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There is nothing quite like a wedding isn't there? To see two people make promises to love, honour, comfort and keep, in sickness and in health, until death do us part is a very special thing. Even more special when this couple have kept themselves for one another. There is nothing quite like it.

And there is nothing quite as sad as when marriages break down. All the hopes of that initial day are now gone. Shattered. Smashed. There are broken pieces everywhere. Each partner feels broken. Any kids involved are divided and disillusioned. And those looking in from the outside are disappointed. For no one wanted this outcome to happen.

You see the Christian view of marriage is one of permanence not convenience. It is a covenant not a contract. Which means it is not based on what the other person does to make it work. It is based on the view that a married couple are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate. And that is because in the Bible the marriage covenant is a picture of the covenant that God makes with his people.

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He is the groom, his people are the bride and God wants this relationship to last forever. But it doesn't always work that way, does it? And in the book of Malachi, chapter 2 we get to see how this covenant between God & his people works, what curses there are when it fails, what conditions are attached and how Christ comes into the picture and breathes new life into this relationship. And offers us a new covenant where he is the groom and the Church is the bride and within that relationship of love everything changes. So, let's have a look at

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1. The Covenant. (verses 4-7)

And I think it will be more helpful for us to actually start at ⁴*"And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the Lord Almighty* ⁵*"My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him;"*

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The word covenant is a very important word in the Bible. It is more than a promise, more than an agreement, more than a contract, it is an agreed relationship enforceable by death. You see when God made his first promise with Abraham, he chose him out of all the people of the earth, he promised to bless him & bless his descendants & through him to bless all of mankind. And what God did next in the book of Genesis took these promises to a new level.

He asked Abraham to do what the people of his region often did when they made covenants between themselves. He got Abraham to cut a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and pigeon in half and arrange the halves opposite each other. And when the sun set, God symbolically passed between the pieces. And the message was clear. If either of us break this covenant then we will end up like the animals. Thus, God's covenant was sealed with blood.

And since that day God continue to extend and clarify these covenants with Abraham's

descendants, the people of Israel. He gave them the ten commandments and the laws of how to live to Moses. He established the kingship and made a covenant that David and his descendants would always be on the throne. And he made a covenant with Levi and this is the one that Malachi wants to talk about.

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⁵ “My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.” Levi was the ancestors to all the priests and Levites. And God gave them a special role to in the life of Israel in upholding his covenant. Their role was to model a reverence to God, to offer sacrifices to God and to teach others about God.

That is why Malachi goes on to say, ⁶ “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.” Levi’s main role was to teach people about the Lord their God. They were joined to each other, in sickness and in health, until death do us part, by this covenant. So they needed to know about God’s greatness, his majesty, his holiness and his judgements.

But not only were the Levites to teach the people about God but they were to model a relationship with God. They were to walk with the Lord. For they were first and foremost people not people who knew about God’s law but people who followed God’s law. And so they showed others what God’s law looked like in every day behaviour.

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God was so committed to his people that he set apart a group who would be his priests, his go-betweens, teaching and modelling what the life of faith was all about. And Levi was good at what he did and so God made with him and his descendents this covenant of life and peace. What a wonderful expression? With God there is life. With God there is blessing. With God there is shalom, there is harmony, wholeness, prosperity, completeness, peace.

Now that was true in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament this important role of being Levites and priests are fulfilled by elders. Who teach and model the way of God. Who live life in front of the people of God. And these elders, some of whom are ministers or pastors have the job to give true instructions. And to preserve knowledge and to walk with God in peace. And when they do that there is blessings for the people of God. That rich relationship with God is constantly offered to all those who belong to the Church.

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But the New Testament actually extends that model as well. 1 Peter 2:9 says “**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into His wonderful light;**” All of us are priests. All of us have the responsibility of proclaiming the truth of God to the people around of us. All of us have to live out our faith. Which means we have to listen to the word of the Lord as Malachi moves from the covenant to

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2. The Curse. (verses 1-3, 8-9)

“And now, you priests, this warning is for you.” Listen up all those who have been given the privilege and the responsibilities of being God’s priests and that includes you and me! ² “If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honour my name,” says the LORD Almighty, “I

will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honour me.”

I will curse your blessings. All the good things that God offers us through his relationship with Him can turn sour just as Moses pointed out in the book of Deuteronomy. There Moses told God's people If you obey me and are faithful to my commandments, life will be filled with blessings. But if you don't obey me, curses will come, actually **the curse** will come.

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You see this covenant had implications. Life, peace and fullness if you keep the conditions of the covenant and if you don't keep them then your lot will be death, struggle & removal from the land. But Malachi takes it one step further, they will be disgraced. ³ *“Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it”*. God will wipe their noses not just in the dirt but in the dung. God's priests will be humiliated. Why?

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⁸ *“You have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty.* ⁹ *“So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”* The priests have caused others to stumble and you can hear an echo of this when Jesus says *“if anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”* (Matt18:6)

That's pretty serious, isn't it? Life and peace are available if those who are acting as go-betweens speak right and live right. But death and destruction run havoc for the go-betweens whose speech or actions cause others to stumble. So that is why James 3 tells us *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly.”* But that is not just a warning for the elders among us. It is for all of us! We need to get our own doctrine and lifestyle right because there are blessings for us & others if we do get that right and there are curses for us & others if we get it wrong.

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3. The Covenant, The Curses & the Conditions.

For those who have a high calling also have high responsibilities. Those who represent a faithful God must meet high standards of faithfulness themselves. And we see that in the next part of our passage where the word faithful comes to the fore. Five times in this section we hear the expression breaking faith or as the NIV puts it, being unfaithful.

So why does being faithful matter? The answer lies in who God is. God is the patron saint of faithfulness. The great claim of the Bible is that God is faithful in character, unchanging in his holiness and love. And so, when God makes his promises to us, he always keeps his promises. Thus, if God is faithful, then those who represent this God must also be faithful.

But that's the problem, God's people have not been found to be faithful. Malachi 2 points out that God's priests, God's go-between have been found to be unfaithful in 5 different areas. Firstly, they have been unfaithful to one another. ¹⁰ *Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?”*

Each member of God's people has the same father, the Lord God. Each one is a part of the same covenant, the covenant God made with the people of Israel. And so, each one is not just a fellow countryman but brothers and sisters. There are ties that bind believers tightly together. But the people of Malachi's time are profaning the covenant by being unfaithful to each other. They are not following God's rules of community and by that they are breaking their communion with their God. But they are also being unfaithful to God Himself.

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¹¹ *"Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel & in Jerusalem Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god. ¹² As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him from the tents of Jacob, even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty."*

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God's people have rejected God's call to only marry other believers. Why should God tell me who I am or who I can't marry? That is my choice, isn't it? And so, in Malachi 2 they are marrying women who don't worship the God of Judah. And this is not about racism but about holiness, about putting God and His word first. For in the OT Boaz marries Ruth a Moabite and is not condemned because she has turned her back on her own gods and is throwing her lot in with the true and living God. Whereas Solomon is condemned because he marries foreign women and over time he is drawn away from the true God to false gods.

It really is evidence of disloyalty, of unfaithfulness when you put your marriage partner in front of your creator and heavenly father. And you can tell from this passage that God has strong feelings about this, very strong feelings. So strong that he will reject your offerings. He will not answer your prayers. He will not accept your service if you are unfaithful to Him.

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Listen to what Malachi goes on to say. ¹³ *"Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favour on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands."* You get what is happening? These men have done the wrong thing, they have married unbelievers, but they still want God's blessings. They still want God to step in and help them. They are doing everything they can think of except, except acknowledging and repenting of their sins. So Malachi continues

¹⁴ *"You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is the witness between you & the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant."* The people of that time had broken faith with their marriage partners. They had broken their marriage vows. They had moved on to someone else. So, God tells them rather bluntly, "I hate divorce." Notice he doesn't say, "I hate divorced people" but I hate divorce.

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You see God hates the things that harm us and God hates actions we do that harm others. God created marriage to bring joy and stability to human relationships but He also knows that the relationships that offer the most potential for joy and blessing can also bring the greatest hurt and sorrow. So, in the same way that God hates the worship of false gods. In the same way that God hates it when we don't keep our promises, in the same way God hates injustice. In the same way God hates evil. Lies and deception. God hates divorce.

Friends if we were to apply that truth today, I would have to say to all those married, Do not give up on your marriage! Fight for them! Fight for them in the confidence that God has brought you together and promises a portion of His Spirit to strengthen you even in the challenges and difficulties of that union. Stand on His promises and you will find, even though it may be hard and costly to do it, that He will bless you and your marriage and your home. Become a model, before the eyes of the watching world, & especially your children, that God's Word is always worth obeying and His promises always worth trusting.

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But I know that when I talk about divorce that some of us have been divorced and there is probably not one person here today where divorce hasn't touched you or your family or your friends. So is this teaching about divorce still applicable today? Jesus is asked about divorce in Matthew 5 and says, *"Everyone who divorces his wife except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."* So there is at least one ground for divorce, the other persons adultery. And the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 adds another ground, *"If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him but if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not bound."*

There are circumstances where divorce is permissible. Adultery, abandonment. There are times when separation might be advisable, domestic violence for example, for women & children shouldn't have to deal with that sort of abuse. But you don't have to get a divorce. If God hates divorce then we should be fighting for our marriages because our marriages are not just a pictures of faithfulness between husband and wife but of God's faithfulness to us.

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Faithfulness to others, to the Lord, to our marriage partners and then faithfulness to our kids. ¹⁵*"Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body & spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard & do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth."* We need to be faithful to our kids. For what does God want from our kids? Not being good at sport or at the top of the class but godliness. And the best way of having godly kids is if we have faithful, godly parents raising those kids.

And lastly we need to be faithful to the vulnerable. ¹⁶*"I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel, and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment."* God hates it when we hurt families, when the most vulnerable are not protected. We are breaking faith with them. The point is if we are not faithful to others around us, we are not being faithful to God. And if God is faithful to us then we need to be faithful in all our relationships with everyone we come across. Everyday.

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But are we? There was an interesting study done in America a while back. They fitted a bunch of people with microphones and recorded everything they said over a couple of weeks. Then they went back and analysed it for LIES and the result was the average person tells some sort of lie once every 8 minutes. Now where is the faithfulness in that? If we belong to a God who keep his promises, we will keep our promises. If we serve a faithful God, we will want to be faithful in all of our relationships. Especially our marriages.

Now I don't know about you but sometimes when I travel away from home I am appalled at what Christians in other countries turn a blind eye to. Domestic violence. Treatment of

women or children. Hypocrisy. But when I read this passage, I am reminded that here are sins that God is appalled with and they are very much a part of my society. Divorce. Lies. Violence. Non-Christian Dating. Unfaithfulness. These are our blind spots. These are sins that should not be a part of those people who belong to God's new covenant.

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So it is all over then? God gives us a covenant. We are not faithful to our end of the covenant so we have no choice but to receive the covenant curses. Game. Set and match? Well at the end of the Old Testament that looks to be the message of Malachi. We are in deep, deep trouble. Our side of the covenant has been broken and God's promises seem shattered. And all is left are the curses. But fortunately, that is not the end of the story.

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4. Covenant, Curses, Conditions and finally Christ and His Church.

For then Christ enters the scene and Christ is the perfect priest. Take a look at these words from Hebrews 2 verse 17: *"For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people."*

Christ fulfills perfectly the covenant of Levi. Christ faithfully teaches us what God is like but Christ also models to us what God is like. But as well as being the perfect priest he is also the perfect sacrifice. So, his death offers forgiveness for our sins and cleansing when we were unfaithful. Unfaithful to others. Unfaithful to God. Unfaithful to our marriage partner, to our kids and unfaithful to the vulnerable. God finds a way where not only does he keep his side of the covenant but allows Jesus to keep our side of the covenant as well. And if we admit that and trust in Jesus' faithfulness, we still get to enjoy God's covenant of peace and life.

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What's more Christ is also the true bridegroom who loves us perfectly. Who serves others whole heartedly? And it is this Jesus who purifies his bride, who restores us and even our marriages when we have made a complete hash of them. It is this Jesus who give us a chance to start again, admit our lack of faith and enable us to start loving our spouses, our families, our Church and our nation the way we should have loved them in the first place.

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So Malachi 2 is a call to faithfulness. A call for those who have seen God's faithfulness in action to reflect that faithfulness in all aspects of our lives. In our relationship with God himself. Our relationship with our spouses and kids. And our relationships with each other.

I heard the true story a couple of weeks ago about a guy from another church who'd just moved out on his wife and kids the week his son was doing his year 12 exams. He's cleared out their bank accounts. But he left them with a \$50 note. And a scrap of paper with a message to his son to say, "Now you're the man of the house." The pastor rang the guy on his mobile. To challenge him about it. And the guy sent him back a text; to say, "Yeah, look, I've decided it's over with my wife. But don't worry mate, I still love the Lord."

You know there are some actions that show we don't love the Lord. And often you and I are blind to those sorts of actions in our own lives. So we need to take this sort of passage to heart. God has always been faithful to us. We are not always faithful to Him. But Jesus has stepped into our spot and fulfilled our part of the bargain just as God has filled his part of the bargain. Which means we need to be on our guard and not be unfaithful any more.