

# THE BURDEN OF GOD'S LOVE

STUDIES IN MALACHI - PART 10

*Turning the Hearts of Fathers*

TEXT: MALACHI 4:4-6 (ESV)



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## *The Great Ellipsis*

Today we come not only to the end of 10 weeks on Malachi, but to the last words of the last book of the Old Testament. There's no punctuation in the Hebrew, but if there were, I think Malachi would end with an ellipsis... It leaves us waiting for what's promised—the coming of the Messiah who'll restore all that's broken. On this Father's Day, we find here one of the most hope-filled promises relating to the broken—God will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

Malachi was likely written, like Ezra and Nehemiah, between 460 and 430BC. A century earlier Israel had been carried off to foreign lands, but since then many had returned and begun the process of kicking through the smoldering rubble that used to be Jerusalem looking for what they could salvage, and what they'd have to rebuild from scratch. They were doubting and disillusioned people. They came from a rich heritage—heirs of the Covenant God Himself cut with their father Abraham. But they and their forefathers disobeyed God, and God allowed them to be carried off into exile, taking them from their most tangible artifact of that covenant with God—the Promised Land.

These sons and daughters of the Exile stood among the ashes of what was once crowned with glory, with their faith, like their land, disintegrated. So God raises up Malachi to give a word to the people—an oracle, which is another word for a burden. Malachi stands to hoist up God's message to the improbable heights of plausibility for this threadbare nation—*"I have loved you, says the Lord of Hosts."*<sup>(1:2)</sup> With all that lies broken around them, it is just so hard for so many to believe this could be.

God is calling Israel and us to return to pinning our hopes on His Covenant faithfulness, and to respond in obedience to Him. Throughout this book, He addresses specific areas where the disintegration of their faith has led to the ruin of other things—worship, ethics, marriages, etc. Here at the end He names another—the relationships between children and fathers. It is on this point the Old Testament draws to a close. Although this may seem like a strange place to end, in light of what Jesus is coming to accomplish, this is a profoundly appropriate ellipsis.

## *Malachi 4:4-6*

<sup>4</sup>"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

<sup>5</sup>"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup>And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

## *Vandalized Hearts and Minds*

A couple of months ago someone entered our home without our knowledge and physically stole a check out of one of our checkbooks, wrote it out to cash and got away with it. A few weeks later, someone tried to break into another home in our neighborhood, smashing a sliding glass door at 4:00am. Fraud security protected us from having to absorb the cost of what was taken from us, and the police were called before the intruder at the other home gained access. Still, something was taken from our entire neighborhood. Peace of mind.

I don't care about the money or broken glass. I care about my family and want to protect them—an uphill battle. Our world is broken. I want my kids to be builders, not breakers. I want their lives to be more remedy than malady. I want them to love well, to trust and obey God, to hunger for His presence. I want them to hope more than doubt. I want them to see more wonder and beauty than malice and ugliness in this world.

How can my kids learn to be like Jesus with people breaking into our homes? Forget vandalized property. What I want to protect them from is vandalized hearts and minds. But this gets me thinking. I stand to be the greatest vandal their minds and hearts will ever know. I have the greatest potential to take from them things they can never get back. So forget criminals. How can my kids learn to follow after Jesus with me as their dad?

Understand, I believe in God's grace, and I believe God means to use Lisa and I for our children's good, and not for their harm. And I believe this is what He'll do. I do. But I'd be a fool not to recognize the power we wield to shape the way they see the world—positively and negatively. I want them to come to know Jesus through my example, but I also know they will have to come to know Him in spite of my example at times as well.

This text in Malachi addresses the far reaching implications of our sin. Everything is broken. Even the relationships between fathers and children are in desperate need of restoration. Though some might despair at this thought, our text bids us: Take heart. The redeeming work of Christ will be so utterly cleansing, it will even scrub clean the residue of every vandalous word, thought, and action perpetrated against you **or** by you. And as it has been from the beginning of Malachi, this is not based on wishful thinking, but on the rock of God's covenant.

## *I Will Send You Elijah*

In addressing a doubting people, God says in vs. 4, "Remember the Law of Moses." Why? Well, in part, they had forgotten it through the travail of exile. When the bottom falls out, it's easy to forget even the most foundational basics. But another reason that stands as immeasurably relevant still today is that it is in the Law of Moses—Genesis to Deuteronomy—where the people of God receive the assurance that they **BELONG** to God, "I will be your God and you will be my people for the generations to come." (Gen 17:7, 19, Ex 6:7) God calls the discouraged to remember the promises He swore to them. Be students of the Book!

In calling them to remember the Law, He says something **FILLED** with hope, “*I will send you Elijah.*” Throughout this book we’ve been getting indictments against the sins of the people of God, but here at the end we see that Malachi wasn’t sent merely to point out all that is wrong with Israel, but also to illuminate even more clearly God’s remedy. He will send the prophet Elijah—something of an ellipsis himself. The last time anyone saw him, he was walking with Elisha and they were talking about the power of the Lord to save His people: “*As they went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.*” (2 Kings 2:11)

His exit left the world looking up; “*What just happened?*” It was as if he was in some kind of celestial holding pattern, waiting to return, as if God had hidden him away until it was time to bring His redemption to completion. The New Testament says John the Baptist represented Elijah’s return. (Mt 11:14, Mk 9:12, Lk 1:17) What was his message? John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. (Mk 1:4) So why is Malachi’s reference to John the Baptist so filled with hope for us today? Two reasons:

**FIRST**, the call to repent of our sin is a loud statement that God’s covenant stands! No matter how far removed we feel from God, His Word alone upholds the **EVERLASTINGNESS** of His covenant. Malachi is insisting the Covenant is alive and so Israel must be mindful of it because they are the **OTHER PARTY** God made the covenant with. He is pleading with their hearts to believe they are **NOT**, in any way, disowned. So likewise, when John prepares the way for the Messiah’s coming by calling the people to repent, this is another way of crying out, “*My message is relevant to you because you REMAIN the people of God.*”

The **SECOND** reason this reference is filled with hope is because of the One whose coming John the Baptist was heralding—Jesus Christ. And isn’t it strange that Malachi would say that the salvation John would speak of would turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers! Why do you suppose Malachi says this, of all the results of the coming of Jesus he could have alluded to? I think the reason is because one of the most devastating effects of sin is the ruin it has leveled against God’s design for the family.

When God created man, He also created the world in which man was to live. Seeing it was not good for man to be alone, God created woman and instituted marriage. Then He gave the man and the woman the charge to fill the earth with children. Built into God’s created order was the home. From the beginning, the hearts of fathers and children were meant to be knit together. Parents were created to love their children.

God calls Himself our Father, as though it is one of the most affectionate and secure titles He could give so that we might understand the **STRENGTH** of His devotion to us. But as is often the case in a fallen world, we often long for God’s design most when we are confronted with its absence in our lives, and have instead a prevailing sense that things are messed up. So many of us, like those in Malachi’s day, ache over the ruin that is the family—the prodigal children, the emotionally or physically absent fathers, the years that pass without ever feeling like you truly know your own dad... or your son... or your daughter.

Think about this in light of everything we’ve learned so far in Malachi. Here’s the condition they’re in. They can’t see the profit in serving God and in fact believe it is better not to. And their worship is heartless, their marriages faithless, their faith hollow. What a sweeping picture of a broken world. And it is a world we know, isn’t it? But when the **HOME** is broken, what hope is there without someone to redeem and restore?

To all of this, the Lord says, “*I WILL redeem. I will turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers.*” These relationships He means to heal through the awesome scope of the saving power of the work of His Son Jesus, Whom He has sent to live and die in our place. There is not one corner of creation He does not mean to restore, even those we may suspect are simply beyond hope. They are not.

We see even more strength in the second part of this verse, “*Lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*” The idea here is if God withholds the restoration of the hearts of fathers to their children, the equivalent would be a decree of utter destruction. “Lest” means “*I’ll do one thing in order to not do another.*” This is how committed He is to seeing His redemption through, keeping His promise to “*spare those who esteem His name as a father spares His son who serve him.*” (3:17)

When God declares He will turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers, I am impressed by the immensity of this promise. How glorious that God’s promise is not that He would change those around me, but that He would change **ME!** This is a much better deal! When I consider only what I need Him to do in me as a young dad, I am reminded again that the scope of His redeeming grace is set like a laser on the source of the problem—my heart!

## *The Honor of Fathers*

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In closing, I want to honor the dads here. Some of you are fathers by providence—God has brought the fatherless to your door that you might be, in some way, a spiritual father to them. The Lord has used you to lead others to Christ, and to disciple them in their walk with the Lord. May He saturate your relationships with grace and mercy. May your home be a place of healing and laughter and reverence for the Lord.

Many here are fathers because the Lord has given you and your wife children. Treasure these children and never stop asking the Lord to turn your heart toward them. Some of you are adoptive fathers. Men, you honor the Lord with your very lives, and you have been given a very special honor by God in that it is through adoption that God Himself speaks of His own Fatherhood with us, His children. May the Lord be your strength and your song, and may your children be your crown.

Some of you have recently buried your fathers. For others, the Lord has turned your hearts toward children you have not been able to keep. Some of you have buried your babies. Others of you have miscarried—a lonely burden that is very difficult to share. Grieving dads and moms, do not think this verse is not for you. God does not cause our hearts to forget our children, but to turn toward them. May God turn your hearts toward your children today, and may the memory of them be for you a healthy homesickness for heaven. The last thing Scripture says prior to the coming of His son Jesus who was to die, was that He would restore fathers to their children. Cling to this hope!

As Malachi ends with this ellipsis in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah Jesus Christ, the burden of astonishing grace is laid before us. If your faith is in His redeemer, Jesus Christ, there is no height you can fall from which He cannot catch you. And there is no single area of brokenness in your life He will not completely restore. And there is no residue of the vandalism of your heart He will not scrub utterly and finally clean when He either returns or brings you home to glory. The reason is simple. He is your Father and He has loved you. Come Lord Jesus.