

Public Exposition of the Book of the Prophet Malachi

Geneva in the year of Christ 1596

1st Lecture, 20th May

What a lovely thing light is, most honoured brethren in the Lord, is understood by all in whom there is at least a little light. This is especially evident in a composition of darkness, which is uncomfortable to all, in whom there is a certain desire for light. He who keeps vigil at night hours when it is gloomy - especially when besieged by the enemy - or is on a journey: how he desires the bright light of day! He who has been cast into a dark dungeon and does not see the sun, how eagerly he desires the enjoyment of the sun! He who sails on the sea, and is so caught in a storm, into which a mighty mist has mingled, that he knows not where he is: how urgently does he plead for the brightness of the sun! He who is blind and cannot see, how he desires to enjoy the blessing of seeing! After Christ departed from Jericho, and was moved by two blind men with incessant crying, he asked them: *What do you want me to do for you?* (Mt 20:32), they answered not, "We ask you for gold or silver!" but: *Lord, that our eyes may be opened. Lord, that we may see.* (Matt. 20, 33/Lk. 18, 41) They did not ask for money, they begged for their sight to be restored, which is undoubtedly much better than silver. Why do they ask so much for the light? Because it is lovely, in a way that mist is not. Verily, this is an earthly and corporeal light, and yet it is asked for by the prayers of so many. How befitting, then, for us, brethren, who are by nature cast into the darkness of ignorance, to do this. Ignorance, I say, not so much of earthly and philosophical things, as of God and ourselves, and so also of our eternal salvation. Do we not flee from the light in this? Yes, verily, alas, we do. Truly, we call forth darkness quite voluntarily, so corrupt and vicious are we, so much do we even like it in the mist of the wrong ways, that we do not even think of stepping out of it, unless the LORD lifts up the light of his countenance upon us; unless he who was given to be the light for the nations also enlightens us; unless the Light-bringer rises in our hearts; unless the bright fire of the Holy Spirit is kindled in us, by which we are so pleasantly enlightened. What then? Let us ask, dear brethren, for the light for our souls, the light of heaven, the light that brings salvation. Do you ask where we can find that light? Let us learn from the apostle who says: *And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place* (2Pt 1:19). Let us learn from the prophet who says: *The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes* (Ps. 19:8) and *Your word is a lamp to my feet*

and a light to my path (Ps. 119:105). Let us follow Christ, who is the light of the world. Whoever follows this light will rise out of all darkness. But let us follow Christ as he shines forth in the prophets and shines clearly in the apostles.

This is also the reason why, having been requested by the honourable Mr. Theodore Beza - our teacher and father - and by the honourable College of Brothers, whose authority I am by no means allowed to evade, that I should - as long as the Lord wills - diligently serve the Faculty of Theology in Geneva. Why, I ask, have I chosen the little book of the prophet Malachi to unravel and interpret - if the grace of Christ will be granted to me - in a philosophical and theological analysis. His prophecy must be pleasing to us, for it is divine light that clearly sets before us our sins, visibly paints for us the punishments, and finally shows us Christ clearly as He delivers us from our guilt and accusation and leads us over from darkness into His kingdom of light.

But before I begin to explain this booklet, I want to preface it with two things: first, the content and, so to speak, a definition of this prophet. Secondly, its classification. On the content: After the Jews were brought back from 70 years of captivity in Babylon to Judea and the city of Jerusalem, they had barely rebuilt the walls and the temple. They gradually began to corrupt the worship of God and their customs there to such an extent that they seemed to be chastened in vain after such a long captivity. Therefore, God raised up this prophet who rebuked their ingratitude after they had enjoyed the very greatest benefits. In particular, he accused the priests of defiling the worship of God. He announced punishments which they had well earned by many sins. He listed some of these sins by name: certainly, marriage with pagans, polygamy, false permission for divorces, blasphemies against God and stubborn disobedience. But all he called to repentance, to comfort the good about the certain coming of Christ and the demonstration of his power. Sometimes he prophesied against the wicked for terror, sometimes against the faithful for salvation. At the same time, he prophesied about the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. Here you have a short summary of the content. Now you will receive a classification for this booklet.

There are two parts: the heading and the prophecies themselves. We will look at the heading soon. The prophecies are composite¹ and extend in four ways.

First, reproaches of God to his people and priests on account of their grave sins, viz. by ingratitude (1:2-6), profanation of worship (1:6-9 + 2:4-10), by defiling marriage, which ought

¹ Gr. ζύμμικτα (=σύμμεικτα).

to be holy, by mixing with unbelievers, practising polygamy, and giving audacious permission for divorce (2, 10-17), by blasphemy (2, 17), by sorcery, adultery, perjury and injustice (3, 5) and opposition against God (3, 13).

Secondly, threats of punishment, which they had earned through the very same sin (1, 9-14 + 2, 1-10 + 3, 5.9.19).

Thirdly, prophecies, once about the calling of the Gentile nations (1, 11), once about John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ (3, 1.22-23), and about Christ himself and his power in the exercise of his office (3, 1-5.20).

Fourthly, exhortations to obedience and zeal for God's glory (2:2), constancy in marital fidelity (2:15-16), repentance (3:7), gratitude to God, and continuing observance of the divine law given through Moses.

So much for the general division of this booklet. Further, it is commonly divided into four chapters, although in Hebrew there are only three chapters, the fourth being connected there with the third. Now we will - under the guidance of our Lord Jesus - interpret this booklet one after the other. In doing so, a special classification for the respective chapters will be sent in advance.

Chapter 1

The first chapter has three parts: the first part is the title, the second part is God's reproach to the people of Israel and the priests for their ingratitude, their scorn to worship God and their depravity, and the third part is the threat of punishment. The first part is the heading because it includes the first verse, which reads²:

1. The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by [the hand of] Malachi:³

The name Jehovah, the Tetragrammaton, which the Jews cannot pronounce, is usually rendered LORD in the Vulgate, as is the term κύριος in the New Testament. Second, Hebraism "by the hand" signifies the work or ministry of Malachi. The grammatical analysis of each term belongs to a different locus and subject. The headline has four parts:

The *first* element is the subject about which the booklet is concerned. It is denoted by the term "burden". This is a dual expression, once as a metonymy and then as a synecdoche. It is, of

² Polanus first gives the Hebrew text and finally the translation from the Vulgate. The Vulgate translation is given here.

³ מִשָּׂא דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּיַד מַלְאָכָי:

course, a metonymy and represents the prophecy predicting the burden or punishment to be endured. But it is a synecdoche because the term is partly taken from the name of the entire booklet. Because not the entire booklet revolves around the threat of burdens or punishments, but only in part: because which prophecies are contained in it has already been said in the classification [above]. The use of the term:

1. The punishment for sin is a heavy burden that crushes the sinner's body and soul with its weight. Comparable expressions used in Scripture are emphatic and emphatic, even when expressed with only one term. Hence, they are noteworthy and worthy of consideration. Punishment is thus compared to a burden, namely, as a burden is hard for a wayfarer: so, the punishments for sins are hard and burdensome for us. As the Psalmist laments, *for day and night thy hand was heavy upon me* (Ps. 32:4).

2. It is not surprising that punishment should be a burden, because sin itself is an extremely heavy burden. Therefore, the two are usually connected: *thy hand presseth me sore, and for mine iniquities* (i.e., the sins of their punishments) *are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me* (Ps. 38:2,4).

3. This burden must be acknowledged. Quite foolish is he who does not feel the heaviness of the punishments. The beginning of healing is to acknowledge and feel one's own evil.

4. Not only must this burden be acknowledged, but it must also come to Christ, who alone can relieve us of this heavy burden, just as he promises to do: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest* (Matt 11:28).

5. If the punishment for sin is a burden, let us take it on our shoulders with composure, bearing it patiently and saying with the prophet Micah: *I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him* (Mic 7:9).

The *second* element of the heading is the efficient cause of this grave prophecy, namely the Lord, who - as of others - is also the primary author and executor⁴ of this prophecy. *For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost* (2Pt. 1, 21). In this regard, Tertullian says in his book on the resurrection of the body that "prophecies are the voice of the Lord".⁵ From this it is easy to conclude what authority underlies this prophecy, namely a divine one. And therefore, it must

⁴ Gr. αὐθέντης.

⁵ Tert. resurr. XXII, 3.

be believed without any hesitation; from here the dogmas of the Church must be confirmed, errors refuted, mistakes rebuked, and conduct instructed; from here exhortation must be sought and firm consolation taken.

The *third* element of the heading is the indirect object, that is, to whom the burden was announced, namely, the Israelites, i.e., the whole people who were returning from captivity. It was indeed lamentable that those who had just been delivered from many years of punishment for their sins should forget their chastening and relapse to their former sins. But we must consider the following warnings.

1. He who comes out of any calamity must by no means forget his chastening, nor return to his vomit, and so bring on himself punishments again. It is hard and dangerous to strike the same stone twice, as they say. Have you recovered from an illness? Take care that you do not fall into that disease again through your sins. Especially does this admonition apply to whole states and peoples. A nation has been delivered from war, from captivity, from famine, from pestilence? Let it not forget its chastening and let it not sin again. If God did not spare the people of Israel who had fallen back into their sins, how much less will he spare us today?

(2) Sins committed together deserve and entail common punishments.

The *fourth* element of the heading is the auxiliary cause which God has deemed worthy to use in order to proclaim the prophecy publicly. This is Malachias or Maleachi, as he is called in the Hebrew text, as if one would say: my messenger. Whether he was an angel, that is, a disembodied spirit being, or Ezra, as the rabbis believe, we will not deal with here. But we have established that he was a prophet of God who prophesied after Haggai and Zechariah, in the time of Ezra, about the year 3513 after the foundation of the world and 457 years before the birth of Christ. For he rebukes the disorder⁶ that had increased after the rebuilding of the Temple, much of which is reported in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. That he was certainly the last prophet in the Old Testament, we conclude from the fact that in the last chapter the people are called upon to adhere steadfastly to the Mosaic Law in the meantime, until the truly great prophet Christ appears, whose predecessor would become John the Baptist. We conclude from this:

1. It is a great proof of his divine favour when God deems it worthy to use someone to publicly proclaim his secret, heavenly prophecies, especially those concerning the

⁶ Gr. ἀταξία.

Saviour of the world, Christ; just as he used Malachi and other prophets. Therefore, let it not be burdensome to us even today to offer a work to the Lord by proclaiming His divine prophecies to His people. And let us not be moved with contempt of this ordinance and let us not be *ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek* (Rom. 1:16).

2. It behoves faithful ministers of the church to serve God, not only by preaching the things that are pleasant to the people, but also the burdens, that is, the things that are displeasing to the flesh, such as punishments for sins and calamities. To the penitent, of course, God's mercy must be proclaimed, but not God's favour to the unrelenting and the unruly, but to them His wrath and most grievous judgment must be set before them and heaped up.

3. The hearers of the word must not take offence at the reproof of their errors and the announcements of divine judgement, but rather should conclude from this that their servants are truly faithful and sincere, who in this point remain loyal to their duty. When Hananiah prophesied only the best to the godless Jews, Jeremiah rebuked him: *Nevertheless hear thou now this word that I speak in thine ears, and in the ears of all the people; The prophets that have been before me and before thee of old prophesied both against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war, and of evil, and of pestilence. The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the LORD hath truly sent him* (Jer. 28:7-9), as if to say: "That what you proclaim as peace and prosperity to the most wicked people is contrary to the law and to all the holy testimonies of the prophets, and finally the outcome itself will clearly show how false your prediction is." Therefore, let us not laboriously endure when faithful servants of Christ severely reprove our sins and remind us of God's sentences of judgment, but rather let us discern from this their sincerity and - having been admonished - repent.

So much for the heading in the first verse. Verses 2 and 3 now follow.

2. *I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob,*⁷

⁷ אֶהְבֵּתִי אֶתְכֶם אֲמַר יְהוָה וְאַמַּרְתֶּם בְּמַה אֶהְבַּתְנוּ הֲלוֹא-אֶת עֲשׂוֹ לִיעֲקֹב נְאֻם-יְהוָה וְאַהֲבָ אֶת-יַעֲקֹב:

3. *And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains Seir and his heritage waste to the dragons of the wilderness.*⁸

The verbs **אָהַבְתִּי**, **אָהַבְתֶּנוּ**, **וְאָמַרְתֶּם** and **אָמַר** are in the past tense, but by an enallage⁹ they should rather be translated present tense: I love you; you ask; wherein do you love us?; the LORD says. For the purpose of prophecy requires such an enallage, so that we later will hear it. In the third verse, "Seir" is not in the Hebrew text and instead of "to the dragons of the wilderness" it should be translated "for the dragons of the desert".

So much for the translation, let us now move on to the analysis. The second part of the first chapter is God's reproach to the people of Israel and the priests about their ingratitude, which they expressed in many ways towards God. First of all, because they did not acknowledge God's love towards them, but made an oblique judgement about the cross they were subjected to and concluded that God hated them. And so, they forgot the many, most excellent benefits with which God had abundantly testified His favour towards them. Therefore, God testifies publicly through the prophet that he loves the Israelites: *I love you, says the LORD*, as if to say: You conclude wrongly from the calamity of which you are guilty that I would persecute you because of hatred. But I declare and testify publicly that I love you.

When love is attributed to God in Scripture, it does not mean a passion or an affect, for God is dispassionate¹⁰, the freest, the most blissful, the most blessed, the most perfect. Nothing slavish happens to Him, nothing lowly, and finally nothing that indicates any imperfection. But God's love denotes three completely, perfect things: eternal benevolence, actual beneficence, and actual delight in the thing loved. For he who loves something is well-disposed towards it, does it whatever good he is capable of, and delights in it. These three things are found in the love of God. Now this love is first the love of God in himself, and then towards his creatures. For God loves himself and above all things: the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Son the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit the Father and the Son. God's love for his creatures is first general and then special. That general love is the one by which he fully embraces all things created by him, blesses them, and preserves and sustains them. In this way there is no one, no man, and no devil either, who can say that he is not loved by God. The special love is that by

⁸ וְאֶת־עֵשָׂו שָׂנְאתִי וְאֲשִׁים אֶת־הַרְרֵי שֵׂעִיר וְאֶת־נַחְלָתוֹ לְתַנּוֹת מְדָבָר:

⁹ A rhetorical figure in which an attribute is grammatically added to a word to which it does not belong in terms of content. Polanus, however, probably means here an hypallage, in which the contextual reference is shifted in such a way that an ambiguity arises (as in this case the tenses). In the Middle Ages and early modern times, however, hypallage was subsumed under enallage.

¹⁰ Gr. ἀπαθής.

which alone he leads the elect to eternal life, as he acknowledges them to be his own children in Christ: this passage here must be understood from this special love.