

The Book of Malachi and Prayer for Revival

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When we meet to pray specifically for revival we must remember that this is not just an 'ordinary' prayer meeting. We must not allow prayer meetings for revival to become indistinguishable from our regular weekly church prayer meetings. There is a very particular focus, which we must maintain.

Malachi's book is a "burden" (Mal 1:1). That word is often used for prophecies given in a situation where God's people are languishing in trouble and in sin. I hope that we are burdened today. God's word pronounces judgment on our failures – and that should burden us. God's word prophesies the manifestation of the glory of Christ in this world. But where is the reality? Its absence should burden us. And being burdened, we gather for prayer.

Where is God's love?

Malachi starts with God's people doubting God's love (Mal 1:2-5). They observe their enemies resurfacing, regathering after a time of ineffectiveness. They seem to be building their bases once again.

Are we not in a similar situation today? It's true, in some ways, our problem is the opposite: we are prone simply to take God's love for granted, to assume that God is love so that's that. But don't we know something of the feeling that marked God's people in those days? If God loves us, why is the state of things so bad? If God loves us, why are the enemies of the gospel on the march? If God loves us, why is gospel progress so slow? If God really loves us, why are our churches struggling and declining? Even if we don't put it exactly like that, it is a phenomenon that I have noticed in many places: God's people have negative expectations; faithless despair has taken us captive. We are doubting God's love.

God has no pleasure in his people!

The next section of Malachi (Mal 1:6-14) provides the answer to such questions. Malachi speaks of a people who fail to honour God. Far from revering his name, they actually despise it. They do so by making mediocre offerings and by treating his worship with contempt. They find worship tiresome, boring, and make fun of it. At the same time they simply presume that God's favour is there for the taking. However, the reality is that God finds no pleasure in a people like that; little wonder, then, that they have no sense of his love.

Again, the parallels with our own time are clear to see. We may point the finger and complain of churches, less Biblically sound than we are, where the worship is irreverent, where people treat holy things frivolously, where professing believers living chaotic lives presume on God's mercy. We feel indignant and declare that God has no pleasure in such things.

But what about us? Are we too quick to pass the buck? Might there be something about us also, which has caused God to remove his favour and caused us to lose the sense of his love? Maybe we are not so much better than the others. Perhaps we are just more adept at doing a cover-up. Do we truly honour God from the depths of our hearts to the widest extent of our lives? When we gather for worship on the Lord's Day, are we bursting with the desire to honour his name? Or are our thoughts full of mundane distractions? Are we bored, because our hearts are not set on the amazing wonder of the grace of God, to whom we are responding in our worship? Are our offerings

of devotion and service thorough and all-embracing, or are we, too, merely mediocre in our spiritual life? Do we dare just to assume that God must be pleased with us? After all, our churches are sound, Biblical, reverent, Reformed, of course God finds pleasure in us! But is the reality that God has removed the sense of his love because of our failures?

This is why we need to pray for revival: it is not just the work of the gospel which needs reviving. It is not just multiplied conversions that we need to see. We ourselves need to be revived. We need to be set on fire with genuine devotion to our Lord. We need to bring to worship the readiness to be moved to deep reverence for the holy God, to fervent praise for his mercy in Christ. We need to be stimulated afresh to service which is not mediocre, but thoroughgoing.

The nations

Not that it is wrong to pray for those other aspects of revival as well. Three times in Malachi chapter 1 the Lord emphasizes that his name will be honoured throughout the world; he will be magnified and revered beyond the borders of his people, amongst all nations to the ends of the earth (Mal 1: 5, 11, 14). That is our great gospel hope. The name of Jesus is going to triumph. The enemies of the gospel will be thrown down.

It is striking that these prophecies are set within the context of such an indictment of the Lord's people. It is as if the Lord is reminding us that he will win the world for Christ in spite of us, not because of us. He is under no necessity to use us. He is under no obligation to use us. If he uses us at all it is sheer grace, stupendous mercy.

And yet, at the same time, this chapter is a challenge to repentance. Do we desire to be the kind of people whom the Lord would be willing to use? Then, enough of our lukewarm devotion, good riddance to our mediocre, half-hearted service. Malachi resoundingly appeals to us to renew our commitment to Christ. He solemnly reminds us that we dare not presume on the Lord's favour, that we can only cast ourselves on his mercy, that if we receive anything from him, it is not due to us, but entirely due to his astonishing mercy. But such an attitude of heart is not one which proud people like us can conjure up out of our own resources. We need God to revive us in these things. That's why we pray for revival.

Take it to heart

Chapter 2 is addressed to the priests (Mal 2:1). But in New Testament terms, all Christ's people are priests. As a holy priesthood, God says to us, as he said to the priests of Israel, "Take it to heart" (Mal 2:2). The priests then needed to be reminded to give glory to God. The alternative was that they would experience God's curse, God's rebuke (Mal 2:3).

Is that where we are today? We do not feel that our work and walk is being blessed as we would wish. We are frustrated in our service, as the results are so insignificant. Could the reason be that we are not giving glory to God's name? The opening verses of chapter 2 take up the theme of the last verse of chapter 1. The Lord is a great King; his name will be feared worldwide. Then, surely, we, of all people, should be glorifying his name now. Let's not just assume that we are doing so. Let's be praying for God to clarify to our hearts and minds those areas where we are not glorifying him as we should, so that we can repent, and implore him for our reviving. Surely that has to be the starting-point in all our praying for revival.

The ideal and the reality

Malachi now draws a pen picture of what God's people should be like (Mal 2:5-7). They should be those who fear the Lord and revere his name. They should speak his word of truth clearly and boldly. Their lives should be marked by fairness in all their dealings with other people. They should be maintaining an undeviating walk with the Lord as a close friend. They should be turning many people from sin.

There we find five marks of a healthy church and a healthy Christian life today. Let's examine ourselves.

(1) Are we truly fearing and honouring the Lord in our hearts, in our personal lives, in our congregational life?

(2) Do we fearlessly proclaim God's truth, not compromising with worldly error?

(3) Are we scrupulously fair in all our contacts with people, never manipulating things to our own advantage?

(4) Can we truly say that we know the felt presence of the Lord in his amazing friendship towards forgiven sinners? Is that a reality in our private devotions and our church gatherings?

(5) Is our church life, are our personal lives, having such an impact that many people are turning from sin to Christ for salvation as a result of our witness?

Malachi now contrasts that ideal with the reality of what God's people were actually like in his day (Mal 2:8-9). They have departed from the way, and they have caused many people to stumble.

How apt a description of our contemporary situation! We have departed from God's way. That sums up our failures on the first four points where we had to face the challenge set by the ideal. Our reverence for the Lord is blighted, our proclamation of the truth is timid, our relationships are marred by self-interest, our devotion has become formal and empty. All that leads on to the other thing: we have failed to achieve the fifth element in the ideal. Far from leading many souls into the abundant blessing of salvation in Christ, the church has, to the contrary, put numerous people off seeking the Lord. That's why we need to be revived. That's the direction in which our prayers for revival need to flow.

Compromise

The prophet now depicts the compromise to which God's people have descended. It takes two forms. First, amongst God's people are those who have sinfully married outside the covenant community (Mal 2:10-12). At the same time they go through the formalities of worshipping the God whom they have defied by their disobedience. But their compromise with the world means that their worship is mere pretence and show.

Do we not again recognise the problem from our own experience? This need not apply merely to marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. That is just a symptom of a deeper malaise. We – all of us – have married this sinful world. We have set our hearts on worldly things. We have not made the radical break with the world which God calls for. Consequently, our worship lacks vitality; there is too much sham in our Christianity. Again, repentance is called for, and for that to be possible we need the reviving touch of God. This must set the agenda for our prayers.

The second area of compromise concerns the marriages between God's people (Mal 2:13-16). Malachi portrays the ardent, fervent religiosity of the people. They are emotionally charged as they bring their offerings. And yet, God won't accept them, and they want to know why. It is because of

treachery in marriage. Some men had divorced their wives, and yet still paraded their supposed faith, in defiance of the Lord's hatred of divorce.

But what a challenge there is here for us. We must be careful not to start patting ourselves on the back and saying to ourselves, but at least I'm not divorced, at least I've been faithful in marriage. But we all need to ask, "Is that how God sees it?" Notice here, twice, God says through the prophet, "Take heed to your spirit." It would be possible for us to be living in outward faithfulness, and yet to be compromised in spirit. It would be possible to be inward traitors, even as we maintain outward propriety, to think evil thoughts about our wives, in our minds to pursue a rival attraction. As far as God is concerned that totally nullifies all our outward devotions. Repentance is called for. Revival is urgently needed. Each of us, I am sure, needs in some area of our lives, even if it is not precisely this one, to be revived afresh to repentance. That must be the burden of our praying.

Chapter 2 verse 17 (Mal 2:17) sums up this section on compromise. Two issues lie at the bottom of it. One is moral confusion, the other is treating God as irrelevant.

Both are plentifully evident in the church today. And again, let's not point the finger at other churches. Let's first turn the spotlight on ourselves. How easily we can become hardened about sin. We live careless lives, at least in the secret place, even if not openly, and yet we still presume that God delights in us. Or we simply go along with the norms of the world without even thinking through whether what we become involved in is compatible with a Christian profession. We no longer take sin seriously. We joke about it. We fail to perceive how horrendous even the tiniest sin is to a holy God. We need the Holy Spirit to revive our moral awareness, to re-quicken our conscience. That must be one of the themes of our praying.

And how relevant is God in our daily lives really? Do we go to work and just follow the crowd, just conform to the standard practices? Do we run our families in the light of the word of God or according to our own ideas? Do the programmes and films we watch, the literature we read, the music we listen to, reflect a holy commitment to the Lord, or do they imply that we regard God as irrelevant to most of our lives. Does our faith shape absolutely everything about us, or is God only for Sunday? Is this not an area where we, God's people, need his touch of revival, even his blast of revival right now? Let's pray for this.

The turning point

We now come to a significant turning point in Malachi, indicated by the word "Behold". The Lord will send his messenger to prepare the way before he comes himself (Mal 3:1-5). The main fulfilment of this prophecy is in the work of John the Baptist, as the forerunner before the coming of Jesus Christ the Lord. God's people then were anticipating the coming of their Messiah, but Malachi has to warn them that their expectations are misguided. The coming of the Messiah will not be all sweetness and light. He will come to refine and purge his people. Once he has done that they will be able to offer acceptable worship which the Lord will find pleasant.

We may apply this in a secondary way to the coming of the Lord to his people in revival blessing. I hope that we are not as misguided as the people of God were then. Do we imagine that revival will be an experience of unalloyed splendour? Have we forgotten that revival may well start as a painful process of purging us from sin, and refining our lives in deeper holiness? Are we ready for that? We probably need to pray not only that God will revive us in that way, but that he will make us genuinely willing to see revival whatever the cost may be to us in terms of a deep searching work of God in our lives.

God is faithful

Malachi now assures God's people of the Lord's faithfulness (Mal 3:6-12). Despite all their sins, failures, compromise, even though they have departed from him, they are still there. They have not been totally abandoned. And the Lord now invites them to return to him and promises to return to them.

And let us remember that it is God's faithfulness which is our only hope. There is nothing about us to give us confidence. We cannot trust in our own loyalty to him: we are so fickle, so rebellious at heart. We cannot look at churches which have departed from the truth, or wandered into gimmickry, and congratulate ourselves that we, at least, have remained faithful. Because our hearts are deceitful, our zeal is puny, our love for Christ is cold. Nothing but his faithfulness to us can give us any hope at all. Part of praying for revival must be to recognize this, to praise God that he remains faithful, even when we depart from him, and to cry to him to display his faithfulness in reviving his work for the sake of his own glory. One aspect of our prayer must be to ask God to move us to return to him, so that we can see the realization of his promise to return to us.

This led God's people in Malachi's day to ask a vital question: what does it actually mean to return to the Lord? And God's answer is that it means that they must stop robbing God, but obey his laws about tithes and offerings. If they stop withholding from God his due, then he will return to them in overflowing blessing. They will be fruitful, their land delightful, and the nations envious.

So what does it mean for us to return to the Lord? It is more than the mere matter of money offerings. The offerings back then are symbolic of our calling to full surrender to the Lord. We give him everything we have, everything we are. There is the nub of our problem: we have held back from the Lord aspects of our lives where we don't want him to take control. But we are robbing him. By his blood Jesus has paid the price and bought us outright. There is nothing about us which is not his by right of purchase. We may cling on to nothing. But not until we give up everything to him can we expect to see overflowing blessing. Not until our devotion is all-encompassing can we anticipate fruitful service, true joy, and a lasting impact on the world around us. Prayer for revival has to mean prayer for the grace to lay our all on the altar. It's not something we can achieve of ourselves. When God comes and revives us like that, then his blessing will flow, then our churches will see fruit for our efforts, then joy will abound, then unbelievers will come flocking to hear about Jesus and find salvation in him.

Harsh words against the Lord

Malachi now speaks about the people's harsh words against God (Mal 3:13-15). They have complained that serving God is useless, and that obedience and repentance gets them nowhere. In fact, it seems that proud wickedness is a better bet than godliness.

We know something of this, surely. We look at the way unbelievers prosper while we struggle, and we feel that it's pointless to be a Christian. We need to pray that we will be revived to see that true godliness brings its own reward, whatever the cost may be in this sinful world.

The day is coming

Malachi ends on a more positive note. He has had to speak God's word of judgment and warning. But now he addresses those who do fear the Lord (Mal 3:16-4:4). He reminds them that when they talk to one another the Lord eavesdrops on their conversation, and he will never forget their words of concern. On the day when he gathers his jewels, they will be there. There is a day coming when

the proud and wicked shall be overthrown, when Jesus will come with healing for those who fear his name. They will then go out, grow, and enjoy the fruits of victory. They will obey God's law wholeheartedly.

Here is a rich encouragement for us. Are we here because of concern for the glory of Christ, the state of his church, the progress of his kingdom? Then we may believe that God does hear us as we pray together, and regards us as his jewels. That's no credit to us, of course. If we have been moved to pray for revival, it can only be because God has planted that desire in our hearts. But we have here God's guarantee that days of blessing shall come. Jesus will tread down his enemies, subduing them to his cause, and healing his failing church. He will send us out afresh in gospel mission, he will allow us to see our churches growing, we shall rejoice in Christ's victory, we shall be transformed by the Spirit to walk in the paths of holiness. So as we pray for revival, we do indeed pray for the fulfilment of these promises.

Turn the hearts

Malachi finishes with another prophecy which is focussed in John the Baptist and the coming of the Lord (Mal 4:5-6). The Old Testament ends with the assurance that it is not God's intention to come and strike the earth with a curse. What will avert that? It is the ministry of the Lord through his prophet to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers.

That is something which we need to pray for today. So many families are fatherless, and the result is that children are sad, and in some cases have grown to hate the father who has abandoned them. As the gospel is preached, may God so work in our nation that the hearts of fathers and their children are turned back to each other. May fatherhood be re-established as the norm in our society. May families be united. That would be a wonderful fruit of true revival, and something which we need to make a primary target of our praying.