

Chapter 61 Malachi 1-4

Malachi's Crisis

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming?” Malachi 3:1-2

The message of Malachi reads like a court transcript from a high profile and hotly contested trial. Only in this case, the plaintiff is none other than God and the defendants are his beloved covenant people. The argument sounds like a divorce trial, because the dispute is over love, honor, respect and reconciliation. The Lord God presents the case of a jilted lover who is dishonored by the beloved, betrayed by bad faith, and ignored out of spite. What makes matters worse is that the defendant feigns innocence and pretends that whatever problems exist between them belong entirely to the plaintiff. There is nothing more infuriating than the person who tries to belittle a serious dispute and make it seem that the complainant is just making a mountain out of a mole hill. Malachi creates a crisis at a time when Israel had reduced worship to a hobby and ethics to whatever was convenient.

Israel is in serious trouble with God, but you would never know it from listening to them and looking at their actions. They are content with the status quo. They have gotten used to complaining about their religious obligations and bemoaning the fact that they have to give offerings and sacrifices. They give just enough to meet outward expectations and receive the approval of others. But who's fooling who? They pride themselves on reserving the best of their hard-earned benefits for themselves. Their self-absorbed personal lives are in shambles. The divorce rate is high and delinquency rampant, but they have no idea what is causing their relational breakdown. They are very emotional in their worship services but in daily life their business deals are shady, their morals are corrupt, and their priorities revolve around themselves. Many scholars date Malachi's message sometime after Nehemiah's twelve year governorship (ca. 433 BC). The problems confronted in Malachi's prophecy correspond closely to the issues Nehemiah faced when he returned to Jerusalem. Between them, Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi are working all the angles, representing the priestly, political and prophetic perspectives in the same difficult phase of Salvation History.

In Court

Malachi presents the entire case from the first person point-of-view of the Lord. Out of fifty-five verses, forty-seven verses quote the Lord directly (Verhoef, 180). Malachi has nothing to say apart from the direct and immediate word of the Lord. The case opens with the Lord holding nothing in reserve but laying it all out. The Lord's first line is his bottom line. Before a word of grievance, he begins with the gospel: "I have loved you." God might have said, "I used to love you," or "I wish I could still love you," but he doesn't. Everything that follows is based on the continuous love of God for his covenant people Israel. God's love remains unconditional. "I the

Lord do not change,” is the bottom line to a costly vowed commitment (3:6). His love remains, but make no mistake there are grave consequences for rejecting God’s love. The loving father remains ready for the embrace, but the prodigal has to come home to receive it.

The entire case could have been easily dropped. If the people of Israel had said, “Lord, we have sinned against heaven and against you. We are no longer worthy to be called your children,” the story would have turned out entirely different. Instead of a heated point, counter-point argument, there would have been a very moving reconciliation right there on the spot (see Lk 15:21). But Israel’s collective response to God’s love was incredulous, even cynical. They asked, “How have you loved us?” Two minutes into the proceedings and we realize that this is a serious tragedy with little hope of redemption. After all that the Lord has done for Israel, and after all that they had been through together, how could Israel possibly question God’s love? Most recently, Israel had experience God’s provision in bringing the exiles back into the Promised land. Haggai had challenged them to rebuild the temple. Zechariah had renewed their identity as the people of God through visions and messages. The Esther scroll tells of how God intervened to protect the Jews from certain annihilation. Ezra and Nehemiah provided the spiritual leadership and administration to re-establish the people in Judah. But instead of making a case for God’s love from the present and working backwards, the Lord returned to the roots of the covenant. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated....” The election of Jacob over Esau was not based on merit but on grace (Deut 7:7-8), and from the beginning the contrast between acceptance and rejection was as great as love and hate.

“Hate” does not imply personal animosity, but accentuates the difference between being chosen and being rejected. Jesus used the word “hate” in a similar sense when he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26). God chose Abraham, a nobody out of nowhere. Then, God chose Isaac over Ishmael, followed by Jacob over Esau and finally Joseph over all his brothers. In each case, the choice was not based on merit but grace and subverted the natural order of firstborn selection. The person chosen was not better or brighter, but an object lesson of dependency upon God. The first truth of election was not that any of those chosen made a difference but that the Lord God who did the choosing made the only difference that mattered.

The Edomites were Esau’s descendants and their hostility toward Jacob and his descendants provoked God’s wrath. If you recall, the thrust of Obadiah’s prophecy was against the Edomites who harassed and profited from Jerusalem’s downfall under the Babylonians. Now more than seventy years later, the remnant has returned and rebuilt Jerusalem but the Edomites have been ransacked by the Nabateans. From Obadiah to Malachi this Advent series has gone full circle. We began with the problem of Edom and we end with the judgment of Edom. Edom symbolized the prevailing culture that haughtily looked down on the people of God and regarded themselves as invincible. But God had another perspective: “They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord. You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the Lord—even beyond the borders of Israel!’” (1:4-5).

God's covenant love made a huge difference between being chosen or rejected, but it was a distinction that many in Israel, who either ignored or scorned the love of God, no longer recognized. They did not believe God's love made any difference. They were just as vulnerable and lost as any other culture and it was up to them to succeed or fail on their own. This is true today for those who call themselves Christians but believe it doesn't make any difference whether a person is a Buddhist or Moslem or a Hindu or an atheist. Everybody has their own tribal deity and it is important that everyone practice their own religion, whatever that may be, with sincerity. Having lost the distinction of God's love, and imbibed the world-views of surrounding cultures, it was not surprising that the Jews felt unloved by God.

"Everything goes on as usual," quipped Soren Kierkegaard, "and yet there is no longer any one who believes in it" (Either/Or). The priests continued to perform their religious duties as if everyone still believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and took the law of the Lord seriously. In court, God challenged the status quo and zeroed in on the priests. God argued that it was routine for sons to honor their father and for slaves to honor their master, but that the Lord Almighty hadn't even been shown the honor due to a father or the respect due to a master. And the greatest perpetrators of this disrespect were the priests themselves. "It is you priests who show contempt for my name," charged God. To which the defendants lamely answered back, "How have we shown contempt for your name?"

An honest admission of spiritual malpractice would have brought repentance and redemption but their studied avoidance of the truth and feigned innocence only compounded the problem. Probably no one actually came out and said, "the Lord's table is contemptible," but they acted like it. Instead of offering sacrificial animals that were without defect and unblemished as required by the Law (Lev 1:3; 22:20-25), they offered blind and diseased animals. They would never think of giving such animals to the governor because he would never accept them, but they routinely used these animals for temple sacrifices. A comparable situation today might be the person who feels they are doing their religious duty by turning in their broken down car to a charity for a tax receipt when the Lord wants their complete self—their total person, as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1). The priests were giving God a cheap tip, because they didn't like the way God had waited on them. But God made it perfectly clear that he didn't want anything to do with their offerings if their heart was not right. Given what was going on, the Lord's solution was simple: "Why doesn't one of you just shut the Temple doors and lock them? Then none of you can get in and play at religion with this silly, empty-headed worship. I am not pleased. And I don't want any more of this so-called worship!" (1:10, The Message).

This contentious court room debate between God and the priests sounds similar to the debate that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Jesus and Malachi were on the same page when Jesus said, "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean" (Mt 23:25). After all the encouragement and effort offered by Ezra and Nehemiah to lift up the Law of God and to promote heartfelt obedience, the Pharisees twisted the meaning of the law and perverted it for their own self-serving purposes.

Under cross-examination these defiant priestly defendants held that there was no real distinction between Jacob and Edom nor any real difference between true worship and false worship. Nevertheless, God affirmed in no uncertain terms that God's covenant love and authentic worship would prevail everywhere. The future was filled with hope. The greatness of God's love will extend beyond the borders of Israel (1:5) and true worship will be acknowledged universally. "My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations," says the Lord Almighty" (1:11). The day was coming in Christ when the walls of partition dividing Jew and Gentile would come down (Eph 2:14-15). One new humanity would be created in Christ Jesus. Malachi's prophecy of universal and undefiled worship of God looks forward to New Testament exclusivity: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12); and New Testament inclusivity: "...With your blood you purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev 5:9-10).

Bad Faith

God's indictment of the priests accuses them of intentionally dishonoring God and violating the covenant of Levi. Instead of being awed by God, they were bored and burdened by all their god-talk and temple business (1:12-13;2:1). The covenant of Levi is not formally recorded in the Old Testament (Baldwin, 234), but it is mentioned in Jeremiah 33:21 and refers to the responsibility of the descendants of Moses and Aaron (Ex 2:1f.; 4:14) to faithfully communicate the truth of God. When Moses blessed the tribe of Levi, he emphasized Levi's impartiality and their commitment to watch over the word, guard the covenant and teach God's precepts to Israel (Deut 33:9-10). By referencing the covenant of Levi, God was showing that there was a long standing precedent for a faithful priesthood characterized by reverence for God and true instruction. God established the fact in court that once there were priests who were not politicians and people-pleasers. "True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin" (2:6).

When priests go bad they lose all credibility. They cause many to stumble and they lead many astray. Twice in the indictment God takes credit for causing their humiliation: "I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices;" and, "...So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law" (2:3,9). This is a sober warning to the church and its leaders to remain faithful to the Word of God. The Lord is not interested in impressive displays of religiosity or magnificent buildings or professionally choreographed performances. What really matters has not changed through the centuries. The prophet Micah spelled it out: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Betrayed Relationships

God's case against Israel continues by moving from their worship life to their family life. Loving and honoring God are intimately related to loving and honoring one another. If we are faithless toward God it is only a matter of time before we will be unfaithful to each other. If we cannot honor God we will not honor one another. Jesus summed up the Law in two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Mt 22:37-40).

God confronts the defendants with this irrefutable logic: "Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?" The most glaring example of betrayed relationships was the culture of divorce permeating Judah. Husbands were being unfaithful to their Jewish wives and "marrying women who worship a foreign god." Defiling the table of the Lord and divorcing "the wife of your youth" were the dual evils destroying the people of God. It stands to reason that if there is no difference between Jacob and Edom, and no difference between true devotion and defilement, then there is no difference between women who worship foreign gods and wives who honor God. "Another thing you do," announces God, "You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands." Marital infidelity apparently had little effect on the intensity of their spirituality. The people remained very emotional about their spiritual experience. But worship wasn't what it used to be. Instead of experiencing God's blessing, they felt a gnawing emptiness, yet they had no idea why they felt this way. They had not only divorced their wives they had divorced God. God makes a strong case for the intimate connection between fidelity in worship and fidelity in marriage, by going all the way back to Genesis 2:24: "Has not the Lord made the two of you one? You belong to him in body and spirit. And why has he made you one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth" (2:15). ". . . Nowhere else in the Old Testament do we find such an elevated view of marriage. . . Nowhere else is divorce condemned in such explicit terms, and nowhere else is the purpose of marriage expounded in such a manner" (Verhoef, 184).

Having drawn the connection between apostasy and divorce, God takes the issue a step further in court and draws a connection between violence and divorce. "'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God of Israel, 'and I hate it when people clothe themselves with injustice,' says the Lord Almighty" (2:16). Literally, the final phrase reads, "I hate it when people cover themselves with violence." The very people who are covering the altar with their tears are covering themselves with violence. They are putting on violence the way they would put on their clothes. Figuratively speaking, it is as if they had committed murder and they are still wearing the blood splattered clothes. God leaves little doubt about what he thinks of divorce. But it must be emphasized that those who suffer abuse, adultery, and abandonment from spouses who have turned away from their marital covenant are deemed worthy of compassion. They are innocent of wrong-doing and victims of grave injustice.

Broken Promises

The intensity of the court proceedings heated up with four more serious charges that were compressed in the closing argument. Each accusation was countered by the people feigning ignorance. In the mind of the defendants they were not guilty of any outward rebellion against God. Could God read their thoughts; did he know their hearts? They acted as if God were making way too much of this whole thing. They were not that bad! To them the whole case sounded like one big misunderstanding. God needed to chill out. They pretended not to know what the plaintiff meant when he said, "You have wearied the Lord with your words." Their response was wearying in itself, "How have we wearied him?" God answered, "By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them,' or 'Where is the God of justice?'" (2:17). The case against them is building. The defendants have blurred the theological distinction between Jacob and Edom, erased the spiritual distinction between defilement and devotion, and divorced their home life from their worship life. Now on top of everything else they relativize good and evil and trivialize justice. They say in effect, "God loves sinners and sin alike. God loves all. Judgement? God's too nice to judge" (2:17; The Message).

God combats the charge with a very specific prophecy that directly links the message of Malachi with the New Testament. "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty" (3:1). The prophecy immediately makes us think of John the Baptist who fulfills it to perfection (Isa 40:3; Mt 11:10-12; Mk 1:2; Lk 1:17, 76; 7:27). Even his message sounds like Malachi (Mt 3:11-12). But the prophecy is confusing to those who would impose their timetable on salvation history, because it links the coming of the forerunner, the sudden arrival of the Lord, and the final judgment all together in one great climactic event. Instead of seeing twin peaks, Malachi envisioned one huge mountain of God's accomplishment. From his vantage point there was one history-consummating event, which combined Advent and Apocalypse. John the Baptist and John the Apostle stand together. The babe in the manger and the throne of glory share the same horizon.

The impact of the Lord's coming purifies some and condemns others. "For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver" (3:2-3). Those who are resistant to repentance and redemption include sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, unjust employers, those who oppress widows and orphans, and those who deny foreigners justice. Their common problem is that they do not fear the Lord.

The sudden arrival of the Lord took everybody by surprise. Who would have thought that Jesus would be born of a virgin in Bethlehem, grow up in Nazareth, and be baptized by John? The coming of the Lord fit perfectly with this trajectory of humility which was steadily moving downward to the Incarnation of God. But no one anticipated the timing, let alone the nature of the coming of the Lord. Even John the Baptist grappled with the humility of the Lord's coming. From prison, he asked Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Mt 11:3). Added to the surprise of the unexpected, yet long-anticipated coming of the Lord is the lengthy interval between the "refining fire" and the final judgment. From our vantage

point, the roughly 400 hundred years between Malachi and John the Baptist is short compared to the more than 2000 years between Jesus' first advent and his second coming. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends" wrote the apostle Peter,

"With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. . . ." (2 Peter 3:8-15).

The very real danger is that the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ would become like the defendants in Malachi's day, tired of the trajectory of humility, resistant to the refiner's fire, and ready to blend in with the world. Malachi's prophecy of purified Levites and righteous offerings was meant to be fulfilled in the church, the Body of Christ. In the Spirit, believers are the royal priesthood and righteous sacrifices Malachi anticipated (1 Peter 2:9; Rev 1:6; Rom 12:1).

The second accusation was just as straight-forward as the first: "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them." This charge was followed by a simple solution, "'Return to me, and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty." But the people continue to play dumb, "How are we to return?" Like an obstinate child or a selfish spouse they dig in their heels and pretend to be ignorant. They claim not to know the first thing about repentance and renewal. Oblivious to the history of renewal under Ezra and Nehemiah, they insist that everything is God's fault. They just don't get it!

The third accusation charges the defendants with robbery: "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me." Predictably, the people ask, "How are we robbing you?" And mercifully the Lord reasons with an unreasonable people. The very fact the Lord cared enough to confront and argue with the people demonstrated his love. As we have seen there were many ways that the people robbed God. They robbed him theologically, by disparaging the covenant and denying the truth. They robbed him ethically, by their infidelity, indulgence, injustice, and ingratitude. They robbed him spiritually by their outward displays of religiosity and their inward contempt for real worship. So when God identifies the missing tithes and offerings as evidence of grand thief, he is presenting the most tangible and measurable proof of only one aspect of their robbery. But even at this point in the trial, God is still looking for reconciliation. The purpose of making the accusation and presenting the evidence is to bring about transformation. God is not reduced to pleading, any more than a loving parent can be said to be begging when they beseech their child to do the right thing. Even now, God delights in issuing promises: "'Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it'" (3:10). Tithing as such "has lost its

significance as an obligation of giving under the new dispensation. The continuity consists in the principle of giving, in the continued obligation to be worthy stewards of our possessions, but the discontinuity in the manner in which we fulfill our obligations” (Verhoef, 311). We are no longer obligated to bring unblemished animals for sacrifice or food for priests, but we are obligated to live unblemished lives by the grace of God. We are no longer bound to give a tenth of our possessions but we are free to give everything we are and have to Christ. God doesn’t want a tithe of our time, talent and treasure, any more than a husband and wife are satisfied with only a tenth of their loved one.

The fourth accusation alleges slander. “‘You have spoken arrogantly against me,’ says the Lord. Instead of confronting God directly with their concerns about justice, in the tradition of Job, Asaph and Jeremiah, they conducted a smear campaign. They are like the people Asaph describes in Psalm 73. They are arrogant, callous, and carefree. They have bought into the world’s idea of success and they ridicule the idea of “going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty” (3:14). They attribute God’s blessing to the self-seeking, self-promoting, highly ambitious entrepreneur. This final accusation seems to echo the philosophy of a Christianity-without-Christ, a self-help movement that promotes a big vision of success at the expense of the Kingdom of God. Of course the proponents of this thinly veiled secular philosophy of life would never admit that their ideas and strategies have absolutely nothing to do with taking up a cross and following Jesus.

This final accusation seems to leave the court proceedings up in the air. Even though Malachi gives the impression that this line of argumentation could go on and on, it is abruptly cut off. The dialogue and disputation are over. Enough said. All that remains to be given is a guilty verdict. But the jury is still out and amazingly there is still time. Between the last arrogant word of the defendants and God’s warning of total destruction there is a testimony of hope. A new day is coming!

The Faithful Remnant

Up until now there has been no hint that a faithful remnant even existed. God’s case against his people seems to parallel Jesus’ coming debate with the Jewish religious leaders and the disputation has been entirely with those who remind us of the scribes and Pharisees. But then another group emerged who “feared the Lord and talked with each other.” What a beautiful way of describing the faithful remnant. Their life together reinforces their relationship to the Lord. And their conversation among themselves was such that the Lord was able to listen and hear rather than argue and dispute. They remind us of God’s faithful followers down through the ages. They are like the 7,000 that did not bow the knee to Baal in the days of Elijah (1 Kings 19:18). They are like Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna. They are like the disciples who left their nets and tax tables to follow Jesus. Hopefully, we have something deeply in common with these devoted followers of the Lord. They are remembered by the Lord because they “feared the Lord and honored his name” (3:16). They are described as the Lord’s “treasured possession.” And the Lord has compassion on them the way a father has compassion on his children. Moreover, through their faithfulness, they keep alive the distinction between

righteousness and wickedness; a distinction that the defendants in court have systematically tried to obliterate.

An awful judgment awaits the arrogant and every evildoer, but “the sun of righteousness will rise” on the faithful remnant “with healing in its rays.” They will experience the joys of family and work as God intended. They will be lifted up over the wicked and filled with good things. Their lives will be in sync with the law of Moses and responsive to the word of Elijah. Together they will be the family of God, living according to the Law and the Prophets. Parents will look after their children and children will look after their parents. Beautiful!

The last word of the Old Testament is a curse, reminiscent of God’s curse at the Fall. But by now, we have learned that if we fall under that curse, we have had to work very hard to reject God’s love and refuse his grace.