



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 37
MALACHI /
JOHN THE BAPTIST**

SEPTEMBER 10-14, 2007

DAY	THROUGH THE BIBLE	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Matthew 1-2, Psalm 31	Malachi 1:1-14, Psalm 31
Tuesday	Matthew 3-4, Psalm 32	Malachi 2:1-17, Psalm 32
Wednesday	Matthew 5-6, Psalm 33	Malachi 2:17 - 3:18, Psalm 33
Thursday	Matthew 7-8, Psalm 34	Malachi 4:1-6, Matt 3:1-17, Ps 34
Friday	Matthew 9-10, Psalm 35	Matthew 11:1-19, Psalm 35



Connecting people to abundant life.

PRAYER JOURNAL

This week I am praying for . . .

. . . Chris and Christine Kernaghan serving with Campus Crusade for Christ on the college campuses of the San Francisco area. Since college, both have been serving with Campus Crusade for Christ. Chris served in the Los Angeles inner city, as well as for two years in North Africa. Christine spent four years involved in their urban ministry where her main area of focus was empowering the inner city church in Los Angeles through after-school mentoring programs.

. . . a young man helped by the Deacon Financial Assistance Fund who was homeless and is now in a program where he will be housed, receive skill training and assistance with obtaining a job.

And . . .

READ

Malachi 1:1-14

Psalm 31

REFLECT

The book of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament in our English translations. The author may have been named “Malachi”; alternatively that term (which means “my messenger”) might simply have been used by him or someone else, instead of his name. The word appears again in 2:7 and 3:1. In any case the book has a lively and passionate style, and the personality of the author comes through even if we are uncertain of his name.

His prophecy progresses through a series of dialogical questions and answers, in which the prophet exposes certain problematic attitudes of the people. For instance, the book opens with the affirmation of God’s love, and then their immediate and abrupt denial of it: “ ‘I have loved you,’ says the Lord. But you say, ‘How have You loved us?’ ” The exchange sounds like one that might occur in an angry family or a tense workplace: everyone seems just a little too familiar with each other, the kind of familiarity that breeds contempt.

The prophet has a number of issues to cover. He begins, as we have seen, with the all-important declaration of God’s love, and then continues with the problems of the priests’ lack of respect for God (1:6 - 2:9); the quality of faithlessness in the community at large (2:10-16); and unrighteousness in the Temple worship (2:17 - 3:12). He then closes the body of his book by insisting that the basic problem is that fundamental arrogance has replaced the attitude of service (3:13-18). The last chapter (4:1-6) speaks of the judgment and restoration that the Lord will bring.

God’s profession of love for Israel at the start sets the tone. The Lord is declaring and offering the greatest possible gift, and yet He receives quibbling in response. There is quite a theological debate about the words, “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.” Many hear in this that the love of God is completely arbitrary; that God flipped a coin as it were, and decided to bless Jacob and curse Esau. This is not a good reading of the history of the two in Genesis, nor of the present passage in Malachi. Genesis is clear that “Esau despised his birthright” (25:34), rejecting the religion of his father Isaac along with Isaac’s material assets. So too in Malachi it is Esau’s habitual wickedness that prompts the Lord’s indignation (1:4; “Edom” is the name of the tribe descended from Esau). At least Esau was consistent in despising the Lord, although he will reap his judgment (1:4). The problem is that Israel remains inconsistent and fickle as the recipient of God’s love and grace. And herein is the reason God has sent the prophets, to plead for love and grace and mercy and blessing. Here is the theme of the protracted history of prophecy in Israel – “I am your God! Be my people!” In Malachi this theme becomes personal, passionate, angry, probing, and always insistent. The relationship has become ripe, and overripe. Surely something new is on the horizon.

RESPOND

No doubt we as Christians have at times taken the love of God for granted, neglecting its deep comfort together with its precise challenges. Psalm 31 provides a counter-example of a stirring kind; the fifth verse guided even Jesus in His agony on the cross. How rich is the spirituality that insists with the Psalmist, “I will rejoice and be glad in Thy lovingkindness” (verse 7).

PRAY

We thank you for your love, O Lord. We respond with our own love for You. Teach us to love with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole strength.

READ

Malachi 2:1-17

Psalm 32

REFLECT

In today's passage the prophet sharpens his criticism of the priests of his day by reminding them how far they have fallen from the ideal of the priesthood. His accusation turns on the fact that instead of respect (or "fear," in the sense of awe) for the Lord, the priests express disrespect and despising (1:6). Every shortcut and shortchange seems to be business as usual in the Temple sacrifice. The prophet places these dirty dealings against the vast and powerful promise of God that, one day, "in every place incense will be offered to My name, and a pure grain offering, for My name will be great among the nations" (1:11). But as for what is happening in His own Temple, He wishes someone would have the courage to bring a stop to the whole thing (1:10).

But the role of the priests doesn't end with their responsibilities in worship. Using the figure of Levi to paint again the true contours of their responsibility, the prophet speaks of the Lord's "covenant with Levi," "one of life and peace, and of respect" (2:5). Levi's role, as the founder of the line of Temple priests, was certainly to stand before the Lord and minister the sacrifices of worship and atonement. But the prophet speaks of another role as well, one of instruction to the people. The one who comes to know the Lord in worship becomes the one who is also sent out to tell of God's grace and love. This one becomes "the messenger of the Lord" (2:7, the same word as "Malachi," "my messenger"). This is also part of the full responsibility of Levi, and of the priests, and one that was sorely neglected. Rather than bestowing "life and peace" in the teaching of the truth, they instead were dispensing personal opinions, and breeding stumbling and corruption (2:8-9).

One of the great insights of the Reformation of the 16th Century was Martin Luther's insistence that as Christians we are, each one, a priest unto God. By this he meant to affirm that each Christian has ready access to the throne of heaven, simply on the basis of trust in Jesus Christ. While we need the whole of the Church to grow in Christian maturity and service, nevertheless when it comes to prayer and worship, there is no one (especially, for Luther, no class of "professional" priests) that stands between us and our God. In the particular struggle of his day with the hegemony of Roman Catholicism, this was tremendously freeing. And it is still tremendously freeing, for many reasons. But Malachi reminds us that such freedoms are equally responsibilities. Free access to the Father and loving relationship with Him is, I would say, a fundamental and defining Christian experience. And it carries with it the fundamentally Christian responsibilities of living for "life and peace," of being ready and able to speak the truth about Him, and of allowing Him to shape our lives as a witness to His love and grace.

RESPOND

We can forget the social and public responsibilities of what we usually experience as our very private relationship with God. Psalm 32 is one of the most profound reflections in Scripture on penitential prayer. In private, in the "hiding place," I make known my burdens to the Lord, and He hears and responds, and blesses. Actually it was in his study of this Psalm that Luther found the courage – the truth – to begin to preach reformation. Hear the point: Luther's grasp of the love and grace of God in the very private moment of penitential prayer, led him to generate perhaps the greatest social, political, and economic upheaval in the history of the West. How will you change your world today?

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the forgiveness I have in Christ, as I come fully ready to confess my sins and my need of You. Help me to walk today in this revolutionary truth, and to be ready to share freely the word of Your love and grace with all I encounter.

- D.D.

READ

Malachi 2:17 - 3:18

Psalm 33

REFLECT

Today's passage is perhaps the lodestone of Malachi, as the insistent and doubting questions of the people are answered with the powerful affirmation that the Lord will arrive at the Temple and set things right. The setting, again, was the period of time after the Exile, when Israel returned to the Holy Land, and under the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah had completed the Temple. But the supernatural arrival of the Lord foretold by Ezekiel and Zechariah had not occurred. Faith was lagging, and turning into peevishness. In this context, the prophet confirms that the Lord will come, and will accomplish the changes that have so long been the hope of the faithful.

The theme that he develops in this regard is that of righteousness. We are reminded that in the Old Testament "righteousness" was the responsibility that expressed itself in faithful behavior. We tend to think in terms of an inward personal holiness, but this is only one sliver of what the biblical term intends. In 2:17 the prophet records the complaint of the people that the Lord does not treat folks right: in fact He seems to delight in those who do evil. Rather than being the righteous God, God is perceived to support unrighteousness. Here is a truly blasphemous statement, which completely confuses what is good with what is evil, and sees God as the rewarder of evil. In fact the people's question "Where is the God of justice?" comes close to denying His very existence.

The prophet responds by affirming that the Lord not only exists, but will arrive to accomplish His will. This is both bad news and good news: the bad news is that His work will be a painful refining, but the good news is that it will result in real purification. "They shall offer unto the Lord offerings in righteousness." (The settings of these two passages in Handel's *Messiah* capture well the looming threat – "But who may abide

the day of His coming?" – and the joyful promise – "And He shall purify....") To "offer unto the Lord offerings in righteousness" then really implies that for the first time Israel will be empowered to serve the Lord in the full range of spiritual beauty and outward obedience that is appropriate, and that is her real "delight." But we must be clear: this perfect service comes about because of the Lord's own work, exhaustive and meticulous. As Elizabeth Achtemeier puts it, "He will not desert us in His fires of affliction until He has delivered us from all our faults."

Who is it that is to come? Strictly speaking, three figures are mentioned in 3:1: "My messenger" who prepares the way; "the Lord whom ye seek"; and someone associated with the Lord's coming referred to as "the messenger of the covenant." Commentators find this confusing, although the New Testament is less stymied. The Gospels understand John the Baptist as the preparer of the way (Mark 1:2-4), and grasp the figure of Jesus in the Temple as the arrival of God Himself. It was Jesus that Himself took on the fire of judgment in His death on the Cross, and in doing so He won for us the gift of righteousness that comes by believing in His name (2 Cor 5:21).

RESPOND

It was Luther who restored to the Church the New Testament teaching of righteousness by faith, or justification through faith alone. We cannot sidestep or minimize the value of that gift. It lays the firm foundation of our secure relationship with God. Jesus died for me, because otherwise I deserve only death; now, I can live in God's love. But neither can we sidestep or minimize the teaching (as Calvin added) that our relationship with God must also express itself in righteous, responsible behavior in family, church, and community. Malachi reminds us that God's work for us is our security, and that our service to God is our delight.

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of salvation, which brings not only peace, but also a life full of challenge and interest.

- D.D.

READ

Malachi 4:1-6

Matthew 3:1-17

Psalms 34

REFLECT

In reading Malachi we have taken note of the themes of faith in God versus rejection, and of service of others versus arrogance. These are repeated at the end of chapter 3, leading to the concluding passage of the book, which again looks to the future. The day of the Lord will bring hot fire to the wicked, but those who fear the Lord will experience it as the rising of a new sun.

As Malachi spurred the Israelites on to obedience by harking back to Levi on the one hand, and forward to the “Messenger” on the other, so in his final passage he also looks behind and ahead. He reminds Israel of the ancient figure of Moses, and the abiding value of the Law he mediated – and also looks ahead to a coming figure, whom he calls Elijah, who will do the work of preparation for the day of the Lord. Elijah’s work is described in very positive terms: he will restore the good and strong bonds of family (and by inference the rest of society) so that God’s judgment will become His blessing. (For other passages in Malachi referring to the value of the father-son relationship, see 1:6, 2:10, and 3:17.)

The final comment of the Old Testament becomes the first story in the Gospels’ account of Jesus’ ministry. John the Baptist becomes the hinge of the Testaments. As we see in today’s passage from Matthew, John was operating very much in an Old Testament mode, expecting the coming of wrath (Matt 3:7) and for that reason urgently calling for repentance. But John also understood his work as preparation for the ministry of another greater figure: “I am not even fit to remove His sandals” (3:11). John baptized with water, but He would baptize with Spirit and fire. When Jesus arrives on the scene, John recognizes Him

as the expected One, but falters as Jesus approaches to be baptized. Does this “greater” one really need John’s baptism? John begins to flag in his own confidence; as we read in Matthew 11:2-6, he sends some disciples to ask if he was maybe wrong about Jesus. Jesus represents something so huge in the plan of God that John, as an “Old Testament” personality – even the “greatest” such personality (Matt 11:11) – just doesn’t have the scope to see it. Jesus would indeed baptize with the Spirit to begin the great mission of the Church; He would hold off on the fire, however, until the Church’s mission was accomplished.

Still, the sacrificial work of John – who died for the cause he served – was indeed a preparation for that of Jesus (see Matt 11:14). His outspoken and forthright preaching of the perennial themes of repentance and righteousness put the Temple priests on notice. His vast popularity (Matt 3:5) prepared for the huge outdoor ministry of Jesus. And his undoubted integrity allowed Jesus to place Himself in line with John, and therefore with the ancient prophets (Matt 21:23-27). His task was in some senses reminiscent of Moses’ task: to lead Israel to the brink of the Promised Land, and yet not to enter in. The lasting legacy of John is his firm faithfulness, despite fierce opposition and inward hesitations, at a momentous time for the unfurling of the plan of God.

RESPOND

Our faith is rooted in antiquity, and yet it is new every morning. The ancient words of our Psalm today burst through the centuries since they were written, and call us to a fresh experience of God’s love: “O taste and see that the Lord is good!” The full details of His plan for us are not always clear; but His love and His presence are always with us nevertheless. He transforms each day by the rising of His sun, with healing in its wings.

PRAY

Dear Lord, We confess our need of You as we seek to know Your way and will in our lives today. But we also confess that You are Lord, and that as You have shown your faithfulness in every generation, we can count on You now.

- D.D.

READ

Matthew 11:1-19

Psalm 35

REFLECT

In our passage today, Jesus reflects on the ministry of John the Baptist. His comments are prompted by the arrival of some of John's disciples with a question from John. John had already been imprisoned by Herod, and apparently his own impending execution led him to wonder if he had gotten it right: was Jesus really the one that John's ministry was meant to prepare for?

The "Old Testament" figure was looking for "OT" signs. What did he expect to see in Jesus' ministry that he didn't? He probably wasn't sure himself, since in his question he asked about no concrete details. Jesus might have replied that John needed to expand his vision if he was to glimpse all that Jesus intended to accomplish. But He didn't. He replied to the "OT" figure with an "OT" response: citing passages from Isaiah, He asked John to consider the astonishing miracles that were being performed, and the fact that "the poor have the gospel preached to them." Miracles, and the true message of God's love: this should be more than enough proof for John. But He added a warning, which in itself conceded that the situation was not as crystal clear as it might be: "Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." The implication is that for all clear fulfillment of certain Scriptures, real attention ought to be given to Jesus Himself and the new work that He is doing.

Jesus then follows up His comments by asking the large crowds around Him what had intrigued them about John. Did they go to see a curiosity (11:7)? Or a celebrity (11:8)? Or rather did they go to hear a man of God speak the message of the Lord (11:9)? Jesus affirms that John is in the great line of prophets, but is more than just one of a series: he is the one foretold by Malachi that would arrive to announce the next great work of God. In that sense John is the greatest of all the prophets.

But the new thing that God will do will be so powerful, that "he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

John is the greatest of all thus far! What can that mean? We read also in Luke, in the story of John's parents and his conception in their old age, that the angel Gabriel tells Zacharias, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:15). I believe that nowhere else does the Scripture describe a person in that way. Greatness, as far as Scripture goes, is of course completely defined by the Lord, and by the standard of the Lord Himself (Psalm 48:1). Greatness in a human, then, and the greatness of John the Baptist, is the willingness and ability simply to serve the Lord, and to do so both inwardly and outwardly. It is the extent to which his outward activity was consistent with his inward dedication that made John great *in the eyes of the Lord*.

RESPOND

If greatness is measured by response to the Lord and service to Him, then what Jesus is saying about those that will follow is that through His ministry of death, resurrection, and outpouring of the Spirit, God will provide unparalleled resources for spirituality and service. Greatness can never, in a biblical sense, mean that a human has achieved something in his or her own strength (look at Acts 8:9 for a negative example). The great apostle Paul was clear on this: he could only boast in his weaknesses, for it was there that Christ showed His strength (2 Cor 12:5-10). A great mom, a great dad, a great kid, a great friend: what makes you so great?

PRAY

Dear Lord, We thank You for the meaning that You give to our lives each day. Thank You that as we know You we have something good and true to share with others. Forgive us today of our sins and shortcomings, and be with us as we move forward in Your work.

- Dave Dorman

Walk Through The Bible Readings

MONTH AT A GLANCE

September 10-14 – Week 37 –

Monday	Matthew 1-2	Psalm 31
Tuesday	Matthew 3-4	Psalm 32
Wednesday	Matthew 5-6	Psalm 33
Thursday	Matthew 7-8	Psalm 34
Friday	Matthew 9-10	Psalm 35

September 17-21 – Week 38 –

Monday	Matthew 11-12	Psalm 36
Tuesday	Matthew 13	Psalm 37
Wednesday	Matthew 14-15	Psalm 38
Thursday	Matthew 16-17	Psalm 39
Friday	Matthew 18-19	Psalm 40

September 24-28 – Week 39 –

Monday	Matthew 20-21	Psalm 41
Tuesday	Matthew 22-23	Psalm 42
Wednesday	Matthew 24-25	Psalm 43
Thursday	Matthew 26	Psalm 44
Friday	Matthew 27-28	Psalm 45

October 1-5 – Week 40 –

Monday	Mark 1-4	Psalm 46
Tuesday	Mark 5-7	Psalm 47
Wednesday	Mark 8-10	Psalm 48
Thursday	Mark 11-13	Psalm 49
Friday	Mark 14-16	Psalm 50

October 8-12 – Week 41 –

Monday	Luke 1-2	Psalm 51
Tuesday	Luke 3-5	Psalm 52
Wednesday	Luke 6-7	Psalm 53
Thursday	Luke 8-10	Psalm 54
Friday	Luke 11-12	Psalm 55