

Malachi 2
November 15, 2020

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: When God calls someone like a pastor or priest into a spiritual leadership role, what attributes should we look for? [Let people engage]

Q: We have identified key attributes we *should* look for, but in reality, is a pastor's ability to spiritually lead the "number one" variable people look at before they join a church? If not, what are other reasons people join a church? [Let people engage]

Transition: People join churches for flimsy reasons. Sometimes they join a church because they like the feeling they get when they attend there. They find the music entertaining and uplifting. Maybe they like the pastor's personality or sense of humor. Or they like the youth activities that are available. Often, they join because their best friends go there. Unfortunately, people don't always consider what the pastor is teaching or where he is leading them spiritually as their "#1 Factor" in choosing a church home.

We are getting ready to read what we should look for in spiritual leaders. These next verses address spiritually lax priests. Let's see what Malachi says. Let's read the text.

BOOK:

Admonition for the Priests

2 "And now this admonition is for you, O priests. 2 If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me.

3 "Because of you I will rebuke (cut off) your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. 4 And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty. 5 "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. 6 True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness and turned many from sin.

7 "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. 8 But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. 9 "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law."

Judah Unfaithful

10 Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?

¹¹ Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. ¹² As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty.

¹³ Another thing you do: You (men who intermarried or divorced women?) flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. ¹⁴ You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

¹⁵ Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

¹⁶ "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

The Day of Judgment

¹⁷ You have wearied the LORD with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about God in this passage? [Let people engage]

- It is NOT God's will for a believer to marry an unbeliever. Excuses often given:
"I love him, and love is what matters the most."
"He promises to go to church with me and the children."
"If I break up with him, he won't have anyone to lead him to Christ. Besides, I'm sure that he's going to become a Christian."
"I've prayed about it and feel a peace that this is God's will."

LOOK:

A. W. Tozer wrote, "Save me from the curse of compromise, of imitation, of professionalism. Save me from the error of judging a church by its size, its popularity or the amount of its yearly offering. Help me to remember that I am a prophet—not a promoter, not a religious manager, but a prophet" ("The Prayer of a Minor Prophet"). That is the essence of spiritual leadership, to honor God by walking with Him and teaching His truth. "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching" (1 Tim. 4:16)!

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Mal 2:1-17). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

III. They Defiled His Covenant (2:1–17)

It was no light thing to be a priest, for this was a gracious gift of God through His covenant with Levi. Verses 5–7 describe the ideal priest: he fears the Lord and obeys Him; he receives the Word and teaches it; he lives what he teaches; he seeks to turn others from sin. But the priests in Malachi's day actually led people astray (2:8) and defiled the holy covenant.

What would God do to them? "I will curse your blessings." This ties in with 3:9 and the lack of tithes and offerings. God cursed the crops; the people were poor; they did not bring the offerings to the priests; therefore, the priests went hungry. In sinning against God's covenant they were only hurting themselves. But vv. 10–16 point out another terrible sin of the priests: they divorced their Jewish wives and married heathen women. They dealt treacherously against the women and their families; see Ex. 34:10–17, Ezra 9:1–4, Neh. 13:23–31. All their weeping at the altar (2:13) could not change things; they had to put away their sins. Read v. 15 like this: "Did not the Lord make husband and wife one? Why? That you might bring forth a godly family." Actually, the nation's looseness about divorce was endangering the promise of the Seed, Christ. God hates divorce; it is the breaking of the covenant between husband and wife and between them and God.

Blaising, C. A. (1985). Malachi. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 1579-1583)

2:3–4. The priests were then warned of a rebuke that would fall against their seed. *Zera* ('seed') refers to grain or to physical **descendants**. The following threat of the removal of the priests from office makes the latter option more probable. Some have suggested that instead of *zera*, the text should read *zerōa* which means "arm." To rebuke one's arm was a metaphor for rendering one powerless (1 Sam. 2:31, "strength" in the NIV is lit., "arm"). This would correlate with the interpretation (cf. Mal. 2:1–2) that the curse concerned the blessings pronounced by the priests on the people.

The Lord said He would **spread on their faces** the waste matter **from the sacrifices**, which ironically were described as festive. "Spread," from the verb *zārâh*, is a pun on the word *zera* ('seed'), the descendants who were the object of God's rebuke (v. 3). The priests would be made as unclean as **the offal**. Much as it was discarded, so they would be disposed of as well. In other words, they would be cast out of service. Then they would realize that **the LORD** was speaking to them. His purpose in admonishing them was to purify the priesthood **so that His covenant with Levi could continue**.

2. THE STANDARD FOR PRIESTS (2:5–9)

2:5–6. The **covenant** with Levi (v. 4), is now discussed in more detail. The tribal name Levi is used for the descendants of Levi who made up the priestly class. The covenant mentioned here refers to what may be called a covenant of grant (Num. 18:7–8, 19–21), a covenant made with an individual (and sometimes his descendants) because of some service the recipient performed. God made a similar covenant of grant with Phinehas (Num. 25:10–13). The phrase **a covenant**

of life and peace seems to recall how Phinehas' zeal for the Lord turned away God's wrath from the people (cf. Num. 25:11 with Mal. 2:6, **He ... turned many from sin**). Most important, **he revered** God (v. 5), the point of exhortation in this oracle. Besides, Levi's teaching was **true**, and his conduct was in **uprightness**.

2:7–9. The word **instruction** is *tôrâh*, also the word for "Law." The priests were to teach the Law (Deut. 33:10). As teachers, each priest was to be a **messenger** (*mal'ak*). However, since they were not giving true instruction, they were rebuked by the prophet whose very name, ironically, means "My messenger." Their **teaching ... caused many to stumble** because they themselves had **turned from the way**. Saying that defiled sacrifices were accepted **violated** God's **covenant with Levi** (see Num. 18:19, 21). So the priests were **despised and humiliated before all the people**. This actually was a light sentence, for their penalty should have been death (Num. 18:32).

IV. Third Oracle: Be Faithful as God's Covenant People (2:10–16)

A. *The charge of unfaithfulness (2:10)*

2:10. The style of the third oracle differs from the others. Instead of an initial statement or charge followed by a question of feigned innocence, this oracle begins with three questions asked by the prophet. However, as at the beginning of each of the other oracles, the point is presented at the outset. The reference to **one Father** is probably parallel to **one God** so that "Father" refers to God (cf. 1:6), not to Abraham, as some suggest. Israel was like God's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22; Hosea 11:1). The fact that God had created Israel to be a distinct people on the earth (cf. Amos 3:2) formed the background for the problem Malachi now discussed (Mal. 2:10–16).

Breaking faith (cf. vv. 11, 14–16) renders the word *bāḡad*, "to act unfaithfully with respect to a prior agreement or covenant." This word is often translated "to act treacherously." The concern of this oracle is the people's unfaithful activity in their relationships **with one another**. This activity was another way (in addition to the charge in the previous oracle) in which **the covenant** was being profaned.

B. *The first evidence: Illegal intermarriage (2:11–12)*

1. THE SIN (2:11)

2:11. What had been charged in the form of a question (v. 10) was then stated as a fact and explained. The unfaithfulness Malachi had in mind (v. 10) is called **a detestable thing** (lit., "an abomination"), something abhorrent to God. Furthermore, this abominable unfaithfulness involved a profaning of holiness. The word for "holiness" (*qōdeš*, "apartness, separateness") may refer to **the sanctuary** (as in the NIV), the covenant, the people, or simply the quality of holiness itself. Since the concern of this oracle was the uniqueness and unity of the people ("Did not one God create us?" [v. 10]), holiness may refer here to the quality of distinctiveness or separateness that the Lord desired **in Israel**.

The abominable unfaithfulness that profaned Israel's holiness was intermarriage with pagans. **Daughter of a foreign god** refers to pagan women who worshiped false gods. (If *qōdeš* refers to the "sanctuary," then possibly the profanation referred to the involvement of these women in temple worship.) Such marriages had been expressly forbidden because they would lead the

people into idolatry (Ex. 34:11–16; Deut. 7:3–4; Josh. 23:12–13). Intermarrying was a big problem after the return from the Exile (cf. Ezra 9:1–2, 10–12; Neh. 13:23–27). The Jews were supposed to marry within their own nation. Failures to do so were acts of unfaithfulness among themselves as well as to God. They involved both a disregard for the nation’s corporate nature and disobedience to God.

2. THE CONSEQUENCE (2:12)

2:12. The prophet invoked a curse on any Jew who had committed or would commit this sin of marrying a pagan. To be **cut ... off from the tents of Jacob** meant either that **the man** would die or that his line would cease and he would have no descendants in Israel. The phrase *‘ēr we’ōneh* is difficult to translate. The NIV translates it **whoever he may be**. The NASB which is more literal, reads, “everyone who awakes and answers,” and the KJV has “the master and the scholar.” Some translate it “who gives testimony” (NIV). Perhaps this was a proverbial expression, whose meaning is not clear today.

The last clause—**even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty**—emphasizes the hypocritical and insensitive attitude of those who committed this sin of intermarrying. One is shocked to read that despite the abomination such a person committed he still brought offerings to seek the Lord’s favor.

C. The second evidence: Divorce (2:13–16a)

1. THE CONSEQUENCE (2:13)

2:13. The two lines of evidence in this oracle are arranged chiastically so that the sin-consequence structure in the foregoing (v. 12) is reversed here. The consequence or symptom of the sin is presented first (v. 13); then the sin is stated (vv. 14–16a). Malachi said “some people” **flood the LORD’s altar with tears**. Whose tears do these refer to? Some have suggested that these were the tears of divorced wives who were seeking justice from the Lord. But the second half of verse 13 indicates that these were the tears of the men who (after divorcing their Israelite wives to marry pagans, v. 14) found that the Lord **no longer** received their **offerings**. This fits naturally with verse 12.

2. THE SIN (2:14–16a)

2:14. Again Malachi stressed the Israelites’ spiritual insensitivity. Since they—surprisingly—could not imagine what the problem was (**You ask, Why?**), the prophet had to spell it out for them. **The LORD** was **acting as the witness between** such a man **and his wife** with whom he had **broken faith** (cf. vv. 10–11, 15–16), that is, whom he had divorced. This “witness” may have been in a legal sense or in a general sense, depending on the covenant referred to. If it is to be taken in a legal sense, then the Lord was called on to be a witness and a judge in a legal agreement, as was sometimes done among the ancients (cf. Gen. 31:50, 53). If *berîtekā* means **your marriage covenant** (NIV) then the Lord’s witness would have this legal sense. He was the witness of the marriage covenant between the man and woman.

However, the word *berîtekā* (lit., “your covenant”) could conceivably refer to the covenant between God and Israel (cf. Mal. 2:10). In that case the Lord was a witness in the general sense

that He knows all that happens. Then “the wife of your marriage covenant” would refer to the fact that she was chosen from among the covenant people. While the preceding context seems to support this second interpretation, the statement **she is your partner** (v. 14) seems to emphasize the marriage relationship itself (cf. Prov. 2:17). Most likely the word “covenant” (Mal. 2:14) refers to both the national covenant between God and Israel and the marriage covenant of individuals.

2:15. This is the most difficult verse in Malachi to translate. The first phrase could be either, “Did not One make them?” or “Did not He [the LORD] make one?” The first rendering emphasizes the creative and sovereign work of the one God (v. 10). The second has several possibilities. It may refer to one wife, one child of Abraham (Isaac), one flesh (man and woman made one in marriage), or one covenant nation.

The second sentence in verse 15 is even more difficult. Literally it reads, “And a remnant of the Spirit [or spirit] to him.” The NIV follows the view of many commentators and reads **flesh** in place of remnant. However, the primary motivation for this is the opinion that the first phrase alludes to Genesis 2:24, which speaks of man and woman becoming one in marriage. This view is possible because marriage is being discussed in Malachi 2:10–16.

Probably a better view is that the prophet was contrasting the Lord’s faithfulness to Israel (His one covenant people) with the marital unfaithfulness of individual Israelites. This contrast had already been drawn in verse 10 and was involved in the discussion of the sin of intermarriage (v. 11).

In this view the **one** in the first clause in verse 15 refers to Israel as one people. The stress on oneness would have special significance in the postexilic period, as the former division between Israel and Judah was removed. (In v. 11 “Judah” and “Israel” are used interchangeably.) Therefore, the first phrase might have an intended double reference: “Has He not made one people?” *and* “Has He not made the people one?” The second phrase could read, “and made them His spiritual remnant.” They could be His “spiritual” remnant only because He would fill them with His Spirit. Though Judah and Israel were united in Malachi’s day, the granting of the Holy Spirit to the remnant is still future (Ezek. 37). But it was described from God’s standpoint as if it had already taken place. Why was God concerned about the unity of His people? (**And why one?**) God is **seeking a godly offspring** (lit., “a seed of God”). “Seed” refers to the people corporately as the heir of His covenant promise (cf. Gen. 17:7) and parallels the phrase “spiritual remnant.”

Malachi’s command, **So guard yourself in your spirit** (repeated in Mal. 2:16) means to have the same desire for covenant unity that the Holy Spirit seeks, which would mean **not** violating the marriage covenant. Because the nation is one, no husband, Malachi said, should **break faith** (vv. 10–11, 14, 16) **with the wife of his youth** (cf. v. 14) by divorcing her (cf. v. 16).

2:16a. Malachi used strong language to emphasize God’s displeasure with divorce. He said, **I hate divorce**. “Hate” (from *śānē*) means to detest. (This differs from the Heb. word for “hate” used in 1:3.) To underscore his point, Malachi said that this pronouncement was made by **the LORD God of Israel**. This recalls the fact that He is the sovereign Lawgiver and Judge of Israel. If God despises a practice, certainly it ought not be done.

A man’s covering himself ... with his garment symbolizes marriage (cf. Ruth 3:9; Ezek. 16:8). But covering himself **with violence** describes violating the marriage relationship, which is what divorce does. The fact that this is the Lord’s view is repeated for emphasis (**says the LORD Almighty**).

This verse is the most explicit statement in the Old Testament on God's feelings about divorce. Divorce was allowed but actually the instructions in that passage (Deut. 24:1–4) were given to protect the wife if a divorce should occur. Jesus taught that those concessions by Moses were given because of the hardness of people's hearts, but He emphasized that God does not approve of divorce (Matt. 19:7–9), though some Bible scholars see some bases for exceptions to this ideal. (Cf. comments on Matt. 5:31–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; and 1 Cor. 7:10–24.)

D. The charge to faithfulness (2:16b)

2:16b. The charge in verse 15b is repeated in verse 16b: **So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith** (cf. vv. 10–11, 14). The Israelites were not to break faith with one another by divorcing their Jewish wives and intermarrying with pagans (v. 11). Such activity profaned the covenant promise God gave to Israel. By guarding their spirits they would be acting in accord with God's purpose and would help preserve the unity of the nation as well as their individual marriages.

V. Fourth Oracle: Hope in God (2:17–3:6)

A. The charge of wearisome speech (2:17a)

2:17a. This oracle has a striking contrast between its first and last verses. Though the people had changed in their views on God's justice (2:17) God Himself had not changed (3:6). Because He does not change, neither do His covenant promises. Therefore, Israel's faith and hope should have been stabilized. However, she was acting and talking as if she had no God to believe in or hope for. Therefore, ironically, the God whose word to people of faith is that He does not change or grow weary (cf. Isa. 40:28) is now said to be wearied with this people's faithless and hopeless **words** (cf. Isa. 43:24).

B. Israel's question of the charge (2:17b)

2:17b. Again, the people were portrayed as being oblivious to their sin (cf. 1:6–7; 2:14): **How have we wearied Him?** (cf. Isa. 44:24)

C. The proof of the charge: No hope for God's justice (2:17c)

2:17c. The apparent prosperity of the wicked (**All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD**) and the suffering of the righteous is an age-old problem. In the Old Testament the problem was more pronounced than it is today because God promised Israel material prosperity as a reward for obedience to His Law (Deut. 28). However, many of these promises were intended for the entire nation, and in a society in which the righteous and wicked were mixed, there was opportunity for confusion and misunderstanding in individual cases. Added to this is the fact that God in His providence blesses the wicked as well as the righteous as a testimony to Himself (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17). Also, the righteous as well as the wicked suffer because of the Fall (Gen 3:16–19; Eccl. 2:17–23). The Book of Job adds to the dilemma of human suffering the extra dimension of God's dealing with Satan. All of this makes it difficult, apart from known sin in one's life, to determine why a righteous person suffers.

The prosperity of the wicked was equally perplexing and was discussed by at least five biblical writers (Job 21:7–26; 24:1–17; Ps. 73:1–14; Ecc. 8:14; Jer. 12:1–4; Hab. 1). Though answers to this problem are not given in these passages, in each case questions about God’s justice are removed by a futuristic perspective: God will come in judgment and punish the wicked (Job 24:22–24; 27:13–23; Ps. 73:16–20; Ecc. 8:12–13; Jer. 12:7–17; Hab. 2:3; 3:2–19) and establish the righteous in His kingdom forever.

The Jews in Malachi’s day had failed to learn such hope from the Scriptures. They questioned God’s justice by saying that He delights in evil people and by asking, **Where is the God of justice?** Yet *they* were the guilty ones; they were the ones who were unfaithful to Him. Here too God responded by referring to His forthcoming judgment (Mal. 3:1–5). However, unlike the answers by the righteous biblical writers mentioned earlier, the judgment which Malachi referred to was to be against the hypocritical questioners as well.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 1396). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

2:10–16 What Malachi taught about divorce must be understood in its historical context. The challenge facing the Judean community after the return from exile was the reestablishment of its religious institutions (see Hg 1:5–8). But Judean men were marrying women from other ethnic groups in the region who worshiped pagan gods (vv. 11–12)—in some cases, at least, divorcing their Judean wives (“the wife of your youth,” v. 14) to do so. Marriage to unbelievers diluted their commitment to the faith of Israel and resulted in children who were not the “godly offspring” the Lord desired (v. 15). The prophet’s overriding concern was not marriage, as such, but the effect of an unwise mixed marriage on a man’s relationship to the Lord, and the impact of many such unions on the solidarity and stability of the covenant community.

Malachi admonished the men of Judah to honor the commitment they had made to the wife they married under the Lord’s covenant, and not to “act treacherously” (v. 15) against her. To divorce her to marry a pagan woman would be to break faith with the Lord, as well as with her. The Lord finds such an action detestable. Malachi appealed not only to the covenant but also to the Lord’s creation of man and woman, with “His life-breath” (v. 15), to become one flesh (Gn 2:7, 21–23). As Creator, God is the Father of His people and desires covenantal loyalty within His family (Mal 2:10). (Apparently polygamy was not an option in Judah at this time, although earlier figures in OT history such as the Hebrew patriarchs, David and Solomon, had more than one wife. Either monogamous marriage had become the norm or, under the rigorous conditions of the earlier return from exile, men of ordinary means could not afford to practice polygamy.)

Clendenen, E. R. (1998). *The Minor Prophets*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman concise Bible commentary* (pp. 391–393). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

PRIESTHOOD CURSED (2:1–9)

The “admonition” (better translated “decree”) here is that if the priests’ attitude and behavior does not change, the Lord will curse them and remove them from service (see Lev. 10:1–3; 1 Sam. 2:29–36; Ezek. 44:6–14; Hos. 4:6–8). God had entrusted them with the spiritual well-being of Israel (see Num. 25:11–13; Deut. 33:8–11). Although Nehemiah “purified the priests and the

Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task” (Neh. 13:30), according to the gospel writers, by the time of Jesus the Jerusalem priesthood was under God’s curse (see Matt. 16:21; 21:23–46). But the promise of a lasting Levitical priesthood was still in effect (Mal. 3:3–4; see also Jer. 33:17–22).

A priest is called here a “messenger of the LORD Almighty” Elsewhere the Lord’s “messengers” are either angels or prophets. Whereas those messengers conveyed new words or instructions from God, priests informed His people of the words of His law previously revealed and applied that law to their lives and situations. Malachi’s time near the end of Old Testament prophecy and the completion of the Old Testament canon would make the term’s use here especially significant. That teachers of God’s Word could be described as “messengers” implies the ongoing relevance of God’s past instructions and shows the continuing importance of the role of biblical teacher (and translator) among God’s people. Those who proclaim God’s written Word are no less important to His redemptive program than those who previously served as “prophets,” since both carry God’s message (see 2 Pet. 1:19–21).

MARITAL UNFAITHFULNESS (2:10–16)

The audience of the second address has broadened to all Judah. The indictment is against unfaithfulness to one another, especially against wives, many of whom were being divorced to marry pagan women. Such behavior involved treachery against those to whom one was joined by spiritual kinship (v. 10a; see 1 John 5:1) as well as by a covenant sworn before the Lord (v. 14).

The vertical aspect of Judah’s unfaithfulness is in view in verses 11–12. By marrying those who worshiped other gods, the people had committed a “detestable” act which “desecrated” or profaned the Lord’s sanctuary. Such unfaithfulness to God also introduced a spiritually destructive element into the covenant community (see Exod. 34:11–16; Deut. 7:3–4; Neh. 13:26; 2 Cor. 6:14–17). Their sin was made more reprehensible by their continuing to sacrifice to the Lord as if all was well (v. 12). Then they complained because He was not honoring the sacrifices (v. 13). The horizontal aspect of Judah’s unfaithfulness—the breaking of marriage covenants—is the focus of verses 13–15a. But this had a vertical dimension as well in that God was “witness” to those covenants.

The point of the very difficult verse 15a seems to be that marriage is not only a union of flesh that can be dissolved, but one of God’s Spirit. Since the Spirit remains, marriage has an inherent unity that survives human efforts to sever it. The nature or purpose of marital unity is “seeking seed of [i.e., “from”] God.” God intended that a man’s purpose in departing from his father and mother and in joining himself to a wife by covenant, thus becoming one with her in flesh (Gen. 2:24), should be fruitfulness. By that means God’s people were to spread His rule throughout the whole earth, producing and discipling children who would manifest the divine glory in their obedient lives and continue the process until the earth was full of His glory. Although couples can no longer be assured of bearing children (as the Book of Genesis makes clear), they are still to “seek” them, and can reproduce themselves in other ways if necessary, through adoption and/or spiritual discipleship.

The instruction section (vv. 15b–16) begins and ends with the command to “guard yourself” and not “break faith.” Between is another difficult passage, whose traditional interpretation as a general condemnation of divorce (reflected in the NIV) is in tension with Moses’ apparent permission for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, Ezra’s prescription for it in Ezra 10:5, 11, and Jesus’ allowance for it in Matthew 19:9. Beginning verse 16 is a particle meaning either “indeed,” “for,” or “if, when.” The syntax favors “if” (see 2:2), producing the literal translation,

“‘If He hates (and) divorces,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘then He covers his garment with violence,’ says the LORD Almighty.” The point is that one who divorces his wife simply because He dislikes her (Deut. 24:2) commits “violence” or injustice against her, that is, “cold-blooded and unscrupulous infringement of the personal rights of others, motivated by greed and hate” (see Ps. 73:6). Such a man deprives his wife of the very things a husband is responsible to provide—blessings, good, protection, praise, peace, justice—and He stands condemned by God.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Mal 2:1-17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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