

# Chief Cause for Decay in the Church

by Ian Murray

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*The chief cause of decay in the church is the decay of heart religion, which can only be restored by God's power and grace.*

**Duration:** 41:38

**Scripture:** Exodus 20:1-17, Malachi 2:4-7, Malachi 4, Matthew 6:21, Matthew 23, Luke 3:3-6

**Topics:** "Judgment Day", "Heart Restoration"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the verses from the book of Malachi, specifically chapter 4. The text speaks of a day that will come, burning like an oven, where the proud and wicked will be consumed. However, for those who fear the name of the Lord, the Son of Righteousness will arise with healing in his wings. The preacher emphasizes that we are currently living in the day of Christ, but it will reach its consummation in the great and dreadful day of the Lord. The sermon emphasizes the importance of the work of grace and the turning of men's hearts as the only alternative to the coming judgment. The preacher also references historical figures like John Calvin and the impact of the gospel spreading through the Greek and Roman world. The sermon concludes with the assurance that God will do the work of restoring the hearts of fathers to their children, as He did in the past.

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## Transcript

As I mentioned on Monday afternoon, I hope this morning to turn your attention to some verses in the Word of God, and let us read then in the Prophet Malachi, the fourth chapter, and from verse one. The Prophet Malachi, chapter four, Remember my name, shall the son of righteousness arise with healing in his wings. And ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.

And ye shall tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet, in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts. Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb, for all Israel with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers. Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. Particularly these latter words in verse six.

He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers. These words, of course, as you see, are the conclusion of the word of God in the Old Testament Scriptures. The

last word of prophetic revelation, until some four hundred years and more were to pass, and the angel of the Lord came and spake to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist.

And yet, although such a lengthy period intervened between the giving of these words and the commencement of the ministry of John the Baptist and then of our Lord himself. Although that period intervened, it is quite clear from the New Testament Scriptures that these particular words were not forgotten. And indeed, they were used on more than one occasion by the enemies of Christ against his claims.

For example, you may remember how on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the disciples had heard the declaration from heaven, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And when they were constrained to a fuller awareness of the deity of our Lord, they nevertheless had a difficulty which they put to Christ. And that was, why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come? And the scribes, of course, were using the fifth verse of Malachi 4, Behold I send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

They were using that verse and literally interpreting it in such a way as to deny the coming of our Saviour. For they said, Elijah was not yet come. And you will recall how our Lord, in reply to that question, said that Elijah is come already.

And they knew him not. In other words, the meaning of verse 5, is not that Elijah literally would reappear on the earth, but the spirit, the power of Elijah. That spirit would be seen again in the earth before the coming of Christ.

As the angel Gabriel says in the words that we have in Luke's gospel chapter 1, He shall go before him, that is John the Baptist shall go before Christ in the spirit and power of Elias. And so our Lord, both there in Matthew 17 after the transfiguration and again in Matthew 11, identifies John the Baptist as the Elijah that was to come. If he will receive it, he says in Matthew 11, this is Elijah which was for to come.

So we have therefore an interpretation given us in the New Testament Scriptures of the 5th verse. And the 6th verse also, which we are particularly concerned with, is interpreted in the New Testament. At first sight, it might appear that the words of verse 6 are a promise of the unity which the gospel will restore to families.

He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers. We know that the gospel often divides families. And yet here is a word which, as I say at first appearance, may be indicating the blessedness of family unity which can be restored and is restored through the gospel.

Well, that is true. But it is not the truth of these particular words. You will remember, I'm sure, how often the Scriptures use the word fathers, not of a man's immediate parents, but of his more remote ancestors.

All the Jews spoke of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as the fathers. When the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 9 speaks of the privileges of the Hebrews, he says, to whom pertaineth the adoption, the glory, the covenants, whose are the fathers. And it is in that sense that the word is used here.

The promise is that the hearts which the fathers of the Old Testament possessed in the best and the brightest days of Israel's piety, the hearts of the fathers would be found again in another generation. The piety and the devotion of the fathers, this would be rekindled and it would reappear in the children. That is the meaning of the verse.

He shall turn, he shall restore, he shall bring back the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers. And so it is expounded in Luke 1, 17, where the Holy Spirit renders it, he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. That is to say, hearts which are by nature disobedient, in these hearts will be restored the wisdom, the piety, the grace, which was in the fathers.

This then is the promise of the verse. Looking then in these words, let us observe in the first place that the chief cause for decay in the church is the decay of heart religion. I say this is the first thing surely which appears in our text.

The failure of heart religion is the cause of the decay of the church. Now you will bear in mind the original circumstances when this prophecy was delivered. The church was not in a condition of fruitfulness and prosperity.

A hundred years before Malachi, there was the restoration in the days of Zechariah and Haggai. There was the rebuilding that was begun in that day and those prophets wrestled against the discouragement and the spirit of weakness that was in the people. The temple was rebuilt, the services were resumed and yet there was so little progress.

The church had not advanced. And the condition of the people when Malachi prophesied was not one that simply required encouragement. It required solemn warning.

The burden of the word of the Lord by Malachi. And the book of Malachi brings this word of judgment and of warning. And at the same time it promises that the God who changes not would bring in a new era.

When from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same Jehovah's name would be praised. But the condemnation of the church in the day of Malachi was a condemnation which had to do with the state of their hearts. And that is implied in the words before us in verse 6. God does not say here, I will perpetuate your hearts in the hearts of your children.

He does not say that the church of the future will possess the spirit which you now possess. No. He says, I will bring back the hearts of your fathers and those hearts, they will be found in the children.

The children to be raised up would be children that will not resemble you but will resemble your fathers in the days of Israel's brightest piety and devotion to God. Now, there is no need to take more than a few moments to remind you of the indications in this prophecy of Malachi demonstrating the weakness, the decay, the failure of heart religion. It comes at once at the beginning in chapter 1. We know that the description of a sound heart is a heart which appreciates the greatness and the marvel of God's love.

And that was just what the generation of Malachi did not appreciate. I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, wherein hast thou loved us? The love of God that had come to them undeserved and unmerited come to them when it had not come to others.

Had not come to Edom, had not come to Esau. That grace which had come to them, that was love which they had grown so accustomed to as to be unmoved by it and no longer truly to appreciate it. And in that peril the church always stands.

To us the love of God has come. Most of us from the very first days of our infancy when we were brought to the ordinance of baptism and we received that sign and seal of the love which led Christ to Calvary. And

from that time we have sat under the institutions of God's worship and the word of His grace.

And yet it may be possible and indeed it is possible that within that very context God may have to say again to His people I have loved you, saith the Lord. And yet He say wherein hast thou loved us? And my friends the Bible tells us so repeatedly that our appreciation of the love of God its reality or its unreality is indicated so clearly by one thing. It is by whether or not we know what it is to give ourselves wholly to Him.

Remember there in Luke chapter 7 the difference in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The difference between that man who set a meal for Christ and who entertained Him and the woman who stood behind Him and washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head and how Jesus spoke to Simon of what that represented. And what it represented was this that here was a heart and a life that was touched with the consciousness and the appreciation of the love of Christ and of what she owed to Christ for that love.

There is a hymn that says Savior, thy dying love thou gavest me nor should I ought withhold my Lord from thee. And yet the people to whom Malachi spoke were those who were able to bring cheap and inferior and blemished sacrifices to the house of God and they did that because they had so little heart attachment to God and so little consciousness of His love. Where your treasure is, says Jesus, there will your heart be also.

And if the things of Christ and of heaven are our treasure then it will be shown by the way that we live. There are other things in this great prophecy that speak similarly. In chapter 2, God rebukes the sons of Levi for their lack of fear of God saying there how in a previous generation the sons of Levi had been those who walked before God in peace.

I gave them to Him for the fear were with He feared me and was afraid before my name. The fear of God that is part of heart religion. And what I am simply saying from the words of our text this morning is this.

That the church is in her best days when heart religion flourishes. When there is true love to Christ. When the fear of God is in the midst of His people.

When there is spiritual vitality and holiness and energy. And when that spirit declines then there is the decay of the church. And that has always been true.

The decay of the church does not come because of the power of error or of external temptations. It comes because there is first a vacuum in the church. There is a decay and failure of heart and of spirit.

And when that vacuum occurs then other things will soon come in. That is what happened across the English speaking world at the end of the last century. And it is still with us today.

And we can have churches and buildings and pulpits and finance and programs. But if we have that without the power of heart religion we have very little at all. I have somewhat against thee Christ said to Ephesus.

Because thou hast left thy first love. Cursed is the man who trusteth in man and whose heart departeth from the Lord he shall be like the heath in the desert. That then is the first thing.

The failure of heart religion is the decay of the church. I will turn the heart of the fathers to the children. Secondly let us notice in this verse that the promise that the heart of the fathers will be restored to the

children is a promise which is made on the basis that this is God's own work.

Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet and he shall turn, that is to say God clothing his servants with unction and authority and power. God will be the one by whose word and power the hearts of the fathers are restored in the lives of the children. It is altogether beyond human power.

One generation cannot pass its spirit to another. What great Christian institutions you can think of and I can think of that once burned with devotion to the word of God which were once so eminently used by Christ and yet they could not pass on that spirit to all the generations that followed. And that is still true.

We can pass on names and buildings and other things but we cannot pass on the heart of one generation to another. So we read in the book of Judges chapter 2 of the sons of the men the spiritual giants who entered Canaan and who conquered the land. We read of their sons they knew not the Lord nor yet the works which he had done.

That does not of course mean that they were intellectually ignorant of what had happened. Of course they were not. They belonged to the same tribes they lived in the same towns.

They knew it in the sense of knowledge they had received and yet says the scripture they knew not the Lord. I was not able to finish my lecture on Monday afternoon and there was one section that I was particularly sorry to have missed and it fits in really at this point. That matter of preaching for conviction of sin preparation that has to be made for men to know that they are lost.

I want to commend to you in John Owen's Discourse on the Holy Spirit that is the third volume of his works. The third volume of John Owen there is a very fine chapter on this whole question of conviction of sin and its relation to conversion. But what I want to say now is this that when John Owen published his Discourse on the Holy Spirit in 1674 as you see by the date the 17th century was far advanced and the days of Thomas Hooker and John Cotton and those other leaders were past and a new generation had come on the scene.

And John Owen mourns that in particular this whole subject of preaching for conviction had begun to disappear. He says, this is what Owen says a generation of new divines was now in the ascendancy. That's my phrase, but now I'm taking him up again.

We have lived to see all these things decried and rejected all conviction sense and sorrow for sin all fear of the wrath and curse due to sin all troubles and distresses of mind by reason of these things he says they are now called foolish imaginations the effects of bodily disease and distempers enthusiastic notions arising from the disorders of men's brains. And he concludes the whole doctrine concerning these things that is preparatory conviction is branded with novelty and hopes expressed of it's sudden vanishing out of the world. And in 1714 in New England Solomon Stoddard speaking of the very same thing he said this is a very dark cloud and if this opinion should prevail in the land it will give a deadly wound to religion it will lead men to think themselves converted when they are not.

Well, I throw that in here because you see how it fits in to our text. God says he will restore the hearts of the fathers to the children and that means that without God's grace and power it cannot be done. And that explains those great periods of decline in the church.

How swiftly they can occur how low the church can fall. It's equally true of course in the individual level. How parents yearn that the spirit of Christ may possess the hearts of their children.

We have to speak of God's word to them we have to see that the truth is not hidden from the generation to come but when we have done all the scriptures remind us that this is God's work and God's alone to give that spirit to the generation that is to come. And the glorious assurance of our text is that God will do that work. He did it in A.D. 27 when the scribes and the Pharisees sat in Moses' feet when the people were led by blind leaders of the blind when the very temple of God was a den of thieves and suddenly in the wilderness of Judea a voice was heard saying repent for the kingdom of God is at hand and then behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.

And what happened was that in the hearts of those who had been indifferent and worldly and simply consumed with all material interests hearts that were hard and unbroken these hearts were possessed by a new spirit and it was because God was fulfilling His own word. The hearts of the fathers were being restored to the children. And how much more under the ministry of our Lord.

You remember that day when Zacchaeus chief among the publicans was called by the effectual power of Christ and Jesus coming to his home and says that this day is salvation come to this house for as much as he also is a son of Abraham. This man who was so unlike Abraham something has happened to his heart he is now truly a son of Abraham. The work of restoration then is God's work.

Thirdly our text tells us or at least I believe it indicates to us that God delights to repeat His own work. Why does the Holy Spirit use the name Elijah? Behold I send you Elijah the prophet. As we said at the outset of course it is not a literal reference to a future reincarnation of Elijah.

It is a spiritual simile. But why use the name Elijah? Well I believe it surely indicates to us that God delights to repeat His own work. What Elijah the Tishbite did in the days when Ahab reigned and Jezebel at his side when the prophets of Baal and the prophets of the grove ruled in the land in those days the voice of God was heard through Elijah the Tishbite.

The authority, the unction the power of the word of God. Hear O Lord hear me says Elijah on Mount Carmel. That the people may know that thou art the Lord God and that thou hast turned their hearts back again.

Then we read the fire of the Lord fell. And the success was due to Elijah's God. And this verse tells us that God delights to repeat His own work.

He did it on the day of Pentecost. He did it in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. He did it as the gospel spread through the Greek and Roman world and right through and on into history.

You remember those beautiful words of John Calvin. After a period when coldness and death had seemed to possess and grip the church. We listened to Calvin saying I offer my heart a slain victim for a sacrifice to the Lord.

Are you my soul chained and bound unto obedience to God. That's new religion. And that's religion rekindled.

The hearts of fathers in the children. There's an anecdote I also didn't have time for on Monday. And I want to leave it with you.

In 1630 in Old England when Thomas Hooker was silenced. For a little while he kept the school for children. And his assistant in that school was a young man who was converted under Hooker's preaching.

John Elliot. The future apostle to the Indians of North America. John Elliot.

And the spirit of Hooker the spirit of God lived again in Elliot. When Elliot was an old man in 1688 he also needed an assistant. And his assistant was a man called Nehemiah Walter.

1688. In the year 1740 Nehemiah Walter was an old man. And one day he heard a young man who had crossed the Atlantic from England preach in New England.

His name was George Whitefield. And when old Nehemiah Walter sat and listened to George Whitefield he could only say one thing afterwards. It is, puritismus ridigivus.

Puritism. Revived. The old preaching that in the days of Hooker had wrought such devastation in the kingdom of darkness.

That preaching which had seemed to vanish as John Owen said in 1674. When nobody seemed to be under conviction of sin. When preachers were men pleasers.

When they sewed pillows on men's elbows as Whitefield says. When they preached peace when there was no preach. Suddenly in the midst of that God raised up preaching that was the very preaching that so many years before had pulled down the strongholds of Satan.

It's puritanism said Walter. Revived. I sometimes remember something that happened to me in the middle of the 1960s when I was visiting Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and being shown round the library.

And there was one particular corner of the library that especially interested me. But as I approached it I was immediately warned that this was a rather special corner and these books did not belong to Westminster Seminary. And when I began to look at the books this is what I discovered.

There was something unusual about them. They were mostly the books of the Southern Presbyterians. Names that were so little known.

The Dabneys and the Thornwells and the Moses Hogan John Rice and these men of these former generations. And then I was told that these books were simply temporarily loaned to Westminster Seminary. They were destined for a new seminary that was proposed in Jackson, Mississippi.

I'm glad that I looked at those books because, you see, they speak of this very verse God gave, as you know, to men here in the South the vision that what was embodied in the fathers that could live again in the children. It wasn't simply that they were books but here was truth and truth that needed to be fed to a rising generation. And I say the promise of our text is that God delights to repeat His own work.

He sent Elijah in the days of Ahab. He sent John the Baptist. He sent Thomas Hooker.

He sent George Whitefield. And He is sending men today into the ministry of the Word of God. And that is why so many of you are here at this present time.

And lastly, the text tells us that a revival of heart religion is the only way for a declining church to be spared the judgment of God. He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. And that is what happened to the church at Jerusalem.

Those whose hearts were not turned whose hearts were not broken who withstood the preaching of the cross of Christ. Not one stone was left upon another lest I come and God come. Repent and do thy first work said Christ to the church at Ephesus lest I come and take away the candlestick.

And Christ came. And Christ comes in judgment to His churches. And we are warned to take heed lest we also fall.

And all the preaching of the gospel, my friends, is preaching against this background that if the gospel is not attended with success if it does not lead to piety and love and fear to God then it is sure to be followed by the judgment and the wrath of God. That is happening in history. It has happened in our generation.

But oh, the text looks forward of course to that final consummation. The day of Christ has begun. We are living in it.

We are seeing its privileges and its blessings. But it is to come to a great consummation in the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And Christ will come as a thief in the night when the elements shall burn with fervent heat.

When all these things shall be dissolved. And my friends, what the Scriptures tell us is that this work of grace, this turning of men's hearts, this is the only alternative to that coming of judgment which will have no end. His fan, said John of Jesus, His fan is in His hand.

He will truly purge His floor. He will gather the wheat into His garner. He will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.

That is still true. Those who go forth with the word of the gospel are going forth with that message. King James I said of a certain Puritan preacher who he didn't much care for.

He said he preached as though death was at his elbow. But my friends, death is at our elbow. We know not what a day will bring forth.

Your fathers, said the prophet, your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? They don't. Every voice that is lifted up in the preaching of the gospel is only a voice for a brief and short day. And what is coming, says the Scripture, is eternity.

And in the face of all the uncertainties of life, in the face of the sure coming of that day of judgment and of woe, O may God clothe us with the spirit of Elijah. And may the spirit come upon a new generation and rekindle in hearts today that spirit which God gave to His fathers. He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers.

Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. Shall we pray briefly and then may I say a few words about the trust. O Lord our gracious God, we thank Thee for these exceeding great and precious promises in Thy holy word.

We pray that in our day and generation we may apprehend them, that we may believe them. That Thou wouldst increase our faith and Lord grant that as we seek by Thine enabling to cling to Thee and to Thy holy word that Thou wouldst use us each one for the furtherance of Thy kingdom and glory in this day. Bless O Lord the work of this seminary.

May it be mightily prospered. Be with those who teach and instruct. Be with those who seek to learn.

May the spirit of Christ be abundantly in the midst that Thy name may be praised not only now but in the generations and ages to come. Hear us we beseech Thee and pardon our sins for Jesus' sake. Amen.

I was asked if I would just say a word briefly about the work of the Banner of Truth Trust. There are copies of the magazine that we produce every month. I think there are some at the front here and there are also some copies at the fellowship hall.

There are many magazines and I don't really urge this magazine on you. I'm much more concerned you should read the books that we seek to publish. But if you're interested in the magazine please take a complimentary copy and if you did want to subscribe the details are on the back.

But as I hope many of you know we seek to produce Christian literature. We seek to do so not so much as a business but in the hope and prayer that we will influence especially ministers and students. And I'm thankful to say that there are many indications that that is so.

But we covet your prayers for the circulation of these books. We very much value the help of churches many of you I'm sure have book tables. That's a great help to us.

We try not to spend much money on advertising. We have found that it is by the testimony and word of mouth of Christians that books best sell. I'm holding in my hand the second volume of the Collected Writings of John Murray and I urge this particularly upon your attention.

I think it is without question one of the very finest books we have been privileged to produce and it contains much of the material which John Murray himself prepared in the latter years of his life. And to conclude I'm going to do something which is not at all British. But I want President Patterson to come forward.

We have inscribed this volume to him as a token of our esteem, our friendship, the encouragement he gave us on his recent visit to the UK. And it's only a book but it's a real token, Mr. Patterson, of our Christian debt to you and our affection for you.

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