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## SESSION TWELVE

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# The Warning Against Shallow Worship

### SESSION SUMMARY

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Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him—or perhaps more specifically, how they shouldn't worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry or heretical doctrine, their worship had grown stale and lifeless. The Word delivered to Malachi was a wake-up call to a people who engaged in half-hearted worship, and Malachi's message resonates with us still today.

### SCRIPTURE

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Malachi 1:6-14; 3:7-12; 4:1-6

# THE POINT

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**Worship involves giving God our very best.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell argued that “overnight success” is rare. It is more frequently spelled with the letters *W-O-R-K*. His book offers examples of successful people: J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Beatles, Bill Gates, and so on. He shows how these people were not instantly successful; they became successful by dedicating at least 10,000 hours to their particular crafts—programming, practicing, and putting in hours when nobody was looking.<sup>1</sup>

If you were asked what kinds of adjectives could describe a professional athlete, you might respond with words like *excellent*, *devoted*, *committed*, or *passionate*. The same adjectives would apply to a prominent entrepreneur, a successful businessman, or a talented actor.

- **Who is someone whose success you admire? What athlete, musician, or writer has abilities you appreciate? How would you describe them?**

Now, let’s change the question. Instead of describing an athlete or businessman, what if we asked which adjectives would describe your devotion to and worship of the Lord? Would you give the same adjectives in order to describe your worship?

Given the pervasiveness of human sin and the hardness of the human heart, it is not surprising that Israel lacked devotion, passion, and commitment in the time of the prophet Malachi. God had given His people the best: He had redeemed them from the Egyptians, led them through the desert, shown them the land, promised the basic necessities for life (i.e., milk and honey), marched them into the promised land, and conquered their enemies.

But what was their response to His steadfast love for them? While one would think it would be extravagant praise and loving obedience, they instead offered him what can only be described as worthless worship. And, on this sad note, the Old Testament drew to a close.

### Option 2

The word *worship* means to express one’s admiration, awe, reverence, or love for someone or something. In Christian circles we know worship as the way we express our love back to God.

- **What comes to mind when you hear the word *worship*?**

Biblical worship isn’t a performance or empty praise, but showing our wholehearted devotion to God. We can worship in many ways—through music, prayer, reading the Bible—knowing that no matter the expression, worship stems from a heart that is completely satisfied in God.

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**Worship involves giving God our very best.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Malachi** - prophet of God; his book is the last book of the Old Testament

## PLOT

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As our journey through the Old Testament comes to an end, we take a look at the Book of Malachi. This final book in the Old Testament speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him—or perhaps more specifically, how they shouldn't worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry, their worship had grown stale and lifeless.

## TIMELINE

### SHALLOW WORSHIP

*The people fail to give God their very best.*

*\*Beginning Spring 2017*

### FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

*The arrival of the Promised One.*

### MARY PRAISES GOD

*God works in the heart and life of Mary.*

## THE PEOPLE COMMITTED SHALLOW WORSHIP

When we think of biblical commandments, we tend not to think of the 613 commandments given in the Old Testament, but of the “Big Ten,” which we see on posters and learn about in church. One of these commandments explicitly tells us to honor our father and mother. Is it any wonder, then, that God expects obedience and honor as our spiritual Father? Look at how God addressed His people through His prophet Malachi:

**“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? 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. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? 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 favor? says the LORD of hosts. And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 1:6-9)**

Notice that God gave two indictments against His people at the beginning: they showed Him no honor, and they showed Him no fear. Not only did they *not* honor and fear Him, but they *despised* His name.

*Despising* means *having an attitude of ongoing disrespect for someone or something*; it refers to the act of conveying insignificance or worthlessness upon an object, idea, or individual. The text shows us that the people did this to God by offering crippled, lame, or blinded animals to the Lord rather than the perfect, blameless sacrifice He requested. He even asked them, “Do you think that if you gave even the governor what you’re giving me that he’d be okay with it?”

- In what ways do people “despise” God’s name today? (p. 84, PSG)
- How can you guard against this in your own life? (p. 84, PSG)

**Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! 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. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food**

**may be despised. But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, 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. (Mal. 1:10-14)**

We could try to put this into perspective for a 21st century audience by saying, "Shut the doors to every church in the world. No more church. No more meetings. It's over." But that analogy breaks down significantly because the Israelites were dependent upon the temple for everything. They were dependent upon the temple for their sacrifices. They were dependent upon the temple for the forgiveness of their sins, for their festivals, for their feast days, and for their offerings. The temple was even the center of national banking and Jewish political power. Without the temple, the nation would cease to function.

Because of how flippantly the priests (and, consequently, the rest of Israel) treated Him, God's anger against them was kindled. This was not an image of an unjust, angry God. He asked for the honor that is rightly due Him. It was the people's lack of respect that ignited God's anger against them because it was a minimization of His worth. The greatness of God should drive us to our knees and cause us to give Him the absolute best of everything that we have to show our adoration.

## **THEIR SHALLOW WORSHIP MINIMIZED GOD'S WORTH**

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On a rainy Sunday afternoon, a little brother and sister were playing "Noah's Ark." Their bathtub functioned as the floodwaters and an old shoebox was a makeshift ark. After the floodwaters had receded, the children decided to present an offering to God. The boy, who was playing the part of Noah, said to his sister (Mrs. Noah), "Here, let's offer up one of your toy animals as a sacrifice." She protested, "No, let's use one of your animals instead!" Her brother replied, "Not a chance!" After a time of disagreement, the girl ran into their attic. Moments later she emerged with an old toy lamb. It was dingy and dirty. Its head was smashed in, and its tail was severed from its body. "Here," she said, "let's use this as our misguided sacrifice. We will never play with it again anyway." Sadly, this story resembles many of us—the motivation of our hearts in serving or sacrificing to God is often. We offer God what's left and not what's best.

In the first half of the Book of Malachi, God questioned the quality of the sacrifices of the people. Then, He questioned the quantity of their sacrifices.

**From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And**

thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 3:7-12)

After hearing from God, the Israelites questioned their departure from God by denying that they ever left in the first place. After all, they still sacrificed to Him, right?

Before we harshly judge the Israelites, we must remember how easy it is to wander. “Far from God?” a churchgoer might say, “I am not far from God! I go to church every week! How can you say that I am far from God?” Many are blinded to the fact that they are blinded.

Essentially, God told the Israelites that despite their believing otherwise, they were far from Him. God had challenged the Israelites previously for their poor sacrifices, their lack of worship, their idolatry, and their faithlessness. *The root of the problem is the heart.* They had misappropriated their funds. In other words, they failed to deal responsibly with what God had given them. Giving is an indication of the state of our hearts, and measures how much we value God.

## SHALLOW WORSHIP DESERVES JUDGMENT

The text speaks of a future light in the midst of Israel’s darkness. Israel expected unending blessings because of their position as God’s chosen people. However, God first informed them that He would come to set all wrongs right—beginning the process with their lukewarm worship.

**“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Mal. 4:1-6)**

## TIMELINE

### GOD WITH US

*The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.*

### JESUS' EARLY YEARS

*Jesus grows in favor with God and men.*

### JESUS' BAPTISM

*The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.*

Israel looked forward to the day when the Lord would repay wrongdoing, but they did not realize that it was a day of judgment. When the Lord returns again, the same conditions apply: He will exact justice, and it is up to us to be prepared for it. The question we must ask ourselves is, “Am I ready for this second coming?”

The final two verses of Malachi offer the ultimate cliffhanger to the Old Testament. He ends with a promise of someone to come and a warning about things already done. “Look,” Malachi wrote, “I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before Day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Worship (p. 86, PSG)

*While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the exact due of praise and adoration that He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only at a personal level within a Christian's life, but also in joining with other Christians in the corporate act of worship and stewarding our gifts for the glory of God. Corporate worship not only serves to edify and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to non-believers of the greatness of God.*

## CHRIST CONNECTION

In the New Testament, a priest named Zechariah was told that he and his wife would have a son in their old age, and he was struck mute for disbelieving the angel's message. Zechariah's son was John the Baptist. When he was finally born, Zechariah's tongue was loosed, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, immediately praised God, and prophesied that John would prepare the way for Jesus. The phrase “sunrise ... from on high” (Luke 1:78) was most likely a direct reference to Malachi 4:2. The “sun of righteousness” was the Messiah to come; the “sun” is the Son—Jesus Christ. The next book of the Bible begins the story of the Son of God's arrival on earth.

# YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Sometimes people assume they are in a right relationship with God, but they are not. What are some ways we can guard against having such a false notion?**  
*One way would be to take a step back and examine whether there is any fruit in one's own life that would serve as a sign of saving grace—good works that naturally flow from an existing relationship with Jesus. Other signs to look at would be whether one has experienced a change of heart towards God, being fully satisfied with Jesus and all that He has done for him or her.*
- **What are some areas of life where students struggle to give God their best?**  
*Answers will vary.*
- **How does this passage relate to Jesus' words about our hearts being where our treasure is?** *Answers will vary.*
- **After having gone through the Old Testament up to this point, what have been some highlights for you? What individuals and/or accounts have challenged you most in your walk with Christ?** *Answers will vary.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*

# YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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We learned from Malachi 3:6-12 about our actions and God's reactions. First, the Book of Malachi teaches that if we obey the mandates of God in humble and faithful service, we can expect God to act. This does not mean He rewards us immediately or even financially; however, when we trust God with what we have, we experience His blessing.

- **How should Christians understand the promise that God will bless Israel if they obey?** *There are obvious blessings to obeying God, even if those blessings aren't immediately seen. In fact, it could be the case that God's blessings through some acts of obedience won't be seen until this life ends.*
- **What are some ways this idea could be misunderstood and misapplied?** *Some people jump to the conclusion that obedience automatically leads to health, wealth, and prosperity. However, this type of thinking is unbiblical.*



## HEART

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God calls us to give the very best of everything we have out of love for Him. In fact, Scripture teaches that followers of Christ should be in the habit of offering up these five things in particular: Our bodies (Rom. 12:1-2), our finances (Phil. 4:14-18), our praise (Heb. 13:15), our works (Heb. 13:16), and our witness (Rom. 15:16). In light of God's greatness and everything He freely offers to us through His Son, we should be willing to joyfully submit all things to Him in response.

- **In what ways does our worship of God through these five offerings display God's greatness?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What do we communicate about our view of God and His grace toward us when we fail to give Him our very best?** *Answers will vary.*



## HANDS

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We learn from these texts that God has blessed us to be a blessing to others. We are to give the Lord our time, talents, and treasures for both His glory and the good of others. As Jim Elliot said, "A man is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

- **What are some ways you are intentionally seeking to be a blessing to others with your time, talents, and treasures?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How might your blessing others in this way point them to Christ?** *Answers will vary.*

## ► ADDITIONAL INFO

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### LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #11, which contains a quote poster related to the topic of worship.

### SOURCES

1. Malcom Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan](http://lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**

# STUDY PLAN

## YEAR 1

### Fall 2015

God the Creator (Genesis 1-11)  
God the Covenant-Maker  
(Genesis 12-50)

### Winter 2016

God the Redeemer  
(Exodus)  
God the Lawgiver  
(Exodus, Leviticus,  
Deuteronomy)

### Spring 2016

God the Savior  
(Numbers, Joshua)  
God the Judge (Judges,  
Ruth, 1 Samuel)

### Summer 2016

God the King (1-2 Samuel)  
God All Wise (1 Kings, Job,  
Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

## YEAR 2

### Fall 2016

God the Revealer  
(1-2 Kings, Isaiah)  
God the Pursuer (Major  
and Minor Prophets,  
1-2 Chronicles)

### Winter 2017

God the Sustainer  
(Daniel, Ezra)  
God the Provider (Esther,  
Nehemiah, Malachi)

### Spring 2017

God the Son (Gospels)  
God Among Us (Gospels)

### Summer 2017

Jesus the Storyteller  
(Synoptic Gospels)  
Jesus the Miracle-Worker  
(Gospels)

## YEAR 3

### Fall 2017

Jesus the Savior (Gospels)  
Jesus the Risen King  
(Gospels, Acts)

### Winter 2018

The Spirit Who  
Empowers (Acts)  
The God Who Sends (Acts)

### Spring 2018

The God Who Directs His  
People (Epistles)  
The God Who Changes  
Us (Epistles)

### Summer 2018

God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)  
The God Who Makes All  
Things New (Epistles,  
Revelation)