

"COLD LOVE"

A Journey through Malachi

By Mike Burnham

This last of the Old Testament prophets ministered in Judah between 460 and 430 B.C. His words sketch a tragic picture of the little company that had returned from Babylon to settle there over 115 years before.

The temple had been completed and the people worshiped there, following the prescribed rituals and offering the required sacrifices. Haggai and Zechariah were gone, and the religious enthusiasm these prophets stimulated had now drained away. Nehemiah's ministry as governor, during which he held the Jews in Judah to the Old Testament Law that they were so prone to break, was over.

The complaints that Malachi recorded indicate the same sins still plagued God's people. And Malachi's blunt report of God's words (the Lord speaks in 42 of the 55 verses in this book) exposes the attitude of those whose love for God has grown cold.

When God seems distant or unreal, it would be good for us to remember the message of Malachi.

Malachi is a discouraging book because again we see Israel sliding down toward sin and spiritual luke-warmness, completely indifferent to Malachi's call for another fresh start. We find that God's people have lost their vision of God, and of their own future.

This is important for us to grasp, because the principle applies to us as well as to Israel. We, too, are forced to live with imperfection, our own as well as that of those around us! It's easy to become discouraged when we try and try again, and still seem to fail.

The hard years seem to have passed. Jerusalem and its walls had been raised, the temple rebuilt. Prosperity as well as relative independence from the peoples around had returned. Gods people had settled down to the "*good life*" in the land of Palestine.

But with blessing had come a peculiar reaction. The sense of the need for God had receded; yearning for their coming destiny had disappeared. God himself was ignored, even despised. All the meaning of life seemed summed up in the experience of the *good things* of this world's "*now*".

Malachi's book is organized around a series of *eight sarcastic questions* posed by the people of God in response to His words to them. These questions show how far Judah's loss of a sense of destiny had caused them to drift spiritually. In looking at these questions we might see some of our own attitudes reflected.

First Question

Verse 2

"*I have loved you*" what a starting point in our relationship with God! It is not that we loved God, but that He loved us.

Yet the people of Malachi's day replied: "*how have you loved us?*" With all the evidence of their history and with all their present prosperity, Judah could still claim to be uncertain of God's love!

God's answer is that He chose their ancestor Jacob over the ancestor of those around Judah. God demonstrated his love primarily in that he chose to establish a relationship with them.

God has demonstrated his love for us in that He sent His only begotten Son into the world to die in our place that we might live through Him. Not because we loved Him, because He first loved us, 1 John 4:9,10.

Second Question

God's complaint against Judah

Verse 6

God's complaint against Judah is that: though He has called this people into a relationship with Himself, the people have refused to honor him. In fact this goes beyond disrespect for *they have despised God's name*.

As the prophet pointed out, a son honors his father-- and God had been a father to Judah. A servant shows respect to his master; and God was rightly called "*Lord*" and "*Master*" by his people.

God says; And you ask: "*How have we despised your name?*"

Do we even come close to giving a Holy God the *honor* He so richly deserves? He is the Lofty One, High and Lifted Up, who inhabits Eternity and yet at times we have no fear of Him, judging by some of the things we do. If there is one thing I need the most to get a handle on its the *awesomeness* of the Holy God that saved me, that in fear and trembling I would live out my life in His service.

Third Question

Verses 7 & 8

God pointed to the *mildewed bread* on His temple's altar and to the *ill and injured animals* offered as sacrifices. These people were offering to God what they would never dare to present to a human governor!

God says; And you ask: "*Wherein have we polluted thee?*"

When we bring the world into our worship we are polluting it. For instance, certain kinds of music, services that geared to appeal to the carnal

man (short and sweet, socialized sermons) etc.

Verses 10 - 14

The priests and the Levites, who were to be closest to God and to serve him (and in return be provided for from the sacrifices and offerings brought to the temple), were unsatisfied with the offerings that God had chosen (v.10-12). They were bored with worship (v.13). And the people constantly sought to swindle God out of what they had vowed to him (v. 14).

Chapter 2

Verses 1, 5-9

If they had only chosen to live by the law, they would have known life and peace (v. 5). But the very priests charged with teaching God's way *denied it*-- first with their actions (v-8) and then in their distorted teaching of God's truth (v-9).

Fourth Question

Verse 13 & 14

When God warned Judah that he would not answer prayers, the people responded with a complaint: "*why?*", Yet ye say, *Wherefore?* (v. 14). They had prayed fervently, flooding the altar of God with tears. *Why* then didn't God pay attention to their offerings?

Here another sin of the people, and another evidence of their hardheartedness is brought out. This society had adopted *divorce* as a life-style. This is not divorce stimulated by a partner's sin or unwillingness to maintain the marriage covenant. It is divorce motivated by lust--by an older

man's desire for a new and younger wife! This kind of faithlessness is something that God cannot stand.

Fifth Question

Verse 17

Malachi's charge that Judah had "weari[ed] the Lord with your words" is met with another sarcastic question: Yet ye say, "*Wherein have we wearied him?*" Malachi's answer went to the root of another symptom of spiritual sickness, by saying: "*all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord.*"

How quickly humanistic values replace God's revelation of true goodness and purity. In modern double-talk, pornographic movies are called "*mature*," and campaigns are launched to present homosexuality as an alternative and perfectly acceptable *life-style*. In Malachi's day too society slipped into the practice of calling evil good.

Chapter 3

Verses 1 & 2

This last charge led Malachi to a promise and a warning. He spoke of the coming of God, but warned, "*who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?*" God's messenger, was approaching, and he would purify the land by judgment.

When we refuse to purify ourselves, God must act for us, and it is not pleasant to be placed over what Malachi calls the "*refiner's fire*". The fire that removes impurities burns while it cleanses.

Sixth Question

Verse 7

God's people had strayed from His ordinances and therefore from Him. God now confronts Judah with a call to restoration. "*Return to me, and I will*

return to you", says the Lord of hosts. But ye said , "Wherein shall we return?" The meaning being, "what do you mean, return? Why, we've never strayed!"

When we quit keeping His commandments our love has waxed cold and we have moved away from Him. And it isn't until we can recognize our sin and confess it that we can return to Him, Jere. 3:12-13; James 4:8.

Seventh Question

Verses 8 - 10

Then God told them that they had robbed Him. *"But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee?"* They had been robbing God of the tithes and offerings commanded in the law. They could return by once again putting God first, and if they did God would open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings.

We too can rob God when we don't put Him first in all aspects of our lives. We rob Him, our brothers and sisters, and ourselves, when we lay out of church. We rob Him when we don't support the work of the church. Can you think of other ways that we rob God?

Eighth Question

Verse 13 - 14

One final word remained. God called Judah to account for saying harsh things about Him personally. *Yet ye say, "What have we spoken so much against thee?"*

Then God answered them, *"You have said, 'it is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord of hosts?"* (v-13,14)

The people went through the motions. Appearance at the temple was

one of those things well-bred people did! But in their hearts there was no longer a place for God. What about us? Making an appearance at church is what good people do. It's expected of us. But where is God in our hearts?

Malachi ended with two special notes. First, he reported that while society as a whole refused to turn to God, there were individuals who listened and heard. Second, that their names were recorded in God's record book of remembrance, and that they would be among His special treasure, (3:16,17).

Chapter 4

Verse 1

Malachi shared a promise. "*Behold, the day cometh*" and it will come, burning like a furnace, and then all the arrogant will be like chaff. Destiny does lie ahead for the good and the evil alike. For he that will serve God and he that will not.

Destiny is ahead for those who look for it, and those who look away. We may not welcome our destiny, but we can not escape it. It's best to make it right with God now and be among His *jewels*.

If you want a fulfilling study, transform the negatives into positives. For instance, the people of Malachi's day ignored God's love as expressed in his choice of their nation. We can thank God for choosing us and His love, expressed in Jesus Christ, who loved and saved us. Or note that the people of Malachi's day withheld their best from God. We can give him our best.