord can keep His own from evil. He has planned a way of escape (I Corinthians 10:13). His grace is sufficient (II Corinthians 12:9) and, where sin abounds, grace superabounds (Romans 5:20). The ship must be in the water, but the water must not get into the ship. God's people must be in the world, but when the deception of the world infiltrates the sacred precincts of their souls, there is a blackout of perception, appreciation and appropriation of spiritual values.

## 8. DEGENERATION

“**And did not he** [God] **make one** [nation for Himself]? **Yet had he the residue** [more remaining power and ability] **of the spirit** [to do likewise for other people]. **And wherefore** [why] **one** [Israel]? [the answer:] **That he might seek a godly seed**” (2:15).

I. After choosing these people, though fewest of all in number (Deuteronomy 7:6-8), [the Lord God referred to them as His peculiar people, those exclusively His, His Peculiar possession. He designed to have in them:

- (1) A people for His glory according to Isaiah 43:7;
- (2) A repository for His Word according to Romans 3:2; and
- (3) A line and lineage for His Son (Matthew 1:1-16)].

It is to this third point our text refers—“**That he might seek a godly seed.**”

It is not a matter of disappointment to Him who knows the end from the beginning to have a chosen people to apostatize, but it became a cause for great grief and deep displeasure. Of the 201 questions in the Book of Jeremiah, the following is one of the saddest: “**I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right [certified] seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?**” (Jeremiah 2:21). Yet they bluntly asked, “**Wherein need we return?**”

## ANTECEDENTS NO DETERRENT

Somehow we are given the impression that they were caught in the cross currents of confusion; that they were the victims of an impossible situation; that they had inherited the status quo (3:7a). Yet each generation had sufficient available knowledge to walk uprightly before God.

None can successfully charge his spiritual failures (or ignorance for that matter) to another, much less to the Lord.

Malachi's contemporaries not only had precept but examples as well.

The Holy Spirit has marched out on the horizon of divine revelation some startling and sobering cases of defeated and dejected personalities, who, by divine judgment and chastening, suffered a revocation of privilege, a removal of opportunity, or some grievous disillusionment.

Samson, for instance, pursued such a devious course that his spiritual power diminished to drab insignificance. His losses began to multiply. Then came the end ignominiously and with rapidity. At the knees of Delilah, in a drowsy stupor, his locks were shorn and his strength eclipsed. A troop of marauding Philistines, poised for such an advantageous moment, rushed with proud delight to the occasion, and in a matter of minutes gouged out the eyes of the dwarfed giant.

Then with dispatch and alacrity, the fetters were affixed, and the divinely chosen nobleman began grinding grist in the prison of his foes. Samson's loss of his Nazarite separation, his strength, his vision and the presence of the Spirit of God was followed by the loss of his life in the temple of Dagon where he was taken to "**make sport**" for his captors. This was Samson's sad end through departure from the Lord.

Saul is another case illustrating the cost of a careless course.

(1) *Saul's testimony was untrue.*

**"I have performed the commandment of the Lord"** (I Samuel 15:13), he assured Samuel. While he yet spoke, the bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle put a lie to his statement (I Samuel 15:4). They were to have been destroyed but the king had spared them. It is always ill-advised to move contrary to the revealed will of God.

(2) *Saul's life was filled with pride* (I Samuel 15: 17).

He developed a sense of independence and was operating as he desired.

(3) *Saul was grossly disobedient* (I Samuel 15:9).

He felt that God would overlook his disobedience if he were to sacrifice some of the animals he failed to destroy.

(4) *Saul's confession was too late* (I Samuel 15:24).

**"I feared the people . . . I listened to their entreaties,"** he mumbled.

(5) *Saul's penalty was almost unbearable.*

Being king of Israel was no small honor. Now he was to be impeached. It was a spectacular regime but it terminated ignominiously.

David also furnishes an example.

His career had sparkled with color and versatility. It abounded in excitement of adventure and intrigue, of daring and triumph. However, when he was about to realize his keenest desire, that of building the great temple, God disqualified him for previous conduct. Like the Arabs who folded their tents and silently stole away, a great and noble leader was making his exit from the limelight of human admiration and divine privilege.

It is hard to watch a champion go down, but this is just a further reminder that men ought not provoke the Lord nor grieve His Holy Spirit. Yet these precedents seemed to have no effect whatsoever upon the people recorded in the last book of the Old Testament.

Now comes this firm admonition in view of the approaching of Messiah's advent, **“Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth”** (2:15).

**“The wife of his youth”** refers to the original intent at the inception of the nation in the early days, that of producing a godly seed.

To **“deal treacherously”** is a warning concerning the bitter results of misjudgment and misconduct as when Abraham turned to Hagar from his lawful wife, Sarah (Genesis 16:4). Ishmael, the son of their union, became a malediction rather than a blessing.

Even so, Malachi warns that unholy alliances would produce an offspring of undesirable children.

With all of these despicable facts characterizing God's people, they were surprised at the call to return. They refused it utterly, pressing on in their willfulness to the inevitable.

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