

Maclaren on Malachi

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Sermons by Alexander Maclaren on Malachi

Malachi 1:6-7: A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

'A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a Father, where is Mine honour? and if I be a master, where is My fear? saith the Lord of Hosts unto you, O priests, that despise My Name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised Thy Name? 7. Ye offer polluted bread upon Mine altar. And ye say, Wherein have we polluted Thee?'—MALACHI 1:6, 7

A characteristic of this latest of the prophets is the vivacious dialogue of which our text affords one example. God speaks and the people question His word, which in reply He reiterates still more strongly. The other instances of its occurrence may here be briefly noted, and we shall find that they cover all the aspects of the divine speech to men, whether He charges sin home upon them or pronounces threatenings of judgment, or invites by gracious promises the penitent to return. His charges of sin are repelled in our text and in the following verse by the indignant question, 'Wherein have we polluted Thee?' And similarly in the next chapter the divine accusation, 'Ye have wearied the Lord with your words,' is thrown back with the contemptuous retort, 'Wherein have we wearied Him?' And in like manner in the third chapter, 'Ye have robbed Me,' calls forth no confession but only the defiant answer, 'Wherein have we robbed Thee?' And in a later verse, the accusation, 'Your words have been stout against Me,' is traversed by the question, 'What have we spoken so much against Thee?' Similarly the threatening of judgment that the Lord will 'cut off' the men that 'profane the holiness of the Lord' calls forth only the rebutting question, 'Wherefore?' (ii. 14). And even the gracious invitation, 'Return unto Me, and I will return unto you,' evokes not penitence, but the stiff-necked reply, 'Wherein shall we return?' (iii. 7). In this sermon we may deal with the first of these three cases, and consider, God's Indictment, and man's plea of 'Not guilty.'

I. God's Indictment.

The precise nature of the charge is to be carefully considered. The Name is the sum of the revealed character, and that Name has been despised. The charge is not that it has been blasphemed, but that it has been neglected, or under-estimated, or cared little about. The pollution of the table of the Lord is the overt act by which the attitude of mind and heart expressed in despising His Name is manifested; but the overt act is secondary and not primary—a symptom of a deeper-lying disease. And herein our Prophet is true to the whole tenor of the Old Testament teaching, which draws its indictment against men primarily in regard to their attitude, and only as a manifestation of that, to their acts. The same deed may be, if estimated in relation to human law, a crime: if estimated in relation to godless ethics, a wrong; and if estimated in the only right way, namely, the attitude towards God which it reveals, a sin. 'The despising of His Name' may be taken as the very definition of sin. It is usual with men to-day to say that 'Sin is selfishness'; but that statement does not go deep enough unless it be recognised that self-regard only becomes sin when it rears its puny self in opposition to, or in disregard of, the plain will of God. The 'New Theology,' of course, minimises, even where it does not, as it to be consistent should, deny the possibility of sin: for, if God is all and all is God, there can be no opposition, there can be no divine will to be opposed, and no human will to oppose it. But the fact of sin certified by men's own consciences is the rock on which Pantheism must always strike and sink. A superficial view of human history and of human nature may try to explain away the fact of sin by shallow talk about 'heredity' and 'environment,' or about 'ignorance' and 'mistakes'; but after all such euphemistic attempts to rechristen the ugly thing by beguiling names, the fact remains, and conscience bears sometimes unwilling witness to its existence, that men do set their own inclinations against God's commands, and that there is in them that which is 'not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.' The root of all sin is the despising of His Name.

And as sin has but one root, it has many branches, and as working backwards from deed to motive, we find one common element in all the various acts; so working outwards from motive to deed, we have to see one common character stamped upon a tragical variety of acts. The poison-water is exhibited in many variously coloured and tasted draughts, but however unlike each other they may be, it is always the same.

The great effort of God's love is to press home this consciousness of despising His Name upon all hearts. The sorrows, losses, and

disappointments which come to us all are not meant only to make us suffer, but through suffering to lead us to recognise how far we have wandered from our Father, and to bring us back to His heart and our home. The beginning of all good in us is the contrite acknowledgment of our evil. Christ's first preaching was the continuation of John's message, 'Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'; and His tenderest revelation of the divine love incarnated in Himself was meant to arouse the penitent confession, 'I am no more worthy to be called Thy son,' and the quickening resolve, 'I will arise and go to my Father.' There is no way to God but through the narrow gate of repentance. There is no true reception of the gift of Christ which does not begin with a vivid and heart-broken consciousness of my own sin. We can pass into, and abide in, the large room of joyous acceptance and fellowship, but we must reach it by a narrow path walled in by gloomy rocks and trodden with bleeding feet. The penitent knowledge of our sin is the first step towards the triumphant knowledge of Christ's righteousness as ours. Only they who have called out in the agony of their souls, 'Lord, save us, we perish,' have truly learned the love of God, and truly possess the salvation that is in Christ.

II. Man's plea of 'Not Guilty.'

That such an answer should be given to such a charge is a strange, solemn fact, which tragically confirms the true indictment. The effect of all sin is to make us less conscious of its presence, as persons in an unventilated room are not aware of its closeness. It is with profound truth that the Apostle speaks of being hardened by the 'deceitfulness' of sin. It comes to us in a cloud and enfolds us in obscure mist. Like white ants, it never works in the open, but makes a tunnel or burrows under ground, and, hidden in some piece of furniture, eats away all its substance whilst it seems perfectly solid. The man's perception of the standard of duty is enfeebled. We lose our sense of the moral character of any habitual action, just as a man who has lived all his life in a slum sees little of its hideousness, and knows nothing of green fields and fresh air. Conscience is silenced by being neglected. It can be wrongly educated and perverted, so that it may regard sin as doing God's service; and the only judgment in which it can be absolutely trusted is the declaration that it is right to do right, while all its other decisions as to what is right may be biased by self-interest; but the force with which it pronounces its only unalterable decision depends on the whole tenor of the life of the man. The sins which are most in accordance with our characters, and are therefore most deeply rooted in us, are those which we are least likely to recognise as sins. So, the more sinful we are, the less we know it; therefore there is need for a fixed standard outside of us. The light on the deck cannot guide us; there must be the lighthouse on the rock. This sad answer of the heart untouched by God's appeal prevents all further access of God's love to that heart. That love can only enter when the reply to its indictment is, 'I have despised Thy name.'

Let us not forget the New Testament modification of the divine accusation. 'In Christ' is the Name of God fully and finally revealed to men. For us who live in the blaze of the ineffable brightness of the revelation, our attitude towards Him who brings it is the test of our 'hallowing of the Name' which He brings. He Himself has varied Malachi's indictment when He said, 'He that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me.' Our sin is now to be measured by our under-estimate and neglect of Him, and chiefly of His Cross. That Cross prevents our consciousness of sin from becoming despair of pardon. Judas went out, and with bitter weeping, himself ended his traitorous life. If God's last word to us were, 'Ye have despised My Name,' and it sank into our souls, there would be no hope for any of us. But the message which begins with the universal indictment of sin passes into the message which holds forth forgiveness and freedom as universal as the sin, and 'God hath concluded all in unbelief that He may have mercy upon all.'

Malachi 1:8: BLEMISHED OFFERINGS

Offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the Lord of Hosts.—MALACHI 1.8

A word of explanation may indicate my purpose in selecting this, I am afraid, unfamiliar text. The Prophet has been vehemently rebuking a characteristic mean practice of the priests, who were offering maimed and diseased animals in sacrifice. They were probably dishonest as well as mean, because the worshippers would bring sound beasts, and the priests, for their own profit, slipped in a worthless animal, and kept the valuable one for themselves. They had become so habituated to this piece of economical religion, that they saw no harm in it, and when they offered the lame and the sick and the blind for sacrifice they said to themselves, 'It is not evil.' And so Malachi, with the sudden sharp thrust of my text, tries to rouse their torpid consciences. He says to them: 'Take that diseased creature that you are not ashamed to lay on God's altar, and try what the governor—the official appointed by the Persian Kings to rule over the returned exiles—will think about it. Will an offering of that sort be considered a compliment or an insult? Do you think it will smooth your way or help your suit with him? Surely God deserves as much reverence as the deputy of Artaxerxes. Surely what is not good enough for a Persian satrap is not good enough for the Lord of Hosts. Offer it to the governor, will he be pleased with it? Will he accept thy person?'

Now, it seems to me that this cheap religion of the priests, and this scathing irony of the Prophet's counsel need little modification to fit us very closely. You will bear me witness, I think, that I do not often speak to you about money. But I am going to try to bring out something about the great subject of Christian administration of earthly possessions from this text, because I believe that the Christian consciousness of this generation does need a great deal of rousing and instructing about this matter.

I. We note the startling and strange contrast which the text suggests.

The diseased lamb was laid without scruple or hesitation on God's altar, and not one of these tricky priests durst have taken it to Court in order to secure favour there. Generalise that, and it comes to this—the gifts that we lavish on men are the condemnation of the gifts that we bring to God; and further, we should be ashamed to offer to men what we are not in the least ashamed to bring to God. Let me illustrate in one or two points.

Let us contrast in our own consciences, for instance, the sort of love that we give to one another with the sort of love that we bring to Him. How strong, how perennially active, how delighting in sacrifice and service, what a felt source of blessedness is the love that knits many husbands and wives, many parents and children, many lovers and friends together! And in dreadful contrast, how languid, how sporadic and interrupted, how reluctant when called upon for service and sacrifice, how little operative in our lives is the love we bring to God! We durst not lay upon the altar of family affection, of wedded love, of true friendship, a love of such a sort as we take to God and expect Him to be satisfied with. It would be an insult if offered to 'the governor,' but we think it good enough for the King of kings. Here a gushing flood, there a straitened trickle coming drop by drop; here a glowing flame that fills life with warmth and light, there a few dying embers. Measure and contrast the love that is lavished by men upon one another, and the love that is coldly brought to Him. And I think we must all bow our heads penitently.

Contrast the trust that we put in one another, and the trust that we direct to Him. In the one case it is absolute. 'I am as sure as I am of my own existence that so-and-so will always be as true as steel to me, and will never fail me, and whatever he, or she, does, or fails to do, no shadow of suspicion, or mist of doubt, will creep across the sunshine of our sky.' And in contrast to the firm grasp with which we clasp an infirm human hand, there is a tremulous touch, scarcely a grasp at all, which we lay upon the one Hand that is strong enough always to be outstretched for our defence and our blessing. Contrast your confidence in men, and your confidence in God. Are we not all committing the absurdity of absolutely trusting that which has no stability or stay, and refusing so to trust that which is the Rock of Ages? God's faithfulness is absolute, our faith in it is tremulous. Men's faithfulness is uncertain, our faith in it is entire.

We might contrast the submission and obedience with which we follow those who have secured our confidence and evoked our love, as contrasted with the rebellion, the reluctance, the self-will, which come in to break and mar our submission to God. Men that will not take Jesus Christ for their Master, and refuse to follow Him when He speaks, will bind themselves to some human teacher, and enrol themselves as disciples in some school of thought or science or philosophy, with a submission so entire, that it puts to shame the submission which Christians render to the Incarnate Truth Himself.

And so I might go on, all round the horizon of our human nature, and signalise the difference that exists between the blemished sacrifices which each part of our being dares to bring to God and expects Him to accept, and the sacrifices, unblemished and spotless, which we carry to one another.

But let me say a word more directly about the subject of which Malachi is speaking. It seems to me that we may well take a very condemnatory contrast between what we offer to God in regard to our administration of earthly good, and what we offer on other altars. Contrast what you give, for directly beneficent and Christian purposes, with what you spend, without two thoughts, on your own comfort, indulgence, recreation, tastes—sometimes doubtful tastes—and the like. Contrast England's drink bill and England's missionary contribution. We spend ?10,000,000 on some wretched war, and some of you think it is cheap at the price, and the whole contributions of English Christians to missionary purposes in a twelvemonth do not amount to a tenth of that sum. You offer that to the spread of Christ's kingdom. 'Offer it to your Government,' and try to compound for your share of the ten millions that you are going to spend in shells and gunpowder by the amount you give to Christian missions, and you will very soon have the tax-gatherer down on you. 'Will he be pleased with it?'

This one Missionary Society with which we are nominally connected has an income of ?70,000 a year. I suppose that is about a shilling per head from the members of our congregations. Of this congregation there are many that never give us a farthing, except, perhaps, the smallest coin in their pockets when the collecting-box comes round. I do not suppose that there is one of us that applies the underlying principle in our text, of giving God our best, to this work. I am not going to urge you. It is my business now simply to state, as boldly and strongly as I can, the fact; and I say with all sadness, with self-condemnation, as well as bringing an indictment against my brethren, but with the clearest conviction that I am not exaggerating in the smallest degree, that the contrast between what we lavish on other things and what we give for God's work in the world, is a shameful contrast, like that other which the Prophet gibbeted with his indignant eloquence.

II. And now let me come to another point—viz., that we have here suggested and implied the true law and principle on which all Christian giving of all sorts is to be regulated.

And that is—give the best. The diseased animal was no more fit for the altar of God than it was for the shambles of the viceroy. It was the entire and unblemished one that would be accepted in either case. But for us Christian people that general principle has to be expanded. Let me do it in two or three sentences.

The foundation of all is 'the unspeakable Gift.' Jesus Christ has given Himself, God has given His Son. And Jesus Christ and God, in giving, gave up that we might receive. Do you believe that? Do you believe it about yourself? If you do, then the next step becomes certain. That gift, truly received by any man, will infallibly lead to a kindred (though infinitely inferior) self-surrender. If once we come within the circle of the attraction of that great Sun, if I might so say, it will sweep us clean out of our orbit, and turn us into satellites reflecting His light. To have self for our centre is death and misery, to have Christ for our centre is life and blessedness. And the one power that decentralises a man, and sweeps him into an orbit around Jesus, is the faithful acceptance of His great gift. Just as some little State will give up its independence in order to be blessedly absorbed into a great Empire, on the frontiers of which it maintains a precarious existence, so a man is never so strong, never so blessed, never so truly himself, as when the might of Christ's sacrifice has melted down all his selfishness, and has made it flow out in rivers of self-surrender, self-absorption, self-annihilation, and so self-preservation. 'He that loseth his life shall find it.'

Then the next step is that this self-surrender, consequent upon my faithful acceptance of the Lord's surrender for me, changes my whole conception as to what I call my possessions. If I, in the depths of my soul, have yielded myself to Jesus Christ, which I shall have done if I have truly accepted Him as yielding Himself for me, then the yielding of self draws after it, necessarily, and without a question, a new relation between me and all that I have and all that I can do. Capacities, faculties, means, opportunities, powers of brain and heart and mind, and everything else—they all belong to Him. As in old times a nobleman came and put his hands between the King's hands, and kneeling before him surrendered his lands, and all his property, to the over-lord, and got them back again for his own, so we shall do, in the measure in which we have accepted Christ as our Saviour and our Guide. And so, because am His, I shall feel that I am His steward to administer what He gives me, not for myself, but for men and for God.

Then there follows another thing, and that is, that Christian giving, not of money only, but of money in a very eminent degree, is only right and truly Christian when you give yourself with your gift. A great many of us put our sixpence, or our half-crown, or our sovereign, into the plate, and no part of ourselves goes with it, except a little twinge of unwillingness to part with it. That is how they fling bones to dogs. That is not how you have to give your money and your efforts to God and God's cause. Farmers nowadays sow their seed-corn out of a machine with a number of little conical receptacles at the back of it and a small hole in the bottom of each, and as the thing goes bumping along over the furrows, out they fall. That drill does as well as, and better than, the hand of the sower scattering the seed, but it does not do near as well in the Christian agriculture in sowing the seed of the Kingdom. Machine-work will not do there; we have to have the sower's hand, and the sower's heart with his hand, as he scatters the seed. Brethren! apply the lesson to yourselves, and let your sympathies and your prayers and your wishes to help go along with your gifts, if you intend them to be of any good.

And there is another thing, and that is that, somehow or other, if not in the individual gifts, at all events in their aggregate, there must be present the fact of sacrifice. 'I will not offer unto the Lord burnt offerings of that which doth cost me nothing,' said the old king. And we do not give as we ought, unless our gifts involve some measure of sacrifice. From many a subscription list some of the biggest donations would disappear, like the top-writing in one of those old manuscripts where the Gospel has been half-erased and written over with some foolish legend, which vanishes when the detergent liquid is applied to the parchment, if that thought were brought to bear upon it. God asks how much is kept, not how much is given.

Now, dear friends, these are all threadbare, elementary, 'A.B.C.' truths. Are they the alphabet of our stewardship and administration of our possessions?

III. One last suggestion I would make on this text is that it brings before us the possible blessing and possible grave results of right or wrong Christian giving.

'Will he be pleased with it? Or will he accept thy person?' Will the governor think the hobbling creature, blind of an eye, and infected with some sickness, to be a beautiful addition to his flock? Will it help your suit with him? No!

It is New Testament teaching that our faithfulness in the administration of earthly possessions of all sorts has a bearing on our spiritual life. Remember our Lord's triple illustration of this principle, when He speaks about faithfulness 'in that which is least,' leading on to the possession of that which is the greatest; when He speaks of faithfulness in regard to 'the unrighteous Mammon' leading on to being intrusted with the true riches; when He speaks of faithfulness in our administration of that which is another's—alien to ourselves, and which may pass into the possession of a thousand more—leading on to our firmer hold, and our deeper and fuller possession of the riches which, in the deepest sense of the word, are our own. One very important element in the development and advance of the religious life is our right use of these earthly things. I have seen many a case in which a man was far better when he was a poor man than he was when a rich one, in which slowly, stealthily, certainly, the love of wealth has closed round a man like an iron band round a sapling, and has hindered the growth of his Christian character, and robbed him of the best things. And, God be thanked! one has seen cases, too, in which, by their Christian use of outward possessions, men have weakened the dominion of self upon themselves, have learned the subordinate value of the wealth that can be counted and detached from its possessor, and have grown in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Dear friends, God

has given all of us something in charge, the faithful use of which is a potent factor in the growth of our Christian characters.

It is New Testament teaching that our faithful administration of earthly possessions has a bearing on the future. Remember what Jesus Christ said, 'That when ye fail they may receive you into everlasting habitations.' Remember what His Apostle says, 'Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.' Let no fear of imperilling the great truth of salvation by faith lead us to forget that the faith which saves manifests its vitality and genuineness, by its effects upon our lives, and that no small part of our lives is concerned with the right acquisition and right use of these perishable outward gifts. And let us take care that we do not, in our dread of damaging the free grace of God, forget that although we do not earn blessedness, here or hereafter, by gifts whilst we are living or legacies when we are dead, the administration of money has an important part to play in shaping Christian character, and the Christian character which we acquire here settles our hereafter.

Brethren! we all need to revise our scale of giving, especially in regard to missionary operations. And if we will do that at the foot of the Cross, then we shall join the chorus, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive riches,' and we shall come to Him 'bringing our silver and our gold with us,' rejoicing that He gives us the possibility of sharing His blessedness, 'according to the word of the Lord Jesus which He spake, It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Malachi 2:12, 14: A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

'The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this . . . out of the tents of Jacob, . . . 14. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth.'—MALACHI ii. 12, 14 (R.V.) .

It is obvious from the whole context that divorce and foreign inter-marriage were becoming increasingly prevalent in Malachi's time. The conditions in these respects were nearly similar to that prevailing in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is these sins which the Prophet is here vehemently condemning, and for which he threatens to cut off the transgressors out of the tents of Jacob, and to regard no more their offerings and simulated worship. They might cover 'the altar of the Lord with tears,' but the sacrifice which they laid upon it was polluted by the sins of their daily domestic life, and therefore was not 'regarded by Him any more.' Malachi is true to the prophetic spirit when he denounces a religion which has the form of godliness without its power over the practical life. But his sharp accusations have their edge turned by the question, 'Wherefore?' which again calls out from the Prophet's lips a more sharply-pointed accusation, and a solemn warning that none should 'deal treacherously against the wife of his youth,' 'for I hate putting away, saith the Lord.' We may dismiss any further reference to the circumstances of the text, and regard it as but one instance of man's way of treating the voice of God when it warns of the consequences of the sin of man. Looked at from such a point of view the words of our text bring before us God's merciful threatenings and man's incredulous rejection of them.

I. God's merciful threatenings.

The fact of sin affects God's relation to and dealings with the sinner. It does not prevent the flowing forth of His love, which is not drawn out by anything in us, but wells up from the depths of His being, like the Jordan from its source at Dan, a broad stream gushing forth from the rock. But that love which is the outgoing of perfect moral purity must necessarily become perfect opposition to its own opposite in the sinfulness of man. The divine character is many-sided, and whilst 'to the pure' it 'shows itself pure,' it cannot but be that 'to the froward' it 'will show itself froward.' Man's sin has for its most certain and dreadful consequence that, if we may so say, it forces God to present the stern side of His nature which hates evil. But not merely does sin thus modify the fact of the divine relation to men, but it throws men into opposition in which they can see only the darkness which dwells in the light of God. To the eye looking through a red tinted medium all things are red, and even the crystal sea before the throne is 'a sea of glass mingled with fire.'

No sin can stay our reception of a multitude of good gifts appealing to our hearts and revealing the patient love of our Father in heaven, but every sin draws after it as certainly as the shadow follows the substance, evil consequences which work themselves out on the large scale in nations and communities, and in the smaller spheres of individual life. And surely it is the voice of love and not of anger that comes to warn us of the death which is the wages of sin. It is not God who has ordained that 'the soul that sinneth it shall die,' but it is God who tells us so. The train is rushing full steam ahead to the broken bridge, and will crash down the gulph and be huddled, a hideous ruin, on the rocks; surely it is care for life that holds out the red flag of danger, and surely God is not to be blamed if in spite of the flag full speed is kept up and the crash comes.

The miseries and sufferings which follow our sins are self-inflicted, and for the most part automatic. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that'—and not some other crop—'will he also reap.' The wages of sin are paid in ready money; and it is as just to lay them at God's door as it would be to charge Him with inflicting the disease which the dissolute man brings upon himself. It is no arbitrary appointment of God's that 'he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption'; nor is it His will acting as that of a jealous despot which makes it inevitably true that here and hereafter, 'Every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward,' and that to be parted from Him is death.

If then we rightly understand the connection between sin and suffering, and the fact that the sorrows which are but the echoes of preceding sins have all a distinctly moral and restorative purpose, we are prepared rightly to estimate how tenderly the God who warns us against our sins by what men call threatenings loves us while He speaks.

II. Man's rejection of God's merciful threatenings.

It is the great mystery and tragedy of life that men oppose themselves to God's merciful warnings that all sin is a bitter, because it is an evil, thing. He has to lament, 'I have smitten your children, and they have received no correction.' The question 'Wherefore?' is asked in very various tones, but none of them has in it the accent of true conviction; and there is a whole world of difference between the lowly petition, 'Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me,' and the curt, self-complacent brushing aside of God's merciful threatenings in the text. The last thing which most of us think of as the cause of our misfortunes is ourselves; and we resent as almost an insult the word, which if we were wise, we should welcome as the crowning proof of the seeking love of our Father in heaven. We are more obstinate and foolish than Balaam, who persisted in his purpose when the angel with the drawn sword in his hand would have barred his way, not to the tree of life, but to death. The awful mystery that a human will can, and the yet sadder mystery that it does, set itself against the divine, is never more unintelligible, never so stupid, and never so tragic as when God says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?' and we say, 'Why need I die? I will not turn.'

The 'Wherefore?' of our text is widely asked in the present day as an expression of utter bewilderment at the miseries of humanity, both in the wide area of this disordered world and in the narrower field of individual lives. There are whole schools of so-called political and social thinkers who have yet to learn that the one thing which the world and the individual need is not a change of conditions or environment, but redemption from sin. Man's sorrows are but a symptom of his disease, and he is no more to be healed by tinkering with these than a fever-stricken patient can be restored to health by treating the blotches on his skin which tell of the disease that courses through his veins.

But sometimes the question is more than an expression of bewilderment; it conceals an arraignment of God's justice, or even a denial that there is a God at all. There are men among us who hesitate not to avow that the miseries of the world have rooted out of their minds a belief in Him; and who point to all the ills under which humanity staggers as conclusive against the ancient faith of a God of love. They, too, forget that that love is righteousness, and that if there be sin in the world and God above it, He must necessarily war against it and hate it.

Our right response to God's merciful threatenings is to ask this question in the right spirit. We are not wise if we turn a deaf ear to His warnings, or go on in a headlong course which He by His providences declared to be dangerous and fatal. We use them as wise men should, only if our 'Wherefore?' is asked in order to learn our evil, and having learned it, to purge our bosoms of the perilous stuff by confession and to seek pardon and victory in Christ. Then we shall 'know the secret of the Lord' which is 'with them that fear Him'; and the mysteries that still hang over our own histories and the world's destiny will have shining down upon them the steadfast light of that love which seeks to make men blessed by making them good.

Malachi 3:1-12: THE LAST WORD OF PROPHECY

Deep obscurity surrounds the person of this last of the prophets. It is questioned whether Malachi is a proper name at all. It is the Hebrew word rendered in verse 1 of our passage 'My messenger,' and this has led many authorities to contend that the prophecy is in fact anonymous, the name being only a designation of office. Whether this is so or not, the name, if it is a name, is all that we know about him. The tenor of his prophecy shows that he lived after the restoration of the Temple and its worship, and the sins which he castigates are substantially those with which Ezra and Nehemiah had to fight. One ancient Jewish authority asserts that he was Ezra; but the statement has no confirmation, and if it had been correct, we should not have expected that such an author would have been anonymous. This dim figure, then, is the last of the mighty line of prophets, and gives strong utterance to the 'hope of Israel'! One clear voice, coming from we scarcely know whose lips, proclaims for the last time, 'He comes! He comes!' and then all is silence for four hundred years. Modern critics, indeed, hold that the bulk of the Psalter is of later date; but that contention has much to do before it can be regarded as established.

The first point worthy of notice in this passage, then, is the concentration, in this last prophetic utterance, of that element of forward-looking expectancy which marked all the earlier revelation. From the beginning, the selectest spirits in Israel had set their faces and pointed their fingers to a great future, which gathered distinctness as the ages rolled, and culminated in the King from David's line, of whom many psalms sung, and in the suffering Servant of the Lord, who shines out from the pages of the second part of Isaiah's prophecy. This Messianic hope runs through all the Old Testament, like a broadening river. 'They that went before cried, Hosanna! Blessed is He that cometh.'

That hope gives unity to the Old Testament, whatever criticism may have to teach about the process of its production. The most important thing about the book is that one purpose informs it all; and the student who misses the truth that 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' has a less accurate conception of the meaning and inter-relations of the Old Testament than the unlearned

who has accepted that great truth. We should be willing to learn all that modern scholarship has to teach about the course of revelation. But we should take care that the new knowledge does not darken the old certainty that the prophets 'testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ and of the glory that should follow,' Here, at the very end, stands Malachi, reiterating the assurance which had come down through the centuries. The prophets, as it were, had lit a beacon which flamed through the darkness. Hand after hand had flung new fuel on it when it burned low. It had lighted up many a stormy night of exile and distress. Now we can dimly see one more, the last of his order, casting his brand on the fire, which leaps up again; and then he too passes into the darkness, but the beacon burns on.

The next point to note is the clear prophecy of a forerunner. 'My messenger' is to come, and to 'prepare the way before Me.' Isaiah had heard a voice calling, 'Prepare the way of the Lord,' and Malachi quotes his words, and ascribes the same office to the 'messenger.' In the last verses of his prophecy he calls this messenger 'Elijah the prophet.' Here, then, we have a remarkable instance of a historical detail set forth in prophecy. The coming of the Lord is to be immediately preceded by the appearance of a prophet, whose function is to effect a moral and religious reformation, which shall prepare a path for Him. This is no vague ideal, but definite announcement of a definite fact, to be realised in a historical personality. How came this half-anonymous Jew, four hundred years beforehand, to hit upon the fact that the next prophet in Israel would herald the immediate coming of the Lord? There ought to be but one answer possible.

Another point to note is the peculiar relation between Jehovah and Him who comes. Emphatically and broadly it is declared that Jehovah Himself 'shall suddenly come to His temple'; and then the prophecy immediately passes on to speak of the coming of 'the Messenger of the covenant,' and dwells for a time exclusively on his work of purifying; and then again it glides, without conscious breach of continuity or mark of transition, into, 'And I will come near to you in judgment.' A mysterious relationship of oneness and yet distinctness is here shadowed, of which the solution is only found in the Christian truth that the Word, which was God, and was in the beginning with God, became flesh, and that in Him Jehovah in very deed tabernacled among men. The expression 'the Messenger (or Angel) of the covenant' is connected with the remarkable representations in other parts of the Old Testament, of 'the Angel of Jehovah,' in whom many commentators recognise a pre-incarnate manifestation of the eternal Word. That 'Angel' had redeemed Israel from Egypt, had led them through the desert, had been the 'Captain of the Lord's host.' The name of Jehovah was 'in Him.' He it is whose coming is here prophesied, and in His coming Jehovah comes to His temple.

We next note the aspect of the coming which is prominent here. Not the kingly, nor the redemptive, but the judicial, is uppermost. With keen irony the Prophet contrasts the professed eagerness of the people for the appearance of Jehovah and their shrinking terror when He does come. He is 'the Lord whom ye seek'; the Messenger of the covenant is He 'whom ye delight in.' But all that superficial and partially insincere longing will turn into dread and unwillingness to abide His scrutiny. The images of the refiner's fire and the fullers' soap imply painful processes, of which the intention is to burn out the dross and beat out the filth. It sounds like a prolongation of Malachi's voice when John the Baptist peals out his herald cry of one whose 'fan was in His hand,' and who should plunge men into a fiery baptism, and consume with fire that destroyed what would not submit to be cast into the fire that cleansed. Nor should we forget that our Lord has said, 'For judgment am I come into the world.' He came to 'purify'; but if men would not let Him do what He came for, He could not but be their bane instead of their blessing.

The stone is laid. If we build on it, it is a sure foundation; if we stumble over it, we are broken. The double aspect and effect of the gospel, which was meant only to have the single operation of blessing, are clearly set forth in this prophecy, which first promises purging from sin, so that not only the 'sons of Levi' shall offer in righteousness, but that the 'offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasant,' and then passes immediately to foretell that God will come in judgment and witness against evil-doers. Judgment is the shadow of salvation, and constantly attends on it. Neither Malachi nor the Baptist gives a complete view of Messiah's work, but still less do they give an erroneous one; for the central portion of both prophecies is His purifying energy which both liken to cleansing fire.

That real and inward cleansing is the great work of Christ. It was wrought on as many of His contemporaries as believed on Him, and for such as did not He was a swift Witness against them. Nor are we to forget that the prophecy is not exhausted yet; for there remains another 'day of His coming' for judgment. The prophets did not see the perspective of the future, and often bring together events widely separated in time, just as, to a spectator on a mountain, distances between points far away towards the horizon are not measurable. We have to allow for foreshortening.

This blending of events historically widely apart is to be kept in view in interpreting Malachi's prediction that the coming would result in Judah's and Israel's offerings being 'pleasant unto the Lord as in former years.' That prediction is not yet fulfilled, whether we regard the name of Israel and the relation expressed in it as having passed over to the Christian Church, or whether we look forward to that bringing in of all Israel which Paul says will be as 'life from the dead.' But by slow degrees it is being fulfilled, and by Christ men are being led to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God.

The more directly Messianic part of this prophecy is closed in verse 6 by a great saying, which at once gives the reason for the

coming and for its severe aspect of witness against sin. The unchangeableness of God, which is declared in His very name, guarantees the continued existence of Israel. As Paul says in regard to the same subject, 'The calling of God is without change of purpose' (on His part). But it is as impossible that God should leave them to their sins, which would destroy them, as that He should Himself consume them. Therefore He will surely come; and coming, will deliver from evil. But they who refuse to be so delivered will forfeit that title and the pledge of preservation which it implies.

A new paragraph begins with verse 7, which is not closely connected with the promises preceding. It recurs to the prevailing tone of Malachi, the rebuke of negligence in attending to the legal obligations of worship. That negligence is declared to be a reason for God's withdrawal from them. But the 'return,' which is promised on condition of their renewed obedience, can scarcely be identified with the coming just foretold. That coming was to bring about offerings of righteousness which should be pleasant to the Lord. This section (vs. 7-12) promises blessings as results of such offerings, and a 'return' of Jehovah to His people contingent upon their return to Him. If the two sections of this passage are taken as closely connected, this one must describe the consequences of the coming. But, more probably, this accusation of negligence and promise of blessing on a change of conduct are independent of the previous verses. We, however, may fairly take them as exhibiting the obligations of those who have received that great gift of purifying from Jesus Christ, and are thereby consecrated as His priests.

The key-word of the Christian life is 'sacrifice'—surrender, and that to God. That is to be stamped on the inmost selves, and by the act of the will, on the body as well. 'Yield yourselves to God, and your members as instruments of righteousness to Him.' It is to be written on possessions. Malachi necessarily keeps within the limits of the sacrificial system, but his impetuous eloquence hits us no less. It is still possible to 'rob God.' We do so when we keep anything as our own, and use it at our own will, for our own purposes. Only when we recognise His ownership of ourselves, and consequently of all that we call 'ours,' do we give Him His due. All the slave's chattels belong to the owner to whom he belongs. Such thorough-going surrender is the secret of thorough possession. The true way to enjoy worldly goods is to give them to God.

The lattices of heaven are opened, not to pour down, as of old, fiery destruction, but to make way for the gentle descent of God's blessing, which will more than fill every vessel set to receive it. This is the universal law, not always fulfilled in increase of outward goods, but in the better riches of communion and of larger possession in God Himself. He suffers no man to be His creditor, but more than returns our gifts, as legends tell of some peasant who brought his king a poor tribute of fruits of his fields, and went away from the presence-chamber with a jewel in his hand.

Malachi 3:6: THE UNCHANGING LORD

'I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.'—MALACHI iii. 6 .

The scriptural revelations of the divine Name are always the basis of intensely practical admonition. The Bible does not think it worth while to proclaim the Name of God without building on the proclamation promises or commandments. There is no 'mere theology' in Scripture; and it does not speak of 'attributes,' nor give dry abstractions of infinitude, eternity, omniscience, unchangeableness, but lays stress on the personality of God, which is so apt to escape us in these abstract conceptions, and thus teaches us to think of this personal God our Father, as infinite, eternal, knowing all things, and never changing. There is all the difference in our attitude towards the very same truth if we think of the unchangeableness of God, or if we think that our Father God is unchangeable. In our text the thought of Him as unchanging comes into view as the foundation of the continuance of the unfaithful sons of Jacob in their privileges and in their very lives. 'I am the Lord,' Jehovah, the Self-existent, the Eternal whose being is not under the limitations of succession and time. 'Because I am Jehovah, I change not'; and because Jehovah changes not, therefore our finite and mortal selves abide, and our infinite and sinful selves are still the objects of His steadfast love.

Let us consider, first, the unchangeable God, and second, the unchanging God as the foundation of our changeful lives.

I. The unchangeable God.

In the great covenant-name Jehovah there is revealed an existence which reverses all that we know of finite and progressive being, or finite and mortal being, or finite and variable nature. With us there are mutations arising from physical nature. The material must needs be subject to laws of growth and decadence. Our spiritual nature is subject to changes arising from the advancement in knowledge. Our moral nature is subject to fluctuations; circumstances play upon us, and 'nothing continueth in one stay.' Change is the condition of life. It means growth and happiness; it belongs to the perfection of creatures. But the unchangeableness of God is the negation of all imperfection, it is the negation of all dependence on circumstances, it is the negation of all possibility of decay or exhaustion, it is the negation of all caprice. It is the assurance that His is an underived, self-dependent being, and that with Him is the fountain of light; it is the assurance that, raised above the limits of time and the succession of events, He is in the eternal present, where all things that were and are, and are to come, stand naked and open. It is the assurance that the calm might of His eternal will acts, not in spasms of successive volitions preceded by a period of indecision and equilibrium between contending motives, but is one continuous uniform energy, never beginning, never bending, never ending; that the purpose of His will is 'the

eternal purpose which He hath purposed in Himself.' It is the assurance that the clear vision of His infinite knowledge, from the heat of which nothing is hid, has no stages of advancement, and no events lying nebulous in a dim horizon by reason of distance, or growing in clearness as they draw nearer, but which pierces the mists of futurity and the veils of the past and the infinities of the present, and 'from the beginning to the end knoweth all things.' It is the assurance that the mighty stream of love from the heart of God is not contingent on the variations of our character and the fluctuations of our poor hearts, but rises from His deep well, and flows on for ever, 'the river of God' which 'is full of water.' It is the assurance that round all the majesty and the mercy which He has revealed for our adoration and our trust there is the consecration of permanence, that we might have a rock on which to build and never be confounded. Is there anywhere in the past an act of His power, a word of His lip, a revelation of His heart which has been a strength or a joy or a light to any man? It is valid for me, and is intended for my use. 'He fainteth not, nor is weary.' The bush burns and is not consumed. 'I will not alter the thing that has gone out of my lips.' 'By two immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we have strong consolation.'

II. The unchanging God as the foundation of our changeful lives.

In the most literal sense our text is true. Because He lives we live also. He is the same for ever, therefore we are not consumed. The foundation of our being lies beyond and beneath all the mutable things from which we are tempted to believe that we draw our lives, and is in God. The true lesson to be drawn from the mutable phenomena of earth is—heaven. The many links in the chain must have a staple. Reason requires that behind all the fleeting shall be the permanent. There must be a basis which does not partake of change. The lesson from all the mutable creation is the immutable God.

Since God changes not, the life of our spirits is not at the mercy of changing events. We look back on a lifetime of changing scenes through which we have passed, and forward to a similar succession, and this mutability is sad to many of us, and in some aspects sad to all, so powerless we are to fix and arrest any of our blessings. Which we shall keep we know not; we only know that, as certainly as buds and blossoms of spring drop, and the fervid summer darkens to November fogs and December frosts, so certainly we shall have to part with much in our passage through life. But if we let God speak to us, the necessary changes that come to us will not be harmful but blessed, for the lesson that the mutability of the mutual is meant to impress upon us is, the permanency of the divine, and our dependence, not on them, but on Him. We may look upon all the world of time and chance and think that He who Himself is unchanging changeth all. The eye of the tempest is a point of rest. The point in the heavens towards which, according to some astronomers, the whole of the solar system is drifting, is a fixed point. If we depend on Him, then change is not all sad; it cannot take God away, but it may bring us nearer to Him. We cannot be desolate as long as we have Him. We know not what shall be on the morrow. Be it so; it will be God's to-morrow. When the leaves drop we can see the rock on which the trees grow; and when changes strip the world for us of some of its waving beauty and leafy shade, we may discern more clearly the firm foundation on which our hopes rest. All else changes. Be it so; that will not kill us, nor leave us utterly forlorn as long as we hear the voice which says, 'I am the Lord; I change not; therefore ye are not consumed.'

God's purposes and promises change not, therefore our faith may rest on Him, notwithstanding our own sins and fluctuations. It is this aspect of the divine immutability which is the thought of our text. God does not turn from His love, nor cancel His promises, nor alter His purposes of mercy because of our sins. If God could have changed, the godless forgetfulness of, and departure from, Him of 'the Sons of Jacob' would have driven Him to abandon His purposes; but they still live—living evidences of His long-suffering. And in that preservation of them God would have them see the basis of hope for the future. So this is the confidence with which we should cheer ourselves when we look upon the past, and when we anticipate the future. The sins that have been in our past have deserved that we should have been swept away, but we are here still. Why are we? Why do we yet live? Because we have to do with an unchanging love, with a faithfulness that never departs from its word, with a purpose of blessing that will not be turned aside. So let us look back with this thought and be thankful; let us look forward with it and be of good cheer. Trust yourself, weak and sinful as you are, to that unchanging love. The future will have in it faults and failures, sins and shortcomings, but rise from yourself to God. Look beyond the light and shade of your own characters, or of earthly events to the central light, where there is no glimmering twilight, no night, 'no variableness nor shadow of turning.' Let us live in God, and be strong in hope. Forward, not backward, let us look and strive; so our souls, fixed and steadied by faith in Him, will become in a manner partakers of His unchangeableness; and we too in our degree will be able to say, 'The Lord is at my side; I shall not be moved.'

Malachi 3:7: A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of Hosts. But ye say, Wherein shall we return?—MALACHI 3:7

In previous sermons we have considered God's indictment of man's sin met by man's plea of 'not guilty,' and God's threatenings brushed aside by man's question. Here we have the climax of self-revealing and patient love in God's wooing voice to draw the wanderer back, met by man's refusing answer. These three divine utterances taken together cover the whole ground of His speech to us; and, alas! these three human utterances but too truly represent for the most part our answers to Him.

I. God's invitation to His wandering child.

The gracious invitation of our text presupposes a state of departure. The child who is tenderly recalled has first gone away. There has been a breach of love. Dependence has been unwelcome, and cast off with the vain hope of a larger freedom in the far-off land; and this is the true charge against us. It is not so much individual acts of sin but the going away in heart and spirit from our Father God which describes the inmost essence of our true condition, and is itself the source of all our acts of sin. Conscience confirms the description. We know that we have departed from Him in mind, having wasted our thoughts on many things and not having had Him in the multitude of them in us. We have departed from Him in heart, having squandered our love and dissipated our desires on many objects, and sought in the multiplicity of many pearls—some of them only paste—a substitute for the all-sufficient simplicity of the One of great price. We have departed from Him in will, having reared up puny inclinations and fleeting passions against His calm and eternal purpose, and so bringing about the shock of a collision as destructive to us as when a torpedo-boat crashes in the dark against a battleship, and, cut in two, sinks.

The gracious invitation of our text follows, 'I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.' Threatenings, and the execution of these in acts of judgment, are no indication of a change in the loving heart of God; and because it is the same, however we have sinned against it and departed from it, there is ever an invitation and a welcome. We may depart from Him, but He never departs from us. Nor does He wait for us to originate the movement of return, but He invites us back. By all His words in His threatenings and in His commandments, as in the acts of His providence, we can hear His call to return. The fathers of our flesh never cease to long for their prodigal child's return; and their patient persistence of hope is but brief and broken when contrasted with the infinite long-suffering of the Father of spirits. We have heard of a mother who for long empty years has nightly set a candle in her cottage window to guide her wandering boy back to her heart; and God has bade us think more loftily of the unchangeableness of His love than that of a woman who may forget, that she should not have compassion upon the son of her womb.

II. Man's answer to God's invitation.

It is a refusal which is half-veiled and none the less real. There is no unwillingness to obey professed, but it is concealed under a mask of desiring a little more light as to how a return is to be accomplished. There are not many of us who are rooted enough in evil as to be able to blurt out a curt 'I will not' in answer to His call. Conscience often bars the way to such a plain and unmannerly reply; but there are many who try to cheat God, and who do to some extent cheat themselves, by professing ignorance of the way which would lead them to His heart. Some of us have learned only too well to raise questions about the method of salvation instead of accepting it, and to dabble in theology instead of making sure work of return. Some of us would fain substitute a host of isolated actions, or apparent moral or religious observance, for the return of will and heart to God; and all who in their consciences answer God's call by saying, 'Wherein shall we return?' with such a meaning are playing tricks with themselves, and trying to hoodwink God.

But the question of our text has often a nobler origin, and comes from the depths of a troubled heart. Not seldom does God's loving invitation rouse the dormant conscience to the sense of sin. The man, lying broken at the foot of the cliff down which he has fallen, and seeing the brightness of God far above, has his heart racked with the question: How am I, with lame limbs, to struggle back to the heights above? 'How shall man be just with God?' All the religions of the world, with their offerings and penances and weary toils, are vain attempts to make a way back to the God from whom men have wandered, and that question, 'Wherein shall we return?' is really the meaning of the world's vain seeking and profitless effort.

God has answered man's question; for Christ is at once the way back to God, and the motive which draws us to walk in it. He draws us back by the magnetism of His love and sacrifice. We return to God when we cling to Jesus. He is the highest, the tenderest utterance of the divine voice; and when we yield to His invitation to Himself we return to God. He calls to each of us, 'Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.' What can we reply but, 'I come; let me never wander from Thee'?

Malachi 3:13-18, 4:1-6: — 'STOUT WORDS,' AND THEIR CONFUTATION

This passage falls into three parts,—the 'stout words' against God which the Prophet sets himself to confute (Malachi 3:13-15); the prophecy of the day which will show their falsehood (Malachi 3:16-4:3); and the closing exhortation and prediction (Malachi 4:4-6).

I. The returning exiles had not had the prosperity which they had hoped.

So many of them, even of those who had served God, began to let doubts darken their trust, and to listen to the whispers of their own hearts, reinforced by the mutterings of others, and to ask: 'What is the use of religion? Does it make any difference to a man's condition?' Here had they been keeping God's charge, and going in black garments 'before the Lord,' in token of penitence, and no good had come to them, while arrogant neglect of His commandments did not seem to hinder happiness, and 'they that work wickedness are built up.' Sinful lives appeared to have a firm foundation, and to rise high and palace-like, while righteous ones were like huts. Goodness seemed to spell ruin.

What was wrong in these 'stout words'? It was wrong to attach such worth to external acts of devotion, as if these were deserving of

reward. It was wrong to suspend the duty of worship on the prosperity resulting from it, and to seek 'profit' from 'keeping his charge.' Such religion was shallow and selfish, and had the evils of the later Pharisaism in germ in it. It was wrong to yield to the doubts which the apparently unequal distribution of worldly prosperity stirred in their hearts. But the doubts themselves were almost certain to press on Old Testament believers, as well as on Old Testament scoffers, especially under the circumstances of Malachi's time. The fuller light of Christianity has eased their pressure, but not removed it, and we have all had to face them, both when our own hearts have ached with sorrow and when pondering on the perplexities of this confused world. We look around, and, like the psalmist, see 'the prosperity of the wicked,' and, like him, have to confess that our 'steps had wellnigh slipped' at the sight. The old, old question is ever starting up. 'Doth God know?' The mystery of suffering and the mystery of its distribution, the apparent utter want of connection between righteousness and well-being, are still formidable difficulties in the way of believing in a loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God, and are stock arguments of the unbeliever and perplexities of humble faith. Never to have felt the force of the difficulty is not so much the sign of steadfast faith as of scant reflection. To yield to it, and still more, to let it drive us to cast religion aside, is not merely folly, but sin. So thinks Malachi.

II. To the stout words of the doubters is opposed the conversation of the godly. '

Then they that feared the Lord spake one with another,' nourishing their faith by believing speech with like-minded. The more the truths by which we believe are contradicted, the more should we commune with fellow-believers. Attempts to rob us should make us hold our treasure the faster. Bold avowal of the faith is especially called for when many potent voices deny it. And, whoever does not hear, God hears. Faithful words may seem lost, but they and every faithful act are written in His remembrance and will be recompensed one day. If our names and acts are written there, we may well be content to accept scanty measures of earthly good, and not be 'envious of the foolish' in their prosperity.

Malachi's answer to the doubters leaves all other considerations which might remove the difficulty unmentioned, and fixes on the one, the prophecy of a future which will show that it is not all the same whether a man is good or bad. It was said of an English statesman that he called a new world into existence to redress the balance of the old, and that is what the Prophet does. Christianity has taught us many other ways of meeting the doubters' difficulty, but the sheet anchor of faith in that storm is the unconquerable assurance that a day comes when the righteousness of providence will be vindicated, and the eternal difference between good and evil manifested in the fates of men. The Prophet is declaring what will be a fact one day, but he does not know when. Probably he never asked himself whether 'the day of the Lord' was near or far off, to dawn on earth or to lie beyond mortal life. But this he knew—that God was righteous, and that sometime and somewhere character would settle destiny, and even outwardly it would be good to be good. He first declares this conviction in general terms, and then passes on to a magnificent and terrible picture of that great day.

The promise, which lay at the foundation of Israel's national existence, included the recognition of it as 'a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people,' and Malachi looks forward to that day as the epoch when God will show by His acts how precious the righteous are in His sight. Not the whole Israel, but the righteous among them, are the heirs of the old promise. It is an anticipation of the teaching that 'they are not all Israel which are of Israel,' And it bids us look for the fulfilment of every promise of God's to that great day of the Lord which lies still before us all, when the gulf between the righteous and the wicked shall be solemnly visible, wide, and profound. There have been many 'days which I make' in the world's history, and in a measure each of them has re-established the apparently tottering truth that there is a God who judgeth in the earth, but the day of days is yet to come.

No grander vision of judgment exists than Malachi's picture of 'the day,' lurid, on the one hand, with the fierce flame, before which the wicked are as stubble that crackles for a moment and then is grey ashes, or as a tree in a forest fire, which stands for a little while, a pillar of flame, and then falls with a crash, shaking the woods; and on the otherhand, radiant with the early beams of healing sunshine, in whose sweet morning light the cattle, let out from their pent-up stalls, gambol in glee. But let us not forget while we admire the noble poetry of its form that this is God's oracle, nor that we have each to settle for ourselves whether that day shall be for us a furnace to destroy or a sun to cheer and enlighten.

We can only note in a sentence the recurrence in verse 1 of the phrases 'the proud' and they 'that work wickedness,' from verse 15 of chapter iii. The end of those whom the world called happy, and who seemed stable and elevated, is to be as stubble before the fire. We must also point out that 'the sun of righteousness' means the sun which is righteousness, and is not a designation of the Messiah. Nor can we dwell on the picture of the righteous treading down the wicked, which seems to prolong the previous metaphor of the leaping young cattle. Then shall 'the upright have dominion over them in the morning.'

III. The final exhortation and promise point backwards and forwards, summing up duty in obedience to the law, and fixing hope on a future reappearance of the leader of the prophets. Moses and Elijah are the two giant figures which dominate the history of Israel. Law and prophecy are the two forms in which God spoke to the fathers. The former is of perpetual obligation, the latter will flash up again in power on the threshold of the day. Jesus has interpreted this closing word for us. John came 'in the spirit and power of Elijah,' and the purpose of his coming was to 'turn the hearts of the fathers to the children' (Luke i. 16, 17); that is, to bring back the

devout dispositions of the patriarchs to the existing generations, and so to bring the 'hearts of the children to their fathers,' as united with them in devout obedience. If John's mission had succeeded, the 'curse' which smote Israel would have been stayed. God has done all that He can do to keep us from being consumed by the fire of that day. The Incarnation, Life, and Death of Jesus Christ made a day of the Lord which has the twofold character of that in Malachi's vision, for He is a 'saviour of life unto life' or 'of death unto death,' and must be one or other to us. But another day of the Lord is still to come, and for each of us it will come burning as a furnace or bright as sunrise. Then the universe shall 'discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not.'

Malachi 4:6: THE LAST WORDS OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

'Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.'— MALACHI iv. 6 .

'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.'— REVELATION xxii. 21 .

It is of course only an accident that these words close the Old and the New Testaments. In the Hebrew Bible Malachi's prophecies do not stand at the end; but he was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and after him there were 'four centuries of silence.' We seem to hear in his words the dying echoes of the rolling thunders of Sinai. They gather up the whole burden of the Law and of the prophets; of the former in their declaration of a coming retribution, of the latter in the hope that that retribution may be averted.

Then, in regard to John's words, of course as they stand they are simply the parting benediction with which he takes leave of his readers; but it is fitting that the Book of which they are the close should seal up the canon, because it stands as the one prophetic book of the New Testament, and so reaches forward into the coming ages, even to the consummation of all things. And just as Christ in His Ascension was taken from them whilst His hands were lifted up in the act of blessing, so it is fitting that the revelation of which He is the centre and the theme should part from us as He did, shedding with its final words the dew of benediction on our upturned heads.

I venture, then, to look at these significant closing words of the two Testaments as conveying the spirit of each, and suggesting some thoughts about the contrast and the harmony and the order that subsist between them.

I. I ask you, first, to notice the apparent contrast and the real harmony and unity of these two texts.

'Lest I come and smite the land with a curse.' That last awful word does not convey, in the original, quite the idea of our English word 'curse.' It refers to a somewhat singular institution in the Mosaic Law according to which things devoted, in a certain sense, to God were deprived of life. And the reference historically is to the judgments that were inflicted upon the nations that occupied the land before the Israelitish invasion, those Canaanites and others who were put under 'the ban' and devoted to utter destruction. So, says my text, Israel, which has stepped into their places, may bring down upon its head the same devastation; and as they were swept off the face of the land that they had polluted with their iniquities, so an apostate and God-forgetting Judah may again experience the same utter destruction falling upon them. If instead of the word 'curse' we were to substitute the word 'destruction,' we should get the true idea of the passage.

And the thought that I want to insist upon is this, that here we have distinctly gathered up the whole spirit of millenniums of divine revelation, all of which declare this one thing, that as certainly as there is a God, every transgression and disobedience receives, and must receive, its just recompense of reward.

That is the spirit of law, for law has nothing to say, except, 'Do this, and thou shalt live; do not this, and thou shalt die.'

And then turn to the other. 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.' What has become of the thunder? All melted into dewy rain of love and pity and compassion. Grace is love that stoops; grace is love that foregoes its claims, and forgives sins against itself. Grace is love that imparts, and this grace, thus stooping, thus pardoning, thus bestowing, is a universal gift. The Apostolic benediction is the declaration of the divine purpose, and the inmost heart and loftiest meaning of all the words which from the beginning God hath spoken is that His condescending, pardoning, self-bestowing mercy may fall upon all hearts, and gladden every soul.

So there seems to emerge, and there is, a very real and a very significant contrast. 'I come and smite the earth with a curse' sounds strangely unlike 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.' And, of course, in this generation there is a strong tendency to dwell upon that contrast and to exaggerate it, and to assert that the more recent has antiquated the more ancient, and that now the day when we have to think of and to dread the curse that smites the earth is past, 'because the true Light now shineth.'

So I ask you to notice that beneath this apparent contrast there is a real harmony, and that these two utterances, though they seem to be so diverse, are quite consistent at bottom, and must both be taken into account if we would grasp the whole truth. For, as a

matter of fact, nowhere are there more tender utterances and sweeter revelations of a divine mercy than in that ancient law with its attendant prophets. And as a matter of fact, nowhere, through all the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, are there such solemn words of retribution as dropped from the lips of the Incarnate Love. There is nothing anywhere so dreadful as Christ's own words about what comes, and must come, to sinful men. Is there any depth of darkness in the Old Testament teaching of retribution half as deep, half as black, and as terrible, as the gulf that Christ opens at your feet and mine? Is there anything so awful as the threatenings of Infinite Love?

And the same blending of the widest proclamation of, and the most perfect rejoicing confidence in, the universal and all-forgiving love of God, with the teaching of the sharpest retribution, lies in the writings of this very Apostle about whose words I am speaking. There are nowhere in Scripture more solemn pictures than those in that book of the Apocalypse, of the inevitable consequences of departure from the love and the faith of God, and John, the Apostle of love, is the preacher of judgment as none of the other writers of the New Testament are.

Such is the fact, and there is a necessity for it. There must be this blending; for if you take away from your conception of God the absolute holiness which hates sin, and the rigid righteousness which apportions to all evil its bitter fruits, you have left a maimed God that has not power to love but is nothing but weak, good-natured indulgence. Impunity is not mercy, and punishment is never the negation of perfect love, but rather, if you destroy the one you hopelessly maim the other. The two halves are needed in order to give full emphasis to either. Each note alone is untrue; blended, they make the perfect chord.

II. And now, let me ask you to look with me at another point, and that is, the relation of the grace to the punishment.

Is it not love which proclaims judgment? Are not the words of my first text, if you take them all, merciful, however they wear a surface of threatening? 'Lest I come.' Then He speaks that He may not come, and declares the issue of sin in order that that issue may never need to be experienced by us that listen to Him. Brethren! both in regard to the Bible and in regard to human ministrations of the Gospel, it is all-important, as it seems to me at present, to insist that it is the cruellest kindness to keep back the threatenings for fear of darkening the grace; and that, on the other hand, it is the truest tenderness to warn and to proclaim them. It is love that threatens; 'tis mercy to tell us that the wrath will come.

And just as one relation between the grace and the retribution is that the proclamation of the retribution is the work of the grace, so there is another relation—the grace is manifested in bearing the punishment, and in bearing it away by bearing it. Oh! there is no adequate measure of what the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is except the measure of the smiting destruction from which He frees us. It is because every transgression receives its just recompense of reward, because the wages of sin is death, because God cannot but hate and punish the evil, that we get our truest standard of what Christ's love is to every soul of us. For on Him have met all the converging rays of the divine retribution, and burnt the penal fire into His very heart. He has come between every one of us, if we will, and that certain incidence of retribution for our evil, taking upon Himself the whole burden of our sin and of our guilt, and bearing that awful death which consists not in the mere dissolution of the tie between soul and body, but in the separation of the conscious spirit from God, in order that we may stand peaceful, serene, untouched, when the hail and the fire of the divine judgment are falling from the heavens and running along the earth. The grace depends for all our conceptions of its glory, its tenderness, and its depth, on our estimate of the wrath from which it delivers.

So, dear brethren, remember, if you tamper with the one you destroy the other; if there be no fearful judgment from which men need to be delivered, Christ has borne nothing for us that entitles Him to demand our hearts; and all the ascriptions of praise and adoration to Him, and all the surrender of loving hearts, in utter self-abandonment, to Him that has borne the curse for us, fade and are silent. If you strike out the truth of Christ's bearing the results of sin from your theology, you do not thereby exalt, but you fatally lower the love; and in the interests of the loftiest conceptions of a divine loving-kindness and mercy that ever have blessed the world, I beseech you, be on your guard against all teachings that diminish the sinfulness of sin, and that ask again the question which first of all came from lips that do not commend it to us—'Hath God said?' or advance to the assertion—'Ye shall not surely die.' If 'I come to smite the earth with a curse' ceases to be a truth to you, 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' will fade away for you likewise.

III. Now, still further, let me ask you to consider, lastly, the alternative which these texts open for us.

I believe that the order in which they stand in Scripture is the order in which men generally come to believe them, and to feel them. I am old-fashioned enough and narrow enough to believe in conversion; and to believe further that, as a rule, the course through which the soul passes from darkness into light is the course which divine revelation took: first, the unveiling of sin and its issues, and then the glad leaping up of the trustful heart to the conception of redeeming grace.

But what I seek briefly to suggest now is, not only the order of manifestation as brought out in these words, but also the alternative which they present to us, one branch or other of which every soul of you will have to experience. You must have either the destruction or the grace. And, more wonderful still, the same coming of the same Lord will be to one man the destruction, and to another the manifestation and reception of His perfect grace. As it was in the Lord's first coming, 'He is set for the rise and the fall of

many in Israel.' The same heat softens some substances and bakes others into hardness. A bit of wax and a bit of clay put into the same fire—one becomes liquefied and the other solidified. The same light is joy to one eye and torture to another. The same pillar of cloud was light to the hosts of Israel, and darkness and dismay to the armies of Egypt. The same Gospel is 'a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death,' by the giving forth of the same influences killing the one and reviving the other; the same Christ is a Stone to build upon or a Stone of stumbling; and when He cometh at the last, Prince, King, Judge, to you and me, His coming shall be prepared as the morning; and ye 'shall have a song as when one cometh with a pipe to the mountain of the Lord'; or else it shall be a day of darkness and not of light. He comes to me, to you; He comes to smite or He comes to glorify.

Oh, brethren! do not believe that God's threatenings are wind and words; do not let teachings that sap the very foundations of morality and eat all the power out of the Gospel persuade you that the solemn words, 'The soul that sinneth it shall die,' are not simple verity.

And then, my brethren, oh! then, do you turn yourselves to that dear Lord whose grace is magnified in this most chiefly, that 'He hath borne our sins and carried our sorrows'; and taking Him for your Saviour, your King, your Shield, your All, when He cometh it will be life to you; and the grace that He imparts will be heaven for ever more.