



WordPoints

Challenging Every Person to Take God More Seriously

Lectures

Biblical Studies in Academic Environments

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Lectures: Biblical Studies in Academic Environments

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“YOU HAVE TURNED ASIDE” (MALACHI 1-2): RESTORATION AS AN ONGOING WORK

Presented at Florida College on February 10, 2011

IF THE BABYLONIAN EXILE PRESENTED A CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, IT MAY BE THAT THEIR RESTORATION FROM EXILE WAS AN EVEN GREATER TEST. The work of rebuilding Jerusalem and the spiritual life of the people was no easy work — especially as the years wore on and the work remained incomplete. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah – and the prophetic preaching of Haggai and Zechariah – the great work was begun and continued for a while. But eventually, the restoration fell short, and it was time for the prophet Malachi to do his work.

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament in our English Bibles. After this oracle was delivered, God did not speak prophetically to His people again until John the Baptist appeared preaching in the wilderness of Judea over 400 years later. The message of Malachi, whose name means “My Messenger,” was God’s last word to Israel prior to the approach of the kingdom of the Messiah. A little book of terrifying warnings and glorious hope, it is just as relevant and powerful today as it was in about 435 B.C. when it was first presented.

The famous decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. had allowed the captive Jews in Babylonia to return to Judea to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Those who chose to return did so in several groups: the first under Zerubbabel, and later others under Ezra and Nehemiah. Those who came back first faced hardship, but they had the advantage of the excitement of an important undertaking in its early stages. As the years came and went, however, disillusionment and disinterest set in. By the time Ezra and Nehemiah arrived, they found social and spiritual conditions dangerously low. The walls of Jerusalem still lay demolished — but worse, *the religious life of the people had badly deteriorated and called for urgent repair*. “The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi” (**Mal. 1:1**) addressed the spiritual needs of Israel in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, 100-150 years after the first Jews had returned from Babylon.

Reading the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi together, we come up with something like the following list of characteristics of the times:

- a. **Spiritual apathy** (**Mal. 1:2,13; 4:6**).
- b. **Corruption of the priesthood** (**Neh. 13:4-9,28-31; Mal. 1:6; 2:1-9; 3:3,4**).
- c. **Degeneracy in worship** (**Mal. 1:7-14**).
- d. **Withholding of tithes and offerings** (**Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10-14; Mal. 3:8-12**).
- e. **Breaking of the Sabbath** (**Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22**).
- f. **Cynicism and lack of moral discrimination** (**Mal. 2:17; 3:13-15,18**).
- g. **Disregard of God’s marriage law** (**Ezra 9:1,2; Neh. 10:30; 13:23-29; Mal. 2:10-16**).
- h. **Social injustice** (**Neh. 5:1-13; Mal. 3:5**).

In Malachi, the expression “fear My name” is of central importance. Underlying each specific condemnation of Israel’s sins is Malachi’s basic charge: *the people had failed to fear God*. The trouble was not unlike that of the Gentiles described by Paul in the New Testament: “Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful” (**Rom. 1:21**). Thus, the little book of Malachi is a call to the genuine *reverence* which must ever characterize God’s people.

But if Malachi is a call to reverence, this presents us with a remarkable situation. How is it that having endured the captivity for 70 years — and now having labored at the restoration for over 100 years — Israel needed to hear *sermons on reverence*? Aren’t “restorationists” the ones who understand the need for reverence? Aren’t they the ones who call *others* back to a true regard for God?

To the priests of Malachi’s day, the Lord said, “The lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth . . . But you have *departed from the way*; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi” (**2:7,8**). Malachi’s “burden” was to confront his brethren with their hypocrisy. As those who should have been continuing the work of restoration to the Lord, the leaders had discontinued, and even perverted, that work. No, they had not dismantled the previous restorations externally; outwardly, things still looked as if they had been “restored.” But in their hearts, the restorers had drifted back into a rebellion and irreverence so disgusting that God said, “Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘nor will I accept an offering from your hands” (**1:10**).

So look at the sad situation that confronts us at the end of Old Testament history: the ones who had begun the work of restoration from Babylonian exile had “*turned aside from the way*” (**Mal. 2:8 ESV**).

In Malachi’s day, it was the restorers themselves who needed restoring!

The Ongoing Need for Restoration

Malachi illustrates one of the most important principles in the Scriptures: *true restoration is an ongoing work*. As members of the “Restoration Movement” in the United States, we sometimes speak of restoration as something that has already been accomplished and just needs to be maintained. To use Robert F. Turner’s famous metaphor, we think of the church today as a completely restored “little red wagon” in which we may ride home to heaven.

But as Malachi shows, restoration must be more than a one-time endeavor. Unlike Christ’s work, which was accomplished once and for all (**Hb. 9:26-28**), our work of restoration must be a continuing effort. There will never come a time, as long as we sojourn here, when we will not need to return to the touchstone of God’s word and ask: “*Where have we departed from God’s truth? What is there about us that needs to be restored now?*”

The Degradation Principle. Restoration must be an ongoing work because of what I call the “Degradation Principle.” The Degradation Principle says that, over time, everything tends to degrade or decay. Nothing can be done and then be left alone. Without constant maintenance, refurbishment, and restoration, things fall into decay. We see it in nature, as well as in man-made activities. Unless new energy is infused and efforts are made to return things to their intended state, they fall into disrepair. Anyone who has ever owned a house surely understands this!

In spiritual matters, two things are surprising about degradation:

One is that *it can happen so quickly*. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I marvel that you are turning away *so soon* from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel” (**Gal. 1:6**). Human beings are nothing if not fickle, and having made an effort to adhere to God’s word, we can “un-adhere” to it very quickly.

But second, *we often don’t see what is happening*. When Malachi confronted his brethren with their need to come back to the Lord, they had no idea what he was talking about. “Where is My reverence?’ says the Lord of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, ‘*In what way have we despised Your name?*’” (**1:6**). “You have wearied the Lord with your words; yet you say, ‘*In what way have we wearied Him?*’” (**2:17**). Then and now, restorationists can be some of the blindest people in the world. The more we have preached on the need for *others* to return to God, the less we see our *own* need to be restored. Cf. **Rom. 2:17-24**.

The Degradation Principle operates both *individually* and *congregationally*.

Individually, we all tend to degrade. It takes constant vigilance (**1 Cor. 10:12**) and many “returns” to the Lord to stay on the path that leads to heaven. Anyone who thinks that he can be “restored” to the Lord by obedience to the gospel and then put himself on autopilot for the rest of his life, is simply not facing the facts. Going to heaven requires many mid-course corrections. Some of these will be little and some big, but all of them will involve the work of restoration. Our lifelong attitude needs to be that of David: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and *renew* a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. *Restore* to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit” (**Psa. 51:10-12**).

Congregationally, things do not “stay put” any more than they do individually. A congregation may be in the lineage of the Restoration Movement, and it may have made efforts in the past to measure itself by God’s word, but over time, degradation will occur. No congregation is permanently safe from the kind of slip-page that took place at Ephesus: “I know your works, your labor, your patience . . . Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works*, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent” (**Rev. 2:2-5**).

Neither individuals nor congregations can rest their confidence in any previous restoration. For one thing, the previous restoration was probably not complete, but even if it was, there is no guarantee that degradation has not taken place since then.

Both as individuals and as congregations, we are “works in progress.” If we are in fellowship with Christ, we are on our way to a complete, final, and perfect restoration to God in eternity, but until then we are in constant need of correction. In evangelism, I cannot hold myself up as a perfect example of what God intended a Christian to be; I can only recommend to others the *standard* to which I have committed myself. And collectively, I cannot represent the congregation of which I am a part as a completely restored example of what a local church ought to be. When asked why I worship where I do, I usually say, “It’s the *closest thing* to New Testament Christianity that I have found in the community where I live — but our restoration to God’s standard is still incomplete.” It is not the Lord’s *people* but rather the Lord’s *standard* that never changes. For our part, the process of coming *back* to that standard, again and again, is a work that will never be finished in this life.

At this point, we need to be careful. The need of every congregation for ongoing restoration does not mean that no distinction can be made between churches that belong to the Lord and those that don't. The scriptural expression "churches of Christ" (**Rom. 16:16**) would be meaningless if it were impossible to be anything *other* than "of Christ." And the Lord's warning about removing the Ephesians' "lampstand" (**Rev. 2:5**) implies a distinction between churches that He recognizes and those that He disavows. With individuals as well as congregations, we must be cautious in judging whether certain ones belong to the Lord or not, but the existence of difficult or ambiguous cases doesn't mean that the call can't *ever* be made. In most cases, the facts are clear.

The Only Corrective to Degradation. Since there is no avoiding the process of degradation, all we can do is take measures to *correct* it when we see that it has occurred. And the only corrective, of course, is God's word. If we would be members of a "Restoration Movement" worthy of the name, we must be *willing to return to the Word continually* — never ceasing to evaluate ourselves by its standard and always willing to make new adjustments when they are needed. Doing this requires honesty, courage, and repentance.

As members of the Restoration Movement, we have characterized ourselves as a "people of the Book," and surely, that is what we ought to be. But having recommended the Book to others, are we ourselves of a "poor and contrite spirit" and do we truly "tremble" at God's word (**Isa. 66:2**)? It's easy to say yes, but when was the last time you examined yourself and honestly asked whether you were in the faith (**2 Cor. 13:5**)? It's time we started paying attention to that passage that we've known about for so long: "*we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away*" (**Hb. 2:1**).

Some Problems and Pitfalls

While it may be difficult to start (or restart) the work of restoration, the difficulty does not end once we've gotten started. While it is going on, restoration can run amuck, as we've seen in Malachi. Here are just a few ways that restorationists, past and present, have had trouble.

1. Measuring by the Wrong Standard. The quality of any restoration is limited to the standard (or "original") to which people are trying to return. In spiritual matters, the standard must be nothing less than God's word: the perfect, unchanging norm before which the reverent person "trembles" (**Isa. 66:2**). If, instead of God's word, we measure ourselves by a previous generation, our restoration is bound to be inadequate, no matter what kind of "golden age" that generation may seem to have been. And by the same token, restoration will also fail when the standard is what is trendy or "contemporary" right now.

2. Not Seeing the Need for Personal Repentance. It is always easier to see the steps that others need to take than those that we need to take. Spiritually blind, and failing to have removed the beam from our own eye (**Matt. 7:1-5**), we call for those around us to "return to pure, simple New Testament Christianity" — as if we had already done so, without the slightest taint of degradation remaining on our part. Or we think that pursuing restoration would simply mean leaving our current congregation and worshiping with a more authentic assembly, with no real change needed on *our* part other than switching groups. In either case, our list of ways that people have "departed from the truth" always seems to be a list of ways that *others* have departed.

But repentance is an integral part of restoration (**Dan. 9:1-19**), and restoration without *personal* repentance is usually shallow, if not outright hypocritical. The restorationist's attitude must be: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within *me*" (**Ps. 51:10**).

3. Going Too Far . . . or Not Far Enough. Human beings are prone to extremes, and nowhere do we see this any better than in restoration movements. Either restoration fizzles out before the job is done or we swing to the opposite extreme and start fixing things that aren't broken. We seem incapable of avoiding the extremes: going too far or not going far enough.

4. Limiting the Reform to Externals. One of the worst failings of many restoration efforts is that they are limited to external practices and fail to address the inward character and attitude. This type of restoration amounts to little more than rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic.

Certainly, if there are external practices that are dictated by God's word, we need to adhere to those, and if there has been a departure from them, they need to be restored. But more often, the thing that has deteriorated is the *hearts* of God's people, as we see in Malachi. The deeper need of our day (and this is true across the entire progressive-traditional spectrum) is for restoration of the *spirit* of apostolic Christianity, including the other-worldly outlook of Christians in the New Testament, their spirit of sacrifice, and their radical reverence. If restorationists do not address issues like these, their reforms will be superficial.

There is no shortage of talk today about restoring "simple" Christianity. In particular, many feel that a return to biblical Christianity necessitates smaller congregations, different seating patterns in the assembly, more casual dress, and so forth. Often, the underlying assumption is that non-traditional practices (a misnomer, strictly speaking, since these practices just tap into a *different* tradition) always go hand-in-hand with a deeper spirituality. But in the real world, neither of these is necessarily accompanied by the other.

My work right now takes me into all parts of the country. I have the privilege of speaking to churches large and small, rich and poor, urban and rural, young and old. *My observation is that there is very little correlation between how traditional a church's worship style is and how spiritual-minded its members are.* I've seen every possible combination: from non-traditional churches that are cesspools of immaturity and immorality to traditional churches that are so spiritually mature I felt embarrassed to be in their presence. The fact is, adjustments in worship style do not automatically translate into strong inward character. In my experience, the connection between non-traditional externals and true spiritual strength is little more than coincidental.

Granted, there are sometimes *expedient* reasons for adjusting our outward practices in a non-traditional direction. But let's not call this "restoration," and let's not be so silly as to think that any set of seating patterns, songbooks, or styles of dress is inherently more "spiritual." Within the limits of scriptural authority, these questions are, at best, matters of judgment and expediency — and usually, they are just matters of personal preference.

Sometimes, the externals don't even *need* to be changed to accomplish real restoration. In Malachi's day, the "restoration of the restorers" did not require changes in the structure of the temple services, but rather repentance in the hearts of the worshipers. So today, if any of our externals are unlawful by God's standard, they must surely be restored to that standard. And in matters of judgment, if we find a more expedient means of implementing God's standard than we have used in the past, we need not be afraid to switch. But let us understand: *the manipulation of external practices is not synonymous with restoration.*

5. Descending into Pharisaism. Over time, even the most sincere restorationists tend to become Pharisees. Historically, Pharisaism began as an effort to resist the encroachments of Hellenistic culture on Jewish life during the intertestamental period. Those who would later be known as Pharisees were concerned (quite rightly) about the extent to which many Jews were accommodating themselves to Greek modes of language,

dress, and entertainment. (It could easily have been the Pharisees who coined the expression, “Brethren, we are drifting.”) As the years went by, however, concerns that had been restorationist hardened into ungodly attitudes. The Pharisees got to the point where they bound their list of issues as the only list that anybody needed to be concerned about, they insisted that their answers to every judgment question were the only answers that sound people could accept, and they eventually became hypocrites, unwilling even to live by their own rules (**Mt. 23:1-3**).

It would be amusing, if it weren’t so sad, how *quickly* restorationists can become Pharisees. Starting out with genuine concerns that some aspects of our faith and practice may be illegitimate, we gravitate toward others who share those concerns. The first thing you know, we have adopted an “inner circle” mentality, and are showing the signs of spiritual pride and condescension toward those who are less enlightened. Before long, we have delineated a new *tradition* about how God is to be worshiped, and we find ourselves becoming increasingly intolerant of disagreement. We bind our new tradition much more exclusively, and with greater isolationism, than any of the “traditionalists” whose “rigid” ways we thought we had to separate from. In no time at all, we’ve gone from progressive change-agents to the conservative guardians of a new status quo (secretly uneasy that our children may reject our “restoration” when they become adults, since by that time our “new” traditions will have become passé).

History is clear: *the restorationists of today are the Pharisees of tomorrow*. None of us is immune to this tendency! But this is not an argument against restoration; it is simply a warning that restoration is a slippery slope. The only way to avoid disaster is to come back to God’s word often enough — and honestly enough — to see when we’ve become Pharisees and to repent.

Some Practical Applications

With the above cautions in mind, let us turn to a few practical areas where some good restoration work might be done today. If, as we have argued, restoration is an *ongoing* work, what are the points at which we need to bring ourselves back to the standard of apostolic Christianity? *Despite previous efforts at restoration, where may it be said that we today have “turned aside”?*

1. Accommodation to Mainstream Culture. Religious groups have always had to wrestle with the question of how far to go in accommodating themselves to the mainstream culture. In the intertestamental period, as we’ve seen, the Jews had to debate the extent to which they could dress like the Greeks, speak like the Greeks, attend the Greek entertainments, and so forth. It should not be surprising that today we have to grapple with the same issue: how far can a Christian go in adopting the dominant culture of the day?

Like many of the preachers of previous generations, who often preached against “worldliness,” I believe that many of us have adopted the sinful characteristics of the culture around us to an extent that would be horrifying to our New Testament brethren. They would be shocked to see how we dress, how we speak, and how we entertain ourselves. Perhaps more than any of our forefathers, we have compromised the *moral distinctiveness* that ought to characterize the Lord’s people in any culture (**2 Cor. 7:14-18; 1 Pt. 2:9-12**; etc.).

We need a restoration of the strong counter-cultural spirit of New Testament Christianity.

2. This-Worldly Christianity. While the “worldliness” just discussed is a huge problem, I believe we have to fight against an even worse kind, and in too many cases, our generation is losing the battle. More than any

previous generation of Christians, our hearts are set on *this* world rather than the world to come. Because we are more affluent, we are more *comfortable* in this world — and less likely to think about heaven in any significant way.

But rather than admit our misplaced emphasis, we have redefined Christianity and turned it into something that is *supposed* to be about happiness in this world. I agree with Larry Crabb, who has written, “Modern Christianity, in a dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world . . . the promise of bliss is for NOW!” (Crabb 13). Contrary to what Ecclesiastes tells us about the incomprehensibility and unfixability of this world (**Eccl. 1:14,15**), we attempt to do with Christianity what the secularist tries to do with science: fix life in this world and make it be what we want it to be. This can’t be done, of course, but you could never tell that by the sermons many of us hear.

Are there temporal benefits to being a Christian? Yes indeed, but if you had asked a New Testament Christian, “Which is more important: the *already* part of the faith or the *not yet*?” he or she would not have hesitated for a split second before saying, “The *not yet* part” (**Phil. 2:12-14; 1 Pt. 1:13**; etc.). Our brethren in the New Testament would, I believe, be shocked at the extent to which we have made ourselves at home in this world and forgotten the fiery message of the gospel about the *end* of this world (**2 Pt. 3:10-13**).

We need a restoration of the other-worldly, apocalyptic, eschatological spirit of New Testament Christianity.

3. Consumer Christianity. Today, Christianity, just like everything else, has become a consumer product. Jesus has become a “brand,” and He is merchandised in ways that are hardly distinguishable from the ways that other products are marketed. These are the days of individual choice and customization of products. We go into the marketplace and from the choices that are presented to us, we select those that fit our “lifestyle,” i.e., those that can become a comfortable part of the life that we want for ourselves.

Trained by church-growth marketers, we present ourselves to visitors as a group of people that they would fit in with right away: “Come, be a part of our fellowship. You’ll like us. We don’t have any rough edges, and Christianity, as we practice it, has none of the stumbling blocks that it used to have. It can be an easy, convenient part of your lifestyle, just as it is a part of ours.” And so our congregations become demographically homogeneous, populated by “birds” who are so much of the same “feather” that they would enjoy flocking together even without the Lord.

But those who formed congregations in the New Testament were not drawn by any of “benefits” that the marketers now tell us to offer the public. They were drawn by the promise of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ — or not (**Ac. 24:25**). And they would be shocked to see how we try to merchandise “brand Jesus” by draining every drop of inconvenience or unlikableness out of the gospel.

We need a restoration of the costly discipleship and self-sacrificial spirit of New Testament Christianity.

4. Radical Individualism. As all of us know, the modern world has become very individualistic. Close-knit neighborhoods are a thing of the past. Families have become scattered. Rarely do people live anywhere for very long. And so, we withdraw into our own little worlds and have little sense that we are a part of anything larger than ourselves. In this kind of culture, where everybody is mainly focused on his own needs, Christians have had a hard time holding on to the “brotherhood” aspect of Christianity.

In the New Testament, Christians saw themselves as part of a “people” who were the Lord’s people (**1 Pt.**

1:9,10). And this consciousness extended beyond the local church. The Romans, for example, would have been thrilled to receive Paul's greetings from, and to hear any news about, "the churches of Christ" (**Rom. 16:16**) elsewhere. Today, many of us are embarrassed by that expression, "the churches of Christ." Granted, Paul did not use it as a proper noun, much less the designation of a denominational entity, but even so, the expression is scripturally meaningful. Our individualism may have been bred in us by long years of fighting against dangerous institutional concepts of the church, but even so, I believe our New Testament brethren would be shocked to see our isolationism, our narcissism, and our unconcern about anything that is happening beyond the borders of our own local assembly (if we are even concerned about the local assembly). They would not understand why we have so little concern for, much less love for, the "brotherhood" (**1 Pt. 2:17; 5:9**), and why we are so reluctant even to use the term.

We need a restoration of the brotherhood spirit of New Testament Christianity.

5. Self-Centered Religion. One would think that religion would be the last thing in the world that anybody could turn into a self-centered project, but is exactly what has happened. And the change has been so pervasive, most people don't even realize what has happened.

At this point in history, most people feel perfectly free to envision God as being anything they think is reasonable or agreeable. And when it comes to "serving" God, most people assume that whatever suits them will be acceptable to God. Since all paths lead to heaven, why not pick the one that is most pleasing to . . . *you?*

Most of us deplore the self-centeredness of modern religion — and then turn right around and practice it ourselves. Rather than commit ourselves unconditionally to God's glory, whatever that might mean for us (**Phil. 1:20**), we think of God as existing primarily to solve our problems and give us what we want. Our brethren in the New Testament would be shocked to see how often we think about ourselves, how rarely we think about God, and how humanistically we think of religion as having no higher purpose than the pleasing of . . . *ourselves*.

We need, above all else, a restoration of the God-centered spirit of New Testament Christianity.

Conclusion

The gospel is a gospel of restoration: a plan whereby God is restoring us to the perfect image of His glory, which image we have marred by our rebellion against Him (**1 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19**; etc.). But the process through which God is restoring us is not yet complete. It is a gradual process, and as long as we live as Christians in *this* world, we will always be works in *progress*. So at the most fundamental level, that of our *individual* relationship with God, restoration must be an ongoing work. How, then, could it be anything less than that in our *congregational* relationship?

Every generation must do its own work of restoration, coming back to God's word with fresh eyes and seeing truths that the preceding generation may have had trouble seeing (**Ps. 119:18**). We cannot depend on the restorations that our parents carried out, and our children will not be able to depend on those that we carry out. Every generation must reconnect itself to the standard of Pentecost: not to the disciples who were baptized that day, mind you, but to the unchanging *word* — the "law" (**Isa. 2:2,3**) — that began to go forth from Jerusalem on that day (**Lk. 24:47; Ac. 1:8**).

Frankly, I am excited about the restoration and renewal that I see taking place among the Lord's people in our country right now. Nearly everywhere I go, I meet Christians who are far ahead of where I was spiritually when I was their age. It is thrilling to see the new emphasis on serious textual study of the Scriptures, the thirsty desire for spiritual growth, and the realization that discipleship involves a seven-days-a-week spirituality rather than the mere attendance at church services one or two days a week. And often, the most encouraging signs of renewal that I see are those that have appeared informally, with no specific "agenda" on anybody's part except a desire to grow to maturity in the Lord.

But sometimes minor change is not enough. Sometimes, as in Malachi's day, there is such a serious need for repentance and restoration that the Lord's people need to hit the "reset button." So let me ask you: when was the last time the congregation of which you are a part hit the reset button and engaged in any serious act of restoration? And individually, when was the last time you hit the reset button? Have you *ever* done so?

Our salvation depends on our willingness to be warned ([Ac. 20:29-31](#)), so let me conclude with a warning. Do we wonder why our "Restoration Plea" so often falls on deaf ears and our appeals for others to come back to God have so little impact? *Perhaps we, the "restorers," still have some restoration work to do!* Perhaps we need to hear the thundering words of God to those of Ezekiel's day, still captive in Babylon: "I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord," says the Lord God, 'when I am hallowed in you before their eyes'" ([Ezek. 36:23](#)).

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“HIS DELIGHT IS IN THE LAW OF THE LORD” (PSALM 1)

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THE PSALMS ARE BOTH DELIGHTFUL AND DIFFICULT. Easily accessible for the most part, they give us great joy — we naturally turn to them for strength and sustenance. But the Psalms also challenge us. In places, they are very hard to understand, and even when we do understand them, we find them to be like the “hard sayings” of Jesus in the New Testament: they call for a response that is by no means easy.

The spiritual depth of the Psalms is unfathomable. We can study them for a lifetime and never comprehend their full meaning. We learn much and we rejoice in what we learn, but as with God himself, there is always more in the Psalms waiting for our discovery. The Psalms are a well that we can never get to the bottom of.

We are drawn to the Psalms because of their personal nature. Unlike the prophets where we hear God speaking directly to his people, in the Psalms we hear God’s people speaking to him in prayer and praise. These are real people, and we can relate to them because we hear the full range of emotions that we experience today: adoration of God, love and gratitude, fear and frustration, grief for our sins, walking with God even when the way is difficult, reaching out to God in our darkest hours, devotion to the word of God, and confidence that, in the end, God’s purposes will be victorious. The psalmists were people just like us, and that is encouraging, but it is even more encouraging to know that the God of those people has not changed. He is the same God today.

It is no wonder that the Psalms are a favorite part of the Scriptures for so many of us. We will surely enjoy our studies this week, but we should set ourselves the goal of understanding the Psalms better than we have before — and especially understanding what God is saying to us in these songs about *the kind of God he is and the kind of relationship he wants to have with us*.

The Book of Psalms

The Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 Hebrew songs located in the Old Testament. It is comprised of five smaller collections (or “books”) of songs. These songs were written over a period of about 1,000 years, from the time of Moses to the return of the Jews from their Babylonian exile. About half of these compositions are attributed to David, the second king of Israel and the “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1). The Davidic psalms, as well as others in the book, were used in the worship which David organized for the temple that would later be built by his son Solomon. We can learn a great deal about any religion by looking at its hymns, and this is especially true of the religion of Israel. It is a religion brimming with song.

Psalms is the longest book in the OT, and it is the one most often quoted, both today and in the past. Indeed, the NT writers frequently referred to the Psalms, as did Jesus himself.

The Psalms are Hebrew poetry. They do not sound like our poetry today, but they are poems and they should be heard as poetry. In contrast to the narrative of the historical books, the commandments of the Law, and the preaching of the prophets, the Psalms express their great truths in poetic style. As poetry, they are intended to reach the emotions as well as the intellect.

Although Psalms is the most diverse book in the OT, its diversity has a very clear focus — and that focus is God himself. Many different subjects are dealt with by the psalmists, and their thoughts remarkably varied, but the centerpiece of the whole story is God. He is the Great King, the One who is sovereign over every last thing that has ever existed — and he, God, is what the Psalms are all about. As J. A. Motyer said, “One of the remarkable features of the Psalms is that though personal testimony abounds, the clearest impression left is not of people but of God” (*New Bible Commentary*, p. 487).

What we learn about God in the Psalms is not simply that his *creation* is complex but, more importantly, that his *character* is complex. The multidimensional character of God is what accounts for the great diversity that we see in these songs, and it is only by pondering all of the Psalms that we see the portrait of God that we need to see. God is not just our Savior; he is our Ruler. He is not just wise; he is powerful. He does not just love what is good; he hates what is evil. He is not just gentle; he is wrathful. He is not just our Father; he is our Judge. The Book of Psalms is the ultimate correction to all lopsided and limited views of God. But, to repeat, it is only by reading *all of the Psalms* that we get this correction.

But putting it all together, what do we learn about God in the Psalms? We learn that he is our *Creator* and our *King*. And given the fact that our sins have alienated us from God, what do we learn in the Psalms about our relationship with him? We learn that He is our *Redeemer* and our *Refuge*. In these four words — Creator, King, Redeemer, Refuge — is summed up the theology of the Psalms (and, in fact, the whole story of salvation).

Ultimately, of course, the Psalms point us to Jesus, the Messiah (**Lk. 24:44**), in whom was revealed “all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (**Col. 2:9**). It is in Christ that we finally learn what the Psalms were always pointing us toward: an uninhibited *delight* in God coupled with a profound *respect* for him. It is in Christ that we see, even more fully than the psalmists saw it, that God really does keep his promises, he really will bring about a glorious future, and in the meantime, he really does want a people who will sing their adoration unto him when they gather for worship (**Psa. 100:2; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16**).

But to see anything close to the truth about God is a shattering experience. (Just ask Isaiah or Ezekiel or the apostle John.) To whatever extent the Psalms show us God, we will find it a disturbing book — disturbing in the very highest sense of that good word. And we need to be disturbed, do we not? The Book of Psalms is “God’s prescription for a complacent church” (W. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, p.23). Much to our great benefit, the Psalms can jolt us out of the silly, self-centered entertainment that we often call “worship,” and bring us back to the throne room of the eternal “I AM” where those who truly love him are those who fear him.

So with those general thoughts in mind, let’s turn our attention to the very first song in the collection: **Psalm 1**.

Overview of Psalm 1

If, as seems likely, **Psalm 1** was put first in order to introduce the other Psalms, we need to see what kind of

an introduction it is. (Actually, **Psalms 1 & 2** together may be seen as introductory, but we will hear about **Psalm 2** in tomorrow evening's lecture.)

The “two ways.” In **Psalm 1**, the psalmist wants us to see that there are only two basic paths or “ways” open to us in life: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. There is no other path. The two paths represent two fundamentally different ways of living, and a choice must be made between them (cf. **Deut. 30:15-20**). In the NT, we hear Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (**Mt. 7:13,14**) speaking very plainly about where the two paths lead, and it is very interesting that the earliest Christians referred to their new life as “the way” (**Ac. 9:2; 19:9,23**; etc.). So in **Psalm 1**, the writer is urging us to read the rest of the Psalms with our eyes wide open to what will happen if we fail to take the path that the Psalms recommend.

A “wisdom” psalm. **Psalm 1** is usually classified as a “wisdom” psalm since it has some of the same characteristics as the OT wisdom books: it emphasizes the importance of human choice, underscores the consequences of good and bad advice, stresses the blessings of obedience and the hardships of sin, and reminds us of the reality of God's judgment. **Psalm 1** can be seen as a commentary on **Proverbs 1:7**: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (**Prov. 1:7**). As in the wisdom writings, righteousness is a very practical matter in **Psalm 1**. The righteous person is the one whose reverence “affects his daily living; he avoids evil and learns how to live from God's Torah, and therein lies his wisdom” (P. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, p. 61).

A “torah” psalm. With its exaltation of God's “law” (Heb. *torah*), **Psalm 1** is termed a “torah” psalm, along with **Psalms 19** and **119**, and its priority of position in the Psalter is significant. Walter Brueggemann argues, “Standing at the beginning of the Psalter, this psalm intends that all the psalms should be read through the prism of *torah* obedience” (*Message of the Psalms*, p.190).

In the OT, *torah* can mean several things. The basic meaning is “law,” so it can refer to what we call the Pentateuch: the first division of the Hebrew canon, which contains the Law of Moses. But *torah* can also have the simple meaning of “teaching, instruction, or guidance,” and in this sense it can refer to any (or all) of what has been revealed by God. In **Psalms 1, 19, and 119**, we need not quibble about whether *torah* is to be taken as “law” or “guidance.” These psalmists surely delighted in the laws and commandments of God (these were seen as wonderful blessings), but their praise extended to any of God's revealed teaching. The fact that the Psalms were incorporated into the Hebrew Scriptures indicates that early on they were recognized as being divine *torah*.

We should not miss the significance of the fact that the Psalter begins and ends where it does. The “book-ends” are **Psalm 1** (wisdom and *torah*) and **Psalm 150** (praise). Today, those who emphasize praise often shy away from any mention of law or commandment or duty, as if that would be “legalism.” But the Psalms take *torah* as their beginning point. Those who would worship God must first embrace his law and find joy in carrying out its requirements. There is no worse blasphemer than the person who thinks he can worship God and still live disobediently while he is away from the place of worship (**Isa. 1:13**).

But if we are right to consider the Psalms themselves as *torah*, think what that says about the placement of **Psalm 1**. First in line, this psalm encourages the reader to consider all of those that follow as divine “guidance” (*torah*) that cannot be safely ignored. We are being called to listen to the Psalms, meditate deeply on their meaning, and above all, respond to them obediently. To hear God's *torah* is a serious thing, for how we respond to it will determine our destiny. As Jesus taught, to hear and not obey is the ultimate disaster:

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man” (Mt. 7:26).

So **Psalm 1** invites us into the Psalms, and it tells us what the Psalms are. They are not just songs to enjoy singing — they are a part of God’s *torah*, and they contain instruction that should be considered carefully and incorporated into the very fabric of our lives. *The Psalms are texts in which our Creator is imparting his wisdom to us.*

Textual Analysis

Two Choices (vv.1,2). These verses contrast two opposite decisions — one to follow the path of reverence and the other to go down the road of rebellion. This psalm certainly points the way to God’s *blessing* (vv.1,2), but it also warns about divine *judgment* upon those who refuse the way of righteousness (vv.5,6).

Verse 1 — “*Blessed is the man who . . .*” The word “blessed” is the translation of a Hebrew expression meaning “O how happy!” Here, the expression is plural, which intensifies the meaning: “O the happinesses of!” The Psalms consistently teach that the “blessed” life is a byproduct of godliness (cf. **Psa. 128:1**). The godly life is not free of difficulty, or even suffering, but it does contain the highest and best of what is available to mankind in this world. It is the truly “good life” (**1 Tim. 4:8**), and we can hardly think about its blessedness without recalling Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes (**Mt. 5:3-11**).

But if godliness is to be accepted, the opposite path must be rejected. Since no one can serve two masters, a fundamental choice has to be made. According to **Psalm 1**, true happiness/blessedness does not come automatically to everybody in the world — it comes to those who have said “no” to every path except the one that leads to God. **Psalm 1**, therefore, pictures the godly man as one who refuses to go along with the world in its defiance of God. Cf. **Psa. 119:104; Prov. 4:14,15**.

(a) “*Walks not in the counsel of the wicked.*” In regard to his *thinking*, the godly man does not “take the wicked for his guide” (NEB). “Counsel” is advice or guidance, and to “walk” in someone’s counsel would be to allow that person to imprint our thinking and impact our principles. Surely, we can ill afford to walk in the counsel of the wicked. Whatever shapes our thinking shapes our lives, and so when we choose our advisers, we make an important choice. It pays to be careful whom we listen to. The worst thing we can do is carelessly pick up whatever values, principles, attitudes, and character traits happen to be around us. If we desire the “blessedness” of **Psalm 1**, we will have to be guided by God’s instruction rather than the advice of those who reject that instruction. We will have to say what Job said, “The counsel of the wicked is far from me” (**Job 21:16**).

(b) “*Nor stands in the way of sinners.*” In regard to his *behaving*, the godly person does not follow the path of sinful conduct. Sin has been defined as “missing the mark.” In **Psalm 1**, the “sinners” whose way is to be avoided are not godly people who inadvertently miss the mark now and then. No, these are individuals who miss the mark and couldn’t care less, as the saying goes. They are practicing a particular “way” of life, and it is one the godly person will have to refuse. “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent . . . do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths” (**Prov. 1:10,15**).

(c) “*Nor sits in the seat of scoffers.*” In regard to his *belonging*, the godly person does not identify himself with those who have rejected God — he does not take a comfortable seat in their assembly and make himself at home in their culture. Cf. **Psa. 26:4,5**.

Does the progression “wicked > sinners > scoffers” indicate an increasing level of sinfulness? Students of the text differ on this point. But however we construe the terms “wicked” and “sinners,” it is certainly true that the final term, translated “scoffer” in the ESV, is a very strong one. This is the only instance of this Hebrew word in the Psalms, and outside of the Psalms it only occurs once in Isaiah (28:14) and five times in Proverbs (1:22; 3:34; 19:29; 21:24; 29:8). The word “describes those who have gone beyond a few sinful acts and even a personal life marked by an inclination to wrongdoing. They actively seek through their mockery to express disdain for right living and seek to belittle and undermine those who want to be righteous” (G. Wilson, *NIV Application Commentary: Psalms — Volume 1*, p.95). The scoffer, then, is not merely a moral weakling — he is defiant in his rejection of God’s authority. (On this kind of attitude, see also **Psa. 10:2-11; 14:1; 36:1,2.**) The scoffer contemptuously ridicules what is right, and not content with defying God, he mocks those who are faithful to God, ruthlessly and deceitfully suppressing them. He is not the only person guilty of sin, but he is the one furthest from repentance, and that makes his situation very serious.

And then what about the progression “walk > stand > sit”? Does that indicate an increasing fellowship with sin? Again, opinions differ. But whether such a progression is inherent in the text, it is an obvious fact that when we depart from what is right we put ourselves on a slippery slope. If we don’t promptly repent, we begin to move deeper and deeper into sin’s territory. At first, we may have done no more than listen to the world’s advice on a “minor” point or two. But having yielded to temptation and not repented, the “counsel of the wicked” began to sound better and better. We soon found ourselves standing in the “way” of those practices. And still failing to repent, we eventually found that our hearts had found a new home. So when we start accepting the world’s advice, we are in danger of learning the world’s habits, and we may eventually adopt the most fatal of all the world’s attitudes: a blatant denial of God. It may be trite, but it is true: if we follow the wrong advice, we will soon run with the wrong crowd — and eventually become a part of the wrong culture.

But to return to the point of **Psalm 1:1**, all three of these (the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers) are people who refuse to live by God’s law — and the godly person will refuse to live by their example. *“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.”*

This does not mean the godly are to withdraw into a monastery and have no contact with the ungodly whatsoever. What is being prohibited is not casual or incidental contact (**1 Cor. 5:9,10**) and certainly not evangelistic contact or the kind of redemptive association that Jesus modeled. But the godly person must not take the “way” of the unrighteous. He is to take a different “way.” He is “in” but not “of” the world (**Jn. 17:11-19**), he refuses to be “conformed” to the world (**Rom. 12:2**), and he does not “love the world or the things in the world” (**1 Jn. 2:15-17**).

What, then, *does* he do?

Verse 2 — *“But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”* In the first verse, we learned that the godly person is *directed* by God’s word — here we learn that he is also *delighted* by it. Cf. **Psa. 25:4,5,8,9,12.**

(a) *Torah*. In regard to God, the “blessed” man in **Psalm 1** has a very specific delight: it is God’s *law* (Heb. *torah*) that gives him joy. “Blessed are those . . . who walk in the law of the LORD!” (**Psa. 119:1**). An emphasis on *torah* is significant in **Psalm 1** because of the introductory role of that Psalm. In the Hebrew Bible, the

Book of Psalms is simply called *tehillim* (“praises”). So think what it means that a book of praise begins with an emphasis on law. Jesus asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (**Lk. 6:46**). The truth is, *worship* (praise/thanksgiving) can never be separated from *law* (instruction/commandment), and we are never praising God any more highly than when we are reverently regarding his commandments and saying, “Thy will be done.” So the Book of “Praises” could not have a more appropriate preamble than **Psalm 1** — a *torah* psalm.

What a pity that we so often see “law” as a negative concept. God’s law is never anything less than benevolent. It is always for our good, the kind of teaching that a caring parent offers to a beloved child: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments” (**Prov. 3:1**). How could any right-thinking person not see such instruction as a blessing?

(b) *Delight*. Here is the main point of this verse (and indeed of the entire psalm). The man who is “blessed” not only studies and knows God’s law, but he delights in it. His “greatest pleasure is in the law of the Lord” (Harrison). This man loves God’s law because he loves God’s person — he is eager to be conformed to God’s image, and he understands *torah* to be the teaching that is requisite to that transformation. “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (**Psa. 119:97**). Cf. **Psa. 26:8; 63:1; 112:1; 119:14,16,35,47,92**.

We should note that this person’s delight is not just in knowledge but also in obedience. He pays close attention to the law of God, and he responds to it faithfully. He “finds pleasure in obeying the Lord’s commands” (NET).

Ultimately, it is our character that determines our happiness, and nothing evidences our character any more than the things that our hearts delight in. When it comes to things to be delighted about, the law of the Lord is the most delightful thing in the world. If your highest happiness is in the Lord and his law, you will never run out of things to be happy about!

(c) *Meditation*. The psalmist’s mention of “meditation” here is fascinating. The word he uses for “meditate” literally means “mutter.” Since few of the ancient Hebrews had a written copy of the Scriptures, their meditation would consist of remembering what they had heard (and memorized) on occasions when the Scriptures were read publicly. The image in **Psalm 1** is that of a person pondering the law by thoughtfully reciting to himself the words that he had stored up in his heart. What a beautiful picture of meditation! In ancient times, it was customary, even when one had a manuscript to work with, for the words of Scriptures to be read audibly. And it is still traditional in some Jewish circles for one to recite the words in an undertone as the Scriptures are being read. In this way, one does not merely “think” about *torah*. He ponders the instruction audibly by “muttering” the words — in search of insight. This is an active (and probably more impactful) form of meditation, and I recommend it to you. Don’t just think with your brain. Read the words of God with your lips. “Mutter” them!

But it is not just once in a while that the godly person meditates on God’s word — he does it “day and night.” Cf. **Psa 63:5,6**. This doesn’t mean that godly people never do anything else, but neither is the expression mere hyperbole. (Cf. “pray without ceasing in 1 Thess. 5:17). It means that God’s word is woven deeply into the fabric of our everyday lives. We need to hear the same thing that God said to Joshua, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (**Josh. 1:8**). Cf. **Deut. 6:4-7**.

Historically, many people have recognized the special meditative value of the Psalms. Even in bound copies of the New Testament books, the Psalms have often been included because they were thought to be indispensable. We desperately need a similar recognition of the Psalms' value today. The Psalms should be our constant companion. We need to read them regularly from beginning to end. We need to pray the Psalms, memorize them, recite them to ourselves, and hide them in our hearts.

But whether it's the Psalms or any other part of the Scriptures, meditation on the word must permeate our lives so thoroughly that it plants our feet firmly on the path toward God. The word won't have a chance to shape our lives if we don't feed on it frequently. So we must give ourselves to this activity wholeheartedly.

Frequent meditation (along with prayer) is a strong protection against the inappropriate associations mentioned back in **verse 1**. Immersion in the Scriptures may be the only thing that will keep us from joining the wicked on their path. That path is likely to prove irresistible if we aren't immunized against it by "day and night" meditation on God's word.

To sum up the second verse, then, the godly (and therefore happy) person delights in God's *torah*, he meditates on it, and he acts on it. He listens to God deeply, and he responds faithfully. He delights both to hear and to do whatever God teaches. Cf. **Jn. 13:17; Jas. 1:25**.

Two Qualities of Life (vv.3,4). Godliness has an impact on our lives even in the here and now, and so does ungodliness. The psalmist portrays the righteous man as a fruit-bearing tree planted by streams of water, while the unrighteous is as insubstantial as the dusty chaff which the wind blows away.

Verse 3 — *"He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."*

(a) *A well-watered tree*. The psalmist uses a vivid metaphor to describe the godly person's strength: he is like a tree with all the advantages of an abundant water supply. The language here has a close parallel in **Jeremiah 17:7,8** where the man who trusts in God is like "a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit." Cf. **Psa. 92:12-15**.

A tree located by a stream can withstand heat and hardship because its roots have access to water. Likewise, the godly, being nourished by God, are strong and productive even in the midst of difficulty. Water, of course, is a symbol used throughout the Scriptures for the life-giving qualities of God's word (e.g., **Jn. 4:7-15; 7:37-39**).

The concept of fruitfulness is extremely important. Even as human beings, we are meant to do more than just exist: we are to be productive, and among the Lord's people, this is even more important. There could be no worse condemnation than to be described as an "unprofitable servant" (**Mt. 25:30 NKJV**). Jesus said, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (**Jn. 15:8**).

(b) *Success*. The godly man "prosper" or "succeeds" in all that he does. Prosperity here involves more than financial wealth, and success is more than the acquirement of power or prestige. Biblically, to "succeed" is to bring one's plans to a successful conclusion. So in this verse, a part of the happiness of the godly man is that the Lord gives him success in his undertakings. With the Lord's blessings, the godly man "succeeds in everything he attempts" (NET) and "success attends all he does" (Jerusalem Bible). Cf. **Psa. 18:29; 128:1-4**.

Joseph is the obvious example of this principle (**Gen. 39:2,3,23**), and Joshua was told that his success would depend on faithfulness to the Book of the Law: “then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (**Josh. 1:8**).

Obviously, God is the one who ultimately decides whether our plans materialize. Cf. **Psa. 127:1,2**. No matter how industrious or intelligent we may be, we are never in complete control over what happens. God always has the final say: at any moment, he can alter the outcome. “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand” (**Prov. 19:21**). So James counsels us to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (**Jas. 4:13-16**).

But in real life, do the godly always prosper? Certainly they do not always become wealthy, but even defining prosperity in more general terms, the good things in life are not the exclusive property of the godly. I agree with Motyer who says that **Psalm 1:3** “professes a ‘creed’: this world is God’s world and those who side with him will surely and ultimately enjoy blessing” (p.489). And as VanGemeren puts it, “The future belongs to the godly, even when the wicked are enjoying temporary power and prestige” (p.77). Cf. **Psa. 4:7**. The godly person’s faith is in both the existence and the benevolence of God: despite the appearance of things at certain times, God will certainly reward those who seek him (**Hb. 11:6**). Our faith is that of Job (**Job 19:25**). As we often sing, “This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

Verse 4 — “*The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.*” Cf. **Job 21:18; Isa 17:13**. Without the water that nourishes the godly, the wicked can have no real strength or stability. In ancient times, when grain was threshed, the sheaves were crushed and then tossed into the air. The wind would blow away the “chaff” (husks, straw, etc.), and the kernels of grain would fall back to the threshing floor. In **verse 4**, the wicked are compared to the “chaff.” Rather than being solid and substantive, they are easily “blown away.”

Created in the image of an eternal God, we were made for permanence and lasting joy. We have a deep need for stability because “eternity” is in our hearts (**Eccl. 3:11**). But the sin broke the perfect picture of the world as was created to be. As a consequence, God has subjected the world to “futility” (**Rom. 8:18-22**). The world is now a place of temporariness rather than permanence. (Cf. the term *hebel* or “vanity” in Ecclesiastes.) Until we get out of this world, we can’t have the stability we so desperately need. So we groan, constantly having to say goodbye to things we don’t want to say goodbye to. In the words of a song several years ago, “The only thing that stays the same is that everything changes.”

When we are told that the wicked are “like chaff that the wind drives away,” that is a serious warning. “Depart from God,” the psalmist is saying, “and you will doom yourself to a life of insignificance, devoid of anything that has any lasting value.” None of us wants to think that we’re “dust in the wind,” but without God that’s all we are. We have no deeper need than the need for stability, and so the wicked cut themselves off from something that is absolutely essential to human well-being. Unlike the godly, who are as solid as “a tree planted by streams of water,” those who reject God are simply “chaff.”

Momentary appearances, however, can be deceiving. When we only look at the short-term evidence, it may look like the wicked have more substance than the godly. Ultimately, it is only God’s judgment — the final “winnowing” — that will show what was solid and what was straw. Cf. **1 Cor. 3:12,13**. Asaph only understood the emptiness of the wicked when he “discerned their end” (**Psa. 73:16,17**). Cf. **Psa. 39:4-6; 90:12**.

Two Results (vv.5,6). Ideas have consequences, and so do decisions. **Psalm 1** ends by contrasting the very

different outcomes of wickedness and righteousness. When we make our decision about God, here is what ultimately grows out of our choice.

Verse 5 — *“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.”* The judgment spoken of here could be any temporal or historical judgment that falls on the wicked in this life or it could be the final judgment of all mankind. It is certainly true that God comes in judgment upon the wicked (nations and also individuals) in the here and now. Cf. **Gen. 6-9; 18-19; Psalms 37**; etc. But I believe the OT writers had at least some awareness that there is going to be a final judgment (e.g. **Eccl. 12:14**). In **Psalm 1:5**, “judgment” has the definite article — it is not just “a” judgment but “the” judgment — indicating perhaps that the speaker had in mind something more definite than any of the preliminary judgments of God.

From the NT, we know that a great day is coming on which every human being will face a final assessment before the Creator. This will be a final “assay” of mankind, the effect of which will be to purge God’s creation of wickedness once and for all. Cf. **Mt. 13:24-30**. At that time, if not before, what the Psalmist says of the wicked will be true: *“they will not stand in the judgment.”* As the NET renders it, “the wicked cannot withstand judgment nor can sinners join the assembly of the godly.” In other words, the refining process is one the wicked will not be able to survive (**Mal. 3:2**). As a protected remnant, the righteous will be spared the punishment of everyone else (**Mal. 3:17**), and when all that is left in the presence of the Lord is the “congregation of the righteous,” the wicked will not be found anywhere in that entire assembly. Cf. **1 Pt. 4:17,18**.

God is the absolute Sovereign over his creation. As Creator and King, he “judges the world with righteousness” (**Psa. 9:7,8**). The final judgment of all mankind will amount to a great *separation* that will be made between those who have submitted to his rule and those who have refused to do so. It will be an irrevocable division, a sorting out, an expulsion. Between the righteous and the wicked, it will be an ultimate “parting of the ways.” The redeemed will enter the eternal congregation of the saints, and all others will be excluded, not because they were predestined to be lost but because they never made the choice to accept God’s redemption.

To return to the agricultural metaphor, judgment will be the final “winnowing” that separates the wheat from the chaff. David’s prayer in **Psalm 35:5** (“Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away!”) looks back to **1:4** (“The wicked . . . are like chaff that the wind drives away”). **Psalm 1:1-4** shows the contrast between the godly and the ungodly. *At the final judgment, God will simply make this contrast last forever.* With every choice we make in the here and now, we move ourselves toward one destiny or the other, and there is no way to follow both paths at the same time. We can’t follow the “counsel of the wicked” (**v.1**) and still expect a place in the “congregation of the righteous” (**v.5**).

Verse 6 — *“For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”* To say that the Lord “knows” the way of the righteous can mean that he acknowledges them with approval (**Jn. 10:14; 2 Tim. 2:19**). But it can also mean that he watches over them with loving care. “The Lord watches over the destiny of the godly” (NEB). **Psalm 18** is a powerful commentary on this truth (**vv.2,19,28,30,36**). Cf. **Psa. 25:15; 26:12**. The righteous have a protection on their path that the wicked do not enjoy on theirs. Cf. **Job 23:10; Prov. 3:5,6**.

The last word of **Psalm 1** is “perish.” To perish is to end in ruin (**Jn. 3:16**). To say the least, the way of wickedness is a road that leads to no good end (**Psa. 146:9**). In the chiasmic structure of **Psalm 1**, the last word,

“perish,” looks back to the first word, “blessed.” A more important contrast cannot be imagined: *be blessed or perish*. Those whom the Lord “knows” will be blessed, but all others will hear him say, “I never knew you; depart from me” (**Mt. 7:23**).

Psalm 1 deals with a life-and-death subject: our choice between “two ways.” As in the story of the Prodigal Son (**Lk. 15:17,18**), our Father waits for us back home, but we can’t get to where he is if we don’t take the path that leads there. All paths have destinations and all lives have outcomes (**Rom. 6:21,22; 1 Pt. 1:9**). Whether we take the path back home or stay on the path of rebellion, eternity will give us the *consequences* of our choice.

Conclusion

What is it, then, that we learn in **Psalm 1** about God and our relationship with him? The answer fairly jumps off the page: *we must be people whose delight is in the law of the Lord*. God is our Creator and King, but we have rebelled against him. His desire now is to be our Redeemer, and then our Refuge, but this can’t happen if we won’t lay down our rebellion, learn the meaning of reverence, and let the joy of living within God’s law be our motivation. We must seek not only to do His will but *delight* to do it, once again trusting our Father’s wisdom and his goodness.

And who, we ask, may have a right relationship with God? Not just anybody, if **Psalm 15** is any indication. God is seeking a certain kind of people (**Jn. 4:23,24**), and we get no better portrait of that person anywhere than the one in **Psalm 1**. *Here is a person who delights (and meditates) in God — God’s law, God’s way, God’s people, God’s blessing, and, yes, even God’s judgment*.

Obviously, none of us is there yet, and we have no room to be proud of ourselves. But this is what we must be *seeking*. And more than that, we must understand what *God* is seeking. His plan involves a good deal more than making us “church members.” He will be not be content until we have been brought back all the way to a perfect, eternal conformity to his character (**2 Cor. 3:18**). If that’s not what we’re interested in, then as far as a relationship with God is concerned, we need not apply. God is seeking only those who are seeking him — just like the seeker in **Psalm 1**, who knew no higher joy than to meditate on the Lord’s teaching.

Psalm 1 sets the tone for the Book of Psalms by introducing the most basic choice that we ever have to make in life. *Which path will we follow: reverence to God or rebellion against him?* The first Psalm is the doorway to a great literary temple, but it is an entrance posted with a clear warning. The warning goes something like this: “If you are ready to hear and obey the law of the Lord, then enter the Psalms and worship. But if you are not willing to obey, then enter at your own peril — the Psalms will declare your doom.” The study of the Psalms, then, is no trivial pursuit. It will probe the deepest recesses of our hearts and either draw us toward God or drive us away.

If we have to choose, however, the Psalms encourage us to make the better choice and say “yes” to God rather than “no.” This has always been the desire of God for his wayward children. While our lives last, our Creator’s plea can be summarized like this: *“If you do not come back to me, you will die. But do not die — return to me and live!”* As long as our time in this broken world remains, God is always saying: “Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (**Ezek. 18:30-32**).

Our theme for these lectures is “You Are My God.” May each of us, personally and individually, be able to say these words to God: **“YOU ARE MY GOD.”** If we learn anything from the Psalms it is surely that God is the Creator and King of heaven and earth. In eternity, he will reign triumphantly, even if some of us have refused his rule and been excluded from that blessed realm. But — by his grace — may we joyously come back to the King while we can and submit to his loving rule. May each of us be in a position to say, with David in **Psalm 40:8**, **“I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”**

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MALACHI: A CALL TO RADICAL REVERENCE

Presented at Florida College on February 2, 1989

MALACHI IS THE LAST BOOK IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. After this oracle was delivered, God did not speak prophetically to His people again until John the Baptist appeared preaching in the wilderness of Judea over four hundred years later. The message of Malachi, whose name means “My Messenger,” was God’s last word to Israel prior to the approach of the kingdom of the Messiah. A little book of terrifying warnings and glorious hope, it is just as relevant and powerful today as it was in about 435 BC when it was first presented. The spiritual conditions confronted by Malachi in post-exilic Jerusalem are distressingly similar to some of our own.

The famous decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. had allowed the captive Jews in Babylonia to return to Judea to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Those who chose to return from exile did so in several groups: the first under Zerubbabel, and later others under Ezra and Nehemiah. Against serious difficulty and discouragement, these returnees repopulated Jerusalem and reinstated the ancient temple worship. Spurring the people on to completion of their great work was the task of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

Those who came back first to Jerusalem faced considerable hardship, but they had the advantage of the excitement of an important undertaking in its early stages. As the years came and went, however, disillusionment and disinterest set in. By the time Ezra and Nehemiah arrived, they found social and spiritual conditions dangerously low. The walls of Jerusalem still lay demolished — but worse, the religious life of the people had badly deteriorated and called for urgent repair. “The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi” (**Mal. 1:1**) addressed these spiritual needs of Israel in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, about one hundred years after the first Jews had returned from Babylonian exile. Reading the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi together, we come up with something like the following list of characteristics of the times:

- a. **Spiritual apathy** (**Mal. 1:2,13; 4:6**).
- b. **Corruption of the priesthood** (**Neh. 13:4-9,28-31; Mal. 1:6; 2:1-9; 3:3,4**).
- c. **Degeneracy in worship** (**Mal. 1:7-14**).
- d. **Withholding of tithes and offerings** (**Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10-14; Mal. 3:8-12**).
- e. **Breaking of the Sabbath** (**Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22**).
- f. **Cynicism and lack of moral discrimination** (**Mal. 2:17; 3:13-15,18**).
- g. **Disregard for God’s marriage law** (**Ezra 9:1,2; Neh. 10:30; 13:23-29; Mal. 2:10-16**).
- h. **Social injustice** (**Neh. 5:1-13; Mal. 3:5**).

Against these sins, Malachi sounds the trumpet call of God’s righteous judgment. The Lord is coming to refine and purge His people (**Mal. 3:1-4**), and the day of His coming will consume with a burning that will

leave the ungodly “neither root nor branch” (**Mal. 4:1**). But to the righteous remnant, that will be a day of blessing: “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall” (**Mal. 4:2**).

The expression “fear My name” is centrally important. Underlying each specific condemnation of Israel’s sins is Malachi’s basic charge: *the people had simply failed to fear God*. The real sickness, of which all other problems were merely symptoms, was that the Lord of hosts was no longer being honored and revered. As John Benton suggests, “Reverence is not the homage which weak minds pay to religious tradition and the status quo; it is rather the loving, sincere and practical recognition of the greatness of God” (*Losing Touch with the Living God: The Message of Malachi*, 27,28). The trouble in Malachi’s age was not unlike that of the Gentiles described by Paul in the New Testament: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (**Rom. 1:21**). Thus, the little book of Malachi, with which the Old Testament closes, is a call to the genuine reverence which must ever characterize God’s people. The prophet’s summons to reverence may clearly be seen in the context of three of the most salient sins of Malachi’s people.

(1) Corruption of the Priesthood

When God conferred the priesthood upon the Levitical family of Aaron, He assigned vital responsibilities to them. Their various duties may be put under three general headings: (1) officiating in the various rituals of the tabernacle and temple service (**Lev. 21:6**), (2) instructing the nation in the Law of Moses (**Lev. 10:11**), and (3) adjudicating disputes over application of the law to specific cases (**Deut. 17:8-11**). In these functions — presiding over the temple sacrifices and ceremonies, teaching what God’s law required, and judging controverted cases between individuals — the priests were to play a critical role in seeing that Israel knew the Scriptures and worshiped properly. Their ministry would be a dominant influence upon the spiritual life of the nation. In short, the holiness God desired of His people would depend heavily upon the exemplary character and function of the priests.

However, when Malachi delivered his prophecy at the end of Old Testament history, the Levitical priesthood was what it had often been since Sinai: corrupt, hypocritical, and a menace to the nation they should have been serving. Malachi’s message contained a forceful rebuke to these negligent and unscrupulous priests, and a plea for them to lead Israel in a renewal of its reverence for the Lord. The sins of which the Lord’s priests were guilty are nothing less than shocking:

- a. Refusing to reverence the Lord, despising His name (**Mal. 1:6**).
- b. Offering the blind, lame, sick, etc. as sacrifices (**Mal. 1:7,8**).
- c. Treating the altar as contemptible (**Mal. 1:7,12**).
- d. Treating the Lord’s service as a wearisome drudgery (**Mal. 1:13**).
- e. Refusing to take the Lord’s warning to heart (**Mal. 2:1,2**).
- f. Corrupting the priestly covenant of Levi (**Mal. 2:4,5,8**).
- g. Not keeping the ways of the Lord (**Mal. 2:8,9**).
- h. Causing the people to stumble (**Mal. 2:8**).
- i. Showing partiality in the priestly functions (**Mal. 2:9**).

If the priests would not repent of these sins, Malachi warned of consequences commensurate with the seriousness of their spiritual crimes. Through the prophet, God said, “I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings” (**Mal. 2:2**). This may mean that the priestly blessing of the people (**Num. 6:22-27**)

would be turned into a curse, or that the priestly portion of the people's sacrifices, on which the priests depended for their sustenance, would be cursed. Further, God promised, "I will rebuke your offspring" (**Mal. 2:3**). An alternate reading is "I will rebuke your *arm*," i.e. the ability to perform the priestly sacrifices and blessings. In addition, God said, "I will . . . spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it" (**Mal. 2:3**). The repugnance of the image of dung being smeared on the faces of the priests indicates the abominableness of their actions as God saw them. Finally, God spoke of a punishment that had already begun: "I make you despised and abased before all the people" (**Mal. 2:9**). The honor in which righteous priests were to be held had been forfeited — these men deserved contempt and disrepute. Walter Kaiser points out the irony of this disrepute. Since they had shown disrespect to God in their efforts to court human popularity, God saw to it that their reward was not greater public acclaim but public mockery (*Malachi: God's Unchanging Love*, 64).

These final Old Testament warnings to the wayward priests of the "covenant of Levi" (**Mal. 2:8**) are set within the context of Malachi's messianic prophecy of a coming day when the "messenger of the covenant" (**Mal. 3:1**) would "purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD" (**Mal. 3:3**). Surely this is a reference to the spiritual priesthood of us today who are privileged "to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (**1 Pt. 2:5**). We are the very occupants of this purged and purified priesthood, having entered into it by the obedience of faith. The honor and blessings of our priesthood before the world far surpass those of the sons of Aaron before Israel. But the greater honor entails greater responsibilities, and Malachi's message ought to probe our consciences. Are we doing any better with our priesthood than the Levites were with theirs?

Malachi describes the function of our priesthood no less than that of the Levites when he says that "the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts" (**Mal. 2:7**). Ideally, the priest stands "in awe" of the Lord's name (**Mal. 2:5**), "true instruction" is in his mouth (**Mal. 2:6**), and "wrong" is never found on his lips (**Mal. 2:6**). He walks with God "in peace and uprightness" (**Mal. 2:6**), and he turns "many from iniquity" (**Mal. 2:6**). An important part of the priest's work, as G. Campbell Morgan puts it, is to tell the people the will of God, and "that not simply as one who possesses it as a wonderful theory, but as one who is himself living within the realm thereof" (*Malachi's Message for Today*, 33). But woe to those priests, then and now, who have had exactly the opposite influence and "have caused many to stumble by [their] instruction" (**Mal. 2:8**). It is sobering to contemplate what must be God's full wrath against those whose ministry it is to represent Him to others, but who, in fact, have been the occasion of others turning their backs on Him. There is no greater irreverence than that of people whose very business it is to glorify the Lord, and the warning of Malachi gives no hope to priests who, when admonished, "will not listen . . . [and] will not take it to heart" (**Mal. 2:2**).

(2) Disregard of God's Marriage Law

Another evidence of Israel's irreverence toward God was their violation of the divine will regarding marriage. There were actually two problems here. The first mentioned was intermarriage with "the daughter[s] of a foreign god" (**Mal. 2:11**). Many — some argue the priests in particular — were marrying Gentile women who were practitioners of idolatry, despite the clear prohibition of this in the Law of Moses (**Exo. 34:11-16**; **Deut. 7:1-5**). Both Ezra (**Ezra 9:1,2**) and Nehemiah (**Neh. 10:30**; **13:23-27**) describe their distress at this situation. In calling for repentance, Nehemiah says, "I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair" (**Neh. 13:25**). Malachi is equally alarmed when he says, "Judah has been

faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem” (Mal. 2:11). He said the intermarriages had “profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves” (Mal. 2:11). This seems to mean they had compromised the holiness that should have been theirs as a people uniquely belonging to God. God was not concerned about the maintenance of a pure physical bloodline, but rather a pure religious character. True to God’s original prediction, this inner holiness had always been contaminated when Israel took idolaters for their spouses (e.g. 1 Kgs. 11:1-8), and so it was in Malachi’s day.

But another, and perhaps more fundamental, problem lay behind the pagan intermarriages. As if these were not bad enough, the men of Israel had been divorcing their original wives in order to marry the idolaters! Malachi said that “the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless” (Mal. 2:14). He then asked, “Did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring” (Mal. 2:15 NKJV). There are only a handful of texts in the Old Testament that are as hard as this one to translate and interpret. But perhaps Kaiser is on the right track in his paraphrase:

Why did God make Adam and Eve only one flesh, when he might have given Adam many wives, for God certainly had more than enough of the Spirit, or his creative power, in reserve to furnish many partners? However, our God was seeking a godly offspring, and such plurality would not have been conducive to this result (*Malachi: God’s Unchanging Love*, 71,72).

It is all too obvious that Malachi’s teaching on divorce is desperately needed today. Consider the sins involved in an unscriptural divorce, even when no adulterous remarriage takes place. First, a covenant is broken to which God Himself is a party. Malachi says of the unlawfully divorced wife, “She is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal. 2:14). Centuries earlier, Solomon had said that the seductress “forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God” (Prov. 2:17). In view of the covenant involved, spouses ought to be able to rest their complete trust in the other’s dependability. When one betrays that confidence by divorce, Malachi says that he commits betrayal and treachery (Mal. 2:14-16). Further, to divorce is to perpetrate an act of injustice and violence against one’s mate (Mal. 2:16). It is an injurious harm inflicted on one who has a right to expect safety and support. To divorce one’s mate is nothing less than to back out of a God-honored covenant, to show oneself to be false hearted, and to commit cruelty in pursuit of one’s own will. It is the ultimately selfish act.

But the wrong done to a marriage partner is not the end of the matter. Malachi says, “You cover the LORD’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand” (Mal. 2:13). The men of Israel could not understand why God was not pleased with their sacrifices, but they were fools to think He would accept the “worship” of men busy doing treachery and violence to their wives. The wives were weeping for the injustice done to them, and “the tears of these mistreated wives stood as an impenetrable barrier between the worshipers and Jehovah” (Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 416). God simply will not submit Himself to the indignity of being worshiped by those who care nothing about the wrongs they have done to others (Mt. 5:23,24; 1 Pt. 3:7; etc.). Unless repentance is forthcoming, broken relationships with other human beings break our relationship with God, and those who contemplate unlawfully divorcing a spouse would do well to consider that it will be impossible to do so and continue to worship God right along. Injustice toward the creature stems from irreverence toward the Creator — and God does not accept the worship of those who do not reverence Him.

To put it pointedly, God has said not to divorce one's mate. In Jesus' words, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt. 19:6). Only one scriptural exception to this is given (Mt. 19:9). Who is bold enough to add other reasons and affirm that man may with impunity do what God said not to do? Malachi's words are as clear as they are strong: "The LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence" (Mal. 2:16 NKJV). It is not without good reason that he added to his hearers, and to us, "So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless" (Mal. 2:16).

(3) Degeneracy in Worship

From the beginning of time, God has required worship of man. He has done so not because He needs anything man is capable of giving to Him (Ac. 17:25), but because worship is inherent in the Creator-creature relationship. Man cannot survive spiritually without worship any more than he can survive physically without air to breathe. But man has not always had an accurate understanding of the nature and purpose of worship, nor has he always done what God required in the actual practice of worship. Malachi was called to prophesy to a people who had greatly perverted the divine worship, and his book deals with the irreverence they were showing at the Lord's altar.

It is disheartening to think that, within a hundred years of the return of the first Jewish exiles from their Babylonian ordeal, their worship of God had already stagnated and become vain, but that was the case. And what God had to say about it is typical of everything else the Scriptures say about vain worship: *the rebuke was blistering*. The thing they were calling worship was worse than no worship at all. The Lord pleaded, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand" (Mal. 1:10,11). God evidently did not judge the crisis to be a minor one. The worship of Israel had become empty and futile. Whatever else their sacrifices and ceremonies might have been good for, they were no good for pleasing the Lord. He did not accept them.

Malachi addressed himself to a people who had, over time, settled down to a rather mechanical concept of worship. They imagined that performance of the bare act itself was sufficient to produce the desired results, regardless of the character, attitude, or intent of the worshiper. What is more, they calculated that even the outward act could be trimmed and reduced to a convenient minimum (Mal. 1:6-14; Mal. 3:8-12). Malachi's people seem to have had little sincerity or genuine reverence about their worship. Even when they were doing what had been commanded by the Lord, their heart was not involved in their actions (Mal. 1:6). Isaiah's words, written many years earlier and quoted by the Lord in Mt. 15:8,9, are apropos: "[They] draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men" (Isa. 29:13). Malachi was simply the last in a long line of prophets God had sent to admonish Israel for the meaningless, disrespectful way in which He was being worshiped.

There was widespread social corruption and injustice among Malachi's people. The Lord said, "I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me" (Mal. 3:5). The populace seems not to have considered how offensive to God these social sins rendered their worship. They were indifferent to the vital connection between acceptable worship and godly character. Failing to understand that God was looking for obedience, purity of life, and holiness in the inner person, they evidently assumed God would be

pleased with their rituals irrespective of what they were doing outside the temple precincts. But Samuel had asked Saul the pertinent question centuries before: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22; cf. Deut. 10:12; Mic. 6:6-8).

In the New Testament, the Lord said that a certain scribe was not far from the kingdom when he said, “To love [God] with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mk. 12:33). Jesus rebuked those of His day for their confusion about what God desires from man. On more than one occasion, in exhorting the ritualistic and self-righteous Pharisees, He quoted Hos. 6:6, where God had said, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” Cf. Mt. 9:13; 12:7.

Today, we sorely need to hear these words. If we think that we can turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the disadvantaged (Jas. 1:27), indulge in secret immorality (1 Tim. 2:8), live lives of bitterness, hostility, and enmity (Mt. 5:23,24), and then come and bow our heads piously before the table of the Lord on His day, we are badly mistaken. One of the Proverbs says simply, “If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov. 28:9). And God said through Isaiah, “I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly” (Isa. 1:13; cf. vv. 10-17). To live unrighteously and then to go through the motions of righteous worship is to make a mockery of all that worship is intended to be. It is to treat God Himself with an offhanded contempt worse than outright blasphemy. God has always been more patient with hatred in His foes than hypocrisy in His friends.

In Malachi’s day, however, the worship of Israel had one other fault: it was a worship of mere convenience rather than of true sacrifice. God said, “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions” (Mal. 3:8). Furthermore, according to the Law of Moses, each animal to be sacrificed as a burnt offering to the Lord was to be without blemish of any kind; it was to be the very best the offerer had (Lev. 22:17-25; Deut. 17:1; etc.). But those to whom Malachi preached were offering animals that were blind, lame, sick, and possibly even stolen (Mal. 1:8,13,14). In these offerings, they were giving God less than they gave their civil rulers in taxes. Through Malachi, God said to them, “Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor?” (Mal. 1:8). They were actually trying to swindle the Lord. “Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished” (Mal. 1:14). Indeed, “only a desire to be something in public that one was not in one’s own heart could have led to this type of showmanship” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Malachi: God’s Unchanging Love*, 50).

King David, of course, had exemplified the correct attitude about offerings to the Lord. When Araunah offered to donate to David the materials for a sacrifice, David replied, “No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24). It represents no great love for the Lord to “sacrifice” to Him whatever one can easily get along without. Hence, Jesus said of the poor widow who dropped two mites into the temple treasury, “[She] has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (Mk. 12:43,44). Though today the Lord does not require tithes and animal sacrifices, we still need Malachi’s admonition. We are the Gentiles among whom the Lord said, “My name will be great” (Mal. 1:11). Our offering to Him must be “a pure offering” (Mal. 1:11). Whether it is time, money, or ourselves we are contributing to the Lord’s cause, it will have to

be more than the surplus we skim off our abundance. The Hebrew writer urged, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (**Hb. 12:28,29**). He will not be mocked with our leftovers.

At the bottom of it all, the worship which Malachi condemned was wrong for one basic reason: *it trifled with the greatness of God*. It was of the sort described by Solomon as “the sacrifice of fools” (**Eccl. 5:1**). It insulted God by using Him as a means to selfish ends; it was something in which the worshipers sought maximum carnal gains from minimum spiritual investments. And as might be expected, they had grown tired of playing even this game. They were slouching through their rituals with the sneer, “What a weariness this is” (**Mal. 1:13**). Their perfunctory and slovenly worship had become little more than a drudgery, and Malachi warned in no uncertain terms that Israel was wasting whatever time they spent in this chore. Until the day when their worship could be an expression of loving reverence for the Lord of hosts, the doors of the temple should remain shut (**Mal. 1:10**).

Conclusion: The Messenger of the Covenant

As was typical of the prophets, Malachi laid great stress on the covenant of God with His people and on the unfaithfulness of Israel to that covenant. Had it not been for God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham (**Gen. 15:18; 17:2**; etc.) and the covenant He made with Israel at Sinai (**Exo. 19:5,6; 34:27**; etc.), the nation would long since have passed away with other peoples under the righteous judgment of God: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (**Mal. 3:6**). Despite the Lord’s steadfast love, however, Israel had not kept the covenant. God said, “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them” (**Mal. 3:7**). Malachi deplored the sins of the people as covenant violations. In regard to the pagan intermarriages, for example, he said, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?” (**Mal. 2:10**). Similarly, the priestly corruptions were transgressions of the “covenant of Levi” (**Mal. 2:8**; cf. **2:4,5**).

Conditions in and around Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile did not appear to be consistent with God’s promise of blessing to His reinstated people, and the people themselves could think of nothing to attribute this to except God’s indifference. Yet certain blessings of the covenant were clearly dependent on obedience to the Law of Moses (**Deut. 28**), and Malachi saw with a clear eye exactly what the problem was: the God of the covenant was being dishonored in the hearts of Israel. The Lord of hosts was being cheated (**Mal. 1:14**), robbed (**Mal. 3:8**), sneered at (**Mal. 1:13**), insulted and treated with contempt (**Mal. 1:7,12**). Harsh words were being spoken against Him (**Mal. 3:13**), His name was being profaned (**Mal. 1:12**), His justice was being called into question (**Mal. 2:17**), and His patience was being worn thin by their words (**Mal. 2:17**). The people denied that God loved them (**Mal. 1:2**), and they had openly begun to doubt there was any advantage in serving God, complaining that God blessed the wicked more than the righteous (**Mal. 3:14,15**). From our vantage point, it is nearly incredible that these backsliders were still expecting God’s blessing. There was irreverence piled upon irreverence. Yet, despite all this, Israel was blindly ignorant that she had a problem. Charged with despising God’s name, the people’s dumbfounded response was: “In what way have we despised Your name?”

It is crucial to note that these covenant-breakers in Israel were not in open, deliberate rebellion against God. To read the horrible ways in which God said they had shown disrespect to Him, we might easily think of

them as blatant sinners who had departed from the Lord altogether. But that was not the case. From God's perspective, they were worse than blatant sinners. These were men and women, perhaps not totally unlike ourselves, who, to borrow Paul's words, had "a form of godliness" (2 Tim. 3:5) but denied the power of it. If they were shaving the corners a bit, they were still continuing to go through most of the outward motions of the public worship of God. Their sins were religiously respectable, and their problem was on the inside, where only God sees. Is it not possible that God at times sees in us the same shallowness of faith, the same selfishness, the same compromise, the same weariness with worship — in short, the same basic lack of reverence that plagued Israel? If so, we need to hear Malachi's warning.

There were those in Malachi's day, as there have always been, who had such a grossly inadequate understanding of their own sins that they looked forward to the day when God would pour out His vengeance on "the wicked." And Malachi left no doubt that a day of reckoning was ahead: "Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze" (Mal. 4:1). But if Israel welcomed this punitive aspect of the Messiah's coming, they might be surprised to find themselves among those burned up.

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming . . . But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD (Mal. 3:1-3).

For those who had trifled with the awesome holiness of God, the coming of the Messiah would not be a joyful event.

But, God be thanked, there was also in Malachi's day a righteous remnant. For these, the Messiah would bring joy.

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. "They shall be mine," says the LORD of hosts, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him" (Mal. 3:16,17).

The Lord continues, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 4:2,3). To those who knew what true reverence meant, the coming of the Messiah would be as the morning rise of the life-giving sun with healing in its rays.

Malachi showed, however, that another figure must come before the Messiah. Through the prophet, God said, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (Mal. 3:1). And at the very end of the prophecy, God foretold, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction" (Mal. 4:5,6). No Old Testament prophecy is interpreted any more clearly in the New Testament than this one, which is a prophecy of John the Baptist, whose work it was to proclaim the repentance from sin without which Christ and His kingdom could not be received (Mt. 11:7-15; 17:9-13; Mk. 1:1-4; Lk. 1:16,17,76,77; Jn. 1:23; 3:28).

Thus we come to “the end of the end” of the Old Testament. God had brought Israel into nationhood and entered into His covenant with them. He had sustained them, blessed them, preached to them, punished them, and restored them. After all this, Israel persisted in irreverent sin. Through Malachi, God issued one last call for repentance, announced the coming of one who would prepare the way for the Messiah, and proclaimed the advent of the Messiah Himself. There was nothing more that God could do or say to Israel until “the fullness of time had come” ([Gal. 4:4,5](#)) four hundred years later.

Malachi’s prophecy ends with this threat of the Lord, “Lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” ([Mal. 4:6](#)). The Gospel of John says, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” ([Jn. 1:17](#)). Placing the law of the Old Covenant over against the grace of the New Covenant, many commentators point out that Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, ends with the word *curse*, while Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, ends on a note of *blessing*. It is surely no coincidence that this is true. Even so, we had better be careful not to underestimate the relevance of Malachi’s curse to ourselves. In the present dispensation of grace, it is just as necessary for us to reverence God as it was for the Jews of ancient Jerusalem. If we do not hold God in our hearts with genuine godly fear, Malachi’s curse will fall on us as surely it did on those of his own day. God requires that we honor and respect Him, not only in word but also in deed. He seeks from us a worship that is truly worship, one that heeds His instructions, as well as one that springs from hearts of love and faith. He requires that we fear His name. As in Malachi’s day, so in ours, God’s words roll thunderously down from heaven: “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear?” ([Mal. 1:6](#)).

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“I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVES” (JOB 19:25)

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THE “PROBLEM OF PAIN” IS A PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL CONCERN. It touches everybody sooner or later. And the problem of pain is more than a philosophical question. When suffering enters our lives, we cry out for relief. When relief does not come, we beg for an explanation: Why are we suffering so? Are we being punished for some sin that we have committed? But rarely is any specific answer available to us. Our means of making a living is suddenly taken away. A child dies a tragic death. We learn that we have a terminal illness. A family member leaves the Lord and plunges into a life of sin. These and a horrible list of other hardships can rip our lives apart, and when they do, God does not explain to us personally why our hearts had to be broken so painfully. Faced with this agony, more than a few people have left the faith. How can a good God exist if these atrocities are allowed to happen?

No book in the Bible speaks to the issue of unexplained suffering any more than the Book of Job, and no passage in Job speaks to the issue more powerfully than **19:23-27**. **Verse 25**, in which Job cries, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth,” is certainly one of the great texts in the Old Testament. Indeed, it is one of the greatest of the great texts. Properly understood and courageously applied to our own thinking, **Job 19:25** can be a strong part of the foundation of our faith. In the real world, where bad things do happen to good people, it can make the difference between hope and despair.

In this study, our review of the passage will be divided into three sections. First, we will discuss the meaning of the passage its original context. Second, we will notice two factors that make the passage all the more striking. And third, we will apply the passage to our situation today.

The Meaning of the Passage

For all its greatness, **Job 19:23-27** is one of the hardest texts in the Old Testament. It is hard to translate, in one or two places the Hebrew text may have been miscopied, and almost every phrase in the passage can be taken in more than one way. A comparison of even a few modern translations will show conspicuous differences in how the details of the passage can be understood. So the passage needs to be approached with great care. Despite the difficulties, however, the main point of Job’s declaration stands out clearly. With that in mind, then, let us examine the passage to see what it was that Job declared concerning God.

In the earlier part of chapter nineteen, Job had been responding to the discourse of Bildad who, along with two other friends, Eliphaz and Zophar, had reasoned that the tribulations which had overwhelmed Job were simply God’s response to sins that Job must have committed. Job was being chastened for his sins, they had argued, and not only that, but the magnitude of the chastening meant that his sins must have been quite

serious. Against that charge, Job had maintained his innocence. He was not a perfect man, of course, but he knew himself to be a godly man. He knew himself to be the kind of person he was described as being in **1:1**: “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.” Cf. **1:8; 2:3**. In a court of law, Job would have sworn, “I, Job, do solemnly aver that I have committed no such transgression as to warrant the catastrophe that has befallen me” (Archer, 74).

Job did not know what the reason for his suffering was, but he knew one thing that it was not, and that was the sinfulness that his friends were falsely attributing to him. Under their onslaught, Job had stood his ground, steadfastly defending his integrity. His friends were being cruelly unfair to him. “Have pity on me,” he said, “have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has struck me! Why do you persecute me as God does, and are not satisfied with my flesh?” (**vv.21,22**). The hand of God had struck him. God was persecuting him. He had no idea why, and from his vantage point it all looked quite unjust, but his friends were only making matters worse by falsely accusing him.

So at this point in the Book of Job, Job’s argument was something like this: I am suffering horribly. God, who could at least have kept this from happening, is ultimately responsible, but I do not know why He has chosen for me to suffer so. I see nothing about this situation that would make it anything less than an injustice to me, and my friends, who should be standing by me, are standing against me. Such was Job’s plea in the middle of his ordeal. But no one seemed willing to listen or to agree that he might be right. So Job wished that his words might be written down. Later, perhaps after he was dead and gone, what he had said might be remembered and it might be seen that his cause was just.

“Oh, that my words were written! Oh, that they were inscribed in a book! That they were engraved on a rock with an iron pen and lead, forever!” (**vv.23,24**). In a series of three progressively stronger statements, Job says that he wishes a permanent record might be made of his words: (1) that they might be written down rather than just spoken, (2) that they might be inscribed on a scroll, which is a more durable medium, and (3) that they might be chiseled into stone with an iron stylus and filled with lead, thus making a record as permanent as any human record could be.

What Job is doing here amounts to the same thing as when we use the expression, “Mark my words.” What we mean is, “Remember what I’ve said. Write it down if you have to. The time will come when the truthfulness of what I’ve said will be borne out.” It may be that Job didn’t expect to live long enough to personally see the truth of his words demonstrated, so he wished that a record might be made that would last until that time came.

Job’s desire for a written, permanent record of his plea would have been meaningless if he had thought the future would never bring anything different than the present. But here is where Job’s bedrock, end-of-the-day confidence in God shone through the cracks in the clouds around him. Job was a hurting man whose pain had made him miserable, perplexed, and even angry. But at even the worst of his ordeal, he still hung on and reached forward to the future. The present made no sense to Job, but he doggedly refused to let go of a future in which there would be some relief, however distant that future might be. In some of the most powerful language in the Old Testament, Job then gave three reasons why he wished his words could be written down, each expressing a confidence in something that he knew about the future:

“For I know that my Redeemer lives” (**v.25a**). The first confidence Job had was that there was one who would redeem him. “Redeemer” (NKJV) is a translation of the Hebrew *gōēl*. Other possible translations are

avenger, vindicator, defender, or deliverer. Many versions capitalize their translation of *gōēl* in this verse, indicating their editorial decision that the term here refers to God. Other versions leave the word uncapitalized, indicating the possibility that Job may not have been speaking of God. Before we make our own decision about that, we need to look at how *gōēl* was used elsewhere in the Old Testament.

The primary use of the noun *gōēl*, and its corresponding verb *gā'al*, had to do with family law. These terms referred to “the duty of a relative to protect and defend the rights of a member of his family who was in trouble” (Gibson, 151). If a person had to sell himself into slavery to pay his debts, a near relative could redeem him (**Lev. 25:47-49**). If a person had to sell his property to pay his debts, his closest relative was to be given the first opportunity to buy the land and keep it in the family (**Lev. 25:25; Ruth 4:1-6**). The most dramatic case, of course, involved murder: a kinsman avenged a wrongful death by killing the one who was guilty (**Num. 35:9-34; Deut. 19:1-13**).

But *gōēl* could also be used of God. In **Isa. 49:26**, God said to His people, “I will feed those who oppress you with their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with sweet wine. All flesh shall know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, and your Redeemer (*gōēl*), the Mighty One of Jacob.” Cf. **Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 47:4; 49:7; 54:5; 63:16**. In **Jer. 50:33,34**, this hope was given to those who were facing captivity in Babylon: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: The children of Israel were oppressed, along with the children of Judah; all who took them captive have held them fast; they have refused to let them go. Their Redeemer (*gōēl*) is strong; the LORD of hosts is His name. He will thoroughly plead their case, that He may give rest to the land, and disquiet the inhabitants of Babylon.” But the nearest parallel to **Job 19:25** may be **Psa. 19:14**, where David prayed, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer (*gōēl*).”

Looking at all of these passages, the common idea is that of deliverance from trouble. Sometimes the *gōēl* was an earthly kinsman; sometimes it was God. Sometimes a price had to be paid; sometimes it did not. But the essential idea is that a *gōēl*, or redeemer, comes to the aid of a loved one and solves the particular problem that has arisen.

In the passage we are studying, Job declares his confidence that no matter how terrible his troubles might turn out to be, he still had a *gōēl*, a near-kinsman redeemer, who would deal with the difficulty. But of whom does he speak: God or someone else? The choice may not be as clear as the traditional interpretation makes it seem, but after studying and restudying the passage, I believe the traditional interpretation is in fact correct. **Verse 25** is part of a section that clearly refers to God. If all we had was the bare statement “I know that my redeemer lives,” the question would be more difficult. But **v.25** can hardly be separated from **vv.26,27**. Andersen is right when he says, “[**V**]erses 25-27 are so tightly knit that there should be no doubt that the Redeemer is God” (194). Job is affirming his confidence that, when all was said and done, right would be done in regard to his suffering, and that the One who would take care of this would be none other than God himself.

But after having laid the responsibility for his suffering at God’s feet (**19:1-22**), what sense would it make for Job to look to this same God for ultimate vindication? Here, I believe, is an area where we have something to learn from Job about the meaning of both total honesty and real faith.

First of all, real faith is neither blind faith nor wishful thinking; it is based on solid evidence. Job’s confidence in God was founded on the past words and deeds by which God had proven his trustworthiness, not only

in Job's past but before Job was born. At the end of the book, Job will say to God that, prior to his ordeal of suffering, he had "heard of You by the hearing of the ear" (42:5). Job's faith was based on the testimony of witnesses to God's past words and deeds.

But second, with such a faith Job could look beyond the confusing circumstances that surrounded him at the moment. No matter how much long-term, large-perspective evidence may exist for God and His goodness, immediate circumstances can hide that evidence from us. At night, for example, there is no immediate evidence that such a thing as daylight exists, but it would be a fool who quit believing in daylight just because there was no evidence for it at night. When it's dark, an unbeliever might say, "Where is the evidence now that daylight exists?" and a believer would have no answer to that question — at the moment. But what about past evidence? Past evidence doesn't suddenly cease to exist when a moment arrives containing questions can't be answered.

Job was more honest than most of us would have been about the unanswerability of the questions that surrounded him. He refused to sugarcoat those questions with pious platitudes. To the contrary, he pressed the issue of the seeming unfairness of what was happening to him. From what he could see at the moment, there was no acceptable reason why he should be suffering so, and he spoke about that with extreme frankness. But even as he was saying, "God, You have struck me for no good reason that I can see," he could also say, "God, Your reasoning is beyond all earthly reason, and I rest my hopes on You. I trust that You are my Redeemer, my Near-Kinsman, who will someday do what is right about whatever is wrong."

There is no inconsistency between Job's charges against God and his confidence that God would still be his Redeemer. Commenting on Job, C. S. Lewis said it well:

No explanation of the problem of unjust suffering is . . . given: that is not the point of the poem. The point is that the man who accepts our ordinary standard of good and by it hotly criticizes divine justice receives the divine approval: the orthodox, pious people who palter with that standard in the attempt to justify God are condemned. Apparently the way to advance from our imperfect apprehension of justice to the absolute justice is not to throw our imperfect apprehensions aside but boldly to go on applying them. Just as the pupil advances to more perfect arithmetic not by throwing his multiplication table away but by working it for all it is worth (69,70).

Job declared his faith in God was his Redeemer at a time when he was anguished and uncertain about many things. Yet his honesty was his salvation; he was too honest to renege on what he knew about God. He hadn't a clue why he had been hurt so badly, but he was certain that there will be an ultimate vindication of goodness and truth. As to the specifics, he knew fewer of the details than we do with our fuller revelation of God, but whatever details he may not have understood, Job had a vice-grip on one thing: God was God, and God would do what was right — sooner or later.

His faith was not unlike that of the three Hebrew men who were about to be cast into Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter, if that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" (Dan. 3:16-18). Even if God did not do what, in their judgment, seemed to be the right thing, the evidence for His goodness was still what it always had been, and they would not back away from that evidence. Similarly, Job could say of God, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him" (13:15).

Where Job went wrong, of course, was in overestimating what he knew of the world. If all he had said was, “Based on what I know of the facts (and that is very little), it appears that I have been wronged by God,” that would have been one thing. But in his frustration, Job went further and talked as if what he knew was all there was to know, and therefore that God had surely wronged him. God was patient with this, of course, since Job truly did love God, but in the end God had to chasten Job and remind him that he actually knew very little of the ways of the world. Once Job’s perspective had been adjusted, he could see that when any human being says, “Based on what I know,” what he knows is very little indeed. And so Job repented, confessing that he had been wrong to forget the gap between his knowledge and God’s knowledge (42:1-6).

But it was not wrong for Job to express his confusion, and even his anger, in the throes of an ordeal that had no apparent explanation. His confusion and anger were very different from those of a blasphemer or a rebel against God’s will. At the bitterest moment of his bewilderment, with unanswered questions that made him angry even to think about, Job could still say, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” That’s not inconsistency; that’s real faith.

“And He shall stand at last on the earth” (v.25b). The second confidence Job had was that his Redeemer would have the last say. “Standing” is probably a legal term, as when a witness “stands up” in court to set the record straight. The Revised English Bible translates this verse, “I know that my vindicator lives and that he will rise last to speak in court.” This rendering is consistent with the role of the *gō’ēl*, the redeemer, as the one who defends the legal cause of a person who has suffered. In **Prov. 23:10,11**, for example, we read, “Do not remove the ancient landmark, nor enter the fields of the fatherless; for their Redeemer (*gō’ēl*) is mighty; He will plead their cause against you.” Job is confident that God will do this for him. When all of the other witnesses have had their say, God will take the stand “at last.” History may have its ups and downs, but God will have the last say. The truth will be known, and right will be done.

“And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (vv.26,27a). The third confidence Job had was that the time would come when he would see God.

This part of the passage is notoriously difficult. To illustrate how differently the passage can be translated, we need only compare the King James Version and the American Standard Version:

And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:
whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another (KJV).

And after my skin, even this body, is destroyed, then without my flesh shall I see God;
Whom I, even I, shall see, on my side, and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger (ASV).

Space does not permit a detailed examination of all the difficulties here, but a few points may be noticed.

(1) “After my skin is destroyed.” The KJV needlessly inserts “worms” into the text. The point is simply that Job’s skin (and by extension, his body) was wasting away. He had “painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7), and he foresaw a time when he would die. The language literally means “when my skin has been struck off.”

(2) “In my flesh I shall see God.” The Hebrew preposition *min* (“from”) can mean “away from,” and so the ASV translates this “without my flesh I shall see God.” Archer, however, comments, “In some contexts

min may mean ‘without,’ but never with the verb to see. Always min indicates the vantage point from which the seeing or viewing is done” (75). So Job is saying, “Even after my skin has been stripped off my body, I will see God in my own flesh” (God’s Word translation).

(3) “Whom I shall see for myself.” “For myself” is literally “to me” and may be taken in a benefactive sense: “for me” or “on my side.” So the Living Bible translates, “Then he will be on my side!” But Andersen says, “‘Whom I shall see for myself’ cannot be improved on” (194).

(4) “My eyes shall behold, and not another.” “Another” is from *zar* which can mean “stranger.” It would be possible to take the word as the object of the verb rather than as a second subject, in which case the meaning would be, “I shall see him not as a stranger, but as a friend.” But there is no compelling reason to reject the conventional translation.

All things considered, the NKJV has done a commendable job of negotiating the various difficulties in translating **vv.26,27a**: “And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

But can Job really be saying what he seems to be saying? So far back in Old Testament history, is he expressing what would amount to a faith in a bodily resurrection after death? Andersen offers several good reasons for answering in the affirmative:

First, there would be no need for Job to deposit a written testimony, if he expects to be vindicated before he dies. Secondly, the word translated earth, as used in Job, is constantly connected with Sheol, and the statement that the Redeemer lives is a direct answer to the fact that a man dies (**14:10**). The repetition of the word after (-wards) in the prominent position at the beginning of **verses 25b** and **26a** suggests an interval, or even, with the meaning at last, something eschatological. Finally, the argument that Job does not expect personal reconstitution as a man, because this idea entered Judaism only towards the very end of the biblical period, can be dismissed in the light of much recent research that shows interest in the after-life as an ancient concern for Israelite faith (194).

I personally believe this passage contains one of the earliest references in the Bible to a bodily resurrection. Job might not have known what we know of the resurrection (cf. **1 Pt. 1:10-12**), and when he spoke of seeing God in his flesh, he probably spoke more truth than he knew he was speaking (cf. **Jn. 11:49-52**). Nevertheless, Job seems to have believed that the time would come when, after his present body had been destroyed, he would have some kind of a body in which he would see God. I believe the Living Bible is correct in its rendering of **v.26**: “I know that after this body has decayed, this body shall see God!” As contradictory as it sounds, that is exactly what the doctrine of the bodily resurrection asks us to believe. If we die before the Lord returns, then the body in which we now live will decompose and our spirits will go back to God who gave them (**Eccl. 12:7**; **1 Thess. 4:13,14**). But at the resurrection, our bodies — our bodies, no less — will be raised. They will be changed into glorious bodies that are no longer corruptible or mortal (**1 Cor. 15:50-54**; **2 Cor. 5:1-4**), but they will still be our bodies, as hard-to-understand as that may be (**1 Cor. 15:35**).

After His resurrection, Jesus had a body that was gloriously different from his previous body, but it was still His body. There was some discontinuity between the before and after, but there was also some continuity. When His disciples saw Him, they probably noticed wonderful differences, but they also recognized His body as being the body of Jesus (**Jn. 20:24-29**). A similar transformation will happen to us, if we are found

in Christ at the resurrection. So John says, “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn. 3:2).

So to sum up, Job 19:26,27 is hard to translate. But despite the difficulties of translation, the clear emphasis of the passage is plain: Job expected to see God. Job had what David (Psa. 17:15; 73:23,24; 139:8) and all the other great fathers of the faith had: a determined confidence that death would not break off a communion with God that had begun in this life.

“How my heart yearns within me!” (v.27b). The thought of seeing God was almost more than Job could bear. “He nearly swooned at the thought” (Ellison, 69). To actually see the God who was his Redeemer was more than a mere preference; it was a heart-wrenching passion. And so it should be with us today.

Two Factors That Make the Passage Striking

What Job says in 19:23-27 is impressive by any account, but just how extraordinary it is may not be seen until we notice a couple of things about it:

(1) *Job was a man who had serious questions about God.* We sometimes do with Job 19:25 what we often do with great texts: we pull it out of context and preach it as a stand-alone principle of truth. Doing this makes Job look like a man who, in the midst of trials and tribulations, still had a buoyant attitude and a triumphant spirit: “I know that my Redeemer lives!” And when we’re suffering, we foolishly wish that we could have as few questions and doubts as Job.

But as we have already suggested, real faith does not mean having no questions. Job was racked with uncertainty, and his gritty declaration of faith in vv.23-27 should be seen in its context. Job 19 is not a bright, sunny chapter; it is filled with a discouragement that few of us have ever felt. When he said, “I know that my Redeemer lives,” Job was not pouring pious syrup over his problems; he was wrestling with God, much as Jacob had to do in Gen. 32:22-32. What was happening to him made no sense, and he was willing to say the same kind of thing that Abraham had said to God, “Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Cf. Hab. 1:2-4,12-14.

We need to understand that the solid foundations of our faith will sometimes be hidden from us; there will be too many tears in our eyes to see the evidence that has been so plain in the past. But that does not mean that faith is any less an option at those times. Real faith means doing what Job did: hanging on in the darkness to evidence we remember having seen in the light. And if it comes to it, we must be willing to do what Job did in 19:23-27. No matter how discouraged we may be at a given moment, we must be willing to reach up out of the muck and the mire and hold on for dear life to the truth that God is God, whether we feel like it or not. There will be times, maybe few, when our faith is easy and enjoyable, but there will also be times, maybe many, when our faith will be no more than sheer, dogged determination. Against all reason that we can see from within our straitened circumstances, we must be willing to say what Job said, having heard the testimony of God in the past: “I know that my Redeemer lives.”

(2) *Job was a godly man.* One reason Job’s friends may have been so eager to find wrongdoing in his life is that it would have given them a measure of security to do so. After all, Job’s sufferings were not the

kind of thing anybody would want to happen to themselves, and it would have been reassuring to them to know that Job was suffering only because he had committed serious sin. As long as they avoided sins like Job's, they could feel protected against hardships like his. But what if Job's sufferings were not the consequence of sin? What if that kind of thing could happen to a godly person? They were godly people themselves, at least on some level, and the possibility that a man as godly as Job could suffer that horribly would have been an unsettling thought.

Because we have the information in chapters one and two that Job's friends did not have, we know that Job was a godly man, innocent of the charges they were making against him, and that Job's sufferings were not the consequence of any sin that he had committed. What this means is simply this: godly people can suffer as painfully in this world as anybody else. It is simply not true that the godly man will have no heartaches. In fact, Job's sufferings came upon him because he was a godly man, and if such things befell a man like Job, are any of us exempt? Are we anything but naive if we think that we are going to get through this life without hurting and grieving and being tested? When we have given the Lord our best and still have our hearts broken, Peter would say to us, "Do not think it strange" (1 Pt. 4:12).

Application to Our Situation

Many applications of this great text might be made to us today. Here are just four:

(1) *It is not wrong to long for vindication.* It is a fact that bad things can happen to us in this world, and when they happen at the hands of other people, it is not wrong to cry out for God to do what is right about the wrongs that we have suffered. Job was mistreated by his friends, and he was right to cry out to God to defend his cause. David, in the imprecatory psalms, often voiced similar sentiments (Psa. 69:22-28; 109:6-20; etc.). In the New Testament, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "It is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God" (2 Thess. 1:6-8). And in the Revelation given to John, those who had been slain for the word of God "cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (Rev. 6:10). Admittedly, the prayer for God to "avenge our blood" is a dangerous prayer. Few can pray it without hypocrisy or without letting sinful thoughts creep in. But on the other hand, if we are too nice to hate what God hates, then we've become far too nice.

(2) *It is possible to have the kind of integrity that Job had.* As we have said, Job was not sinless, for none have lived sinlessly in this world except the Lord. But Job was something it is possible for a human being to be: he was blameless (1:1,8; 2:3). If you wanted to make a charge against Job, you could find nothing to charge him with but the common foibles that all people are prone to. In that respect, Job was like Daniel (Dan. 6:4,5). It is high time we understood that a godly, faithful life is possible. It was so even before the coming of Christ, as evidenced by the commendation of Zacharias and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents: "they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Lk. 1:6). And blamelessness is not merely an option; we are commanded to lead blameless lives. "Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:14,15; cf. 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Pt. 3:14; etc.). Often, "I'm only human" is not an expression of humility; it's only an excuse for irresponsibility. We need to quit making excuses and get busy living the kind

of life that Job lived — and Enoch and Abraham and Daniel and many others. We need to build the kind of record that can be defended as steadfastly as Job was able to defend his.

(3) *We need to be honest enough to see when our integrity is not what Job's was. Job was right, but that doesn't mean that we are.* Before we get carried away defending our blamelessness and calling upon God to blast our enemies, we need to consider that, in our case, God might say our enemies are right and we are wrong! It's easy to assume our own rightness and our enemies' wrongness, but that might not be the truth of the matter. When the Judge considers all the evidence and gives His perfect judgment, those of us who have called loudly for justice may find that what we need is not justice but mercy. So while it is possible to be in Job's position and know that we have been mistreated, it takes a person of more than average honesty to see when that is true and when it is not. The people of Malachi's day looked forward to the coming of the day of the Lord, when He would punish the Gentiles. And that day was indeed coming, but it would hold some serious surprises for many who thought they were the "good" folks. "The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. But," the prophet added, "who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" (**Mal. 3:1,2**). The day of justice will be a fearful day, no less for many churchgoers than for the atheists and the apostates (cf. **Rom. 2:17-24**).

(4) *There MUST be a Redeemer who will someday stand up and do what is right.* There is much about the world as it stands today that does not make any moral sense. The world is full of suffering, and much of it is suffered by people who have done nothing to bring it upon themselves. In short, much of what happens in the world is wrong and requires vindication. We may bear it for now in the hope that justice will be done later, but if there were never to be any vindication at all, we would have to say that this life is worse than no life at all. As one writer put it, "Vindication rescues life from absurdity" (Ciholas, 176). There MUST be a Redeemer who will at last stand upon the earth, or else life is meaningless. There is no safe middle ground, and we need to be honest enough to confront that reality.

Conclusion

The hope of the gospel of Christ is that there is indeed a Redeemer who will stand up and do what is right about all that is wrong. Job could not have known much of what we know about the kind of redemption Christ would accomplish, but he did not really need to know the details. He simply needed to trust — as he surely did — that at some point in the future God would act on behalf of those who had been faithful to Him. And so the "words of Job have now echoed throughout eternity, having become real in the person of Christ through whom the Jobs of all times can have an audience with God" (Ciholas, 178).

God has placed monumental evidence on record, above all in the resurrection of His Son, that He can be trusted. And He asks us, despite whatever momentary doubts may assail us, to hang on to two truths: (1) that He is (His existence) and (2) that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (His benevolence). Cf. **Hb. 11:6**. He asks us not only to believe these things intellectually but to be confident of them and to entrust ourselves to Him when we are suffering. Oh, how we need to learn the meaning of entrusting ourselves to God (**Hb. 13:5,6; 1 Pt. 5:6,7**; etc.). How we need to be able to say what Paul said, "For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (**2 Tim. 1:12**). And how we need to do what Peter said, "Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in

doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Pt. 4:19).

The reward of righteousness is not here and now. This world will never again be what it was before sin did its damage, and to live in this world is to hurt. The Lord lived perfectly in this world, but that didn't keep Him from suffering (Jn. 11:35), and living as His people won't keep us from suffering. So our expectations of life in this world shouldn't be too high. We shouldn't expect to do much more than groan. Paul wrote, “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance” (Rom. 8:22-25).

In the here and now, if we ever quit groaning, the devil will have us (2 Cor. 5:1-8). Most of us will need some “thorn in the flesh” to keep us from getting too comfortable this side of heaven. Our thorns may not be any more comfortable than Job's boils, and when we cry for relief, God's answer may be what it has often been when His people have cried for relief: “Not yet. Hold on a while longer.” If our attitude is what it ought to be, we will think about suffering as Paul did. We will look upon anything that pries our grip loose from this world as something to be thankful for. “Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:8-10).

God does not plan to renovate this world and take the pain out of it; He plans to destroy it and give us a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pt. 3:10-13). Until that time comes, we should be prepared to suffer. Our hope must not be in the betterment of this world, whether by our own or anyone else's effort, but in Christ's ability to overcome the world. “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace,” He said to the apostles. “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

So when we find ourselves in some predicament like Job's, even if only to a smaller extent, the thing that will get us through is the same kind of grit that he had, the same determination not to give up, and the same through-it-all faith that God will settle every account in the end. It's the kind of faith pictured so powerfully in Maltbie D. Babcock's great hymn, “This Is My Father's World”:

This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.

Oh, that my words were written! Oh, that they were inscribed in a book! That they were engraved on a rock with an iron pen and lead, forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

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THE NEW EXODUS

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SHORTLY AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST, THERE CAME A DAY WHEN PETER AND JOHN WENT TO THE TEMPLE AT THE HOUR OF PRAYER. At the Beautiful Gate, they encountered a lame man who asked them for alms. “Silver and gold I do not have,” said Peter, “but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk” (**Acts 3:6**). Immediately the man was healed of his lameness. With the apostles, he entered the temple greatly rejoicing and praising God for his deliverance from a lifelong affliction. The text says that those in the crowd were astonished to see this man walking upright: “Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” (**Acts 3:10**).

Peter began his discourse to this amazed audience by saying, “Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this?” (**Acts 3:12**). *Why do you marvel?* If these Jewish people found it hard to believe that a lame man could be delivered from his physical ailment, then they had probably forgotten their history as a people. The God who had made this man well was none other than “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers” (**Acts 3:12**). The God of Israel had a long and well-established record of delivering His people from bondage and oppression. It was this God who had sent Moses to bring them out of Egypt, and it was Moses who had said, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear” (**Deut. 18:15**). The gospel of Jesus Christ is first and foremost a gospel of *deliverance* (**Luke 4:16-21**), and no one ought to be surprised at it who has read the story of the Exodus in the Jewish Scriptures. *We only find it hard to believe God’s acts of deliverance in the present when we forget the acts of deliverance that He has already accomplished in the past.* Our deliverance from sin today is the New Exodus, and we are prepared to believe it if we have “gotten the point” of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.

The Exodus as a Prefiguring of Salvation from Sin in Jesus Christ

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the elements of the gospel are seen more clearly in the story of the Exodus than in any other part of the Old Testament. There is virtually no aspect of our redemption from sin in Jesus Christ that was not prefigured by the Exodus. The most basic parallel, of course, is that in the Old Testament Israel was delivered from physical captivity, while in Christ, we are delivered from spiritual bondage to sin. But in addition to this general parallel, there are a number of others that are more specific:

1. The Exodus was led by Moses, a prophet sent from God, who gave himself up completely to the work of freeing God’s people; the leader of the New Exodus is Jesus Christ, the great Prophet of whom Moses was a type or foreshadowing (**Deut. 18:15,18; Acts 3:22,23**).
2. The Exodus was not accomplished without the shedding of blood. On the eve of the Exodus,

- the blood of the Passover lamb was shed; Christ is our Passover, the Lamb of God (**John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:18,19; Rev. 7:14; 12:11**).
3. Israel ate of the Passover lamb; we eat and drink of Christ when we assimilate His teaching (**John 6:53-56**).
 4. Israel was to commemorate the Passover each year; we are to commemorate Christ's sacrifice each Lord's Day (**Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor. 11:23-29**). The commemoration of Christ's sacrifice was even instituted as Jesus ate the Passover meal with His apostles.
 5. God "redeemed" Israel from slavery; we are "redeemed" from sin (**Exod. 15:13; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:13,14; Hb. 9:12; Rev. 5:9**).
 6. To allow themselves to be delivered, Israel had to be willing to follow God's instructions based on their trust in Him; our deliverance from sin also requires trust and obedience (**Rom. 1:5; Eph. 1:12,13; Hb. 11:29; Jas. 2:14-26**).
 7. The Exodus was an act of God's grace; our deliverance from sin is an act of God's grace (**Exod. 2:24,25; 15:13; Isa. 63:9; Ezek. 16:3-6; Eph. 2:8,9; 2 Tim. 1:9,10**).
 8. Israel's freedom lay on the other side of a baptism in the Red Sea; our freedom lies on the other side of a baptism into Christ's death (**Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 10:1,2**).
 9. Although free from slavery after the Exodus, Israel still had a faith-testing sojourn in the wilderness before the Promised Land could be enjoyed; after baptism, we have a sojourn in this world before being able to enjoy the rest that God has for His people (**Hb. 3:12-4:2**).

Numerous other parallels could be suggested, but these are sufficient to illustrate how close the analogy is between the Exodus from Egypt and the New Exodus in Christ. Clearly God intended in the Exodus of Israel to do something that would typify the great event toward which every other event was moving: the coming of the Messiah into the world to accomplish our liberation from sin.

But if, on the one hand, we have the Exodus from Egypt and, on the other, the New Exodus in Christ some fourteen hundred years later, it is in the Jewish prophets that a link is made between these two historical events. The prophets reach back, as it were, to the formative event in Israel's physical history, reach forward to the formative event in their spiritual history, and then make a prophetic link between the two. In Hosea, for example, we hear God saying, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (**Hos. 11:1**). This text is recalled in Matthew when, following Herod's attempt to kill the young Jesus, Joseph "arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Out of Egypt I called My Son'" (**Matt. 2:14,15**). The text in Hosea, therefore, can be seen as not only looking back to the physical Exodus, but also forward to the Messianic deliverance of His people from "Egypt," He Himself having sojourned there as a child. In the prophets, it is always out of "Egypt" that God's people are called.

It is especially in Isaiah that the typology of the Exodus is used to prefigure the work of the Messiah. In the messianic prophecies of that book, the Messiah will accomplish a new, and much greater, redemption of His people from bondage (**Isa. 63:11-14**). Looking ahead to the restoration of Israel from Babylon and even farther ahead to the Messianic age, the prophet says of God, "You lead Your people to make Yourself a glorious name" (**v.14**). This statement recalls the time when God "led [Israel] by the right hand of Moses, with His

glorious arm, dividing the water before them to make for Himself an everlasting name” (v.12). In Isaiah, the freedom of the messianic age will be “as it was for Israel in the day that he came up from the land of Egypt” (11:16). And the “glad tidings” of Israel’s freedom from Egypt will have their counterpart in the “glad tidings” of the Messianic age (52:7).

As in the original Exodus, when God led His people on a procession through the “wilderness” and the “way” was prepared by the Angel of the Lord (Exod. 14:19; 23:20,23; Num. 14:13,14), so there will come a New Exodus. At that time, says Isaiah, “the way of the Lord” will be prepared by another kind of forerunner: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth’” (Isa. 40:3,4). Thus Isaiah, like others among the prophets, anticipated a time when the great event of the Exodus would be surpassed by an even greater thing that God would do to bring to an end the “captivity” of His people.

God’s Use of Historical Events to Teach Us to Trust Him

That God would use a set of physical events like the Exodus to prepare the hearts of mankind for the realities of His Son’s kingdom is not unusual. God has frequently used “object lessons” to teach truthful principles and to prepare His people for a more “spiritual” revelation of Himself later. Consider four examples:

1. When in the Old Testament God commanded “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain” (Deut. 25:4), He was not interested in the welfare of oxen, but in teaching a *principle*. Centuries later, Paul would write, “For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.’ Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope” (1 Cor. 9:9,10).
2. The institution of marriage was not merely for the benefit of the marriage partners, but to furnish an object lesson in the love relationship between God and His people (Eph. 5:22-33). In this text, Paul does not say, “God’s love helps us to understand marriage,” but rather “Marriage exists to help us to understand God’s love.” Marriage, it would seem, was always intended to be an object lesson in a kind of love much more important than that between earthly spouses.
3. Jesus’ miracles of healing were object lessons in the principles of His compassion, His power, and His authority. If those who saw them came away amazed only that sick persons had been made well, they would have missed the point of Jesus’ deeds. “‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’; then He said to the paralytic, ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house’” (Matt. 9:6). The miracles did not merely make people well; they made statements about the character of a God who *desired* to make people well!
4. When Jesus fed the multitudes, the point was not that He had the supernatural ability to multiply loaves and fishes; it was to teach certain principles concerning His Father’s nature. If those who were fed were impressed only with the miracle itself, the lesson of that miracle would have been lost on them. “Jesus answered them and said, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him’” (John 6:26,27).

The feeding of the five thousand was not about people receiving a much-needed meal, nor was it primarily about God's power to provide such a meal. It was about the love that God has for His people — a love that should cause us to trust Him no matter what our needs may be on any occasion.

God never does anything that is not intended to *teach* us something, and the thing He is most interested in teaching us is *His* nature. He is always illustrating the principles of His thinking by actions that put these principles in concrete terms that we can more easily “see.” When He does something powerful, He desires us not only to know that He is powerful. The purpose of demonstrating His power is always to show that His power is on our side, that He loves us, and that we can trust Him enough to obey Him.

Can we not see the Exodus as an act in which God was revealing Himself? If the Exodus was a set of powerful events by which God was teaching something, what was the point of the lesson? When Israel stood on the other side of the Red Sea, amazed at their unexpected deliverance from the pursuit of Pharaoh's army, what should have been their main thought? If their overriding thought had simply been “We're free!”, they would have missed the point of what had just happened. Instead, the proper thought would have been, “So this is what God is like!” And this emphasis on God's character is exactly the emphasis of the Song of Moses sung after their deliverance and recorded in **Exodus 15**:

1. “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him” (**vv.1,2**).
2. “Your right hand, O Lord, has become glorious in power; Your right hand, O Lord, has dashed the enemy in pieces. And in the greatness of Your excellence You have overthrown those who rose against You; You sent forth Your wrath; it consumed them like stubble” (**vv.6,7**).
3. “Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders? You stretched out Your right hand; the earth swallowed them. You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation” (**vv.11-13**).
4. “The Lord shall reign forever and ever” (**v.18**).

It would be hard to read these words and miss the consistent emphasis upon God Himself. What He had just done for the people of Israel greatly benefited them, to say the least. But the importance of that benefit was secondary to *the truths that it should have taught them about their God*. And if they had never forgotten the truths about Him that were momentarily impressed upon their thinking at the Red Sea, their subsequent history could have been much different.

In the events of the Exodus, God was proclaiming Himself to be *a God who has compassion* and *a God who delivers*. He was illustrating that He is a God who breaks the bonds of “captivity” for those who will follow Him out into the “wilderness.” The story of the Exodus is the original “good news” in the Scriptures, and the message of the story is that *freedom* is possible for those who will trust the power of God. In the glad event of the Exodus, God was pointing forward to the one thing that everything else was leading up to: the deliverance of His people from their sins. And there is little about the gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament that does not recall the language of freedom associated with the Exodus in the Old Testament.

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the **Isaiah 61:1,2** and applied the words to Himself:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (**Luke 4:18-21**).

The Gospel of John records an incident when Jesus talked about freedom to a group of Jewish people who had trouble seeing their *need* to be made free:

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be made free?’” Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed (**John 8:31-36**).

This is the same Jesus about whom the Hebrew writer speaks when he says that Jesus came to “release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (**Hb. 2:15**). Had those to whom Jesus first came understood what God had said about Himself in the Exodus, they would have welcomed the One to whom those events pointed. But such was not the case. If they had ever thought about it, most of those to whom Jesus spoke had long forgotten that God had, as Moses said, stretched out His right hand and led forth the people whom He had redeemed, guiding them in His strength to His holy habitation (**Exod. 15:12,13**).

Our Response to the New Exodus

But what can be said about our own response to the Exodus? If Israel failed to learn what they should have from God’s deliverance then, do we do any better in regard to the New Exodus under Jesus Christ? To put this matter into perspective, consider some of the ways in which Israel failed to respond properly to what God was willing to do for them:

1. They were reluctant, rather than eager, to accept Moses’ leadership (**Exod. 5:20,21; 6:9; 14:11,12; 16:2,3**).
2. They did not adequately appreciate their need to be delivered. However unpleasant the conditions in Egypt might have been, many of the people would have argued that they were not all *that* bad (**Acts 7:23-25**).
3. After crossing the Red Sea, they complained about the conditions under which they were being delivered (**Exod. 16:2,3**).
4. They threatened to go back to Egypt (**Num. 14:1-4**).
5. Through a failure to trust God, they died in the wilderness and fell short of entering the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb ended up being fully delivered from Egypt; the rest might as well not have crossed the Red Sea (**Num. 14:29-35; Jude 5**).

It is tempting to say that we would have done better had we been in their place. But their Exodus was as nothing compared to our own! We are those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11), and the Exodus in which we are called to participate involves a much greater accountability than theirs (Hb. 10:28,29). Are we doing any better with our Exodus than they did with theirs?

1. How eager are we to accept the leadership of Jesus Christ? Does He have to beg us to accept the deliverance that He has come to provide for us?
2. How comfortable are we in our own “Egypt”? Do we passionately groan for deliverance, or have we accommodated ourselves to the conditions of our slavery?
3. If we have at least crossed the “Red Sea,” do we complain about the conditions under which the Lord is leading us through the wilderness?
4. Do we put the Lord on notice that He had better make life comfortable for us or else we will go back to Egypt?
5. How many of us will fall in the wilderness and never make it to the Promised Land? When all is said and done, how many of us will prove to have had too little trust in the Lord to go the full distance with Him?

What would Moses say if he could speak to this assembly? It seems likely that he might dispense with the pleasantries and warn us not to repeat the mistakes that his people made after crossing the Red Sea. Perhaps he would take us to Hebrews 12:25,26: “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, ‘Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.’” Or perhaps he would remind us of Hebrews 4:1,2: “Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.”

Indeed, Moses was among those about whom Peter wrote when he said:

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven; things which angels desire to look into (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

And what was Peter’s conclusion? In the very next verse, he says, “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13).

On the practical plane of everyday living, it is in *our response to fear and discouragement* that we demonstrate whether we have “gotten the point” of the Exodus or not. If we have been paying attention to what God has done in the past, how can we fail to face anything in the present with anything less than courage? On one occasion Jesus was with His disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A storm arose and threatened to sink the boat. But Jesus was asleep in the stern. The disciples “awoke Him and said to Him, ‘Teacher, do

You not care that we are perishing?’ Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, ‘Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?’” (Mark 4:38-40). The disciples’ fear indicated that they had not really *thought* about the many things they had already seen Jesus do. For the most part, the Lord’s object lessons had been lost on them. And in a similar way, we may fail to learn what God had been saying about Himself in the Old Testament, long before Jesus ever came into the world: *that He is always able to deliver His people.*

Conclusion

Whatever difficulties we may cry out to be delivered from, we should make our cry to God in the confidence that He *can* deliver us and that, if we are in Jesus Christ, He *will* deliver us. As members of the spiritual commonwealth of Israel, we need to have the confidence that comes from knowing our history and our heritage. We are the spiritual heirs of a nation that God once delivered from four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. He did this not merely for their benefit, but to prefigure the much greater deliverance that was to come: the breaking of sin’s bondage and the formation of a people who, having been delivered from sin, would serve Him in gladness and gratitude. If we are members of that multitude, we need not be amazed at anything God can do for us. Having heard the “gospel” of the Exodus — both the Old one and the New — let us not be surprised at any bondage that God can break. If we are surprised, our brother Peter would probably say to us also, “*Men of Israel, why do you marvel?*”

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HOW FEMINISM WILL IMPACT THE CHURCH

Presented at Florida College on February 9, 1995. At this lectureship, Melvin Curry was asked to speak on “Male and Female in the Church” — and three men were asked to respond to the Curry lecture. Gary Henry was one of those asked to respond, and the following notes were used during that response.

- A. Does it make any difference to God whether the teaching and ruling roles in the church are filled by men or by women?
- B. Events are pressing the question on us more forcefully every day.
- C. In his lecture, Melvin Curry has helpfully overviewed this issue of church-related gender roles.
 - 1. I found much to agree with in his analysis.
 - a. I appreciate the comprehensive bibliography that accompanies his lecture.
 - b. This will be not only a guide but an incentive to many who need to begin doing some serious background reading on this issue.
 - 2. Curry begins exactly where I would have begun: by looking at the early chapters of Genesis.
 - a. I couldn't agree more that the point of departure for discussing gender roles in the church of the NT must be the creation principles found at the beginning of the OT.
 - b. How we are to relate to one another — in the church or elsewhere — can't be understood without correct concepts of our essential nature as created beings.
 - c. What we do grows out of what we think we are.
 - 3. It's absolutely essential, then, that we grapple with the basic statement in **Genesis 1:27** that God created us “male and female.”
 - a. If we misunderstand what is inherent in manhood and womanhood — if we read too much or too little into the creation account — we make a mistake that reaches out and does damage in many places.
 - b. This controversy has to do with our very nature as human beings.
 - c. That's why it is such an important subject and why it is connected to so many other important subjects.
- D. Most of us would agree that, if the Lord tarries, gender problems are going to give us trouble in the church.
- E. But what form will this trouble take?
 - 1. I happen to believe that gender issues are of more than academic interest.
 - 2. They generate some very practical problems.
 - 3. To underscore this point, I would like to elaborate briefly on three areas of concern.
 - 4. This will indicate my best guess as to the actual ways feminism is going to have an impact on us.

Bible Authority

- A. Gender trouble will precipitate yet another crisis of biblical authority for us, one that in some ways will be worse than any we have seen up to now.
1. This is so because the Bible, as it stands, is simply incompatible with feminism and egalitarianism - e.g. **Eph. 5:22**.
 2. A straightforward reading of the text of Scripture indicates that God restricts teaching and ruling roles in the church to males - e.g **1 Tim. 2:12**.
 3. The plain meaning of Scripture, recognized for centuries, must be rejected or reinterpreted to maintain any other position. Cf. **1 Cor. 4:6; Col. 3:17; 2 Tim. 3:16,17**.
 4. Some are ready to do this very thing — and that represents a great danger.
 5. But an even greater danger is that the willingness to do violence to the Scriptures at such a point will end up as a cynical disregard for any scriptural teaching that does not fit our philosophy.
- B. Considering the uniquely powerful societal pressures that are involved in this particular issue, I predict that we will see people discount what the Bible says about gender roles who have never done such a thing on other kinds of issues.
1. We will have people who have never in all their lives deliberately disagreed with the Bible, but who, when it comes to gender roles, will say, “Well, I know that’s what it says, but I don’t accept it.”
 2. The dynamics of this problem being what they are, this will be the first real point at which some will find the walls of their allegiance to biblical truth breached.
 3. Once breached, these walls are likely to fall down completely.
 4. In time, we can expect to see more and more adults with a general disregard for scriptural authority that began as a specific questioning of scriptural teaching on male-female distinctions.
 5. ***When the history of the twentieth century is finally written and we are able to identify the social forces that threw biblical authority into general disrepute, feminism will be near the top of the list.***

Evangelism

- A. As the biblical view of men’s and women’s roles in the church comes more and more to be thought of as unacceptable to mainstream society, our position in the religious world will be even further marginalized.
1. We are accustomed to being in the minority, but gender issues present a different situation.
 2. Whereas some of our doctrinal positions have long been considered eccentric and quaint, there has never been the social stigma attached to them that is now being attached to the traditional biblical view of gender roles.
 3. ***Evangelism will present some tough challenges when we have to inform those with whom we study that we still hold to a view about men and women that is so outdated and abhorred by society that its practice may eventually be made illegal.***
- B. Randall Balmer talks about the growing sense of “cultural dislocation” that fundamentalists like ourselves feel at present.
1. He argues that *“fundamentalists have found the rapidly changing views of women in recent decades utterly disconcerting. Perhaps nothing — not even Darwinism and higher criticism, the issues of the 1920s — has contributed so greatly to their sense of cultural dislocation. . . . [The] feminist movement has left them confused and full of resentment because the domestic ideal that fundamentalism has reified since the nineteenth century is now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture.”* Randall Balmer, “American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity” in *Fundamentalism & Gender*, ed.

John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.54.

2. Whether or not we are “confused and full of resentment,” Balmer is certainly correct in that our views on gender are “now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture.”
3. The point is not just that the biblical view is thought to be anachronistic, but that it is derided as such.
4. This derision will have profound evangelistic implications that we may as well be prepared to face. Cf. **Phil. 2:15**; **1 Pt. 2:11,12**.

Our Children

- C. When they reach maturity, will our children be willing to publicly identify themselves with views that are ridiculed by mainstream society? Cf. **Eph. 6:4**.
- D. ***Will they accept a religious position on gender roles that not only puts them out of step with respectable society but risks the possibility that they will be charged with violating human rights?***
- E. By now, the feminist principles of equality have so thoroughly saturated our culture that average people simply take them for granted.
 1. The present generation of children will be the first in America to grow up never having known any social environment but this one.
 2. When they have to choose between the fundamentalist faith of their parents and the politically correct views of nearly everybody else, what will their choice be?
 3. When they realize that what we taught them about the roles of men and women is “now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture,” how will they react?
- F. Those who think that feminism will not have any significant practical impact among the non-institutional churches of Christ had better get in touch with their kids.

Conclusion

- G. The “question” of gender roles in the church, involving as it does a number of separate questions, presents us with a veritable thicket of problems.
- H. I fear that the cluster of issues overviewed in Curry’s “Male and Female in the Church” will not only create significant trouble for us, it will do so sooner rather than later.
- I. We need to get ready.
 1. ***I would suggest, first, that we must learn to deal seriously with the biblical texts that have been so dangerously reinterpreted by the egalitarians.***
 - a. It’s not enough merely to shout “No, that’s not what those verses teach” - e.g. **Gal. 3:28**.
 - b. We must do our homework and be ready to show how the texts have been misused.
 - c. As one of the pioneer preachers said, the best way to show that a stick is crooked is to lay a straight stick alongside it.
 - 1) We must recognize the sometimes subtle mistakes that make up the feminist hermeneutic.
 - 2) We must demonstrate the twisting of the truth that is taking place.
 - 3) Being able to do these things, of course, requires hard work — work that is yet to be done by most of us.
 - d. It’s time to dig in and study, more seriously than we ever have, each passage of Scripture that has a bearing on gender roles.
 2. ***Second, I would suggest that in dealing with gender-related issues in the church we must do more than take a reactionary stance.***
 - a. We can’t afford merely to be against what is wrong.

- b. We must be for what is right.
 - 1) Our vision of how men and women should relate themselves to one another in the Lord's church must be more than a vision of what men are allowed to do and women are not.
 - 2) If it is biblical, ours will be a vision of men's and women's roles, and it will have all the positive winsomeness of truth and reality.
 - 3) It will be a vision in which sisters in the Lord are honored no less than brothers, their work being understood and affirmed as it should be.
 - c. When we come, for example, to Paul's description of Phoebe as "a servant of the church in Cenchrea" (**Rom. 16:1**), we must do more than evade the passage with embarrassed explanations of what it does not mean.
 - 1) The question is: what does it mean?
 - 2) And how important ought that to be to us?
 - d. We can't claim to stand for God's truth unless we are willing to stand for all of God's truth, even parts of it we have previously paid little attention to.
 - e. I maintain that feminism would not be able to challenge churches so dangerously today if in the past our vision of men's and women's roles had been biblically balanced.
 - f. Satan is attacking at a spot where we truly are weak, an area where our practice has fallen below the heights of the goodness and strength of God's word.
- J. As Christian men and Christian women, the very best way we can refute the feminist falsehood about roles in the church is not only to learn, but to live the truth of **2 Timothy 2:21**: "Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work."
- K. When we study and grow and serve as vessels in the Lord's house, rejoicing faithfully in the unique place the Lord has prepared for each of us, then our women no less than our men can know the fullness that comes from being "a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work" (NKJV).
- L. *When we get the part about being a "vessel" right, then the part about the "honor" will tend to take care of itself, whether we are women or we are men.***

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