

SESSION #53

MALACHI

We have now come to the final book in the Old Testament, Malachi.

1. Context

Malachi's prophetic ministry took place during the time of Nehemiah, perhaps with some overlapping with Ezra. By this time, the returned exiles have now been living back in Judah for 100 years. With this much passage of time, what is likely to be the situation among the people of God? Being the fallible humans they were, they have now become discouraged, disillusioned and even corrupt.

Yes, the temple had been rebuilt. Yes, the walls of Jerusalem were now in place. But now there is a sense of settling down into apathy and discontentment. What the people had expected to happen by now, especially in terms of their own personal wealth, had not happened yet and they are quite disillusioned in some cases.

Malachi enters this situation at a time when the "spiritual-health" graph of the people of God is heading downwards once again here at the end of the OT.

2. Message

The message of Malachi reveals two things in particular. First, it reveals a sensitive God who says over and over again, "*I have loved you. I have loved you.*"

And secondly, it shows us an insensitive people who say back to this sensitive God, "*How have you loved us?*" A very cheeky response indeed! God has affirmed His love to these people so many times throughout their history and now they have the audacity to respond like this? That's the degree of hardness which has developed by now. The death of their love for God has turned now into terrific callousness towards Him.

So, Malachi uses an unusual approach as God shows him how to get God's message through to people who are really tough nuts. The approach involves a three-part pattern. We see it a number of times in this book, but let's use chapter 3 to illustrate it.

First, God makes a statement, or in many cases an accusation. For example, in 3:8 God says, *“Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me!”* That’s stage one.

Stage two in the pattern is an objection by the people. In the second part of verse 8, they reply: *“In what way have we robbed You?”* Wow! It’s incredible to see how far down these people have come.

The third element in the pattern is God’s response refuting what they had said. The final line of verse 8 provides God’s answer to their derisive question: *“How have you robbed Me? In tithes and offerings.”* That pattern repeats over and over as God, through Malachi, highlights certain aspects of the life of the people which are absolutely wrong. God makes a statement, they raise their objection, and God refutes it with the facts.

They demonstrate wrong attitudes, or what the NT calls “worldliness”, concerning a number of different areas of life. They had wrong attitudes about worship, about marriage, about riches, and about giving. They had wrong attitudes about what was right and what was wrong. They had important things backwards, upside-down, inside-out.

Malachi appeals to them to recognize what’s wrong, to hear God’s objection against their objections, and to turn and repent and get things right with Him. If they will do that, then there is a wonderful promise that God will indeed be with them and bless them. But there is a warning if they refuse and continue in their hard-hearted ways.

3. The Key

Chapter 3, verses 1 and 2 says, *“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”*

They were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, just as their fathers had waited for hundreds of years. This was their big hope: *some day God will send the Messiah and He will be our King, kill all our enemies, raise us up to a formidable status among the nations of the world, and everything will be great for us.*

And Malachi says, Yes, you're looking forward to that day when the Messiah will come. But, as 3:2 says, "*who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?*"

You may recall that one of the first things Jesus did in His ministry was to enter the temple where He overturned tables of the corrupt money-changers and drove them and the animal sellers from the temple courts. The prophecy of verse 2 in Malachi chapter 3, is beginning to be fulfilled here in the cleansing of the temple by Jesus. So, the Messiah is going to come like the rising sun for judgment and not just for blessing.

There are two effects of the sun when it rises. 4:1 tells us, "*For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts.*"

Verse 2: "*But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings.*" So, the sun is coming – capital "S O N" – but He, as Malachi declares with God's words, will be rather like the physical sun having these two effects.

He will burn those who will be judged for their sin. And those who will respond to Him in obedience will be blessed by Him. He will heal them and be life-giving for them.

Now, as we come to the final book of the OT, the people of God are still looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. But they have a wrong idea as to what that will involve. They are liable to be among those who will be burned up in that day; they are not responding to God with obedience.

So, the final word in the book of Malachi – the last word of all the 39 books of the OT – remains a terrible possibility. And that word is "*curse*". If these people don't change their ways and turn back in repentance to God, this is what will await them. The rising of the Sun will indeed burn them, not bless them.

4. Salvation History

The entire OT is what Bible scholars call a "*salvation history*". It begins in the OT but it is only completed in the NT: the salvation aspect, and the history aspect. Both will be completed in the NT.

Without the NT we are only left with this final word of the OT: “*curse*”. What if there was no NT? Where would the focus of all the promises go? Into an empty, dark void if there was no NT to fulfill the salvation history we see in the OT. We need both. We need the OT to set the background, to begin the path of theology, to understand the reason why Jesus had to come and die. But if He didn’t come and die, on behalf of the sins of the whole world, then where would we be left? We would be left under a curse.

5. Course Summary

In closing, let’s get a quick summary of what we’ve seen in this course.

The entire Bible is surely focussed on Jesus, the theme of the two parts of the Bible, the OT and the NT. Let’s see how this was worked out in the books we studied.

In the early sessions of this course, we looked at the books of the Law. These books of Moses laid down a foundation for the coming of Christ, looking ahead, as all the books do, to the NT. Genesis gave us the election of the people of God. Exodus, the redemption of those people. Leviticus, the sanctification of those people. Numbers – God’s direction for them even in a time of disobedience. Deuteronomy, the instruction of God’s people. These five books provide a crucial foundation about the people of God, looking ahead to the coming of Jesus, and also – of course, giving us the beginnings of the Jewish people through whom God would bring into the world it’s two most treasured gifts: the Living Word (Christ) and the written Word, the Scripture.

There is something of a downward movement in the setting of this foundation in the books of the Law. The Jewish nation is chosen to provide the foundation for the coming Christ. The four Gospels in the NT to some extent parallel this foundational movement concerning who Jesus was and what He did, so that the rest of the NT can be based on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ promised through the OT.

The books of history provide an outward movement of the people of God, again preparing the nation of God in particular for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts is the NT counterpart, giving us the propagation of Christ in the birth and growth of the Church.

In those books of history the kingdom of Israel is formed. It expands, and then deteriorates as the people fall into sin. The nation gets destroyed and the people go into exile to Assyria and Babylon. But they are protected during the Exile in Babylon, they move back to the Land, and are restored once again. They reconstruct the temple, Jerusalem and the nation as they move ahead again in preparation for the turning of the page over into the NT. All of these things had to happen before we get to the book of Matthew.

The books of poetry and wisdom provide an upward movement, as we saw over and over in those books the aspiration expressed to know God better and experience His life in a real way. The Epistles of the NT are a kind of parallel in terms of theme. They help us to aspire to be the people of God, to know Jesus better and live godly lives by the power of His Spirit.

In those poetic/wisdom books, Job expressed an aspiration for a Mediator. The Psalmist expressed an aspiration for communion with God. Proverbs shows a concern for wisdom. Ecclesiastes, a desire for true satisfaction. And the Song of Solomon showed us a concern about union in love, the ultimate perfection in relationship which can only be achieved in a living relationship with a loving God. All those spiritual desires of Israel, expressed in different ways, are ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The books of prophecy show us a forward movement of Jewish expectation that some day a Messiah would come from God and be their King. The most forward-looking book in the NT is, of course, Revelation which looks ahead to the consummation, the completion/finalization of all things in God's economy.

The OT prophets kept messianic expectations alive for hundreds of years, giving hope for national restoration by Christ and that they would come into a place of great blessing under His kingship. The NT takes all of these elements and completes the story which was begun in the OT, especially by presenting God's final solution for mankind's biggest problem: how to have our sins forgiven. That is our deepest, ultimate need. How can we have our sins forgiven so that can have eternal life and live forever with the loving Creator God? How is that possible?

Such forgiveness, as we saw many times in this course, is only possible through the death of an innocent substitute. A lamb must pay the ultimate price of giving its life which God's justice demands. When we identify with that Lamb, then we don't have to pay that ultimate price. The Lamb of God comes to do that ultimately for everyone. The OT looked forward over and over again to the coming – not just of the Messiah who would be King of kings – but most especially to the coming of the Lamb of God who would be the solution to our great sin problem.

There are over 300 specific prophecies in these 39 books which point us to the Lamb of God who comes as the Messiah. The statistical chance of even just 8 such prophecies coming true in one person is 10^{17} – ie. 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000 (1 followed by 17 zeroes). To give a rough approximation as to how improbable this is, let's assume you gather this many coins together and pile them up in an area around 700 sq. km. (about the size of the island city of Singapore), to a depth of 6 meters. You mark one of those coins and then blindfold someone, sending them into this pile of coins. The chances that they would find the marked coin on the first attempt is 10^{17} ! The Bible has amazing fulfilled prophecies indeed!

Israel, as you follow the record of their story from Genesis to Malachi, failed miserably to do what God had asked them to do. And that was to model to the nations of the world the relationship they had with Jehovah God as His people. That failure found its ultimate expression when Israel rejected God's Messiah when He finally came.

Out of that rejection, God calls another group of people to be His showcase people, His missionaries, and the recipients of His blessing: the Church. The NT Bride of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. You and I, if we are believers in Jesus Christ, and have put as it were our hands on the head of the Lamb of God, identifying ourselves with Him and letting His blood cover our lives like the Passover blood on the doorways, then we are part of that Church, that invisible global family of God, which God now entrusts with His own life so that we might be His showcase people demonstrating what God is like and what it is like to live with Him.

As He calls us to that high privilege, we have at least two advantages over OT Israel. On one hand we have the OT record, 39 books which we can read and study, discovering

principles for godly living and avoiding the mistakes which the OT people of God made. God dealt with Israel externally – He gave them laws, sent them judges and prophets, punishments from other nations, and so on.

But God gives us another advantage as the Church. He deals with us *internally*. He gives us – everyone in His body, the Church – His own Spirit. This is something God's OT people could never say. But you and I can say it. God deals with us on a different basis because we have His Spirit within us to work with our spirit and help us to know what He wants and what doesn't please Him.

We have such high privileges as God's new people. But these also bring high responsibility. Luke 12:48 says, "*Great gifts mean great responsibilities.*" If you have been with me through the study of these 39 books, I hope you don't leave thinking it was all just an academic exercise of some kind. It wasn't. Since this is God's own Word we have been studying, whatever you may have picked up in this study will mean you now have additional responsibility.

So, may God grant you wisdom and courage as you respond to His Word and as God works in you through His Spirit. And "thank you" for your time spent studying the Old Testament through this course!
