

2. Faith in Decline

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn up with me the first chapter of Malachi on page 801.

Is it quite warm on the top row here? Can you warmish up there? It's a lot warmer just here than it is down there. It's cold down there, isn't it, Audrey? Is it quite warm even down there? I think it gets warmer.

Does hot air rise? There must be a lot of hot air coming from down there. I'm just going to have a little sip of this brew which looks like water but isn't. It's Billy Bradford's famous special which is calculated to put zing and zest into even the most sleepy of preachers.

So I trust that will be a blessing to us. All right, friends. Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray to the Lord again. God, our Father, indeed we bow before you because you are the great King.

And we ask that you will lift up our hearts and our minds and our understanding and our love and our joy to you tonight. So that we might indeed learn from your word what it is to serve you with all our hearts.

[1 : 21] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, I rather hope that as you heard Malachi chapter 1 being read a few minutes ago, your heart began to sink.

If the Bible passages that detail and expose the shortcomings of God's people don't depress us and make our hearts sink, it means either that we're asleep or that we've grown insensitive to the word of God.

But I do want to encourage you before we look at the sin of God's people as the prophet Malachi exposes it here. The ministry of the Old Testament prophets is a ministry of mercy.

So when they speak strongly and even fiercely, as Malachi does here, about the sins of their contemporaries, they do so because they long to see a revival of faith and joy and obedience in their contemporaries.

So if they sometimes cut with a sharp edge, they cut as a surgeon cuts. The sharp edge hurts, but it's done so as to bring healing and recovery.

[2 : 34] You see, the prophets, as they examine the sins of God's people, are calling the people to repentance. And repentance is such a blessing because it is the only road to the recovery of our spiritual life and our real joy.

If God had finished with his people, if God was determined to be rid of them and to wash his hands off them, he would never have sent them his prophets. It was because he had not finished with his people, because he continued to love them, that he sent the prophets to them so that they might rediscover spiritual health and blessing.

Now this is why we need to hear the message of the Old Testament prophets today. It is a searching message for us, but it's a message that will revive us and strengthen us and set our feet again on the road to useful and joyful service.

Of course, many of the details of Old Testament life are no longer applicable to us. For instance, in tonight's passage, we're dealing with the type of animals that were being brought to the temple for the regular sacrifices.

And of course, we don't need to offer animals today, not since the great sacrifice of Christ has been offered. That's a rather good thing, isn't it? Can you imagine what all that blood would do to our posh new floor?

[3 : 53] And I don't know what the city fathers or Glasgow City Council Health and Safety would do. They'd be down on us like a ton of bricks if we had to do that sort of thing. So the details differ. That's obvious.

But the underlying principles are exactly the same. This passage in Malachi chapter 1 is about the way in which God's people thought of him.

Did they honour him? And revere him? And fear him? Or were they, in effect, despising him? And just going through the motions of living a religious life or a believer's life?

And those are questions that we need to think about today. We don't have to concern ourselves with blemished animal sacrifices, lame goats and sick lambs and so on.

But the state of our hearts, that is something which is of perennial importance. So friends, we must lie back on Dr. Malachi's operating table this evening and prepare to receive the scalpel.

[4 : 51] But when he puts it in, it's for the sake of our recovery and our blessing. The sin-exposing ministry of the Old Testament prophets is always a ministry of mercy.

And all of us need to hear Malachi's message. Because in any church, there's going to be a great variety of people. A mixture. Some of you, I know, are running the race, the Christian life, with great joy and purpose and perseverance.

You're growing as Christians. You're delighted with the Lord and with the Gospel. Others here, I'm sure, are faltering a bit because of difficult and adverse circumstances.

Your little ship, the ship of your life, is facing into a stiff north wind. You're being knocked about by adversity. It's very difficult to hang on in there and keep afloat as a Christian.

And there may be yet others who are faltering because of sin or apathy or coldness of heart. And yet you're here. And it's so good that you are here.

[5 : 53] And yet there's a part of you that wishes you weren't here. There's a part of you that wishes you might be any place where you're not having to listen to a sermon. So we're a great mixture of people.

And yet even the strongest and most vital of Christians need to be probed by the message of Malachi. Because the possibility of spiritual decline is constantly at our elbow.

You could have the faith of a John Calvin or a John Knox. And yet you're still in danger of going into a nosedive before the end of next week. So Malachi's scalpel will expose both the rot and the potential rot.

You may be running the race well, but you're not impervious to temptation or to Satan's fiery darts.

All right, well let's turn to the text in front of us. As I said earlier, the details of the problem are not our details, but the underlying principles of how believers think about God and how believers relate to him are exactly the same for us as they were for Malachi's contemporaries.

Now I'd like to take this chapter under two main headings. The headings might run into each other a little bit, but I want to give you the broad shape of where we're going. First of all, we'll look at Malachi's diagnosis of the needs of the people.

[7 : 10] And secondly, we'll look at God's answer to the problems. So if you like, we'll look at the problems first, and then God's remedy for them. Now the heart and soul of the problem here is that God's people have lost their grip on the nature of God's love for them.

Do you remember last week, if you were here, we saw this in the first few verses, and I just need to restate it. God says to the people in verse 2, I have loved you.

But they reply, how have you loved us? It's as though they can't, they're incredulous, they can't really understand what he's saying. Their memory of the love of God for them is so vague that it seems to have drifted away from them over the horizon.

These people seem to have had every drop of passionate interest in God squeezed out of them.

Now, they have been struggling. We need to understand that. Their times have been very hard.

Yes, they've returned to Jerusalem from the exile in Babylon some 70 or 80 years previously, and they have managed, with the help of God and with the encouragement of their prophets, they've managed to rebuild the temple.

[8 : 23] It's a bit of a second-rate temple compared with the first one. It doesn't have the glories of Solomon's temple, but there it is. And they've managed to reinstate the priesthood, and they've set up and restarted the regular sacrificial system in the temple.

But everything is a shadow of its former glory. I guess they're feeling a little bit like a football club that once upon a time was at the top of the Premier League, but has now dropped down into the third division, and even there is facing relegation.

Jerusalem in 450 BC, that's roughly what we're thinking about here, it was a broken-down little city in the further reaches of the great Persian Empire.

It lacked money, it lacked arms, it lacked political independence. How have you loved us, they say to God. We can't see much sign of it in our national fortunes.

Now God answers them by reminding them in verses 2-5 of the covenant that he had made with them some 1400 years previously, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[9 : 30] I have chosen you, he's saying in verses 2, 3 and 4. Esau I've rejected, I've hated, but I've chosen Jacob and his descendants. I've set my love upon you for time and for eternity.

I am your God and you are my people, you're my treasured possession. So times may be tough, I know they're tough, but I've not gone back on my covenant promise and I never will.

So it wasn't that God's love for them had failed. The problem was that they had lost their grasp on how much he loved them. They were as far from his love as they were from the North Pole.

And the sins and disobediences that Malachi is about to open up before them all stem from the fact that they have lost sight of the greatest reality in the world, which is that God is everlastingly committed to his people in love.

So friends, there's a principle for us to learn. Spiritual decline will begin on the day that we lose sight of God's covenanted, committed, everlasting love for us.

[10 : 36] To look up to God and to know that he loves us everlastingly. That is the beginning of spiritual health. So if that's where the problem begins, in this failure to grasp the love of God, how does the problem go on to show itself in their lives?

Well, it shows itself in God's people bringing worthless, blemished offerings for sacrifice in the temple. And the priests, the spiritual leaders of the people, who should have known better, the priests are colluding with the people and accepting these sick and deficient animals and they're offering them on the Lord's altar.

Now they should have sent the people packing and insisted that they come back with an unblemished animal for sacrifice. But the priests joined in the game and took no responsibility. Now, why was the Old Testament sacrificial so important that it required perfect, unblemished animals to be brought for sacrifice on the Lord's altar?

Well, the answer is that sacrifice brings atonement and it is central to the whole of not only the Old Testament faith but to our gospel as well. God commanded the setting up of a temple in Jerusalem and the centrepiece of the temple is the altar.

On the altar, sacrifices were to be offered regularly and the sacrifice assured the worshipper that his sins were truly forgiven and dealt with.

[12 : 05] The sacrificial animal died in the place of the worshipper. The wages of sin is death. The wages of sin were always death. And the animal died instead of the worshipper.

The animal died as the worshipper's substitute. But there's great emphasis in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy on the importance of the animal being unblemished.

Let me just quote to you from Leviticus 22. You shall not offer anything that has a blemish. Animals blind or disabled or mutilated or having a discharge or an itch or scabs, you shall not offer to the Lord.

You'll remember perhaps that the Apostle Peter in his first letter, chapter 1, speaks of the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice, the great lamb of God, had to be without blemish as he fulfilled and brought to an end that whole sacrificial system by his death on the cross.

Now we have to ask ourselves, why did these Old Testament sacrificial animals have to be unblemished and spotless? Well, the answer, I think, is pretty obvious.

[13 : 21] Think of yourself as a small farmer up in the hill country of Judea. That was a rural economy. You would have had a small flock of sheep. And when the time of the year comes round to take your annual sacrifice up to the temple, you go out to your sheep pen and you look through your crop of lambs for the year.

Just imagine yourself as a small farmer. There you are. You go out to your pen of lambs. You've got maybe 15 or 20. It's the fruit of your labour and husbandry for the year. And you have worked hard as a farmer to bring them up to condition and maturity.

You think back over the months. You helped their mothers at lambing time to bring them into the world. You've protected them as they've grown from lions and bears and robbers. You've shorn them in the heat of summer.

You've provided these lambs with shelter and good food and good water. Some of them are going to be food for your family. You'll slaughter them. You need them. Others, you'll keep on as breeding stock for the following season.

Now, they are a valuable commodity. You've worked hard to bring them up to their present state of fitness and health. They are a very significant element in your domestic economy.

[14 : 32] Now, which of these lambs are you going to select for sacrifice? The temptation is obvious, isn't it? If you've got a runty lamb, an animal that is knock-kneed and bow-legged and has one eye and a twisted neck and seems to be suffering perpetually from worms, that's the one that you're going to be tempted to take up to the temple.

I mean, you will compare that runty little animal with the best ram lamb in the flock. Now, the best ram lamb is the one that draws your eye. It's a beautiful animal. Big, broad, straight-backed, clear-eyed, holds himself like a champion.

You look at him and you say, I couldn't take that one for slaughter. He's the pride of my flock. He's the best one I've bred for years. He's the one I want to keep on as my stud ram for the next year or two.

If I slaughter him, I'll impoverish and weaken my strain, and I'll risk my family's food supply. So I'll take old bandy legs, the runt. The priest up at the temple, he's known me for years.

He's kindly. He understands that I'm not well off. He'll accept that animal. So why does the law of Moses insist that the sacrificial animal should be a good one, an unblemished one?

[15 : 46] Well, precisely because to offer a really good animal is costly to the worshipper. And to offer a costly sacrifice is an expression of the worshipper's love and gratitude.

It's not that the worshipper is somehow paying for atonement or paying for his sins to be forgiven. Not at all. It's all the other way around. The whole of the Old Testament sacrificial system was God's provision for man, not man's way of getting something out of God.

God took all the initiative in setting up the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices, just as he took all the initiative finally in providing the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.

Man cannot make any contribution to the forgiveness of his sins except for the sin for which he needs to be forgiven. So for the Old Testament worshipper to offer an unblemished, fine animal, that was God's way of helping that worshipper to express thankfulness and appreciation.

It was costly to the worshipper. Therefore, it meant something to him. King David understood this principle very well. You may remember the time in the Old Testament history when he was identifying the site on which the temple was to be built in Jerusalem.

[17 : 11] And they settled, after various ups and downs and adventures, on the threshing floor of a man called Arona the Jebusite. And Arona the Jebusite wanted to give to David, I guess he was quite a wealthy man, he wanted to give to David some oxen so that David could offer them in sacrifice on this spot where the temple was to be built.

And so Arona offered him these oxen free of charge. But David insisted on paying for them. He said to Arona, I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.

That's rather the same thing when a man buys his wife a nice piece of jewellery because he loves her. He doesn't go to some little tawdry knick-knack shop in Skegness on the pier or the promenade, does he, and buy her some rotten little piece of jewellery for a fiver.

No, he goes to a good shop in Glasgow. He digs into his bank account and he buys her something really pretty and valuable as an expression of his love and gratitude. It costs him something.

And she realises that because it's cost him something, it means a lot. And this is why the Old Testament worshipper had to bring a valuable, unblemished animal. He wasn't paying for his forgiveness but he was telling the Lord how much he loved him and appreciated him and valued him.

[18 : 34] To give something costly and valuable binds together the one who gives with the one who receives. To offer something costly is an expression of real love.

But you see, Malachi's contemporaries had forgotten how much God loved them and that is why they had forgotten how to show love to him. And the Lord is grieved and indignant about it.

Let me read again from verse 6. A son honours his father and a servant his master. These are obvious things accepted in society.

If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear? Says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name. But you say, how have we despised your name?

By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, how have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised. For when you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil?

[19 : 37] And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor. Will he accept you or show you favour, says the Lord of hosts? Offering these defective animals is evil in God's sight.

And the prophet sharpens his point there by that remark at the end of verse 8. The governor would have been the governor of the province of Judah. A man appointed by the Persian emperor to rule this far away little province.

And the governor's table and household needed to be supplied by the people of Judah. So as a kind of local taxation, the local people, the Jewish people, would have had to furnish the governor's table with regular beasts and other sorts of food.

So Malachi is saying, would you dare to take old runty bandy legs to the Persian governor? You present the governor with a scabby little runt like that and see what happens to you.

See what he thinks of it. You wouldn't dare risk your neck by taking a substandard animal to the governor. Certainly not. Because you're very concerned to be in the governor's good books. And yet you have no concern to please God.

[20 : 48] God has become so remote to you and his covenant love means so little to you that you'll take him any old worthless animal so long as it doesn't drain your bank balance.

When believers lose sight of how greatly God loves us, we lose sight of offering anything valuable out of our lives to God. our relationship with him grows dull and we can find ourselves just going through the motions of a believer's life.

So how might this show in our lives? How might it demonstrate itself in a believer's life or in the life of a congregation, a church? Let me suggest one or two examples.

Think first of the capacity that we have to give love. Let's compare the love that we give to each other with the love that we give to the Lord.

The love that we can give to each other can be so deep and strong and unhesitating. The love, for example, that husbands and wives give to each other.

[21 : 57] The love that parents and grandparents give to their children and grandchildren. Utterly determined, committed love in fact, there are certain people that we know, good friends as well as relatives, that we would do anything for.

We'd empty our bank accounts for them, wouldn't we, to help them. We'd travel halfway across the world to rescue them if they got into difficulties. We'd even give them our kidneys and our bone marrow if that would save them from some horrible illness.

We'd do anything for them. But by comparison, we can give the Lord just the dregs and the dog ends of our capacity for love.

Half-hearted, meager helpings of love. In fact, we can be so reluctant even to give him just an hour or two of our time because we prefer to be watching the football or digging the garden.

Do we think that the Lord is happy with these meager dog ends of our capacity for love? We wouldn't dare offer thin quantities of love like that to our spouses or our children or our good friends, but we take them to God and expect him to be satisfied with them.

[23 : 08] Or think of the trust that we place in other people. There are some people in this world that we would trust absolutely. We'd say, if there's one friend I can rely upon totally without question, it's so and so.

He or she will always be as true as steel to me. I will never doubt that friend. And every ounce of the weight of our confidence we place upon that friend. But by contrast, we reach out a very hesitant and trembling hand to the Lord.

We hardly dare grasp his hand at all, although it is strong enough to uphold the universe. We doubt whether he's able to keep us going for another week.

Contrast the confidence that we place in men with the confidence that we place in God. Isn't it absurd to put so much trust in people who are so frail and yet to place so little trust in the rock of ages?

Or think of our money. We need to contrast the amount of money that we give for gospel purposes with the amount that we spend without two thoughts on our comforts and our indulgences.

[24 : 24] our Christian giving can so easily be just what is left over after we have seen to the satisfying of our own desires and tastes. Isn't that right?

The Old Testament worshipper was tempted to bring this sickly lamb which was worth nothing to him rather than a fine unblemished lamb that was worth a significant part of the family's annual

income.

So let me ask is there something about the Bible's wider message which is going to help us to take a different view of how believers bring their sacrifices and gifts to the Lord?

Yes, I think there is. The Bible teaches us the whole Bible now Malachi 1 certainly teaches this lesson but the whole Bible teaches it that the way to relate to God is to give him simply the best. These sickly animals were no more fit for God's altar in the temple than they were for the Persian governor's table. The gift that was acceptable to God was the unblemished lamb the perfect offering.

[25 : 35] Now what is going to persuade our reluctant hearts to give of our best to the Lord? I think the answer is simple. It is because he has given to us his best.

He has given us the unblemished lamb his only son Jesus Christ. Was it costly for God the Father to give us his son in sacrifice? It was the most costly gift in the history of the world.

The apostle Paul called it the unspeakable gift the gift so costly and wonderful that human words can never express its worth. Now God gave the gift of his son in sacrifice so that we should receive the gift.

Now have we received this gift? Have we received the sin cancelling benefits of the death of God's unblemished lamb? If we have received the gift of God's unblemished lamb man, not only are our sins covered and dealt with, but so much more.

We have been born again into a new creation. We are united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. We have been adopted into the family of God. We belong now to that innumerable company who will be gathered around the throne rejoicing in the lamb of God and his eternal salvation.

[26 : 54] And once we have seen how God has given his unblemished son for our benefit, won't it follow that our whole attitude and life and our possessions will be turned inside out?

These folk in Malachi 1 had lost sight of God's love for them. That's why they were so stingy and so wretched. But God has demonstrated his love for us in presenting his own son to be laid upon the altar.

Now you remember when Abraham had to lay his son upon the altar, his son was restored to him and a substitute was provided. But when God took his son to the altar, his only son, the son that he loved, no substitute could be found.

There could be no substitute because Jesus was already the substitute, your substitute and mine. Now it's when we have seen this overwhelming love for us and have received it and have thanked God for it that our inner world is turned right around.

We cease to be absorbed by our own lives and our own needs and our own self-centred concerns. We become oriented to the concerns and purposes of the one who loves us so deeply.

[28 : 16] We become a body of believers who live for him, a body of believers who are prepared to give him the best of our lives because he was prepared to give us the best of his life.

The love of our hearts rises up to him in response to the love that he has lavished upon us. Now I've already in a sense strayed into my second section.

I think we've begun to see that God's remedy for our problem lies in our grateful consideration of the death of God's son. But let's see what else Malachi chapter one shows us of God's answer to the problem of Malachi's contemporaries.

Let's notice two things. First, we need to notice God's grief and indignation at this failure of love and generosity on the part of his people.

You'll see it comes out in verse 10. Oh, that there were one among you, says the Lord, who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain.

[29 : 19] I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. Now the doors there, of course, are the doors of the temple. So God is saying, I would rather see the temple doors locked, barricaded, closed up for worship, than to have to look down at this charade, this pretend worship that means nothing to the worshipper.

Now sometimes we need to hear this tone of voice from the Lord. It matters deeply to him that we should bring the cream of our hearts and our energies to him. He's not indifferent to us.

If our love for him grows cold, he would rather have no worship at all than the kind of pathetic play-acting worship that was going on in Malachi 1. A few months ago I was preaching at a church one Sunday.

I was away morning and evening at this church, some distance outside Glasgow. And because I was there all day, I was entertained hospitably to lunch by one of the church elders. He and I spent the afternoon together.

And we went out for a walk in the afternoon and we began to talk about the church, his church. And he told me he was worried about it. He said to me, we had another visiting preacher here a couple of weeks back.

[30 : 32] And I asked him what he thought about our church once he'd spent a bit of time with us. And he said, I don't think you're serious. I think you're playing at church.

church. Now that was a very strong criticism, wasn't it, for a visiting preacher to make of a church. But I must confess that as I spent that particular Sunday with that church, I felt I could only agree with what that other minister had said.

There was something about that church that seemed to be saying the right things and doing the right things on the surface. But you felt there was no heart in it, no desire for the blood, toil, tears and sweat and rejoicing of real heart and soul Christianity, which is prepared to spend itself in love and service and generosity.

God would rather shut the temple up than to have to look at mock worship and insincere sacrifice. So let's ask him to help us so to love him that we fear to grieve him.

Well now secondly and last, let's notice that God insists on the greatness of his name. It's the greatness of his name that acts as the incentive to offering acceptable sacrifices.

[31 : 48] Look with me again at verse 10 from partway through that verse. I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations.

And in every place, incense will be offered to my name and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. In scripture, the name of God means not only his reputation, but the revelation of his whole character and purposes.

Jesus shows how concerned he was with the name of God and its greatness when he teaches us to pray, hallowed be your name. May your name be held in the highest honor.

And where, according to verse 11, is God's name to be honored? From the rising of the sun to its setting. In other words, all over the world, as far as you can go to east and west.

Now that's a challenge to the Israelites who might have begun to think that Israel's God was only known in Israel. So God is reminding them that he's not only the king of Israel, but the creator of the whole world and its sovereign.

[33 : 06] And, as if he doesn't make the point strongly enough in verse 11, look on to verse 14. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, an unblemished male, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.

For I am a great king, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. Now, of course, we're tapping into a big biblical theme here. From Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, we know that God is the God of the whole universe, not just the God of Israel.

And early in Genesis, we find that God's saving purposes, which are focused in Abraham's family, right from the beginning are intended to bring blessing worldwide.

And we see the greatness of God's name throughout the Old Testament. Think, for example, of his mastery over the Egyptians and their gods that he expressed at the Red Sea when they were drowned and subdued.

Think of the sovereign power that brought Israel into the land of Canaan, subduing the local peoples who lived there previously. We see God's power determining the history of the Assyrian Empire and the Babylonians and the Persians.

[34 : 16] We see the pagan queen of Sheba coming all the way from North Africa to visit Solomon and finding herself speechless and astonished as she sees the wealth and the order and the provisions of Solomon's kingdom.

The whole of the Old Testament history is a trumpet blast that heralds the glory of God across the face of the world. And then in the New Testament, from the day of Pentecost onwards, we see the greatness of the name not only of God the Father, but of Jesus Christ, that name being carried to the farthest corners of the earth, including the United Kingdom.

So the force of verse 11 and verse 14 is to point out to the Israelites a shocking discrepancy. On the one hand, their God is not only the God of Israel, he's the Lord of all.

His name stands above all other names. It is great across the world, so great that even pagans are beginning to recognize it and bow down before it. But on the other hand, these Israelites are bringing their blemished and valueless offerings.

Malachi is presenting his people with the horrible incongruity of what they're doing. A great king being presented with worthless offerings.

[35 : 36] Well, we must finish. But as I close, let me point out the head and tail of Malachi chapter 1. The chapter begins with the love of God and it ends with the greatness of God.

Malachi is showing us that we need to see both of these things about God. If we will grasp afresh how much he loves us, it will be a delight and a joy to us to bring to him the sacrifices of our energy, our time, our money, our love.

We will lay these things on the altar with glad and generous hearts. In fact, we'll be so delighted that we'll pinch ourselves with wonder at the thought that the God of the universe has covenanted his love to his people.

And if we will grasp afresh how great his name is and how insistent he is that his name receives its due honor, we'll be preserved from living a shallow and careless Christian life.

The mark of his name will be upon us and upon our shared life as a church. And other people will see that mark and will be drawn to him.

[36 : 48] Verse 14. For I am a great king, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray to him.

Our gracious God, we thank you that you remind us here of your greatness and your name is great and is feared and will be feared among the nations.

We thank you too for this challenge to our hearts. And we think of the way that you were not willing to stint in any way as you were prepared to offer your own son to present him as a sacrificial offering so that we might be eternally redeemed.

We don't deserve any of this, our dear Father, but we thank you so much for it. And we pray that you'll give us great joy in our hearts as we go home this evening and that you'll stir us up to return the generosity that you have shown to us with our own generous hearts so that others may see the greatness of Christ and be drawn to him.

We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.