

Malachi ~ Sermon

Today we're going to be looking at the book of Malachi. It's the last book in the Old Testament on page 664 in the Bibles on the seats. By luck of the draw, it seems that I drew the three most unusual of the so-called minor prophets. Joel wrote warning to the people of Judah, but we don't know where or when; Joel could have been the first Old Testament prophet or the last—we just don't know. What we do know is that he warned of the incredible coming of the Day of the Lord. He says that all will be judged, the unfaithful will be punished but restoration and blessing will come to those who repent. Then Habakkuk who, unlike all the other prophets, asked God questions. We learned from him that it's okay to ask God questions and God will answer them—not always with the answers we want or expect and on his time schedule, not ours. We learned that God is good, he does not tolerate evil, he is concerned for the righteous, and he keeps his promises. Malachi reiterates these lessons, but adds a little bit too.

I said that Malachi was unusual, but that's primarily in the writing style. Malachi makes statements on behalf of the Lord. He then puts himself in the shoes of a doubter in the audience and asks a question about the statement. He then moves back to being the Lord's messenger and demonstrates the foolishness of the doubter and God's wise answer to the question. The name Malachi actually means "messenger" or "my messenger" and some historians think this is the title of the book rather than the name of a person. It doesn't matter because what we are interested in is the message that this book has for us today.

A little history: The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria and the people were taken into exile about 725 BC. Judah lasted roughly another 140 years until they were conquered by Babylon in about 585 BC. However, the Persian empire was beginning to rise in power and in contrast to Assyria and Babylon, they believed in repatriation and maintaining the status quo of the people they conquered as much as possible. So after they conquered Babylon, their king, Cyrus the Great, in 539 BC issued a decree allowing the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. After some false starts, they finally did this under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah along with rebuilding their homes and the walls of the city. Nehemiah then returns to Persia to serve Cyrus.

Now you have to understand that Jerusalem was in quite a weird position. They were subject to the Persians, they had no political or military defense, they had no king or royal dynasty, and had no marks of a nation at all. Yet to live as the Lord's people, they needed their own laws to govern both civil and religious conduct. So here they are, not quite a nation but at least no longer slaves to the Babylonians, they were back home, they had rebuilt the temple, their homes, and

the walls of the city. Not bad!

But somehow the excitement they should have been feeling about this freedom and rebuilding, and even the incident with Esther and Haman, has died off and discouragement has set in. Part of the problem is that it simply takes a long time to revitalize a country which has been so totally devastated. But another part of the problem seemingly stems from the very thing that was meant to give the people of Israel hope and encouragement—that is, all the restoration prophecies with their grand visions of the coming Messiah and his powerful kingdom. After many years of slow progress, ongoing opposition, and continued dominance by the Persians, the people are asking the obvious questions: is this the restoration we were promised? Where is this Branch of Jesse, this King of the House of David who is supposed to deliver us from our enemies and establish an everlasting kingdom? When will this city that still lies mostly in ruins be transformed into a glorious Jerusalem? Was the Haman incident only a coincidence? Does God really care about his people? Is there really divine justice?

As discouragement and cynicism set in, the people's spiritual commitment suffered. We're talking a real slippery slope. They complained about God and showed contempt for his name. They offered false worship. They led others into sin. They broke God's laws. They short-changed God with their tithes and offerings. The priests failed to instruct in the law. Men were marrying wives who worship foreign gods. Divorce was rampant. And they were arrogant about it. Whoa!

Was there no spiritual leader during this decline—no one to chastise the sinners and bring hope to the disheartened? Well, maybe not a spiritual leader like Ezra, but at least a prophet: Malachi. To be honest, I wasn't all that familiar with the book, so I looked at 9 or 10 different commentaries about it and read a lot of varying points of view. There's a lot here, but what it boils down to is that Malachi has a powerful, straight-forward message: yes, God does still love his people and wants to bless them. But judgement day, the Day of the Lord, is coming. If you repent and walk in my ways, this will be a joyful day, but if you don't, you'll be punished along with all the evildoers. In the meantime, it is each person's responsibility to lead the kind of life that will be fit for God's holy kingdom.

Let's delve into the scripture itself. It is divided into three main sections and a short closing of just three verses. Earlier I mentioned that Malachi would make a statement followed by a doubter's question, followed by an answer. These are called disputations. In the first section of scripture, which focuses on the sins of the priests, there are two disputations. In the second section which focuses on the sins of the people, there are four disputations. The last short section has a

prophetic promise for the future about the great Day of the Lord.

So. First, the sins of the priests. Malachi 1:2 reads, “I have loved you,” says the Lord. Malachi then takes the role of a doubter and asks, “How have you loved us?” And the Lord answers with an example. He says that he chose Jacob to be the ancestor of the Israelites, that he helped him outwit his brother Esau, and then turned Esau’s lands, that is Edom, into wastelands. Moreover, even if the Edomites attempt to rebuild, the Lord says “I will demolish it.” He says you will see it with your own eyes and say, “Great is the Lord—even beyond the borders of Israel.” Edom, remember, is east of the Jordan River and not in Israel or Judah.

Malachi then goes on to the second disputation in verse 6, in which the Lord states, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the Lord Almighty. “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.

“But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’

Malachi goes on to present the Lord’s answer to the priest’s question. Verse 7 says. ⁷“You place defiled food on my altar.

“But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’

“By saying that the Lord’s table is contemptible (meaning the Lord’s altar).⁸ When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty.

This discourse against the priests continues for the next 16 verses. Let me summarize rather than read all the verses. Verse 9 says if the priests can’t honor God properly, how can they mediate between God and the people? Verse 10 says it would be better to have no offerings than dishonorable ones. Verse 14 focuses on a “cheater” who promises to give an acceptable offering, but then gives something less.

Verse 2:1 says if the priests don’t listen and continue to not honor the name of the Lord, they will be cursed and their blessings on the people will also be cursed by the Lord. I have to read verse 2:3, it is so graphic: “Because of you I will rebuke [cut off] your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.” You can’t get much more graphic than that.

He goes on and says that priests should preserve knowledge so they can teach others. They are the messengers of the Lord. But he says, you priests have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused others to stumble, so I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have

not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

So what does this section about priests mean to us? Malachi says if religious leaders go wrong, how will the people be led? But he’s not just talking to pastors and deacons—we are all leaders—every one of us sitting here—in some capacity (as parents, in small groups, at work, on sports teams, and so on). He’s saying we can’t neglect our responsibilities and be ruled by what is convenient. Neglect and insensitivity are acts of disobedience. God wants leaders who are faithful and sincere.

One other thing. He’s talking mostly about sins of omission. These aren’t sins where you do something wrong: lying, or killing, or coveting your neighbor’s stuff. These are sins where you don’t do what is right. Think of commandments 1 to 5: not worshiping God, doubting what God is doing, not keeping the Sabbath, not offering a full tithe, and not teaching others. How often do we do those things—or I should say, NOT do them?

Next is the section on the sins of the people. It has four disputations, the first of which is in two parts. The first accusation in verses 2:10 to 12 is that the people don’t respect the covenant the God made with them. They have profaned the covenant says Malachi, “by marrying the daughter of a foreign god.” Some commentators say this means the men were marrying pagan women but the Oxford Bible Commentary, which I think is more accurate, says the people have profaned the covenant by worshiping a goddess, in other words, worshiping an idol.

This leads then to the second part of this disputation which does, in fact, charge that men have been divorcing their wives who have grown old; that this violates the notion that man and wife are one flesh, and also undermines the loyalty to the covenant.

In the NIV, Verse 2:16 says, “I hate divorce,” says the Lord God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the Lord Almighty. That seems quite clear and unequivocal, but actually there’s a lot of debate on the meaning of the simple statement. “I hate divorce.” There are thousands of web pages on that one verse and I’m taking the coward’s way out and not going to get into it here. What’s very clear is that God says that divorcing your wife because she’s getting old or because you’re tired of her is NOT acceptable. No how, no way.

The second disputation on the sins of the people starts at verse 2:17, which reads, “You have wearied the Lord with your words.

“How have we wearied him?” you ask.

By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?”

The complaint that evildoers prosper materially in the world when they really ought to suffer misfortune was as common 2,500 years as it is today. But then God says, “I’m tired of hearing this.” The Lord promises that he is going to act decisively. His messenger will prepare for God’s coming at which time evildoers will be judged and punished. In Handel’s *Messiah*, if you’ve ever listened to more than the Hallelujah Chorus, you’ve heard verse 3:2 – But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire. This section ends with Verse 3:5 – “So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty” (as long as you’re walking in my ways).

The third disputation on the sins of the people starting in 3:6 brings a new style into play, namely a direct address in which Malachi basically says: your misfortunes are not due to God’s indifference but to your failure to observe God’s laws. But, being a benevolent God, he gives them a way out and says, “Return to me and I will return to you.”

But then the people ask, “How are we to return?”

And God turns it around and asks them, “Will a man rob God? [Pause] Yet you rob me.” Uh, oh. Doesn’t sound good.

Then the people ask, “How do we rob you?”

“In tithes and offerings. *Tithes and offerings!* Verse 3:9 You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple.” [Then we have a change in tone.] “If you do,” says the Lord Almighty, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test! ¹¹ Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,” says the Lord Almighty.” Wow! Thank you, Lord. [BTW, that’s from the NLT, which is a little easier to understand than the NIV.]

The last disputation starts in Verse 3:13. “You have said harsh things against me,” says the Lord.

“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’

¹⁴ “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty?’ ¹⁵

But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.”

The people keep coming back to this same theme: why do evil people prosper? Where is your justice God? This time they even add that those who try to keep God’s commands see no benefit. If I were God (be glad I’m not) I’d be pretty exasperated by this time. But God is just so benevolent and patiently answers in verse 3:18, “And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.” So the God-fearers are assured that they will see a difference between themselves and the wicked. And what’s the occasion for this? The coming day of the Lord (4:1) that will destroy the evildoers and bring healing and life to the faithful (4:2-3).

So, the sins of the people. What does this section mean to us? The people then had not learned the lesson of their exile, they’d not listened to the prophets. Their excitement about their freedom and their new homes and temple had worn off. They’ve become complacent, lazy. They were divorcing their old wives for new young exotic foreign chicks. They were worshiping idols. They were saying to themselves they would give a full tithe and then not doing so. They were mad at God that evil people were prospering. They doubted God’s justice. They didn’t see any benefit to serving God. They were arrogant. Does any of this sound like us? Does *all* of this sound like us?

I see myself in almost every one of these faults. It’s so darned annoying. I go to a Promise Keepers rally, get all fired up, and 2 weeks later I’m back with same old, same old. Worship an idol? You betcha — position, prestige, money. I’ve been trying to sell my military jeep for a couple of months, placed ads and all that. Then this guy Jack, who is anything but a Christian, says this guy walked up to him and last week and asked if he wanted to sell his jeep. So Jack says, sure, for the right price. The guy says, “how about \$13,000? Which is about \$3-4,000 more than it’s worth. Jack says sure and the guy peels off 130 hundred dollar bills and dives it away. God, what’s going on here? How come Jack and not me? Where is your justice, Lord. Oh, yeah, and I’m divorced; it happened before I became a Christian, but I’m not sure if that’s a good excuse.

The last three verses, 4:4 to 6 were probably added later as a conclusion not only to Malachi but to the 12 minor prophets, and to the Old Testament itself. Let’s read them: ⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day

of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

The key idea in this whole chapter is the Day of the Lord is coming, the same day spoken of in Zephaniah and Joel. However, Malachi adds a key point. Remember, the people were complaining that the evildoers were not getting their due. Well Malachi tells us that God warns that not only will the evildoers be punished, but so will you people with your bad and arrogant attitudes.

So what is the message of this whole book? I think it's the idea that God really wants us to come to him. And if we repent and seek his forgiveness, he will bless us and welcome us with open arms. My favorite verses are the second part of 3:7, “Return to me and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty. And verse 4:2 which says, “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”

Thank you Lord. It just doesn't get much better than that.

Dave Ahl ~ May 2011