1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Minor Prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

Theme: Give Careful Thought

Overview: Seth Wilson used to say, "You are not what you think you are, but what you think, you are." He stressed humility in the first phrase. In the second phrase, he stressed the destiny of the direction of our minds. When God's people returned from Babylonian exile, how they directed their thoughts would shape the new nation. Six men helped the remnant reconstitute themselves. The three key leaders were Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. These leaders were assisted by three Minor Prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In this month's lessons, students will learn about thoughtful ways to obey the Lord, about thoughtful hearts that should not be hardened by life's situations, about thoughtful offerings to test God's provision, and about thoughtful relationships to evidence faith.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Authors

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the last three books of the Minor Prophets. Haggai and Zechariah are named together in Ezra as the prophets who encouraged the returned exiles to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). Zechariah was a son of Berekiah and grandson of Iddo, likely from a priestly family (Zechariah 1:1; Nehemiah 12:16). Little is known about Malachi, whose name means "my messenger."

Audience

All three prophets spoke to the remnant of God's people who had returned to Judah and Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Haggai addressed Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and the people (Haggai 1:1, 12). Zechariah called the nation to return to the Lord (Zechariah 1:3). Malachi confronted both the priests and the people about their careless worship and broken faithfulness (Malachi 1:6; 2:1, 13-17).

Date

Haggai delivered his messages in 520 BC, in the second year of the Persian king Darius (Haggai 1:1). Zechariah began prophesying that same year (Zechariah 1:1), and the lesson text in chapter 7 is dated about two years later (Zechariah 7:1). Malachi likely ministered several decades after the temple was completed—probably in the mid-400s BC, around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Setting

After Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home in 538 BC, the exiles rebuilt the altar and laid the temple's foundation (Ezra 1–3). Opposition and apathy soon halted the work for years (Ezra 4:24). Through Haggai and Zechariah, God stirred the people to finish the temple, which was completed in 516 BC (Ezra 6:14-15). By Malachi's day, the temple stood, but worship had grown cold and family life was in disarray.

Theme

Haggai twice called the people to "give careful thought" to their ways (Haggai 1:5, 7). The phrase means to "set your hearts" on the right things. All three prophets challenged God's people to think carefully about their priorities, their hearts, their offerings, and their relationships—and to remember that the Lord Almighty was with them.

Why Study Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi?

These prophets speak to believers who are tempted to settle into comfort and indifference. They remind us to put God's house first, to keep our hearts soft toward him, to give him our best, and to keep faith with one another. They also point forward to the messenger who would prepare the way and to the Lord who would come to his temple.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	Haggai 1:5-15; 2:1-9
WEEK 2:	Zechariah 7:4-14; 8:16-19; Malachi 4:5-6
WEEK 3:	Malachi 1:6-14; 3:8-18
WEEK 4:	Malachi 2:13-17; 3:1-5

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Give careful thought to your ways; obey the voice of the Lord.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

THEME: Give Careful Thought

LESSON TEXT: Haggai 1:5-15; 2:1-9

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezra 6:14-16; Psalm 25:3-5; Proverbs 3:5-7; 4:25-27; Colossians 3:7-10

THOUGHTFUL WAYS

BY MARK SCOTT

A man said to his friend, "I think the problem with the world is ignorance and apathy. What do you think?" The friend replied, "I don't know, and I don't care."

It's a corny old joke, but it serves to highlight that apathy might be worse than idolatry, and indifference might be worse than immorality. When God's people do not care, they endanger God's vision in the world. Such was the problem for the post-exilic prophet Haggai.

God's people were coming home after 70 years of captivity. Ultimately 50,000 would come in three waves under Zerubbabel (the leader), Ezra (the Bible teacher), and Nehemiah (the governor), assisted by three prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Haggai (whose name means "festive") prophesied around 520 B.C. We know little about him, but we do know he was very conscious of his calling, for he used the phrase *what the Lord Almighty says* several times in this, the second-shortest book of the Old Testament.

The House Compromised Through Thoughtless Ways

Haggai 1:5-11

Nebuchadnezzar had trashed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. For 70 years the city lay in ruins. When God's people came back, they began to build the altar of burnt offering and the foundations of the city (Ezra 3). But then apathy set in. The people became preoccupied with their own houses. The house of the Lord (i.e., the temple) and the walls of the city were left unfinished.

The Lord Almighty spoke through Haggai to put the priorities of God's people back on the right track. He called them to "give careful thought" to their ways; that phrase occurs twice in the lesson text and means "set your hearts" on the right things. The people's economic impoverishment should have been a clue that they were not obeying God and putting him first (Leviticus 26:19-20; Deuteronomy 28:22-24). Their planting, eating, drinking, clothing, and wages were all compromised. They earned wages but did not become prosperous; they were described as having a *purse* (bundle or pouch) *with holes in it*. God divinely chastened the people with lack of *dew* (so important for the spring moisture of planting) and *drought* (so vital for the maturation of grain and the future harvest). Lack of grain, wine, and livestock should have given Israel pause.

But things did not have to be this way. God told them to go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the temple (probably referring to acquiring the trees of Lebanon). God wanted to *take pleasure* (delight) in the temple again and be honored. Haggai had to move them from their thoughtless ways to thoughtful ways.

The House Commenced Through Thoughtful Ways

Haggai 1:12-15

Haggai's challenge was accepted. The people came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty their God. This happened by God figuratively building a fire under Zerubbabel and Joshua son of Jozadak (certainly not Moses' assistant, who was identified as the son of Nun). God *stirred up* (i.e., roused or incited) the spirit of each of the men. He did the same to the *remnant* (rest or residue). The fear of the Lord among the people returned and they moved forward appropriately. God promised to be with them in their efforts.

The House Compared Through Former and Future Thoughts

Haggai 2:1-9

God's people were busy bees. Within 23 days, the work was being noticed and taking shape. Comparisons were made to the former temple (i.e., Solomon's temple).

Three rhetorical questions were asked: (1) Who had seen the house's former glory? Some, maybe even Haggai, were still alive and could remember the glory of Solomon's temple. (2) How did it look now (i.e., the second temple, which even Herod the Great would put the finishing touches on—John 2:20)? (3) Did it seem like nothing? Maybe some of the people thought it was not as great as the first temple (Ezra 3:12-13). But God encouraged the leaders and the people to *be strong*, not to *fear*, and to remember that he was with them.

Besides, something greater than the temple was coming (Matthew 12:6). God would *shake* the heavens, earth, sky, and land. This phrase need not have been understood literally. It was used to talk about God reshaping peoples and nations (Isaiah 2:12-21; 13:13; Ezekiel 38:20; Amos 8:8). Specifically, what would be *desired by all nations*, and how would God's glory be in the temple once again? When Jesus came into the temple, God's glory would fill it once again (Luke 2:32). The second temple was not as outwardly impressive as Solomon's, but it would be greater because Jesus would be there. The church may also be envisioned here (Hebrews 12:26; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19-20). There will be peace wherever God's people gather and focus on his thoughts.

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PREACHING TO LISTENERS WITH HOLES IN THEIR PURSES

BY DAVID FAUST

The Jews returned to Jerusalem after years of Babylonian captivity and began rebuilding God's temple. Before long, though, they neglected the temple and focused on their own houses. The prophet Haggai rebuked their misplaced priorities and asked, "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this [God's] house remains a ruin?" (Haggai 1:4).

Someone said a preacher's job is to "disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed," and Haggai did both. People surely squirmed when he quoted the Lord's words, "What you brought home, I blew away. Why? . . . . Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house" (1:9). Later, however, Haggai encouraged the governor, Zerubbabel, the high priest, Joshua, and the rest of the builders by saying, "'Be strong, all you people of the land . . . and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty" (2:4).

Full Houses, Empty Lives

A preacher friend and I were discussing the apostle Paul's warning that people will "gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3).

"There are two ways preachers scratch itching ears," my friend pointed out. "One is by preaching false doctrine. The other is by saying things that are true, but avoiding any topics that make people uncomfortable."

Haggai proclaimed an unpleasant but necessary message. He preached, "Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it'" (Haggai 1:5-6).

The people had full houses, but empty lives. They were so frustrated and ineffective, it was as if they were putting money in purses filled with holes; yet they refused to repent and turn to the Lord.

A Challenge to Us

What would a prophet like Haggai say to American Christians today? Might he preach something like this?

"Your priorities are wrong! You are preoccupied with your own comfort and neglecting the Lord's work.

"You devote hours to your cell phones and TV trivia, but you can't find time for Bible reading and prayer. Your lifestyles aren't significantly different from those who don't follow Jesus. You want church leaders to entertain you instead of equipping you to do ministry yourself.

"You spend extravagant amounts of money on specialty coffees and restaurant meals, but you give less than a tithe to the Lord's work—and make ministry leaders beg for support to spread the gospel and care for the poor.

"Your stadiums are full but not your church buildings. You gladly sit outside in scorching heat or freezing cold to watch a four-hour football game, but you complain when a worship service lasts more than an hour.

"You worry about your kids, but you give them little spiritual guidance. You fixate on politics and economics but pay little attention to loving God and loving your neighbors. Stop neglecting the house of God!"

If he were here today, I'm not sure Haggai would say those exact words. But I'm sure he would comfort us—and make us uncomfortable. That's what faithful preachers do.

Personal Challenge:

According to Hebrews 12:6, "The Lord disciplines the one he loves." How do you respond when a preacher or another Christian speaks firm words of rebuke and calls you and other believers to repentance? Is your heart open to receive correction from the Lord?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Talk about a time when you planned carefully and worked hard for something that fell through in the end. What did you learn from your experience?

Ask two people to read aloud **Haggai 1:5-15; 2:1-9**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. Today's passage begins with a word to Israel from God: "Give careful thought to your ways" (Haggai 1:5). Lesson writer Mark Scott explains that this phrase means to "set your hearts" on the right things.
   - What was the nation doing that was wrong?
   - What did God want from the Israelites?

3. As Israel was disobeying God, God was sending warnings to the nation (Haggai 1:6-11).
   - What kind of warnings did God send?
   - Do you think God warns us against disobedience today? Explain.

4. Upon hearing God's message, the leaders and the people "obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai" (Haggai 1:12). How were the concepts of knowledge and obedience linked? How are knowledge and obedience linked today?

5. Something interesting happened once the people listened to and obeyed the voice of the Lord: "So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel . . . and the spirit of Joshua . . . and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people" (Haggai 1:14).
   - What role does obedience play today in the Spirit-filled life?

6. With their spirits "stirred up" (Haggai 1:14), the people began in earnest to construct the house of the Lord.
   - Compare and contrast Haggai 1:14 with Haggai 1:4.
   - What does this tell us about the difference obedient, spirit-filled living makes?

7. Some among the Israelites likely felt the temple they were building would be less significant than the former temple. But God allayed their concerns when he said, "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house" (Haggai 2:9).
   - How does it make you feel to know that God gives glory and honor at his pleasure, and not according to earthly standards?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Zechariah 7:4-14; 8:16-19; Malachi 4:5-6**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Give careful thought to your heart; do not harden it.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

THEME: Give Careful Thought

LESSON TEXT: Zechariah 7:4-14; 8:16-19; Malachi 4:5-6

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Deuteronomy 30:6; Psalm 51:7-10; Ezekiel 11:17-21; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:6-8; James 1:27; 1 John 3:17-24

THOUGHTFUL HEARTS

BY MARK SCOTT

The word *heart* occurs well over 700 times in the Bible. Sometimes it literally means the muscle in the chest that pumps blood (1 Samuel 25:37). Sometimes it figuratively means the depths of something like the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:40). But most often it means the center of the inner person (Deuteronomy 6:5). Scripture warns us against having a hard heart. Instead, our hearts should be repentant and thoughtful.

Zechariah is yet another post-exilic prophet. He prophesied alongside of Haggai. Whereas Haggai's prophecy concerned the temple, Zechariah's prophecy concerned the nation at large as it came back from captivity. The book of Zechariah is filled with visions and object lessons. In the first six chapters of the book, Zechariah conveys no less than eight visions to the people. The visions serve to call on the people to have pure hearts for God. By the time we reach chapter 7, the prophet no longer is revealing visions or giving object lessons. He is confronting the people with straight prose.

Hard Hearts Don't Listen to God

Zechariah 7:4-7, 11-14

God's name *Lord Almighty* occurs many times in Zechariah. It means "Lord Sabbaoth" or "Lord of Heaven's Armies." The power of God, evident in his name, should have been enough to cause his people to listen to him. This powerful Lord, through the prophet, called out the people concerning their presumptuous fasting. They had the wrong attitude and motivation for serving him. They were filled with empty formalism. In fact, they may have been fasting for the king instead of the Lord (*fifth month*). This hypocritical fasting is addressed in many texts (Isaiah 1:11-17; Hosea 6:6).

Their fasting was for show and selfishness. They went through the religious motions to receive things from God. Zechariah reminded them that this was what pre-exilic Israel did. Even in the previous good times, when things were *at rest* (inhabited) and *prosperous* (at ease or peace), Israel was not really listening to God and obeying him. God gave them clear instructions, but they refused to follow them (Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 19-21; 26:12-13). In fact, the people turned their *backs* (shoulders) on God and covered their ears to God. Their hearts were as hard as *flint* (as hard as diamonds), and they would not listen to him. God was angry for such things, of course, and scattered them with a *whirlwind* among all the nations. The beautiful land became desolate.

Thoughtful Hearts Listen to God

Zechariah 7:8-10; 8:16-19

Through Zechariah, God called his people to have thoughtful hearts. This would not just be something they would feel or think about. It was more than mere intellectual assent. It would show up in tangible ways. They would *administer* (render) true justice. They would show *mercy* (*chesed*, God's loyal love) and *compassion* (empathy felt in the womb or bowels). They would not take undue advantage of the widow or the *fatherless* (orphan). Neither would they oppress the foreigner or the poor. They would not plot evil against each other.

In contrast to the above, they would speak the truth to each other (Ephesians 4:15). They would render true and sound judgment in their courts. They would refuse to swear falsely to anyone. Their fasting and feasting in their festivals would be acceptable to God because they would love truth and peace. Post-exilic Israel was quickly falling prey to the same things as pre-exilic Israel. Thoughtlessness was perhaps one of the greatest sins. A thoughtful heart always listens to God.

Repentant Hearts Experience God

Malachi 4:5-6

The final post-exilic prophet is Malachi. He overlapped with Haggai and Zechariah, but he also followed them. He followed some of the same themes as those shared by Haggai and Zechariah. In addition, he addressed themes related to the leaders of Israel. Some of those leaders were acting hypocritically—even in their families. He also addressed the rebellion and selfishness of the people.

But the lesson text happens to be the final two verses of the canonical Old Testament. Malachi pictured a time when Elijah (John the Baptist) would come and turn the hearts of the children to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to the children. When people repent, harmony and peace have a much greater chance of succeeding. God always welcomes repentance. But the flip side is also true. If the people do not experience the heart of God through repentance, then God will come and strike the land with total destruction. Do not harden your hearts (Hebrews 3:8).

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GUARD DUTY

BY DAVID FAUST

Select members of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, known as "The Old Guard," keep daily watch over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. They carry out their duties 24 hours a day, seven days a week, regardless of the weather.

All soldiers who guard the tomb must be in superb physical condition, possess an unblemished military record, and undergo a strict selection and training process that includes rigorous interviews and tests. They keep their uniforms and weapons in immaculate condition. The guards follow an unchanging routine, marching 21 steps down the mat behind the tomb before turning and facing north for 21 seconds, then taking 21 steps back down the mat. (The number 21 symbolizes the high military honor of the 21-gun salute.)

Keep Watch Over Others

Only a few select guards protect the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, but we all need to be vigilant. The apostle Paul told members of the Corinthian church, "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13), and he urged a young preacher, "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care" (1 Timothy 6:20). Paul told the Ephesian elders, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

God calls parents in families and leaders in churches to shepherd those under our care. We must guard our flocks in several ways:

Protect them from starvation, for without a shepherd, sheep don't know where to find food and water. We must make sure our flocks are nourished on the "pure spiritual milk" and "solid food" of God's Word (1 Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:13-14).

Protect them from harm, for without a shepherd, sheep fall prey to predators. Like "savage wolves," false teachers "distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

Protect them from aimlessness, for without leaders to guide them, sheep tend to stand around going nowhere.

Protect them from wandering, for sheep tend to go astray and drift away from the flock.

Guard Your Own Heart

Faithful prophets like Zechariah served as spiritual guardians. The people of his day stubbornly turned their backs on the Lord and developed "hearts as hard as flint" (Zechariah 7:11-12). Zechariah boldly pointed out that instead of administering justice, speaking truth, and showing compassion, they were oppressing the vulnerable and plotting evil against each other (7:9-10; 8:16-17).

It's noteworthy that before Paul told elders to guard the flock, he instructed them, "Keep watch over yourselves" (Acts 20:28). We won't lead others well if our own hearts are hard as flint.

Most of us will never master the physical and mental rigors displayed by those who guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. But out of love for the Savior who died for us and left behind an empty tomb, we must be vigilant about our own state of mind. According to Jesus, danger doesn't come from the outside only, but from evil thoughts in our hearts—sexual immorality, greed, envy, slander, arrogance, and other sins (see Mark 7:20-23).

That's why Proverbs 4:23 reminds us, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

Personal Challenge:

In a quiet place, pray about what (or whom) the Lord is asking you to guard. Thank God for going before you and being "your rear guard" (Isaiah 52:12). Thank him for his peace, which will "guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Think of a time when you caught yourself serving God to impress other people or to gain a personal advantage. How did you discern this and how did you correct it?

Ask two people to read aloud **Zechariah 7:4-14; 8:16-19; Malachi 4:5-6**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. The Israelites worshiped God in captivity, but their motives were questionable. God asked them, "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?" (Zechariah 7:5).
   - Why do you think they lost their focus in worship?
   - How can we lose our focus in worship today?

3. God provided a solution to Israel's misguided worship: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another" (Zechariah 7:9).
   - How do qualities like holiness and obedience impact our personal worship?

4. God spelled out the sad consequences of Israel's disobedience and self-centered worship: "When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen" (Zechariah 7:13).
   - How do obedience and submission to God impact our prayer lives?

5. In Zechariah 8:16-17, God spelled out certain things the Israelites were to do along with certain things they were not to do. Regarding the latter, God said, "I hate all this" (v. 17).
   - What do you think it means to say that God hates sin?
   - What does it mean to you to love what God loves and to hate what God hates?

6. God pointed out that the current nation of Israel had fallen into the same cycle of disobedience that led to their initial downfall. Why does this appear to be a common pattern in Israel's history, and how might it be a common pattern for Christians today?

7. Despite their disobedience and resulting punishment, there was hope for the nation of Israel. God promised to send them the prophet Elijah who would "turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to their parents" (Malachi 4:5-6).
   - When do you think this prophecy was fulfilled? (Hint: See Matthew 11:11-14 and 17:10-13).
   - What comfort do you draw from knowing that God always keeps his promises?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Malachi 1:6-14; 3:8-18**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Give careful thought to your offerings; see God throw open the floodgates of heaven.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

THEME: Give Careful Thought

LESSON TEXT: Malachi 1:6-14; 3:8-18

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Leviticus 22:17-22; Deuteronomy 15:10-11; 28:10-12; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 11:41

THOUGHTFUL OFFERINGS

BY MARK SCOTT

Thoughtful givers put their money where their mouths are. An old hymn says, "Give of your best to the Master; Give him first place in your heart; Give him first place in your service; Consecrate every part." That song would have been tough to sing in post-exilic Israel, for selfishness and pride had turned thoughtful offerings upside down.

Malachi used a rhetorical device called interrogation to get his point across to the returned exiles. He used it throughout his book, and he used it in the lesson text in verses 1:6-7; 3:8, 13. Malachi posed a question, and then proceeded to answer it—all of which produce a verdict of "Guilty!"

Cheating God

Malachi 1:6-14

One would think that when the exiles returned home they would have a skip in their step and a song in their heart (Psalm 126). One would expect them to be obedient to God. But, not so. Drawing on the father/son and master/servant examples, Malachi argued from the lesser to the greater. If sons *honor* (glorify) their fathers and slaves honor their masters, shouldn't Israel honor God? Their *respect* (fear or reverence) was lacking—particularly among the leadership (that is, the priests).

The priests were showing *contempt* (despise or disdain) for God by offering compromised animals on the *Lord's table* (probably a reference to the altar of burnt offering). Leviticus 22:17-22 made it abundantly clear that animals sacrificed to God were to be pure and without blemish. Post-exilic Israel was offering blind, lame, injured, and diseased animals. Even Governor Nehemiah, who was generous with his table (Nehemiah 5:17-18), would not accept those animals.

God basically said, "I have had it with your defiled offerings" (cf. Isaiah 1:11-15). In other words, "You might as well shut the temple doors so that no unholy fires will be offered again." What could be worse than hearing, "I am not pleased with you"? They had been cheating God. But God will get the last word. His name will be exalted among all the nations. His *name* (which stands for his character) will be great and feared among the nations despite Israel's crummy worship habits.

Robbing God

Malachi 3:8-12

Imagine robbing God at gunpoint. How could that happen? That is essentially what the people asked. The answer? "In tithes and offerings." Malachi 3:10 has long been looked to as a key verse with regard to the stewardship of finances. It is the one biblical instance when God invites his people to *test* him in this. Believers normally should not test God (Matthew 4:7). But it is welcomed when it comes to leaning into God for our provisions.

Thoughtful offerings allow God to open the *floodgates of heaven* and pour out the blessings on his people. And beyond that, *pests* (the one that devours) will not eat their crops and vines will not drop their fruit before it ripens. Faithfulness is hooked to creation, especially in the old covenant. Modern-day application has to be handled carefully. It is never tit for tat (i.e., give to God so he will give to you). But God finds his own ways to bless those with thoughtful offerings.

Lying About God

Malachi 3:13-15

God's people *spoke arrogantly* (blasphemed) against God. When confronted by this reality, they responded, "Wait, what?" So, God had to quote them. "It is *futile* [vain or worthless] to serve God." Others said that nothing was to be gained by carrying out God's requirements by fasting and praying. The arrogant seemed blessed, and the evildoers prospered. They put God to the test—but in all the wrong ways, in contrast to the above. Thoughtful offerings never portray a wrongheaded view of God.

Fearing God

Malachi 3:16-18

Malachi 3 ended on a better note. The people who feared God convened a holy huddle. They knew they were being appropriately chastised, and that humility caused God to hear their prayers. Some kind of document (*scroll of remembrance*) was produced with names(?) of those who feared God and honored his name.

The faithful remnant would become God's *treasured possession* (special or peculiar property). God would act toward the remnant like a loving father would act toward his children. At that point the line would be clear between the faithful and the wicked. Thoughtful offerings begin with thoughts of God.

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THE OTHER 90 PERCENT

BY DAVID FAUST

When I was a young boy, I heard people at church talk about tithing, but I didn't understand what they meant.

In those days, our church provided little cardboard boxes filled with offering envelopes that were labeled and numbered—one envelope for every Sunday of the year. Dad brought home three of those cardboard boxes for his three sons. He took a hammer and pounded three small tacks into the doorframe next to the kitchen in our old farmhouse. On those tacks, he hung our three cardboard boxes—a not-so-subtle reminder that his boys should give offerings to God. Most weeks, I put a nickel in my offering envelope and placed it in the Sunday offering.

A Strange Word

But what did *tithing* mean? That was a strange word to me, and although the preacher may have explained it, I must have missed the explanation. I saw people put cash in the wicker baskets the ushers passed around every Sunday, but what were those mysterious tithes? I wondered if a tithe was something like a check—or even an IOU. As a teenager, I finally began to understand the concept of giving back to God 10 percent or more of one's income—but I struggled to apply it.

After Candy and I were married, she insisted we should tithe, but I balked at the idea. We were college students getting by on part-time incomes from her job serving in a restaurant and my weekend work with CIY (Christ In Youth). Candy's convictions were strong. She saw tithing as a way to show faith and gratitude to God, and she insisted the Lord would provide. She helped me understand it's not just about the 10 percent; the other 90 percent belongs to God, too. Everything we own is actually "on loan" from God, and we are stewards or caretakers. All of it—100 percent—is God's property.

Candy and I can testify that whether our finances have been tight or abundant, God has faithfully provided our needs.

A Joyful Rhythm

No one should tithe out of misguided guilt or because a preacher twists their arm. Tithing shouldn't be done to brag or to impress others. We shouldn't try to manipulate God and give so we can get.

It's true that tithing is an Old Testament concept and New Testament Christians are not explicitly commanded to practice it. But after God has blessed us so much and filled us with his Holy Spirit, why should we who live under the new covenant of grace give less than believers gave before Christ came? God has opened "the floodgates of heaven" (Malachi 3:10) and poured out lavish blessings on us through Christ (Ephesians 1:8), so isn't tithing a reasonable starting point for anyone who aspires to "excel in this grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7)?

Jesus said to give without public fanfare (Matthew 6:1-4). He rebuked the hypocrites who were meticulous about tithing but "neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). He didn't say tithing was wrong; he emphasized having the right attitude and priorities when we give.

Grateful generosity should be a joyful rhythm in a believer's life. I think that's what Dad was trying to teach my brothers and me when he hammered those tacks into the doorframe years ago.

Personal Challenge:

Do you practice tithing? What do you think Jesus meant (and didn't mean) when he said, "Give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:38)? What new or additional step should you take to "excel in this grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7)?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Recall a time when someone you were counting on gave you less than their best. How did that make you feel and what did it teach you?

Ask two people to read aloud **Malachi 1:6-14; 3:8-18**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. The Israelites and their religious leaders went through the motions of worship, but their worship was far from pleasing to God. What were they doing wrong (see Malachi 1:7-8)?
   - How might we engage in worship without honoring the Lord?

3. God chastised Israel for their thoughtless worship and declared, "I am not pleased with you" (Malachi 1:10). How do you think that made the Israelites feel?
   - Have you ever felt as if your sin made you displeasing to God?
   - How can a passage like Romans 7:21-25 help in such circumstances?

4. Not only did Israel worship God carelessly, they were stingy with their material resources (see Malachi 3:8). God commanded the nation to give tithes and offerings to support those in ministry and to provide for those in need.
   - How do you think the Israelites justified their neglect of this command?
   - How might people justify a lack of generosity toward God today?

5. God promised to richly bless those who "bring the whole tithe into the storehouse" (Malachi 3:10-12). In his Application for this lesson, David Faust notes, "Grateful generosity should be a joyful rhythm in a believer's life."
   - How have you seen God bless your generosity?
   - How can you make generosity a joyful rhythm in your life?

6. When things failed to go right for the Israelites, they "spoke arrogantly against [God]" (Malachi 3:13). Why do you think a common first response to trouble is to blame God?
   - What would be a more rational and worshipful response?

7. Thankfully, a remnant existed in Israel that still feared God. They "talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard" (Malachi 3:16). The Lord referred to them as "my treasured possession" (Malachi 3:17).
   - Have you heard the phrase, "God always has a remnant"? What does that mean to you?
   - How can followers of Christ today remain a part of God's remnant?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Malachi 2:13-17; 3:1-5**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Give careful thought to your relationships; guard yourself and do not break faith.**

STUDY: Minor Prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

THEME: Give Careful Thought

LESSON TEXT: Malachi 2:13-17; 3:1-5

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 82:3-4; Matthew 5:21-32; 19:3-9; James 4:1-6; 5:1-6

THOUGHTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

BY MARK SCOTT

We often hear, "I am not into religion; I am into relationship." The person who uses such a statement obviously has disdain for the word *religion*. It is not a bad word. It is in fact a biblical word (1 Timothy 3:16, Revised Standard Version). The idea of relationship is all over the Bible.

Relationships were in disarray in post-exilic Israel. The priests were out of sorts with God. The people were not in sync with the priests and with the oppressed. And marriages were more than on the rocks. In fact, family life in Israel largely was in shambles (read the latter chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah).

Marriage Relationships

Malachi 2:13-16

Family life was hard during the Babylonian captivity. Interfacing with Babylonian culture created many problems. Israelite men were tempted to intermarry with non-Israelite women. Even Hebrew, the native language of faith, had gone on the skids (Nehemiah 8:8, NASB). Malachi called the people, particularly the men, back to their proper marital relationships.

The priests and the men of Israel were *flooding* (covering) the Lord's altar with tears. They were weeping and *wailing* (groaning or sighing) because God was not accepting their offerings. They could not understand why this was happening. Malachi explained that their marriages had become compromised. The horizontal relationship between marriage partners was mixed, and therefore the vertical relationship with God was damaged. The phrase *wife of your youth* (which occurs twice in this passage) referred to the original marriage (cf. Proverbs 5 and 7). The men had become *unfaithful* (treacherous) to their partners. They had broken the marriage covenant. Their adultery had produced ungodly offspring.

God *hated* (detested—a different word is used in Malachi 1:3 which meant to "prefer second") divorce because it undid his work of unity in marriage. Divorce is not outside God's redemptive ability, but it is not his original design (Matthew 19:3-9). What God has joined together in body and spirit should not be put asunder. The man is to protect his wife, not divorce her. Malachi twice called the Israelite men to be on their guard against such disruptive family relationships. The marriage relationship is to mirror the relationship that God's people have with him.

Messenger Relationship

Malachi 2:17—3:5

Israel ultimately was to have a relationship with God through the messenger (whether that be the one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah—Luke 1:17—or the Messiah himself). But in Malachi's time, that relationship with God was in jeopardy due to unfaithfulness at home and wrongheaded words and injustice. Israel had *wearied* (to the point of fainting) the Lord. The people had the gumption to say, "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?" This was similar to calling good evil and evil good in the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Some messenger from God would have to correct that erroneous thinking.

This *messenger* (ambassador or representative) would prepare the Lord's way for justice to replace injustice. It is difficult not to think that this messenger is John the Baptist (Matthew 11:7-10). Jesus said as much. Some scholars would contend that the *messenger of the covenant* is someone else—maybe even the Messiah. However, the content of this messenger's message sure sounds like the preaching of John the Baptist (Luke 3:1-20). His message would function like a *refiner's fire* or a *launderer's soap*. He would refine the corrupt priests into gold and silver. Their offerings would then be in righteousness and acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by.

So God, through his servant Malachi, put post-exilic Israel on trial (*judgment*). Five sins were called out. Israel was to do away with sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers. If laborers were being defrauded, it was to stop. If widows and orphans were being oppressed, it was to stop. If foreigners were deprived justice, it was to stop. All five sins indicated that proper reverence for God was absent.

A New Testament text summarizes the emphasis of this lesson text. "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Israel was not stewarding thoughtful relationships at home (i.e., not watching themselves). Neither were they keeping an eye on their doctrine (i.e., misrepresenting God evident in the mistreatment of people). Thoughtful relationships balance both.

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THE VITAL VIRTUE OF RELIABILITY

BY DAVID FAUST

The song, "Count on Me," made popular by singer Whitney Houston in the 1990s, included these lines:

> *Count on me through thick and thin,*
> *A friendship that will never end.*
> *When you are weak, I will be strong,*
> *Helping you to carry on.*

Where did we get the expression "count on me"? Medieval bankers counted money on counting-benches. (The Italian word for "bench," *banca*, is where we get the word "banker.") The benches held tables with rows and columns that helped to provide an accurate result when workers counted money. As time passed, the phrase referred to items or people you could "count on" to do the right thing.

Be a Rock

When you buy a car or a household appliance, you want it to be reliable. You want reliability from your plumber and mechanic, your family and friends—and your preacher. According to author Frank Sonnenberg, an advocate for moral and personal responsibility, "You can be the most talented person in the world, but if you're not reliable, you're going nowhere fast." Here is another way to say it: Ability without reliability equals inability.

Reliable people are dependable, responsible, steady, and trustworthy—and those are some of the same qualities we admire about God. David wrote, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge" (Psalm 18:2).

In the New Testament, Simon the fisherman was impetuous and impulsive, but Jesus nicknamed him *Petros*—the rock-man. Perhaps the Lord intended this nickname as a way of reminding Peter to be solid and consistent in his faith, words, and actions. We all can find greater stability and strength by building our lives on Christ, the solid Rock.

How Reliable Are You?

The prophet Malachi rebuked God's people because they had become unfaithful in numerous ways. They were "sorcerers" (unfaithful in spiritual matters), "adulterers" (unfaithful in sexual behavior), and "perjurers" (unfaithful in legal affairs). They were unfaithful at work (defrauding laborers of their wages), unfaithful toward the vulnerable (oppressing widows and orphans), and unjust toward foreigners from other lands. Worst of all, they were unfaithful to the Lord himself and lacked reverence for God (Malachi 3:5).

If you are married, does your spouse consider you reliable? According to Proverbs 31:11, the husband of a godly wife has "full confidence in her." Malachi insisted that no husband should harm "the one he should protect," for married couples should "be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful" (Malachi 2:16).

Do your boss and coworkers consider you reliable? Can they count on you to be on time, do an honest day's work, and carry out your responsibilities faithfully?

Can your friends rely on you to tell the truth and be there in times of need? Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "When friendships are real, they are not glass threads or frost work, but the solidest things we can know."

Are you a reliable church member? Can other believers count on you to show up and contribute to the growth of the body? Do you consistently have a positive attitude as you worship and serve the Lord and encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ?

If every other member of your church were as reliable as you, how healthy would your congregation be?

Personal Challenge:

Have a direct, forthright conversation with your spouse or a close friend about the issue of trust. Ask them, "Do you consider me reliable and trustworthy? What can I do to build stronger bonds of trust with you and with others?"

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Give an example of a model Christian married couple and explain why this couple stands out to you.

Ask two people to read aloud **Malachi 2:13-17; 3:1-5**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. Malachi pointed out another dilemma the Israelites faced. They were weeping and wailing at the altar of God because he refused to accept their sacrifices and offerings (Malachi 2:13).
   - What does this say about God's ability to discern sincerity in worship?
   - What warning or direction can we receive from this example?

3. The sin God pointed out to Israel in this instance was their failure to honor their marriage vows (Malachi 2:14).
   - Why is marriage such a sacred institution in God's eyes? (See Matthew 19:4-6.)
   - How is God honored by faithfulness in marriage?

4. Twice in the text God said to husbands, "So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful" (Malachi 2:15-16).
   - If you're married, how can you protect yourself from unfaithfulness to your spouse?
   - On a more positive note, what will you do to honor and bless your spouse this week?

5. God promised Israel that he would send a messenger to prepare the way before him (Malachi 3:1).
   - How would this promise bring comfort to the beleaguered nation?
   - How might it have motivated some among them to turn back to the Lord?

6. God said his promised messenger would act as "a refiner's fire" and "a launderer's soap" (Malachi 3:2). Lesson writer Mark Scott observed, "It is difficult not to think that this messenger is John the Baptist (Matthew 11:7-10)."
   - In what ways was John's ministry a refining and purifying ministry?
   - How would this prospect have given Israel hope?

7. While the promise of a messenger gave the nation hope, there was still much sin to be accounted for within the nation (Malachi 3:5). How can we today remain accountable for our sins while resting in the promise of God's grace?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.