

Wanted Alive: Worship. Last seen ...
Malachi 2:1-9

The following notice was posted on the bulletin board in a business office: *It has come to management's attention that workers dying on the job are failing to fall down. This practice must stop as it becomes impossible to distinguish between death and the natural movement of the staff. Any employee found dead in an upright position will be dropped from the payroll.* You know what's sad? It may actually apply in some places. You know what's even sadder? It does apply in some churches.

Last week we discovered that when our focus is not on God our worship and service easily changes from an act of love to a chore. We do what's required, but our lifeless appearance reveals a lack of enthusiasm for God, let alone right living. There is no way to tell the difference between life and death, between the church and the world, and the priests are to blame. It was the case in the Israel. Listen to what God says through Malachi (**Read Text**).

God seems especially displeased with the priests; and he has good reason to be. They should have been a living testimony to the life and joy that comes from serving an awesome God. Instead of honoring God, worship had become a chore. God was getting the leftovers, the deformed, diseased, and scrawny, when he deserved the best. The priests should have refused these "offerings" but, because worship and service had become for them a chore, they caused the people to stumble in their relationship with God. So God, through Malachi, threatens to send a curse on the priests and to cause their blessings to become curses upon the people. These aren't words of anger as much as they are words of heart-break.

God had a special covenant with the tribe of Levi. After God had brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt and while Moses was on Mount Sinai with God for 40 days receiving God's instructions as to how they were to conduct themselves as a nation set apart for God, the people

grew restless and demanded that Aaron make them something to represent God. So a golden calf was made and the people began to worship the calf. When Moses came down from the mountain he called out, “Who is for the Lord?” and the Levites came forward and became instruments of God’s judgment on the people.

For their faithfulness, God made a covenant with them. Instead of receiving a portion of land as their inheritance, the tribe of Levi would be set apart for special service to God. The Levites were to point the way to God. Certain families from the Levites God chose as priests to serve as messenger of the Lord Almighty. The priests and Levites took their responsibilities seriously. The Levites had a reputation of revering God, teaching truth, and living good and righteous lives. When the Levites were faithful to God, the nation of Israel was faithful.

But the priests had neglected the covenant. They no longer served God and the people by faithful service. Instead of standing firm and focusing the people on God they tried not to offend anyone. Instead of teaching, admonishing, and calling the people to repentance they opted for making the people feel good about themselves. Instead of revering and standing in awe of God they were more concerned about what the people might think. In essence, they revered and feared the people, not God.

About this time you are probably wondering why I am preaching this message to you. It would seem this message is for me; and it is. My primary job is to be an example to you of the life and joy of serving and loving our awesome God. My primary responsibility is to teach you how to live a life of love and service to the One who gives us life. And because this is my role that I encourage you to be in worship, reading God’s Word, attending Bible studies, and remembering that we are to worship God in all that we do.

But, I am not the only priest in this sanctuary. Read with me what Peter tells us, “*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy*” (1Pt.2:9-10). God has chosen you and set you apart as priests to serve Him and to be an example of the life and joy of serving and loving our awesome God. We all have been given the distinct responsibility of “declaring the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.” We have been given the “light of the world” to shine into the world’s darkness so people can have life. We can’t do this with dead worship – in church or in our life offering. Why are so many churches lifeless? And how is it individual Christians become so lifeless? Many reasons may be offered, but I suggest they fall under one of four categories.

1. *Worship is lifeless because there isn’t yet new birth.* Jesus said we must be born again, of the Spirit. This takes place when we believe in Jesus Christ and accept Him as Savior and Lord of our life. Some people go through the motions of faith because of parents influence, or social connections, or the misguided belief that going to church means you’re a Christian. But until we believe we are still dead in our sins (Eph.2:1). We cannot truly exhibit alive worship until we are first alive in Christ.

2. *Worship becomes lifeless when it is choked out.* Like seeds planted in the weeds, when the tasks, pleasures, cares, and frustrations of life become priorities in our lives they can literally suck the life out of us spiritually. This happens because we take our focus off God and fail to be nourished in his Word, spend time with God in prayer, and no longer fellowship with other believers who can help us remain focused.

3. *Worship becomes lifeless through unmet expectations.* We all have expectations of what church and the Christian life should be. The fact is the church of Jesus Christ is full of many not-yet-fully sanctified people; in fact we are all not-yet-fully sanctified. And sometimes we hurt each other and when we fail to forgive relationships are broken. In some cases we disconnect and withdraw from the fellowship altogether. Others still come to church but disconnect in every other way. In worse cases, critical spirits and attitudes of bitterness spread, further sucking the life out of the body of believers killing the worship of both the church and individual Christians.

4. *Worship is lifeless when Christians refuse the transforming power of the Holy Spirit living in them.* Self-reliance characterizes today's teaching in psychology and even religion. "Be your own boss. Think positive. The power is in you." The philosophy of the world is that we can do it all ourselves. Christians have even been taught, by well meaning preachers, to apply this to faith, but it doesn't work. The result is that many Christians limp along because they try to live the Christian life in their own power. Paul says that is not possible; rather, "*I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength*" (Phil. 4:13).

But, all is not lost. Malachi tells us how to get life back into worship.

1. *Remember the covenant.* God reminded the Levites of the special relationship they had with God. God had set them apart for Him. We, too, must remember the covenant we have with God. It's a covenant that distinguishes us from the rest of the world, not by anything we have done, but by what Jesus did for us. Jesus said, "This is the new covenant in my blood which is for you" (Luke 22:20). We need to remember again and again our new life in Christ and allow that to enliven our worship.

2. *Know and share God's Word.* Being in this special covenant relationship with God, required that the priests be the messengers of God. Jesus left this responsibility with us, "Go and make disciples ... baptizing them ... and teaching them" (Matt 28:19-20). And Peter reminds us to live in such a way that when others ask us the reason for the hope that we have that we will have an answer (1 Pet. 3:15). When you allow God's Word, which is itself alive and active (Heb. 4:12), to get into you it will enliven you. And when you share God's Word, in Bible studies as well as casual conversations, you will experience an excitement and joy like none other.

3. *Focus on God.* God, reminding the priests of the Levites before them, says, "He ... turned many away from sin." Sin is essentially a preoccupation with self, of meeting own needs and wants at any cost. When we take our eyes off of self and refocus them on worshipping God and serving others our excitement for worship grows. I have never known anyone to experience dead worship when they have been blessing others.

4. *Let others see your passion for God.* God says "men will seek" instruction; they will be looking to you to see God. Throughout the Old Testament when the priests had a passion for God and worship, so did the people. I know that when I feel my worship to be lacking I look for someone who is full of energy and excitement. When others see how much we love God and how much we love to worship together on Sunday and in living lives of worship as an offering to God, they will want to be a part of that energy and excitement, too.

There should be no possible way to confuse the living and the dead among those who are Christians. By our very conduct and teaching, whether in a formal Sunday worship or the worship of lives lived for God, others should be infected with life. They should look at us and know that we are different and want what we have. Just think what might happen if that kind of ALIVE Worship infested our church and community.