

Preparing for Spiritual Renewal

This morning I am going to finish up my series in the Minor Prophets that I have been calling “Major Lessons from the Minor Prophets.” We are going to finish up the last couple of chapters in the book of Malachi.

These last two chapters deal with the people’s complaint, in Malachi’s day, that God was not intervening enough in their lives. They complained about God’s seeming absence. “Where is God,” they said. “Where are his mighty signs and wonders that we have heard about so much in the past? We look out at the world and there is no justice. No one seems to be punished for doing wrong. It doesn’t appear to make a difference if we are righteous or unrighteous.”

It is the experience of the absence of God. Where are you, God? Why don’t you intervene? Why don’t you speak? Why don’t you heal? Why don’t you answer prayer? Why don’t you bring justice into the world?

You know, this kind of complaint goes back thousands of years. People in America think that they are unique in their struggle regarding the absence of a sense of God. But the biblical writers sometimes complained about their struggle with this. For example, we read a prayer of David in Psalm 13 that says, “How long, O Lord, will you forget me, forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O my God, give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. My enemies will say that I have overcome him and my foes will rejoice when I fall.”

The psalmist cries out over and over again, “Arise, O Lord, arise” because sometimes our experience of the absence of God feels like God is asleep at the wheel or that there is no one home when we are calling.

Let’s set the historical context again for this message from the book of Malachi when God seems absent. The Jews came back to the Promised Land after a long exile. The Temple was rebuilt. But then after the Temple was rebuilt in 520 BC there was this period of decay spiritually and morally. And so God raises up several people to address the decay and the compromise. One was Nehemiah, the governor of Judah. The other was Malachi, who was a prophet.

As I mentioned last week, if you read the last few chapters of Nehemiah and compare them with the message of Malachi, they are both dealing with the same kinds of issues of corruption that had crept into the national life of Judah – the issue of mixed marriages, the issue of a corrupted priesthood, the issue of cheating God, the issue of financial abuses. So both Nehemiah and Malachi are speaking to the Jewish people at about the same time, about 450 BC. To give you a broader global perspective, Malachi was prophesying about the same time that Socrates in Greece was developing his particular school of philosophy in the ancient city of Athens.

As I told you last week, the Old Testament is not arranged in alphabetical order. So you don’t find Malachi in the middle of the Old Testament, you find it at the end. Malachi is the last prophet commissioned to write scripture before the birth of Jesus in the New Testament. So since Malachi was written about 450 BC, there is a long period in Jewish history where no one was commissioned with the task of writing scripture.

Here is an important argument in terms of the inspiration of the Bible. The Jews believed that their history was shaped by the intervention of God. It was a fundamental

conviction of the Jews that God Almighty was supernaturally intervening in the world, shaping and directing the history of Israel. As part of that supernatural intervention, the Jews also believed that God was prophetically intervening in their lives i.e. he was sending prophets to speak to them, to give them God's word.

Now, all of this could be explained naturalistically. The Jews just wanted to imagine themselves special and so they contrived a story of God intervening in their past and they attributed their national existence to God. Many nations have done that throughout history. Wanting to make themselves the center of the universe, they came up with various myths and legends to support their claim of chosenness. What is interesting in the case of the Jews is that if the intervention of God, particularly his prophetic intervention, his speaking and commanding prophets to write down what he was saying, if that were simply a cultural contrivance or a human invention to secure the place of the Jews as God's Chosen People, then why didn't the Bible just continue to be written? I mean, if the Bible is just a human invention to offer some legendary support to the Jews' need for specialness, then why did the legend writing suddenly stop?

The reason the writing of scripture suddenly stopped is because the Bible is not simply a human invention. At a certain point in time, God stopped sending writing prophets. What is so fascinating about the scripture is that it stopped being written – not that it just started, but that it stopped. In 450 BC without any cultural explanation whatever, sovereign God stopped speaking scripture, and so the Jews stopped writing the Bible. For 450 years there is this silence of writing scripture. And then with the birth of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist, there is this sudden prophetic intervention all over again.

Do you understand the argument? If the culture produced the scripture, if it can all be accounted for apart from any kind of divine intervention, they why didn't the culture keep

producing scripture? Why did the scripture suddenly stop with Malachi? And why did it suddenly begin again with the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist in the 1st Century after 450 years of silence? Apart from God, I would like for you to write me your cultural, non-supernatural, naturalistic explanation.

Now Malachi 2:17 contains two charges the people had against God. The verse reads, “You have wearied the Lord with your words. ‘How have we wearied him?’ you ask. By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them’ or ‘Where is the God of justice?’”

The people were claiming that God was inactive and that life was unjust. While there is a pervasive sense of unbelief that under-girds the people’s charge, nevertheless it is not hard to come up with a justification for why the people were complaining. They heard about God’s great acts in the past. The priests taught them that their God was a God who intervened in the days of Moses and in the days of the Kings. They heard about the great miracles of God through the ministry of Elijah and Elisha.

But where was God in their day and in their time? It wasn’t just that they heard about all these great past activities of God and wondered why God was not doing the same in their day, but they had promises from prophets 70-80 years before, that were still unfulfilled. Haggai, we read at the beginning of this series on the Minor Prophets, had promised that the glory of the rebuilt temple would exceed that of the former temple, and that the desired of all nations would come to the temple.

Zechariah, who prophesied at the same time as Haggai at about 520 BC, promised this: “This is what the Lord Almighty says, ‘I am very jealous for Zion. I am burning with jealousy for her.’ This is what the Lord says, ‘I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem.’”

Remember, the Lord had not dwelt in Jerusalem since the destruction of the first temple. The Holy of Holies that used to contain the presence of God as it rested above the Arc of the Covenant was empty. The prophet Ezekiel had the great vision of God's glory lifting off of the temple and hovering over Jerusalem and then leaving. And so Zechariah, in 8:3, prophesied a return of the Lord to Jerusalem.

Given the record of God's past wonderful activity and the promise of the prophets that the Lord would return and that Holy of Holies would not remain a monument to an absent God, the people were complaining and saying, "Where is the Lord? Where are his mighty deeds, his signs and wonders, his prophetic activities?"

Does it bother you that God's interventions in the life of the church in America or on a more individual basis in your own life, are few and far between? Does it disturb you that you see very few miraculous healings? The voice of God is absent; you don't hear him, and the church doesn't hear him? Do you find it strange that a movement that was filled with supernatural activity at the beginning, the movement of Jesus the Messiah, is not today filled with supernatural activity throughout the world? Do you say inside of your own heart and spirit, "Where is God? I long for the activity of God in our day, in this church."

Or do you say, "Why would I expect the supernatural? Why would I expect healings or miracles or prophetic intervention? After all, all that stuff is abnormal. It is not God's usual way of dealing with people to intervene, to work a miracle, or to heal. I mean it is certainly wonderful to open an oyster in a restaurant and find a pearl, or dig in the sand on the beach and find a diamond ring, but I don't live life counting on those most unusual serendipitous occurrences."

You know friends, most of the churches in America don't long for the intervention of God. They find nothing strange in their absence of power, the absence of a sense of the

Holy Spirit, the absence of any reports of healings or prophecies or words of knowledge, because most of the church in America says this is the way it is supposed to be. This is normal.

You know, in trying to figure out what God's normal activity is, you shouldn't start with your own speculation or philosophy – what you think God ought to do. You should even start with theology and what really bright people have said that God ought to do or the latest book off the shelf concerning why God seems absent as people try to justify the ways of God. The appropriate starting point in discovering what God's normal activity is is the Bible. To figure out what God is going to do and what God is like, you don't reason up toward God. Rather, you allow the Bible to reason down toward you. Men and women, in order to find out about God, require revelation. God unveiling and disclosing what he is up to. Apart from revelation, we don't have a clue. We are completely confused. God remains a black box hidden to our understanding.

So, what does the Bible say about signs and wonders, prophesy, and God's intervention. Should we expect these things or are they abnormal?

Well, in the Bible, the absence of signs and wonders was never taken as a normal thing by the people of God. It was always understood as a signal of God's judgment, and his rejection of his people. I want you to see this with me. Turn to Psalm 74, if you have a Bible. The psalmist says, "Why have you rejected us forever? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture? Remember the people you purchased of old, the tribe of your inheritance whom you redeemed, Mt. Zion, where you dwelt. Turn your steps towards those everlasting ruins and all the destruction the enemy has brought on the sanctuary. Your foes roared in the place where you met with us; they set up their standards as signs. They behaved like men wielding axes to cut through a thicket of trees. They smashed all the

carved paneling with their axes and hatchets. They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of your Name. They said in their hearts, ‘We will crush them completely!’ They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.”

And then the psalmist says this, “We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.”

Do you think that the psalmist was viewing what was going on in his country as normal? Oh well, this is to be expected. I will just write a book about the inactivity of God and suggest that this is what God intends. There is nothing wrong here as the invaders come and destroy the temple, wielding their axes and smashing the paneling. Why this is the day of the favor of the Lord. After all, we have the ancient scrolls and people around to teach them. Why should I be concerned that there are no prophets or signs and wonders? Because the absence of prophets and the absence of signs and wonders are always, always seen in the Bible as a sign of God’s rejection of his people. They are a sign of God’s judgment.

During the dark days of the Judges, right before Samuel was called, it says in 1 Sam. 3 that “the boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli and in those days the word of the Lord was rare. There were not many visions.” And the scripture writer doesn’t say this to suggest that is the way things ought to be. The scripture writer notes that there were no visions and the word of the Lord was rare in order to suggest a time of spiritual decline. Something is wrong when we don’t see the intervention of the Lord.

Or the prophet Amos, who said in Amos 8:11, “The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘when I will send a famine through the land. Not a famine of food or thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.”

The absence of prophetic activity, the absence of revelation through dreams and visions and prophecies, is not the normal state of things. The Bible tells us that God's inactivity, his absence of communication, and the absence of healing are abnormal and something to be mourned over.

You know, there will never be spiritual renewal in an individual, or spiritual renewal in a church or in a nation until we look around us and say, "This is not the way things ought to be. This is not normal. This is not what God intends." We get so dulled by our surroundings. You have heard the illustration of the frog in the kettle. It is said that if you put a frog in a kettle of water and place that kettle on the stove and slowly turn on the fire under the kettle so that the water gradually heats up, the frog will literally boil to death without jumping out of the pan of water. It doesn't realize that there is something abnormal going on around him. We Christians in America can literally boil to death in a kettle of immorality and sexual suggestiveness and materialism and the absence of a sense of God's breaking in, while saying the whole time of this rising temperature, "It's normal." The first step of preparing of any kind of renewal must be the shocking sense that things are not the way God intends.

And the people in Malachi's day complained about the lack of justice. "Where is the God of justice?" they asked. Sometimes it is our experience of injustice that opens our eyes to the fact that the world is not as it ought to be. While life tilts our way, when we are always the recipient of every bank error, whenever you land on "Chance" in the Monopoly game of life and you get a "Get Out of Jail Free" card you say, "Well, what is wrong with this world?"

But when injustice slaps you in the face, when life deals you an unfair hand, it is then that we often say, "Something is wrong." It is then that we start crying out for God.

You ask, “What do you mean by injustice, Rich?”

I am not just talking about the global things of inequitable distribution of food or racial discrimination on a massive scale. I am talking about the little things. The wife who puts her husband through medical school and stands by him through the internship and delays having a family. The one who stays up at night waiting for him to come home from the lab or the library so that they can have a few minutes together. And then when his residency is finally done and pay-day comes for her, her wonderful husband takes up with a nurse at the hospital just as the dollars start rolling in. How common is that story of wives of 10 or 15 years getting dumped? Too common.

Or someone brings into a long established business a close friend, a friend of the family. We work together. They have so much to bring to the business. Two years later the close friend leaves carrying under his arm trade secrets and the client list.

Where is the God of justice?

I was just asked for help regarding an overseas church that was established after much hard work and significant financial investment as well as investment of literally blood, sweat and tears. The church was established in an unchurched part of the world. New converts were streaming in – just babies in the Lord. And then this guy from America came in and slandered the pastor, split the church that took so many years to build.

Where is the God of justice?

When a corporate raider comes in and fires long-term employees? When a husband or wife is slandered in a divorce proceeding and visitation for the kids is limited? Whenever you are maligned or slandered or ripped off or abused, those are often the wake-up calls that life is not as it ought to be. Your experience of injustice is often preparation for spiritual renewal.

And frankly, I believe that the reason why renewal has often broken out in countries that have suffered real persecution – South Korea after the Japanese invasion in WWII and right after the Korean War, China under Communist domination, Argentina after the horrific political abuses of the 70's and 80's – I think that the reason why spiritual renewal often follows immediately on the heels of great injustice is because God's people wake up and justice slaps us in the face and says, "This is not the way life ought to be. Where is God?"

It is important, that as we seek and long for the coming of the Lord and his intervention, that we be sober minded about what it is that will occur when God comes. We say, "Lord, come quickly. Intervene in America. Bring justice. We want renewal." But I think many of us think about the Lord's coming as we think about Santa Claus' coming. That the Lord's coming means that he is coming with a sack of gifts. He is coming to fill up our stockings. And whether we have been naughty or nice, because it is Christmas morning, we are going to have big presents under our tree.

I often think to myself as I listen to people's prayers and sometimes as I listen to my own prayers, that we will be shocked to get the answers to our prayers because God's answers to our prayers often come in a package very different than what we were expecting.

Let's take a look at Malachi 3. The people are saying, "When are you coming? Where is the God of justice?" In Malachi 3:1-6, the Lord says, "OK, I am coming."

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and

the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years. So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty.”

Then chapter 4, “Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the Lord Almighty. Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things, says the Lord Almighty.”

This is a very different kind of coming of the Lord. Note, of course, in v. 1 that there is always preparation for the coming of the Lord. The father says, “See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant whom you desire.”

There are three persons involved in v. 1 of chapter 3. We see the speaking father, the announcing prophet, and then the messenger of the covenant – the Lord whom you are seeking. The announcing prophet, we know from the New Testament, is John the Baptist. He came to prepare the way of the Lord. And he came in the Spirit and in the power of the prophet Elijah. John the Baptist was not Elijah. He told us he was not. But his ministry was a preparatory ministry, a ministry of clearing the way before the Lord, and of getting rid of the obstacles that were between people and God.

Now, I believe that before spiritual renewal will break out in this church, in your life, in the life of America and the American church, the Lord will raise up messengers like John the Baptist and like Elijah to clear the ground for the coming of God. There will be, first of all, a longing for God supernaturally created in the hearts of people. I believe God always, sovereignly prepares us through longing. There might be an increase of injustice to shake people out of their lethargy and their sense of normalcy. They are going to be these preparers of the way – these messengers, who will level the ground, clear it out so that obstacles that get in the way of people’s contact with the Lord will get removed.

Let me make this more personal, if I can. Does God have a clear shot at your heart right now? If the roadway between your heart and God in heaven was described, would it be like a high speed straight way – like an empty Montana road that goes forever – straight from your heart to God? Is that what the road looks like between you and God?

Or does the road look more like a NYC street? Full of potholes, burned out cars cluttering the streets, fire hydrants that have been turned on, taxis veering back and forth – loads of obstacles in the way, or a street in India with thousands of bicycles carrying all manner of pots, pans, and bananas. There are cows wandering back and forth on a twisting and turning roadway.

Let me ask you again. You say you want the Lord to come. Does he have a clear shot at you right now or is his way blocked by lots of obstacles?

“I don’t know, Rich. I don’t know how to answer that.”

Well, the Bible teaches that broken relationships in family life, and broken relationships in the church are obstacles that get in the way of God. Our lack of reconciliation with each other, the lack of peace and unity, a lack of forgiveness, bitterness – these are obstacles. And the messenger will come along to challenge us toward peaceful relations with each

other, toward forgiveness and reconciliation in the church. Before the Lord comes, he will bring about great unity in families and in the church as part of the preparatory work before his coming.

Look at Malachi 4:5-6, “See, I will bring you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

There will be this great reconciliation across the generation gap before the Lord comes.

What obstacle needs to be cleared out of your life before you receive the coming of the Lord? Is it unrepented sin? An emotional block that you know is there, but you just live with? Instead of engaging in the hard work of healing that emotional block, of seeking the necessary counseling, of undergoing the ministry necessary to break through the blockage, you say, “It is all very normal.”

But before the Lord comes, he will raise up messengers to prepare the way. They may come through anointed preachers. I hope that is one of the ways the Lord will prepare his people – through anointed preachers. It may be through movements. Perhaps the Promise Keepers movement is preparatory in clearing out obstacles in the family and obstacles in men’s hearts. Maybe his messengers will be through the raising up a generation of worship leaders and renewed worship music. I don’t know. But I do know that it is going to be preceded by messengers because the Lord doesn’t do anything without first sending his prophets.

It is the case that the Lord makes us wait for his coming. When Jesus told the Parables of the Second Coming, one of the phrases that he uses over and over again is the phrase, “After a long time...” He told his early followers that his coming would be delayed. And so

we read the phrase in the parables over and over, “after a long time...” For example, in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matt. 25, the foolish virgins are the ones who fall asleep, who are not watchful and prepared for the Lord’s coming, because in Jesus’ words, the bridegroom was a long time in coming.

Or it’s like the parable of the wise and foolish servants. Jesus speaks of the foolish servants in Matt. 24:48 who says to himself, “My master is staying away a long time.” And so he begins to beat his fellow servants and eat and drink with drunkards.

Or it’s like the parable of the talents. The master leaves and entrusts his servant with talents. In Matt. 25:19 it says, “After a long time, the master of those servants returns to settle accounts.”

There is this principle of delay in the coming of the Lord and there is a principle of delay in spiritual renewal. God begins to stir the affections and longings of his people. People begin to pray, “Where is God? Where is the God of justice?” What is going on today is not normal. God sends his messengers to prepare people and to clear obstacles out of the way, but there is this delay. There is this waiting on the Lord.

And then the Lord suddenly comes. Malachi 3:1, “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking comes to his temple.” I don’t know if there is any adjective that you could use to better describe the coming of the Lord than “sudden”. Virtually every text referring to the coming of the Lord in the New Testament speaks of it as a sudden coming. It is absolutely unexpected, and unplanned for; people are caught unaware.

Matt. 24 says that if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief would come, he would have kept watch and not let his house be broken into. The coming of the Lord is like a sudden breaking in of a house by a thief. In fact, this “thief in the night” theme is repeated throughout the New Testament. Paul speaks about it in Thess. 5

where he says, “Brothers, about times and dates we don’t need to write to you. For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

Peter echoes the same thing in 2 Peter 3, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.” There is a sudden break-in, a sudden return of the boss. The master comes. Every one is in the office using the office computers to book tickets for their summer vacations. They are surfing the web to find out the temperature of the place they are going to or to copy recipes. They are standing around the coffee machine chatting. Their feet are up on their desks. They are throwing paper airplanes. They are reading the box scores from yesterday’s games. When suddenly the owner of the company walks in totally unexpected from out of town. Surprise.

That is the nature of the coming of the Lord. It is always sudden. You are praying – nothing, nothing, nothing, and nothing – then boom! All heaven breaks loose. The Bible describes the coming of the Lord as a sudden unveiling. It is not that he isn’t here, and then he will be here, but rather the curtain suddenly gets lifted and we see him. We experience him.

I remember the first meeting I was at where the Holy Spirit’s presence was manifested in a visible way. This fellow was hosting a meeting and invited the Lord to come. I thought that was strange – that you would invite the Lord to come. I assumed, like most Christians in America, that not sensing God’s presence, not seeing anything, having so signs and wonders, not really experiencing radical changes or watching radical changes in marriages or in families, no real break throughs in evangelism, I thought that was God’s normal activity in the world. But this man prayed for the Lord to come, to break in, and to intervene. I remember one man in the meeting began to shake and tremble. The fellow who was leading the meeting invited him to come forward and had him stand in front of us. In a very clinical

way he said, “See, when God comes he often creates a physical reaction in people. You can’t be before Holy God without trembling in his presence. Without falling before him.” Then he asked the man to pick up his hand and the man’s hand was shaking, but he picked it up. He said, “Now, bless the audience.”

He blessed the audience and one of my dear friends, Craig Heselton, began to tremble. At that point, I thought something was really wrong. Here is the most stable person I knew, absolutely consistent in his habits, all of his high school notebooks are labeled, and his sermon outlines are all filed correctly. Craig can tell me what I preached 8 years ago! He could tell you what I preached better than I could tell you.

My dear friend, who I respect so much – Craig, began shaking. Then pandemonium broke out in the room. I stepped back away from the scene of growing chaos as people were crashing through chairs and folks were experiencing the power of God. I stepped back away from all of it. I said, “I am not going to be swept up into this emotionalism. This is not for me.”

Oh, I asked for the coming of the Lord. I wanted God’s intervention. But God’s intervention was coming in a surprising package, an unexpected package. I didn’t want that. And then suddenly, without warning, I felt this extraordinary pressure on my body. It was as if a giant hand was pushing me to the ground. But there was no one standing within ten feet of me. I thought, “I am just getting swept away with all of this. I better sit down and take a deep breath and compose myself.” But this giant hand just ground me into the carpet – the sudden unexpected coming of the Lord. It was designed to reduce me to dust and ashes before him. When God came for me, he didn’t come as Santa Claus. He came to break my pride, my willfulness, and my desire to be in control.

Now, I want to say this one thing about the sudden coming of the Lord. When the Lord comes, it is too late to prepare. Jesus at the end of Matt. 7 speaks of people who either build their houses on rock by listening to his word and putting it into practice in their lives. They fear God enough that they say, "I am going to take what God says seriously enough to put it into practice in my life." He says those people are like people who build their houses on a rock. Other people just sort of let God's word wash over them, like water off a duck's back. He says those people are like folks who build their houses on sand.

Well, both groups of people, those who put God's word into their lives, and those who don't get hit by a sudden flood. And the houses built on sand get washed away, while those that are dug deeply into rock remain.

Here is the principle I want to underline for you regarding his sudden coming or the sudden coming of a flood or a trial. It is too late to prepare when the flood comes. You can't dig a foundation in your life deeply into God during the storm. Then it is too late.

I have had the opportunity to watch the positive side of this practice in the lives of my dear friends, Lance and Cheryl Pittluck in New York. They pastor a Vineyard on Long Island. Out of nowhere, for no reason at all, last January they lost their little boy who was 3½ years old. He was fine. He caught a little virus. He was sick for a few days and then died. No explanation. They did an autopsy. They talked with pediatricians who told them that this occasionally happens. That in a little chest a virus will leap across and go into the heart and a child dies.

Now, I have watched these two. In the midst of their brokenheartedness, I have watched them stand. I have seen in their lives a depth of rooting in God that could stand the great and terrible day. No collapse of the house. No washing away. No throwing up their hands and saying, "Forget it" and walking away from God. But they didn't start

building a deep life in God two days after their son died. Those pilings have been going down for years.

The coming of the Lord is a purifying coming. And I don't believe there is renewal without the purification of God's people.

V. 2 says, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand before him when he appears? He will be like a refiner's fire, a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord as in the days gone by, as in former years."

It is inappropriate for us to use words like "renewal" or "revival" unless there is a profound spread of holiness. Unless people's lives get really cleaned up. The notion that renewal or revival is just people falling down, people having a good old time in God – you can find nothing of that in the Bible or in the history of the church. The Lord comes to purify. It says that he is coming with fire and with soap. Fire gets rid of the slag, the impurities in metal. Soap gets rid of the dirt. The picture here is of God sitting as a refiner of silver and there is this dramatic moment when the refiner knows that all of the dross, the impurities, and the slag in the metal are gone from the silver. There is this dramatic moment when the refiner peers over the silver that is in the refining pot, and it suddenly becomes a liquid mirror in which the image of the refiner is reflected. Then he knows that his task is done.

So it is with the Father. His purifying work in our lives is done when he can see in our lives the image of his Son reflected back at him. He comes to purify. He comes to purify our lives, to purify our worship, and to purify our motives. That is why the Holy Spirit is often described as fire. When the Spirit of God came on the day of Pentecost, it says that he

came suddenly (Acts 2). This violent wind came suddenly into the room, and it was like tongues of fire that broke out over people. Fire is a description of the holiness of God and his refining purpose in our lives.

We ask the Lord to come. He is going to come to refine. His fire will test your character, and your inner person. It will either purify your inner person or consume it. See, you ask the Lord to come. You pray, "O Lord, I want to experience you. I want more of you." But to desire more of the Lord is to desire more of his holy fire. And he may come in a surprising way for you. His holy fire may come into your life through trials to really test the character of your marriage. Can it stand or will it be consumed? Or his holy fire will come to test your perseverance. What are you made of? Are you really a follower of Jesus? Or are you just a person who is along for the ride so long as the ride is good?

The Lord may send the fire of anointing and blessing. Many people don't understand that additional anointing is a fiery trial from the Lord. As God gives you increased prominence, increased visibility, increased success in ministry, the Holy Spirit is coming like a fire. And the anointing of God, that is his special presence in the life of a man or woman, is like the fire in the burning bush. Either the bush will be consumed because the character of that person is not substantial enough to carry it, or the bush will remain.

The Lord comes as a fire to purify. That is what spiritual renewal looks like. People start getting their lives cleaned up. They start getting their relationships cleaned up. The church, over all, takes on a much holier character. Our families and our conversations with each other, what we watch and what we input into our lives just has a cleanness to it. We get rid of all the dross and all the filth.

And then the Lord's coming is decisive. There is this decisive separation between those who are the Lord's and those who aren't the Lord's.

Malachi says, “So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud their laborers, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me, says the Lord.”

There are seven categories of sin listed here. God comes near to refine his people and God comes near to judge those who are not his people, those who are not under the protection of the blood of Christ, those who have not sought refuge in the Rock who is Christ, and those who are not hidden under the cross. Here is the description of people like that.

He speaks about sorcerers. There is a growing trend in America about exploring different ancient kinds of spiritualities. People are checking out the worship of Mother Earth, pagan religions. It is all so very natural. Engaging in white magic. Stores are springing up to assist people in casting spells and to be involved in witchcraft or the occult or astrology. There is a renewed interest in this form of spirituality. The Bible calls it sorcery – all of it. And says that people will be judged.

Adulterers. That is a big word in the Bible. It doesn’t just imply breaking your marital vows through sexual intercourse with another, although it does certainly cover that. But adultery in the Bible is any kind of sexual uncleanness. That includes sex before marriage and homosexual sex. Any sexual uncleanness is a violation of the 7th commandment.

Perjury. Lying. White lies as well as lying in court. Cheating people. All of this is going to be judged when the Lord comes.

And his coming will be a decisive coming, one that separates people. Chapter 4:1, “Surely, the day is coming. It will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire.” See, the Lord comes as

fire. And depending on the character of the person, they are either set ablaze, and their works are set ablaze and they are reduced to ash. Or they remain. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”

I believe that is a Messianic prophecy. I believe Jesus is the sun of righteousness. He came as the light of the world. He is the sun who rises to bring healing, to bring deliverance, to bring freedom for us, to heal the places in our lives that hurt, to heal broken relationships, to heal broken hearts, and to heal broken bodies. That is how he comes to those who revere his name.

Revival, real revival, will always proceed out into the community and bring about a decisive distinction between those who love God and those who don't. We long for the Lord. We recognize that what is going on is not normal. We start crying out to him and God sends messengers to clear the obstacles out of our way and to prophesy to us. We recognize that his coming will be for the purpose of purifying us, not simply for our entertainment - as another form of “we are done with the movie, now can go to an exciting meeting.”

There is one little practical thing that God's people can do to draw the coming of the Lord near. We can begin to give generously. Chapter 3:6, “I, the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.”

Here is the summary of the prophets' message, if you wanted to put the whole of the prophets under one word – whether it is Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, or Malachi. The prophetic message is this: Return. Return to me and I will return to you. That word “return” implies

turn around. Reverse field. You are going 180 degrees in the wrong direction. A lot of people picture their relationship with God as being like a growing plant. Ask someone who is not quite connected with God, “Where are you at with Christ?” Where are you at with Christ?

They might say, “Well, I feel like I am growing toward Christ like a plant. Things are beginning to open up to me. The rays of the sun are beaming in ever increasing measure with the dawn.”

But the Bible doesn’t say that we grow naturally toward God. The Bible says that we are moving away from God and there needs to be a turnaround, a decisive break. Rather than growing like a plant, the Bible says that an ax needs to be laid at the root of the tree. There needs to be a reversal of field in order to be connected with God. You have been in control of your life and now you need to radically surrender and yield control to God.

You say, “Well, how do I return to the Lord? Where do I need to yield control?”

Fortunately, the Bible doesn’t make this business of spiritual renewal so abstract. It makes it as practical as our wallets and our paychecks. Vv. 7-8: “...How are we to return? [what does it mean for a people to come back to God?] ‘Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.’ But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse, the whole nation of you, because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into my storehouse that there may be food in my house...”

We must understand that money is a spiritual issue. That God cannot have a grip on our hearts, he cannot come, while our bank accounts have a grip on our hearts, while our stuff fills our hearts. Money in the Bible is perhaps the paramount spiritual issue. Jesus said you cannot love God and money. So in this passage it calls people to be free from the love of money through a practice called tithing. Malachi says that you are robbing God by not

giving him his tithes. Tithe means a 10th of your income. In the ancient near East when a King conquered a country he demanded as the conqueror's share a 10th of the produce of the land. The Lord used this ancient near Eastern practice of a conquering King. As the King of Israel, he demanded his 10th from the people of God. This was before the Mosaic Law was ever given. The Lord demanded a 10th from the people. He owned everything, but he wanted them to voluntarily give him his portion as the conquering King – a 10th of their income. Abraham tithed to Melchizekek 500 years before the Law was ever given. And Jacob pledged to give the Lord a 10th in Gen. 28 when he met the Lord at Bethel. Tithing is not a legal principle; it is a kingdom principle. I happen to be convinced that in the New Testament Christians are to go beyond the tithe in returning to the Lord, because I believe that the Spirit of God always goes beyond legal righteousness. Not only that, but in wealthy America, those who have much are called to give much more than a tithe. I believe a tithe of our income to the Lord is a minimum, not the ceiling. It is not just a goal to shoot for; it is the floor. This is where we start.

There were principles very practically laid out. First of all, we are to bring our whole tithe to the Lord. We do not short change God. It might be helpful for many of you to check your income tax forms for the last three years and look at that box under charitable contributions. Just figure up what percentage of my income did I actually give to God. Most people drastically overestimate it. Even those who think that they are tithing their income often give much less than a tithe.

The Bible says that the Lord will come near when we stop robbing him. When we bring him the whole tithe. That is of all of our money, all of our possessions, we give him a 10th as a minimum, a 10th of your inheritance, a tenth of gifts you get. And we teach our children to tithe. From the time our kids were small, whenever they got money we said to them, “OK,

10% of that needs to be set aside for the Lord. In Sunday School or in the poor boxes you drop a tenth of your income.” Of course, when kids are small, it is not entirely voluntary. In our home, it was a requirement that we hoped over time would become part of the fabric of the way they thought about their money, that it was not mine, it is the Lord’s and he allows me to keep some of it. Now, I see already in one of my kid’s lives that they just don’t think about all of their money as being theirs. They say, “I have to tithe this.”

The same principle applies to you. It says bring your whole tithe and bring it to the storehouse that there may be food in my house. The storehouse or the treasury is the place where God’s blessing springs forth for you. Back then it was the temple. I know Malachi was not thinking about the local church and answering the questions that we ask about where do we bring our whole tithe. But I believe this passage has an application to bringing your whole tithe to the place where blessing springs froth for you. If that is the 700 Club or Christian TV give them the whole tithe. If that is a campus ministry, give them the whole tithe. If that is your local church, then give it your whole tithe, whether it is this church or another church that you attend.

Then God makes us a proposition. He says, “Test me in this.” What an offer. The Bible often tells us, “Don’t test the Lord.” Don’t try to make God prove his faithfulness. Don’t ask God to prove that his character is the way that he says it is. But regarding the business of tithing, the Lord actually invites us, and he challenges us. He says, “You want me to come into your life? Give me the whole tithe and you test me on it.”

Then there are three wonderful promises that if we bring the whole tithe to the Lord, he will give us provision. V. 11, “Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the flood gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” There is a promise in v. 11 of a blessing, a provision, of prosperity. We cannot out give

God. God will not be in your debt. If we give generously, God promises to open the floodgates. So much so that the bank of heaven will be exhausted.

Of course, this is hyperbole, but the idea is that there is super abundant blessing that follows our giving. And this promise of provision is not just an individual thing. He is speaking to the nations. We start with the church. We want the Holy Spirit to break out upon the church. Then we call the church toward extravagant generosity. To getting loosed from the death grip of money. Heaven comes down when we are generous.

There is not only a promise of provision; there is a promise of protection. V. 11, “I will prevent pests from devouring your crops and the vines in your field will not cast their fruit,” says the Lord Almighty. So often we hold back on God because we feel we can’t afford a whole tithe. The Lord is saying in Malachi 3:11, you can’t afford not to give a full tithe. We say we have so many bills, and we have to hold back on God. The fact is many of us have so many bills because we have been holding back on God. We have lost our protection from the devourer.

So our washing machine breaks down and our basement gets flooded. Our TV goes on the fritz. And we live in a continual savings and loan crisis – no savings and too many loans. When you don’t give a whole tithe, it is like your wallet has a hole in it. Your pockets spring a leak. The Lord promises to protect us. The Lord promises to provide for us. The Lord promises our proliferation throughout the land. V. 12, “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.”

Here is an echo of the promise made to Abraham – that we will be a blessing to the nations. We ultimately see spiritual renewal as the gospel dominates the world more and more. As missionaries are sent out and previously unreached people groups are brought into the fold, we say that is the coming of the Lord - that is the renewing work of God. This is

not all very mystical and mysterious. See, I believe that the greatest missionary enterprise ever to exist in world history, in large measure, turns on the willingness of the church in America to give out of the abundance of our possessions. If folks in America would give a whole tithe, just a whole tithe instead of 2%, and if the church gave a whole tithe to the world, do you know the kind of mission force that could be released? I read of a church movement in South India, 8000 people, who were sending 80 full-time missionaries to North India. 8000 people and they were sending out 80 people. They were giving a tithe of their people to world missions. Do you not think that the Lord will come to North India and to that group of 8000 as a result of their abundant generosity?

We want spiritual renewal. Let me review some of the principles today as we begin to have a longing for God's coming that I believe is created by the Holy Spirit himself. We start seeing that these times are not normal. There is something wrong. There is no justice. The inactivity of God is not what God intends. He intends to bring healing and power and deliverance. And we start praying for it and groups of people start gathering together to pray.

The Lord, then, sends messengers to clear out the obstacles, and to challenge us about healing our relationships and getting rid of our sins. And then the Lord begins to come, but he comes to purify us, and to clean us up. And we can, in a very practical way, draw the Lord's coming near by being generous with our money.

Isaiah 58 says this: "For day after day they seek me out. They seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of the Lord. They ask me for just decisions. They seem eager for God to come near them..."

And here is what Isaiah says is the key for God to come near: "Will you not share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter? When you see the naked

to clothe him and not to turn from your own flesh and blood. Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear. Then your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the Lord will answer. You will cry for help and he will say, 'Here am I.'

Let's pray.