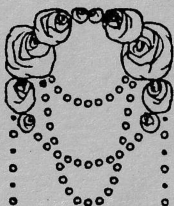


THE LAST MESSAGE

OR
THE WORD OF THE LORD
BY MALACHI

BY HAMILTON SMITH



MINISTRY FOR HEART AND CONSCIENCE
No. 23

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I.

The Condition of the People.

THE prophet Malachi has the solemn duty of delivering God's last message to His earthly people before the coming of Christ. The message having been delivered, God speaks no more for a period of four hundred years. Then at length the silence is broken by the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight."

Last words possess a special power by which they often reach the conscience, touch the heart, and linger in the memory. If this be so with men's poor words, how much more when towards the end of a dispensation God speaks a last word! And as we read the prophet Malachi we do well to let it speak to us with all the power of a last word from God.

Let us first consider the circumstances under which the book was written, for, however truly it may have an application to God's people in these last days, we must not forget to whom in the first instance it was addressed. The prophecy opens with the words: "The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel." It is a message, therefore, to God's chosen earthly people. Yet while all Israel may thus be included in the scope of the prophecy, it is actually addressed only to the small part (often called "the remnant") delivered from the captivity of Babylon. As we learn from other parts of Scripture, while the great mass of the people were still in captivity, some sixty thousand, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, had been allowed to return to the land of their fathers, rebuild the Temple, revive the sacrifices, build the walls and set up the gates of Jerusalem.

God's people, therefore, at that time, were divided into two main classes, and it will be helpful to notice the broad distinctions between them.

There was (i) the mass of the nation in Babylonia, in captivity. They were not in Palestine where God had placed them, but in Babylonia, whither their sin had brought them. They were not freemen as God by His power and goodness had made them, but slaves to a foreign overlord. Clearly therefore the mass of the nation may be rightly described as in a wrong *position*, because not in the place or state purposed for them by God.

But they were clearly in a wrong *condition* also, for they were content to remain in this wrong position when the opportunity, the invitation to leave it was vouchsafed (see Ezra i. 3).

Then there was (ii) the band of returned Israelites dwelling in their own land and engaged in the religious rites and exercises originally ordained for them by God. Of these, unlike their captive brethren, it may be said they were in a *right position*, as being in the place and carrying on the religious system purposed for them by God. But, as of those in Babylonia, so of these in Jerusalem, it must be said they were in a *wrong condition*, for the book of Malachi throughout is an exposure of their moral and spiritual failure while outwardly characterised by formal orthodoxy.

Again, in both of these great classes were to be found (iii) individuals in happy contrast with their surroundings; men marked by practical nearness, faithfulness and devotedness to God. Daniel and his friends may be cited as examples amongst those of the Captivity, while Ezra, Nehemiah and the pious few referred to in Malachi iii. 16 will serve to indicate those of a similar stamp among the returned "remnant."

Such, in a few words, were the circumstances and characteristics of the nation in the Malachi period. Now, although the prophecy opens with the

words, "The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel," it was clearly only to the remnant in the land of Palestine that this, God's last message, was actually addressed. We find allusions to the Temple, to the sacrifices, to the priests, to tithes, etc., all features perfectly natural to Jerusalem and Canaan, but which could not have been descriptive of those in exile.

What was the burden of the word of the Lord to this returned remnant? It was no longer a denunciation of idolatry, as in the days of the Kings; it was not an appeal to return to the Land, as in the days of Ezra; nor was it an appeal to rebuild the Temple, as in the days of Haggai, or even to rebuild the walls, as in the days of Nehemiah. Idolatry had been given up; the remnant were back in the Land; the Temple was rebuilt, and the round of religious observances was being conducted with the semblance of outward order. Though outwardly, however, in a right position, with a correct ritual, nevertheless their moral state was entirely wrong. And thus the burden of the Lord, in this last message, mainly consists in a solemn appeal to the conscience of the remnant as to their low state morally and spiritually.

Here let us pause. Bearing in mind what we have seen to be the setting of the book and its characteristic message, let us consider the position and condition of the Church of God to-day, with a view to applying thereto the spiritual lessons which the prophecy of Malachi would suggest. In doing so we shall be compelled to own that there are found conditions, among the people of God at the present time, that correspond in a striking way to these different conditions found at the close of the past dispensation.

As we survey Christendom are we not compelled in the first place to own that the mass of Christians are held captive in unscriptural, not to say apostate religious systems, just as Israel was held nationally in the captivity of idolatrous Babylon? And hence

of the great mass of Christendom it has to be said that they are in a wrong position, as tested by the purpose of God for them revealed in His Word. Further, a truthful observer would be compelled to state that not only is Christendom generally in a wrong *position*, it is also in a wrong moral *condition*. Of this the address to Laodicea in Rev. iii. 14-17 is a sad proof and testimony. Christendom as a whole, therefore, corresponds strikingly with Israel in Babylon during the Malachi period.

If now we carry our survey of Christendom back to the beginning of last century, we are bound to recognise a very distinct work of God, whereby a remnant of His heavenly people (like that of His earthly nation in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah) were delivered from these unscriptural religious systems of men in which they had been held captive. Set free from sectarianism they were by His grace enabled to recover the true ground upon which it is God's purpose that all His people should stand, and thus, like their Jewish prototypes, were once more in a *right position*. As time went on, however, while still professedly in the true path of the Church's calling, failure and declension has more and more marred their course, so that to-day God has a solemn controversy with these delivered saints as to their *wrong moral condition*. Their ecclesiastical position may still be right, but their moral and spiritual condition is not in accord with the position they have taken. This class, then, closely corresponds with the restored remnant in the Land.

Yet again, to continue the parallel, in both of these classes there has always been found many a devoted servant of God whose moral and spiritual condition has been of a very high order, and whose course has been well pleasing to the Lord.

Now just as the prophecy of Malachi has chiefly in view the restored remnant in the Land, outwardly orthodox but inwardly offensive to God, together with an exquisite word of encouragement for the

faithful individuals found amongst them, so, we believe, it makes a special appeal to-day to the feeble and failing remnant of saints gathered out of the ecclesiastical captivity of Christendom, together with the faithful individuals found in the midst of this company. And just as in Malachi's day the last message to the people, before the coming of the Lord, was given to arouse the conscience as to their condition, so to-day, on the eve of the coming of the Lord, we believe that God's last message to His people is a solemn appeal to awaken conscience as to our moral and spiritual condition; so that there may be found on the earth those who are suited to the One who is coming, and who, with quickened affections, can say, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Having seen that the prophecy is addressed to the returned remnant, and that its burden concerns their condition, we shall do well to carefully enquire, What is this condition, and how far does it depict the condition of God's people to-day?

1st. *They were marked by high profession but low practice* (chapter i. 6). They professed that Jehovah was their Father and their Master, but in practice they did not render to Jehovah the honour due to a father, nor the fear that was due to a master. And must we not own to-day that our practice has fallen far below our profession? In our daily life and walk do we honour the Lord? Do we think and speak and act in the fear of the Lord? But showing neither honour nor fear exposed the remnant to the further charge of despising the name of the Lord. To this charge they immediately reply, "Wherein have we despised Thy name?" A solemn response to a solemn charge, and one which brings to light another sad feature of their condition—

2nd. *They were marked by spiritual blindness to their own low state.* Spiritual blindness is the inevitable result of a high profession and a low walk. The people of God are prone, almost unconsciously, to excuse low walk because of their high profession.

We may say, "With all our failure we have the light, and we are in the right position"; and thus our very profession may become the means of blinding our eyes to the seriousness of our low practice. So that when faced with our failure we either palliate it, refuse to face it, or, like the remnant, profess we cannot see it.

3rd. *The outward service of the Lord was continued, but the true inward motive for the service was lacking* (chapter i. 7-10). They brought their offerings to the altar, or table of the Lord; they kindled the fire on the altar, and they opened and shut the doors of the temple. But no one would shut the doors for nought. Love of self, and not love to the Lord, was the motive for their service. The result was that, in the service of the Lord, anything would do. The lame and the sick would do for the Lord. Not so would they dare to treat their earthly ruler. Men had a greater place in their eyes than the Lord, and to give them such a place was treating the Lord with contempt. If they treated their ruler thus, would he be pleased with them?

And now, says the Lord, "I have no pleasure in you" (verse 10). Viewing them in the light of His purpose the Lord can say, "I have loved you" (verse 2); viewing them in the light of their practice He has to say, "I have no pleasure in you" (verse 10). How solemn when the Lord has to say of those He loves, "I have no pleasure in you."

Has all this no voice for us? May not we, too, continue the outward service of the Lord—preaching, teaching, pastoring, etc.—and yet the true motive be lacking? The service outwardly correct, the motives inwardly corrupt? If we compare the church at Ephesus (Rev. ii. 2) with the church at Thessalonica do we not see this exemplified? The church at Ephesus was busy in the service of the Lord, but the true hidden motive was lacking. The church at Thessalonica was marked by "works of faith," "labour of love," and "patience of hope." The

church at Ephesus was also marked by "works," and "labour," and "patience," but "faith," and "love," and "hope" are lacking, and therefore the Lord has to say to this church, "Thou art fallen." We may well ask are "faith," and "love," and "hope" the springs of our service?—qualities which only the Lord can discern, and which are very precious in His sight. Or is the motive for service self in some form—self-exaltation, self-advancement, or the hope of gain?

4th. *The service of the Lord became a weariness to the remnant* (verse 13). Profession without practice, and service without devotedness, will lead to weariness in the things of the Lord, and what people are weary of they will end by despising. Thus the remnant not only said of the Lord's service, "Behold, what a weariness is it!" but they "puffed" at it (verse 13, New Translation). Alas! can we not see in our day this same weariness in the things of the Lord? Are there not many who were once active in the service of the Lord, but who have now grown weary? Possibly their practice fell below their preaching, then the preaching was continued when the devotedness was gone, and now at last they have grown weary. The hands hang down and the knees are feeble; the hands never lifted up in supplication, the knees never bent in prayer. They have grown weary—wearied of prayer, weary of reading the Bible, weary of remembering the Lord, weary of preaching the gospel, and weary of hearing it, weary of the Lord's things, and weary of the Lord's people. And what we weary of we despise; little wonder, then, that they end by "puffing at the Lord's things and the Lord's people. How deeply important to have Christ ever before us, the true motive for all service—to "consider Him," the Leader and Completer of faith, "that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

This, then, is the solemn picture portrayed by

the prophet of the general condition into which the mass of the returned remnant had fallen. (1) High profession and low practice ; (2) moral insensibility and spiritual blindness ; (3) outwardly serving the Lord without devotedness to the Lord ; and (4) weariness and contempt for the service of the Lord.

Does it not behove us to seriously challenge ourselves as to how far this is a true picture of our own condition ?



II.

The Condition of the Leaders.

WE have already seen that God's last message to the returned remnant, before the coming of the Lord, concerned their moral and spiritual condition. We have also briefly reviewed the general charges brought against the mass of the remnant, revealing their low condition. But, beside these general charges against all, this last message contains particular charges against the priests, or leaders of the people. These charges are brought before us in the second chapter of the prophet Malachi.

Before briefly looking at these charges, we do well to pay attention to the solemn way in which the chapter opens—"If ye will not hear and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto My name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings."

When God speaks to His people as to their moral and spiritual state, the least they can do is to hear, and lay to heart, what God may have to say. People who refuse to hear, when God speaks, are indeed in a hopeless case, be they saints or sinners. Refusal to hear brings down the chastening hand of the Lord upon His people. Their blessings are withered up.

And may we not ask, How stands the case with God's people to-day? Have we not to confess that while the condition of God's people is low, yet the most solemn and ominous sign of decay is that, in spite of repeated warnings, and though the Lord's hand is upon His people in chastening, there seems little evidence that they "hear" and "lay it to heart"?

Have we given the prophets a hearing? Teachers who instruct our minds we are ready enough to follow, but the prophet who speaks to the conscience we neglect or reject. Professing Christians may "heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears," but they will "stone the prophets" who warn them of their sins. And if there is no "hearing" the prophet, there will be no "laying to heart" the message that he brings. On every hand we are face to face with the low condition of God's people. The divisions, the contentions, the bitterness amongst His people are manifest on all sides. And yet how little are they laid to heart; how little mourning before the Lord; how little confession to one another; how little do we lay to heart the sorrow and shame to ourselves, and the dishonour to the Lord. We seem a great deal more anxious to prove that we are right than to own that we are wrong.

And must we not recognise that, as a result, the Lord's hand is upon His people in chastening? Thus there is much preaching, and little blessing amongst sinners; much ministry, and little progress amongst saints. The blessing is very largely withheld.

Remembering the solemn warnings of these introductory verses, may we have grace to "hear" and "lay to heart" this last message to the leaders of Israel, and hear therein a voice that speaks to ourselves with no uncertain sound.

First the prophet presents a beautiful picture of the priesthood as established by God in the beginning. We can only get a true estimate of our condition in the end of a dispensation by comparing it with the condition at the beginning. Thus only shall we learn the extent of our departure from what is according to the mind of God.

In the beginning the priest was marked by (1) life, (2) peace, (3) the fear of the Lord, (4) the law of truth in his mouth, (5) iniquity not found in his lips, (6) a walk with God in peace and equity,

and (7) blessing to others — turning them from iniquity and instructing them in knowledge. Such is the mind of the Lord for the one who is “the messenger of the Lord of hosts” in this dark world (verses 5-7).

In the light of this beautiful picture the prophet proceeds to unfold the then condition of those who professed to be “the messengers of the Lord,” and in doing so he brings five distinct charges against them.

1st. *They were wrong in their relations to the Lord.* “Ye are departed out of the way,” says the prophet (verse 8). In the beginning the priest “feared Me” and “walked with Me,” said the Lord. But now they had departed out of the way of life and peace, with the solemn result that, instead of turning many from iniquity, they “caused many to stumble” and brought themselves into contempt in the eyes of the people (verses 8 and 9).

2nd. *They were wrong in their relations with one another.* “Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother?” enquires the prophet. Can we not supply the answer? Because they were wrong in their relations with the Lord. As one has said, “Satan first divided men from God, and then one man from another.” The prophet seeks to correct this evil by reminding them that they have one Father and one God. And in our own day it is only as we view the people of God as one,—children in one family of which God is the Father, and members of one body of which Christ is the Head,—that we shall be able to deal faithfully with one another. But alas! departure from the Lord has been followed by contention, strife, bitterness, and unfaithfulness with one another.

3rd. *They were wrong in their relations with the world.* “Judah hath dealt treacherously . . . and hath married the daughter of a strange god” (verse 11). From this point the charges become more general. It is no longer exclusively the priests that

are addressed, but Judah is now included in the common charge of worldliness, showing itself by worldly alliances of the most intimate character. But while all are involved in this charge, it is connected with the failure of the priests. The order of these charges is solemn and instructive. First the leaders were wrong with the Lord—they departed out of the way. Then they dealt unfaithfully with one another. And lastly, while the shepherds were wrangling the sheep were wandering. The contentions of the leaders allowed the people of God to drift into the world and form unholy associations.

4th. *They were wrong in their family relations.* They are charged with dealing treacherously (or “unfaithfully”) with their wives (verse 14). If we are wrong with God we shall be wrong in every other relationship. If we form unholy alliances with the world, it will not be long before we follow the unholy practices of the world in the most intimate relationships of life. In order to counteract this the prophet reminds them of the oneness of the marriage relationship, so that amongst His people there should be found “a godly seed.” How deeply important this principle. If the children are to be holy, let the parents be holy.

5th. *They were wrong in their dealings in discipline.* They dealt treacherously against their wives, putting them away on trivial pretences. But, says the prophet, “the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that He hateth putting away” (verse 16). Amongst the remnant, however, it was far otherwise, for we read, “One covereth violence with his garment.” Under the garb of maintaining order they acted with the greatest violence. While this passage is directly concerned with men wrongfully putting away their wives, the principle is capable of wider application. It may well be considered in connection with “putting away” an offender from amongst the company of God’s people, and is a solemn warning against

violently getting rid of a brother without adequate and scriptural grounds.

Amongst the remnant men put away their wives, not for sin, but to gratify their own selfish interests. And, alas! amongst the people of God have there not been many glaring instances when known godly persons have been put away, not for sin, but simply because the exigencies of a party demanded their exclusion?

In reading these solemn charges we cannot but be struck with the recurrence of the word "treacherously." It occurs in verses 10, 11, 14, 15, and 16. In each case it may be more correctly translated "unfaithfully." Having departed out of the way they were unfaithful in every circle. They were unfaithful every man with his brother; they were unfaithful in relation to the world; they were unfaithful in the domestic circle; and they were unfaithful in their discipline.

What a solemn picture does this last message present of the remnant of God's people, who outwardly occupied a right position and who outwardly were carrying on the Lord's service. And if we are at all intelligent in the things of God, it is only too easy to see amongst the people of God to-day the counterpart of this remnant. Amongst those to whom much light has been given, is it not true there has been a grave departure "out of the way," and that, too, on the part of many of the leaders? Departure from God has been followed by dissension amongst leaders—unfaithfulness to one another. Jealousy, envy, strife, evil speaking have too often marked leaders in their attitude to one another. This again has been the occasion of many turning aside to the world, and unholy alliances with the world have led to the unholy practices of the world intruding into the family life of God's people. And if we have been wrong in our own homes, little wonder that we have been unable to govern in the house of God. "If a man know not how to rule his

own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?" (1 Tim. iii. 5).

Is there not enough in these charges to bring us to our knees in humiliation, confession, and supplication? May we hear therein the voice of God speaking to our consciences, and may we lay this last message to heart.



III.

The Door of Repentance.

WE have already seen how solemnly the prophet lays bare the low moral condition of the remnant—a condition which brings down the chastening hand of the Lord and cries aloud for judgment.

Accordingly, in chapter iii., the remnant are warned of the coming of the Lord in judgment (verses 1-5). Wearied by the confusion which their own folly had wrought, they cry out "Where is the God of judgment?" (chapter ii. 17). And they receive the immediate reply, "Behold, I will send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me: and the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple." "But," the prophet asks, "who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth?" And the Lord Himself adds, "I will come near to you to judgment"; and when the Lord comes He will be a swift witness against evil and evil doers.

Thus the remnant are not only charged with their low condition, but warned as to the judgment it entails. God, however, is not only a God of judgment, He is also a God of mercy, and hence it is ever His way to grant grace for repentance before the judgment falls. Again, all God's dealings, whether in judgment or mercy, are founded upon the immutability of His nature. For this reason we have the formal declaration of the unchanging character of God before the call to repentance. "I am the Lord," we read, "I change not . . . therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (verse 6). God does not change in holiness, and

therefore He must chasten His people when they sin. Neither does God change in His purposes of grace and blessing, and therefore His people are not consumed.

Having thus sounded the note of warning, God next, in accordance with His unchanging principles of acting, calls His people to repentance. "Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts" (verse 7). Furthermore the Lord *encourages* them to return, by unfolding the blessings that will follow repentance. (1) They themselves would be enriched; the windows of heaven would be opened, and blessing, beyond their capacity to retain, would be poured upon them. (2) They would become a witness to the Lord before the world, "All nations shall call you blessed (verses 7-12).

In addition to calling to repentance the Lord also shows the way. It is well to face our low condition, to confess it before the Lord; but occupation with our own evil will not in itself lead to recovery. It is not the badness of man but the goodness of God that leads to repentance (Rom. ii. 4).

This way of recovery lies, we believe, in the appreciation of all that God is for His people as presented, in a threefold way, in the opening chapter of the prophecy:—

- 1st. The sovereign love of the Lord (i. 2).
- 2nd. The settled purpose of the Lord (i. 5 and 11).
- 3rd. The mighty power of the Lord (i. 14).

Let us look briefly at these three great truths.

(1) *The sovereign love of the Lord.*

The prophecy opens with the sublime statement, "I have loved you, saith the Lord." This great statement is rich with instruction.

1st. It assures us that whatever the condition of God's people, His love towards them does not alter. Israel may depart from the Lord, may fall

into idolatry, may go into captivity, may be restored and again fall into a low moral condition, but, says Jehovah through the prophet Jeremiah, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer. xxxi. 3). So, too, disciples may fail, may forsake the Lord, may even deny the Lord, but, "having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end" (John xiii. 1).

2nd. However solemnly the Lord may have to speak to us as to our moral condition, and however severely He may have to deal with us because of it, behind His rebukes and His chastenings there is love. The hand that smites is moved by a heart that loves.

3rd. The love of the Lord is the true measure of all failure. We can only truly gauge the depth of failure when we measure it by the height of His love. This is true, whether it be the failure of Israel or the failure of the Church; whether it be individual backsliding or general breakdown. I can only estimate my personal failure when viewed in the light of the personal love of the One "who loved me, and gave Himself for me." How black, too, the Church's history, how great its ruin, when viewed in the light of the great truth that Christ "loved the Church, and gave Himself for it." How contemptible our divisions, our contentions, our bitterness to one another, seeking to put one another in the wrong to exalt ourselves, misconstruing one another's actions, misinterpreting one another's words, and seeking to impute evil to one another, after hearing the touching words of the Lord, "I have loved you, *that ye also love one another*" (John xiii. 34). What appalling littleness our words and actions often betray when we remember that "Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us" (Eph. v. 2).

4th. The love of the Lord is not only the measure of our failure, it is also the way of recovery from it. Was it not a look of love that recovered Peter? Peter denies the Lord with oaths and cursing,

and the "Lord turned and looked upon Peter." A look, may we not say, of infinite love. Peter discovered by that look that his denial of the Lord had not altered the Lord's love to him. And Peter went out and wept bitterly. Love broke him down. Our sins broke His heart, but His love breaks our hearts. How did Joseph dispel the lingering doubts in his erring brethren, who had treated him so shamefully? We read "he comforted them and spake to their hearts" (Gen. l. 21, margin). He confirmed his love to them. And how will Jehovah at last restore his backsliding people? We read in Hosea these touching words of the Lord: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak to her heart" (Hosea ii. 14, New Translation). In wilderness circumstances God speaks to her heart, opens to her a door of hope, and there, when love has done its work, once again she sings as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And may we not say, in these sorrowful days, the Lord is dealing with His people after the same manner? How many mourn the loss of some loved one, whose face they will see no more down here. The wife mourns her husband, the children their father, the mother her son. Thus for many a heart the Lord has turned the world into a wilderness. He has allured us into the wilderness, but, in so doing, He has allured us to Himself, that, in the midst of our tears, He might speak to our hearts, and, as He tells us of His love, bind up our wounds and enable us to sing—

With mercy and with judgment
 My web of time He wove,
 And aye the dews of sorrow
 Were lusted with His love.

In the light of this great love may we judge our low condition, and, by its constraining power, may we henceforth live not unto ourselves, but unto Him who died for us and rose again.

(2) *The unchanging purpose of the Lord.*

The Lord not only reminds His people of His love, but He would fain recover them by unfolding the *purposes* of His love. This leads us to the second great truth unfolded by the prophet. We read "The Lord will be magnified from the border of Israel" (verse 5); and again, "From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts" (verse 11). To the declaration of the Lord's love the remnant retort, "Wherein hast Thou loved us?" And the Lord meets this spiritual blindness by giving proof of His love. They are taken back to the past and reminded of the sovereign love that chose their father Jacob, and they are led on to the future and shown that love has purposed to make Israel the centre of blessing on the earth. "The Lord will be magnified," but it will be from the "border of Israel." And the accomplishment of this great purpose will make manifest the love of Jehovah. In the prophet's day they professed they could not see His love. They said, "Wherein hast Thou loved us?" But the Lord replies there is a day coming when you will see, "Your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The Lord will be magnified beyond the border of Israel." Edom may seek to oppose, but all in vain; Edom will be called "the border of wickedness," but "the Lord will be magnified from the border of Israel."

And are we tempted in our day, by reason of the roughness of the way, to call in question the Lord's love, and again say, "Wherein hast Thou loved us?" Then let us remind our souls once again of the Father's sovereign love that chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, and of His settled purpose to get glory to Himself in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout the ages of ages. Let not the passing sorrows of time for one moment dim our

vision of the love that chose us before time was, and shall bless us eternally when time shall cease to be.

The power of Satan, and the intrusion of the flesh and the world, ruined the testimony of God's ancient people, just as they have ruined the testimony of God's people to-day. Nevertheless in the end God's purposes will prevail, whether for the earthly or the heavenly people, and the glorious result will be that "the Lord will be magnified" and His name "shall be great" (verses 5 and 11). We shall be blessed, but He will be magnified. And just as His name will be great among the heathen on earth, so His name will be great among the hosts in heaven. For we read, "His name shall be in their foreheads." Our names may be written in heaven, but only one Name is seen in heaven.

(3) *The mighty power of the Lord.*

What love has purposed power will perform, and so the prophet brings before us *the mighty power of the Lord*. "I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts, and My name is to be revered among the heathen" (verse 14). The Lord is great in majesty and great in power. He has at His disposal unnumbered hosts. The chapter opens with the touching announcement, "I have loved you, saith the Lord," and it closes with the sublime statement, "I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts." Love and power combine to carry out God's purposes.

How solemn the state of the remnant when viewed in the light of *the Lord's love* for His people, *the Lord's purpose* to exalt His name and bless His people, and *the Lord's power* on behalf of His people. So low is their condition that they cannot discern His love, they profane His name, and treat with contempt the One who is "a great King" and "the Lord of hosts."

And does not the low condition of God's people to-day stand fully exposed, when viewed in the light of the sovereign love that has chosen them, the high

destiny that awaits them, and the exceeding greatness of the power towards them? Does it not behove us to return again to the Lord, and in His presence review our moral and spiritual condition in the light of these great truths, to review the manner of our lives—the inner life and the outer life—the things that hold our affections and engross our thoughts, the words we utter and the spirit in which we utter them, the things we do as well as the motive for doing them? And as we thus make search in the light of His love, and purpose, and power, we shall have to confess that much in our lives looks very poor and mean.

Let us not, however, be discouraged. That by which we measure our failure *becomes the means of recovery* for those who are exercised thereby. As we dwell upon the love that chose us, the glorious destiny that awaits us, and the mighty power that works in us, we shall be delivered from all that we are and rejoice in all that He is.



IV.

The Approved of the Lord.

WE have seen that in this last message the Lord has a controversy with the people and their leaders, in regard to their low moral and spiritual condition. Further, we have seen that the Lord opens to them a door of repentance, with the promise of immediate blessing if they avail themselves of His way of recovery.

The prophecy, however, clearly shows that for the mass of the people there was no hope of recovery. They were morally insensible and spiritually blind. Satisfied with a correct position and the outward performance of religious observances, they were utterly insensible to their low condition, and spiritually blind to all that the Lord was for them. If God reminds them of His love, they say, "*Wherein* hast Thou loved us?" (i. 2). If He rebukes them for despising His name, they say, "*Wherein* have we despised it?" (i. 6). If He reproaches them with offering polluted bread, they say, "*Wherein* have we polluted Thee?" (i. 7). If they are accused of having wearied the Lord, they say, "*Wherein* have we wearied Him?" (ii. 17). If God charges them with robbery, they say, "*Wherein* have we robbed Thee?" (iii. 8). If He says, "Your words have been stout against Me," they say, "*What* have we spoken so much against Thee?" (iii. 13). If He beseeches them to return to Him, they say, "*Wherein* shall we return?" (iii. 7).

A low condition is serious, but the refusal to acknowledge it makes the condition utterly hopeless. This was the terrible case of the remnant in Malachi's day. Alas! is it otherwise with the people of God

to-day? We cannot suffer those who warn us; as ever, we stone the prophets. How impatient we are with the slightest suggestion that anything may be wrong. As one has said, "The pride of the human heart dislikes to be told of sin; it dislikes still more to own it." How quick we are to condemn others; how slow we are to condemn ourselves. Herein lies the utter hopelessness of any general or corporate recovery to-day. Satisfied with a correct position, and the outward and orderly observance of religious life, there is the refusal to own that we have done wrong, or that we are wrong. Hence there is no general restoration, no recovery, no healing.

But if there is no recovery for the mass, there is every encouragement for the individual. In the history of God's people the most devoted men of God are found in the darkest days. Samuel "ministered unto the Lord" in the days when the priesthood was defiled, the sacrifice abhorred, and the lamp of God going out. It was not in the palmy days of King Solomon, but in the apostate days of King Ahab, that Elijah bears his bright witness for God. So in the days of Malachi there were those who, amidst the prevailing gloom, were not only outwardly correct, but morally suited to the Lord. They met with the Lord's approval and commendation as a little remnant within a remnant.

The characteristic marks of this little remnant are of a moral order. It is not their outward position, however correct, or their outward service, however zealous, which gains the Lord's approval. It is their moral condition which He approves, and which makes them precious in His sight. It is not, surely, that the Lord makes light of a right position, or of service to Himself, but in the last stage of His people's history, when outward testimony is ruined, what the Lord does look for, above all else, is a moral condition suited to Himself.

The first distinguishing mark of this remnant is that "*they feared the Lord*" (iii. 16). This is in

striking contrast to the religious mass by which they were surrounded, who, while making a high religious profession, showed only too clearly by their low practice that they had cast off the fear of the Lord. The Lord details many grievous sins that call for judgment, but they are all summed up in this great sin, the people "fear not Me, saith the Lord of hosts" (iii. 5). Looking upon the mass, the Lord has to say, "Where is My fear?" (i. 6); looking upon this godly remnant, He delights to own that they "feared the Lord" (iii. 16). The man who fears the Lord is governed by the Lord and not by man. He obeys the Lord rather than men. He refers everything to the Lord, and has the Lord before him in all his ways. He allows no man, whatever his position and gift, to come between himself and the Lord. In a word, he gives the Lord His right and supreme place, and this is very precious in the sight of the Lord.

The second mark is they "*spake often one to another.*" This is fellowship; but not simply the fellowship of a right position, but rather the fellowship of a right moral condition. It was the fellowship of those who "feared the Lord." The prevailing dishonour to the Lord, and the low moral condition of those by whom they were surrounded, *drove* them together; on the other hand the soul exercises, and their common fear of the Lord, *drew* them together in a holy, happy fellowship.

In these last days is it not a fellowship of this character that has such value in the eyes of the Lord? Not a fellowship which begins and ends with a correct ecclesiastical position; not an organised fellowship to conduct an evangelical campaign, or to carry out some great missionary enterprise; not a fellowship for the assertion of some great truth, or to raise some fresh testimony; not a fellowship which the world around can recognise, but rather a quiet, hidden fellowship expressed by the happy interchange of thought between souls drawn together by their common links in the Lord.

The third mark is they "*thought upon His name.*" They did not seek to magnify their own names, but they sought to maintain the honour of His name. While those around despised the name of the Lord, these godly souls were very jealous for His name.

Such were the characteristics of those who, in a day of ruin, had the Lord's gracious approval. There was nothing in them that created any stir in the world of their day; they were not marked by any great gift that gave them a prominent place before men; they were not remarkable for any great works of charity that would have earned the world's applause. They possessed neither striking powers of intellect nor miraculous gifts that would have exalted them amongst their fellows. They had no clearly defined organisation, that would have secured for them a place among the parties and systems of men. Indeed, there was an entire absence of those qualities which are highly esteemed among men, but they possessed those moral traits which, in the sight of the Lord, are of great value. And the Lord was not slow to express His appreciation of those who, in the midst of the prevailing corruption, feared Him and thought upon His name.

First the Lord "*hearkened,*" or, according to a better translation, "*The Lord observed it.*" Unnoticed by the mass around, or if noticed only to be despised, they were not too insignificant to attract the notice of the Lord. He "*observed*" them, and His eye could rest upon them with delight. The God-fearing walk of this little remnant was of great value in His sight.

Second, the Lord "*heard.*" Not only He observed with delight their godly walk and ways, but, as they held holy intercourse with one another, He was a delighted listener.

Third, "*A book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and thought upon His name.*" They feared the Lord, and the Lord remembered them. They thought upon *His* name,

and He will not forget *their* names. But it was "before Him" the book was written, not before the world. A God-fearing walk, godly intercourse, godly jealousy for the Lord's name, these are not the traits that will inscribe a man's name on the roll of this world's worthies, it has only a short memory for such. It is to the heart of the Lord that they are dear, He treasures their memory, and inscribes their names in His book of remembrance.

Fourth, "*They shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels.*" Not only did they experience the Lord's secret approval in a day of ruin, but they will be honoured with His public recognition in the day of glory. In a day of ruin they were indeed precious in His sight—His jewels, though not as yet "made up." In the coming day they will be jewels displayed in a glorious setting. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Fifth, "*I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.*" Judgment was about to deal with evil and evil doers, however great their religious profession. This little remnant has the assurance that they will be spared. In the midst of those who professed to be in a special place of nearness to the Lord, and to be serving Him correctly, they had a place truly near to the heart of the Lord, and their service was really acceptable to Him. And so the Lord says, "I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him." Then will be made manifest the difference between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not.

Thus while this last message proclaims, in no uncertain terms, the low condition of the mass of God's professing people, it as clearly distinguishes individuals marked by moral traits, to whom it brings a message of recognition, of comfort, and of encouragement. Further, not only have they the consciousness of the Lord's approval as a present thing, to

sustain their faith and cheer them on the way, but they have the coming of the Lord as their *immediate hope*, and as their *only hope*.

They had no expectation that evil would decrease, or the wicked grow less, or the world grow better, until the coming of the Lord "dealt with the proud and all that do wickedly" (iv. 1).

They looked for no great revival, or general "healing" among God's people until "the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings" (iv. 2).

They looked for no fresh message from God, nor any further accession of light to relieve the deepening gloom, until the Lord should come, and, as the Sun of Righteousness, dispel the clouds of darkness.

They looked for no revival of miraculous power, nor further public intervention of God on behalf of His people, until the Lord should intervene in His almighty power, enabling them to tread down their enemies under foot (iv. 3).

Surrounded on every hand by a great mass of religious profession boasting in its outwardly correct position, and its orderly round of religious ordinances, and yet withal morally insensible and spiritually blind, these godly individuals, weak, despised, and almost unknown by the world, midst scorn and shame it may be, pursued their lowly and separated path, walking in the fear of the Lord, jealous of the name of the Lord, and waiting for the coming of the Lord.

And if we are to get any profit from this last message to God's ancient people, must we not read it as a last message to ourselves? As stated in the beginning of this meditation, the conditions that prevail in Christendom, and amongst the people of God, in these last solemn days, on the eve of the coming of the Lord, are strangely like the conditions that prevailed in Malachi's day.

Are we not, again, surrounded by a great religious profession? Are there not those who say they are

rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, and yet are morally insensible to their own low condition, and spiritually blind to all that the Lord has for them to meet their deep, deep need? In the midst of this religious profession does not the Lord once again distinguish a few who have His approval, and whose characteristics give them a striking likeness to the godly of Malachi's day? Concerning them the Lord can say, "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name" (Rev. iii. 8). As with the Malachi few, it is not correct outward position, or any great "works" or witness before the world, but rather moral traits which gain for them the approval of the Lord. In a coming day they, too, like their Malachi prototypes, will be displayed in power and glory, and all the world will know that the Lord has loved them. And just as the Malachi remnant will be spared from the coming judgment, so will the Philadelphians be kept from the hour of trial which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Moreover, as the coming of the Lord was the only hope of the godly to whom Malachi prophesied, so the coming of the Lord is the only hope set before the Philadelphians. "Behold," says the Lord, "I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no one take thy crown."

In conclusion, may we not say that in these last closing days—these solemn days, these dark and apostate days—God's last message to His people addresses the conscience and appeals to the heart? It is no longer a message conveying fresh light to the understanding—the light has been given, the truth has been recovered. But the serious question is now raised, "How have we answered to the light; what is our moral condition?" May our consciences be laid bare in the light of this last message. In the presence of God may we so judge ourselves that we may be found amongst those of whom the Lord can say, "Thou hast a

little strength, and hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name." Thus indeed shall we truly be looking for the Lord, and as He says, "Surely I come quickly," we shall be able to reply, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."



"Be Thou Faithful . . ."

Revelation 2:10

Israel in the wilderness praised Abraham and persecuted Moses. In the days of the Kings, they praised Moses and persecuted the prophets. In the days of Christ, they praised the prophets and persecuted the Saviour. In the days of the popes, they praised the Saviour and persecuted His devoted followers. Multitudes now applaud the faith, courage, and fortitude of the patriarchs and prophets, the apostles and martyrs, but condemn as stubbornness and foolishness anything like faithfulness to the truth.

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