

Commentary
on Malachi

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PREFACE TO 2003 EDITION

Although Scripture distinguishes between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, it does not group its documents into what we call the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Bible is one book – not two – revealing to us information about the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, which are two administrations of only one dispensation of grace, contrary to the teaching of modern dispensationalism.

In addition, although Scripture acknowledges that the New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant as a superior administration of grace, it never says that what we call the New Testament documents are superior to or would replace what we call the Old Testament documents. Neither does Scripture say that the New Covenant replaces the moral requirements that are listed in the Old Testament documents, but that are not exclusively tied to the Old Covenant, unlike the ceremonial laws that have been fulfilled in Christ.

Therefore, Christians cannot ignore any part of Scripture, and they have no warrant to declare any part of Scripture as inferior or less relevant. As Paul writes, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

In the following exposition of Malachi, we will see that the God of the Old Covenant is the same as the God of the New Covenant – he exercises the same love toward his elect, and requires the same reverence from his people. It will also be clear that human nature, before being transformed and sanctified by the Spirit, has remained the same throughout history. Many professing believers and ministers are often guilty of the same sins for which Malachi rebuked his contemporaries.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have disputed whether the word *Malachi*, meaning "my messenger," should be understood as a proper name or as a title. To understand the word as a title would turn the book into an anonymous composition, although this does not diminish its authenticity and authority.

Some people contend that the word is a title because of the unusual superscription of Malachi 1:1, where there is no biographical or other information concerning the prophet. But this observation as an argument is unpersuasive since, "While most other prophetic superscription provide one or more of these points of information, Malachi's simple naming of the prophet is not unprecedented."¹

Then, some try to argue that the word is a title by identifying Malachi with "my messenger" in 3:1. However, the passage indicates that this "messenger" in Malachi 3 is someone who would come in the future, and therefore the term cannot be referring to the same person as 1:1.

Some suggest that even if "my messenger" functions as a title rather than a proper name, it does not necessarily make the book an anonymous composition, since it may be a title of a specified individual. For example, "the targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel...added to Malachi 1:1 the explanatory phrase, 'whose name is called Ezra the Scribe.'"²

Calvin seems to support a version of this view, and writes, "I am more disposed to grant what some have said, that he was Ezra, and that Malachi was his surname, for God had called him to do great and remarkable things."³ Against Origen, Calvin also argues against the view that the object designated by the word could have been an angel, because it carries an ending that was usual for proper names, and therefore the word should be considered as the name of a man.⁴

Harrison argues that, although attributing the book to Ezra was a "tradition accepted by Jerome, it is actually no more valuable than similar ones associated with Nehemiah and Zerubbabel."⁵ His position on the matter is that, "While the historical period and the general interest of the composition might suggest any one of these individuals as the author, there appears to be some legitimacy for the view that regards the work as an

¹ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman II, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 438.

² Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1999; p. 958.

³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. XV; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1998; p. 459.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁵ Harrison, p. 958.

anonymous composition."⁶ Other scholars contend that the book is in fact the concluding section of Zechariah.⁷ Robert L. Alden writes, "On the positive side...If a man named Malachi did not write the book bearing this name, he would be the only exception. Moreover, Malachi is neither an unlikely nor an unsuitable one for the author of this last book of the prophets."⁸

On this matter, I agree with Joyce Baldwin: "While there is no evidence that Malachi is to be identified with Ezra the tradition is strong that Malachi is a personal name, and in the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary it is logical to accept that the prophet was called Malachi."⁹ This is not a unique belief in Old Testament scholarship, since it is also "the conclusion reached by Chary...and he cites A. van Hoonacker, H. Junker and A. Deissler as being of the same opinion."¹⁰

Pieter A. Verhoef offers the same conclusion, maintaining that, "In the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary it is logical to accept that the prophet was called Malachi," and that, "According to G. A. Smith 'it is true that neither in form nor in meaning is there any insuperable obstacle to our understanding *mal'akhi* as the name of a person.'"¹¹ W. J. Deane also convincingly argues for this position. He points out that the author of this book could not have been Ezra because of the marked differences in literary style, and that "it is hardly possible that the authorship of so distinguished a man should have been forgotten when the canon was arranged."¹²

However, just because the author could not have been Ezra does not mean that it must have been a prophet named Malachi. The answer to this is that "to all the prophetic books the writer's own name is prefixed. The use of a pseudonym or a symbolical name is unknown; and the authenticity of the contents of the prophecy is always testified by the naming of the author as one known to his contemporaries and approved by God."¹³ Thus *Malachi* in 1:1 is intended to be understood as the name of the prophet, whose divine utterances follow, and not a title or office.

The remaining reason for questioning the authorship of this book is the aforementioned unusual superscription; that is, the beginning of this book contains no biographical or other information relevant to the prophet himself. But such an exception does not in itself exclude the authorship of one named Malachi, especially "when the same omission occurs in the case of Obadiah and Habakkuk, of whose personality no doubt has ever

⁶ Ibid., p. 958.

⁷ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985; p. 702.

⁸ Ibid., p. 702.

⁹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 24; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1972; p. 212.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 212.

¹¹ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p. 156.

¹² *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers; "Malachi," p. iii.

¹³ Ibid., p. iii-iv.

arisen."¹⁴ For these reasons, I conclude with Deane that "Malachi, therefore, is certainly a real person."¹⁵

Most scholars are in agreement that several inferences from internal evidence yield an approximate date to Malachi's ministry.

The fact that the temple had been rebuilt (1:13; 3:1, 10) indicates that the book is post-exilic – it was composed after the Jews had returned from their captivity to Babylon.¹⁶ This also places the ministry of Malachi after that of Haggai and Zechariah, the two prophets immediately preceding Malachi in the Old Testament canonical arrangement.

Since the temple was completed in about 515 B.C., Malachi's ministry must have been after this date. In addition, we know that the temple worship had been in place long enough for the people to have grown weary of it (1:13). As Verhoef points out:

[Haggai and Zechariah had] stirred up the returned exiles to rebuild the temple, which was completed in 515 B.C. (Ezra 5-6). As far as Malachi was concerned, this event already belonged to the past. The book assumes the existence of the temple (1:10; 3:1, 8) and presupposes a time of spiritual decline, because the temple worship had already deteriorated to such an extent that the priests and the people had to be reproved by the prophet about their malpractices (1:6-14; 2:1-9; 3:6-12).¹⁷

The word used for "governor" in 1:8 "is a technical term from the Persian period,"¹⁸ and places the prophecies before "the death of Nehemiah, who was the last civil ruler."¹⁹

Malachi addressed the very issues corrected during Nehemiah's second term in Jerusalem, which places him prior to 445 B.C., and thus limiting the prophecies in the book to some time after 515 B.C., but before 445 B.C..

If Malachi had ministered after Ezra's arrival to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., it narrows the date to somewhere between 458-445 B.C.. Despite a small number of difficulties, most scholars are in agreement that the composition of Malachi occurred around 450 B.C.. Although some place Malachi before Ezra, that is, prior to 458 B.C., the fact that he must have prophesied long after the completion of the Second Temple (after 515 B.C.) is not in dispute.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. iv.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. iv.

¹⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1986; p. 230.

¹⁷ Verhoef, p. 157.

¹⁸ Dillard, p. 439.

¹⁹ Boice, p. 230.

Malachi addresses his audience in the form of disputations, where the prophet attributes to the people challenges to God's initial assertions, whereupon God would answer their objections through Malachi, often followed by certain promises or predictions.

Although some scholars consider such an approach unique,²⁰ others think that the method was not entirely novel,²¹ seeing that one may find the semblance of disputations in passages such as Amos 5:18-20 and Micah 2:6-11, "and Jeremiah frequently refers to exchanges with his contemporaries,"²² as do Isaiah and Ezekiel. Nevertheless, some maintain that Malachi was at least "an early example of an extended use of the question-and-answer method," which later became "the usual format for rabbis and scribes."²³

In any case, the significance to this is that, "Malachi reveals the same sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of his contemporaries as did his predecessors."²⁴ He was aware of the people's objections to God's ways, and by divine inspiration, was able to provide authoritative responses to them.

²⁰ Dillard, p. 439.

²¹ Baldwin, p. 213.

²² Ibid., p. 213-214.

²³ *Expositor's*, Vol. 7; p. 704.

²⁴ Baldwin, p. 214.

1. THE BURDEN OF THE LORD (1:1)

The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. (1:1)

We have already discussed the word *Malachi*, and have concluded that it is the name of an individual, whose prophecies are recorded in the rest of this document. We will now examine the rest of this verse.

Many people believe that the word "burden," when used in a prophetic context, does not refer only to prophecy in general, but also to the pronouncement of judgment. Calvin says, "Whenever this word is expressed, there is ever to be understood some judgment of God."¹ Verhoef elaborates, "We may concede to the opinion that in prophecy the word...generally acquires an ominous sense linked up with the catastrophic nature of many prophecies. In this sense the word usually denotes a pronouncement of utmost importance, a prophecy of judgment."²

In Jeremiah 23, we read that the word had become a way for the ungodly to deride the prophets, who at times brought them messages about God's impending judgment against the people's sins. Jeremiah 23:33-34 says:

And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What is the burden of the LORD? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? I will even forsake you, saith the LORD. And as for the prophet, and the priest, and the people, that shall say, The burden of the LORD, I will even punish that man and his house.

As Feinberg argues,³ it is better to translate "What burden?" in verse 33 as, "You are the burden!" – as in, "What a burden (you are)!" Because of the people's sins, God's prophets had been bringing words of judgment to them, prefacing the prophecies with "The burden of the Lord." But instead of repenting of their sins, the hearers had grown to find such messages *burdensome*. Thus they had begun using this term in their derogatory challenges to the prophets, saying, "What is the *burden* of the Lord this time?"

Nowadays, we find many people who likewise find the requirements of God burdensome. To them, God's commandments limit their liberty and seem to be outdated relative to the culture. Those who preach biblical principles without compromise are often said to be inflexible and intolerant, placing unreasonable demands on the people. On the other hand, John reminds us that to love God is to obey his commandments, and it should not seem

¹ Calvin's, Vol. XV; p. 461.

² Verhoef, p. 188.

³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986; p. 526.

burdensome to us: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3, NIV).

The rebellious nature of the human heart has not changed since Jeremiah's day. Even then, the people had grown weary of the constant warnings and urgings of the prophets. Or, as some people would complain today, it seems that some ministers are always preaching sermons of "doom and gloom," of sin and judgment. But they do not realize that there may be good reasons for preaching these messages.

The people considered God's word burdensome, and would say to the prophets, "What is the burden of the Lord now?" To such blatant irreverence, God replied, "It's you! You are the burden!" Thus there is a play on words here in Jeremiah – whereas in one instance the burden refers to the message of prophecy, in the next it refers to the people as a troublesome group in God's eyes. He proceeds to note that this is one burden God would soon unload from his shoulders: "I will even forsake you, saith the LORD."

Not only those who call themselves unbelievers make such complaints against God. Professing Christians everywhere find it difficult to live the Christian life, and they would often complain against biblical requirements, and the restrictions that God has placed upon them. They enjoy calling attention to the "sacrifices" that they have already made, and how it would be unreasonable to ask them for more. Such "Christians" form what may be the greatest burden of the church. Of course, most of these people are false converts, who have never been regenerated and are still heading toward hell.

The ungodly and carnal tend to blame the godly and obedient for their problems. As Ahab said to Elijah, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17). But Elijah answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim" (v. 18). It is those who "have forsaken the commandments of the Lord" that are the troublemakers of society, not those who faithfully follow God.

Family divisions are often blamed on those who have converted to Christianity. This includes how false converts who call themselves Christians persecute the true converts in the family who take their faith seriously. Such conflicts occur between parent and child, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, and among friends. Christians should say to their accusers, "It is you, not me, who is causing trouble in this relationship. It is you who is rebelling against the Lord, and therefore it is you who must change." Unbelievers also blame the Christians for other conflicts and divisions in society, and most who call themselves Christians are too cowardly to let the sinners know otherwise.

Christians who are faithfully following God are not responsible for family divisions and social conflicts. They are not to blame, as if they have done something wrong. No one has the right to compromise truth in order to maintain a false unity. It is those who are in opposition to the Scripture that God will hold accountable for the problems of society. Non-Christians, including false converts, are the problems of society. In fact, Christians are the only ones preventing society from getting much worse.

Every Christian should examine himself as to whether he considers God's word to be burdensome in any area, and whether he questions God's justice or wisdom in any way. Do we find it a burden to study or to pray? Do we complain that our relationships suffer because of God's claims on our lives? Do we bemoan the fact that biblical standards at times prevent us from profiting financially? These are indications of an unrenewed or even unconverted mind, whose attitudes are not submissive to God's word. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible for the elect to obey God's word, and delight at his commands.

2. THE WORD OF THE LORD (1:1)

The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. (1:1)

Malachi says that he is delivering "the word of the LORD" (1:1) to the people, and thereby claiming divine origin for his prophecies. "Everywhere in the OT the expression 'the word of the Lord' denotes the divine revelation."¹ Some scholars consider it significant that this expression is usually connected with the name of *Yahweh* (thus the capitalized "LORD") instead of *El* or *Elohim*. Vriezen may indeed be correct that *Yahweh* is used in connection with the *revelatio specialis*, or special revelation, and *El* is used more often in connection with the *revelatio generalis*, or general revelation.² Exegesis of the relevant verses in support of this claim and the question of how far one may apply this distinction are beyond the intent of this present volume. In any case, we are satisfied that Malachi's use of the expression, "the word of the LORD," is his affirmation that the statements that follow have their origin in the mind of God, and that his prophecies consist not in merely human thoughts and words.

Peter reminds us, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). Martin Luther comments, "Now what is found written and foretold in the prophets says Peter, that men have not discovered nor invented; but holy and pious men have spoken it from the Holy Spirit."³ To say that a message is from "the LORD," brings attention first to its origin; that is, the content of the speech or writing does not come from the speaker or writer, but from God himself.

That a message originates from God yields at least two implications, namely, since that message is from God, it is both binding and decisive. This means that whatever God says carries absolute authority, and this places an inescapable obligation upon the audience to obey its demands, and that any message from God possesses total control over historical events.

As the creator of all that exists, God has the authority to dictate the thoughts and behavior of his creatures. Since God has revealed his moral requirements through the Scripture, biblical ethics is therefore based on the authority of God. When he delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, God began by a declaration of his divinity: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). He immediately proceeded to forbid the worship of all other so-called gods, saying, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (v. 3). Only after he had

¹ Verhoef, p. 189.

² Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*; Wageningen: Veenman; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970; p. 345.

³ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1990; p. 249.

established himself as the sole object of worship did he proclaim the other moral laws, such as, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (v. 14). Thus God asserts his divine status as the "peg" on which all of his commandments rest.

If there are no moral laws, or if the moral laws do not rest on divine authority, who is to say that it is wrong to murder? On what basis other than preference will another man try to persuade me against stealing? Why is it wrong to commit adultery? Who says that I should not commit perjury even when it appears to be the most convenient course of action? Mere opinion or pragmatic concerns place no moral obligation on me to concede to another person's moral standard, for I could most likely assert an opposite standard on the same grounds.

Therefore, a system of thought that is without a revelation from God has no basis for any universal and binding ethical principles, but a system of thought that is wholly derived from a revelation from God has an universal and binding moral code. These are the only two possibilities. However, if God has indeed revealed an absolute and universal moral code, then the first is not a real option. In other words, if God has indeed given moral laws to his creatures, then there is only one legitimate system of ethics, and all other alternatives exist only as examples of defiance against the Master. And this is in fact the case – God has verbally revealed his moral demands to humankind in the Christian Scripture, and only in the Christian Scripture.

Scripture affirms that what God says will occur exactly as he declares. Jeremiah says to God, "There is nothing too hard for thee" (Jeremiah 32:17), and Numbers 23:19 adds that God is truthful, and therefore whatever he says will be fully carried out by his power: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?"

God declares through Isaiah, "I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:9-10). Job says to God, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2, NIV). Since what God says will happen will certainly happen, and his words are recorded in the Bible, this means that what the Bible says will happen will certainly happen. There is no difference between what God says and what the Bible says. The immediate implication here is that all the predictions of Malachi would certainly come true.

Applying this to contemporary preaching, our messages must be "the word of the Lord" to be authoritative and relevant, and this means that we must preach the words of Scripture. Speaking from the Scripture means that no one may say that we are expressing our personal opinion, that what we say are not morally binding, or that our messages about biblical predictions will come to nothing. Rather, when we are preaching the words of Scripture our messages will be authoritative, universally applicable and binding, and historically accurate.

Peter realizes the importance of faithfully speaking God's word, and declares, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Jesus himself was the highest fulfillment of such a ministry: "For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him" (John 3:34). Lest any should teach things that are inconsistent with what God has revealed in Scripture, both Jesus and James warn their hearers: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19); "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1, NIV).⁴

In his final letter, Paul gives a solemn charge to Timothy, and prefaces it with an appeal to the divine witness: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1). This important charge is nothing other than for Timothy to "Preach the word" (v. 2). But Paul elaborates on this, and adds that Timothy must "be prepared in season and out of season" (v. 2, NIV) in carrying out his task, or as the NLT has it, "Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or not." This ministry of preaching requires Timothy to "Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching" (v. 2, NLT).

The preacher must be ready and persistent: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). This is an accurate description of many people today who claim to be Christians, but who contradict that claim when they prefer preaching that tickles their ears and encourages their lusts against that which is faithful to the words of Scripture. Such widespread wickedness is all the more reason why we must also accept Paul's charge to preach the word. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16), and therefore possesses the authority of God. Only by promoting the words of the Bible can we transform society and bring a much needed reformation to the church.

Since what God says carries ultimate authority, when we preach or write from the words of Scripture, we can be sure that what we say is both binding and decisive. It is binding in the sense that the audience must obey God's commands, and decisive in that what we preach from the Scripture concerning the future events, such as the damnation of unbelievers to endless conscious torment in hell, will occur without fail. With complete accuracy, those who speak according to the word of God can predict the final destiny of mankind and history. "Every time the true prophets spoke...'by the word of the Lord'...things would happen...'according to the word of the Lord.'"⁵ Such can be the power and scope of our preaching ministry.

⁴ In James 3:1, the word translated "masters" in the KJV is *didaskalos* – rightly rendered as "teachers" in the NIV and other translations.

⁵ Verhoef, p. 190.

When our messages faithfully relate the words of God, we are not expressing only our preference, but we are relating God's own declaration to the people. We can be certain that the messages contain God's will for them, so that we may urge them to submit to the words of Scripture with both exhortations and warnings. People may differ with us on matters of mere preference, but no one has the right to disagree with God.

If we are indeed preaching the words of Scripture, then a moral obligation comes upon the hearers to believe and obey what is being said. Those who submit are right in God's sight, but those who resist sin against him. In this way, the word of God is "sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Biblical preaching quickly divides the righteous and the wicked in the audience, although we cannot know a person's inward reaction until he expresses his thoughts. But God knows all of our thoughts, and he knows our attitudes toward him. The true Christian says, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

If God has called you to preach, you must realize that if you faithfully preach the words of Scripture, then what you say becomes binding and decisive. The word of God binds the conscience and decides history. But if you do not preach the words of Scripture, your messages will lack authority and relevance. Many Christians have already grown accustomed to this latter type of preaching.

It is significant that "the word of the Lord" is here being delivered "by Malachi" (literally: "by the hand of Malachi").⁶ Calvin comments, "The word *hand*, as we have observed elsewhere, means ministrations. The meaning then is, that this doctrine proceeded from God, but that a minister, even Malachi, was employed as an instrument; so that he brought nothing as his own, but only related faithfully what had been committed to him by God from whom it came."⁷

Although God could speak to his creatures directly from heaven, he chose to reveal his thoughts through human instruments, such as his prophets and apostles. After his words have been committed to writing, he now entrusts the Scripture to ministers whom he has chosen to promote, as their vocation, his words through preaching and writing. In addition, every Christian has been given the honor and responsibility to promote the knowledge of God through their money, labor, speech, and other available means.

Being a representative of Christ is a duty and privilege not to be underestimated. As Paul exclaims, "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16, NIV). But then he answers, "Our competence comes from God" (3:5, NIV). Therefore, let us faithfully and

⁶ *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 1.

⁷ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 462.

persistently proclaim the authoritative word of God to our generation by preaching and writing from the words of Scripture.

3. ELECTION OF INDIVIDUALS (1:2-5)

I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever. And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel. (1:2-5)

After Malachi asserts the divine origin of his message, he proceeds to prophesy. Before explaining the significance of the above passage, we need to examine the statement, "I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau" (NASB). An accurate understanding of this statement will help us appreciate the force of the passage. Statements like this often perplex readers more than they should, and many people try to explain them away by showing why these statements mean something other than what they obviously assert.

The statement brings up the subject of election. One popular explanation says that Malachi is referring to the election of nations, so that he is not speaking of Jacob and Esau as individuals, but rather the nations that they represented, namely, Israel and Edom. In other words, God did not choose Jacob the individual over Esau, but he chose Israel over Edom.

However, this interpretation fails to account for the fact that Jacob and Esau were indeed individuals, and that God had indeed chosen Jacob over Esau. In fact, for God's election of Israel over Edom to make any sense at all, one must presuppose his election of Jacob as an individual over Esau as an individual. One who says that the passage refers to national election cannot, without contradiction, deny individual election. It is precisely because God had chosen Jacob the individual that the nation that came from him, Israel, was preferred over Edom.

Scripture records the birth of the twins in Genesis 25:21-24:

And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived. And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

Both Malachi and Genesis mention the nations that would arise from the twins, but the present question is whether we may derive individual election from the biblical account of Jacob and Esau.

Now, Paul quotes the statement in question in Romans 9:13: "As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." If we can demonstrate that Paul is referring to God's election of individuals, then we must accept the doctrine of individual election even if Malachi's main emphasis had been the election of nations. Instead of using national election to explain away individual election, one must admit that even national election is based on individual election, and that God had chosen Jacob the individual over Esau the individual.

The passage in Romans reads as follows:

And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. (v. 10-16)

Paul does not mention the two nations in this passage, but quotes Scripture as saying, "The elder shall serve the younger" – not that the elder nation would serve the younger, but the elder brother, Esau, would serve the younger Jacob. God predicted this to Rebecca while "the *children* (not nations) being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to *election* might stand." So the passage is speaking of election, and Paul writes that this is God's decision about the destinies of the *children* (not nations) *before* they were born, and *before* they had "done any good or evil."

Many people wish to avoid the conclusion that God is the one who sovereignly predetermines the overcome of each individual. Therefore, they assert that although God's election of individuals is not based on their past works and beliefs, perhaps it is based on his "foreknowledge"¹ of their future works and beliefs. However, Paul's point is that election is "not of works" at all, whether we are speaking of the past, present, or future, but he states that election is "of *him* that calleth" – that is, election is based on God's sovereign calling.

¹ The word is placed within quotation marks since, at this point, I am using *prescience* as the definition of God's foreknowledge, which is the way many people have defined it, but I will refute this definition later.

Paul says that God's election is "not of him that *willeth*, nor of him that *runneth*, but of *God that sheweth mercy*" (v. 16). The NIV reads, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." The NLT is even more explicit: "So receiving God's promise is not up to us. We can't get it by choosing it or working hard for it. God will show mercy to anyone he chooses." Election depends on God's sovereign mercy, not man's will or work, for he said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Whether someone receives mercy does not depend on his choice or effort, but on God's will alone.

Thus the Bible teaches that election is not based on foreknown faith or good works; that is, God does not choose someone because he foresees that this person will exhibit faith and good works. Instead, the Bible teaches the reverse, so that faith and good works are granted to those whom God has chosen by his sovereign grace; that is, a person exhibits faith and good works only because God has chosen to save him. It is not because of foreknown faith and good works that one becomes God's elect, but it is because one has been elected that God produces faith and good works in him. Therefore, faith is "the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8), and good works are produced by "God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

William Barclay observes:

Paul argues that there is more to Jewishness than descent from Abraham, that the chosen people were not simply the entire sum of all the physical descendants of Abraham, that within that family there was a process of election all through history...there *was* election within the family of Abraham's physical descendants....²

He makes the further point that that selection had nothing to do with deeds and merits. The proof is that Jacob was chosen and Esau was rejected, *before either of them was born*. The choice was made while they were still in their mother's womb...Everything is of God; behind everything is his action; even the things which seem arbitrary and haphazard go back to him. Nothing in this world moves with aimless feet.³

Douglas J. Moo writes as follows:

I think that a corporate and salvation-historical interpretation of vv. 10-13 does not ultimately satisfy the data of the text...Paul suggests that he is thinking of Jacob and Esau as individuals in vv. 10b-11a when he mentions their conception, birth, and "works" – language that is not easily applied to nations...a description here of

² William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (The Daily Study Bible Series); Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975; p. 128-129.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

how God calls nations to participate in the historical manifestation of his salvific acts runs counter to Paul's purpose in this paragraph.

In order to justify his assertion in v. 6b that not all those who belong to 'physical' Israel belong also to 'spiritual' Israel, and thus to vindicate God's faithfulness (v. 6a), he must show that the OT justifies a discrimination within physical Israel in terms of the enjoyment of salvation. An assertion in these verses to the effect that God has "chosen" Israel rather than Edom for a positive role in the unfolding of the plan of salvation would not contribute to this argument at all...

For these reasons I believe that Paul is thinking mainly of Jacob and Esau as individuals rather than as nations and in terms of their own personal relationship to the promise of God rather than of their roles in carrying out God's plan. The nations denoted by these names, we must remember, have come into existence in and through the individuals who first bore those names...

What does Paul mean by asserting that God "loved" Jacob but "hated" Esau?...If God's love of Jacob consists in his choosing Jacob to be the "seed" who would inherit the blessings promised to Abraham, then God's hatred of Esau is best understood to refer to God's decision not to bestow this privilege on Esau. It might best be translated "reject."⁴

Then, John Murray writes in his commentary on Romans:

The thesis that Paul is dealing merely with the election of Israel collectively and applying the clause in question only to this feature of redemptive history would not meet the precise situation. The question posed for the apostle is: how can the covenant promise of God be regarded as inviolate when the mass of those who belong to Israel...have remained in unbelief and come short of the covenant promises? His answer would fail if it were simply an appeal to the collective, inclusive, theocratic election of Israel. Such a reply would be...no more than a statement of the fact which, in view of their unbelief, created the problem. Paul's answer is not the collective election of Israel but rather "they are not all Israel, who are of Israel." And this means, in terms of the stage of discussion at which we have now arrived, "they are not all elect, who are of elect Israel."⁵

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996; p. 585-587.

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997; p. 18.

In other words, not every *individual* within an elected *nation* has been chosen for salvation, and therefore, "the interpretation which regards the election as the collective, theocratic election of Israel as a people must be rejected and 'the purpose of God according to election' will have to be understood as the electing purpose that is determinative of and unto salvation."⁶

Thomas R. Schreiner also argues that the passage addresses the election of individuals for salvation. He writes:

Verse 13 introduces a scriptural citation...that confirms and elaborates on the scriptural promise enunciated in verse 12. The citation "I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau"...is an exact rendition of the LXX (and MT) of Mal. 1:2-3, except that the object...now precedes the verb, perhaps to emphasize that Jacob was the object of God's choice...the point of the text is that God set his affectionate love upon Jacob and withheld it from Esau...What Rom. 9:13 adds to the promise of verse 12 is that the submission of the older to the younger is based on God's choice of Jacob and his rejection of Esau...Does the text suggest double predestination? Apparently it does.⁷

The view saying "that this passage does not relate to individual salvation but only to the temporal destiny of nations since Jacob and Esau represent two peoples (Gen. 25:23) and their historical destiny...ignores the fact that the issue in the context of Rom. 9 relates to the salvation of the Jews, and a discussion of historical destiny apart from salvation is irrelevant to the issue that called forth this discussion."⁸

Concerning verses 15-16, Marvin R. Vincent comments:

Have mercy therefore contemplates, not merely the sentiment in itself, but the determination of those who should be its objects. The words were spoken to Moses in connection with his prayer for a *general* forgiveness of the people, which was refused, and his request to behold God's glory, which was granted. With reference to the latter, God asserts that His gift is of His own free grace, without any recognition of Moses' right to claim it on the ground of merit or service...God is laid under no obligation by a human *will* or a human *work*.⁹

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998; p. 500-501.

⁸ Ibid., p. 501-502.

⁹ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. III; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers; p. 104.

Kenneth S. Wuest says, "This emphasizes the absolute sovereignty of God in the disposition of His mercy...A participation in God's mercy is dependent upon God's sovereign will alone."¹⁰ John Piper agrees: "God's decision to treat Esau and Jacob differently is not merely *prior* to their good or evil deeds but is also completely *independent* of them...This rules out the notion...that election is based on God's foreknowledge of men's good works."¹¹

Verse 16 does not only say that election is not "of him that *runneth*," but election is not even "of him that *willeth*." This means that election is independent not only of foreknown works, but it is independent also of foreknown decisions – that is, it is independent even of foreknown faith. Accordingly, Piper writes:

Paul never grounds the "electing purpose of God" in man's faith. The counterpart to works in conjunction with election (as opposed to justification) is always God's own call (Rom 9:12b) or his own grace (Rom 11:6). The predestination and call of God precede justification (Rom 8:29f) and have no ground in any human act, not even faith. This is why Paul explicitly says in Rom 9:16 that God's bestowal of mercy on whomever he wills is based neither on human *willing* (which would include faith) nor on human *running* (which would include all activity). So far then we may say that the prediction of Rom 9:12c ("the elder will serve the younger") is an expression of God's predetermination of...the destinies of Jacob and Esau. Moreover this predetermination is not *based on* any actual or foreknown distinctives of the brothers. It is based solely on *God* who calls...God's purpose is to be free from all human influences in the election he performs.¹²

As John says, "We love him, *because* he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Since the faith and love in us have been caused and produced by God, it makes no sense to say that his election of us are based on our faith and love, as if his election of us was a reaction to these qualities in us. God did not choose us because he knew that we would have faith, but we have faith *because* God has chosen us. God did not choose us because he knew that we would believe in Christ, but we have come to believe in Christ because God has first sovereignly chosen us. Repentance itself is a gift from God, available only to those whom he has chosen: "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25). No one can even repent of their sins unless God grants it.

In response to the biblical teaching that it is God who selects individuals for salvation, and that his choice is completely independent of any prior knowledge of faith and works, many people then voice the objection, "Is there unrighteousness with God?" (v. 14). Paul

¹⁰ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973; p. 161.

¹¹ John Piper, *The Justification of God*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993; p. 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

answers, "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (v. 15-16). Barclay comments, "Man has no claim on God whatever. The created has no claim on the Creator. Whenever justice enters into it, the answer is that from God man deserves nothing and can claim nothing. In God's dealings with men, the essential things are his will and his mercy."¹³ If one wishes to discuss justice with God, he must remember that it would be in full accord with divine justice for God to send everyone to hell. That God has chosen to have mercy on some and to condemn all others to hell does not contradict his justice at all; rather, it establishes both his mercy and his justice.

This introduces Paul's additional points in verses 17-24, which we will quote without further explanation at this point:

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

This chapter has thus far demonstrated that the doctrine of election does not refer only to God's sovereign preference of one nation over another nation, but it refers to God's sovereign choice of some individuals for salvation, and his sovereign choice to condemn all other individuals. There is much more to say, but since the rest of this chapter against requires extended arguments, we must be allowed to proceed. Therefore, we conclude this section with Calvin, "Let us then feel assured that the salvation of those whom God is pleased to save, is thus ascribed to his mercy, that nothing may remain to the contrivance of man."¹⁴

We have already argued against the view that the election of individuals for salvation is based on God's "foreknowledge" of human choices and actions. However, those who insist that election is based on foreknown faith or works continue to derive their confidence from several passages, such as Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2. Since some

¹³ Barclay, p. 130-131.

¹⁴ *Calvin's*, Vol. XIX; p. 358.

readers may not see through their serious misuse of these passages, we should take time to examine them.

Romans 8:29-30 says, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Our opponents claim that the words "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate" indicate that God's election of individual for salvation is based on his knowledge of the future faith or good works of people.

Accordingly, they claim that the words "foreknow" and "foreknowledge" must mean God's knowledge of the future, such as our future decisions and actions. That is, the "knowledge" here refers to God's cognitive awareness of decisions not yet made, actions not yet performed, and events not yet occurred. Then, they say, God elects individuals for salvation on the basis of such knowledge of the future. God elects a person for salvation if he looks into the future and foresees that this person will accept Christ. God chooses this individual as one of the elect because of this foreknown faith. Thus foreknowledge means *prescience* (knowledge of something before it happens).

However, this is an unbiblical understanding of God's foreknowledge. Although we have already examined arguments as to why it is impossible that God bases election on foreknown faith, I will offer additional arguments, and arguments specifically about foreknowledge, to refute this view in what follows.

Even on the face of it, it makes no sense to say that God bases election on foreknown faith. Since God is the one who generates faith in someone as a gift, then to say that he elects someone based on foreknown faith only means that God elects someone based on what God himself will do, not what man will do, and foreknown faith would then refer to God's knowledge of what God himself will decide, not what man will decide.

Therefore, unless our opponents can show that faith is not a gift, but that it is something manufactured by man at his own will and by his own ability, then to say that election is based on foreknown faith still does not refute the biblical teaching that it is God who determines who will receive salvation or damnation. However, for our opponents to refute the notion that faith is a gift requires them to refute the Bible. Although the Bible cannot be refuted, to even attempt to refute it would make them non-Christians.

In any case, the position saying that election is based on divine prescience is commonly called *Arminianism*, and the position saying that election is based on divine sovereignty is commonly called *Calvinism*. However, we must remember that the correct view is in fact the *biblical* view, regardless of which personality it may be associated, whether John Calvin or Jacob Arminius. As Jonathan Edwards writes:

Nevertheless, at first, I had thoughts of carefully avoiding the use of the appellation *Arminian* in this treatise. But I soon found I

should be put to great difficulty by it; and that my discourse would be so encumbered with an often-repeated circumlocution, instead of a name, which would express the thing intended as well and better, that I altered my purpose....However, the term *Calvinistic* is, in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term *Arminian*, yet I should not take it at all amiss to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake; though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them.¹⁵

That is, we do not believe a doctrine just because a prominent person believed it; rather, we believe a doctrine because the Bible teaches it. Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, I will be using these two terms to represent the opposing views in this discussion, so that what follows opposes Arminianism, and defends Calvinism.¹⁶

Let us read the passage in question again: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30). Assuming that one already has a general knowledge of the New Testament, it is possible to refute the Arminian interpretation using information available from this passage by constructing a dilemma whose alternatives exclude Arminianism.

This passage describes the "order of salvation" (*ordo salutis*), or "the process by which Christ's work of salvation is made manifest in the life of the redeemed man."¹⁷ The passage asserts that one who goes through any point of this process has also been through the previous ones, and will certainly go through the ones that come after. That is, "whom he did predestinate...he also called," and "whom he called...he also justified," and so on. In other words, one who has been *predestined* by God will also be *called* by God, who will then also be *justified* by God. Every predestined person will be called, and every called person will be justified. There is no one who is predestined who will not be called, and there is no one who is called who will not also be justified.

According to the passage, the process begins with God's foreknowledge, which means that those whom God foreknows will also be predestined, called, and justified. Now, Scripture teaches that God knows all future persons and events, and all decisions and actions. Therefore, if the Arminian defines "foreknowledge" as prescience, then God must "foreknow" every individual in history, since God knows all things, including all future things. But if this is the case, then it would mean that this passage teaches universal salvation; that is, every person in history would be saved or "justified" before God.

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*; Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996; p. viii-ix.

¹⁶ Also see *Systematic Theology* and *Ultimate Questions*, by Vincent Cheung.

¹⁷ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1; Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1994; p. 503.

We affirm that God knows all things: past, present, and future. If foreknowledge refers to God's cognitive awareness of individuals, then he foreknows everyone, and there is no one whom he does not foreknow. If he foreknows everyone, then everyone is predestined; if everyone is predestined, everyone is called; and if everyone is called, everyone will be justified – which means that everyone will be saved. This is a conclusion that even the Arminian will not accept. But if one were to be consistent with his definition of foreknowledge as prescience, and so accepts the doctrine of universal salvation, he will be confronted with a host of biblical verses that teach otherwise.

Of course, the Arminian is not saying that God's foreknowledge in this passage refers to his cognitive awareness of the *existence* of individuals, but that he foreknows the future *faith* of those who would accept Christ. But this is precisely the problem with the Arminian interpretation. Romans 8:29 says, "For *whom* he did foreknow, he also did predestinate...." Paul relates God's foreknowledge with *persons* rather than their *faith*. He does *not* say, "For whom he did foreknow *would believe*," or any such thing. There is no mention of the persons' faith or works. This is also consistent with the construction of the rest of the passage. That is, the *person* whom God foreknows, he also predestines; the *person* whom God predestines, he also calls; and the *person* whom God calls, he also justifies. The Arminian adds to the passage what he thinks it *should* say, rather than reading what it actually says.

The Arminian who defines foreknowledge as prescience has several options. First, according to Romans 8:29, everyone whom God "foreknows" will be saved, and since God "foreknows" all things (if foreknowledge is defined as prescience), then it means that everyone will be saved. Second, the Arminian may deny that God "foreknows" everyone, but that he only "foreknows" some people, and only those so "foreknown" will be saved. But since he defines foreknowledge as prescience, then when he denies that God "foreknows" everyone, it means that God's prescience is not comprehensive, and therefore he denies God's omniscience, or that God knows all things. Third, seeing that the first two options are unacceptable, he can concede that foreknowledge refers to something other than prescience, or foreknown faith.

The first two options effectively make the Arminian a non-Christian, since they entail blatant denial of biblical doctrines. But if he chooses the third, then he has acknowledged that Romans 8:29 does not support his Arminianism. If God's prescience is comprehensive (if God knows all future things), if everyone whom he "foreknows" will be saved (according to Romans 8:29), and if universal salvation is an unbiblical doctrine (the Bible teaches that not everyone will be saved), then this must mean that God's foreknowledge is different from God's prescience. That is, God's foreknowledge cannot refer to his cognitive awareness of the future existence, faith, or works of individuals.

Some Arminians say that Calvinists ignore the "obvious" meaning of this passage. However, the Arminian interpretation is not obvious at all, since the passage says that God foreknows the *persons* who would be saved, and not their *faith*. Given the Arminian definition of foreknowledge, the obvious implication is not Arminianism, but universal salvation, that everyone will be saved. But universal salvation is unbiblical, since the

Bible teaches that many people will be condemned forever. Therefore, what is obvious from this passage is that foreknowledge cannot refer to prescience, and thus it is obvious that the Arminian interpretation fails.

Contrary to Arminianism, although God certainly possesses an intellectual knowledge of all future persons and events, the Bible often uses the word *foreknowledge* (Greek: *proginosko, prognosis*) to mean *foreordination*. The "knowing" here would then involve what the Hebrew *yada* conveys, as speaking of a personal relationship. It refers to an act of God's will rather than a passive reception of information. That is, the biblical concept of God's foreknowledge involves a type of "knowing" that is both personal and cognitive, and the emphasis is often on the personal.

For example, when referring to false prophets and false disciples, Jesus says, "And then will I profess unto them, I never *knew* you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:23). When he says, "I never knew you," he cannot be denying cognitive knowledge of the people's existence, thoughts, and works, since he is without doubt cognitively aware of their wickedness when he says, "depart from me, ye that *work iniquity*." Thus when he says, "I never knew you," he is denying that he has a personal and salvific relationship with them, and not that he has no information about them.

Another example comes from Jeremiah 1:5, where God says, "Before I formed thee in the belly I *knew* thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations." Now, when a verse is in the form of a parallelism, one part expands on or clarifies the meaning of the other part. For example, "For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods" (Psalm 24:2), does not necessarily mean that in addition to having "founded it upon the seas," he also "established it upon the floods." Rather, "established it upon the floods" carries a similar meaning, and helps to clarify "founded it upon the seas." Another example is in the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus says, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13). Again, it is not that we are to ask God to "deliver us from evil" in addition to "lead us not into temptation," but that "deliver us from evil" gives the meaning of "lead us not into temptation."

Likewise, the parallelism in Jeremiah 1:5 clarifies the meaning of "knew": "Before I formed you in the womb I *knew* you, before you were born I *set you apart*; I *appointed you* as a prophet to the nations" (v. 5, NIV). For God to *know* Jeremiah is to *appoint* him and set him apart. God "knew" Jeremiah before he formed him. The words "knew" is parallel to "sanctified" and "ordained." Thus the type of knowing here carries the idea of choosing. The main sense is that God had chosen and designed Jeremiah before he was conceived.

S. M. Baugh also uses this verse to illustrate the meaning of God's foreknowledge in the Bible:

Another remarkable example of divine foreknowledge is expressed in Jeremiah 1:5, where God says to Jeremiah: "*I knew you* before I

formed you in the womb, *I consecrated you* before you emerged from the womb; *I have given you* as a prophet to the nations." The first two lines are closely parallel in the number of syllables and word order...But how can God have known Jeremiah before he was even conceived? Because he personally fashioned his prophet, just as he had fashioned Adam from the dust (Gen. 2:7), and just as he fashions all people (Ps. 139:13-16; Isa. 44:24). God foreknew not only the possibility of Jeremiah's existence – he knows all possibilities indeed – but God foreknew Jeremiah by name before he was conceived, because he knew how he would shape and mold his existence. Given this Old Testament background, we can understand why in the New Testament we have no extended discussion on the nature of God's foreknowledge. There was no need.¹⁸

J. A. Thompson translates the verse as, "Before I formed you in the womb I *knew you intimately*; Before you were born I set you apart," and comments, "The verb, *yada*, 'know,' often carried considerable depth of meaning in the OT, for it reached beyond mere intellectual knowledge to personal commitment. For this reason it is used of the intimate relations between a man and his wife (Gen. 4:1)."¹⁹ Huey writes, "Here it involves a *choosing* relationship (Gen 18:19; Deut 34:10). The Lord was thinking about Jeremiah before he was born. At that time God had already designated Jeremiah to be a prophet."²⁰

Of course, a personal relationship is impossible without intellectual knowledge; otherwise, one would not even know with whom he is having a relationship. But the point is that God's foreknowledge, in a salvific context, refers to a relationship established by his sovereign choice. Therefore, God's foreknowledge refers to his predetermination about persons and events, including the election of individuals for salvation. For God to foreknow someone is to set his affection on that person, even before he is born. It is this meaning of election and favor that Romans 8:29 seeks to convey.

Even when it comes to prescience, we cannot think of God's knowledge as a passive reception of information; rather, even the content of God's prescience is completely determined by his will. God knows all future things because he determines all future things. As Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matthew 10:29, NIV). Knowledge does not "happen" to God as an addition to his mind, but since he is the one who determines all events, and he knows his own thoughts, then he also knows all future events, because he knows what he has decided will happen. Therefore, even divine

¹⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware, ed., *Still Sovereign*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000; p. 186.

¹⁹ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980; p. 143-145.

²⁰ F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah & Lamentations* (The New American Commentary); Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1993; p. 50.

prescience is not a passive knowledge of something that will happen apart from God's predetermination, but prescience is in fact his knowledge of what he has decreed will happen. Since this is the case, the Arminian can appeal to neither foreknowledge nor prescience to support his theology.

The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says, "In the case of God, to know, being an act of will, means to make an object of concern and thus carries the nuance 'to elect.'"²¹ The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says, "God's foreknowledge stands related to his will and power. What he knows, he does not know merely as information. He is no mere spectator. What he foreknows he ordains. He wills it."²²

J. M. Gundry-Volf writes,

Rather than referring to speculative or neutral knowledge (i.e., knowledge of who will believe), the Pauline notion of divine foreknowledge is understood by many interpreters as a knowing in the Semitic sense of acknowledging, inclining toward someone, knowledge which expresses a movement of the will reaching out to personal relationship with someone...This kind of knowing is illustrated by the meaning of the Hebrew *yada*, "to know," in texts such as Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; and Jeremiah 1:5...In Paul's use of *proginosko* the aspect of pretemporality is added to the Hebrew sense of "know" as "have regard for" or "set favor on." The result is a verb which refers to God's eternal loving election.²³

Then, in its article on this subject, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says the following:

Arminian theology, in all its variant forms, contends that God's foreknowledge is simply a prescient knowledge, a knowing in advance whether a given person will believe in Christ or reject him. God's election, therefore, is said to be simply God's choice unto salvation of those whom He knows in advance will choose to believe in Christ. God foresees the contingent free action of faith and, foreseeing who will believe in Christ, elects those because they do. But this is destructive of the biblical view of election. In biblical thought election means that God elects people, not that people elect God. In Scripture it is God who in Christ decides for us – not we who, by making a decision for Christ, decide for God.

²¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985; "*ginosko, gnosis, epiginosko, epignosis*," p. 120.

²² *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984; "Foreknowledge," p. 420.

²³ *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993; "Foreknowledge, Divine," p. 310-311.

Reformation theology has contended that the divine foreknowledge contains the ingredient of divine determination. The Reformers claimed that God indeed foreknows who will believe, because believing in Christ is not a human achievement, but a divine gift imparted to men by God's grace and Spirit. Thus God's foreknowledge is not merely prescience, but a knowledge that itself determines the event. That is, in Reformation thought what God foreknows He foreordains...

There are...scriptural passages in which foreknowledge quite explicitly carries the meaning of foreordination. In Peter's speeches in Acts, what Peter says about the predestination of the crucifixion of Christ in 4:28 is almost identical with the meaning of *prognosis* in 2:23. What happened to Jesus, says Peter, took place according to "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." Foreknowledge here echoes the idea of God's counsel or plan in 4:28, reflecting that foreknowledge is an ingredient of that determination which made the death of Christ certain. God foreknows the death of Christ because the crucifixion was His planned determination...

That God's foreknowledge contains the idea of divine determination does not rest merely on a few biblical texts but reflects a truth about God that comes to expression in a variety of biblical concepts descriptive of the unique and mysterious character of God's actions. God's foreknowledge is itself a form of determination which accounts for the reality of that which is divinely foreknown...As in God's foreknowledge, all of these divine actions are reality-imparting, blessing-bestowing divine actions, which as such predetermine. He who creates (or recreates) by that very fact determines in advance...

God's foreknowledge is far from mere prevision or prior intellectual awareness; even its ingredient of determination is an expression of blessing. In biblical usage God's foreknowledge does not relate to whatsoever comes to pass, to an all-comprehensive divine will. Foreknowledge relates to matters beneficent and salvific...The Bible uses the words "foreknow" and "predestinate" in a salvific context and with a salvific meaning...

In biblical thought, divine foreknowledge includes the idea of foreordination to salvation and we may not enlarge the meaning of either term to include "whatsoever comes to pass." To give it a large coverage is to include those whom the Bible describes as

those whom God does not know, as in Jesus' disclaimer, "I never knew you" (Mt. 7:23).²⁴

Now that we have clarified the meaning of foreknowledge, we should apply it to Romans 8:29-30, which I will quote again: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified."

Baugh writes:

The classic Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:29, that God's foreknowledge of faith is in view, is clearly reading one's theology into the text. Paul does not say: "whose faith he foreknew," but "whom he foreknew." He foreknew us...in Romans 8:29, predestination is not dependent on faith; rather, God predestines us on the basis of his gracious commitment to us before the world was...Perhaps another rendering better expresses the concept behind Romans 8:29: "Those to whom he was previously devoted..." This again, is not to say that God's foreknowledge is devoid of intellectual cognition; to have a personal relation with someone, such as a marriage relation, includes knowledge about that person...God has foreknown us because he fashioned each of us personally and intimately according to his plan...That Paul refers to this concept of a committed relationship with the phrase *whom he foreknew* in Romans 8:29 is confirmed by the context...Further confirmation of "foreknowledge" in Romans 8:29 as referring to a previous commitment is found in a nearby passage, Romans 11:1-2, where *proginosko* can have only this meaning: "God has not rejected his people, has he? No way! For I also am an Israelite...God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." As in Romans 8:29, the objects of foreknowledge are people themselves rather than historical events or a particular person's faith...The Arminian notion of "foreseen faith" is impossible as an interpretation of God's foreknowledge in Romans 11:1-2, and, consequently, in the earlier passage, Romans 8:29, as well. The latter explains that God initiated a committed relationship from eternity with certain individuals whom he predestined for grace.²⁵

On this verse, Calvin writes, "But the foreknowledge of God, which Paul mentions, is not a bare prescience, as some unwise persons absurdly imagine, but the adoption by which he had always distinguished his children from the reprobate...he foreknew nothing out of

²⁴ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982; "Foreknowledge," p. 336-337.

²⁵ *Still Sovereign*, p. 194-195.

himself, in adopting those whom he was pleased to adopt; but only marked out those whom he had purposed to elect."²⁶ F. F. Bruce agrees: "God's foreknowledge here connotes that electing grace which is frequently implied by the verb 'to know' in the Old Testament. When God takes knowledge of people in this special way, he sets his choice on them."²⁷

John Murray explains:

It needs to be emphasized that the rejection of this [Arminian] interpretation is not dictated by a predestinarian interest. Even if it were granted that "foreknew" means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. For it is certainly true that God foresees faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates...The interest, therefore, is simply one of interpretation as it should be applied to this passage. On exegetical grounds we shall have to reject the view that "foreknew" refers to the foresight of faith...Many times in Scripture "know" has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with "love," to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action...There is no reason why this import of the word "know" should not be applied to "foreknow" in this passage, as also in 11:2 where it also occurs in the same kind of construction and where the thought of election is patently present...It means "whom he set regard upon" or "whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight" and is virtually equivalent to "whom he foreloved."²⁸

Thomas R. Schreiner holds the same view:

Some have argued that...God predestined to salvation those whom he saw in advance would choose to be part of his redeemed community...According to this understanding predestination is not ultimately based on God's decision to save some. Instead, God has predestined to save those whom he foresaw would choose him...It is quite unlikely, however, that it accurately represents the meaning...in Rom. 8:29 the point is that God has predestined those upon whom he has set his covenantal affection. Note that the

²⁶ *Calvin's*, Vol. XIX; p. 317-318.

²⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), Revised Edition; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985; p. 166.

²⁸ Murray; *Romans*, Vol. 1; p. 316-317.

object of the verb...is personal, "those whom"...God set his affection upon.²⁹

Douglas Moo likewise argues for this position:

In [Arminianism] the human response of faith is made the object of God's "foreknowledge"; and this foreknowledge, in turn, is the basis for predestination: for "whom he foreknew, he predestined." But I consider it unlikely that this is the correct interpretation...The NT usage of the verb and its cognate noun does not conform to the general pattern of usage...the three others besides the occurrence in this text, all of which have God as their subject, mean not "know before" – in the sense of intellectual knowledge, or cognition – but "enter into relationship with before" or "choose, or determine, before" (Rom. 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:2)...That the verb here contains this peculiarly biblical sense of "know" is suggested by the fact that it has a simple personal object. Paul does not say that God knew anything *about* us but that he knew *us*, and this is reminiscent of the OT sense of "know...."Moreover, it is only *some* individuals...who are the objects of this activity; and this shows that an action applicable only to Christians must be denoted by the verb. If, then, the word means "know intimately," "have regard for," this must be a knowledge or love that is unique to believers...This being the case, the difference between "know or love beforehand" and "choose beforehand" virtually ceases to exist.³⁰

Therefore, as the *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says, "In Romans 8:29 and 11:2, the apostle Paul's use of the word foreknew means 'to choose' or 'to set special affection on.' The electing love of God, not foresight of human action, is the basis of His predestination and salvation."³¹

At this point, some Arminians object that if foreknowledge does not mean prescience but foreordination, then why does Romans 8:29 say, "whom he did foreknow, *he also did predestinate*"? That is, if "foreknow" means what the Calvinist says it means, then does not the reference to predestination become redundant? As Godet says in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, "Some have given to the word *foreknow* the meaning of *elect, choose, destine beforehand*...but what is still more decidedly opposed to this meaning is what follows: *He also did predestine*."³²

²⁹ Schreiner; *Romans*, p. 452.

³⁰ Moo, p. 532-533.

³¹ *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986; "Foreknowledge."

³² As quoted in: Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986; p. 183.

This is a stupid and amateurish objection. It is a desperate and futile attempt to escape the conclusion that we have so firmly established. In fact, only the most incompetent would make such an argument after carefully examining the passage, or even just having read verse 29 to the end. The entire verse says, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be conformed to the image of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." Paul is telling us that whom God has chosen for salvation, he has also predestined the same people "to be conformed to the image of his Son." *Foreknowledge* in this verse refers to God's election of individuals to salvation, while *predestination* reveals the specific purpose or end that God has designed for his elect.

Thus Gundry-Volf writes:

Paul distinguishes between divine foreknowledge and divine predestination in Romans 8:29: "those whom he foreknew, he also predestined." While foreknowledge denotes the exercise of God's will to establish a special relationship with those whom God graciously elect before all time, predestination expresses God's appointing of them to a specific goal before all time...In Romans 8:29 this goal is conformity with the image of the Son, a reference to the final salvation of the elect...Foreknowledge as divine choice is thus the basis of predestination to glorification with Christ...Foreknowledge does not have to be understood as foresight of faith in order to be distinguished from predestination.³³

Wuest recognizes that foreknowledge in this verse refers to God's sovereign election of individuals, and so he translates verse 29 and 30 as follows:

Because, those whom He *foreordained* He also *marked out beforehand* as those who were to be conformed to the derived image of His Son, with the result that He is firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, those whom He thus marked out beforehand, these He also summoned. And those whom He summoned, these He also justified. Moreover, those whom He justified, these He also glorified.³⁴

The GNT translation says, "Those whom God had *already chosen* he also *set apart* to become like his Son, so that the Son would be the first among many believers. And so those whom God set apart, he called; and those he called, he put right with himself, and he shared his glory with them."

Without additional arguments, we have also refuted the Arminian interpretation of 1 Peter 1:2. The verse says that we have been chosen "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." Of course this is true, since foreknowledge means foreordination. Peter

³³ *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 311.

³⁴ Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

is saying that our election for salvation is based on God's sovereign decision – that is, his foreordination or foreknowledge.

Calvinism is repulsive to many people who claim to be Christians. But as Charles Spurgeon said, Calvinism is nothing other than biblical Christianity. Thus if you do not affirm Calvinism, you do not affirm biblical Christianity. If you call yourself a Christian, then you are obligated to affirm and promote Calvinism, and to denounce and refute Arminianism.

4. ELECTION OF NATIONS (1:2-5)

I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever. And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel. (1:2-5)

Our discussion on the election of individuals serves to prevent one from using the reference to the election of Israel as a nation in Malachi 1:2-5 to deny the election of Jacob as an individual. In fact, God favored Israel over Edom precisely because God favored Jacob over Esau. The conclusion from the previous chapter is that God sovereignly and actively chooses some for salvation, and he sovereignly and actively chooses all others for damnation. Salvation comes from God's sovereign grace, and not from man's will or work.

Malachi begins his message by asserting God's love for Israel. By reminding the nation of God's favor, Malachi makes clear that although it is necessary to confront the sins of the nation, God has always been faithful to his covenant people. In contrast, Israel has not been faithful or obedient toward God. Given God's supreme status, his faithfulness toward this nation, and his covenant relationship with it, there is no excuse for the people's apostasy. The prophet arranges his materials as disputations between God and Israel. Here the audience responds by challenging this initial assertion of God's love: "I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us?" (1:2). This chapter deals with God's answer and its implications.

The people challenge God's statement about his love for Israel, and demand to be shown in what way God has exhibited this love. Malachi responds with an argument from history:

Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever. (v. 2-4)

Although Malachi here mainly contrasts God's treatment of Israel with his treatment of Edom, we have established that the words, "I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau," do not exclude the election of individuals for salvation. Rather, Paul uses the same words in Romans 9 with the understanding that God had chosen Jacob as an individual and rejected Esau as an individual before they were even born, not on the basis of their future decisions or actions, but on the basis of God's sovereign will alone, "that the purpose of God according to election might stand" (Romans 9:11).

Jacob and Esau are mentioned here to remind the audience of their different treatments by God regardless of their similarities. They were not only brothers, but they were even twins. If one were to have the advantage over the other, Esau should have been the privileged one, since he was the firstborn. However, God had chosen Jacob and rejected Esau independent of any foreseen conditions in either of them, and this shows that God does not give his love to one who seems to be more worthy of it, but rather he gives his love to whomever he chooses. God said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Romans 9:15). God had chosen Jacob because God decided to choose him, and not because of any existing or future goodness in Jacob. Any goodness in Jacob came because God had chosen him; God did not choose Jacob because of any existing or future goodness in Jacob.

God may similarly choose a nation for his special purpose and favor. Israel had arisen from Jacob, and thus the election of Israel the nation presupposes the election of Jacob the individual. As Moses says:

For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

God has indeed favored Israel, seeing how he has "chosen [Israel] to be a special people unto himself." The passage explicitly states that this choice was not based on the merits of the people of the nation, but rather on the promises that he has sovereignly made to their ancestors as individuals. This confirms that the election of Israel as a nation presupposes the election of Jacob as an individual:

And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel. And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of

thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land. (Genesis 35:10-12)

Now, Moses had warned the people of Israel that if they were to disobey God's laws, then God would punish them, and "if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, but walk contrary unto me...I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste" (Leviticus 26:27, 33). That is, God would eject the people from their land if they would continue to defy him. But he also said that he would bring them back to the land if they would repent of their sins:

If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land. (v. 40-42)

Before Malachi's ministry, the people of Israel had sinned and were thrown out of the land. Even Solomon's temple was destroyed. Later, God allowed them to go back and rebuild the land. By the time of Malachi's ministry, the temple had been rebuilt, although the new temple was inferior to the previous one: "But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice" (Ezra 3:12); "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" (Haggai 2:3).

Because of these painful circumstances in their recent history, some of the people had become cynical, and they began to question the foundation of God's relationship with the nation, namely, his covenant love and faithfulness. Thus they say to God, "How have you shown your love for us?" What love? What faithfulness? Malachi answers by reminding them that God had treated Israel and Edom in different ways.

Although Edom had arisen from Jacob's twin brother, Esau, it was not at all friendly to Israel. When Jerusalem was under attack by Babylon, the Edomites "were on the side of the invader, acting as informants."¹ They also looted the people of Israel, and attacked those who were trying to escape. Obadiah writes concerning Edom:

On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune, nor rejoice over the people of Judah in

¹ Baldwin, p. 222.

the day of their destruction, nor boast so much in the day of their trouble. You should not march through the gates of my people in the day of their disaster, nor look down on them in their calamity in the day of their disaster, nor seize their wealth in the day of their disaster. You should not wait at the crossroads to cut down their fugitives, nor hand over their survivors in the day of their trouble. (v. 11-14, NIV)

The "Edomites moved into Judah's vacated territory and apparently had the better of their enemies."² But later, they were invaded and driven out by the Nabateans.³ By the time of Malachi, the Israelites had returned to their land. The temple had been rebuilt, and had been in service for a number of decades. Edom also wanted to rebuild, saying, "We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places" (v. 4). But God says through Malachi, "They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever" (v. 4).

Both nations had sinned against God, and both were demolished. God allowed Israel to rebuild, but he prevented Edom from doing the same. Malachi reminds the people of Israel, "the LORD's great power reaches far beyond our borders!" (v. 5, NLT), so that both Israel and Edom were under God's control, and Edom could have rebuilt if God had permitted it. Since it was God who determined the outcomes of both nations, their opposite fates indicate his different treatments toward them, showing God's favor toward Israel.

It is significant to say that the power of God extends beyond his favored nation. The gods of the other nations, which were not gods at all, were often territorial. For example, after losing a battle to the Israelites, the Syrians said, "The gods of Israel are mountain gods, and that is why the Israelites defeated us. But we will certainly defeat them if we fight them in the plains" (1 Kings 20:23, GNT). Of course, this was a misconception. Throughout the Scripture, and now in Malachi, we are presented with a God that possesses absolute sovereignty over every person and every nation at all times. He is master over all of history.

Ever since Adam, the reprobates have been trying to overthrow the rule of God over them. As Psalm 2 says, "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (v. 1-3). God's commands are as chains and fetters (v. 3, NIV) to them, restricting their freedom to live and sin as they wish. From the Tower of Babel to the murder of Christ, and from the persecution of the first Christians to the persecution of today's Christians, the ungodly have been plotting against God, his Christ, and his people.

² Ibid., p. 222.

³ Ibid., p. 223.

But no one can overturn what God has decided: "For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27). So, Psalm 2 continues, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure" (v. 4-5). The wicked devices of men do not threaten God's control over the nations; it is impossible to eliminate divine sovereignty by human legislation. We can be sure that God will accomplish his plans despite extreme opposition.

Since all authority has been given to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18), who also "shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1), the only intelligent course of action is to dedicate ourselves to serve his purpose and obey his commands. Accordingly, the Psalm admonishes the people, "Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him" (v. 10-12).

On the relationship between Christianity and history, Ronald Nash writes:

Christianity has always had a special interest in history. Not only does Christianity teach that God is Lord over history (in the sense that history began in his act of creation, is governed by his providence, and will end at his judgment), it also holds that through Christ, God actually entered into human history. In an important sense, Christianity is grounded upon certain revelatory events (such as the Crucifixion and the Resurrection) that took place in the real world of space and time.⁴

These statements are essentially accurate, although careless and imprecise at several points.

God had always controlled all of history, and in a sense, it is true that God "entered into human history" in the person of God the Son, Jesus Christ. However, this must not be misconstrued to mean that God has become a temporal being. The divine nature is timeless, and since the divine nature is also immutable, it can never change. God the Son did not enter history in the sense of becoming a temporal being, since this is impossible, but he entered history only in the sense of having taken up a human nature, or a set of human attributes, without affecting his divine nature at all.

That Christianity is "grounded upon certain revelatory events" must not imply that these events alone constitute God's revelation to mankind, and that the Scripture is only a written record of revelation and not the revelation itself. Rather, Scripture is itself the revelation, so that the words of the Bible constitute God's direct revelation to us, and not just an indirect record of revelatory events.

⁴ Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History*; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998; p. 18.

Therefore, let no one consider any revelatory event as somehow more authoritative than the Scripture, since *the words* of the Bible (not just *the events* recorded in the Bible) "came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). As Paul writes, "*All scripture* [not just the events that it records] is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is not merely a human record of divine revelation, but it is in itself God's divine revelation to mankind.

In addition, it is misleading to say "*the real* world of space and time," as if the non-spatial and non-temporal realm of God is unreal. Nevertheless, it is correct for Nash to emphasize that the Christian faith involves events that took place in space and time, including the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ.

No meaningful religion or philosophy can totally ignore history, since the universe itself is historical in nature, and an adequate intellectual system must be able to account for its creation or existence. Of course, a biblical approach to theology and apologetics would insist that no non-Christian philosophy of history can succeed.

God's complete control over all of history carries strong implications for the historian. Since God controls all of history, and since God has revealed himself exclusively through the Christian Scripture, this means that only Christians can provide an accurate account of any historical event. All non-Christians are poor historians. They will always fail to acknowledge the ultimate and common cause of all historical events, and thus neglecting a necessary principle by which one can accurately interpret history.

Jesus says that not even one sparrow will "fall on the ground without your Father" (Matthew 10:29). The word translated "without" is *aneu*, which Thayer defines as "without one's will or intervention," and so the phrase appears as "apart from the will of your Father" in the NIV. Such is the extent and precision of God's sovereign power over individuals, nations, and all of history. This means that even Arminians, although they claim to be Christians, cannot be good historians, because they reject the teaching of Christ, or at best pay lip service to it without drawing out and acknowledging its necessary implications. Only Calvinists can be good historians. For that matter, since only those who affirm the biblical worldview can accurately interpret anything, only Calvinists can be truly good at anything.

If you disagree, it is probably because you have a wrong definition of what *good* means – nothing is good if it is not biblical. In *America's Providential History*, Beliles and McDowell write, "Since God is the author of history and He is carrying out His plan in the earth through history, any view of the history of America, or any country, that ignores God is not true history. He is Sovereign over His creation and 'His Story' in the earth, and is at work in significant, and seemingly insignificant, events to accomplish His purposes for mankind."⁵ But this view of history is not widely taught. Christian ministers should teach their people a biblical philosophy of history, and parents should teach it to their

⁵ Mark A. Beliles and Stephen K. McDowell, *America's Providential History*; Charlottesville, Virginia: Providence Foundation, 1996; p. vii.

children, so that Christians may have an accurate view of historical events, always keeping in mind God's sovereignty over all of creation.

Now, although God had favored Israel as a nation, he did not save every Israelite from sin – many never inherited salvation, but were condemned to hell. That is, God did not choose every individual within the "chosen" nation for salvation. Paul explains, "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Romans 9:6, NIV). In other words, it is not that God's promise to Abraham had failed, but that God never promised his grace to all of Abraham's *physical* descendants:

Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. (Romans 9:7-8, NIV)

Therefore, although Ishmael was Abraham's physical descendant, God commanded Abraham to send him away: "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son" (Galatians 4:30). Likewise, although both Jacob and Esau were the physical descendants of Isaac, God sovereignly accepted Jacob and rejected Esau.

By God's sovereign control, Israel continued to disobey God, and even killed his prophets and servants:

Then he sent some more servants and said, "Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet." But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. (Matthew 22:4-6)

Therefore, as God had planned to do all along, when Christ came, he announced the destruction of Jerusalem: "The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city" (v. 7). This happened in 70 A.D., when the Roman "army" marched into Jerusalem, they "destroyed those murderers" (the Jews killed Christ and the prophets), and literally "burned their city."

At the same time, God permanently removed the "kingdom" from Israel, and gave it to the church:

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:11-12)

Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him." But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. "This is the heir," they said. "Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. (Luke 20:13-16)

The church is now the covenant community of God; however, as with the covenant community in Israel, not all those who have joined or have been born into this community have been chosen by God for salvation. In theological terms, not all the members of the visible church belong to the invisible church.⁶ In fact, it seems that only a very small minority of those who belong to the visible church are truly saved.

But those who have the faith of Abraham are the children of Abraham, and they have such faith precisely because God has chosen them for salvation. Scripture commands us to examine ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5) and to gain assurance (1 Timothy 3:13), so that we may distinguish ourselves from the false converts, and know that we are truly among God's elect (2 Peter 1:10). Then, knowing that we are among those who are "called according to his purpose," we can be confident that "all things work together" for our good (Romans 8:28).

In the context of thinking about God's special favor toward his elect, Paul exclaims, "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). If we are true Christians, then we can be sure that nothing can separate us from the electing love of God, and that in all things "we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (v. 37). But this is not true for the wicked, as the Scripture says, "The LORD preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy" (Psalm 145:20).

God has chosen to show us favor. The proper response to his electing love consists of worship and obedience. But we should affirm the sovereignty of God not only on the individual level; rather, we should proclaim that his "great power reaches far beyond [the] borders" of our church (Malachi 1:5, NLT), and extends to every pagan society, political party, business corporation, and even the fate of every false religion rests in his hands.

⁶ See my other writings on election and covenant for more information.

5. THE COVENANT OF FAITH (1:6-2:9)

A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.

And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons? saith the LORD of hosts. Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the LORD a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen.

And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it. And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law. (Malachi 1:6-2:9).

This is a long passage, so we will not take time to analyze every phrase, but we will discuss only some of the main points.

The proper response to God's covenant love consists of worship and obedience; it should result in gratitude toward God and confidence in him. However, Malachi's hearers did not have these qualities; instead, they have broken their covenants with God and one another. Therefore, Malachi begins to confront them about their sins.

Malachi first directs his accusations against the sinful priests. Just as a father must be honored, and a master must be feared, God should be honored and feared because he is both the father and master of his covenant people. But God complains that the priests "despise my name" (1:6). Of course, it is a serious charge to accuse the priests of despising God, since one would expect them to honor God the most out of all the people.

The prophet's argument appears simple, but it is indeed compelling. His culture takes for granted the premise, "A son honoureth his father," and the Decalogue includes the authoritative command, "Honour thy father and thy mother" (Exodus 20:12). Also, a servant belongs to his master by right of purchase, and it is assumed that fear is owed to one's master. God says, "If then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear?" (v. 6). If a person honors his human father and fears his human master, should he not show the same and even greater honor and fear toward his divine father and master? Thus this first point is a type of *a fortiori* argument.

Instead of admitting their guilt, the priests say, "Wherein have we despised thy name?" (v. 6). They are saying that if they have done wrong, then their fault remains a mystery to them. God answers that they "offer polluted bread upon mine altar" (v. 7). But this clarification does not seem to remind them of any wrongdoing, for again they ask, "Wherein have we polluted thee?" (v. 7). First, God replies, "Ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible" (v. 7), and then, "ye offer the blind for sacrifice...and...ye offer the lame and sick" (v. 8). Of such behavior, he challenges, "Is it not evil?" (v. 8).

Long ago, God had set forth the requirements for any sacrifice offered to him:

Ye shall offer at your own will a male without blemish, of the beeves, of the sheep, or of the goats. But whatsoever hath a blemish, that shall ye not offer: for it shall not be acceptable for you. And whosoever offereth a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the LORD to accomplish his vow, or a freewill offering in beeves or sheep, it shall be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no blemish therein. Blind, or broken, or maimed, or having a wen, or scurvy, or scabbed, ye shall not offer these unto the LORD, nor make an offering by fire of them upon the altar unto the LORD. (Leviticus 22:19-22)

Any sacrifice offered to God must be "without blemish." Animals that are "blind, or broken, or maimed," are unfit as sacrifices. However, these are precisely the types of animals the priests offer to God: "And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil?" (v. 8). Lest the priests think that there is nothing wrong with these defective animals, God asks if they had offered the defective animals "unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person?" (v. 8). They would certainly give the best animals to secure the governor's favor, but they offer to God what is useless to themselves.

Verhoef thinks it best to translate the words "is it not evil" (v. 8) as "there is nothing wrong," thus reflecting the attitude of the priests: "When you bring a blind animal for sacrifice, there is nothing wrong, or when you offer crippled or diseased animals, there is nothing wrong. Do offer them to your governor!"¹ Paul Redditt writes, "God himself supplied the clinching argument: if they were to say such an offering showed no disrespect, they should try giving it to their...governor."² They would cower under men of authority, but they dare to spit in God's face. Many professing Christians behave the same way today.

The ministry's purity have deteriorated because the priests have been saying, "The table of the LORD is contemptible." Verse 7 in the NLT says, "Then you ask, 'How have we defiled the sacrifices?' You defiled them by saying the altar of the LORD deserves no respect." In these disputations, Malachi relates God's message to the people, and includes responses from them fitting to their attitudes and behavior before refuting them, and so "it was unlikely that these words were uttered"³ explicitly by the priests themselves. Rather, "Malachi is trying to bring to the surface subconscious attitudes by drawing out the implications of unworthy actions,"⁴ that is, "they have said it to themselves, that these words reflected their subconscious attitudes."⁵ Thus the NRSV translates, "By *thinking* that the LORD's table may be despised." They offer defective sacrifices to God and think little of it, showing that they hold their priestly duties and God himself in contempt.

The priests consider their service to God "a weariness," saying, "How tired we are of all this!" (v. 13, GNT). Leviticus 22:23 says, "a bullock or a lamb that hath any thing superfluous or lacking in his parts...shall not be accepted...for a vow," but the people attempt to play the "deceiver" (v. 14) with God by sacrificing to him "blemished" (v. 14, NRSV) animals to fulfill their vows. In response, God brings a curse on them: "A curse on the cheater who sacrifices a worthless animal to me, when he has in his flock a good animal that he promised to give me!" (v. 14, GNT); or, "Cursed is the cheat who promises to give a fine ram from his flock but then sacrifices a defective one to the Lord" (NLT). One who attempts to cheat God invites a curse upon himself.

¹ Verhoef, p. 208-209.

² Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (The New Century Bible Commentary); Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995; p. 165.

³ Verhoef, p. 216.

⁴ Baldwin, p. 226.

⁵ Verhoef, p. 216.

Although God is "a great King," they are weary of worshipping him in the prescribed manner, and instead they bring to him "that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick" (v. 13). This is because "For them the holy service of God had become a bore, a labor of duty rather than of love, a yoke around their necks," and "The very men who were the mediators between God and his people (Exod 28:1, 43), the teachers of Israel (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; 2 Chron 15:3), and the court of appeal (Deut 19:17-19) were, by their own choice, profaning their office and bringing shame on the name of Yahweh."⁶

The word translated "torn" (*gazul*) in the KJV refers to something stolen or obtained through violence and robbery,⁷ and so in the NLT: "Think of it! Animals that are *stolen* and mutilated, crippled and sick – presented as offerings!" God certainly rejects this type of "worship," and so he says, "I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand" (v. 10). He so detests such feigned worship that he exclaims, "Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain!" (v. 10, NRSV).

In contrast to these priests, God recalls the fidelity of Levi, who "feared me, and was afraid before my name" (2:5). He says that, "the law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity" (v. 6). It is with him that God made a "covenant...of life and peace" (v. 5). But the priests in Malachi's day have "departed out of the way," having "caused many to stumble at the law," and "corrupted the covenant of Levi" (v. 8). Therefore, God sent a curse upon them (v. 2), and made them "contemptible and base before all the people" (v. 9).

Many people regard Malachi 1:11 as a prophecy about the New Covenant era, in which believers will worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). That is when "his majesty shall be recognized throughout the wide world, and pure worship shall be offered to him from every nation under heaven"; "There is a general consensus of commentators in referring the time to the Messianic future," and "there can be little doubt that a prophecy is intended."⁸

God had said through Hosea, "I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God" (Hosea 2:23). He would call those who were once not his people as his very own people. As Jesus says in Matthew 8:11, "And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." The elect in Christ would know to worship God in truth and sincerity.

⁶ *Expositor's*, Vol. 7; p. 713.

⁷ Verhoef: "Some interpreters assume that *gazul* is an animal that has been taken by violence, that has been caught and mutilated by a wild animal... This interpretation is indeed possible... However, the meaning 'stolen' seems preferable..." (p. 233).

⁸ *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 3-4.

What Malachi says about the priests applies to today's ministers, since "Then a professional clergy existed, and today one also exists."⁹ From among his people, God has chosen some to serve him in special ways, and this is true in both the Old and New Covenant eras. Some Christians mistakenly believe that, although some individuals were specifically called to the ministry under the Old Covenant, all the Christians under the New Covenant are called to the ministry in the same sense, and that no one has any ministerial authority over another. Any authority one has within a church is given because of purely functional or pragmatic reasons, but all are "equal" under God.

Proponents of this view often cite as support 1 Peter 2:9, which says, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." They argue that although not all were priests under the Old Covenant, all the Christians are now priests in Christ, and therefore there should be no professional clergy that carries special authority in the church.

However, this is a misuse of the text, since Peter is in fact quoting from an Old Testament passage directed at the people of Israel: "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:6). God calls "the children of Israel" a "kingdom of priests," just as Peter calls Christians "a royal priesthood." Thus to admit that every Christian is in some sense a "priest" does not eliminate the professional clergy. If 1 Peter 2:9 destroys the distinction between clergy and laity, then Exodus 19:6 should have done the same under the Old Covenant. But since Exodus 19:6 did not destroy the distinction between clergy and laity, then neither can one use 1 Peter 2:9 to destroy such a distinction.

On the other hand, the Bible says that, after his ascension, Christ "gave gifts unto men...And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:8, 11-12). Then, in another place, Paul denies that everyone is called to these offices (1 Corinthians 12:28-30). When Paul greets the Philippians, he makes special mention of "the overseers and deacons" that are among "all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (Philippians 1:1, NIV). James writes, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). This implies that Christian teachers are distinguishable from other Christians, and that God himself distinguishes between the two.

Therefore, although every Christian is a priest in some sense, God has evidently selected some people to carry additional responsibility and authority in the church. Hebrews says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

⁹ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Tithing and Dominion*; Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1979; p. 13.

However, this does not mean that Christian ministers are mediators between God and his people in the sense that other Christians cannot approach God without them. Scripture says that there is "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Anyone who has believed in Christ, therefore, needs no other mediator than Christ to approach God in worship and confession.

Edmund Clowney writes as follows:

In addition to the inspired apostles and prophets, Christ also gives to his church evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Such men are called to preach the Word with authority. They do not share with the apostles in the inspiration that first delivered Christ's gospel, but they do share in the stewardship that ministers it.

The steward of biblical times was an overseer among the servants. He carried the keys to his master's house and bore responsibility for its administration. He was a servant among fellow-servants, but with authority...

God does call workmen in the Word with deepened insights to perceive the outlines of sound words and with anointed lips to declare them. There are men made "mighty in the Scripture" (Acts 18:24). A stewardship of the gospel is committed to such men...

As they are obliged to preach, so others are obliged to hear. Their message must be received as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13); those who by faith receive their witness will rejoice in the day of Christ's return, while those that obey not the gospel will know the judgment of God's vengeance (2 Thess. 1:8-10).

The congregation must respect the authority of ministers of the Word as those "over them in the Lord: (1 Thess. 5:12) to be esteemed highly in love for their work's sake.¹⁰

Another way to express this is that Christians are equal as *children* of God in Christ, but they do not possess equal authority or qualifications as *ministers* of Christ. They have equal access to God, but not equal grace and power in ministry.

This distinction between the clergy and laity is repugnant to many people, who often oppose this design of God. But Scripture prescribes such a distinction, that there are ministers such as overseers and deacons who possess spiritual gifts and authority that other Christians do not have, and that not all are called to these ministries. The true motive for opposing this distinction is often a rebellious desire to usurp the authority that rightly belongs to God's chosen ministers. Wicked people who claim to be Christians

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry*; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964; p. 45, 50-51.

desire to show off their talents and speak their minds. They pay little attention to the apostle's warning: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1).

A strong tendency to cheat ministers of their salaries also contributes to this opposition against the clergy and laity distinction. If a professional clergy does not exist, then a person who *functions* as a pastor in fact does not hold an office that deserves a salary. Therefore, the church does not need to pay him a salary for his service; rather, he must earn an income from a secular job, and faithfully perform all his church duties at the same time. However, this is robbing a worker of his rightful wages, and God has expressed his wrath against this throughout the Bible (see Leviticus 19:13, Jeremiah 22:13, Malachi 3:5, Colossians 4:1). Such wickedness has no place in the kingdom of God. The church must urgently correct its people about this great injustice.

Paul writes, "If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you?" (1 Corinthians 9:11, NASB). But many professing Christians are cheating preachers of their pay, so that many faithful workers in the church are underpaid or not paid at all for their services. Those people who withhold the proper wages from these ministers increase their own savings, and they make purchases that add to their own comfort. But the money that they have saved and the items that they have purchased will cry out against them to testify about their wickedness (James 5:4). God will not hold these people guiltless, but he will punish them very harshly.

However, only faithful Christian ministers who demonstrate exemplary doctrine and character deserve their wages. Today, many who claim to be Christian ministers are offering defective sacrifices to the Lord. Like the priests in Malachi's day, they despise their ministerial offices, saying that it is wearisome and unprofitable to serve God. As a result, they relax the strict standards of ministry that God reveals in the Bible, and they offer only worthless sacrifices to him.

They neglect their private life with God. They are called first to serve God with worship, prayer, and study. Their doctrinal distortions reflect their unfaithfulness to Scripture. Failing to understand God's revelation, they misdirect those who hear them with inaccurate teachings. Doctrinal compromise leads to moral laxity and confusion, so that adultery, homosexuality, abortion, blasphemy, the neglect of theological study, and other sins are not confronted with the full force of the authority given to them. This is a betrayal their ministerial office, and they are like the priests who "corrupted the covenant of Levi" (Malachi 2:8). Since false doctrine misrepresents and defies the will of God as explicitly stated in the Bible, from it comes all kinds of wickedness and destruction that permeate all of life and society.

God says that his covenant with Levi "called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name" (Malachi 2:5). This description stands in stark contrast to the priests that the prophet is confronting here, seeing that they despise God and his ordinances. To be in the ministry, one must fear and love God; otherwise, he is disqualified from holding any spiritual office. As James Boice writes:

If God's ministers are godly, the people of God will tend to be godly also and even the ungodly will have some cause for honoring the Lord's name. If ministers are unfaithful – if they suggest by their conduct that God is contemptible and His service a burden – then the people will not be edified, their lives will not exhibit the excellencies of God's character, and God will be despised among the heathen for their sake.¹¹

If a person has been called by God to the ministry, and if he truly fears and loves the Lord, he will not remain theologically ignorant very long. Godly people "find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord, and they study it day and night" (Psalm 1:2, GNT). To these people, "The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb" (Psalm 19:9-10, NIV). If each person must live "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4), how much more must the minister "be diligent" (2 Timothy 2:15, NASB), so that he may become one who "correctly handles the word of truth" (v. 15, NIV)?

Thus faithful Levi did not only fear God, but "True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips." God says, "He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin" (Malachi 2:6, NIV). Proper moral influence can result only from biblical proclamation with theological precision, since without this, God's moral requirements remain undefined in the minds of the minister and his audience, and any discussion on such matters may degenerate into nothing more than a reflection of the current culture or one's preference.

Malachi continues, "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 2:7, NIV). Many people evaluate a ministry based on its political correctness instead of its theological correctness, indicating how far their thinking has departed from God's word. Malachi says to the priests, "By your teaching [you] have caused many to stumble" (v. 8, NIV). Only fools and rebels say that sound doctrine and theological orthodoxy do not occupy the highest place.

In connection with this, Boice says,

I am particularly concerned about the sermons many preachers offer to God on Sunday mornings. Years ago a distinguished preacher who had spent a summer listening to others preach told me, "It was all pretty thin gruel." This is my judgment too, if indeed my own assessment is not worse. Where are the great themes of Scripture? You do not find them in the majority of sermon topics listed in the Saturday edition of most city newspapers. Where is the effort that is necessary to make a sermon

¹¹ Boice, p. 237.

say something worth crossing town or even crossing the street to hear? God can no doubt rightly say of many ministers today, "It is you, O priests, who despise my name... You place defiled food on my altar."¹²

Our passage sets forth personal piety and theological soundness as the two basic requirements of a minister. Paul teaches the same – as he instructs Timothy on being a "good minister of Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 4:6), he says, "Watch your *life* and *doctrine* closely" (v. 16, NIV). But many people are least concerned about these two things, and such is the sinful state of the Christian clergy.

However, although many people place all the blame on preachers, we can place much blame also on the people. In the first place, the people of Israel had a history of rejecting godly priests and murdering true prophets. False ministries are often allowed to continue because, as God says, "The prophets prophesy falsely...and my people love to have it so" (Jeremiah 5:31). Paul predicts that, "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires" (2 Timothy 4:3, NRSV). Christians must bear much of the blame for the existence of false teachers and prophets. They are the ones who continue to finance them and attend their gatherings. Christians sometimes even turn against their ministers for warning them about false teachers and prophets, a reaction that exposes their wickedness and contempt for the truth.

Although Malachi could blame the priests for offering defective sacrifices, for they were indeed at fault, we must also note that the sacrifices were brought to the priests by the people. Against the explicit teaching of Scripture, the people brought blemished animals to the priests. Although the priests had the responsibility of examining the sacrifices and rejecting the inappropriate ones, the people were also guilty.

Rather than tolerating the people's rebellion against God, faithful ministers must boldly "Preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2), that is to "speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority," and "Let no man despise" (Titus 2:15) them. Ministers must "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3) regardless of pressure and opposition. Those who are truly serving the Lord need not be frightened or discouraged in the midst of difficulties, but we can be confident that God has reserved for himself a remnant, who are growing in personal holiness and biblical understanding, and at the appointed time they will exert a positive influence on the earth in accordance with God's sovereign plan.

Christians who long for genuine revival must begin to treasure those who are good "ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3) and who are "mighty in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24). They must see them as the church's greatest assets, and treat them accordingly. Paul writes, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17, NIV).

¹² Ibid., p. 237.

Those who labor well in "preaching and teaching" are very rare. Wisdom dictates that Christians should provide the necessary resources to these faithful ministers so that they may live peaceful lives, develop their spiritual gifts, and impart their knowledge "to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). A "good minister" (1 Timothy 4:6) is one who exhibits personal piety and theological soundness, and who is able to impart these to those who hear him.

6. THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE (2:10-16)

Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously. (Malachi 2:10-16)

Once a person breaks his commitment to God, his relationship with human beings also suffers. God's commandments constitute the only sufficient basis for a meaningful and authoritative system of ethics, and in turn, one's obedience to these commandments is the only proper basis for being faithful and ethical in his personal relationships. One who is not faithful to God may still appear to be faithful to his wife or his friends, but without faithfulness to God as the context and background, all his apparently faithful actions are superficial, and ultimately sinful. In addition, there is no ultimately rational and binding reason for him to remain even superficially ethical. It is different for one whose allegiance belongs to God alone. Since God holds the ultimate position of authority over his life, the only thing that can cause him to disown the biblical principles of ethics is his prior repudiation of God. The Bible says, "the love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14, NASB).

Why do the Israelites "deal treacherously every man against his brother"? The people are in a state of spiritual apostasy, with the priests being responsible for much of the damage. Since they have broken their commitment to God, they no longer respect his commandments in their human relationships. That they have "one father" and "one God" who made them is no longer morally relevant in their thinking.

Malachi then deals with the ramifications of their unfaithfulness to God when it comes to their marriages. Verse 11 says that they have committed "an abomination" by having "married the daughter of a strange god." They are marrying women who worship "gods"

other than the God of Israel. Baldwin argues that the issue is not interracial marriages, but interfaith marriages. She writes:

There was no objection on racial grounds to intermarriage. A mixed multitude went out of Egypt with the Israelites (Ex. 12:38), but by submitting to circumcision and keeping the passover they committed themselves to the God of Israel (Ex. 12:48; Nu. 9:14). Boaz married Ruth the Moabitess, but she had forsaken Chemosh for Israel's God (Ru. 1:16).¹

However, these Israelites are marrying women who remain devoted to their false gods. These marriages "assumed a compromise between the God and Father of Israel and...pagan [idols]."² Their eagerness to marry women of other faiths signifies their lack of commitment to God and his commandments. Malachi says that the Lord would "remove from the community of Israel" (v. 12, GNT) those who "married women who worship foreign gods" (v. 11, GNT). Marrying an unbeliever is an extremely serious sin. Alden observes, "Malachi said there would be no exception to the rule: Intermarriage meant excommunication (v. 12)."³

Then, the prophet turns to address another sin, one so serious that the Lord has ceased accepting their offerings because of it: "And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand" (2:13). When asked why God rejects their offerings, Malachi answers that it is because they have "dealt treacherously" against "the wife of thy youth" (v. 14), that they have "broken your promise to the wife you married" (v. 14, GNT).

The NIV indicates that they have violated the "marriage covenant" (v. 14). The men were divorcing their wives, and breaking the covenant with them. Malachi condemns these divorces as "disloyal" (v. 14, NLT) and "cruel" (v. 16, GNT), and in verse 16, God says, "I hate divorce!" (v. 16, NLT).

Although verse 14 teaches that marriage is a covenant, some have rebelled against this proper interpretation, suggesting that the words in question means only that "the wife too belonged to a covenant with God,"⁴ However, better scholars have argued that an exchange of marriage vows form a covenant between the couple, and therefore marriage is even more binding than a signed contract.⁵ As Hugenberger writes:

Perhaps the most significant of these arguments was the observation that this interpretation overlooks the opposing evidence of the four nominal syntagms...attested in Biblical

¹ Baldwin, p. 238.

² Verhoef, p. 270.

³ *Expositor's*, Vol. 7; p. 717.

⁴ Redditt, p. 172.

⁵ Baldwin, p. 239.

Hebrew which parallel the disputed expression...In each case the mentioned covenant exists between the person(s) indicated by the *nomen regens* and the person referred to by the pronominal suffix or additional construct, exactly as is being argued for "your wife by covenant..." in Mal. 2:14.⁶

Moreover, the idea that marriage is a covenant is not unique to Malachi, given passages such as Genesis 31:50 and Proverbs 2:16-17: "If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me" (NIV); "...the adulteress...has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God" (NIV). When two people marry, even if no one else is present, God acts as a witness, as Malachi indicates, "the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth" (2:14). Jay Adams explains that the marriage relationship is a "covenant of companionship," and "forsaking the companion of one's youth is paralleled with forgetting the covenant of God (Prov. 2:17)...In Malachi 2:14...God denounces husbands who are faithless to their companions. These companions are further described as those who are wives by covenant (NASB)."⁷ Therefore, the relationship between marriage partners is formed as a "covenant...made before God."

The implication is that marriage is even more binding than "a legal contract to be drawn up with the appropriate documents."⁸ God himself is a witness to this union, and this makes disloyalty to one's marriage partner especially despicable, such that God "regardeth not the offering any more" (v. 13) of one who "deal[s] treacherously against the wife of his youth" (v. 15).

Another implication is that since God is the witness to a marriage, putting the two together and making them one, the fate of the marriage is never up to the couple to decide, but if divorce is to occur at all, it can happen only on God's terms.

As Jesus says, "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). Since God is the one who puts together a marriage, to destroy it without his explicit permission and under his prescribed conditions would be to attack a work of God. Man has no right to dismantle what God has constructed. Even if the husband and the wife agree to divorce, it is not up to them; rather, they must obey all the relevant biblical precepts.

Christians should never enter into this covenant relationship with non-Christians. As Paul writes:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what

⁶ Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994; p. 340.

⁷ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980; p. 15.

⁸ Baldwin, p. 239.

fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." (2 Corinthians 6:14-16, NIV)

Since religious commitment is such that it should permeate all of life, there can be no fellowship between believers and unbelievers beyond the most superficial level.

Therefore, Scripture forbids Christians to marry atheists, agnostics, Buddhists, Mormons, Muslims, and Catholics – that is, all non-Christians are unacceptable. In effect, "non-Christians" would also include those who claim to be Christians, but who do not exhibit the evidences of true conversion as listed in Scripture. Since it appears that most professing Christians today are in fact non-Christians, this means all non-Christians and most "Christians" are unacceptable as marriage partners.

In other words, if you are unmarried, do not marry someone unless you are certain that the person is a true Christian, exhibiting the biblical signs of true regeneration and conversion. And if you are married, do not divorce unless your situation clearly meets the biblical conditions. Blatant disobedience will put your very soul in danger of hellfire.

God wants the union of a man and a woman to produce "godly offspring" (2:15, NIV). If one reason for marriage is to produce godly children, then it follows that the parents' conflicting concerns would hinder this goal. The Christian parent would emphasize theology, spirituality, integrity, and humility, but the non-Christian parent may emphasize wealth, accomplishments, competitiveness, and relativistic ethics. To say the least, a non-Christian would not teach a child to be a true Christian. "The family was intended to be the school in which God's way of life was practiced and learned (Ex. 20:12; Dt. 11:19)."⁹ It is difficult to provide such an environment unless both parents are true Christians, that is, people fully committed to the teaching of Scripture.

The topic of marriage deserves extensive study. To derive a set of scriptural guidelines for marriage and divorce, it is necessary to perform careful exegesis of relevant biblical passages such as Genesis 2:23-24, Deuteronomy 24:1-5, Malachi 2:13-16, Matthew 5:31-32, Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, Ephesians 5:22-33, 1 Timothy 3:2, Hebrews 13:4, and several others.

For now, we will be satisfied with the following summary: Marriage consists of the special and exclusive union of a man and a woman, whose covenant relationship is witnessed and officiated by God himself. A Christian is only permitted to marry another Christian. If one is converted after marriage, one is not to divorce the spouse. But if the non-Christian spouse desires to sever the relationship, the Christian cannot force the unbeliever to remain. Once within a marriage relationship, one must remain faithful and

⁹ Ibid., p. 240-241.

not to divorce the other, except when the other is unfaithful. Even then, divorce is not necessary, but only permitted. One who illegitimately divorces the spouse is a covenant-breaker, and incurs God's judgment.¹⁰

The above mentions that marriage is only between one man and one woman. There is no such thing as a "homosexual marriage." Scripture condemns homosexuality as a most wicked and perverted sin. God will send all homosexuals to hell:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? *Do not be deceived*; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, *nor homosexuals*, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NASB)

Paul says, "Do not be deceived" about this, but many people today are deceived on precisely this issue, and they are lying to themselves and to others that God accepts homosexuals. The truth is that unless a homosexual repents and renounces homosexuality, so that he is no longer a homosexual, God will send him to hell to suffer endless extreme conscious torment. Any person who disagrees with this disagrees with the explicit teaching of the Bible, and thus defies Paul's authority and denies Scripture's infallibility, meaning that this person forfeits any justification for calling himself a Christian.

¹⁰ Some scholars have derived and defended stricter guidelines from Scripture on divorce and remarriage, but we will not discuss them here.

7. REFORMATION IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY (2:17-3:5)

Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment? Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 2:17-3:5)

Malachi 2:17 alludes to a common objection against how God governs the world: "Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?" The people challenge God's justice on the basis of how evil men often prosper, so much so that they accuse God of regarding evil as good.

The people's words have "wearied"¹ the Lord, just as those who complain against God today are stupid and annoying. Some take the statement, "Where is the God of judgment?" as "tantamount to doubting His existence,"² although others more correctly maintain that this challenge is only about how God dispenses justice. The lack of prosperity among the people and the absence of God's glory in the temple have generated this cynicism and doubt. It seems to them that God favors evil men, seeing how the evil people were prospering rather than destroyed.

The reference to "my messenger" predicts the arrival of one who "shall prepare the way." This prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist, who then introduced "the messenger of the covenant." Thus the book of Malachi consists of consists of a *messenger* of God (1:1) delivering to the *messengers* of God (2:7) a prophecy concerning the *Messenger* of God, who is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. As Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last

¹ Verhoef: "Here the perfect tense has the meaning of a present tense, and indicates that the conduct of the people was not only a fact of history but continued until the present day" (p. 285).

² Baldwin, p. 242.

days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds."

The people ask for the God who dispenses justice. Malachi answers that "the Lord" himself will "suddenly come to his temple." Although it seems that the Lord tarries, the prophet affirms that he will surely come. And when he does, he will indeed bring justice with him: "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." When the Lord comes, he will be "like a refiner's fire...and purifier of silver." Contrary to the people's accusation, instead of tolerating or delighting in wickedness, he will thoroughly purge evil from among his people.

The rhetorical questions, "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?" suggest that very few or even none will be able to stand under God's judgment. "The interrogative pronoun which is repeated for the sake of emphasis refers to people and therefore alludes to the speakers of 2:17,"³ and this gives us a clue as to the objects of the Lord's judgment, made explicit in the following verses.

The primary objects of purification and judgment are not those whom the complainers regard as evil; rather, the Lord "shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness" (v. 3). A positive change in the nation's spiritual condition should begin with the spiritual leaders, for it is their corrupt theology and conduct that are increasing apostasy. Contrary to what Baldwin suggests, "An offering in righteousness" (GNT: "the right kinds of offerings") likely refers to the correct manner and objects of sacrifice⁴; that is, the priests would again minister "in perfect accord with the demands of the law." Just as their contempt for the temple rituals exposes their inner rebellion and irreverence, to offer sacrifices in the prescribed manner presupposes a change of heart in the priests. Therefore, the implication is that when the purification results in the presentation of acceptable sacrifices, it also means that they would be "offered in the right spirit."⁵

After the priests have been purified, "*Then* shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years" (v. 4). Spiritual reformation among the people usually occurs after the proper changes have been made in the clergy. Nevertheless, Calvin rightly observes that, "he meant to confine to the elect what ought not to have been extended to all, for there were among the people, as we have seen and shall again presently see, many who were reprobates, nay, the greater part had fallen away."⁶ Only those who have been sovereignly chosen by God would respond to spiritual purification.

God further responds to the call for the "God of judgment," and says:

³ Verhoef, p. 290.

⁴ Verhoef, p. 291; Baldwin, p. 243-244; Redditt, p. 177.

⁵ Baldwin, p. 244.

⁶ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 575.

And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.
(v. 5)

He would come indeed, not to judge only those whom the complainers consider as evil, but he says, "I will come *near to you* to judgment."

Accordingly, C. F. Keil writes:

The refining which the Lord will perform at His coming will not limit itself to the priests, but become a judgment upon all sinners. This judgment is threatened against those who wanted the judgment of God to come, according to ch. 2:17. To these the Lord will draw near to judgment, and rise up as a swift witness against all the wicked who do not fear him.⁷

Being the spiritually backward people that they are, their demand for justice has backfired on them. The people have been making false accusations against God, but God would come to judge all the reprobates, including those who accuse him of wrongdoing:

[They say] that he hid himself from them and looked at a distance on what was taking place in the world, as though the people he had chosen were not the objects of his care...when they denied that he was the God of judgment, because he did not immediately, or soon enough, resist their enemies...His answer is, "I will not forget my judgment when I come to you, but I shall come in a way contrary to what you expect."⁸

Malachi then lists several sins for which God will judge the people (v. 5). The list includes sorcery, which was rampant among the post-exilic Jews.⁹ God condemns both their spiritual and social sins. That they "fear not me" (v. 5) reveals "the source from which all these sins flowed, and refer to all the sinners mentioned before."¹⁰

Boice observes that challenges against God's justice (2:17) are "distressingly frequent."¹¹ Even many professing Christians are easily swayed by feeble arguments, and they would question the love and justice of God at the slightest sign of trouble. Although Jesus says

⁷ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 10; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001; p. 658.

⁸ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 576.

⁹ Keil: "On sorcerers and adulterers see Ex. 22:17, Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22. That sorcery was very common among the Jews after the captivity, is evident from such passages as Acts 8:9; 13:6, and from Josephus, *Ant.* xx. 6, *de bell. Jud.* ii. 12, 23..." (p. 658).

¹⁰ Keil, p. 658.

¹¹ Boice, p. 248.

that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15), they persist in measuring God's favor in terms of such things as wealth and popularity. But James says that God has chosen many poor people to be "rich in faith" (James 2:5).

Jesus says to his disciples, "I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (John 15:15). Theological understanding – that is, knowledge of the ways of God as revealed in Scripture – is one important measure of God's favor and friendship. Jeremiah says:

Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Material wealth, secular wisdom, natural strength, and political influence are nothing to boast about. The fact that many professing Christians admire and are intimidated by those who have worldly wealth and secular education exposes the apostasy of the church, and it is likely that these are not Christians at all. Rather, they are probably false converts who want to go to heaven (although they probably will not), but at the same time they look back to the world. Jesus says that a man does not profit at all if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul (Mark 8:36). Such a man is to be scorned for his folly, not admired for his short-lived riches.

Paul tells us not to be "conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). We must stop thinking like non-Christians, and stop prizing what they hold dear. He continues, "But be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (v. 2). What the world considers good, acceptable, and perfect often does not agree with God's standards. To think as the world thinks is to adopt a mindset that esteems dung as gold (Philippians 3:8). What foolishness! Scripture says, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:22). In other words, the Bible says that non-Christians claim to be smart, but they are stupid.

On the other hand, God says, "let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me." Do we know God? Do we understand him? Those who claim to be Christians, but whose perverted minds fail to grasp the essence of spirituality, sometimes denounce the study of theology as impious. They claim to know much about God because of their experience, but when you question them, they will spew out ideas about God that are completely foreign to Scripture. They are impostors; they do not know God. If we do not understand much about theology – that is, God's word and God's ways – then we have nothing to boast about, even if we are wealthy, popular, or educated according to non-Christian standards.

However, if we have arrived at an intellectual comprehension and volitional assent that God is one who exercises and delights in "lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness," and if we have biblical assurance based on biblical evidence that we have come to know God in a salvific relationship, then that is something to boast about. Only true Christians who know God's word and God's ways has the right to boast, but even then, only about what God has done for them by his sovereign grace. Knowledge of God is ultimate, and anything else is child's play in comparison. Therefore, let not the Christian boast about other things, and let him not be intimidated by the boasting of unbelievers, but rather reduce them to silence by biblical wisdom.

The people accuse God of being unjust, or failing to dispense justice. Why is it that God does not always swiftly judge the wicked? Many biblical passages answer this, such as Psalm 37, Psalm 92, 1 Timothy 5:24-25, and others. However, the reprobates will reject the truth, since they produce objections against God to excuse their wickedness. Many are persistently distressed by the so-called "problem of evil" and the prosperity of the wicked because they are not close to the Lord. As Psalm 73:16-17 says, "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (NIV).

Now, although Scripture conclusively answers the problem of evil and the prosperity of the wicked,¹² God does not owe us an explanation in the first place. Thus we must receive with gratitude any revelation from Scripture, as a precious gift of knowledge about God's ways. Of course, the unbelievers' hostility against the Bible is wicked, and God will punish them with everlasting hellfire. And those who claim to be Christians but who disdain theological understanding are without excuse. If we claim to be Christians, then let us ask questions about God not with an accusatory attitude, but with fear and trembling, knowing his goodness and justice (Romans 9:20).

To the challenge, "Where is the God of judgment?" Malachi gives the surprising answer that the God of justice himself will come to his temple. Malachi 3:1 is correctly understood as a messianic prophecy, and in this verse, the prophet identifies "the Lord" with "the messenger of the covenant," who would "suddenly come to his temple," indicating that the Messiah would be deity and not a mere man. Of course, this is consistent with other predictions about him. As Isaiah says, the Messiah would be called "mighty God" and "The everlasting Father" (9:6).

Referring to the Messiah, Psalm 110:1 says, "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." However, the Messiah must also be David's descendent, and so Jesus asks his opponents, "If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?" (Matthew 22:45). This is possible only if the Messiah is in fact the preexistent Son of God, who takes on a human nature in a way that does not compromise or affect his divine nature.

However, he will come to bring another surprise in that he will come to judge his own people. Calvin explains:

¹² See Vincent Cheung, *The Light of Our Minds*, "The Problem of Evil."

They expected God to be to them like a hired soldier, ready at hand to help them in any adversity, and to come armed at their nod or pleasure to fight with their enemies: this they expected; but God declares what is of a contrary character – that he would come for judgment; and he alludes to that impious slander, when they denied that he was the God of judgment, because he did not immediately, or soon enough, resist their enemies....They indeed wished God to put on arms for their advantage, but God declares, that he would be an enemy to them....¹³

God would indeed dispense justice. But if he comes to judge sinners, and if "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17), then he would also punish the sins of Israel. To those who falsely consider themselves righteous, Jesus say, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). There is indeed a righteousness that can escape God's wrath, but it is sovereignly granted by God only through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Those who accuse God of being unjust can hardly be righteous. So then, "let us ever fear lest our haste should prove our ruin, for he has no respect of persons, so as to favour our unfaithfulness and to be rigid toward those who are hostile to us. Let us take heed that while we look for the presence of God, we present ourselves before his tribunal with a pure and upright conscience."¹⁴

Malachi lists some of the sins for which God will punish the people, but these are the very same sins that many professing Christians commit today:

And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.
(3:5)

Of course, most professing Christians are in fact false converts, and they will be condemned to endless suffering in hell, like all the other non-Christians.

Many professing Christians seem to be unaware that all occult practices are "grievous sins in the eye of the law"¹⁵ deserving of the death penalty. Living under the New Covenant does not mean that what is sinful in the Old Covenant suddenly becomes acceptable or morally neutral. Divination and all similar practices are still abominations in the sight of God: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

¹³ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 576.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

¹⁵ Keil, p. 658.

Christians must never study occult materials or non-Christian religious texts for personal interest or application; rather, we must either criticize and refute them in the harshest terms, or we must destroy them:

And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed. (Acts 19:18-20)

Adultery (v. 5) is also common among those who call themselves Christians. This sin violates the marriage covenant, and makes the offender particularly reprehensible. When a thief is caught, "he shall give all the substance of his house" as restitution (Proverbs 6:31), but how can a person repay the man whose wife he has defiled? "He will not regard any ransom; neither will he rest content, though thou givest many gifts" (v. 35). Adultery cannot be undone, and so "he that goeth in to his neighbour's wife; whosoever toucheth her shall not be innocent" (v. 29). In connection with adultery, Proverbs 5:21-23 warns: "For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings. His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins. He shall die without instruction; and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray."

Scripture commands us to tell the truth, so God will punish "false swearers" (Malachi 3:5). Paul says, "putting away lying," we should "speak every man truth with his neighbour" (Ephesians 4:25). We should "lie not one to another" because we have "put off the old man with his deeds" (Colossians 3:9). Therefore, one who has been regenerated by the Spirit of God has the obligation and the ability to cease his former sinful conduct, since his inner dispositions have been converted toward a godly direction.

Besides its obvious referents, the phrase, "those that oppress the hireling in his wages," applies also to those who cheat the servants of God by underpaying, or even not paying, preachers for their work. Oppressing "the widow and the fatherless" is also sinful, since according to James, "pure religion" does not ignore social issues such as the needs of the community (James 1:27). Nevertheless, helping the needy must never be done without presenting the gospel. Christians must not help others out of humanistic motives, as if it is right to help others without leading them to repentance and faith toward God, when in fact helping others is meaningful only in the context of obedience to God's commands.

Ministers are called to "feed the flock of God," and be "ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). When the spiritual leaders backslide, many of the people will follow. On the other hand, when the ministers have learned to bring "an offering in righteousness," then the people's offering will become "pleasant unto the Lord" (3:5). Referring to the "sons of Levi" (3:3), Keil writes, "Since they, the supporters and promoters of the religious life of

the nation, were quite corrupt, the renovation of the national life must begin with their purification."¹⁶ Likewise, W. J. Deane writes:

Thus judgment should begin at the house of God... We may call to mind Christ's purging of the temple, and his denunciations of the teaching body among the Jews, and see herein his way of trying his ministers in all ages, that they may shine like lights in the world, and adorn the doctrine of God in all things... When the purification has taken place, and the priests offer pure worship, then the sacrifices of the whole nation will be acceptable.¹⁷

Verhoef observes that the ministers were "responsible for the religious decline of the people. Thus the purification of the people has to start with them," although "the people themselves were also included in this act of purification."¹⁸

Therefore, a spiritual reformation should usually occur with the purification of the ministers. The two items mentioned earlier remain the most important aspects of the process; that is, good ministers are known by their personal piety and sound theology, without which they cannot properly lead the people. Purification of the ministers must first repair their devotion and theology.

A lack of personal piety and sound theology is rooted in spiritual blindness. Jesus denounces the Pharisees as "blind leaders of the blind," and "if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14). Of course, this does not say that the people are better, for they are also said to be blind in this verse, so that "the *blind* lead the *blind*." Those people who criticize their ministers are often just as sinful and hypocritical, and just as blind. But God has chosen faithful preachers to open their eyes (Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4), and this makes spiritual blindness a fatal disease to the Christian ministry, since both will be lost if the one who leads the blind cannot see. Preachers must be those whose eyes God has opened, and as a result are able to lead others to see the truth (Ephesians 1:17-18).

Psalm 119:18 says to God, "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." While walking with his disciples, Jesus "opened...their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Those without clear spiritual sight cannot derive sound theological knowledge from Scripture. Without the understanding granted by God's sovereign grace, they may read the words, but their minds will distort the meaning and deduce false implications, which in turn will lead them "unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

With diligence, a person with clear spiritual sight can develop the ability to correctly handle the word of God (2 Timothy 2:15). Then, reasoning from biblical axioms, he is able to derive a sound system of theology, which in turn functions to direct his conduct

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 657.

¹⁷ *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 39.

¹⁸ Verhoef, p. 291.

toward right worship and obedience toward God. By sharing his wisdom with others, he will "turn many away from iniquity" (Malachi 2:6).

Malachi says concerning the priests, "You have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble" (2:8). Many people do not live godly lives because their leaders have poisoned them with unbiblical theology. False teaching causes them to stumble in their spiritual walk. Many people fail to see this connection because of their aversion to formal theological studies. A biblical lifestyle is defined by a biblical theology, and it is by means of this biblical theology that the Spirit will enable a person to live a biblical lifestyle. Godliness is thus not more important than theology; rather, godliness is impossible without theology.

When speaking about adultery, Scripture says that one who commits this sin "lacketh *understanding*" (Proverbs 6:32). The Revised English Bible says that he is "a senseless fool" – it does not say that he is especially romantic, that he has experienced too much pressure at work, or that his wife does not satisfy him. Among other things, the adulterer fails to understand and acknowledge the meaning and implications of breaking the marriage covenant – something that a pastor should have explained to him, perhaps by preaching or counseling.

But what if the pastor endorses adultery? In our day, many ministers assume theological positions that allow people to commit almost all of the sins that the Bible forbids. For example, instead of resisting occult teachings, many pastors are even teaching occult practices to their people, saying that they are spiritually and morally neutral when the Bible explicitly condemns them. To make sinful practices acceptable to the general Christian public, the apostates must first construct a theology that allows and justifies these practices. In our day, theologies have been produced that permit divination, adultery, perjury, homosexuality, feminism, and all things evil.

Therefore, spiritual reformation must begin with the ministers and scholars, whose sermons and writings direct the life and thought of those who follow them. But a remnant chosen by God will gather that hold to sound doctrine, and they will resist the kingdom of darkness through biblical argumentation: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

One's spiritual *sight* determines his *theology*, which in turn determines his *conduct*. Thus we should pray that God will grant Christians leaders sight to "see wonderful things" (Psalm 119:18) from the Book, and be bold to preach these insights to this generation, so that our lives and thoughts may become pleasing to God. Christians, and especially ministers, urgently need to heed Paul's admonition: "Be careful in your life and in your

teaching. If you continue to live and teach rightly, you will save both yourself and those who listen to you" (1 Timothy 4:16, NCV).¹⁹

¹⁹ Or, "Keep a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching. Don't be diverted. Just keep at it. Both you and those who hear you will experience salvation" (*The Message*, Copyright by Eugene Peterson, 1993, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group).

8. REFORMATION IN CHRISTIAN DEVOTION (3:6-12)

For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightful land, saith the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:6-12)

The spiritual condition of the clergy is often reflected in the general believers. The ministers who preach sound theology and practice godliness give clear direction to the people, who can then apply biblical precepts to their life and thought, resulting in godly living. Now, contrary to what many people believe, Christians must obey even hypocritical ministers as long as these ministers teach sound doctrine, even if they disobey it themselves: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:2-3). Therefore, providing biblical teaching without personal examples should be sufficient to command obedience in the people; nevertheless, Scripture commands a minister to be a good example to the people by his godly conduct, so that he does not become a hypocrite in denying what he preaches by his sinful behavior (Titus 1:16). In any case, a person can never excuse his disobedience by pointing to hypocritical ministers. Each of us will give an account to God.

In other words, a person must not require an example to model after before he obeys God, but he should only require knowledge of what God commands; however, it remains a minister's duty to be an example of godly living (1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Corinthians 9:27). Without personal examples, some people might find it more difficult to apply God's word to their lives; nevertheless, when there is no one who can serve as an example of godly living, a Christian should still be able to obey God by imitating Christ based on the information about him in Scripture (1 Corinthians 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; John 10:4-5; Hebrews 12:2).

The fact that ministers carry the responsibility of teaching and obeying the word of God (Matthew 5:19) does not mean that the rest of the people are blameless when spiritual decline occurs. The Bible notes that even when there is nothing wrong with the ministers,

the people often rebel against the Lord: "But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted" (Ezekiel 3:7); "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Since apostasy cannot be blamed solely on the clergy, Malachi turns to address the people, and reprimands them for their lack of devotion to the Lord.

God first reminds the hearers of his immutability, saying, "I am the Lord, I change not" (v. 6). God's attributes remains the same, and they will never change. He is not subject to any external influence, and he is eternal so that there is no before or after in his being, so that he does not change. His omniscience implies that he has no succession of thoughts, and therefore he does not change his mind. His knowledge and decisions eternally exist in his mind, and are not subject to alteration. Since he knows all, he does not gain knowledge, and nothing surprises him. Since he is eternally immutable and comprehensively perfect, he never becomes better or worse.

However, Malachi is not focusing on God's ontological immutability, but his unchanging policy toward his covenant people, and so he says, "therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (v. 6).¹ That is, although Israel has been rebelling against God's laws throughout the generations (v. 7), it has never been completely extinguished by God. This echoes Malachi's earlier argument – whereas Edom has been destroyed and is not allowed to rebuild, Israel has also come under God's judgment, but is allowed to rebuild their nation by God's providence.

The people of Israel have accused God of being unjust to his own people, and that he has even been kind to evildoers. They accuse him of being unfaithful to his promises toward Abraham and Israel, seeing how the nation is not prospering as they have expected. God answers that he has not changed, but it is Israel that is at fault for departing from his ordinances (v. 7). In fact, it is precisely because of God's faithfulness that the people of Israel are "not consumed" (v. 6) despite their sinfulness.

God then calls to them, saying, "Return unto me," to which they again retort, "Wherein shall we return?" (v. 7). Keil explains, "From time immemorial they have transgressed the commandments of God...And yet they regard themselves as righteous. They reply to the call to repentance by saying...wherein, i.e., in what particular, shall we turn?"² They are like the adulteress that Proverbs describes: "She eats and wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong'" (Proverbs 30:20, NASB). This sounds like many professing Christians today. They would commit adultery and perjury, approve of abortion and homosexuality, encourage unity with heretics and unbelievers, and then each of them

¹ The Hebrew verb rendered "are not consumed" may also be translated "have not ceased" (REB). The latter would imply that just as God has been consistently faithful, so has Israel been consistently defiant against his laws (Baldwin, p. 245). Following Verhoef (p. 299-300) and others, here I assume the first interpretation; that is, it is because of God's unchanging policy toward his covenant people that Israel has not been destroyed, even though its people have been disobedient throughout the generations.

² Keil, p. 659.

would say, "I have done no wrong." But these are not Christians; rather, they are those to whom Jesus will say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:23).

On God's call to "return," Calvin writes:

It would be account of their sins, which, as Isaiah says, hinder the course of that beneficence to which he is of his own self inclined....And he bids them to return. Hence the Papists very foolishly conclude, that repentance is in the power of man's free-will. But God requires what is above our strength; and yet there is no reason why we should complain that there is a too heavy burden laid on us; for he regards not what we can, or what our ability admits, but what we owe to him and what our duty requires. Though then no one can of his own self turn to God, he is not on this account excusable, because we must consider whence comes the defect; and how much soever, as I have already said, a man may pretend his own impotency, he cannot yet escape from being bound to God, though more is required of him than he of himself can perform.³

Justification and sanctification depend on God's sovereign grace, and not on a non-existent "free will." Beyond this, we must defer a discussion on the economy of God and man in sanctification for another setting.

Hugenberger observes:

[The verse may contain a reference to Jacob] in order to highlight the people's sin. After Jacob's exile in Paddan Aram, when he "returned" both to the promised land and to the Lord, he built an altar at Bethel, and he offered a tithe to the Lord according to his vow in Gn. 28:20-22 (*cf.* also Gn. 35:1-7). When Jacob's descendants similarly returned from their exile, they rebuilt the altar at Jerusalem, but they were grossly negligent in offering their tithes (*cf.* also Ne. 13:10-13).⁴

In reply to the people's challenge, "Wherein shall we return?" Malachi mentions what seems to be an impossible transgression: "Will a man rob God?" Used also in Proverbs 22:23, the word for "rob" carries the idea of "plunder" or "take by violence." Although the LXX favors "to deceive," thus creating a pun on the name of Jacob, it seems that the Hebrew should be preferred, as supported by the Vulgate.⁵ This meaning is also well

³ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 583.

⁴ *New Bible Commentary*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000; p. 888.

⁵ Verhoef, p. 302-303; Baldwin, p. 245-246.

established in the Talmudic literature.⁶ So the question is whether a man may seize what belongs to God.⁷

How is it possible for a man to rob or to defraud God? One would be foolish to even try, but this is what Malachi accuses the people of having tried to do. Then, as we have come to expect by now, the people respond, "Wherein have we robbed thee?" (v. 8). The answer is that they have robbed God "in tithes and offerings" (v. 8).

Tithing refers to giving ten percent of one's possessions and income to God, usually accepted by his chosen representatives. Abraham and Jacob practiced it (Genesis 14:20, 28:22), and God made it a compulsory legislation under Moses. Malachi accuses the people of robbing God by not paying their tithes, and in addition, they also robbed God of their "offerings," which "was partly a voluntary and partly a compulsory contribution."⁸ The tithes are to be brought "into the storehouse," which was a "repository for the tithes attached to the temple and presided over by the Levites (1 Chr. 9:26, 29)."⁹ J. M. P. Smith observes that the tithes and offerings "together constituted a large element in the maintenance of the temple staff of priests and Levites."¹⁰ By neglecting their tithes and offerings, the people have generated financial hardship for those who are dedicated to spiritual work.

God says in verse 9 that since the nation has robbed him, he has released a curse against it, so that "the punishment mentioned in 2:2 would be visited upon the guilty nation as a whole."¹¹ Verses 10 and 11 indicate that the curse consists in failure of crops, resulting from adverse weather conditions and pestilence. It seems that the people have used their economic difficulties as an excuse to withhold from God what belongs to him, although it is precisely their disobedience that has placed them under the curse from God. As Hugenberger observes,

This negligence may have seemed justified because of crop failure, drought and pestilence (10-11), which would have been more than enough to deter such complacent worshippers. The Lord reveals, however, that these natural disasters were the result, and not the cause, of the nation's disobedience (8; cf. Hg. 1:6, 9-11; 2:16-19).¹²

⁶ Baldwin, p. 245.

⁷ But the idea of deception or "to circumvent" may not be completely absent. Keil writes, "The prophet thereupon shows them their sin: they do what no man should presume to attempt – they try to defraud God in the tithe and heave-offering, namely, by either not paying them at all, or not paying them as they should into the house of God" (p. 659).

⁸ Verhoef, p. 305.

⁹ *New International Bible Commentary*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979; p. 993.

¹⁰ Quoted in Verhoef, p. 305.

¹¹ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*; The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1962; p. 918.

¹² *New Bible Commentary*, p. 888.

The nation had earlier been under a curse during the ministry of the prophet Haggai. The reason was that they were focused on building their own houses, while the temple of God was far from complete:

Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. (Haggai 1:3-6)

God surely speaks the truth when he says, "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (Malachi 3:7). Haggai's message was similar, urging them to give God what he demanded, and to put God's honor before their own comfort: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD" (Haggai 1:7-8).

To repair the damaged relationship between God and Israel, the people must again bring "all the tithes into the storehouse" (Malachi 3:10). The Hebrew verb here expresses a command, so that God's laws are not to be obeyed or ignored based on one's preference. "All the tithe," followed by a determinate genitive in the Hebrew, means the entirety, and may be rendered as "the whole tithe" (NIV) or "all the tithes" (NLT). The verse may imply either that the people are not bringing in the whole tithe or that not everyone is tithing. The first interpretation is preferred, because God says that "the whole nation" (v. 9) is robbing him. Keil writes, "In v. 10a the emphasis lies upon *kol*: the *whole* of the tithe they are to bring, and not merely a portion of it, and so defraud the Lord; for the tithe was paid to Jehovah for His servants the Levites (Numbers 18:24)."¹³

If the people would return to God by bringing in all their tithes, then he promises, "[I will] open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field" (v. 10-11). To open "the windows of heaven" means that he will satisfy the nation's need for rain,¹⁴ and the words, "there shall not be room enough to receive it" denote an "overflowing blessing" (NRSV).¹⁵

¹³ Keil, p. 659.

¹⁴ Calvin: "It is the first thing as to fertility that the heavens should water the earth, according to what Scripture declares: and hence God threatens in the law that the heaven would be iron and the earth brass, (Deut. xxviii. 23.) for there is a mutual connection between the heaven and the earth...for when it is dry and as it were famished, it calls on the heavens, but if rain be denied, the heavens seem to reject its prayer... We hence see that God is not only in one way bountiful to us, but he also intends by various processes to render us sensible of his kindness: he rains from heaven to soften the earth, that it may in its bosom nourish the corn, and then send it forth from its bowels, as though it extends its breast to us; and further, God adds his blessing, so as to render the rain useful" (Vol. XV; p. 590-591). Keil: "Opening the

Therefore, "Without omitting the need for holiness (*cf.* 2:13; 3:3-4), God promises in vs 10-12 that as soon as his people become faithful in presenting their full tithes, the desperately needed rain will come (10), pestilence and crop failure will cease (11)."¹⁶ The result is that "all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land" (v. 12). That is, "Israel will then once again take up its central and unique position as 'the favored people' (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 61:9; Zech. 8:13)...The same nations who have ridiculed and oppressed the returning exiles will be obliged to proclaim them a nation which is being blessed by God."¹⁷

In our day, the restoration of right worship and piety in the church entails not only a reformation of Christian ministry, but also a reformation in Christian devotion. Spiritual revival means a renewed commitment to study the Scripture and obey what it commands. This in turn entails a return to God's "ordinances" (v. 7), including the biblical precept to support Christian ministers by your tithes and offerings.

Some people teach that tithing is not for today, but their arguments against the practice are weak. We will begin with Verhoef's example. He admits it "cannot be denied" that, between the Old and New Testaments, "there is continuity in connection with both our obligation to fulfill our stewardship and the promises of God's blessing in our lives." But then he adds:

It must be clear that [tithing] belonged, in conjunction with the whole system of giving and offering, to the dispensation of shadows, and that it therefore had 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, and the discontinuity in the manner in which we fulfill our obligations.¹⁸

We may find fault with his above statements right away, but let us read more about the reasons for his conclusion on Christian tithing:

The law declares one day out of seven to be holy unto the Lord, the Spirit sanctifies all seven of them. The law sets apart one tribe out of twelve to be priests, the Spirit declares that the whole congregation has to fulfill the priestly office (1 Pet. 2:9). The law demands a tenth part of his people's possessions, the Spirit translates us to become God's possession with all that we have.

sluices of heaven is a figure, denoting the most copious supply of blessing, so that it flows down from heaven like a pouring rain (as in 2 Kings 7:2)...till there is no more need, i.e., in superabundance" (p. 659).

¹⁵ Vulgate: "*usque ad abundantiam*"; Septuagint: "until it suffice"; Syriac: "until ye say, It is enough."

¹⁶ *New Bible Commentary*, p. 888.

¹⁷ Verhoef, p. 309.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

Everything belongs to him. We are but stewards who will have to give account of all we possess.¹⁹

This is ridiculous. First, in these sentences he contrasts "the law" and "the Spirit" as if these two are in radical conflict, but he gives no biblical justification for this. Instead, Paul says, "We know that the law is spiritual" (Romans 7:14), but perhaps Verhoef does not know. Since he frames his assertions in this unjustified manner, his position is already in suspect.

He says, "The law declares one day out of seven to be holy unto the Lord, the Spirit sanctifies all seven of them." Does he mean by this that the law does not declare the other six days as "holy"? But it is the law that says, "Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Unless God is holy only on the Sabbath, his people are required to be holy all seven days of the week. It is precisely because all seven days belong to God that he demands of his people, "keep my sabbaths" (v. 3). The New Covenant has not "improved" on this, for Peter writes, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; *Because* it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16). He cites *the law* as the reason for *the Christian* to be holy "in *all* manner of conversation." Rushdoony writes:

All our lives, days, and activities are required to be holy in *all* of Scripture: there is no difference here between the Old and New Testaments. One day in seven is to be set aside for *rest*, but all seven must be given over to holiness, all are sanctified unto the Lord and by His Spirit. Verhoef confuses the ideas of *rest* and *holiness*; they are related, but clearly separate. Not only rest but work also must be holy.²⁰

Next, Verhoef says, "The law sets apart one tribe out of twelve to be priests, the Spirit declares that the whole congregation has to fulfill the priestly office (1 Pet. 2:9)." The verse to which he refers reads, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9). However, Peter himself is citing from the Old Testament:

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a *kingdom of priests*, and an *holy nation*. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:5-6)

But the LORD hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day. (Deuteronomy 4:20)

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 311.

²⁰ Rushdoony, *Tithing*; p. 12.

For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath *chosen* thee to be a *peculiar people* unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth. (Deuteronomy 14:2)

And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken. (Deuteronomy 26:18-19)

It appears that in 1 Peter 2:9, Peter merely summarizes these Old Testament passages that were originally spoken to Israel, and applies them to the Christians: "But ye are a *chosen generation*, a *royal priesthood*, an *holy nation*, a *peculiar people*; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

A previous chapter mentions that one cannot use 1 Peter 2:9 to eliminate the distinction between clergy and laity. That is, by saying that every Christian is a "priest" under the New Covenant, Peter is *not* making a contrast to the people under the Old Covenant. This is because, again, Peter is citing Old Testament passages that in their original contexts refer to the people of Israel. That is, even the Old Testament calls Israel "a kingdom of priests," and yet God had chosen from among the people the Levites to function as a professional clergy.

This contradicts Verhoef, who asserts that the Spirit has chosen every Christian to be priests in the sense that the Levites were chosen to be priests. If a professional clergy existed under the Old Covenant even through the entire nation was called "a kingdom of priests," then Verhoef cannot use 1 Peter 2:9 to say that all Christians are priests in a sense that eliminates the distinction between the Christian clergy and the Christian laity. By this verse, Verhoef cannot refuse to acknowledge a distinction between the Christian clergy and the Christian laity similar in kind to the one that had existed between the Levites and the other Israelites under the Old Covenant. As Rushdoony observes:

This is an amazing statement, amazing in its dishonesty and falsity. Surely Verhoef knows that here too Peter is citing the law!... To be a *holy people* means to be a separated people, a dedicated or a priestly people. This the Old Testament was, and this the New Israel of God now is. Then a professional clergy existed, and today one also exists. What Ex. 19:6 says, 1 Peter 2:9 repeats.²¹

Then, Verhoef applies the former examples, which we have demolished, to tithing: "The law demands a tenth part of his people's possessions, the Spirit translates us to become God's possession with all that we have. Everything belongs to him. We are but stewards who will have to give account of all we possess." The implication is all that the Old

²¹ Ibid., p. 13.

Covenant believers had belonged to themselves except for ten percent, but all that the New Covenant believers have belong to God with no exception. Although this is false, even if Verhoef is right about this, what he says still fails to explain why New Covenant believers may cease to tithe, instead of giving a hundred percent, that is, all of their possessions to God.

Verhoef says that under the Old Covenant, ten percent of a person's possessions belongs to God, and therefore the Old Covenant believer is required to give ten percent of his possessions to God's ministers. On the other hand, Verhoef maintains that under the New Covenant, a hundred percent of a person's possessions belongs to God. But instead of concluding that compulsory giving has thus increased from ten percent to one hundred percent, he concludes from this that the New Covenant believer becomes a manager over his possessions for God, and that he is not required to give ten percent, or any designated amount, to God's ministers.

Now, If Verhoef is saying that we should give to the ministers only what belongs to God, and that we may keep the rest, then by saying that all of our possessions belong to God under the New Covenant can only mean that compulsory giving has increased from ten percent to one hundred percent under the New Covenant. Verhoef concludes that we may give less precisely because more of what we possess belongs to God! However, unless Scripture explicitly teaches otherwise, it would seem that when more belongs to God, more should be given to him.

Verhoef's reasoning is that Old Covenant believers give one day out of seven to God because one day out of seven belongs to God, and the other six belong to themselves. But under the New Covenant, all seven days of the week belong to God, so Verhoef says we should give God none of those days. By the same reasoning, Old Covenant believers are required to give ten percent of everything they have to God because ten percent belongs to God, but since everything that we have belongs to God under the New Covenant, we are somehow required to give him nothing at all. The point is that Verhoef's absurd and unbiblical argument backfires against him, so that instead of canceling compulsory giving, it results in increased compulsory giving.

The truth is that *everything* belongs to God under *both* the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, and to give God ten percent represents an acknowledgment of God's total ownership of all things. God could demand less or demand more, since everything belongs to him, but he saw fit to establish the tithe as a means by which his people may honor him, and to supply for his ministers.

Accordingly, Rushdoony writes:

Surely a professor of Old Testament should know that the first-fruits and the tithe represent the dedication of *all* the harvest and of *all* our income, persons, and lives to the Lord. The whole point of giving of the first-fruits, the firstlings of the flock, and the *tenth*, not the left-over but the first portion to the Lord, means the

dedication of all to the Lord...We have already seen that Deut. 4:20 speaks of Israel as God's inheritance or possession, Deut. 14:2, as a unique or peculiar people unto the Lord, i.e., as His own, and so on. In *every* age, God's elect are His possession in the fullest sense of the word....The refusal to tithe is turned into a virtue, as a sign that somehow, by withholding our tithe, we are giving the Lord everything!²²

Rushdoony then concludes his criticism of Verhoef, and says:

At one point, Verhoef is right: we are "God's possessions with all that we have for one hundred percent. Everything belongs to Him. We are but stewards, who will have to give account of every dime we possess." Precisely, and this is why God requires the tithe of us, our first-fruits. His claim on us is prior and total. We acknowledge that claim by giving God the tithe He requires of us by law. If we give Him priority in our lives, time, work, and income, then we have indeed manifested thereby that we are truly His possessions. If we deny Him His tithe, then our professions are indeed empty ones.²³

The following illustration may help clarify the point:

[God] knows there is something wrong with the husband who answers his wife's complaint that he doesn't give her any time by saying, "What do you mean, I don't give you my time? ALL my time is yours. I work all day long for you and the children." That has a very hollow ring to it if he doesn't give her any "especially time." Giving her some evenings together and some dates does not deny that all his time is for her, it proves it. This is why God declares one day in seven especially God's. They are all his, and making one special proves it. And this is the way it is with our money and God. Giving God a tenth of our income does not deny that all our money is God's, it proves that we believe it. Tithing is like a constant offering of the first fruits of the whole thing. The tenth is yours, O Lord, in a *special* way, because all of it is yours in an *ordinary* way.²⁴

Another objection to Christian tithing comes from Hebrews 7, where it says that Jesus is a greater high priest than Aaron:

²² Ibid., p. 13.

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ John Piper, *Toward the Tithe and Beyond: How God Funds His Work*; Bethlehem Baptist Church, September 10, 1995.

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever. Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor. (Hebrews 7:1-10, NIV)

The Aaronic priesthood is inferior to the Melchizedekian priesthood for several reasons. First, Abraham, the ancestor of Aaron and the Levites, paid tithe to Melchizedek, who in turn blessed him, "And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater" (v. 7). Second, the former is administered by mortal beings, but the latter is founded on "the power of an indestructible life" (v. 16). Third, the Levites were priests because of their ancestry, but Christ is our high priest by a personal oath from God: "For it is declared: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'" (v. 17; Psalm 110:4). The Melchizedekian priesthood is indeed superior to the Aaronic priesthood. Since God has made Jesus a priest in the order of Melchizedek, it follows that Jesus is greater than Aaron.

But what this implies is another matter. Why does the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood imply the abolition of the tithe? Being under the administration of a superior priesthood does not automatically mean that one does not need to tithe. Perhaps one may point to verse 12, which says, "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law." But again, that does not automatically settle the issue. Why does "a change of the law" necessarily entail the abolition of the tithe? The law says, "Thou shalt not murder." Does it mean we may commit murder under the new priesthood, seeing that there is "a change of the law"?

What is this "change in the law"? Does it refer to a change, or even the abolition, of all previously revealed moral laws, ceremonial laws, and civil laws? Or, given the context, does it refer only to the laws relevant to the Levitical priesthood? Albert Barnes explains:

The connexion requires us to understand it *only* of the law *so far as it was connected with the Levitical priesthood*. This could not

apply to the ten commandments – for they were given *before* the institution of the priesthood; nor could it apply to any other part of the moral law, for that was not dependent on the appointment of the Levitical priests. But the meaning is, that since a large number of laws – constituting a code of considerable extent and importance – was given for the regulation of the priesthood, and in reference to the rites of religion, which they were to observe or superintend, it followed that when their office was superseded *by one of a wholly different order*, the law which had regulated *them* vanished also, or ceased to be binding. This is a very important point in the introduction of Christianity, and hence it is that it is so often insisted on in the writings of Paul.²⁵

Therefore, the change from the Aaronic priesthood to the Melchizedekian priesthood changes only those things that are directly relevant to the Aaronic priesthood, and does not automatically eliminate the tithe. Rather, the question should be whether the Melchizedekian priesthood is one that receives tithes. We find that this priesthood indeed receives tithes, since the same passage refers to the Genesis account in which Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. Then, we observe that Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, which is an order priesthood that receives tithes.

In Matthew 23:23, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, saying that they appear to be faithful in paying their tithes, but they neglect the even more important matters of the law: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." Indeed, Jesus says that inward virtues such as judgment, mercy, and faith are "weightier" than tithing, but he does not abolish or belittle tithing in any biblical passage, nor does he say that it is passing away.

As Piper observes, Jesus never said, "You have heard that it was said to you, Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse! But I say to you, Five percent will do, or even two."²⁶ Rather, he says, "*these ought ye to have done*, and not to leave the other undone." That is, they should maintain *both* inward character (faith, love, justice, etc.) and outward obedience, such as tithing.

Some people claim that Paul does not ask for money to support his ministry, and that he even teaches against it. But this is a gross distortion of Scripture. Although Paul sometimes works to support himself, this is because he does not want to negatively affect how the gospel would be received by those who have never heard. He writes, "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of

²⁵ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Inc.; p. 1277.

²⁶ John Piper, *You will be a Land of Delight*; Bethlehem Baptist Church, December 6, 1987.

Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:12, NIV). On other occasions, he does accept financial support from Christians (Philippians 4:15-16).²⁷

Paul certainly does not teach that Christians should withhold support from their ministers and churches. Instead, he explicitly teaches that ministry work itself deserves full wages, that ministers should not have to find work outside of their ministries, and that Christians must provide them with full financial support:

Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?...Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. (v. 6-11, 13-14; NIV)

For Christians to deny financial support to gospel ministers is to cheat them of their rightful wages. Since these ministers are God's chosen spokesmen, to cheat them is also to rob God, and no one can rob him with impunity.

Paul has not always taken advantage of his right to receive financial support (v. 15), but that does not mean he never had this right. If Christian ministers do not have the right to demand financial support from Christians, Paul's argument would be meaningless. His point is that he has not taken what was rightfully his, and not that he has given up what did not belong to him in the first place. Therefore, the right to receive financial support is for the minister to temporarily relinquish whenever he deems appropriate for the sake of the gospel, but it is never up to the Christians to withhold the money from him.

As for those who think that the tithe is an Old Covenant ordinance that has been abolished in the New Covenant, notice that Paul establishes the minister's right to receive financial support by twice appealing to Old Covenant law:

For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is

²⁷ NLT: "As you know, you Philippians were the only ones who gave me financial help when I brought you the Good News and then traveled on from Macedonia. No other church did this. Even when I was in Thessalonica you sent help more than once."

concerned?...Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?" (v. 9, 13).

Then, he states the point he is making when he appeals to the law, saying, "*In the same way*, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (v. 14). He says *in the same way* that Old Covenant priests were cared for by the people's offerings to God, New Covenant ministers are to receive their financial support from those who hear them.

In addition, Paul goes so far as to say, "The elders who do good work as leaders should be considered worthy of receiving double pay, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17, GNT). Some translations read, "double honor" (KJV, NIV, etc.), but this is clearly wrong, since the very next verse says, "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages'" (v. 18, NIV). The context is about money, or paying the ministers what they deserve. Thus Jay Adams writes, "Paul referred to double *pay*, not honor," and adds, "One wonders what it was that induced the translators to err when the correct translation was so obvious."²⁸ Perhaps the translators were biased against a command to pay our preachers written in such plain language?

The statement, "The worker deserves his *wages*," indicates that financial support to a minister is as wages to any other worker; that is, the money is *owed* to the person, and it is not just a voluntary gift. To deprive the minister of a salary would be like cheating any worker of his pay, an act that God will certainly punish. Therefore, if a minister does well in overseeing the church, and especially if he works hard in preaching and teaching, Scripture commands you to pay him, and pay him double! Christians who pay their ministers well are not especially generous or honorable, but they are only fulfilling their obligations, but those who deny ministers of their pay are no better than robbers and thieves.

We have shown that the New Testament seems to reaffirm the tithe rather than abolishes it. Moreover, it explicitly renews the instruction that we must pay workers the wages that they deserve, and that Christian ministers deserve double pay. Therefore, the contemporary aversion to tithing and disgust at the mere mention of money by ministers, betrays a heart bound by deep covetousness and defiance against God. Rather than worshiping God and respecting ministers, they worship money and respect wealth. But as Jesus warns, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24, NIV).

R. Paul Stevens asks, "Does the disbursement of monies represented by our checkbook or credit-card invoices reflect God's priorities for everyday life?"²⁹ Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21, NIV). In other words, you

²⁸ Jay E. Adams, *The Place of Authority in Christ's Church*; Timeless Texts, 2003; p. 60.

²⁹ *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997; p. 965.

will spend your money on what you consider important, so that we can gain much insight into your spiritual condition by examining how you spend your money. If we were to look at how you have been spending your money, what would we conclude about you? Would we conclude that you constantly deny yourself and daily take up your cross (Luke 9:23), or would we conclude that you are a false convert who is only interested in preserving your own safety and comfort?

Failing to resist our biblical arguments, some people claim that preachers are generally greedy, and any talk of money from them is only a reflection of their insatiable lust for money. For support their case, they often cite the examples of those who had been exposed as frauds, those who had mishandled or embezzled large sums of money, and those who are living especially extravagant lives.

But surely this is a Red Herring. It is like the pro-abortionist who argues for the right of women to abortion from examples like pregnancies resulting from rape. How many women considering abortion were raped? Even if we grant all rape victims the choice to abort their pregnancies, how would that even come close to solving the abortion debate, seeing that the majority of women are not pregnant by forced sexual intercourse? In any case, does the rapist's sin nullify God's command?

In a similar way, for every greedy or dishonest person who calls himself a Christian minister, there are thousands of stingy and covetous people who call themselves Christians. Why should the counterfeit silence the genuine? Should not the true and faithful ministers of God speak all the louder and bolder, so that the true word from God may be heard? And should not true Christians encourage such bold speech about money, rather than suppress it? The truth is that those who oppose sermons or books that teach Christian obligation and generosity do so to hide their covetousness and defiance, and to suppress their tormented conscience. On the other hand, John Piper observes:

Every time you give a tithe, you must deal with the desire for what you might have bought for yourself. To give is not to buy... We must fight covetousness almost everyday. And God has appointed an antidote: giving. He tests us again and again: what do we desire most – the advancement of his name or 10% more security and comfort and fun? As Jesus says, You know where your heart is by where your treasure is. Tithing is one of God's great antidotes to covetousness.³⁰

Instead of succumbing to the "greedy preachers" argument, we must expose the complaint for what it is – a glimpse into those whose minds are ensnared by the love of money. They are the covetous ones, and not necessarily the preachers. Ministers should "rebuke with all authority" (Titus 2:15) such Mammon worship, and let no one despise them (v. 15) for teaching obligatory tithing and generous giving. It is not only a matter of comfort for the ministers, but true Christians are those who puts first the interests of God's kingdom. Accordingly, Piper continues:

³⁰ Piper, *Toward the Tithe*.

The task [Jesus] gave us is so immense and requires such a stupendous investment of commitment and money that the thought of settling the issue of what we give by a fixed percentage (like a tenth) is simply out of the question. My own conviction is that most middle and upper class Americans who merely tithe are robbing God. In a world where 10,000 people a day starve to death and many more than that are perishing in unbelief the question is not, what percentage must I give?, but how much dare I spend on myself?³¹

As Boice says, "It is generally the case that in the New Testament the obligations of the Old Testament legislation are heightened rather than lessened. That is, the law is interpreted in the fullest measure...Under reasonable circumstances any true believer in Christ should give more than the tenth, for all we have is the Lord's."³²

Randy Alcorn correctly states that the Old Testament in fact demands several tithes from God's people, which amounted to twenty-three percent of their income.³³ Thus for me to argue for a ten percent compulsory giving is rather mild in comparison, and serves to establish only a starting point for Christian giving. Do those who resist tithing prefer Piper's perspective – that is, to ask, "How much dare I spend on myself?" – or are they instead bound to the idea that ministers should work full time jobs outside of the church to earn their own living, and still function as perfect pastors?

2 Chronicles 31:4 says, "[Hezekiah] ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the LORD" (NIV). Then, Nehemiah 13:10-11 reads as follows:

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

The people are not to merely supplement an income that the minister must obtain elsewhere, but they must give him an amount that is at least sufficient to free him from secular work altogether. To fail to do this is to neglect the house of God.

However, that is only the minimum. Even in the secular arena, a person's salary is often determined, among other things, by the difficulty and worth of his work. The minister's task is unparalleled in both of these areas. He has to convict sinners, convince skeptics, encourage the downcast, teach the ignorant, and bring the elect to maturity – all by faithfully handling the word of God. The effects of his accomplishments are far-reaching,

³¹ John Piper, *I Seek Not What Is Yours But You*; Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 24, 1982.

³² Boice, p. 255.

³³ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*; Tyndale House, 1989; p. 213.

and will endure forever. Therefore, 1 Timothy 5:17 says that those church leaders "who do their work well should be *paid well*" (NLT), and not just with an amount enough to live on. The GNT says that he is "worthy of receiving *double pay*." This applies especially to the doctrinal ministers – those who work hard at preaching and teaching (v. 17).

Since a minister's work involves teaching people the words of Scripture, how you treat your minister reflects your estimation of the value of God's word, so that if you rob your minister of his salary, you have no biblical justification to say that you love God and his word. What you give to your minister will demonstrate whether you treasure God's word "more than gold" (Psalm 19:10), or whether you will trample God's wisdom under your feet, and then turn to abuse the one who delivers it to you (Matthew 7:6).

Of course, when Scripture commands you to support your minister, and especially your doctrinal minister, it is referring to a minister that is faithful and competent. You are under no obligation to support a heretic; rather, Scripture commands you to expose and oppose him. Concerning one who teaches false doctrine, John writes, "Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 1:11). If you know that a minister teaches heresy, then to support him with your money or to help his work in any way would be to share in his sin. Instead, you must submit to a minister that teaches the true biblical faith, and support his work with your money. This is such a simple point that you might think we can just assume it, but whereas many people disobey the biblical command to support their ministers, many others support the wrong ministers with their money.

9. THE FEAR OF THE LORD (3:13-18)

Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered. Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not. (Malachi 3:13-18)

The prophet here contrasts the thoughts and words of the wicked with the thoughts and words of the righteous. In addition, he provides a definitive answer to those who accuse God of overlooking evil deeds. The passage examines "on a more profound level"¹ some of the topics that have already been discussed, especially in the section 2:17-3:5.

The exchange begins with God addressing a group of murmurers through Malachi (v. 13). "Stout" from the Hebrew means "hard"² (REB) or "harsh" (NRSV), and so it might read, "You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD" (NRSV). The attitude is more antagonistic than 2:17. Jude 15-16 refers to the "hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him," saying that God will "execute judgment" upon these "murmurers [and] complainers."

As before, the people deny the charge and say, "What have we spoken so much against thee? (v. 13). Deane reads "have we spoken" as having the idea of "together," and so to mean, "What have we said against thee in our conversations with one another?"³ Jamieson supports this, saying, "The niphil form of the verb implies that these things were said, not directly *to* God, but *of* God, to one another," and adds that the Hebrew for "have we spoken" indicates a case of habitual mode of accusing him.⁴ Verhoef points out that some "ancient versions neglected the reciprocal sense of the Niphil (*nidbarnu*, 'have we spoken ourselves'), but this is evidently the meaning here... The people were busy with malicious gossip, which was directed against the Lord."⁵ And so he translates, "What have we spoken among ourselves against you?"⁶

¹ Verhoef, p. 313.

² Jamieson, *Fausset & Brown's Commentary*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961; p. 874.

³ *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 41.

⁴ Jamieson, p. 874.

⁵ Verhoef, p. 315.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

The content of such "malicious gossip" is set forth in verses 14-15: "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered." The people complain that it is "futile" (NIV) to have "kept his ordinance." In addition, they say:

[It is without profit to] go about dirty or black, either with their faces and clothes unwashed, or wrapped in black mourning costume (*saq*) [as a] sign of mourning, here of fasting, as mourning for sin...from awe of Jehovah. The fasting, and that in its external form, they bring into prominence as a special sign of their piety, as an act of penitence, through which they make reparation for certain sins against God.⁷

But as we have already seen, the people have not been keeping God's ordinances – not even in a superficial way. Their violations in offering defective sacrifices and breaking marriage covenants are externally recognizable, but they still claim to have obeyed God. Keil observes:

What is reprehensible in the state of mind expressing itself in these words, is not so much the complaint that their piety brings them no gain...as the delusion that their merely outward worship, which was bad enough according to what has already been affirmed, is the genuine worship which God must acknowledge and reward.⁸

They falsely claim to obey God, and when their desires do not materialize, they accuse God of failing to treat them in accordance with their piety. That is, they dare claim to be more faithful to God than God is to them.

The "profit" that they fail to obtain is that "the righteous have no advantage over sinners."⁹ Those that they perceive as wicked people seem to prosper, and so they "call the proud happy," or "blessed." Those who "work wickedness" are "set up" to gain wealth and stability, and "leave a name behind them."¹⁰ Those who "test God's patience with their evil deeds" are permitted to "get away with it" (GNT), and they are "delivered when they fall into misfortune."¹¹

Then, verse 16 contrasts the thoughts and words of these murmurers with the thoughts and words of "they that feared the Lord." The latter "spake often one to another," and the word "then" (v. 16) indicates that their words are occasioned by the blasphemous talk

⁷ Keil, p. 660.

⁸ Ibid., p. 660.

⁹ Ibid., p. 660.

¹⁰ *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 41.

¹¹ Keil, p. 660.

against the Lord coming from the murmurers. Deane suspects that, "They may have argued with these impious talkers, and warned others against them."¹² The verse reminds us that God always reserves for himself a remnant of true believers who are prepared counteract the wicked in every age. The Lord listens to the thoughts and words of the righteous, and "a book of remembrance" (v. 16) is written concerning them.

God promises to have mercy on these righteous people on "that day...as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (v. 17). What they will be spared from is described later, but one significance of "that day" is that it will be a time to "discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not" (v. 18). The Lord will separate the righteous and the wicked to their very different fates.

The NRSV renders verse 17 as, "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them." The righteous shall be God's "special possession" (NIV: "treasured possession") on that day. Verhoef translates "the day that I will *make*"¹³ rather than "the day when I *act*," but with the Septuagint and Vulgate, Deane prefers, "They shall be to me, saith the Lord of hosts, in the day which I am *preparing*, a peculiar treasure."¹⁴ This is the day of the Lord's "unexpected appearance."¹⁵ It will be a day of judgment, in which God will "spare" those who fear him (LXX: "I will choose them").

On the day of judgment, it will be obvious that God treats the righteous and wicked differently (v. 18). The righteous person is one who "serveth God," and the wicked person is one who "serveth him not" (v. 18). This addresses what has been brought up in 2:17 and 3:15:

Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?...And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.

Baldwin thinks the fact that the righteous is "spared" (v. 17) indicates that he "had nothing to his credit."¹⁶ As the Scripture says, "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Romans 9:18), and "whom he called, them he also justified" (Romans 8:30). According to this sovereign will, God reserves a remnant of people who will remain faithful to him, and to whom he will show his mercy (1 Kings 19:18; Romans 9:23).

¹² *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 42.

¹³ Verhoef, p. 312. Also Keil, p. 661.

¹⁴ *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. XIV; "Malachi," p. 42.

¹⁵ Verhoef, p. 322.

¹⁶ Baldwin, p. 249.

The NIV is preferred in verse 18: "And you will *again* see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."¹⁷ The "again" (per Keil, et al.)¹⁸ indicates that such distinction between the righteous and the wicked have been previously demonstrated, perhaps with the Exodus as one example (Exodus 11:7). This distinction will again be dramatically made on "the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (4:5).

God will spare the righteous (v. 17), and these are "they that feared the Lord" (v. 16). To better understand the difference between the righteous and the wicked, we must understand what it means to fear God. We can derive much of the needed information by examining Malachi's description of the two groups before interacting with other sources.

God says concerning the wicked, or those who do not fear him, that they are people who have "gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (3:7); that is, they disobey scriptural commands and precepts. In our context, their disobedience includes offering blemished sacrifices, perverting sound doctrines, and breaking marriage covenants. Also, the wicked have challenged God justice throughout this prophetic book, giving us a glimpse into the nature and direction of their thought and speech.

For example, they say, "Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them" (2:17), even though this obviously contradicts the character of God as revealed in Scripture. Moreover, they judge God to be unjust, or that he has failed to dispense justice, based on their experiences and circumstances. Thus they say, "Where is the God of justice?" (v. 17, NIV). They also say, "And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered" (3:15), indicating that it is futile to expect God to properly deal with humanity. They claim that the righteous and the wicked receive the opposite of what they deserve, and that they blame God for it.

This kind of talk reminds us of the murmuring Israelites whom God had brought out of Egypt by Moses: "And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread" (Numbers 21:5). They have tested God's patience many times with such words, reminding us of the charge that God directs toward the people in Malachi's day: "Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD" (3:13).

The people complain that, "It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?" (3:14). But as the earlier portion of Malachi has shown, they have *not* "kept his ordinance." God says, "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them" (3:7).

¹⁷ Also NASB: "So you will again"; Keil, p. 661; Verhoef, p. 312.

¹⁸ Keil, p. 661-662.

Their claim to have "walked mournfully" before God probably refers to some sort of voluntary religious humiliation, such as fasting or other rites.¹⁹ But they have done these things as merely superficial and outward acts to gain God's favor, and failing to obtain such, they have quickly turned against him, signifying their insincerity from the beginning. They have used harsh words against God, but even when their speech seems to honor him, it is as Isaiah says, "Forasmuch as 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). Their thoughts do not correspond to anything positive that they say about him. As Keil observes, "What is reprehensible in the state of mind expressing itself in these words, is not so much the complaint that their piety brings them no gain...as the delusion that their merely outward worship, which was bad enough according to what has already been affirmed, is the genuine worship which God must acknowledge and reward."²⁰

They appear willing to worship only because they think that it would result in gain. Instead of affirming God's intrinsic worth as the reason for worship, their motivation for serving him depends on practical benefit or "profit" (v. 14), without which they begin to "call the proud happy" (v. 15). In other words, righteousness is not to be upheld for the sake of honoring and obeying God, but for the sake of expected gain.

This is the picture of those who do not fear God. One would hardly think that these are believers in the God of Israel, but some of them are even priests. Calvin remarks:

They thought that they worshipped God perfectly; and this was their false principle; for hypocrites ever lay claim to complete holiness, and cannot bear to confess their own evils; even when their conscience goads them, they deceive themselves with vain flatteries, and always endeavour to draw over them some veil that their disgrace may not appear before men. Hence hypocrites seek to deceive themselves, God, angels, and men; and when they are inflated with the confidence that they worship God purely, rightly, and without any defect, and that they are without any blame, they will betray the virulence which lies within, whenever God does not help them as they wish, whenever he submits not to their will: for when they are prosperous, God is vauntingly blessed by them; but as soon as he withdraws his hand and begins to prove their patience, they will then show, as I have said, what sort of worshippers of God they are. But in the service of God the chief thing is this – that men deny themselves and give themselves up to be ruled by God, and never raise a clamour when he humbles them.²¹

¹⁹ Verhoef: "They have voluntarily submitted themselves to the rites in connection with mourning and penitence to please the Lord, but according to them it all was of no avail" (p. 317).

²⁰ Keil, p. 660.

²¹ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 597-598.

Upon their profession of Christ, some people appear to worship him with great joy and enthusiasm, but upon some slight pressure or misfortune, they stop serving God, and some even deny him. They would complain that they have faithfully served him, but they have not received the benefit that they expected. Of course, this exposes their initial motive and the fact that they have never sincerely served him in the first place. Anyone who says, "I have served God, but it was of no use," never really served him at all.

As Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sower, one may have "received the seed that fell on rocky places...and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21, NIV). Some theologians call this type of "faith" a "temporary faith" and an "imaginary faith":

It is not permanent and fails to maintain itself in days of trial and persecution...They who possess this faith usually believe that they have the true faith. It might better be called an imaginary faith, seemingly genuine, but evanescent in character...It is a faith that does not spring from the root implanted in regeneration, and therefore is not an expression of the new life that is embedded in the depths of the soul. In general it may be said that temporal faith is grounded in the emotional life and seeks personal enjoyment rather than the glory of God.²²

This is the type of false religious commitment we are describing – one that "is grounded in the emotional life and seeks personal enjoyment rather than the glory of God." Once personal enjoyment deteriorates and the emotions suffer, a person who possesses only a temporary faith "quickly falls away." The faith and excitement may initially appear to resemble that of a genuine believer, but time and circumstances will often expose them. But some people never find out that their faith is false in this life. This is why the Bible teaches us to examine ourselves to see if our faith is real. Just because you feel like your faith is real does not mean that it is real; instead, your life must exhibit the biblical evidence of true conversion.

The church presently contains many false Christians. Many of them will forsake Christ in their lifetimes,²³ perhaps because of their inability to embrace sound doctrine (John 6:53-69)²⁴ or endure adverse circumstances (Matthew 13:20-21). But God will distinguish between the true and the false:

The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The

²² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938; p. 502.

²³ By this, I mean an outward abandoning of their outward commitment. Inwardly, they have never truly believed on Christ. So, it is not that true faith can be lost, but that they never had it in the first place. Their entire religion is superficial.

²⁴ Especially verses 60 and 65-66.

enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear. (Matthew 13:38-43)

Because false faith is not only possible but very common, we must make sure of our "calling and election" (2 Peter 1:10), and see to it that we are truly "in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5). As we increase in the assurance of our salvation, built upon biblical evidence instead of subjective feelings, we can also be increasingly confident that our salvation is forever secured, for God is "able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).

In contrast with the wicked, the righteous are those who fear the Lord (Malachi 3:16). Their trust in God is ultimately independent of emotional satisfaction, material benefit, and physical comfort, but they worship God because he is intrinsically worthy of worship. They serve God because he is God, and they do what is right because God says it is right. They perceive that knowledge about God is its own worthy end. Their commitment does not slacken because of pressure or persecution, but their stability comes from God.

Those who feared God were those who "thought upon his name" (3:16). The GNT has "respected him," and the REB renders the phrase, "had respect for his name." However, "kept his name in mind" (Verhoef)²⁵ and "loved to think about him" (NLT) are better.²⁶ The righteous love to think about God, and their thoughts about him are full of respect and gratitude, without any complaint or resentment. "Doubtless this is a rare virtue," Calvin says, "...he who remembers God has made much progress in his religious course."²⁷ Throughout Malachi, we have caught glimpses of the wicked thoughts within those who do not fear the Lord, and the thoughts of the righteous stand in stark contrast to the reprobates, who "glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21). But for those who fear the Lord, "My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the LORD" (Psalm 104:34).

Also, the righteous "spake often one to another" (v. 16). This is in opposition to the harsh words that wicked men have spoken against God. Jesus says, "O generation of vipers,

²⁵ Verhoef, p. 312.

²⁶ The Hebrew verb *chesheb* means to reckon, count, or think. Thus, to recognize the meaning and authority of God's name would be a correct understanding; nevertheless, that remains an activity belonging to the category of thought, or something in the attitude of mind. And so, a translation of "love to think about him" may arguably be less accurate in wording, but more expressive in meaning. "Love to think about him with reverence" may be even better, though perhaps awkward as a translation.

²⁷ Calvin's, Vol. XV; p. 604.

how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34). Out of an evil heart comes hate, blasphemy, and murmuring, but out of a pure heart flows thanksgiving, praise, wisdom, and encouragement. Doubtless the righteous spoke well of the Lord. They "exhort one another daily" (Hebrews 3:13), encouraging one another "unto love and to good works" (Hebrews 10:24). The righteous person prays, "May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my mind be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer!" (Psalm 19:14; GNT: "my words and my thoughts").

Thus we discern from Malachi that the fear of God involves having an accurate intellectual concept of God, resulting in reverent thoughts and words about him. It is tested to be genuine through great pressure, adverse circumstances, honest self-examination, and authoritative preaching.

Now let us examine some other sources to see if we can derive additional biblical information about the fear of God. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* gives an explanation that is typical but unsatisfactory:

A healthy fear is reverence or respect. The Bible teaches that children are to respect their parents (Lev. 19:3), wives are to respect their husbands (Eph. 5:33), and slaves are to respect their masters (Eph. 6:5). The Scriptures also declare that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7) as well as "the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 16:16).²⁸

The examples listed above seem to indicate a sense of reverence that implies obedience more than mere respect. Wuest translates Ephesians 5:33 using the words, "with deference and reverential obedience."²⁹ Richmond Lattimore's translation reads, "the wife should be in awe of her husband."³⁰ Thus the concept of "healthy fear" in the Bible appears to mean much more than mere respect.

Lawrence Richards provides another typical definition: "Such fear is reverence for God. We who fear God recognize him as the ultimate reality, and we respond to him."³¹ Common to most definitions on the fear of God are the concepts of reverence, awe, and respect, but the element of dread is mostly ignored or even denied. As Earle writes, "It should be obvious that 'the fear of the Lord' does not mean being afraid of God."³² But this is not obvious at all! It seems that the popular misconception about the fear of God results from unbiblical presuppositions about what our concept of God and relationship to him should be, rather than what the biblical evidence suggests that they are supposed to be. The examples that Earle gives,³³ which supposedly make his conclusion "obvious,"

²⁸ *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986.

²⁹ Wuest, *The New Testament*.

³⁰ Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; Bryn Mawr Trust Company, 1996.

³¹ *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991; p. 272.

³² *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 409.

³³ Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 14:27, 15:33, 8:13, 10:27, 14:26, 19:23, and 22:4.

do not eliminate the element of dread at all, but they simply describe several aspects or implications of fearing God.

On the other hand, G. A. Lee correctly includes the element of "terror" in his definition of the fear of God. He says:

God does inspire human beings to be in dread of him, sometimes unintentionally (in contexts of revelation or theophany, e.g., Ex. 3:6), sometimes intentionally. Thus He may rebuke the people for not fearing (*yr*) or trembling (*hil*) before Him (Jer. 5:22), and the psalmist exhorts: "Serve the Lord with fear [*yira*], with trembling [*rada*] kiss his feet" (2:11f.).³⁴

But then he brings out another point that we must address:

To the believers this fear of God may become a problem. Since they (presumably) have been delivered by God from judgment, they should not have to experience the dread and terror that are usually associated with divine judgment. One solution to this problem is to regard this terror as a chastisement rather than a judgment.³⁵

In other words, if true Christians have been guaranteed deliverance from divine punishment, then there should not be anything for them to be afraid about. Lee suggests that the "terror" element in the believer's fear of God is the fear of receiving his chastisement. However, this is inadequate. Jesus himself feared God during his earthly walk (Isaiah 11:2), but if he knew within himself that he would not sin, this would have eliminated the possibility of divine chastisement. But if the object of godly fear is chastisement, it would be difficult to imagine how Jesus could have the fear of God, knowing that he would not sin.³⁶ Lee assumes that one can fear only some negative natural consequence, but this is not necessarily true. For example, a believer's joy is not derived from some positive natural consequence, but it is produced and energized by the Holy Spirit through his renewed mind. It is not the result of some gain in the natural realm.

A better explanation of the element of dread in godly fear is that such dread results from an unambiguous perception of God's nature. We are specifically referring to God's transcendence as intrinsically capable of inducing such terror in a person (human or angel), even one who seems to have no natural consequence about which to be fearful. Nevertheless, this "terror" does not produce an ungodly spiritual bondage, but it makes

³⁴ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2; p. 290.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Some people maintain that Jesus could have sinned; however, this would imply either that Jesus functioned purely as a human or that his divine nature had no control over his human nature. Both of these options are heretical. His human nature in itself could have sinned, since it was a genuinely human nature, but his human nature never functioned by itself without his divine nature, or else he would not have been God when he was on the earth.

one a faithful slave of Christ, and causes profound reverence and godly conduct. It also produces an unshakable confidence that results in having been freed from the obsession for self-preservation (Proverbs 14:26).

Although Claude F. Mariottini lacks precision and unnecessarily appeals to "mysteries," he recognizes that God's transcendence produces godly fear:

When God appears to a person, the person experiences the reality of God's holiness. This self-disclosure of God points to the vast distinction between humans and God, to the mysterious characteristic of God that at the same time attracts and repels. There is a mystery in divine holiness that causes individuals to become overwhelmed with a sense of awe and fear. They respond by falling down or kneeling in reverence and worship, confessing sin, and seeking God's will (Isa. 6).³⁷

Mariottini has other flaws. Godly fear refers to something that should exist at all times, and not only when one has a special experience with God. Nevertheless, he is right in affirming that a recognition of God's transcendence induces awe and fear in man beyond mere respect. Mariottini continues:

The God of Israel is an awe-producing God because of His majesty, His power, His works, His transcendence, and His holiness. Yahweh is a "great and terrible God" (Neh. 1:15); He is "fearful in praises, doing wonders" (Ex. 15:11); His name is "fearful" (Deut. 28:58) and "terrible" (Ps. 99:3)...God's works, His power, majesty, and holiness evoke fear and demand acknowledgment.³⁸

The point is that the fear of God must include a sense of terror, that it is more than what many people mean by reverence or respect, although it includes these things. Also, this terror is not produced only by the possibility of punishment, but also a clear perception of God's transcendence. As the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says, "This fear would subsist in a pious soul were there no punishment of sin."³⁹ However, we need not wholly eliminate the fear of punishment in godly fear, since the fear of punishment does not really contradict the preservation of the saints, seeing that the saints may be preserved at least partly by means of the fear of punishment, while the reprobates fear punishment and still disobey. Moreover, the fear of God is not mainly a product of divine encounters or mystical experiences, but it is a product of knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:2-5; 15:33). Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding."

³⁷ *Holman Bible Dictionary*; Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991; p. 481.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*; Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1988.

Some people say that our New Covenant privileges have eliminated this kind of fear. This misconception has partly results from some of the false distinctions that they have made between the two Covenants. In any case, the New Testament contradicts their conclusion. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 10:28 that we should fear God rather than men. For Paul, "fear or reverence of God or Christ is foundational for the Christian's relations to God and humanity."⁴⁰ Philippians 2:12 says, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (NIV).⁴¹ 2 Corinthians 5:11 says, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." Acts 9:31 says that the early believers were "walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost." The element of dread is also retained, as Hebrews 10:31 implies: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

S. E. Porter writes:

The fear of God is the most important motivating factor for Christian conduct...and it is what distinguishes Christian behavior from that of others...It is to a large extent the distinguishing mark of believers...that they fear God...For example, Peter says in Acts 10:35 that God accepts people from all nations who fear him, and similarly 1 Peter 1:17 implores its readers to live lives of fear before the God who judges. This God is one into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall (Heb 10:27, 31).⁴²

But does not 1 John 4:18 say that the Christian should have no fear? The verse reads, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." How then are we justified in saying that the fear of God contains an element of terror?

As with any verse in the Bible, we must read John's words in context, so as not to misconstrue their meaning. Verses 16-17 read as follows: "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world." Verse 17 is clearer in the NLT: "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world."⁴³ The KJV rendering of "fear hath torment" is unclear to many. The NLT translates that, *in the context* of this passage, "If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment" (v. 18).

⁴⁰ *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 292.

⁴¹ Wuest: "carry to its ultimate conclusion...your own salvation with a wholesome, serious caution and trembling..." (*The New Testament*).

⁴² *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997; p. 371-372.

⁴³ As a translation, the NLT may not be precise enough in this verse. In particular, "our love grows more perfect" is unacceptable, since perfection in usual English language cannot be increased, as it is impossible to be "more unique" than something else. The NIV rendering of "love is made complete among us" may be better.

The fear that our love "casteth out" is that which causes one to "be afraid on the day of judgment." But we have already mentioned that the fear of the Lord does not refer only to the fear of punishment, since the possibility of damnation has been eliminated with one's justification through faith in Christ. As one increases in God's love, he also increases in his confidence that he has been truly delivered from God's wrath, and in turn he can have "boldness in the day of judgment."

To summarize, the fear of God consists of *both* reverence and terror, resulting from *both* God's transcendence and his power to punish. However, it is not only produced by fear of punishment, and as one's assurance increase, his fear of punishment may decrease; nevertheless, he will continue to have a holy terror toward God because of his divine transcendence. This kind of fear toward God results in reverent thoughts and words about him, as well as godly conduct.

Malachi's audience complains that God favors the evildoers and forsakes the righteous. The prophet answers that *both* these evildoers and the murmurers fail to fear the Lord, and that God pour out his wrath on both groups of people. However, God will show mercy to those who fear him. Malachi's answer to the people echoes the words of Proverbs 23:17: "Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long." Let us, then, "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28).

10. THE DAY OF THE LORD (4:1-6)

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts. Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. (Malachi 4:1-6)

Verses 1-3 are usually seen as a continuation of the previous verses (3:13-18), belonging to the same disputation; therefore, we should not lose sight of 3:13-18 when examining 4:1-3. In response to those who challenge God's justice (2:17, 3:15), Malachi speaks of a "day" when the righteous and the wicked will be distinguished (3:18), and that only those who "feared the Lord" (v. 16) would be spared (v. 17). Malachi 3:18 is in fact speaking of what will result from the day of the Lord as described in 4:1-3.

The *day* in "the day cometh" (4:1) refers to the Day of the Lord as mentioned in 3:2, 3:17, and 4:5. The Hebrew expression *hinneh...ba*, or "behold (the day) is coming," indicates a future time, but also implies the imminence of what is predicted.¹

That this day will "burn as an oven" (v. 1) indicates the heat of severe and destructive judgment, as opposed to the "refiner's fire" in 3:2. The purpose of this burning is not to refine or purify, but to destroy. The object of this destruction includes "All the arrogant and every evildoer," signifying a comprehensive procedure. This will be a day of severe punishment for the wicked, and they will not escape. "Those who are called blessed by the murmuring nation will be consumed by fire, as stubble is burned up, and indeed all who do wickedness, and therefore the murmurers themselves."²

The extent of the destruction is indicated in that the wicked "shall be stubble" (v. 1) and that the day will "burn them up" (v. 1), so that "it shall leave them neither root nor branch" (v. 1). This divine judgment will be comprehensive and thorough, inflicting permanent destruction to the wicked, so that "there will be nothing left of them" (v. 1, GNT). As Verhoef writes, "Contrary to the public suggestion that evildoers prosper, that they put God to the test and get away with it (3:15), they will all perish on that day!"³

¹ Verhoef, p. 324.

² Keil, p. 662.

³ Verhoef, p. 326.

On the other hand, God has a different plan for the righteous. "But unto you" (v. 2) signals a transition from predicting the fate of the wicked to what is in store for the righteous. God says that for those who "fear my name" (v. 2) will "the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" (v. 2).

The focus is on "righteousness," and "sun" indicates how it will be manifested. On that day, righteousness will become apparent and dominant, as the sun shining forth in its full strength and brightness. We find similar expressions in Psalm 37:6 and Isaiah 58:8: "And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday...Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward."

This "sun of righteousness" will bring "healing in his wings" (v. 3). Within the context of the metaphor, the "wings" proceed from the impersonal "sun," and thus it should read "healing in *its* wings" (NIV; NASB). The wings would be the rays of light coming from the sun.

The "wings" of the sun have been variously interpreted – from the wings of a bird, to Luther's unlikely "symbol of protection with reference to a hen and her chickens,"⁴ to Reinke's interpretation of swift movement. C. van Gelderen offers the alternative that the "wings" may refer to the fold of a Jewish person's garment where valuables are stored, and thus "healing" would be what is brought about by the sun's wings. In any case, there is nothing preventing the more straightforward understanding of the sun's rays shining forth to bring healing to the righteous, although the same heat will burn up the wicked as straw, leaving them neither root nor branch.

Another issue raised by this "exegetical labyrinth"⁵ is whether the "sun of righteous" refers to Christ, perhaps even as a messianic title, or whether it is just representing righteousness as the sun.

In agreement with many of the church fathers and early commentators, Calvin writes, "There is indeed no doubt but that Malachi calls Christ the Sun of righteousness,"⁶ saying that it is "a most suitable term"⁷ for the Messiah. Walter L. Wilson concedes to this interpretation, and says, "This beautiful type represents the Lord Jesus when He shall return to this earth in power to heal all human woes, and to remove all curses from the earth."⁸

On the other hand, although Keil acknowledges that the messianic interpretation "is founded upon a truth, viz., that the coming of Christ brings justice and salvation," he

⁴ Ibid., p. 330.

⁵ Ibid., p. 327.

⁶ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 617.

⁷ Ibid., p. 617.

⁸ Walter L. Wilson, *A Dictionary of Bible Types*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., p. 1999; p. 402.

nevertheless finds that "the context does not sustain the personal view, but simply the idea that righteousness itself is regarded as a sun."⁹ Alden adds, "'Sun' is capitalized in the KJV... This capitalization has sustained the idea that the figure is a messianic one. No use is made of this figure, however, in the NT. For that reason most translations have not capitalized 'sun.'"¹⁰

However, I doubt that every true messianic type in the Old Testament must be directly recognized and repeated in the New Testament, and it is questionable that Bible translators do not capitalize "sun" as a denial of its messianic implications just because it is not used as a messianic designation in the New Testament. If one were to say that the "sun of righteousness" does not refer to Christ, he must do so on grounds other than that the New Testament does not repeat this imagery in reference to Christ.

In addition, there is a possible allusion to the winged sun disk pictured in some Eastern cultures. But even if the sun disk is used as a type, its meaning must be ascertained from the context of our passage, since even in the ancient cultures and religions, the symbol represents different and often contradictory concepts.¹¹

In any case, the above options are not necessarily in conflict. It may be that a common imagery taken from the cultures is here used to represent righteousness as the sun, which in turn figuratively points to Christ. In him is the ultimate fulfillment of judgment against the wicked and healing for the righteous. Thus although the christological interpretation has a strong consensus, the other viewpoints are not necessarily excluded, but appears to add meaning and background to it. Nevertheless, any figurative interpretation should not deny the apparent meaning, that righteousness is here depicted as the sun.

God will destroy the wicked on that day, and he will uphold the righteous. "The sun of righteousness" will come with "healing in its wings" (4:2). God will heal the wounds inflicted by the wicked upon those who fear the Lord. The semantic domain of the Hebrew word implies a healing in the most comprehensive sense; that is, it refers not only to the opposite of disease, but also of disaster and trouble. It is the basis of an abundance of peace and life.¹² "See then in what way he meant there would be healing in the wings of Christ; for the darkness would be dissipated, and the heavens would be free from clouds, so as to exhilarate the minds of the godly."¹³

⁹ Keil, p. 662.

¹⁰ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985; p. 702.

¹¹ Verhoef: "The sun-god Shamash was the god of righteousness and the protector of the poor... The sun disk of the Assyrians and Persians was a symbol of dominion and therefore a sign of violence and destruction. Under the wings of Malachi's sun no violence or destruction will be found, but healing, redemption, everlasting life, and peace" (p. 331). Verhoef is correct here only if the activity of the sun does not apply to 4:1; otherwise, the same sun that scorches and destroys the wicked is the same sun that heals the righteous with its rays.

¹² Verhoef, p. 330.

¹³ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 620.

The coming of the Lord and the dawning of righteousness will produce effects represented by two imageries. First, the righteous "shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall" (4:2). This is to say that as calves are "freed from their stall in the spring and allowed for the first time to leap about and exercise their legs,"¹⁴ that day would be a time of great liberty and joy for those who fear the Lord. Second, verse 3 says, "And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts." The state of the righteous and the wicked will undergo an "amazing reversal."¹⁵ Having been made into "ashes" under the heat of God's judgment, the wicked will be trampled upon by the righteous, which is an image taken from the custom of war, where the victor puts his foot on the neck of the conquered.¹⁶ Paul writes, "And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20, NASB). Stepping on one's enemy as representative of triumph is a "symbol familiar, probably, in all languages to express not only the completeness of the defeat, but the abject humility of the conquered."¹⁷

Verse 4 begins the final section of Malachi. In its canonical order, this passage also concludes the Old Testament in the Greek and Latin versions.¹⁸ Deuteronomy uses "remember" thirteen times to remind Israel of God's deliverance.¹⁹ The object of this remembrance here is the "law of Moses" (v. 4). The word in this context refers to both intellectual recollection of and obedience to the law. Of course, intellectual recollection of God's law is the necessary prerequisite to faithful and deliberate obedience to it.

"Horeb" (v. 4) is synonymous with Sinai, where Moses received God's law. Some modern versions (e.g. NLT and GNT) simply translate the word as "Mount Sinai." The covenant includes "decrees and ordinances" (v. 4),²⁰ and was made with "all Israel" (v. 4), so that it required conformity by the whole people.

Very few Christians understand the role of the law under the New Covenant, and some people falsely assume that the whole law has been abolished, resulting in Antinomianism, or lawlessness. But as Donald C. Stamps writes, "Faith in God always includes an attitude of obedience to the Lord from the heart. Believers in Christ are still required to follow the moral demands of the OT law as well as the commands of Christ."²¹ Jesus says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The New Covenant fulfills the Old, but it does not abolish the word of God. Paul writes that, "love is the *fulfilling* of the law" (Romans 13:10), and not the *replacing* of the law. Walking in love does not mean that one *violates* the law, but that one *fulfills* it. The principle behind Malachi 4:4 and the words of Jesus in John 14:15 demand that Christians obey all the moral precepts in Scripture.

¹⁴ Redditt, p. 184.

¹⁵ Baldwin, p. 250.

¹⁶ See Joshua 10:24; 2 Samuel 22:41; Psalm 91:13; Psalm 110:1.

¹⁷ Jamieson, p. 1183.

¹⁸ The Hebrew version places the Writings at the end, not the Prophets.

¹⁹ Baldwin, p. 251.

²⁰ Verhoef, p. 337.

²¹ *The Full Life Study Bible* (NIV); Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House; Life Publishers International, 1992; p. 1395.

The important instruction in verse 4 serves as a strong warning to prepare for the Day of the Lord, when the wicked will be destroyed. Verse 4 is an instruction for the people as to how they must prepare for the Day of the Lord. The prophet urges his hearers to "return" (3:7) to God's "ordinances" (3:7), so that they will not suffer ultimate loss on the day of judgment that will surely come. This day is going to be "great and dreadful" (v. 5).²²

Verses 5 and 6 say that God will send "Elijah the prophet" before the Day of the Lord arrives. Elijah is certainly an appropriate choice, since he had "served as a moral catalyst to the nation. No other prophet so dramatically changed the attitude of his contemporaries, nor so influenced the destiny of the nation."²³ He was a spiritual reformer whom God had given the power and the boldness to challenge the apostasy of his time.

Elijah represents the kind of ministers that many people in our culture would find most unwelcome and offensive. Most "Christians" would probably deny that God would send such a person to the world as his spokesman. From the perspective of today's culture, Elijah was narrow-minded, intolerant, judgmental, violent, and fanatical. Rather than trying to "learn" from other religions, he challenged the false prophets to a supernatural duel (1 Kings 18). He had no respect for those who did not worship his God. He said, "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Thus he upheld the law of non-contradiction when it comes to religion, affirming that two contradictory belief systems cannot both be true. If the biblical faith is true, then all the others are false. Such is the spirit of Elijah.

Paul also understood that Christ and Belial are opposed to each other, just as light has no communion with darkness, and righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). However, many of those who claim to be Christians today do not follow after Elijah and Paul. Instead, they conform to the current ideologies of this world, something that Paul explicitly prohibits (Romans 12:2). These people are false prophets and traitors of the faith.

Malachi here predicts that Elijah will come before the Day of the Lord, and Scripture says that John the Baptist had fulfilled this prediction. Gabriel announced to Zechariah that he would have a son (Luke 1:19), who would turn many back to the Lord: "And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). This is a clear reference to Malachi 4:5-6, signaling that John would be the fulfillment of Malachi's prediction.

²² See also Joel 2:31.

²³ Baldwin, p. 252.

John 1:21 may confuse some people, because John seems to deny that he was Elijah in this verse: "Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not." But right after this, John says that he is the person that Isaiah prophesied about: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias" (v. 23). Since the forerunner, or he who prepares the way of the Lord, had always been understood to be Elijah, John's words constitute an admission that he was indeed Elijah. In John 1:21, he is denying that he was the *historical* Elijah; that is, he denied that he was the reincarnation of the same Elijah who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire many years before. As Gabriel has said earlier, John's ministry was to be one exhibiting the "*spirit and power of Elijah,*" and not that he was to be the historical Elijah returned in person.²⁴

Jesus also said that John the Baptist fulfilled the prophesy about Elijah: "But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist" (Matthew 17:12-13). Therefore, we can be certain that John the Baptist fulfilled Malachi's prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6.

Malachi 4:6 also predicts that this Elijah would "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Gabriel repeats this to Zechariah, although he omits "the heart of the children to their fathers," but replacing that with the explanatory words, "the disobedient to the wisdom of the just" (Luke 1:17). So the task is not just about "bridging the generation gap."²⁵ Instead:

The fathers are rather the ancestors of the Israelitish nation, the patriarchs, and generally the pious forefathers, such as David and the godly men of his time. The sons or children are the degenerate descendants of Malachi's own time and the succeeding ages... This chasm between them Elijah is to fill up...so that they will be like-minded with the pious fathers.²⁶

John the Baptist did fulfill such a ministry: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand...Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6). His task was to make preparation for the coming of Christ, and to "make his paths straight" (v. 3).

In addition, John's prediction of the one who would come after him corresponds to Malachi's description of the "messenger of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1), whom he said would follow God's "messenger" (v. 1). For example, corresponding to Malachi 3:1-3 and 3:16-4:6, John says in Luke 3:16-17, "one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:

²⁴ See also Matthew 14:1-2, 16:13-16.

²⁵ Baldwin, p. 252.

²⁶ Keil, p. 664-665.

Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable." Then, he says that his words are to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth: "John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me" (John 1:29-30).

Now, many people assume that the Day of the Lord is the same thing as the Second Coming or the Final Judgment, but they are not the same. Whereas the Second Coming refers to the time when Christ will come to resurrect both the righteous and the wicked – to welcome the righteous to heaven and to damn the wicked to hell – the Day of the Lord refers to 70 A.D., when Jerusalem was destroyed. Many biblical prophecies referring to this event have been falsely attributed to the Second Coming, with the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 as a prominent example. We will observe only several verses here:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down...." I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. (Matthew 24:1-2, 34; NIV).

This prediction refers to what happened in 70 A.D., when the Roman army invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and set fire to the city. God came in terrible judgment and destroyed all those who rejected Christ. When Pilate asked what he was to do with Christ, the Jews insisted that he be crucified, and said, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25, NIV). And it came true that Jerusalem was destroyed about 40 years after they said this, killing them and their children. However, the Christians were delivered because they followed Christ's instruction to flee the city (v. 16). Thus Malachi 4 and Matthew 24 have been completely fulfilled, and they do not refer to a time in our future.

However, there is still a judgment coming. In fact, your own day of judgment is coming. As Hebrews 9:27 says, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." Throughout Malachi, the wicked accuse God of being unjust and unfaithful. Malachi answers with a prophecy about the first coming of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem. At the present, it may again seem that the evil people often prosper, and the righteous are not always treated with grace, but all these will be rectified in the next life, if not in this life. Paul writes:

Remember that some people lead sinful lives, and everyone knows they will be judged. But there are others whose sin will not be revealed until later. In the same way, everyone knows how much good some people do, but there are others whose good works won't be known until later. (1 Timothy 5:24-25, NLT)

Exact justice may not be rendered in this life, but God's ultimate answer to this is that all will be made right and every account will be settled at the final judgment. On that day, there will be a clear distinction between the wicked and the righteous. "The fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" (Revelation 21:8).

As in the day of Malachi, God will spare the one who fears his name (Malachi 4:2), "as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (3:17). Calvin explains well what it means to fear the *name* of God:

This fear is what peculiarly belongs to true religion, so that men submit to God, though he is invisible, though he does not address them face to face...When therefore men of their own accord reverence the glory of God, and acknowledge that the world is governed by him, and that they are under his authority, this is a real evidence of true religion: and this is what the Prophet means by *name*. Hence they who fear the name of God, desire not to draw him down from heaven, nor seek manifest signs of his presence, but suffer their faith to be thus tried, so that they adore and worship God, though they see him not face to face.²⁷

One who fears God does not require him to "openly show his hand armed with scourges"²⁸ before he submits, but he will obey what God has set forth in Scripture without defiance.

To those who will serve him faithfully in this manner, who will fear him and obey his word without doubt, murmuring, or resentment, he promises that, "I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Revelation 21:7). Therefore, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

²⁷ *Calvin's*, Vol. XV; p. 620-621.

²⁸ *Ibid.*