

Our Covenant Relationship

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[0 : 0 0] ...to understand it and hearts to obey it. In Christ's name, amen. Now, I want to talk to you about the second chapter of the book of Malachi.

And the book of Malachi is found in your prayer book, or in your pew Bible, on page 841. Now, in order to do this, I have to just try and provide the setting into which this was written.

First, it was written probably in the 5th century B.C. It was written by a man who apparently was called Malachi, but there is no historical evidence of his existence apart from the fact that his name is given as the title of this book.

We don't know anything more about him than that. But it came at a peculiar time in the history of the people of God. You know how the grand theme of history runs through the Bible, how there is Adam, and then there is Noah, and then there is Abraham, and how Abraham established a nation, and how that nation was led into captivity and out of captivity back into their own land, and how they disobeyed God to the point where the great pre-exilic prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel said, there's a day coming when you're going to get what's coming to you because you can't go on living this way and not expect retribution from God.

And so in due course, the enemy moved in on them and devastated their city and took them all away into exile where they lived for many years away from their homeland, always singing the songs of their homeland, always longing to return.

[2 : 1 3] And they were given by God then certain messengers among them who lived with them in their captivity and said, one day God will take you home.

And so in due course, under Cyrus and then under Darius, they returned to their homeland, they rebuilt the walls of the city, they rebuilt the temple, they became established again and the offerings and worship of the temple went on and so they became re-established.

But then all the exciting things were behind them, the promise of the exile, the promise of the building of the temple, all those things were behind them and now they had to live generation after generation waiting for something to happen and they didn't get along very well waiting for something to happen.

And the big break never came. The temple was there dominating the center of the city, the daily life of the temple went on, but gradually it began to erode and to become corrupted.

And Malachi is the man that, in a sense, diagnoses the problem. In our city of Vancouver, if you were to stand up on one of the mountains and look down, you'll see that central to the city is the great downtown core with the great high buildings.

[3 : 4 1] And if you were to compare that to the city of Malachi, that's where the action is. The God whom they worship is the ticker tape from the stock exchange telling them what's happening in New York and in Toronto and in Vancouver and all of them sit there quietly watching this happen.

And the priests stand up and say, buy, and others stand up and say, sell, and messengers and couriers run all over the place to give messages to people.

And everybody sees that their prosperity depends upon buying when they're told to buy and selling when they're told to sell. And so the prosperity of our nation goes on in this until a prophet like Joe Granville comes along and pulls the rug out from under them all.

Well, that in a sense is a comparative kind of thing to the fact that this community that Malachi was in was not centered in the stock exchange, but it was centered in the life of worship, that the central activity of man was connected with the temple, which was in the middle of the city.

And the priests in the temple were the ones who said, buy and sell, and told people what to do. And you see what happens when chapter 2 opens.

[5 : 03] Malachi says, Now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, I will send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings.

Well, that was God's concern expressed through Malachi about his people, that they would lay it to heart to give glory to God.

You see, the daily cycle of prayers and readings and sacrifices that went on in the temple slowly became just an outward form with no inward meaning.

It slowly became just words and words with no content, no heart to them. And so he says, what you have done is you've got all the form and all the structure, but you haven't any power.

There's no reality here. So these people carried on their religious life, but it had no meaning. Malachi points out the priests of the temple and says, it's your fault.

[6 : 16] And then he, if you read carefully, he really tells the priests what they've done wrong. Moral corruption has come among them, you know, because it wasn't very important any longer.

It might be the same as in certain times on the stock exchange. Unless there is basic integrity, unless there is basic honesty at work, in a world which, in which opportunities seem to present themselves to people all the time to be a little bit dishonest one way or another, there's a tremendous amount of pressure to keep the whole process honest.

And so in the same way with similar kinds of people, basic corruption and dishonesty, instead of people laying to heart to give glory to God with their religious life, they were using it for their own mean advantages, whatever they were.

They were using the whole business of religion for their own purposes. There was no central burning concern in the hearts of people to give glory to God.

And so Malachi says, what's going to happen is that when you bless people, they will be cursed. Your blessing will no longer be a blessing to them.

[7 : 37] It will be a curse rather than a blessing. Then he says, I will rebuke your offspring and I will spread dung on your faces. Now that's a very powerful picture because the priests were always dressed in immaculate robes and they were specially cleansed and purified for their function and they went up into the temple each day dressed in these immaculate robes to do this and the Lord says, but you're going to have dung on your face.

Because the true nature of what you're doing will be apparent to everybody. The false hypocrisy of it all will be very apparent.

Then he goes on in verse 5 and says, this is what I wanted you to be as priests. This is where I wanted you within the whole structure of the worship.

And he talks about the covenant that he established with Levi. Well now Levi was one of the sons of Jacob and the Levites were those whose special responsibility it was to carry out the priestly offices in the temple.

And it was their special responsibility to lead the worship of the whole people. And God says, the Lord says to them in verse 5, my covenant with him was a covenant of life and peace.

[9 : 02] I gave them to him that he might fear and he feared me and he stood in awe of my name. So that the priests who don't stand in awe of God cannot lead the people in the worship of God.

And they didn't. And they weren't leading the people in that worship. He goes on and tells them in verse 6, true instruction was in the mouth of the priest that I had appointed.

No wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness. He turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge and men should seek instruction from his mouth.

For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. And so he says this idyllic picture of the function of the priest as the messenger and spokesman for God, as the counselor, as the man who brings peace and life wherever he goes, a man who when he pronounces a blessing people are blessed.

And that's the thing that the ideal priest is supposed to do. But what were they doing in verse 8? You've turned aside from the way. You've caused many to stumble by your instruction.

[10 : 25] You've corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts. And so I make you despised and abased before all the people. That's the dung on their faces.

Inasmuch as you have not kept my way, but have shown partiality in your instruction. You see, what happened was that the priests got to the place where the people were demanding that they be taught this and demanding that they be instructed in this way.

And these were the values that they wanted. And so the priests were compromised and began to show partiality in the instructions that they gave. they submitted to the pressure that's always on them to curry the favor of men rather than to do the will of God.

And they therefore showed partiality in their instruction. And so you can see the erosion and the breaking down of this whole central system of worship that was at the heart of the nation and why God says you are not, you haven't laid it to heart to give glory to my name.

Worship is no longer that important to you. Then he goes on, the Lord, because this whole book of Malachi is carried on as a debate between the Lord and his people.

[11 : 49] And he says, have we not all one father, meaning Abraham, that he is the father of our nation and we are the children, has not one God created us?

Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? So what happens, you see, is that when the breakdown in the worship of God, when the priests cease to hold God in awe and reverence and the people no longer are involved in worship, they're breaking their covenant with God, then their covenant to one another breaks down.

The honesty and integrity of relationships between people, between brothers in the same nation, between creatures of the same God, their relationship to one another breaks down.

And he goes on to talk about that. In verse 11, he gives a specific example. Judah has been faithless and abomination has been committed in Israel and Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord which he loves and has married the daughter of a foreign god.

Well, marriage was regarded as very sacred. And the thing about marriage was that it wasn't marrying a foreigner. That wasn't the problem.

[13 : 16] It was marrying the daughter of a foreign god that was the problem. because the whole concept of marriage was that it was a covenant between two people who feared the same God, who obeyed the same God.

And this was how they tried to maintain the integrity of the nation by making sure that people didn't marry not outside their race but outside their faith because they understood marriage as being based as a covenant between people who believe in and trust in the same God.

And so, marriage is one of the manifestations in the relationship between men which reflects the fact that the relationship between God has been neglected and eroded and broken down.

And so, he sees this as an abomination in the middle of the people. And he goes on in verse 13 and he says, you cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand.

And what this is is emotional religion as though by really stirring up a storm you can get the attention of God by really crying out and by waving your arms and cutting yourself and doing all sorts of things you can attract God's attention.

[14 : 56] And God isn't very pleased with this. He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. And you ask, he says in verse 14, why does he not?

Well, the reason that God no longer accepts the offering is because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

So, the covenant between God and his people, between God and his priests, peace, as it were, was broken.

The result of the breaking of that covenant was the covenant between people and people was broken. The particular manifestation of that was the breaking of the covenant between a man and his wife.

And so, starting at the top, the covenants were all breaking down, breaking down seriously. And it's a most magnificent verse and a reassuring verse in terms of the basis of marriage, that the Lord is the witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth.

[16 : 18] And it tells you what marriage is for. It's a covenant relationship between a man and a woman. It's a relationship which, out of which they should derive a lifetime of companionship.

it's a covenant through which God can impart to them life. Verse 15, has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life?

Life comes to us as the gift of God. God is the witness to the covenant. God is the one who gives life to us. And then it asks the question in verse 15 when it says, what does he desire?

Well, what he desires is godly offspring. In other words, marriage has a purpose which God has in giving life and in establishing people as companions, establishing them in the covenant, is that they may have offspring.

And these offspring are God's gift to his people. So, Malachi says, take heed to yourselves and let none of you be faithless to the wife of his youth.

[17 : 47] For I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel, and covering one's garments with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.

The breakdown of marriage, the Lord regarded as an activity which was violent. It was violent because people's garments were soiled because of the violence that they were engaged in.

In the violent overthrow of the covenants of marriage within the community. Now, I don't like talking about divorce this way because divorce is something that very much afflicts our society.

And you say, well, and the thing I don't like talking about it is that you sort of center out people who have been divorced and lay on them the guilt of this whole passage.

marriage. And I don't think that's what's meant. Lots of people come to St. John's to be married. It's a lovely church to be married in. And some of them are slightly startled to find that the kind of marriage that is celebrated here is the kind of marriage that's spoken of in Malachi.

[19 : 11] It's a covenant to which the Lord bears witness. And it's a lifetime covenant. And that that's what they subscribe to.

They may like the candles and the choir and the windows and the loveliness of this sanctuary, but the covenant they enter into is not as agreeable to many people.

But that's the covenant that is laid down for us. But you see, the reason that covenant doesn't work is because another covenant has broken down.

The primary covenant is between God and his people. And when that covenant breaks down, then the covenant between people breaks down.

And so what has to be restored is not to lay guilt trips on the people whose marriages have failed, but to seek to restore in the midst of the people the covenant relationship with God from which life derives, from which our whole sense of awe and worship derives its focus.

[20 : 25] That's what needs to be done. Because in the whole area of marriage, none of us can stand up and point at anybody else.

it's a faithlessness which some express overtly and some experience quietly, but it's the insidious reality of a higher covenant having been broken.

And that's what it led to among these people 400 years before Christ. But then you see how he concludes the chapter.

You have wearied the Lord with your words. God's tired of listening to you. He says to them, I know that you've been busy about saying prayers and saying prayers and saying prayers and saying prayers.

Well, God's tired of it. And you with some indignation can reply as he suggests here, well, how have we wearied him?

[21 : 31] And the answer comes right back how you wearied him, by saying everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them.

And of course, all they've done is turned everything upside down. The honest man in this society is the man who doesn't become involved with God and with religion and with all that nonsense.

He's the honest man who expresses himself not in the fear and reverence of God, but recognizing himself to be the sole answer to the world's problems.

And God is wearied of this, turning of all the values upside down, and man vindicating himself and saying, I don't need God to tell me, I'm right.

Oh, yes, you do, because there's nothing else that's right except a relationship to God. I don't need a God to depend on. And that kind of thing wearies God because he is our father.

[22 : 46] He has created us. He is the source of our life. He is the witness to our covenants. So he's weary of our words when we don't hear what he's saying to us.

And he summarizes it in the last verse by people saying, where is the God of justice? There's no justice in our society. There's only every man for himself.

And that's the way I'm going to live. God is fed up with these people who on the one hand derive their life from him and on the other hand live their lives independently of him.

Have not laid it to heart to give glory to his name. And the difficulty you see is that all the way through the covenant breaks down. The covenant in which God has committed himself to us and we have committed ourselves to him, that covenant breaks down and becomes useless and meaningless.

And that covenant must be established so that it can never break down. And the heart of the New Testament, of which this book is the last book before the New Covenant, before the New Testament opens, the heart of the New Covenant, is that God in Christ as man confronts God the Father and establishes a new covenant.

[24 : 28] Christ as man lives and dies on the cross and says to his disciples at the Last Supper, this is the blood of a new covenant, a new kind of relationship.

So that we no longer live in a world like that of Malachi, where covenants are always breaking down because of the insubordination and insufficiency and inadequacy of man.

Man has done precisely what God wanted him to do. Man has been perfectly obedient to God. Man has fulfilled every commandment of God in Jesus Christ.

And the position for you and me is not that we establish our own covenant with God and say, if you'll be my God, I'll do this, this, or this.

Not that we establish our own covenant with God, but that we enter into that covenant which Christ has established. A covenant in which we find renewal by the Holy Spirit.

[25 : 50] A covenant in which we find forgiveness and cleansing of all our sins. A covenant which is constantly renewed because of Jesus Christ.

That's the relationship into which we are called to live. Not in a world where covenants are always breaking down and trying the patience of God so that he says, I'm weary with all your works, but a covenant which has been firmly established in Jesus Christ.

That's why when we pray, we approach God not in my name, but in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's why when we stand before God, we stand not on our own record, but we stand before him in the faith of Jesus Christ.

That's who God sees us as. Not as the broken and weak people that we are, though he recognizes that, but he sees us in Christ, and he sees Christ as the fulfillment of all that man was meant to be, as the one who as man has fulfilled all the conditions of the covenant and established a new relationship.

And all the endless streams of sacrificial offerings in the temple at the center of the city are finished. As it says in the magnificent words of the prayer book, Christ did thereby by his one sufficient and perfect sacrifice of himself, establish a new covenant in his blood.

[27 : 44] And that's the basis on which we as a community of people, regardless of race or regardless of what cultural background we may come from, we are a new community living under a new covenant which God has established for us in Christ.

I'm finished. I'd like to tell you by way of a postscript only that I feel that the second chapter of Malachi is sort of like a grand scale, full length production, and I've given you one of those little trailers you see coming soon, you know, which just gives you snippets of what's here.

And I'd like you to go through it, the second chapter, and take a Bible that you can underline and underline all the questions that are asked in the second chapter of Malachi and underline all the references it makes to covenant and read the story with care and ask God to instruct you because our high priest that instructs us as is described in this thing is Jesus Christ himself.

He is the fulfillment of that priest which is spoken of in Malachi 2. for a moment. He is the