

# Healing the Land

By David H. Roper

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Lenny Bruce tells a story about a convention of Dodge and Chrysler dealers who held a raffle and gave away a 1958 Catholic church. It's a funny story and just as easily could have been about a Protestant church. The story is a spoof, of course, on the decline of spiritual values in the West. This is what C.S. Lewis calls "the unchristening of the West", the disentangling from spiritual or religious values. Of course, when we cut ourselves loose from God, there inevitably is a decline in society. This is what we are seeing today in the West. Life is becoming less and less worthwhile because we have disconnected ourselves from God. Without a personal, intimate relationship with God, life always declines in value. This is true of nations, and it is true of individuals. Jesus warned us that if we, the people of God, do not take seriously our relationship with God, then eventually society will trample us underfoot. We would be like salt that has lost its taste. The other day I heard someone suggest we build prefabricated churches so the next generation could dismantle them and reassemble them in a form more appropriate to that particular generation.

That instability is what we are seeing in our nation, and it is what Malachi tells us happened to Israel in the fourth century B.C. The Israelites were experiencing a decline in the quality of their life because they had lost the sense of God's immediacy, his personal and intimate love for them. Therefore, because they had no sense of God's love for them, their love for God became cold and mechanical, perfunctory. They were just going through the motions. They had a system of worship, but it was merely formal. Next, that coldness crept into their homes, and so their homes began to break up. Then there was a further degeneration. Whenever homes are affected spiritually and morally, society inevitably begins to feel the effects. There was a great social upheaval in fifth-century Israel which can be traced directly to the Jews' departure from the Lord. They never took him seriously and so the nation declined, until no one took the nation seriously.

In chapter 2, verse 17, through chapter 3, verse 12, Malachi outlines the way of return for the people. Of course, that is our concern, as well. How do you heal a nation? When spiritual values no longer mean anything, when the quality of life has declined as it has in our country, how do you heal that nation? How do you exalt it? In verse 12 of chapter 3, Malachi says, "And all the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts.

That was the hope of the prophet, that Israel again would become a delightful land. And our hope, as a nation, is that other nations of the world will call us blessed instead of "the ugly American", and there will be healing in our land. Beginning in chapter 2, verse 17, Malachi outlines for God's people the steps they are to take in order to heal their nation.

**"You have wearied the Lord with your words."**

God is saying through the prophet, "My patience with mere words is exhausted; it is time for you to do something about the situation, something redemptive." And then he begins to outline what those steps are.

But first, in the rest of verse 17, he calls to their mind two statements of principle, two philosophies, that the Israelites were holding.

**"Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him? In that you say, 'Everyone who does evil is good**

## **In the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them,' or 'Where is the God of justice?'"**

Two philosophies prevailed in Israel at that time. One was relativism: they called good evil, and evil good, and said God smiled on both. This belief maintains that it does not matter whether a person's actions are righteous or not. Whatever a person chooses to do, whatever turns him on, whatever feels good, is right; God smiles on our actions, good and bad. Good and bad were relative terms to the Jews. The second philosophy the Jews were holding had to do with an attitude of pessimism. "Where is the God of justice?" the Israelites asked. Inevitably, when law and order break down, people become disillusioned and cynical about life. "Where is the God of justice?" They do not see justice in the land and so they believe that God has abandoned the land and is not acting justly toward them.

Relativism is always the result of a relationship with God that has gone sour because you cannot have morality in the land apart from a relationship with God. Men may attempt to maintain morality without God, and this morality will hold up for a few generations. But inevitably it begins to break down because, apart from God, there is no reason for morality. He is the basis for all morality in a nation. I understand that in Washington D.C., at the Bureau of Weights and Measures, there is a platinum bar on which all of our units of measure are inscribed, from 1/64 of an inch up to a yard. That is the standard for the measurements that we use. Now hardly anyone has seen it, but it is there in the vault (they tell me). Now, suppose through some accident that bar is destroyed or lost. For a few generations we might be able to exist without that standard because we all have measuring devices in our homes that we can use. but after a period of time, if there is no objective standard to appeal to, then we can begin to change those measurements. If I am selling property, I may decide that a yard is really only thirty inches. And if you are buying that property, you may come to me with a yardstick that is 38 inches long. After awhile, the unit of measure becomes whatever I want it to be, because there is no standard. And that is what is happening in our nation. Without God, there is no basis for morality, no objective standard, and so men make the law whatever they want it to be, whatever pleases them, whatever serves their interest.

The other problem is that without a relationship to God, it is impossible for anyone to have the power to measure up to any standard, or to have the desire to do so. The impulse to be righteous and the power to be righteous come from God, not from us. We do not have that capacity. So when you do away with God, you cannot keep the law. After a period of time, you don't want the law because it creates unnecessary stress, it inhibits and frustrates you. So you begin to do away with it by making good evil, and evil good. The law itself can never empower or motivate people; it is a dead instrument. The law may be a good thing, but it cannot empower, it cannot give me the desire to obey it, and therefore I am always two or three steps behind.

The other day I decided I was going to set up some new standards for running our house. Mornings are a disaster around our home. We all go five different directions. One child goes off to kindergarten, another to junior high, another to high school, I go to work, and Carolyn is busy doing other things. Mornings are like an explosion in a mattress factory, with each of us shooting off in a different direction. Last Monday was particularly traumatic; everything fell apart. So I decided things were going to change.

That afternoon I took a 4x6 card and wrote out a series of rules to get us organized. There were ten rules, if that is at all symbolic. When I got home, I stuck my 4x6 card on the shaving mirror and thought, "Now, tomorrow morning when I get up, I'll see my rules and I'll go down the list and get everybody organized." Tuesday morning I woke up. walked into the bathroom, and looked at my shaving mirror. I felt good; this was the morning we were going to get organized! I looked at my first rule. It was, "Get everybody organized the night before." It really was! I just had to laugh, because that is the problem with the law. You are always a dollar short and a day late. You never catch up. When Carolyn came into the bathroom and I told her what I had done, she just laughed. She said, "That's all right; we'll just try again. We'll start now." She did not say, "You dodo, what do you think you're doing?" There was an atmosphere of love and support and encouragement that made me want to try again. But apart from that climate of acceptance, the law is dead, it is frustrating, it cannot work. You see, that is the problem when you do away with God in a nation. The law doesn't mean anything, it doesn't work. You may hang onto it for a generation or two, but eventually the law begins to break down. There is no desire or power to keep it. Without a God, why bother to keep it? People begin to think maybe there really is no such thing as law, anyway,

and man is free to do what he wishes.

Inevitably the situation gives rise to the second question, "Where is the God of justice?" As morality breaks down, people run amok and do what they please. Eventually this immorality creeps into the legal system of the nation and courts become corrupt and unjust, and men cry out, "Where's the God of justice? Why doesn't he do something?" Interesting, is it not? We box ourselves in, we create our own problems, then we blame God. We do that as a nation; we do that as individuals. I have often thought we could retell the story of the prodigal son, in which the young man takes everything that the father gives him and uses it for himself. He takes all the resources that are his, uses them for his own self-interest, and ends up destroying his life. There he sits in the pigpen, saying, "One thing I will never do is go back to my father's house because it's all his fault!" Basically, that is what we do. We say that it's God's fault our nation is in such a mess! People are saying, "God is not just." He didn't create the problem, but they blame him. If you know anything at all about the character of God, you know that he does not write people off because they have rejected him; he acts in redemptive, constructive ways. And that is what he does here. He proceeds in chapter 3, verse 1, to give the Israelites the solution to this situation within their nation.

**"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me."**

Literally, he says, Here am I, sending my messenger. You think God doesn't know what's happening and you're blaming him for being unjust. But here I am, sending my messenger.

**"And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple..."**

That has an ominous ring! He is going to appear suddenly, unexpectedly. At a time when you least expect it. He is coming.

**"...and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming," says the Lord of hosts.**

The Lord is coming. That is always the solution to any problem in a nation. God is coming; he is going to do something to change things. This morning I was having breakfast at a restaurant along El Camino and there were a number of men seated at the counter eating breakfast. They had been reading the Sunday paper and started talking about the Big Game. They all were bad-mouthing the Stanford team and coaches; they had a very negative attitude. To my surprise, who should come walking in the door but Jack Christianson, the head coach at Stanford. I thought, "Now this is going to be interesting!" This was the sort of moment that you dream about. He came in and sat down and you would be amazed at the change in the conversation! Those men were so solicitous, so concerned. I could not help but think, "What a change there will be when God turns up!" Things are going to change. He is going to put things right. This is the hope that the world has. This is the only thing that is going to change things, the presence of God on the scene.

There is an interesting parallel passage dealing with injustice in the New Testament, in James 5.

Four hundred and fifty years after Malachi wrote, there was still the same sort of injustice. James 5 says,

**"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth."**

This is the same term that Malachi uses so frequently, "the Lord of hosts." The Lord is in charge, he hears the cries of the oppressed. The oppressors think that they are going to get away with injustice, but the Lord hears. The passage continues, "You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter:" That is an interesting metaphor. I used to raise pigs, and we would put them in a pen and force-feed them to prepare them for market.

I used to stand there and watch those pigs eating. They would just get fatter and fatter, and I would think, "You stupid pigs! If you just knew what was coming! You're just fattening yourselves for the day of slaughter." And this is James' meaning here. The passage in James concludes, "You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you. Be patient, therefore, brethren [the oppressed brethren], until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." The only thing that will set this world right is the coming of the Lord. And James says to those who are oppressed, "Wait, be patient." He does not say to rise up and overthrow the oppressors. I do not see that anywhere in the Scriptures. There may be occasions when Christians have to act on behalf of others who are being oppressed, but the word to the oppressed is, "Wait. God is going to set things right. He is coming." This is Malachi's word. Every man is going to have to confront God. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus and asked, "Are you the coming one? Are you the one we should look for?" he was referring to this passage in Malachi.

Now the interesting thing about this section is that the coming, as described by Malachi, refers not merely to the second coming, when the Lord comes in judgment, but also to the first coming. Two messengers also are mentioned. The first, who is the forerunner, is certainly John the Baptist. Jesus, quoting this very passage in Malachi, said it referred to John the Baptist. So the messenger who precedes the Lord is John the Baptist. Then there is the messenger of the covenant, the Messiah. This is a reference to his first coming and it tells us something of our Lord's attitude toward injustice. He will do something; but he is patient, he waits. He comes first in grace and mercy, in a redemptive way, and he waits for people to respond. Only when men have so hardened their hearts that they are totally unresponsive, will he act in judgment. But first he sends the messenger of the covenant, which is the new covenant. He reminds them that God has promised to write the law on their hearts, to forgive them all of their sin, and to provide all that they need to be the kind of people that God desires them to be. That is the first message. It is only after that message has been rejected that judgment, in any final sense, takes place.

Helmut Thielicke, a wonderful old theologian and Bible teacher, was at Mount Hermon a few years ago at a college conference. Someone asked him what he would say to the Lord when he saw him. Dr. Thielicke's face broke into a smile and he said, "When I see him, I'll say, 'I thought you meant what you said.' " He is coming. He means what he is saying. In chapter 3, verse 2, Malachi goes on to say that there is another coming, and that this coming is one of judgment.

**"But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand [his ground] when He appears?  
For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."**

You can hardly read those words without thinking of that section in Handel's Messiah, where this refrain is repeated over and over: "And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts." God says, "First I am going to judge the Levites. The Levites were the priests, the teachers of Israel, the ones mentioned earlier in Malachi. They were not teaching the law and they had turned from God. Since the people reflected the priests' spirit, the Levites were especially responsible for Israel's moral decline. God said, "I am going to deal with the Levites." And I am sure there were many in Israel who said, "It's about time! Those corrupt, lecherous old men! We hope you do them in because they deserve it. Look what they've done with their liberalism and their lack of appreciation for the Scriptures. They've corrupted our children. They're responsible."

But Malachi says that when God judges, he will not judge the Levites alone; he will judge all the people. The people said, "Where's the God of justice?"

When is God going to act in justice? Why doesn't he set things right?" Malachi says, "He will. But when he judges, he will do so right across the board. He will not deal just with the sins of the Levites; he is going to deal with every sin." Now that ought to strike a responsive chord in our hearts. I know I have the same spirit as the people in Malachi's day. I want God to deal with sin over there, but I am not willing to let God deal with sin right here. And that is what God is after. If God is going to be just, he has to deal with us all.

In the story of David and Nathan, the prophet Nathan came and told David about a rich man who had enormous flocks of sheep. This man held a party, and instead of taking one of his own sheep for the feast, he took his servant's only lamb, a pet lamb, and killed it. David was incensed; he blew his cork! Now stealing sheep is not a capital offense, not even in Israel, but David said that man ought to die. And Nathan said, "You are that man."

Then it was a different story. We want to judge people out there; but God says, "Do you really want judgment? When I judge, it will be right across the board. Or would you rather have me deal in mercy?" That helps me to see why God tarries, why he delays, why he does not judge sin now. I read the paper and, like you, I am shocked at the things that God allows to go on.

And God looks at my life and says, "I'm allowing some of the same things to go on in your life, too, because I'm merciful. Do you really want me to judge?."

One of my favorite books by C.S. Lewis is *Till We Have Faces*. There is a great line in the section where the old queen is about to die. She is going off to meet the gods. She is told, as she dies, "Do not expect justice from the gods." She says, "Oh, then, are the gods not just?" The answer is, "Oh, no, my child; what would become of us if they were?" If God suddenly decided to act in justice instead of mercy, every time I drove forty miles an hour down Middlefield Road, my right foot would shrivel up. Every time I said something cutting and caustic, my tongue would drop off. But God is not dealing with us according to justice; he is dealing with us according to mercy. Our problem is, we are too selective in our concept of justice.

Malachi 3, verse 5, tells of the coming judgment.

**"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts.**

For a long time, some of the more radical elements in our nation have pointed out the same things that are mentioned here, such as "those who swear falsely". There is injustice in our courts. We can agree. When the radicals talk about the oppression of the wage earner, or certain minority groups, Third World people, women, and others, we can agree. But Malachi says you are far too selective when you talk about social injustice. Why not talk about sorcery and adultery while you are at it? Because those things are just as destructive to society as the oppression of the worker. Let us deal with everything that destroys society: lies, every form of sexual perversion, etc. When God comes, he is going to judge right across the board. But do you notice this clear-cut statement of his motive in this passage? When God judges, he judges in a redemptive fashion. He is not interested in merely blotting people off the face of the earth. He is going to purify the sons of Levi, he will smelt them like gold. He will withhold judgment and work in their lives. Eventually he will judge, but that judgment is intended to be redemptive; it will restore.

Finally, in verses 6-12, he calls for repentance.

**"For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."**

Literally, the passage reads, "For I, the Lord, do not change; and you, the sons of Jacob, do not cease." He says, in effect, "I am the Lord, and I always act like the Lord. I never change. You are the sons of Jacob, and you never stop acting like the sons of Jacob." Does that ever hit home to me! If ever there was a son of Jacob, I am one. Jacob was the supplanter, the one who deceived, the distrustful one. God says, "From time immemorial I have acted like God; I have never acted in any other way than you would expect God to act. And you have never acted

other than as a son of Jacob: deceitful, treacherous, crooked." That is why he says in verse 7,

**"From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes, and have not kept them."**

At that point, you would expect God to say, "I'm through. I've had it. I wash my hands of you people; get lost." But he does not say that. He says, "Return to Me, and I will return to you." says the Lord of hosts. That is always his offer. As long as there is life in our bodies we have not gone too far.

**"But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until there is no more need. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the Lord of hosts. "And all the nations shall call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts.**

Malachi gets very specific. If you want to stop injustice in the land, then stop being unjust yourself. Wherever you are oppressing people, stop it. Wherever you are being unrighteous in a relationship to a neighbor or a friend or a husband or a wife or a child, stop it. C.S. Lewis says that of all the people in the world, there is really only one you can do very much about, and that is you. I am not really responsible for anyone else's moral actions; I am responsible for my own. And if I want to set things right in my nation, if I want to stay the hand of God in judgment of my nation, Malachi says I should stop being unjust.

The specific thing that he points to is our unwillingness to provide for the needs of the poor. Let me just briefly give you some background to this section. The Jews had a very interesting way of looking at their land. They always knew it did not belong to them; it belonged to the King. Not their human king, but the Lord. That was very unusual, for throughout the ancient Near East, the kings normally owned the land. In Egypt, the land belonged to Pharaoh. In Mesopotamia, the land belonged to the king. If anyone had any private ownership of land at all, it was because the king had set up a kind of feudal system, similar to that in Medieval Europe, where land would be granted for services to the king. The land did not belong to the person, although the rights could be passed on from one generation to the next. But the land was always owned by the king. In Israel, however, the king never held the land; the Lord did. This is clear throughout the Old Testament.

Isaiah refers to "Emmanuel's land". It was the Lord who conquered the land and gave it to the people. The land belonged to him, and therefore their property rights were limited. There were certain things they could not do.

They could not exploit the land. They could till it, and serve it, but it belonged to him. Neither could they use the land merely for their own self-interest. Basically it belonged to all the people. When they reaped the field, they left a corner untouched, so that the poor could glean in that corner. And regularly they brought a tithe into the storage-houses located in cities all over Palestine. It was from that tithe that the poor could eat. God says, "You are robbing me. You are ripping me off, because you're not bringing that tithe into the storage houses and the poor are in need. You are so preoccupied with feeding your own belly and providing for your own need and acquiring more land, that you're forgetting the needs of others around you." He puts his finger right on that problem and in a very specific way he says, "Stop oppressing the poor, and start obeying me right here."

There are all sorts of applications of that principle we can make. Wherever we have offended our neighbor or friend, or are sinning against anyone in our nation, we need to make things right. Start with whatever needs to be done in reparation. I will never forget the story that Watchman Nee tells about the Christian man who had a rice field on the side of a hill. These farms were terraced with dikes so they could be flooded and kept moist.

This man had a neighbor just below him who would wait until the man had watered his rice field, then he would break a hole in the dike, and the water would flow downhill into his rice field. Every day this farmer would have to carry water up this hill to water his field, and it was very difficult, time-consuming, exhausting labor. And every

day his neighbor would break the dike in order to water his field just below. The farmer became filled with bitterness against his neighbor, and understandably so, until the body of believers in his area got together and began to work with him, to encourage him to act righteously toward his neighbor. Eventually this man began to fill his neighbor's field first, and then his own. And the result was healing. Now that sort of love comes only from God. But that is the sort of action that Malachi says will heal a nation. I cannot merely point my finger at the people in Washington D.C.; I have to point my finger at me. I have to be righteous in my own relationships with my neighbors. And it is that righteousness, Malachi says, that will exalt a nation.

Father, you have exhorted us to pray for those in positions of authority, that we might have the freedom to live godly lives. You are not willing that any should perish, but that all should have the truth and come to repentance. We recognize that when we, as believers, act in responsible and righteous ways, then truth can go forth, the gospel can be proclaimed with power, and our nation can be changed. Correct in all of us, Father, the tendency to point at others. Help us to deal with injustice in our own lives, wherever we have failed to act according to the truth. We all have failed, Father. We thank you for your grace and forgiveness extended to us, and the power to begin to change, in very specific ways, our responses toward those that we have wronged. We thank you for all these things, in Christ's name, Amen.

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