



Date: 12-7-2025

Text: Malachi 2:10-3:5 NLT

Sermon Title: Ingredients for fresh faith: Faithfulness and Fear

What do you do when your faith loses its freshness?

Malachi 2:10–17 NLT

10 Are we not all children of the same Father? Are we not all created by the same God? Then why do we betray each other, violating the covenant of our ancestors? 11 Judah has been unfaithful, and a detestable thing has been done in Israel and in Jerusalem. The men of Judah have defiled the LORD's beloved sanctuary by marrying women who worship idols. 12 May the LORD cut off from the nation of Israel every last man who has done this and yet brings an offering to the LORD of Heaven's Armies. 13 Here is another thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, weeping and groaning because he pays no attention to your offerings and doesn't accept them with pleasure. 14 You cry out, "Why doesn't the LORD accept my worship?" I'll tell you why! Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage vows. 15 Didn't the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. 16 "For I hate divorce!" says the LORD, the God of Israel. "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife." 17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. You have wearied him by saying that all who do evil are good in the LORD's sight, and he is pleased with them. You have wearied him by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

This is the third dispute between God and His people.

God confronts them on unfaithfulness:

Notes:

1. Unfaithful to _____

2. Unfaithful to _____

3. Unfaithful to _____

Ingredient # 1 _____

Malachi 3:1–5 NLT

1 "Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. 2 "But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. 3 He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning

away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD. 4 Then once more the LORD will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past. 5 "At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

Notes:

1. "Look! I am sending my messenger..." (v.1)
 - This is prophecy—fulfilled in:
 - John the Baptist ([Matt 11:10](#); [Mark 1:2](#))
 - With Elijah imagery ([Mal 4:5](#))

2. Purpose of His coming: _____, not destruction
 - God is not coming to crush His people, but to purify them.
 - o "Like a refiner's fire..."
 - o "Like launderer's soap..."
 - Purifying the sons of Levi → restoring worship
 - o He is purifying:
 - Their worship
 - Their relationships
 - Their justice
 - Their integrity
 - Their compassion

3. God's judgment targets those who refuse _____ (v.5):

- Sorcery
- Adultery
- Lying
- Oppressing workers
- Ignoring widows and orphans
- Abusing foreigners

"Yet do not fear Me," says the LORD

Ingredient # 2 _____

A Fear Born of Awe, Reverence, and Respect
Why fear the Lord?

Here are the two questions Malachi confronts us with:

1. Where is the Lord calling you to renewed faithfulness?

Be honest:

The refiner doesn't destroy silver—He restores it.

Where is God refining you?

2. Where has the fear of the Lord grown weak?

Fresh faith starts with fresh fear of the Lord.

So what needs to change today?

A confession?

A conversation you've been avoiding?

A return to a spiritual discipline?

A step of obedience?

Notes:

COVENANT

A solemn agreement between two or more parties, made binding by some sort of oath (cf. Ger. *Bund*). What is mutually agreed upon is usually the future conduct of one or both of the parties concerned. “Covenant”-type relationships were ubiquitous in antiquity, and in the Bible they are undoubtedly alluded to more frequently than a simple study of Heb. *bērīt* and Gk. *diathēkē* would suggest. Such relationships might include compacts or pledges between private persons (e.g., Ruth 1:16–17; 3:11–13; Exod. 21:2–6), agreements or compacts between a king and private persons (cf. Judg. 4:17; 2 Sam. 19:31–39), treaties or alliances between kings and/or political states (1 Kgs. 5:1 [MT 15]; 2 Kgs. 24:17; cf. Ps. 2:1–3; Isa. 30:1), promissory oaths proclaiming official policies (Neh. 5:11–13; 9:38–10:39 [10:1–40]), and covenants between Yahweh and human beings (e.g., Gen. 25:23; 1 Kgs. 14:7–19; 2 Kgs. 9:6–10; cf. Gen. 12:1–3; 2 Sam. 7; 21:7). (The term *bērīt* does not occur in the preceding references.)

Covenant and Moral Character

The viability of covenant relationships—in stark contrast to legal ones—depends solely upon the integrity of those partners actually making promises under oath. The partners are directly accountable to one another, not to some judicial overseer. If the partners are insincere in making promises or unreliable in keeping them, then the relationship is in jeopardy; its continued viability now depends upon the repentance of the offending party and the ability of the offended party to forgive.

Because the ethical character of the covenant-makers is so crucial, almost all covenants have a spiritual dimension insofar as they depend upon a tangible commitment to such abstractions as honesty, integrity, loyalty, trust, selflessness, and love. Not surprisingly, oaths invoking the transcendent (i.e., the gods) were a common feature of covenant-making, in the hopes that this would help solidify the commitment to promise-keeping. At a time when the gods were taken seriously as monitors of human integrity and when the effective reach of state government could be quite limited, covenants filled the vacuum as functioning instruments controlling human behavior.

Old Testament

Where God is Not a Partner

During the course of the millennium in which biblical texts were composed Heb. *bērīt* did not enjoy the same stability as the English word “covenant.” When referring to certain relationships between human beings, *bērīt* indeed corresponds very closely to the English term (and Ger. *Bund*), unmistakably referring to bilateral agreements such as pacts, alliances, and treaties. Included are compacts or pledges between private persons (e.g., Gen. 31:44; 1 Sam. 18:3; 2 Kgs. 11:4; Prov. 2:17), agreements or compacts between a king and private persons (e.g., Gen. 21:27; 26:28; 2 Sam. 3:12; Dan. 9:27), treaties or alliances between kings and/or political states (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:1–3; 1 Kgs. 5:12 [26]; 15:19; Hos. 12:1 [2]; cf. Ps. 83:5 [6]), and leagues involving different social groups (e.g., Exod. 23:32; Josh. 9).

In time, *bērît* could be applied to the oath activating the relationship: a *bērît* could thus be any solemn promise made binding by an oath, regardless of whether or not it constituted a bilateral agreement. Thus in later biblical texts it could be applied to “promissory oaths,” where one party unilaterally pledges itself to a certain course of action or policy (e.g., Jer. 34:8–18; 2 Kgs. 23:3; 2 Chr. 15:12; at best, Yahweh was invoked [by oath?] to enhance the solemnity of the act, although in none of the latter three texts does the narrator actually depict Yahweh even being aware of the proceedings, much less being a party to them). Frequently this commitment is forcibly extracted, giving the impression that *bērît* is not a “covenant” but an “imposed obligation” (Ger. *Verpflichtung*).

Where God is Under Obligation

However, when referring to relationships between God and human beings, it is not immediately clear that *bērît* conveys the same sense as the English “covenant.” When God makes a solemn promise bestowing favors on certain individuals (e.g., Abraham, Phinehas, David), a special relationship is created, but it appears to resemble more of a “charter” (a grant of rights by a sovereign) than a mutually agreed-upon “covenant” (e.g., Gen. 6:18–21; 9:1–17; 15, 17; 2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 54:9–10). Indeed, this type of *bērît* (where God functions as the sovereign) is clearly modeled after the royal grants that were well known in the ancient Near East.

Where Israel is Under Obligation to God: Sinai

The case is far less clear for the “Sinai covenant” associated with the Ten Commandments and the rest of the biblical laws. It is not surprising that this covenant receives the most attention in the Bible: it alone spells out what Israel must do to maintain its special relationship with God. Arguably, all biblical covenants where Israelites have sworn obligations to God (e.g., Exod. 19:5; Jer. 11:2–10; Deut. 29:1 [28:69]–30:20; Josh. 24; Mal. 2:4–9 [cf. Num. 25:12–13]) are either subsumed in the Sinai *bērît* or constitute renewals of it.

It is not even clear whether this “covenant” was initially labeled *bērît*: Some evidence suggests that it was referred to instead as the *dēbārîm*, “statements (of obligation?)” or “terms (of an agreement?),” *’ālâ*, “oath,” or *’ēdût*, “sworn obligation.” What was this Sinai *bērît*, and how was it originally regarded by the ancient Israelites? Was it a true “covenant” (*Bund*) between God and Israel, analogous to a treaty/pact, a mutually agreed-upon relationship? Or was it an “imposed obligation” (*Verpflichtung*), a unilateral arrangement by God that Israel had little choice but to accept?

Later Traditions About the Sinai Bērît

Postexilic Period

Questions linger about how the Sinai *bērît* was regarded by the ancient Israelites prior to the 7th-century—indeed, some scholars doubt that the idea of a Sinai *bērît* even existed before then. The issue becomes clearer during the postexilic period with the rise of early Judaism (6th–5th centuries and later). As Mosaic law became a more dominant force in

shaping Judean identity, *bērît* became increasingly synonymous with *tôrâ*, “law”: It referred to the obligations that a faithful Jew was expected to perform. Regardless of what it may have meant earlier, the Mosaic *bērît* came to be regarded now as obligations God had imposed upon the Israelites.

Hellenistic Period: Sinai as Diathékē

When combined with late-5th-century injunctions against intermarriage (Ezra 10:3–5), the Sinai *bērît* came to be associated with Judean ethnicity. By the Hellenistic period it had become viewed traditionally as the special religio-cultural possession of the Jews, a sign of their “election” as God’s “chosen people” (cf. Rom. 9:4). Greek-speaking Jews believed this *bērît* to be roughly synonymous with Gk. *diathékē*, “an order or institution established by authority” (such as God), although in the technical sense it could refer to a deceased person’s “last will and testament,” yielding an interesting paradox in the claim that the *diathékē* was God’s (cf. Gal. 3:15–18; Heb. 9:16–17)!

The Sinai *diathékē*—and its numerous laws (Gk. *nómoi*)—came to be viewed as God’s ultimate “will” for Israel, the special cultural “heritage” or “legacy” that he had irrevocably “bequeathed” exclusively to the Jews. Readers of the Greek Bible—including apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature—almost certainly understood God’s covenants to be the unilateral and ultimate expressions of his binding will and disposition (whether toward Israel, Abraham, David, or whatever), not some mutual agreement between two parties (which would have been conveyed instead through Gk. *synthékē*).

New Testament

Jesus. Jesus seems not to have accepted as authoritative these later connotations, but it is difficult to plot his actual thought on the matter since he avoids using *bērît/diathékē* terminology. He seems to have regarded Israel’s bond with God as a dynamic process of interrelatedness (which he labeled “kingdom/rule of God”), not a theologoumenon designating Israel’s traditional heritage. His reliance upon more archaic patterns of covenant thought becomes clearer when we see him as a “reformer” insisting that Israel is now *directly* accountable to God and to the higher righteousness implied in the Law (i.e., the stipulations of the Sinai *bērît*), and no longer accountable to God *indirectly* through adherence to the *modus operandi* of accumulated religious tradition.

Perhaps in a parody of the traditional view that *bērît* was (the “departed”?) God’s final and binding “testament” (*diathékē*) for Israel, Jesus’ parables frequently depicted God as an absentee landlord, a rich man on a journey, a king off to a distant land, whose return always spells disaster for those entrusted with the master’s business (i.e., oversight of the religious community). The keepers of Jewish tradition correctly understood that such parables and similar teachings about God’s “coming” kingdom were aimed at them, and they responded ruthlessly (Matt. 21:45–46). The source of conflict between them and Jesus was two competing (and authoritative) views about the essence and relevance of Israel’s *bērît* with God: for them it was a theologoumenon that sanctified the traditions over which they presided; for Jesus it was a historical enactment that had little regard for human (or Jewish) institutions or hierarchies.

At the end Jesus acquiesced to their ruthlessness, but not before speaking of a “new covenant” that would be inaugurated by his death and would draw his disciples into the

ultimate relationship with Israel's God (Mark 14:24; 1 Cor. 11:25). The connection is unmistakably to the eschatological *bērīt* anticipated in Jer. 31.

Paul. When referring to Sinai, Paul uses *bērīt/diathékē* terminology quite sparingly and always with significant qualification. This is not surprising given his conviction that the Sinai covenant had not supplanted the Abrahamic and that it no longer has a role to play in defining the distinctive essence of Israel's religion (Gal. 3:15–18).

In Rom. 9:4 he lists *diathékai* (plural!) as part of the distinctive heritage or legacy that God had bequeathed Israel. While this usage is typical of 1st-century (esp. Hellenistic) Judaism, it is not clear which *diathékai* Paul has in mind. In 2 Cor. 3:14 he explicitly links the “old *diathékē*” to Mosaic legislation written in the Pentateuch, and probably understands it in the traditional sense of imposed obligations instituted by God (cf. “first *diathékē*” in Heb. 9:1).

Paul's animating belief that Judaism was no longer to be based on divinely-imposed obligations not only justified his use of the adjective “old” (Gk. *palaiá*) but also found expression in his allegory of Hagar and Sarah, each of whom represents a *diathékē* (Gal. 4:21–31). Hagar represents the Sinai (= “old”?) *diathékē*, which is clearly an “imposed obligation” (*douleía*, “bondage, slavery”). In fact, when referring to Sinai and its operational dynamic Paul's word of choice is usually *nómos* (“law” or “customary obligation”), not *diathékē*. For Paul, the equation of *diathékē* with “imposed obligation” or “law” adequately and accurately summarizes the current state of traditional Judaism (represented by Jerusalem, Gal. 4:25), in which religion (like Ishmael) is conceived with respect to the principle of relying on self and on the age-old way of doing things (i.e., “the flesh”).

In this allegory Sarah represents a heavenly (= “new”?) *diathékē* for Israel that is clearly not an imposed obligation. It summarizes the Christian religious worldview, which (like Isaac) is conceived with respect to the principle of a living relationship (i.e., “the spirit”) of trust in God's ability to keep his promises. In fact, when referring to this heavenly covenant and its operational dynamic Paul's word of choice is not *diathékē* but *epangelía*, “promise.” Paul, like Jesus, thus expresses the idea that “covenant” draws one into a living relationship of direct accountability to a partner, not conformity to religious traditions, institutions, and personnel who claim to mediate that relationship.

This notion that Israel's special bond with God is not an “imposed obligation” may not be quite so “new.” It could be rooted in archaic patterns of meaning that still understood God's *bērīt* with Israel—even the Sinai *bērīt*—more on the model of a mutual agreement.

Issues in Understanding the Sinai Covenant

For the past century scholars have vigorously debated the nature, antiquity, and significance of the Sinai covenant tradition. At one pole are scholars (e.g., George E. Mendenhall, Delbert R. Hillers) who claim that (1) the Sinai covenant tradition in fact goes back to Moses; (2) from the outset it was a fundamental (if not the definitive) component of Israelite religion; (3) its religious ethic actually functioned historically as the basis of Israelite life and society in the centuries before the Hebrew monarchy; and (4) when applied to the Sinai event, *bērīt* indeed meant approximately the same as the English word “covenant” (*Bund*). At the other pole are those (e.g., Lothar Perlt, Ernest W. Nicholson) who claim that (1) the Sinai covenant tradition arose later during the Monarchy; (2) it was simply one among many elements of Israelite religion; (3) it was

never more than a theological construct or idea (theologoumenon) that helped sanctify an Israelite society actually rooted in the more secular ethic of national self-interest; and (4) *bērīt* when applied to Sinai intrinsically meant “obligation” (*Verpflichtung*).

On one point they agree: Hebrew thinking about Israel’s *bērīt* with Yahweh was shaped by a familiarity with the international treaty conventions prevalent in biblical times. However, here the agreement ends. Actual copies of these treaties have been uncovered, principally those of the Hittites (1400–1200 B.C.—time of Moses?) and of the Assyrians (750–650—time of the prophets). They exhibit sufficient similarities (preambles, stipulations, witnesses, curses) to suggest a general continuity in the treaty pattern over 800 years. Yet there are important differences both in actual form and in rhetorical tone, revealing subtle but important differences in treaty conventions during biblical times. The question is *which* treaty conventions of *which* period influenced Hebrew thought about Israel’s relationship to God.

The 2nd-millennium texts usually include a historical prologue depicting the history of prior good relations between the two parties, particularly the beneficent deeds of the suzerain on behalf of the vassal. The 1st-millennium texts almost always lack this.

The 2nd-millennium texts include not only curses (a litany of disasters and misfortunes to befall a disobedient vassal) but also blessings (a litany of benefits to befall a faithful vassal). The 1st-millennium texts contain only curses.

Consequently, The 2nd-millennium Hittite texts reflect a sophisticated and artful attempt to underscore the presumed good will and integrity of everyone involved: a vassal enters the relationship and willingly accepts its obligations because the relationship with his overlord is a mutually beneficial and satisfactory one. The public rhetorical appeal in these texts is to gratitude, reciprocity, fellowship, and honor. There is little doubt that these texts represent true “covenants” (i.e., mutual agreements; *Bunde*) between two parties.

the 1st-millennium Assyrian texts are comparatively unsophisticated, constituting brutally naked attempts to coerce obedience. A vassal accepts his obligations because they have been imposed upon him and because he is tangibly afraid of the consequences of disloyalty. The public rhetorical appeal is to fear and intimidation; there is not even the pretext of a real choice, much less the pretext that the vassal’s interests are of any concern. Although initially labeled “(vassal) treaties,” these texts are actually “loyalty oaths.” They are not true “covenants,” but “imposed obligations” (*Verpflichtungen*).

All scholars agree that biblical texts depicting the Sinai *bērīt* have at least been “filtered” through the 1st-millennium lens of the biblical writers, and that the parallels are striking between the Assyrian loyalty oaths and the Sinai tradition (particularly as recounted in Deuteronomy). Those who believe that the Sinai tradition arose late emphasize (1) these parallels, especially verbatim parallels between Assyrian curses and those associated with the Sinai *bērīt*; (2) the fact that *bērīt* traditionally seems to have meant “imposed obligation”; and (3) the conspicuous lack of references to a Sinai *bērīt* in the 8th-century prophets (in contrast to its emphatic use later).

Those who believe that the Sinai tradition arose early emphasize parallels with the 2nd-millennium Hittite treaties, particularly to (1) the rhetorical tone of the Sinai tradition (Yahweh attempting to “woo” rather than frighten Israel into a relationship); (2) the apparent formal analogues to the historical prologue (Exod. 20:2; cf. Josh. 24, a late text); and (3) the inclusion of blessings (even in a demonstrably late text such as Deut. 28). This suggests that the Sinai *bērīt* (or whatever it was originally called) was not originally

regarded as an “imposed obligation” but as a “covenant” in the true sense of the word. If, in time, the word *bērīt* became “contaminated” (e.g., by the elevation of the Davidic charter in Judean culture), 8th-century prophets would have felt uneasy applying it to the Sinai tradition. Hosea’s resort to the marriage analogy and even Amos’ questioning of Israel’s sense of privileged election (Amos 9:7; cf. 3:2) presuppose some type of “covenant bond” between God and Israel, as does the prophetic “lawsuit” indicting Israel for failure to keep its obligations to God.

The New Covenant

Regardless of when the Sinai tradition arose, by the late 7th–early 6th century as Deuteronomistic writers were busy promoting it as the major *bērīt* in Judean culture, other biblical writers were convinced that it had outlived its usefulness. They were anticipating a new *bērīt* between God and Israel (Isa. 55:3; 59:21; Jer. 31:31–34; 32:37–41; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Hos. 2:18 [20]). In this *bērīt*, obligations would not be forcibly imposed but freely embraced due to a transformation of the human heart. The early Christians linked this prophetic hope with Jesus’ Last Supper allusion to a “new covenant.” For them, the resurrection of Jesus not only vindicated his teaching but linked God’s ultimate “will” or “testament” not to the Sinai *bērīt* but to the fellowship of those who are “in Christ.”

The Christian tradition of dividing the Bible into two “testaments” (“Old” and “New”) indicates that Christianity has seen “covenant” as the organizing principle providing meaning and coherence to the whole of Scripture. Likewise, Judaism’s emphasis on Israel’s unique status as “the people of God” signals its awareness of the definitive role that “covenant” plays in shaping religious life and identity. In both these religious traditions, the covenant relationship being extolled is that between God and God’s people, whether understood as the Jewish people or the faithful Church. To study the biblical notion of “covenant” is thus to study what is arguably *the* central or core concept of the entire Bible.

Bibliography. D. R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore, 1969); J. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (San Francisco, 1987); D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, rev. ed. AB 21A (Rome, 1978); G. E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *BA* 17 (1954): 50–76; repr. in *BAR* 3, ed. E. F. Campbell and D. N. Freedman (Garden City, 1970), 25–53; E. W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1986); R. A. Oden, Jr., “The Place of Covenant in the Religion of Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride (Philadelphia, 1987), 429–47.¹

¹ Gary A. Herion, “[Covenant](#),” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 288–292.