

MALACHI

or

WILL A MAN ROB GOD?

by

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CHAPTER THREE

THE LORD GOD'S WORSHIP CORRUPTED

“Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar” (Malachi 1:7).

“GOD IS SPIRIT: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). It is not conceivable, therefore, that those who bluntly question His love and unabashedly disesteem His name could worship God acceptably. Nor did they.

The word **“worship”**, derived largely from *“worth”* (*worthiness*), became used to denote honor or reverence of which one was regarded as worthy. It speaks of deference, supreme respect and veneration. As a verb, it means *to pay honor or reverence, or to show homage*. In a spiritual sense, it is to be regarded as a sacred attitude and solemn expression of devotion for the Most High on the part of His acknowledged people.

THE MISSING ESSENTIAL

The practice was pursued—“Ye offer” (1:7).

There was no dearth of activity. They had their scheduled meetings, their appointed feasts, new moons and seasons. Religious programs may be most impressive in the eyes of men with no glory whatsoever accruing unto the Lord. Recently I asked a pastor about his church, to which he replied, “We are operating but not producing.” It is an apt description of the people in Malachi's day.

As apostasy increases, worship becomes more meaningless to the masses of humanity, but the practice is religiously continued. The crucifixion of Christ was hurried because the passover feast was at hand and the people reasoned that they could better worship if the Son of God were disposed of. Fifty days later they gathered at Jerusalem from some sixteen different nations, but mocked when the Spirit of God manifested Himself.

People universally have some type of worship even though superstition, ritualism and rationalism eclipse the true and living God.

The place was proper—“Upon mine altar” (1: 7).

Moses received detailed specifications on the mount regarding the Tabernacle. This was particularly true concerning the Brazen Altar (Exodus 27:1-8). The word “**altar**” in our text, however, seems to denote, not a particular part of worship, but worship in its entirety. Thus the people assembled regularly even as multitudes do today, more as a custom than through conviction—more as a habit than through heartfelt devotion.

Almost every community has its place of worship. People find ways and means to erect edifices ranging from small chapels to magnificent cathedrals. These, in themselves, cannot assure worship. Liturgy and ceremony may be devoid of reality, as may be the repulsive informality of irreverence. The One to be worshiped must be present (Matthew 18:20), recognized and acknowledged.

In the early days, the Lord God's glory was with Israel in the Shekinah. However, the irresponsibility and disobedience of the people forced a departure.

“Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub, and stood over the threshold of the house” (Ezekiel 10:4).

“Then the glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house” (Ezekiel 10:18).

“And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city” (Ezekiel 11:23).

It was a reluctant withdrawal but the Lord God removed His presence from the insincere worshipers. Despite the beautiful anthems and pleasing oratory, the meeting place is an empty place if God is not there.

The procedure was wrong—“polluted” (1:7).

The Lord had many times previously reproved the people for impiety and impropriety.

“When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?” (Isaiah 1:12).

And later, **“This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me”** (Isaiah 29:13).

Again, **“What hath my beloved to do in mine house, seeing she hath wrought lewdness with many”** (Jeremiah 11:15).

And yet again, **“To what Purpose cometh there to me incense? . . . Your burnt-offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me”** (Jeremiah 6:20).

Before undertaking to worship, God's people need to learn two things.

First, that “the gift without the giver is bare.”

The saints at Macedonia had learned this. They “**first gave their ownelves to the Lord**” (II Corinthians 8:5).

Second, what God does not authorize He cannot approve; what He cannot approve,

He will not accept. To engage in a form of worship without the essential spirit and truth is not only profitless to those who so carelessly proceed, but from God's point of view it is a pollution (desecration, defilement). This was the divine charge.

INDICTMENT REGISTERED

The Remonstrance

The official note handed by the Lord's ambassador to these rebellious people was stern and convicting:

“Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar . . . Ye say, The table of the Lord is contemptible . . . If ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil?” (1:7, 8).

“The table of the Lord” (1:7) is not the table of showbread (Exodus 25:23). It is **“the table that is before the Lord”** (Ezekiel 41:22, last line). It is the altar of incense (Exodus 30:1) and is highly symbolical of worship. The complaint does not focus primarily upon the imperfect offerings but rather upon the imperfect heart attitude of the offerers.

Dealing with God is ever a matter of the heart.

A divided heart is not acceptable. Hearts invaded by idols are disqualified for worship. Hearts that are insincere are rejected. **“They have not cried unto me with their heart”** (Hosea 7:14), the Lord God charged.

Then, too, true worship is withheld because personalities are allowed to hinder.

- Jeremiah was a pessimist and an alarmist.
- Hosea was a fool and mad.
- Paul's bodily appearance was obnoxious and his speech contemptible.

These are the impressions which prejudiced the people and closed their ears to the heaven-sent message. What they needed was to see the Lord as did Isaiah, and trust Him as did Job.

What we need so greatly in our day is to **“keep looking unto Jesus”**, to **“see no man save Jesus only.”**

The Resentment

“**Wherein have we polluted thee?**” was the quick retort—a vigorously implied innocence of the self-justifying worshipers. This follows a long-established pattern. When God warned the people through Jeremiah against their lack of spiritual perception and their violated orthodoxy, their resentment was voiced in this fashion: “**Let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words**” (Jeremiah 18:18b).

- In 26:8, they threatened God's servant with death.
- In 37:16, Jeremiah is in prison—all because he conveyed the Lord's message of displeasure to them.

How immediate and intense would be the reaction today if the superficial multitudes were to be told their worship is a delusion, that, with a mere form of godliness, they are denying themselves the power thereof (II Timothy 3:5).

Religion so-called in our day has suffered a wide divergence from the early New Testament position. Denominational pride, hereditary influence, associational ties, personal preferences, representative solicitation, apart from Holy Spirit guidance, have combined to give a somber cast to the spiritual life of our day.

One wonders at the patience of God, “**Ye say, The table of the Lord is contemptible**” (1:7). Uttered or unexpressed, this was their feeling about the prescribed means and manner of worship. The flesh (self-life) is so deceitful as to abhor, not only what God approves, but what He actually designs and desires. Because they had some inclination to worship and because they actually thus engaged themselves, the word “**contemptible**” may seem overly strong as here employed. But not so. God knows hearts (John 2: 25b). God has commanded worship (Matthew 4:10). He desires worship (John 4:23). No other word could so perfectly describe their attitude. “**Contemptible**” here means “*to relegate to unimportance*”, “*to make nothing of*”, “*to set at nought*,” “*to think to scorn*”, and this was most grievous to the Lord God.

The Lord is to be worshiped “**in the beauty of holiness**” (I Chronicles 16:29; Psalm 29:2; 96:9).

The beauty of holiness is nowhere so acceptably revealed as in obedience to God's will and way. Innovations, modifications and adaptations are the fruit of self-opinion, therefore meaningless to and rejected of God.

How different would be the whole picture were we, as Andrew Murray, to pray:

“Teach me, O Lord, how holy Thou art
That I may know
How holy Thou dost want me to be”
(cf. I Peter 1:16).

Or, were we, with Robert Murray McCheyne, diligently to prepare the heart and mind on Saturday evening to meet the Lord in worship the day following.

Self-examination demanded.

“Offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the Lord” (1:8).

The Spirit of God would never exhort people to examine themselves to see if they be in the faith (II Corinthians 13:5) if there were not available measuring rods.

Here is a practical test.

God desired the firstripe fruit but received only the gleanings (Micah 7:1). He asked that the animals for the sacrifice be without spot or blemish (Numbers 19:2), that they not be blind and lame (Deuteronomy 15:21), yet He now receives the worthless.

Selfishness and personal gain are reflected in their flagrant violation of divine precept. They could sell the perfect creatures, so they sacrificed the imperfect. They would not offer such as a gift to an earthly dignitary. It would be an affront to present to him something valueless.

When the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon **“she gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones: there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the Queen of Sheba gave; to king Solomon”** (I Kings 10:10).

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower made his eastern goodwill tour (1960), there preceded his jet plane another aircraft heavily loaded with gifts for the leaders of nations whom he planned to meet. A committee in Washington gave scrupulous attention to each such gift as to protocol, as to desirability, as to worthiness, as to value. Yet the people of Malachi's day brought to the infinite God animals for sacrifice which were blind, sick and lame.

A NEEDFUL EXHORTATION

“And now, I pray you,” said Malachi the messenger, **“beseech God that he will be gracious unto us”** (1:9).

If they had thus sincerely prayed, no supplication could have been more appropriate. It was time for a repentant people to confess their grievous mistake and to seek divine forgiveness. The offense should have been confessed. There is no question that this was in order, for Malachi adds, **“This hath been by your means.”**

That is to say, ***“You, the people, have done this thing. You went to the field. You deliberately ferreted out the sick and dying animals. You brazenly conveyed them to the place of worship. You presented them as a gift to the Most High, all the while recognizing their worthlessness.”***

Speaking for the Lord, Malachi asks, “**Will he [God] regard your persons** [when you have so confessed]?” The answer is “Yes.” Should they not so confess, the answer would be “No.”

That they refused to turn their hearts heavenward; that they did not so confess; that they did not seek God's favor is pathetically evident. This posed a serious threat to their spiritual well-being. Man is ever reluctant to do things in God's way. Confession is clearly required for restoration (Hosea 14:1, 2; I John 1:9), yet this is one of the last things a guilty one is willing to do.

DIVINE DISAPPROVAL EMPHASIZED

“I would that one among you would shut the doors [of the temple] that no more vain fire should kindle on mine altar” (v. 10 marg. See also Isaiah 1:11).

The Calamity of Feigned Worship

The Lord is here revealing that it would be better not to attempt to worship than in doing so to pursue unauthorized measures which only incur divine Wrath. Closed doors are preferred to pretense. This is doubly true because open doors in such persistence would have a continuing harmful effect upon younger generations. How terrible is an epidemic of apostasy! Darkness of unbelief grows denser and denser. When one generation fails spiritually, the failure will be greater with the succeeding generation.

The only thing that can change spiritual decline is a heaven-sent, Holy Spirit revival to lift God's people back to a loftier plane.

It is gravely doubtful that our children will be able to sing with honesty, “Faith of our fathers living still.” Then will not be much from us to encourage and challenge them unless we sink the roots of our faith deeper into the soil of Truth and engage in daring exploits for the Lord. The fact that the curtain went up on the New Testament scene to reveal a people who had no room for Messiah, no desire for His message and no compunction in calling for His crucifixion is all traceable to conditions right here in the Book of Malachi.

The patience of God is the greatest mystery of any day. As long as they maintained even a faint regard for the divine instructions, the Lord, who is slow to anger, bore patiently with them.

However, the testimony of the people never became prominently strong. Indeed, there were times when it seemed the pulse of spiritual devotion had all but ceased. Such was this day.

God told Isaiah to cry with a full-throated voice, sparing not in showing them their sins (Isaiah 58:1). He commanded Jeremiah to go into their midst and urge upon them to amend their ways and their doings (Jeremiah 7:1-3). Now He must reveal through Malachi, “**I have no pleasure in you . . . neither will I accept an offering at your hand**” (1:10). Unbelief had wrought its havoc.

The Plunge of Intellectual Pride

“Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it and ye have snuffed at it, saith the Lord of hosts” (1:13).

It is never a reflection upon one's intellect to take God at His Word. It is, on the other hand, intellectual suicide to question the precepts of Him **“in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** (Colossians 2:3).

The word **“snuffed”** speaks of *intellectual snobbery*—the inflated ego disesteeming the counsel of God, presuming that God's way is not best, and implying that man's way is more acceptable. It is the philosophy of Cain which has been espoused throughout the ages by the unbelieving heart.

The reason they **“snuffed at it”** (God's way) was due to what they considered burdensome procedure in the ceremonial requirements. **“What weariness it is!”** was their lament. Paul served with his spirit in the gospel (Romans 1:9) and finished his course with joy. These people served in the flesh and became wearied and mournful (3:14).

Intellectual snobbery in objection to divine precept is usually manifested with **“I think”** or **“I have a right to my opinion!”** This is never productive of good.

“Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness” (Luke 11:35).

Deception comes under the curse (1:14), and one who deliberately and wittingly offers to God anything but the best that he possesses is deceptive, especially when, like Ananias and Sapphira, one **“voweth”** or presents what he knows is not acceptable or true.

David had set an impressive example when Araunah, the Jebusite, asked him to accept oxen as a gift for his burnt-offering. Israel's sweet singer replied resolutely, **“Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt-offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing”** (II Samuel 24:24). What a contrast has thus developed!

A missionary related how he passed a mother sitting by the then raging Ganges River. By her side was a healthy little boy; in her arms a sickly child. Upon his return, she was still sitting there, the child in her arms, the little boy missing. In conversation, the missionary learned the lady sacrificed her healthy child to appease her heathen god by casting him into the turbulent river. When he asked why she did not offer the sickly child, her reply was, **“I give of my best to my god.”**

It is reasonable to conclude that God's people in Malachi's day were less devout than such predecessors as David and not even as devoted to Him as the heathen were to their lifeless idols.

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