

The Rising of the Son

By David H. Roper

This section in the book of Malachi we want to look at now begins in verse 13 of chapter 3. It is unfortunate that in our English Bibles there is a chapter division after verse 18, because it certainly does not belong there. The Hebrew Bible has always omitted that chapter division, and it is obvious that the six verses of chapter 4 are an argument based on what precedes it. So the division should not be there; this is one unit of thought, beginning with verse 13, through chapter 4, verse 6. In this final section, Malachi is contrasting two types of people. Let us begin with chapter 3, verses 13 through 18.

"Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?' You have said, 'It is in vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts? So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also test God and escape.'

"Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name. "And they will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him."

It is not apparent from our translations, but Malachi's reasoning revolves around the word "spoken," or "spoke." It occurs twice, first in verse 13, and again in verse 16. The form of the verb means "to speak to one another, to carry on a conversation." It is akin to our modern day term, "to rap." I do not know the origin of that term, but I suspect it comes from the word "rapport." You have an affinity for the person you are rapping with. The term "to rap" came out of the student rhetoric of the Sixties and has found its way into our vernacular today. It is a very apt term to describe the sort of conversation that we can have with certain people who understand what we are saying and who agree with it. I believe that is what Malachi means when he uses the word "spoke" here.

Malachi says there were two classes of people speaking together. There is another occurrence of this term "speaking together" in the book of Ezekiel. Some of the people of Israel standing alongside walls and "talking together" about the prophet. In that particular situation they were hostile toward the prophet, but they were acting as though they were hearing his words. The Lord told Ezekiel, "You will be to them as one who sings or plays well on an instrument, for they will hear your words but they will not do them." Malachi refers to a group of people who were gathering together to talk, to rap about the things of God, but they were betraying a certain attitude. They shared this attitude and it was the basis for the affinity they had for one another. On the other hand, there was another group of people with an entirely different attitude who were meeting to talk. Both groups were talking about the things of God, but their speech betrayed something about their hearts, and the condition of their hearts in relationship to God.

Those in the first group are described as saying, "It is vain to serve God. It is profitless, empty, to serve him. What profit is it that we have kept His charge and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?" We have referred to the spirit of Judah during this time. The Israelites were looking at their circumstances and feeling that because their circumstances were grim, God had forsaken them. They looked at Israel and the nation and concluded that the righteous suffered and the wicked flourished. Now that is nothing new. You can find that

attitude wherever you find people talking. Even David comments in one of his psalms that it seems that the wicked flourish and the righteous are suppressed, inhibited, and frustrated. I used to think that attitude was a distorted view caused by our own suffering. But, for a number of reasons that we will not have time to discuss this morning, I have come to believe that it actually is true that externally, superficially, the wicked seem to have things much better than the righteous. The righteous always seem to get the dregs. As we saw in the first chapter of Malachi, God's love for us is not demonstrated by our circumstances, but, rather, by our destiny. God is at work in our life-not to make life easy for us, but to make us men and women in the full sense of the word, to enable us to grow to maturity. Circumstances may be grim indeed, but we do not look at the circumstances and say, "God doesn't love us"; we look at the purpose God has in mind. It is our destiny that demonstrates the love of God. But there were some in Israel who were reasoning from their circumstances that God had rejected them. This group arrived at the conclusion found in verse 15,

"So now we will call the arrogant blessed."

It is much better to be arrogant, much better to thumb your nose at God, for life is certainly much easier if you do. You can keep God at arms' length and prosper, so why not defy him? Again, that is nothing new. That spirit is one that pervades our age as well. It is the arrogant who get what they want; it is the arrogant who succeed. Those who have no time or use for God seem to have things well in hand, under control. That was one attitude that was prevalent in Judah, as we have seen throughout the book. There were many who sided with that particular point of view because their circumstances were so stressful. They said, "God has forgotten us, so let's forget God."

But on the other hand, Malachi describes some who feared the Lord. They rapped together, "and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name." First, a word about their character, and then a word about their conduct. Their character is described as "those who feared the Lord". Now, fear is not used in the sense of anxiety or dread, a craven sort of fear; fear involves reverence. Despite appearances, Malachi says there were some who still gave God the worship that was due him. They did not look at their circumstances, but rather they looked at what God had revealed about himself, and they gave him the sort of honor and respect and reverence that was due him. Who today gives God the sort of worship and honor that is due him? But Malachi says there were some who did then. In contrast to the climate of their day, they gathered together to encourage one another and to support one another, and to build up one another in that attitude. That attitude is impossible to maintain apart from association with other believers. When you are in a cold, dead climate where no one has use for God, how easy it is to pick up that attitude. It may take a long time. The development of that attitude is so slow that we do not always realize what is happening until we begin to pick up the coldness, the indifference to spiritual things, from the world around us. This is why it was so essential that these people talked together, to reinforce one another. This was a fifth-century B.C. application of Body Life. They met to build up one another, to be supportive and encouraging. Then they could go into a cold and loveless world and live out the life of God.

Because these people met to talk together about the things of God, Malachi says certain things were true. "A book of remembrance was written before God." That is a wonderful figure taken from the culture of that day. Oriental kings kept a register of people who were loyal to the throne. Come to think of it, that is true of our day, too! There is an example of this in the book of Esther. When Xerxes the king had a sleepless night, he called for the book of records to be brought to him. He read that in one instance Mordecai had delivered him by alerting the palace guards to a plot against his life. So he rewarded Mordecai. This is the figure that Malachi is using. Now it is merely a figure. God does not have ledgers that he has to refer to in order to remember you. God never forgets you. The only thing he forgets about you is your sin. But what a beautiful symbol this is of the memory God has of those that are his. Those that gather are written in a book, not merely because they gather, but because of their attitude. In the midst of all the moral and spiritual decline of that day, they feared God. There were some who met together and gave praise and honor and worship to God, and God hearkened to them and their names were written down in this book. He will never forget them. And it says in verse 17, "They will be Mine." A heavy emphasis is put on the word "mine".

"And they will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare My own

possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

The King James translation of this verse says, "They will be mine on the day that I make up my jewels." That translation is not bad, because the word "possession" means "a valued treasure." "They're mine," God says. "I treasure them." This is the term that is translated in the New Testament by both Peter and Paul as "a unique possession". We are God's own people, we belong to him. Are you aware of that? You are God's possession. If in your heart you fear (in the proper sense) the Lord Jesus Christ, if you love him, if you have given your heart to him, you are his possession. You are his precious jewel and he will never let you go. You are secure in that relationship. In John 10 Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice, and I know them and they follow me; I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of the Father's hand." He uses the double negative, which is bad English, but good Greek. "They shall not never perish." He goes on to say in the next verse, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand." So there is a double protection. We are in the Son's hand, and the Father's hand envelops the Son's hand. That means we cannot take ourselves out of the Father's hand if we truly belong to him. Once Christ becomes Lord in our life, we are his possession, and God will see to it that we live like his possession. This is not to say that we can't acknowledge Christ as Lord in some superficial way and then live our life the way we want to. But what the Bible does teach is that when Christ genuinely is Lord, and we are living out the life of God, we will demonstrate that relationship. We will begin to act like sons of God. God will see to it that we behave, and he will hold us to the end. We are his possession.

There is a marvelous illustration of this security in the Old Testament in the life of Abraham. God actually wrote a contract with Abraham. He said, "I will bless you, I will make your name great; through you I'll produce a seed that will bless the entire world." He promised him a land, and then he put him to sleep so that he could not even sign the covenant. God signed it; Abraham had nothing to do with it. Abraham and all his descendants would be the possession of God. But in chapter 22, when Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, as he came down the mountain from that place of sacrifice, God said to Abraham, "Because you have done this thing, I will bless you." In that instance, God's covenant seems to be conditioned upon Abraham's obedience. In the first instance, it is conditioned upon God's faithfulness; in the second, upon Abraham's faithfulness. I believe what God is saying is this: God had purposed to fulfill in Abraham his promise, and he would see to it that Abraham himself would fulfill the terms of that contract. It was not even up to Abraham; it was God's work. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." You are secure, you are his possession. No one can take you out of his hand if you truly belong to him.

Malachi begins this section with the distinction between those who truly belong to God and those who do not. There are some people who do not fear the Lord, and they support one another in their conversation; and there is another group of people who do fear the Lord. That is the basic distinction-unobservable, but fundamental. There is no way you can look at a person and tell which group he belongs to. We do not wear fish stickers on our foreheads. But God makes the distinction. He sees the heart. He knows, and he writes the book. You cannot look at a person's circumstances and say, "My, that person must know God because he's blessed." Or, "Obviously this other person does not know God because he's not blessed."

When you look at circumstances, you see the righteous suffering and the unrighteous flourishing. So there is no way to make that distinction superficially; it is an attitude of the heart. The issue is: Do you fear God, or not? In truth, we all need to fear him. We may not recognize it. We may believe that in ourselves we are adequate to face life. But right down at the level where every one of us bleeds, we are all beggars, we all have needs. I thought of a children's poem last week that I had not thought of for years. It goes,

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark!
Beggars are coming to town:
Some in rags, and some in tags,
And some in velvet gown.

That is true. Some of us obviously are beggars. We look like it-the poor in spirit. Others are not; they seem very

confident, able to handle any situation. Yet, at the most fundamental level of life, we are all beggars. Whether we are in rags or in velvet gown, we need God. Malachi says this is where you begin. You acknowledge that you need God. "Lord Jesus, help me. I need you. I want you to be Lord. I need a Lord to run my life. I can't run my life any longer. I make the most disastrous kind of lord possible. I need another Lord." And with that fundamental attitude, our relationship to God changes. We are taken, as Paul says, "from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light." We are written into God's book. Our circumstances may not change. They may even become more difficult; but we are given the life of God that enables us to cope with those circumstances. That is the internal distinction that Malachi makes.

But, Malachi says, a day is coming when the distinction will be made on another basis, one that will be observable. That prophecy is found in chapter 4, verses 1 through 3.

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave neither root nor branch."

This is the passage John the Baptist refers to in his ministry when he says to the Pharisees, "The ax is laid to the root of the tree and it will be cut down and thrown into the fire." And they knew what he was talking about. It is always so impressive to me that Jesus and the apostles were not just speaking out of a vacuum. Practically everything they said was rooted in the Old Testament. They knew and loved the Old Testament; they had confidence in it. It was the basis of their ministry. If you look at John the Baptist's ministry, you'll see that much of what he says and does is rooted in the book of Malachi, because he saw himself predicted in this book. Verse 2,

"But for you who fear My name [here is the second class of people, again] the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings [or rays; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall."

This is a very colorful figure. If you have ever been on a farm, you know how a stalled calf acts when you open the gate. It leaps about in the open field as it experiences its freedom.

"And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the Lord of hosts.

This is not necessarily true now. Maybe in a spiritual sense we can experience the same sort of victory over our circumstances, over various enemies of the soul. But this verse is looking forward to the time when the sons of God come into their own and experience this fully, in the complete sense that God has in mind, at the Second Coming, which Malachi describes here as the day of the Lord. This is the time when God has his say. We have our day now, but God's day is coming. God is not trying to run the world right now, although he could, if he so chose. As we saw last week, he is acting now in grace and mercy and patience, not willing that any should perish. But the time is coming when he will say, "Enough! It is time for my day!"

Throughout the past there have been what people have described as "reddening of the horizon," such as the destruction of Jerusalem, twice, and other prefigurings of the day of the Lord. But the day of the Lord is coming, in its full sense, when Jesus comes again. Note how it is described-like the sun coming up. And for one class of people, those who do not fear his name, it will be a threat. It will be like a furnace, like the desert sun that burns up the dry shrubs. On the other hand, for those who look for his coming, who fear his name, who love him, it will be "the sun of righteousness rising with healing in its wings," with the warmth and restorative powers of the sun. Now again, the distinction is made according to attitude, not actions or performance. And at that time, Malachi says, the difference, the distinctions, will become obvious. The internal will become external.

In verses 4 through 6, Malachi brings the book to a close. And, in so doing, brings the Old Testament to a close. In the Jewish Bible the book of Malachi is not last, the books of the Chronicles are. But the Jews knew that Malachi was the last prophet. They were very clear about this. There were no prophets after Malachi. The books of the Maccabees were written in the period between the writing of Malachi and the time when Jesus came, and they

refer to the fact that there were no prophets in Israel. There is one very interesting account about the altar. The altar had been defiled and they did not know what to do with it. So they dismantled it and put it over to one side of the temple and said, in the first book of the Maccabees, "We will wait until a prophet comes, who will tell us what to do." They knew there was no prophet in Israel. In verse 4, Malachi tells the people that a prophet is coming, and they are to await his coming.

"Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse."

This is God's last word before the coming of Jesus, who was himself the last word. And in these final words of instruction to his people, he tells us two things that are extremely important. First, Malachi says, "Remember the law." He does not say to keep the law, but to remember the law. That is the phrase that occurs a number of times in Deuteronomy. Malachi reminds the Israelites in a very subtle way what the law is like. It is associated with Horeb (Mt. Sinai) and with Moses and it contains statutes and judgments. What he wants them to remember is the terror of the law. Hebrews says that when Moses went to the mountain he was filled with fear and dread. If an animal touched the mountain where the law was given, it was to be stoned. That is the nature of the law-awesome, frightening--because it is a display of the character of God. And who of us can stand before the character of God? There is nothing sinful about the law, there is nothing wrong with it. The New Testament tells us in no uncertain terms that the law is good and righteous. It is a codification of the character of God, a statement of all that God is, and therefore there can be nothing evil about the law. The problem with the law is us, me. I cannot keep the law. Whenever I see the demands of the law, it is frustrating. It calls forth my own inadequacy. It calls forth an attempt to act on my own strength, and the result is always failure. And so whenever I remember the law, it is frustrating to me. I cannot cope with the law. And yet, that is where Malachi begins the last section of this book, "Remember the law." But that is not where he leaves us. He says in verse 5,

"Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord."

The first word is, "Remember the law;" the second word is, "Wait for the prophet." Somehow the prophet would solve the dilemma that the law created.

And the prophet, we know, is John the Baptist. There is no question about that. John the Baptist himself refers to the book of Malachi, to the reference that we saw earlier, to describe his own ministry. When the angel announced to John's father, Zechariah, the nature of the child's ministry, he was told that he would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah." Then, in Matthew 17, after the transfiguration, the apostles ask Jesus, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said, "Elijah is coming, and will restore all things..." He was speaking from the standpoint of Malachi's prophecy, which said the prophet was coming. "...but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them of John the Baptist, who had been beheaded. So Jesus identified the ministry of the prophet Elijah with John the Baptist. He was the forerunner. Malachi says, "Remember the law; wait for the prophet who will solve the problem of the law," because this prophet will do a remarkable thing (verse 6),

"And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come, and smite the land with a curse."

Notice that he does not say, "Keep the law or I'll curse the land." Nor does he say, "The prophet must come, or I'll curse the land." What he says is, "Your hearts must be changed, or I'll curse the land." The hearts of the fathers must be turned to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. That is, the generation gap must be breached. What greater evidence of a change of heart could there be than that fathers should understand their sons? For a couple of years, I have had some teenagers around my house. They are difficult to understand. I can readily

understand why some of you, who have had teenagers around for a longer period of time than I, have found them very difficult to understand. Malachi says the time is coming when you will understand your children, when you will accept them and love them. And what is more, your sons will respond to your love. They will not fight your authority; they will love you. You will have their hearts. And nothing but a radical change of heart could explain that. In literary terms, what Malachi is doing is called synecdoche, using one part to describe the whole, one illustration to describe a greater truth. Prophets often do this. Zechariah describes the same change of heart that will occur during the time when Jesus is King. He says children will play in the streets. No one will run them down in chariots, or cars, or whatever. I suppose that in Zechariah's day people drove their chariots through school zones at fifty miles per hour, too. Zechariah says hearts have to be changed, and this will be the evidence of that change: children will be able to play in the streets.

Malachi says the same thing: the only solution is a change of heart. You can remember the law, but the law will never save you; it will only curse you. Await the prophet who will announce the message that will change your heart. John the Baptist announced, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." You see, that was his function, to point to Jesus. That is the function of all prophets. Only Jesus can change a heart. It is Jesus in our life that makes the distinction that we talked about earlier. The distinction is not necessarily obvious today. You may know Jesus as Lord, and your circumstances may be just as difficult, or more so, than when you came to know him. And you may not know him, and your life may be very satisfying, very easy and smooth. What God sees now is your attitude. And if you honor him, if you have made him Lord in your life, then God does give you, right now, all of his resources, all of his assets, to help you face those circumstances. But from an outward standpoint, a person may not be able to look at you and say, "That person belongs to God." You will know it, and God will know that you are his possession, but no one else may know it.

On the other hand, Malachi says, there are those who do not fear God. It may not be obvious today, but the time is coming when the day will dawn and the sun of righteousness will rise. He will be to us either a threat, someone before whom we are ashamed, or he will be the One we have been looking for. When Helmut Thielicke, the wonderful old German Bible teacher and theologian, was here some years ago, he spoke to a group of students on the Second Coming. They asked him a good question, "What will be your response to the Lord when you see him?" He said, "My Lord has told me that he's coming. And when I see him, I will say, 'I thought you meant what you said!' "He is coming, and that day will declare the condition of our heart. But we do not have to wait for that day. That is the day when every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The issue is not debatable then. But we can bend the knee now. If you never have let Christ into your life, never asked him to be Lord of your life, this may be the time. It may be that you have been living your life on your own, that you have known him in some superficial way, but he has never really been Lord, in that final and absolute sense. He has never been King. Perhaps this is the morning to make that decision. This is something that no one can detect from the outside; this is a transaction between you and God alone, something that can take place in the quietness of your own heart, when you say, "Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into the world to be my Lord. I want you to take my life and do with it as you please." And he will come in.

Father, your Word tells us that "eyes have not seen, nor have ears heard the things that you have prepared for those that love you." We thank you that today you have prepared for us a special kind of life, a life of adequacy that we can experience now. We thank you, Father, that you are to us, even now, the sun of righteousness, who gives life. We thank you that you are our Lord. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.