

# MALACHI

MINOR PROPHETS SERIES

## Sin of Intermarriage and Divorce 2:10-16

In Malachi 2:10-16 we have the third disputation in the book. God makes charges against the people of Judah who were marrying foreign (pagan) women and divorcing their first wives. Marriages with those who worshipped idols was a covenant violation (Ex. 34:16) yet in the days of Malachi it had become commonplace.



In verse 10 Malachi asks three questions to delve into the heart of these problems surrounding marriage. The first two are rhetorical questions with a “yes” answer expected.

1. Have we not all one Father?
2. Has not one God created us?
3. Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?

Some translations capitalise Father in verse 10 while others do not. Either of these translation decisions could be correct because this word could refer either to God or to Abraham. If the first question refers to Abraham then Malachi is addressing their common heritage as a covenant people pointing back to the patriarchs and God’s promises to their fathers. He then turns their attention to God as Creator. If (much more likely) the first question refers to God as Father then the second question reinforces the first.

God is the Creator of heaven and earth, but here Malachi more specifically has in mind that God created the nation of Israel and set her apart as his covenant people.

### 1. Why does Scripture so often remind us that God is Creator?



The repetition of “one” is important because it reinforces the unity and distinctiveness of Israel as God’s covenant people. The Jews had one God, they were one nation, and they should be unified in one mind to obey and serve Yahweh.<sup>1</sup>

The marriages of God’s people to unbelievers show they had broken their covenant with Yahweh. “In the ancient world the father was the principal negotiator in arranging a marriage. The implication is that Yahweh is (or should be) in charge of their choices of marriage partners.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Petterson, Anthony R. *Haggai, Zechariah, & Malachi: Apollos Old Testament Commentary*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015, p. 347.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, James E. *Postexilic Prophets*. Lulu, 2007, p. 304.

The third question (*why are we faithless to one another*) shows that being unfaithful to the covenant they had with God meant they were also unfaithful to one another. Even though Malachi was not personally guilty of this sin, in verse 10 he now uses the words “we” and “us” including himself as part of the covenant people. This was a national sin and affected every member of the community. This covenant violation included marrying pagan women and the divorce of their first wives.

## 2. How do collective sins harm nations and God’s covenant people (the church) today?

In verse 11, Judah is called faithless and it is said that they had committed an “*abomination*.” The word translated as abomination describes a sin so detestable and deplorable that God cannot and will not tolerate the sin, but will bring his wrath upon the perpetrator. Judah (God’s children) had sinned by marrying the daughter of a foreign god (idolatrous women.) This is further described as profaning the sanctuary of the Lord. To profane is to treat a person or object as unholy and the sanctuary of the Lord here refers to Israel, the home of God’s covenant people.<sup>3</sup> Through this sin, the people had treated the entire nation as unholy and deserving of God’s wrath. Once again, we are reminded that sin within a community is harmful to everyone in that community.



“Ezra 9:1-2 indicates that the priests have led the way in this error of intermarrying with pagan nations.”<sup>4</sup> Marrying outside of their faith was contrary to their covenant with God and would inevitably lead the people into idolatry. The reason why marrying foreigners was forbidden was not racial or ethnic, but because of spiritual contamination.<sup>5</sup> Foreigners who worship the God of the Bible “are readily accepted into the covenant community (e.g. Moses’ wife Zipporah, Rahab, Ruth, Abigail.”<sup>6</sup>

## 3. What lessons might Christians learn about marriage from Malachi 2, Deut. 7:3-4; 2 Cor. 6:14?

Verse 12 describes the punishment due to those who violated the covenant through these unholy marriages. They would be cut off from the benefits of belonging to the community (tents of Jacob) through death or expulsion. God would carry out his punishment on the offenders even though they continued to bring him offerings.

In verses 13-14 the people cannot understand why God no longer accepted their sacrifices and provided his blessings. They came with weeping, and tears, and groaning before God, but he did not answer them. In verse 14 the people of Israel ask “*why*” seemingly oblivious to the seriousness of their sin and the consequences it brings. God had begun to withdraw his blessings upon Israel because the people had not honoured their marital vows, but had divorced the wives of their youth.

## 4. Why didn’t the offerings of the offenders appease God’s wrath?

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 114:2.

<sup>4</sup> Hahlen, Mark Allen and Ham, Clay Alan. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Minor Prophets Vol. 2*. Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2006, p. 551.

<sup>5</sup> Nehemiah 13:23-30 address this same problem in the same timeframe.

<sup>6</sup> Petterson, *ibid.* p. 348.

## 5. What does 1 Peter 3:7 teach Christians about expecting God to answer prayers while failing to honour the marital relationship?



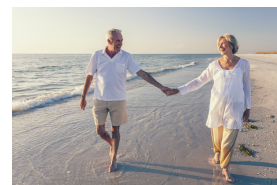
It was God who instituted marriage and it is he who stands as witness (vs. 14) to the vows husbands and wives make to one another. The “wife of your youth” paints a vivid and beautiful picture of a man and woman of God, who are joined in the covenant of marriage, according to the plan of God, and who spend a life together as companions.

The ESV says the men had been “faithless” to their wives and the NIV says they had “broken faith.” Perhaps the NASB most accurately captures what God wants to communicate by translating this verse “... Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously ...” It is a painful, traitorous, and barbaric act to divorce a spouse except for marital unfaithfulness. “The language indicates the seriousness of divorce. In the ancient world women were virtually destitute after divorce, especially if they had no male children to care for them. Casting off such a faithful spouse to satisfy the lust of the flesh is therefore considered by God a treacherous act.”<sup>7</sup>

The person pictured in verse 14-16 had cast off a faithful companion with whom they had entered a covenant. They were bound both by their relationship and by a legally binding agreement. These men had no rightful grounds by which they could put away the wives of their youth; yet they did to marry idolatrous women from surrounding nations. Marital unfaithfulness is a sin against God, against one’s spouse, and against the entire covenant community.

## 6. Why is marriage described as a covenant?

The word translated as “companion” is an important one. The verbal root of this word comes from “architectural contexts to designate a ‘seam’ or ‘joint’ in a building ... and suggests ‘permanent bonding’ ... The husband and wife are viewed as an equal companions in the marriage covenant even if they exercise different roles.”<sup>8</sup>



## 7. Why is one’s spouse described as a companion?

Verse 15 is an extremely difficult verse to translate from the original Hebrew and because there is no consensus on how it should be translated, English Bible versions are quite varied. The ambiguity of the original Hebrew means we cannot be certain to whom or what the word “one” refers. Some believe “one” refers to the one God; others that the husband and wife become one in marriage, still others that the one refers to the creation of one couple in Adam and Eve or that God made one woman for Adam as a pattern for marriage.

Equally difficult to translate or interpret is the phrase “with a portion of the Spirit.” As we view verse 15 in its context within Malachi 2 we can agree that one God made Adam and Eve as well as future couples to live as husband and wife in a lifelong monogamous marriage. It is “God who has an

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *ibid.* p. 311.

<sup>8</sup> Petterson, *ibid.* p. 352.

abundance of the life-giving spirit or creative power. The point is that God could have made several wives for Adam. Marriage is monogamous by divine appointment.”<sup>9</sup>

In the lifelong union of man and wife Yahweh is seeking “*Godly offspring*.” God desires that his people remain faithful and do not allow themselves to be polluted by the idolatrous world around them. A husband and wife who love and honour God are more likely to produce children who will walk in God’s ways. Faithful marriages which produce godly children protect the entire covenant community. Verse 15 closes with a strong warning to guard oneself against unfaithfulness to his spouse.

**8. In what ways are children influenced by a godly father and mother who love each other, view each other as companions, and are faithful for a lifetime of marriage?**



Verse 16 is another verse that is difficult to translate from Hebrew to English. It is generally either translated as a statement by God that he hates divorce as in the NASB, KJV, NKJV or that man is showing hatred to his wife in divorce as in the ESV and NIV. While the original author only had one of these facts in view, we know that both are true.

Divorce literally means, “*sending away*” and while divorce is permissible in cases of adultery God’s plan for marriage is one man and one woman for their lifetime. The man who divorces his wife without cause is said to “*cover his garment with violence*.” This pictures divorce as a stain on a man’s life and reputation which places him in a spiritually dangerous position. Divorce is a violent act on a wife who may find herself destitute and endangered and it puts children in both physical and spiritual jeopardy. The word translated as violence is a strong one and indicates a serious crime.

Again (as in verse 15) we find the warning to “*guard yourselves*.” This admonition in the plural tense shows the warning is for all within the nation. Divorce and remarriage to unbelieving wives brought violence to the family and introduced idolatry into the nation. Divorce and remarriage was a covenant violation and a national sin for Israel and needed to be dealt with collectively. These sins were destroying the cohesion of the nation and the relationship between God and his people.

**9. Describe some of the harmful effects of divorce.**

The sin of divorce and remarriage to foreign wives was greatly harming Israel in the days of Malachi. Today people like to claim that their sin is personal and affects no one but themselves, there really is no such thing as a harmless (or victimless) sin. All sin offends God and harms our relationship with him.

Believers caught in sin often hurt others directly because they involve them in the sin or they harm them by the sin. Sin weakens our relationship with God, discourages our brothers and sisters in Christ, harms our ability to serve the Lord and his church, and cripples our personal witness and the witness of the church to unbelievers. Even if a sin somehow remains “secret” it is an offense to our Creator and robs the church of the vitality of service we might have had. God’s covenant people are called to be holy and distinct in a world that is morally and spiritually depraved.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *ibid.* p. 313.