

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Malachi - The Dangers of Spiritual Blindness: Problems in the family (Malachi 2:10-16)

Today we continue with our study of Problems in the Family, in Malachi 2:10-16.

Malachi 2:10-16 deals with the problem of divorce amongst the people of God during the ministry of the prophet Malachi. Malachi deals specifically with husbands who divorced their wives to marry non-Jewish women who did not worship the God of Israel.

Our reading starts with Malachi 2:10, *"Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers?"*

Malachi begins by reminding his people that God is the Creator (Malachi 2:10) and that He also established the marriage covenant (Malachi 2:10). He then challenges them about their unfaithfulness to their wives and how this behaviour also demonstrates their unfaithfulness to God Himself.

God first established the marriage covenant and later through their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God also established the nation of Israel. This nation, the Bible explains, was in contrast to all other nations who did not believe in the one true God but in manmade idols.

God's reason for choosing Israel is given in Deuteronomy 7:6-8, *"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."*

Malachi argues that unfaithful husbands had formed new relationships with non-believing wives which violated *"the covenant"* (Malachi 2:10) made by God. This covenant marked them out as a people separated from the other peoples of the world, as outlined in the Pentateuch:

- *"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine"* (Exodus 19:5, New International Version);
- *"But I said to you, 'You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.' I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations"* (Leviticus 20:24, New International Version); and
- *"Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons"* (Deuteronomy 7:3, New International Version).

Intermarrying not only undermined the covenant God had made with Israel, but also caused real suffering to the wives who were forsaken. God was the common Father of the Israelites recognised as the Creator God and as the One who had redeemed them out of Egypt. Malachi's words, *"created us"* (Malachi 2:10) relates to physical creation and also relates to Israel being created to be His peculiar and chosen people, *"But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine'"* (Isaiah 43:1).

This background is further enhanced by the fact that through God's promises and faithfulness His people had been released from Babylon to return to the land He had given them.

In Malachi 2:11, Malachi outlines how God viewed the behaviour of Judah, "*Judah has dealt treacherously, And an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the LORD's holy institution which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god*" (Malachi 2:11).

Malachi associates Judah with the treachery and the disrespect shown to the holiness of God evidenced by the behaviour of the husbands divorcing their wives. This is very sad when we think about the words of Jacob when he blesses his children in Genesis 49:1-28. When he blesses his son Judah, Jacob says, "*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet*" (Genesis 49:10).

Judah was the tribe of King David and the line through which the Lord Jesus came. Sadly, it was David's own son Solomon, renowned for his wisdom, who succumbed to the temptation of foreign wives (see 1 Kings 11:1-8). This led to the division of the kingdom. Now Malachi had to deal with the people of God behaving in a similar way to Solomon at a time when God was restoring them to the kingdom. This is an important lesson because it demonstrates that even when God is proving His constant faithfulness to us we are capable of being so unfaithful to Him through our faithfulness to others.

God loved His people and He had set them apart so that His holiness and glory would be seen in them and they would be a witness to Him in the world. They were all a holy people - men and women. But wives were being treated in a shameful way and forsaken for women who worshipped idols. Malachi accuses Judah of marrying, "*the daughter of a foreign god*" (Malachi 2:11)

It is interesting that Jeremiah describes the idol worshippers in terms of father and child. "*They say to wood, 'You are my father,' and to stone, 'You gave me birth'*" (Jeremiah 2:27, New International Version).

The unfaithful husbands were abandoning their wives for idolaters.

In Malachi 2:12 we read, "*As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD remove him from the tents of Jacob - even though he brings an offering to the LORD Almighty*" (New International Version)

The inference in Malachi 2:12 in the words, "*whoever he may be*" is that unfaithful husbands were found across the whole of society. They were not restricted to a particular class. Indeed, the reference to bringing, "*an offering to the LORD*" may refer to both the offerer and the priest.

In 1 Samuel 2 we discover that the sons of Eli, the High Priest, were the most immoral men in the land. Sadly, throughout history those with responsibilities for the spiritual welfare of the people of God have too often failed to provide the right spiritual guidance and, worse still, have participated in behaviour which has brought dishonour to God's name and shame on the Christian testimony.

Malachi commits the matter into God's hand with the words, "*may the LORD remove him from the tents of Jacob*" (Malachi 2:12). Malachi demonstrates his understanding that the situation demanded God's sovereign intervention. Paul use similar words, "*Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works*" (2 Timothy 4:14).

Malachi ends Malachi 2:12 by highlighting the hypocrisy shown by unfaithful husbands. These men were behaving in an unloving and unjust way towards their wives and dishonouring God's name. At the same time, they were bringing offerings to God as though spiritually everything was fine. Sin always damages the sinner and those affected by the sin. When we do wrong we more often than not feel guilty even if that guilt wears thin. But sometimes we have no feeling of guilt. Paul refers to this in his first letter to Timothy, "*Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron*" (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

Paul's expression, "*conscience seared with a hot iron*" (1 Timothy 4:2) vividly describes the lack of any sense of responsibility or guilt for the wrong we do. Hypocrisy is the road that leads to this condition.

If you read the beginning of the story of Gideon in Judges 6 you discover the people of God crying to Him to deliver them from the oppression of the Midianites (Judges 6:1-10). Whilst they prayed they were continuing to worship Baal and when Gideon destroyed the altar of Baal the men of the people threatened to kill him 9 Judges 6:24-35).

King David was filled with indignation when Nathan told him the story of the poor man whose one ewe lamb was stolen by his rich neighbour (2 Samuel 2:1-6). But Nathan declares to the king, "*You are the man!*" (see 2 Samuel 12:7-15) and David discovered the story was a picture of his own sin when he committed adultery with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11:1-17).

Such hypocrisy is shocking and not limited to bygone days. It can still affect us as Christians today. To pretend to spiritual behaviour whilst in reality living an unholy life only serves both to weaken us personally and also to damage the wider Christian testimony. Malachi was addressing such failure in the lives of his contemporaries and it serves as a warning to us today.

Malachi explains that God would not overlook the behaviour of husbands who were divorcing their wives to gratify their selfish passions. It did not matter if they were rulers, priests or ordinary men; God is no respecter of persons (see also Acts 10:34). Bringing offerings to God whilst living unholy lives only compounded their poor behaviour. As Samuel told Saul, *"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams"* (1 Samuel 15:22).

By sinning against their wives, unfaithful husbands were sinning against God.

Malachi 2:13 explains that their tears, expressing regret that their offerings were no longer acceptable to God, did not wash away the guilt of their actions, *"You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favour on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands."*

What God was looking for was repentance and change. When Joshua fell down before God to complain about Israel's defeat at Ai in Joshua 7 God was very direct with him. He told him to get up and sort out the sin that caused the problem so the people could be victorious again.

We have to admit that sometimes we can be very dramatic, tearful and falsely spiritual about some matters when we know where the failure lies. God wants us to get up and put it right. We cannot hide behind the fact that we are God's people when we do not behave like God's people. God asks us to be consistent with the things we preach and teach and not to be hypocrites.

In Malachi 2:14 God defends abandoned wives, *"You ask, 'Why?' It is because the LORD is 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."*

Malachi explains why God was rejecting offerings. The husbands were not recognising their unfaithfulness to their wives and to God. God was taking the side of the wives who were being oppressed. God always takes the side of the down trodden. He is the God of the fatherless and the widows and of the many who suffer injustice sometimes at the hands of those who should be protecting them.

God takes the husbands back to the beginning of their marriages, to *"the wife of your youth"* (Malachi 2:14). In Deuteronomy 24:5 we learn of the provision made for a newly married couple, *"When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, and bring happiness to his wife whom he has taken."*

That year was critical to the establishment of a sound marriage and would not be a bad idea today! Malachi reminds the husbands of the joy they had at the beginning of their marriages and the commitment they had made to their young wives. Then he confronts them with their unfaithfulness as husbands. They had betrayed the love and trust of their wives. Malachi uses the terms, *"she is your partner"* and the *"wife of your marriage covenant"* (Malachi 2:14). They were not only joined by the marriage covenant but also by the covenant between God and Israel. This meant that a sin against a wife, a daughter of Israel, was also a sin against God. Marriage also is called *"the covenant of her God"* in Proverbs 2:17 where it refers to an unfaithful wife.

Genesis 2:23-24 underpins the concept of marriage. We read, *"And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."*

The Lord Jesus refers to Genesis 2:23-24 in Matthew 19:4-6, when He challenges the attitudes of the Pharisees to marriage. *"And He answered and said to them, 'Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.'"*

Matthew 19:4-6 demonstrate the value the Lord Jesus places on marriage.

In Malachi 2:15, Malachi goes on to emphasise responsibility of husbands towards to God and their wives. *"Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth"* (New International Version).

This responsibility is towards the God who created and redeemed His people. We belong to Him and we are to be faithful to Him in body and spirit. Faithfulness in marriage, as well as in other relationships, is a key way in which we demonstrate our faithfulness to God. God seeks His people to be holy as He is holy (Leviticus 11:44, 1 Peter 1:16). Each succeeding generation of God's people is to witness to Him and not, as the Apostle John warns, to love the world and embrace thinking and actions which are contrary to Christ's teaching (see 1 John 2:15-16). Christians are to resist harming others to fulfil selfish needs. This is the warning Malachi gives to husbands, who, in this verse may not have been unfaithful to their wives, but who were in danger of becoming unfaithful under the influence of others who had already gone down that path. Malachi warns them to consider their actions and be true to God and their wives.

Finally, in Malachi 2:16, Malachi re-asserts the responsibilities of the husband, *"The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'does violence to the one he should protect,' says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful"* (Malachi 2:16, New International Version)

The great sadness which Malachi refers to in Malachi 2:16 is when a husband's love for his wife is replaced by hate and that hatred becomes the basis of divorce.

Malachi's teaching addresses men's abuse of women. It does not go into other reasons or circumstances associated with divorce which might be discussed at another time. Malachi simply focuses on the responsibility of husbands towards their wives when they are tempted to gratify their passions with other women and sacrifice their existing marriages and faith in God to do so. He confronts husbands about the consequences of their selfishness and immoral desires and holds them responsible for abandoning their commitments. Malachi highlights the ways in which men justify poor behaviour to destroy what was once treasured and valuable. He demonstrates how such actions are never limited to the individuals involved but cause immense and long-term damage to families particularly children. Malachi also recognises the damage done to society at large. Selfishness leaves a legacy of insecurity and mistrust in its wake and causes immense physical, emotional and spiritual turmoil.

Malachi also refers to the violence done to the wife the husband vowed to protect.

In the Book of Ruth, when Boaz meets Ruth for the first time, he tells her, *"It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before. The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge"* (Ruth 2:11-12).

In this beautiful passage Boaz says, *"...the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge."* Instead of "refuge" he could have said "protection." Later in the story Boaz acts to protect Ruth by marrying her (see Ruth 4:1-12).

We live in a world where women still suffer abuse. This abuse can be physical or psychological or both. It can occur within a marriage as well as outside of marriage. Malachi wrote a long time ago but the Word of God is living and powerful (see Hebrews 4:12) and its message always has relevance. Desires and temptation do not change. Malachi challenges us as Christian men to ensure we act with complete faithfulness towards our wives and, of course, our children, that we protect and care for those who we love and who love us and ensure that love is not betrayed.

In Malachi's day marriage was being endangered by the nation which should have done most to uphold it. Today Christian husbands have the same responsibility to love, care for, and protect their wives and families. God holds us responsible to fulfil the vows of faithfulness we made in His presence. On our wedding day these vows were not made to a woman we did not love, but they were made because we loved her.

Of course we are all capable of making the most dreadful mistakes. A good marriage can become a bad marriage but a bad marriage can also, under the hand of God, become a good one. The reason the husbands Malachi spoke to had forsaken their wives is because they had forsaken God first. The key is to stay close to the Saviour because in doing so we shall be kept close to each other.

May God bless our marriages and day by day strengthen and increase the love on which they are based.

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