

# Second Sunday of Advent, Year C, Old Testament

The One Gift That Produces Many Offerings

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

**DIAGNOSIS: Offerings that Expose Our Sin**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Self-Polluting Offerings**

Summary: Israel's temple offerings were polluted, a dishonor to God as well as to Israel.

Against a corrupt temple priesthood in post-exilic Jerusalem c. 525-500 BCE, Malachi's chief aim was to lift Israel's hope for a better life by exposing the laxity, greed, disobedience and dishonor of priests (1:6-13) who, contrary to the commandments (Leviticus 1-7), habitually offered unclean animals (blind, lame, sick; 1:8) for the temple sacrifices. According to Malachi, correcting the temple offerings (Hebrew: *qorbanot*, offerings-up or gift-offerings, commonly known as sacrifices) according to the received instructions (Hebrew: *torah*, law or instruction) would reaffirm the LORD's covenant with Israel (1:2; 2:4) in the short run (3:10b-12) and save them from the impending Day of Judgment in the long run (2:2-3; 3:2; 4:1). Only unblemished animals—meaning the best of one's stock—were suitable as gift-offerings because, like a feast given for an honored guest, the more precious the “food” (1:7) the more secure the “covenant” relationship between God and Israel. But the priests in Malachi's day were not offering back to God the best of their stock that God had already provided for them to give—if, that is, their God was the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By offering “polluted” (1:7) animals to God, Israel herself was being polluted and the LORD of hosts was “dishonored” (2:6).

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Sham Offspring of an Unholy Marriage**

Summary: Israel's polluted sacrifices were idolatrous—a sham, based on a sham faith.

Malachi called this practice “wrong” (1:8), “robbery” (3:8),

“faithless,” and an “abomination” because Israel proved thereby to have “married the daughter of a foreign god” (2:11)—which is idolatry of the highest order. How so? The sacrifices in Malachi’s day were not representative of Israel’s best. At best they were second best. Offering polluted animals “despised” God’s name and altar (1:6-7)—a slap in the face to the One who had given them the covenant, life itself, and all the bounty of the earth. By not offering back to God their best, Israel in effect was saying that their covenant with God was a sham, and so reciprocated with sham sacrifices. For Malachi, this state of affairs (affairs of the heart) showed that Israel, in truth, was wedded in their heart (2:2-3), not to God’s *torah* but to another god (2:11), and that the “offspring”—the evidence—of this unholy marriage was their sham sacrifices.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Rebuke, Curse, and Judgment**

Summary: God cursed Israel by withholding his blessing and promising a Day of Judgment.

Therefore God refused their sham offerings (1:10). Israel, according to Malachi, much like her erstwhile sacrifices, was in need of “purification” like a refiner’s fire (vv. 2-3). For, according to the *torah* (2:6), only a pure Israel (through her priests) can offer suitable gifts to God. For now, Israel was under God’s “curse” and “rebuke” (2:2b-3)—lead indicators of the more consuming “judgment” yet to come. Then “the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (v. 1), an event that no one except the righteous “can endure” (v. 2) because it is like a “burning oven” (4:1) that consumes the wicked, leaving only “ashes” behind (4:3). The Day of Judgment, for Malachi, will be

tempered by God's eternal covenant to Israel so that those who remain, who are "fear the LORD" (3:16) by following the *torah* with respect to correct sacrificial practices, will trample upon the ashes of the wicked.

Subsequent history shows that Israel was indeed "rebuked" and "cursed" via the Babylonian Exile and her continual domination by foreign powers, but the Day of the LORD came upon them in quite another form than Malachi had supposed.

### **PROGNOSIS: The One Gift that Ends All Religious Sacrifices**

#### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God's Own Offering, a Blessing to the World**

Summary: Jesus' crucifixion, as God's best offering to the world, ended all religious sacrifices.

When Israel's messiah suddenly came into his Father's house (v. 1b) and symbolically ended the priestly sacrifices, polluted or pure, he was killed within the week. Jesus may have been killed because he interfered with the temple's money-making enterprises, but his interruption of the sacrifices, symbolizing their ending, was the real reason. Jesus' crucifixion, being God's gift-offering to Israel—and thus also to the world—was henceforth not only the basis for all godly sacrifices (religious sacrifices have no such basis), but also ended God's "curse" whereby God had extended Israel's exile from his forgiveness and blessing. Only now, the lifting of the curse

became a blessing for all creation.

The “marriage” between Israel and *torah* which produced “godly offspring” in the form of pure sacrifices—as understood by Malachi, ended with Jesus. And Israel’s “forgiveness” as preached by John the Baptist—as Malachi’s Elijah (4:5), was accomplished. Henceforth, all such religious sacrifices, the sham ones along with the best ones are shown, by God’s own pure offering, to be useless—even damning. With Jesus, the age-old sacrificial order for establishing and maintaining a relationship or covenant between God and humankind was overthrown, and its “blessing” was magnified beyond measure. With God’s gift-offering of himself on the cross, creation’s idolatry, including Israel’s idolatry as demonstrated by her own damning sacrifices, was extinguished. In this way, the sons of Levi (v. 3) could become, along with all other people of the earth, purified children of God in Messiah Jesus.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Faith: Offspring of a Holy Marriage**

Summary: Faith in Jesus is God’s best gift to us, and the foundation for all future offerings.

The “godly” or “righteous offspring” (2:15; 3:3) that Malachi wanted through the marriage between Israel and *torah*, but never could achieve, is now made possible, not by any human sacrifice, but by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit in the form of “faith” in Messiah Jesus. The prior “marriage” between Israel and *torah* has given way to a truly holy marriage between Messiah Jesus and the new Israel (the new family of God replacing all others) with their holy offspring of faith in Jesus. However, the offspring

of this new marriage is not in any way created or offered by the new Israel. All previous sacrifices—whether corrupt or pure, as “offspring” of the old marriage, were crucified with Jesus. Faith in Jesus, as the “offspring” of our new marriage with Messiah Jesus, is a new creation of the Holy Spirit. As such, faith in Jesus is not an “offspring” of human desire, nor can it ever become a religious “offering” or sacrifice from us to God. Jesus is gift. Faith in Jesus is a gift.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Offerings That Please the LORD**

Summary: Love for others is faith’s righteous, fragrant, and pleasing offering to God.

What can and does become a “righteous” offering “pleasing” to God (vv. 3-4) is love—the kind with which God loved us in Jesus. When we love one another, when we forsake our own well-being for the well-being of others (especially our erstwhile enemies) the way that families often do, those love-gifts become a “fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2). Love that is based on God’s love-gift for us is an exchange of life for death: our life for and with the sufferings of others, to share or ease their real-life burden in the midst of real evil, real judgment, and real death. Because our life has already been crucified with Jesus, and the life of faith is ever before us, the mortality that remains in our bodies, has but one task: to be a blessing for others—however ambiguous, frail, or misunderstood. Thus, giving our limited time and energies to others is a wonderful gift *to them* from us—and through us *from Jesus* who first loved us.