

Faithless Marriage, Faithful God

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[0 : 00] Will you turn again with me this evening to Malachi chapter 2, Malachi chapter 2, verse 10 through verse 16.

Faithless marriage, faithful Lord. Situated a couple of miles offshore from my wife's family home is the island of Grinyard.

It's a desolate island of perhaps four square miles. In the late 1950s, the United Kingdom government chose Grinyard Island as the site of a biological weapons experiment.

So it sprayed the whole island with anthrax, a spore which if contracted by human beings is almost certainly fatal. So since the 1950s and 60s, human beings have been forbidden from setting foot on Grinyard Island.

However, it's thought that after all this length of time, the anthrax spores are no longer on the surface of the ground. And the only danger to human beings would be if we decided to dig a big hole in the ground.

[1 : 12] You haven't tried that Ross yet, have you? No, not yet. There are animals on the island of Grinyard again. And there's a great white-tailed sea eagle which makes its nest there.

And bird watchers from all over Scotland come to see it. On the surface of Grinyard, there is light and life again. But dig a bit. And there is death.

On the surface of things, the book of Malachi is one of the darker books of the Old Testament. It paints a picture of a broken society. A society which, because of its relationship with God being broken, is chaotic.

There is class war. There is breakdown in civil and religious government. Malachi also describes a God who, in order to bring the nation to its senses and back to himself, performs what I might call aggressive surgery.

That's why on the surface of things I say, the book of Malachi is one of the darker books of the Old Testament. But dig a bit. And there's light.

[2 : 23] The gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ is all the way through the book of Malachi. On Grinyard Isle, life is on the surface, but death is underneath.

In Malachi, death is on the surface, but life is underneath. Nowhere is that more apparent than in Malachi 2, 10 through 16, when on the surface of things, there is the evil of faithless marriage in the nation, and of God's condemnation of it.

But underneath, there is the eternal love and grace of the God, who will always be faithful to his people, and whose faithfulness will eventually lead to the giving of his Son, Jesus Christ, to take away all our sins.

So not for one second this evening would I want any of us to leave filled with the darkness we see on the surface of this passage. Rather, we want to focus on the grace we see underneath, the grace of the God who is Lord of creation, redemption, and salvation.

And so here in this passage, we have on the surface faithless marriage, but underneath we have faithful Lord. Faithless marriage, one of the ways in which this nation is demonstrating its brokenness.

[3 : 48] Faithful Lord, the God of all grace. Faithless marriage, first of all. Faithless marriage. You will know that the book of Malachi is almost wholly directed toward Israel's priests, men who are to be channels of the blessing of God.

They were to model what faith in God looked like and what loyalty to God was like. But we discover that these men, far from modeling the faith of Abraham and David, were modeling the unfaithfulness of the nations around them.

The reality of devotion to God had been replaced by the pretense of religion. In other parts of the Old Testament, the relationship of God to the nation of Israel is pictured as that of the covenant promises between a husband and a wife.

And so, for example, the book of Hosea is an extended discussion on the faithfulness of God to Israel, but on her unfaithfulness to him. The New Testament continues the picture when in Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul speaks of human marriage as a picture of Christ's love for his church.

And so here in Malachi 2, verses 10 through 16, in all our talk of breakdown in marriages among the priestly class, we have to have this at the back of our minds. This is a parable of the breakdown in the relationship between God and his people.

[5 : 23] Their worship of foreign gods, their forsaking of him. Because among the priestly class, it would seem, it had become normal for priests to divorce their wives and to marry another woman, with that woman often being the follower of a foreign god.

And these priests, therefore, rather than being channels of the blessing of God, became causes of the curse of God. Because through their new marriages, they were introducing the worship of foreign gods into the life of the nation of Israel.

They were divorcing their wives and marrying women who had no loyalty to the God of Israel, but were worshippers of Baal. In verse 11, God calls it out and names it for what it is.

Judah has acted faithlessly. An abomination has been done in Israel and in Jerusalem. On the surface of things, the nation of Judah is in a mess of its own making.

The priestly class are acting faithlessly in marriage. And of course, if we remember that their marriages are a picture of God's commitment, their faithlessness in marriage is being used as an image of their faithlessness to God.

[6 : 53] The only reason they find it so easy to leave their wives behind and marry the daughters of foreign gods is because they already left the God of Israel far behind them.

They divorced their wives because they divorced their God. Consider with me the very poignant words of verse 14. The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Here we have all the poisonous ingredients of the symptoms of a faithless marriage of Judah's priests.

Think of how the aggrieved wife, the wife of the priest, is described. She's the wife of his youth. She's the person who, from an early age, he was pledged to marry.

In that culture, arranged marriage was very common. And so this was the wife who, from when he was a boy, their families had arranged for him to marry.

[8 : 00] The dowry price had been paid. And then in marrying her, he was obliged to be faithful to her. And so by divorcing her, not only was the priest divorcing her, but also forsaking the agreement made by their families.

She's also described in verse 14 as your partner. This is a word that's used very often in today's politically correct word.

But it's not a bad word to describe a marriage relationship. Husband and wife are partners, companions, sharers in life.

And then she's also described as being the wife of your marriage covenant. The woman to whom you swore lifelong loyalty. The person you promised to love exclusively and to share your life with. In those days, men and women didn't wear wedding rings like we do today. But if they had, it's almost like God is saying to the priests, take a look at the ring on your finger, guys.

[9 : 05] That's your sacramental promise to her. Don't ever break it. As an aside, do you see how throughout the whole Bible, God is consistently raising the status of woman in society?

In the culture of Israel, of the Israel of the day, men often treated women as little more than slaves. Nothing much had changed by Jesus' day, which is why time and again he calls on husbands to love and cherish their wives and to remain faithful to him, because only together are they heirs of life.

Any so-called Christian culture which treats its women as second-class citizens is not Christian in any sense of the word and is to be utterly condemned. But look at, very importantly, how six times in these few verses, the priests are described as being unfaithful, faithless, or having broken faith.

They think that their avant-garde attitude to marriage was fashionable, but God calls it out and names it for what it is, unfaithful, faithless.

God is the witness of their marriages, and when he sees the way the priests are treating their wives, he is disgusted. Just as they have broken faith with him, so they have broken faith with the wives of their youth, their partners.

[10 : 32] They're wives of the marriage covenant. These men are faithless. Others may respect them and look up to them, but they have dealt treacherously toward those.

They have promised to love their traitors. I don't want to give any offense to anyone who's divorced. There are, according to our Lord, very legitimate reasons why couples may divorce.

I'm just simply explaining this passage of Scripture, which condemns the high-handed priests of Israel for the abomination of their faithlessness, for their willful divorce of their wives and their remarriage to women who followed foreign gods, and by thus doing, introducing idolatry and impunity in foreign religion into the nation of Judah.

Life has been lived with the wife of one's youth. Promises have been made. Companionship has been enjoyed, but these priests have forfeited it all for the sake of an idol.

In our society, divorce, though tragic, is fairly commonplace. But in Malachi's day, divorce was a really big deal, especially if it should result in the religious leaders of a nation worshipping a foreign god.

[11 : 56] The impact of the priests' unfaithfulness to their wives was writ large across that society. And I want to just point to two ways, very briefly, in which these priests were divorcing their wives and the impact that had upon the national life of Judah.

In the first instance, it resulted in the breakdown of their relationship with God. The so-called private actions of the priests, according to verse 11, desecrated the sanctuary of the Lord.

Furthermore, according to verse 12, no matter how many tears they shed at God's altar, no matter how often the priests groan in religious fervor, no matter what they offer up to God, God's not listening.

They think that as long as they are faithfully performing their public duties as religious priests, God won't care about their private lives. It's a pattern we see repeated in society at large, but tragically also in the church, where leaders act one way in public, another way in private.

They insist, my private life has no bearing upon my ability to perform my public duties. Now, to some extent, this may be true in secular professions, but it most certainly is not true in the church.

[13 : 23] In Psalm 66, verse 18, words which speak powerfully into the heart and mind of every Christian, we read David's confession when he says, if I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Though no one else may see it, private sin destroys our relationship with God completely and inevitably impacts upon his blessing of our work.

But in the second instance, more importantly, it resulted in the breakdown of their relationship with their children.

The breakdown of their relationship with their children. In verse 15, God reveals why it's so important for the priests to be faithful to their wives. It is because he is seeking, and I quote, godly offspring.

How exactly shall a new generation rise up with zeal and enthusiasm for God and his worship if their fathers are playing the hypocrite?

[14 : 25] Where will the godly offspring come from if the flower of the covenant in Israel is rotten through? These priests, not only are they polluting the temple with their divorces, they are screwing up their children.

And of course, that's a question for us, is it not? That's a very strong challenge, as it were. What are we passing on to our children? Faithfulness or faithlessness?

If a father cannot be trusted to keep his vows to his wife, why should his children keep theirs? What we are modeling to our children will impact them for their whole lives, which is why passages like this tell us that the greatest gift a father can give to his children is that he loves and is faithful to their mother.

The greatest gift a father can give to his children is that he loves and is faithful to their mother. So how then shall the covenant promises of God pass on through leaders like this?

Because on the surface of things, Judah's in a mess. Their lax attitude to marriage and divorce, they're polluting the purity of Judah by introducing foreign gods into its worship.

[15 : 45] The priests, not the people, the priests, imagine that. What hope do the people have if the priests are being so faithless? But the point is that the priests' faithlessness to their wives, it's just a symptom of their faithlessness to God.

They've broken faith with the God who loved them, is promised to them, is passionate about them. On the surface of things, Judah's priesthood is filled with death and darkness.

It is rotten through and through. They've got a faithless marriage to their wives because, because first and foremost, they've got a faithless marriage to their God.

Faithless marriage. Secondly, faithful Lord. Faithful Lord. Well, by now, if you're anything like me, you're getting kind of sick and tired of hearing about the 5th century BC priests of Israel and their unfaithfulness to God, their attitude to God and to the society around them, is frankly depressing. What you want to hear, because it's what I want to hear, is the gospel. On the lintel stone at the top of the steps going up to the pulpit in IPC Savannah, many of you will have seen these words, is the inscription on a gold plate saying, Sirs, we would see Jesus.

[17 : 26] Top of the stairs going up to the pulpit in IPC Savannah. Next time you're there, go and check it for yourself. Sir, we would see Jesus. That is the delight and the responsibility of the preacher to display the magisterial and merciful power and love of Jesus Christ, both the person and the work.

Well, Jesus isn't on the surface of this text, there's no point denying it. What's on the surface of this text in Malachi 2, verses 10 through 16 is the death and darkness of unfaithfulness.

And so, we want to ask the question, where is Jesus here? Where's the gospel here? And I can hear you saying it because I was saying it to myself as I was studying for this sermon and trust me, it was hard, hard work.

I can hear you saying, Colin, warm my heart with grace and don't freeze it with the law. Show me the light of Christ, not the darkness of the priests.

Precisely, I thought. Precisely. And so, we could fixate on God's repeated command in verses 15 and 16, so guard yourself and your spirit and do not break faith.

[18 : 41] But there's no grace here either. And there's no Jesus. All there can be is a law we struggle to keep because in the first instance we don't know why we have to keep it and in the second instance we don't have the strength to keep it.

So, where is Christ and his gospel grace here? Well, I can tell you one place you won't find it. In the 5th century BC priests of Judah. In fact, that's the point of this passage.

And that's where you find the gospel here. The priests' unfaithfulness in marriage is a symbol of their unfaithfulness to God. their marriage relationship to God is broken.

They have divorced him. And this is where if I had been wise at all I would have read this version of the Bible before I prepared my sermon.

And if you look at the footnote at the bottom of page 961 referring to verse 16, God says, I hate divorce.

[19 : 50] I hate divorce. In other words, although the priests by virtue of their unfaithful marriages are not committed to him, he says, I will always be committed to you.

I will never divorce you because I hate divorce. No matter how much you shake your fists at me and no matter how far you stray from me I will never divorce you.

See how great God's love is. A love which is described in image form throughout the book of Hosea where a man is told to go and take a wife whose only inclination was toward unfaithfulness.

A wife who strays continually from him but who he's told to go and take back. Hosea will not divorce his wife no matter how grievous her unfaithfulness and God will never divorce his people and forsake his covenant to them.

He will never break the promise to be their God and for them to be his people. His love goes too deep and lasts too long for him to give up on us.

[21 : 13] God is the faithful Lord and this is the foundation of the gospel the basis of the good news which warms our hearts and gives us hope.

But then doesn't this seem all rather abstract rather far off? Indeed it might be would it not for a little phrase we find halfway through verse 15.

What does the one God seek? Godly offspring. Godly offspring. The priests by their unfaithfulness have demonstrated that they will never produce godly offspring.

But before we pass by this clause let me retranslate it from the original Hebrew because he was seeking an offspring of godliness.

In other words the offspring word here is not set in the plural many offspring but in the singular one offspring.

[22 : 28] And I want to argue that what Malachi has in mind here is the one offspring the one seed God promised to Abraham all those thousands of years before.

That one offspring through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed. That one offspring being the Messiah Jesus Christ. The priests of Judah by their unfaithfulness will polluting the covenant line.

But by inference God is telling us that what they cannot do because of their sin he will. That salvation for his people will not come through the priests and their unfaithfulness but by the Messiah he himself shall provide for his people.

He shall provide a Messiah who will never act faithlessly either toward God or toward God's people. The Messiah shall be the priest Judah have always needed but have never had.

God's priest whose heart will be completely devoted to God and who will love his people to the end. So you see on the surface of things Judah is a mixed up broken place.

[23 : 51] Its unfaithful priests are leading its people down blind alleys. But underneath it all are the sovereign promises of a loving God. The covenant of the God who according to verse 10 remains their father and who is infinitely and passionately committed to them.

On the surface of Grinyard Island there is greenery and life but under the surface because of the anthrax there is death and desolation. on the surface of Judah there is death and destruction but under the surface because of God's faithfulness that is the light of the everlasting covenant promises of God which in the fullness of time will bring about the birth of Jesus Christ who is our high priest.

that is where the gospel is in this passage not on the surface but underneath the grace of God in sending his godly offspring to a ruined nation to save it from its sins the love of God in sending his Messiah into a world which would hate and crucify him the passion of God in sending his son to the cruel death of the cross this was the world God loved in that he gave his son so that whoever should believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life the world which rejects him and is unfaithful to him Malachi 2 10 through 16 points us to our need of a greater priest the godly offspring of God who is utterly committed to both his God and to his people a priest who will offer himself upon the cross to take away our sins and to reconcile us with God in short

Malachi 2 10 through 16 points us to the grace of God in Jesus Christ let me close as we apply this teaching in two very brief directions first of all if you're not yet a Christian let this passage fly like an arrow straight into your heart true greatness isn't found in religious men and women it's found nowhere else other than in Jesus Christ he's the savior we've always needed he is the perfect lamb of God the perfect priest who gives himself to take away all our sins he is the Christ who will never ever stop loving you no matter how much you shake your fist at him and he calls us this evening to believe and trust in him but in the second instance a word of application to those of us who are Christians we may I'm sure we have been disappointed hurt and disillusioned by the fall of prominent Christian leaders and we wondered what should my response be to their fall Malachi 2 10-16 gives us the template for our response namely that the failures of our Christian leaders should point us to our need for our perfect Lord Jesus that rather than eroding our faith in Jesus the failure of our leaders should cause us to turn away from them and turn toward deeper trust in the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ remember just as in the nation of Judah BC so in the church today on the surface of things it looks a mess but underneath are the covenant promises of an infinitely committed

[27 : 57] God who in his son will never divorce his church will never leave his church will always love his church and that's why we can look into the future with confidence knowing that the mission of Christ's church which is to proclaim the love and the grace of God in Christ will ultimately break through the mess and the world shall see the glory of Christ shining before us let us pray