

THE BOOK OF MALACHI
Lesson 4, Chapter 1 Continued 2

We will continue our journey through Malachai in our steady and deliberate fashion because the inspired work and what it presents to us demands it. I'll remind you that because of the way Malachai is constructed there is something important to talk about at every turn.

It is only logical that every year that goes by, and the dimension of time puts more distance between us and the actual event when an ancient biblical document was written, it would naturally result in more obscurity of how that culture thought, or how we are able to identify with what is written, and thus it is harder to discern what is meant by the narrative we read. On the other hand, while what I just said is true, it is ironic that in the modern age, because of the increase of interest and knowledge of the ancient Semitic languages and script, and the discovery of scores of thousands of cuneiform documents along with a better ability to accurately translate those records, and with each generation of scholars building upon work of the previous, suddenly we find ourselves in the strange position of having MORE knowledge and understanding of some of those biblical documents as each year goes by than we did 1000 years ago. This is a rather new phenomenon, and I can only assume that God has a reason for wanting us to know a lot of things that not that long ago were unknown and seemingly unknowable.

As I have mentioned a few times, the somewhat recent academic study discipline of cognate languages (that is, languages that existed earlier than biblical Hebrew, but out of which the Hebrew language evolved and eventually separated), has resulted in the eruption of an even newer field of biblical study that recognizes, and is able to identify, ancient biblical Hebrew cultural idioms, expressions, and figures of speech in the Holy Scriptures. Idioms and figures of speech by their nature defy what we would call a literal translation because the sum of the words carries a meaning that is different than what the individual words used in their literal sense mean. A typical American idiom or expression like "don't let the cat out of the bag" loses its meaning if taken literally, word for word. When those words are strung together, it simply means not to divulge a secret. It works that way because that string of words

forms a recognized and understood expression. So, since we are now finding scores of Hebrew idioms and expressions in the Hebrew Bible, this means that reading the Old Testament as we find it in our English Bibles needs much revision or at least a revision of how we are to understand the intent of those words. The ironic part is that we have only yet to understand what a few of those idioms actually mean. So, it seems that many things that Christian (and sometimes Jewish) scholars and pastors think were being said in the Bible, were not. Thank goodness, Christ never told anyone to go fly a kite or sacred kite flying would probably be part of every worship service.

Since perhaps the most significant aspect of the Book of Malachai is that it represents the end of the Prophetic era... Malachai being the final biblical Prophet (chronologically speaking) of the Old Testament genre... and since Malachai rushes by certain statements that are actually major biblical principles, but he gives us no explanation for, or definition of, them... then it is important that we pause to look at all of this with both a magnifying glass *and* from a wide-angle lens. As you have seen thus far in our study, sometimes looking at a single word or phrase and better interpreting it through the lens of all the relatively recent research, can give us a far better and deeper insight on intended meaning on the one hand, and result in a different conclusion of the overall meaning of an oracle of God on the other.

It is actually very much like our recent astrophysics and astronomic research that has been so greatly enhanced by the deployment of the Hubble space telescope, and now joined by other and even more sophisticated space telescopes. It has enabled scientists to look further back in time to the actual beginning moment of the Universe, such that some things we thought we knew, were wrong. That is, instead of the logical assumption of passing time producing a larger and larger distance between humanity and the Creation event that would naturally create a more and more obscured ability to understand it, and thus introduce greater and greater error in our conclusions, new research and technology has actually found a way to look further back in time and reveal some underlying fundamentals of the creation of the Universe that we never knew were there. The result is that many old and settled conclusions have found themselves in need of revision.

The challenge now becomes this new information and reality filtering down to our Bibles, and then even further to the Seminaries, Pastors and Churches. Even then, however, the question becomes: with all this new information will the Church governments be willing to amend some of their most cherished doctrines to conform with the better understanding (in some cases) of what God's Word says? Or will the Church find it too threatening or complicated to change those doctrines and simply stay the course? I'm sorry to say that thus far, history says they will just stay the course. So... what will **you** do?

In our previous lesson we opened up the 2nd burden given to Malachai that begins at chapter 1 verse 6. God unloads on the Levitical Priesthood. It's best if we re-read this portion to set the foundation for today's study.

RE-READ MALACHAI CHAPTER 1:6 – end

While it is the Priesthood that is specifically named, nonetheless God's accusations pertain to the entire nation... all the Jews of Yehud (and without doubt, also to all the Jews living in the Diaspora). The primary accusation is that the duty of the Priesthood to teach truth, as taken from the Torah, to all the Jewish people had been neglected. In the minds of the priests, they had been teaching truth. In the minds of the people, they had been hearing these truths. In reality the priests were teaching manmade doctrines that they claimed were proper interpretations of God's Word, and so the people were learning those manmade doctrines all the while believing they were learning the divine truth.

I enjoy the conversational style of the narrative that sets up an imagined conversation between God and the personified collective Priesthood. It is God who accuses the priests, and then they respond by being incredulous about why God would say what He said about them. Essentially, they are denying God's accusations. The accusations begin with this statement:

CJB Malachi 1:6 *"A son honors his father and a servant his master. But if I'm a father, where is the honor due me? and if I'm a master, where is the respect due me?- says Yehoveh-Tzva'ot to you cohanim who despise my name.*

The collective response of the Priesthood is:

CJB Malachai 1:6 ...*'How are we despising your name?'*

In modern terms, they are saying: “We disagree at such an unfounded accusation!” The first thing to understand about this statement is that this is not a simple matter of the Priests breaking a specific Torah Law. I also don’t think God is asking the Levite priests to recall the Exodus commandment (that is one of the 10 Commandments) for children to honor their parents. The priests would never think to question that commandment, nor ever think they were breaking it. Rather God is simply stating the fact that just as the undisputed Middle Eastern cultural proverb that a son is always supposed to honor his father, and a servant is always supposed to honor and obey his master, then so is Yehoveh the Father and Master of all Israel to be treated with at least as much honor and obedience. Maybe the priests have forgotten that God is their Father.

Probably because of the Lord’s Prayer of the New Testament, it is normal and customary for Believers to routinely refer to God as Father. However, this same thought wasn’t at the tip of the tongue or the front of the mind of the ancient Hebrews. Rather, for them, the term “father” when speaking of the Israelites as a people group was applied to the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham, specifically, was called Father Abraham by the earliest Israelites. It was Moses that first applied the term Father to God.

CJB Deuteronomy 32:6 *You foolish people, so lacking in wisdom, is this how you repay Yehoveh? He is your father, who made you his! It was he who formed and prepared you!*

Isaiah, and also Jeremiah, call Yehoveh the Father of Israel. Even so, neither the priests nor the Israelites looked upon God in this fatherly way. And here in Malachai, God is reminding them that they should. All along, Yehoveh has treated Israel as a son; so why haven’t they reciprocated by treating Him as their father? It’s the priesthood’s fault! It’s their job to formally educate the

people in this and other truths, and to demonstrate it in their own behavior and actions, and they haven't done either (according to the Prophet).

In the middle of Malachai 1:6, the CJB reads: "...if I'm a Master, where is the respect due Me?". "Respect" is a much too weak of a word to translate the Hebrew word **morah**. **Morah** carries the sense of terror, awe, dread or fear. A servant was indeed in dread of his master because, generally speaking, a master could legally require anything, and do almost anything to a servant short of killing him. The conditions of that servant's life were in his master's hands at all times. So, a better more intended translation would be: "...if I'm a Master, where is the awe and dread due Me?". The reason for God approaching the Levites in this way is that the relationship between them is based on covenant. Thus, obedience and allegiance to the already revealed will of God (as set down in the terms of the Law of Moses), established the nature of the relationship between God and Israel and it ought to have engendered as much awe and dread as love of Him. Remember: God has no interest in anyone's warm feelings of affection towards Him. The only thing God accepts as love is obedience to His laws and commandments. So, it is not that the Levite Priests weren't showing warm affections towards Yehoveh, or saying good things about Him; it's that they were not obeying God's covenant terms nor properly regarding His authority and kingship over them. And, as we'll see, those covenant terms have much to do with the Levites' main area of responsibility: teaching people the Torah and all the Hebrew Bible (as it existed up to that point in history).

So, how does God view their lack of obedience and reverence to Him? He says that it amounts to despising His name. And, He includes His name: **Yehoveh Tzva'ot**... Yehoveh of hosts... so that there can be no mistake. In Hebrew, the word for name is **shem**. **Shem** means a distinguishing mark or attribute. It is that character or attribute of a person that gives them their identity. So, when referring to God, God's **shem** means the essence of God's very being as a completely unique being; a being that is far above, and totally different from, every other being because all other beings are created. Therefore, God is saying to the Levites that it simply doesn't matter what you say or claim, because you don't obey Me out of proper fear and awe (God's definition of love

towards Him). In behaving this way, they have avoided or rejected the very person of God, which He calls “despising” His name.

I want to pause to point out something this passage highlights that is literally life and death. All this that we’re learning has no value whatsoever if we don’t apply it to our lives in the terms God expects of us. Knowing and doing are two different things.

CJB James 2:19-20 ¹⁹ *You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it too- the thought makes them shudder with fear! ²⁰ But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such "faith" apart from actions is barren?*

The Levite Priesthood had the knowledge, yet they had hijacked the Hebrew faith and the Torah, and reformulated it essentially into some new Jewish religion made in their image, but selling it to the people as the true faith of God. The Israelite people went blindly along with them. A few centuries earlier, after Solomon’s death and a costly civil war which saw unified Israel split into two kingdoms... Judah and Ephraim/Israel... Jeroboam became king over Ephraim/Israel. He immediately installed his own separate priesthood, ordered a new and different temple, reworked the Torah, and started a new religion. The Levite Priesthood was following a similar path. If any of us think this applies only to the ancient Hebrews and their priests, and somehow Believers in Yeshua and the institutions created to acknowledge this belief are immune to this propensity to corrupt, we are sadly mistaken.

Folks, if we do as the Ephraim/Israelites did, and as the Levite Priesthood the 5th and 6th centuries B.C. did by changing God’s very image; and if we set aside His laws and commands and moral code and exchange them for modified ones that express our own doctrines, then in God’s economy, we are overtly saying that we despise Him. It simply doesn’t matter how we humans look at it or how we intended it. I’m not inventing this; it is right here before us in Malachai (and in many of the other Prophets that we’ve already studied). But, who among us wants to hear that indictment? Rather, we tend to respond much like the Levite Priests: we say, “No, God, you’re wrong! How could you say something like that about me and my Church?”. It is ironic that any

human who claims to be a God-worshipper could think that when God reprimands us and tells us why we are being reprimanded, and informs us of what we are doing wrong, that we would respond by telling Him that perhaps *He* is wrong! Telling Him that He is judging us on the wrong criteria! Rather, we need to re-embrace the fact that God's Word is the standard we are to strive for. His Word is the mirror we stand in front of to see if we, His worshippers and followers, are who we claim we are and are living out His manual for living the redeemed life. I tremble at how much Judaism and Christianity have deviated from God's Word, deny that they have done so (even though what is taught is so often visibly and obviously well off the mark as compared to what the Bible plainly says), and then go right on as though all is well. Any of us who do not regularly test ourselves and what our leaders are telling us against what God's Word says, is taking a big, and unnecessary, risk. And, the painful truth is that when we do this, it doesn't really come from innocent error. It comes from us wanting our own way, or in being quite comfortable with what we believe, or from disinterest in discovering God's truth, or in fear of finding out that what we have believed for many years might be wrong. And, leaders, teachers and elders, this applies doubly to us.

So, in verse 7, which is God's response to the priests' asking in what way are they despising His name, we read this:

CJB Malachi 1:7 *By offering polluted food on my altar! Now you ask, 'How are we polluting you?' By saying that the table of Yehoveh doesn't deserve respect;*

The first part of God's response has to do with the how the priests have neglected the proper discharge of their duties as the ones who are to officiate and tend to the altars and all that happens upon them. What is the polluted food? There are two possibilities, because the term "my altar" could be referring to 2 different things. Outside the front door of the Temple sanctuary is the large bronze altar that is also called the altar of burnt offering. This is where animals and the grain offerings are sacrificed and burnt up as sacrifices to Yehoveh. The other altar is the Altar of Showbread. This smaller altar is located inside the Temple sanctuary, in its front chamber called the Holy Place. There was no open fire on this altar except for incense that was burned on it.

No animals were ever placed on it and it wasn't really for sacrificing per se. Rather, 12 loaves of bread made from a very special recipe were put there, and rotated out with 12 fresh loaves every Shabbat. This is further complicated by the reality that in the first part of verse 7, what it really says is: "By offering polluted **lechem** on my altar". In Hebrew, **lechem** has a double meaning. It can mean "bread", just as we think of loaves of bread. But it is also the same word that means "food" in general. So, which is it in this verse? I think it is more likely the altar of burnt offerings being referenced because verse 8 immediately rolls into speaking about the unfit animals that are being used for sacrifice, and it is discussed even further in verse 14.

In sacrificing, polluting a sacrifice is mainly only possible as concerns the meat. There are indeed ways to pollute the showbread, or perhaps the grain part of every offering, but those ways have more to do with the condition of the worshipper or the priest than with some fault with the food items themselves. The word used here in Malachai for polluted is **me'og'al** and it means to be ritually defiled. A defiled offering makes it ritually unsuitable for its purpose, and therefore unacceptable to God. Yet, the priests were knowingly using those defiled sacrifices.

The final part of verse 7 says: "... by saying that the table of Yehoveh doesn't deserve respect". This phrase "table of Yehoveh" only appears here in Malachai and nowhere else in the Bible. This has led some interpreters to conclude that it means the table upon which the Showbread is placed. That is, it is a special piece of furniture. But, the greater possibility is that it is an expression. It was a common Middle Eastern expression that was used in Europe as well. The phrase was "table of the king". If this is the case (I think it clearly is) verse 7 was not referring to furniture, but rather to the king's food supply. To eat from the table of the king meant that you ate food supplied by the monarchy often including actually dining with the king. It was an honor to be asked to partake, and of course, you got the best food available in the kingdom prepared by the best chefs because it was for the king.

The question, then, is what *kind* of sacrifice is being contemplated here, since there were several different kinds, each for a separate and unique purpose. There is not enough information to be certain about it. Yet, there are hints that

might expose it. There is a daily offering of sacrifice that occurs morning and evening called the **tamid**. This offering is made on behalf of the entire people of Israel as a whole. Therefore, since this isn't about any individual's offense or personal concern, then there was no individual offender to supply and bring the sacrificial animal for slaughter. Instead, the priesthood supplied the needed animals from their own flocks and herds, and animals for the **tamid** were needed every day. It seems far more likely to me that this polluted food offering was that the priests would give themselves a break and occasionally used an animal for the **tamid** from the priestly herd that was damaged goods. This was never to be done, and likely God is calling these priests onto the carpet about it.

There was another side to offering a polluted sacrifice. It's that people that were themselves polluted... ritually unclean... could contaminate an otherwise suitable sacrificial offering merely by touching it. A principle of ritual impurity is that an impure thing that contacts a pure thing, defiles that pure thing thus rendering it unclean. Impurity was transferable by touch, and sometimes by proximity. Thus, the priests could have been careless and somehow become ritually impure, and when they offered a sacrifice, the fact that they touched it polluted the sacrifice, which kept the disqualified animal from being used. Except, what we read tells us that the priests used these ritually defiled animals anyway. This action made God's "food" (the table of Yehoveh) despised. Verse 8 tells us a little more about the nature of the animal and the pollution.

CJB Malachi 1:8 ***so that there's nothing wrong with offering a blind animal as a sacrifice, nothing wrong with offering an animal that's lame or sick. Try offering such an animal to your governor, and see if he will be pleased with you! Would he even receive you?" asks Yehoveh-Tzva'ot.***

The CJB does as a number of standard English Bible texts do, and leaves out some words. The word often left untranslated is **ki**, which has the sense of time to it, and so ought to be translated as "when". The RSV does a better job with this verse.

RSV **Malachi 1:8** ***When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that no evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that no evil? Present that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts.***

So, the idea is that sometimes (when) blind, or lame, or sick animals are offered it is an evil thing for the priests to do... but it does not always happen and probably not as the rule. So, Malachai exposes that the priests don't seem to see a problem with only occasionally offering up an unsuitable and defiled animal because it was blemished in some way, or improperly handled, that makes its use prohibited. This was a direct violation of a Torah law.

CJB **Deuteronomy 15:21** ***But if it has a defect, is lame or blind, or has some other kind of fault, you are not to sacrifice it to Yehoveh your God;***

What the priest does has direct bearing and connection to the covenant. They are supposed to be protectors and the par excellence observers of the covenant for the people, but their corrupt minds lead them to violate and have contempt for the covenant. Did the people know what the priests were doing wrong when they offered faulty animals? Of course! These were not arcane rules about sacrificing that only the priests knew; they were rules that had been in place for 800 years, and the people knew the rules because they had to personally bring sacrifices that adhered to the ritual requirements of the Law of Moses.

It is just human nature that when we observe a leader do what he or she tells you is something that you are not supposed to do, we have a couple of different reactions. We lose respect for the leader, see them as a hypocrite, or we see that behavior as a license to do the same ourselves. In that way, this wicked behavior gets passed on from the leadership to the people. Let's make this more applicable to an average Believer in the 21st century.

While a sacrifice is not precisely the same thing as an offering given to your place of worship, the principles are biblically the same. The worth of your gift is indicated by its intrinsic value to you, the giver. For instance: if you make

\$1000 per week in pay, and you put a \$20 bill in the offering box as your weekly tithe, you have just established that gift's worth, before God, as amounting to very little in His eyes because it cost you so very little. But, if a person making \$100 a week puts a \$20 bill in the offering box as their weekly tithe, the intrinsic value is very great in God's eyes because it was very costly for that person. It is that intrinsic value, as opposed to its market or face value, by which God judges the giver.

As for a sacrifice that is polluted (defiled, unclean) it is different than a tithe in that no matter who gives it, it has a value of zero. Even worse, God will not accept a polluted sacrifice. In fact, it would be better to have not given a sacrifice at all because such a sacrifice says to God that you have no fear of Him and in fact are showing Him contempt.

An immutable biblical principle is that when we give to God... whether required as our obligation or as a free-will gift... it must be from our best or God rejects it. If it is not from our best, or it is knowingly polluted, it tells God that we do not love Him nor are we sincere. Let me be clear: does this mean His feelings get hurt? Like if, husbands, you forget your anniversary and it hurts your wife's feelings? Not at all. Your wife reasonably expects you to remember her as a show of love towards her, with the sincerity of that love being reflected by your warmest affections along with the giving her a meaningful gift and celebrating your marriage to her. God expects your gifts towards Him as love reflected as a matter of your sincere obedience to His commandments, in order that He is pleased. Each have their own rightful expectations, but they are quite different, so attempting to substitute the one for the other makes it unacceptable. That is, your wife doesn't consider it as love if she has to command you to remember your anniversary, and God doesn't consider it as love if all you offer Him is your warmest affections in place of actual obedience.

Even so, in all cases of giving and sacrifice, our love that is shown must be genuine, sincere, and authentic. If we give to God grudgingly and only in order to mechanically obey a command, that gift has no value. If we give a gift to our wife mechanically or grudgingly because its only in our best interests if we do, that gift has no value.

So, after Yehoveh says that to give Him a blemished sacrifice is, of course, a sinful evil (and clearly the Levitical priests are thinking that if it only happens now and then, it shouldn't be that big of a deal to God), how about they try giving a worthless or blemished gift to their civil governor? How do you suppose he will receive it? Graciously? Feigning delight for your sake and thinking "it's the thought that counts"? I love the way this question is asked in two parts. The first part is: would the governor be pleased with the gift itself (that is, is he grateful for it; delighted and finding good value in it)? And the second part is: would you ever even be received by the governor to give to him a poor or defective gift in the first place?

In ancient times, a person requesting an audience with a king or governor or some other higher- up authority, might wisely bring a good gift if they hoped to get in. An assistant to the king or governor would be the first to examine and evaluate that gift. If it is something they know will please the authority figure, they get their audience. If it is substandard in any way, the petitioner is sent packing and never even gets the opportunity to stand before the man. There aren't shades of gray. It's either yes or no. This was common knowledge in those ancient times. So, why (God asks) would these wicked priests think that if this is so with a mere earthly governor, that it wouldn't be doubly so with the Creator of the Universe?

I *could* spend a couple of minutes and give you a few anecdotes of actual experiences I've had over the years with people who want to donate things to the ministry and feeling good about it. But, sometimes it was because someone had no more use for it, or it was broken and needed repair, or it was old and obsolete, etc. And, of course, they want the ministry to see these things as valuable and to feel grateful about it, even though they well know the truth. I can tell you it doesn't reflect well on the giver nor does it tell me they have any respect or sincere care about contributing to the ministry efforts. But what we humans might think of these rather valueless gifts being offered to us is so unimportant compared to what God thinks of our puny efforts to please Him, when these efforts are based on insincerity and low intrinsic value of the offering. And, in the case of the Levites and their officiating of Temple duties, and their giving of sacrifices, and the performance

of other ritual tasks that are required of them, God doesn't grade on a curve nor does He pretend. It is yes or no; accepted or not accepted.

This might be something we don't want to hear about or deal with because we don't like it. We'd prefer to think of God as a kindly grandfather whose commands are but suggestions, and who winks at sin provided we don't sin too much or commit a big one. But the biblical reality is clear and tells us something else, so there is no need trying to fool ourselves or thinking we can fool God. Verse 9 adds more fuel that fire.

CJB Malachi 1:9 ***So if you pray now that God will show us favor, what your actions have accomplished is that Yehoveh-Tzva'ot asks, "Will he receive any of you?"***

Ugh. It just gets worse. Rather than tear this apart word for word, let's look at the intent and thought. What is being said is ironic. It's like: seriously? You do wrong, you do evil, you disobey and then honestly expect to be in God's presence and for Him to bless you? Good luck with that.

This principle that is presented to us in ironic fashion is not meant to be funny. It's meant to have an impact. It is one thing for ordinary people to just rationalize their wrong behavior and sins as being generally inconsequential in nature, and so therefore feel perfectly righteous in approaching God in prayer seeking His favor. But, it is another for God's priests to do it. In the purely human sphere, psychologists use the term cognitive dissonance to describe such expectations and behavior. That is, you hold firm pre-existing beliefs (no matter how illogical or irrational) that are in conflict with information and facts you are well aware of that contradicts what you choose to believe and what you do. Usually, the person experiencing this uses rationalization (no matter how absurd) to explain that what they're doing or believing is, nonetheless, correct.

It is spiritual cognitive dissonance to ignore God's laws and commands, to behave in ways completely counter to the instructions of God's Word, and then turn around and fully expect for God to hear our prayers and intervene on our behalf to give us what we seek. In fact, as with the king or governor, the final

words of this verse (“Will he receive any of you?”) reveal that you will never even get an audience to present your concerns that the king or governor might consider them. And, so, why would we expect that as holy, as all-knowing, as universally omnipotent is God, that He would ever entertain your prayers in the midst of such wicked behaviors? That, my friends, is a pretty unnerving thought. Yet, here it is right before us and I have no doubt that none of us think “that can’t be right”. We believe what it says; we just don’t like what it means.

We’ll pause here and continue with Malachai, next time.