

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 17 – God's Last Word
Malachi

Introduction

Malachi was the last prophet in the Old Testament, before the 400 “silent years” leading up to the birth of Christ. Israel had been in a covenant relationship with God since the time of Moses (1440 B.C.). Sadly, for most of the 1,000 years leading up to Malachi, the people of God had failed to live in obedience to the terms of the covenant. In this final word, God once again confronted the people with their failure to obey Him. The book of Malachi has 55 verses. In 47 verses, God's broken heart cries out. The God of justice and mercy speaks firmly to His people for the last time. The name that God chose for Himself in Malachi was “Lord Almighty” or “the Lord of the hosts-armies” (used 24x), a military term. Yet, the faithfulness of God was evident in the closing lines of Malachi, as God pointed forward to the promised forerunner. His messenger John the Baptist would come in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for the Messiah.

The prophet Malachi was charged with the difficult task (as with all the prophets), of speaking God's heart and His firm truth to an erring people – both the spiritual leaders (the priests) and the people who followed them. The impact of Malachi's message comes out in the form of a running dialogue between God and His people. God presents the challenge/offense; the people challenge God with a question; and God replies with a correction or warning.

An overview of the dialogue/issues that grieved God's heart:

- 1) *“I have loved you” (1:2a). “How have You loved us?” (1:2b). “I loved Jacob, but ‘hated’ Esau” (1:2c-5).*
- 2) *“As your Father and Master, where is My honor and respect due Me? Yet you priests despise My name” (1:6 a,b). “How have we despised Your Name?” (1:6c). “You have offered defiled food upon My altar” (1:7a).*
- 3) *“You have offered defiled food upon My altar” (1:7a). Priests: “How have we defiled You, that Your altar is ‘despised’” (1:7b).*

“Do you think that a blind, sick animal is an acceptable sacrifice? Try offering it to your Governor to see if he approves. Oh that one would shut the temple doors. My NAME will be great among the nations” (1:7c-12).

4) *“You cry and complain of the burden to serve Me, and over My lack of attention and response to your offerings” (2:13). “Why do You not accept our sacrifices?” (2:14a). “You have dealt treacherously, breaking your marriage covenant with the wife of your youth, and have divorced her for a non-Jew. I hate divorce, (2:14b-17). (God pictures divorce as a husband removing the garment of covering over his wife. See Ezekiel 16:8; Ruth 3:9.)*

5) *“You have wearied the LORD with your words” (2:17a). “How have we wearied Him?” (2:17b). “By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the LORD’S eyes; or ‘Where is God’s justice?’” (2:17c).*

6) *“Ever since your forefathers, you have turned away from My decrees and not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you” (3:7a). “How shall we return?” (3:7b). “You have robbed Me” (3:8a).*

7) *“You have robbed Me” (3:8a). “How have we robbed You?” (3:8b). “You have robbed Me of My tithes and offerings. Bring the whole tithe into My house and watch Me bless you!” (3:8c-12).*

8) *“Your words have been arrogant against Me” (3:13a). “What have we spoken against You?” (3:13b). “You say, ‘It’s futile to serve God. What have we gained by following His commands? The arrogant are blessed, the wicked prosper and the evil escape His judgment’” (3:14-15).*

Israel doubts God’s love: 1:1-5

The first issue that God raised was the doubt concerning His love in the hearts of His chosen people.

“I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals” (1:2-3).

Esau and Jacob were brothers; but God chose Jacob to bring forth the line of Israel. God did not literally “hate” Esau or his descendants (the Edomites). Jesus used the term “hate” when He described to His disciples-followers, that in contrast to loving Him,

they needed to “hate” their families (Luke 14:26). The point is that God’s love for Jacob, His first-born (the Israelites), was very special (a reality that Israel had been doubting due to the hardships of the post-captivity period). The reason that the land of Edom was turned into a waste was because of their harsh treatment of Israel over many centuries, and their ongoing refusal to acknowledge the God of Israel as the One, true God (a regular theme in the words of judgment against Edom in the prophetic books). God was saying that Israel had been disciplined and restored back to their land, but proud Edom had been punished and not given back their land.

One of the most critical steps of spiritual maturity is to come to the place where we KNOW beyond a shadow of a doubt that God LOVES US. This is what the apostle John meant when he wrote: “There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear; because fear involves punishment; and the one who fears has not been perfected in love” (1John 4:18). Paul wrote: “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39). Of course, God our Father will faithfully discipline His children (Hebrews 12:10f); but even this is a sign of His love for us. Often, if we grew up in a home where love was conditional, based on our performance, it is difficult to embrace God’s unconditional love and to rest in it. Take some time to answer this question: What causes me to doubt God’s love for me?

Israel dishonors God with blemished sacrifices: 1:6-14

A requirement in the Mosaic Law stated that only *unblemished* animals could be sacrificed to God. This was important for several reasons. 1) Sacrificing one’s very best animal reminded the individual of the seriousness of the sin problem and the cost of atoning for sin. 2) Only unblemished sacrifices could depict the holiness, majesty and perfection of God Himself. 3) The animal sacrifices were pointers to the Lamb of God who would someday come into the world to once and for all take away sins. As such, they needed to be unblemished to accurately depict the sinless perfection of the Lamb of God (the Messiah, Jesus Christ). Yet, the Israelites were bringing blemished sacrificial animals to God.

“When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame 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 (1:8).

Israel was bringing their least valuable, flawed sacrifices to God, and He was not pleased at all. Flawed sacrifices show that we do not truly LOVE GOD in the deepest part of our heart. In Revelation 3:15-16, Jesus described not fully loving Him as being “lukewarm” (hot is soothing, and cold is refreshing). Here are some ways we might bring our ‘flawed sacrifices’ (our lukewarm devotion) to God today: through token giving to God’s work when we spend huge amounts on our personal interests; through half-hearted church attendance and service- not giving some of our time and talent to serve Him and His purposes; through personal compromise or tolerance of sinful ways; through failure to apply our minds and hearts to the study of His Word personally and in community with others; through our fear of identifying ourselves as followers of Jesus, through our words and actions; through failing to “worship” during a “worship set” at church... Ask God to reveal to you the ways that you are dishonoring Him with your “sacrifices” today.

God was so dishonored by their flawed sacrifices that He wished for someone to shut the temple doors to prevent any more of this half-hearted “worship.”

“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty (1:10,11).

God desires that His name be praised in every nation. This was why He chose Israel as a “nation of priests” in the first place (Exodus 19:5,6). This is the message of the entire Bible: “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised” (Psalm 113:3). Even at the end of the O.T. period, God vowed through Malachi that His name would be made famous among the nations, with or without Israel’s help. How might God desire to use YOU, today, to make His name famous in your sphere of influence? Another way to say it is “to put God on display”. Pray this prayer of faith: “God, I want to be used by You as a vessel through whom Your name is made famous. I want to put YOU on display for others to see and be intrigued to knowing more about You. Reveal to me what You would like to do to make this happen through me. I am willing. Reveal your light and life through me.”

God's rebuke of the Levitical priests: 2:1-9

While Israel was supposed to be a “nation of priests” representing God to the world, the tribe of Levi had been chosen from among the 12 tribes of Israel to be the priestly tribe, serving God daily at the temple. They were to not only maintain the sacrificial system; but they also were to instruct the people in the words and ways of God. Sadly, the book of Malachi reveals that the priests had failed to represent God well. This, in turn, had a negative impact on the spiritual lives of the people. Thus, God had harsh words for these spiritual leaders.

“My covenant was with him (Levi), a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth” (2:5-7).

As the above words from God indicate, there were times in Israel's history when the Levites served faithfully according to God's instructions (the book of “Leviticus” was the handbook for the priests). Certain priests from the tribe of Levi were especially faithful. Moses and his brother Aaron were descendants of Levi (Exodus 6:16-25). Their descendant Phinehas put God on display when he stood up among the Israelites and restored righteousness amidst sin (Numbers 25:1-13). Yet, sadly, throughout the history of Levi's descendants, there was a relatively small number of priests who truly loved the LORD, and served Him with all their hearts. (Even 2 of Aaron's 4 sons disobeyed the new laws as to how the priests were to conduct themselves and offer sacrifices.) Before the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's magnificent temple, the priests had long been corrupt and not leading the people in the true worship of God.

After the 70 years of captivity in Babylon and later Persia, there was new zeal and a few passionate priests who truly wanted to start it all over again, according to the way that God had initially prescribed true worship to be done.

But by the time of Malachi, the priesthood had become very corrupt. (This self-determined pattern would continue until the time of Christ

400yrs later. The Pharisees and Sadducees were very corrupt and far from leading the people toward a sincere faith, rather further away from God.)

“But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty. “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” (2:8,9).

Spiritual leadership is a weighty entrustment from the Lord. No one should ever take spiritual leadership lightly. This is why the apostle James wrote this warning: “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). Are you in a position of spiritual leadership over others? If so, walk humbly with the Lord and realize that you have been entrusted with the high calling of pointing others to the truths of God, by both your words and your walk. Make sure you are growing yourself. You can only give away what you are taking in and are sincerely trying to live out.

The problem of divorce: 2:10-17

Divorce was a major issue in the post-exilic community. But the problem was not just divorce; it was divorcing their Jewish wives whom they married in their youth for the purpose of marrying foreign women who did not hold to the same belief in Yahweh. This had been an on-going issue from the time that the Israelites came out of Egypt. Even great Kings like Solomon married many foreign wives who caused their hearts to be turned toward the gods of their wives. The men who were divorcing their Jewish wives were continuing to worship God as if everything was fine (see Nehemiah 13:23). The nation had paid a high price for many centuries by ignoring God’s command to not marry women who worshipped foreign gods. But divorcing their Jewish wives to remarry was even worse!

“Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. The man who hates and divorces his wife,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the LORD Almighty (2:13-16).

God’s heart was to build a godly nation and through them to build many nations that would raise families that loved/worshipped Him.

Jesus was asked about the issue of divorce. He clearly stated that divorce was not part of God’s original plan for marriage. He also stated that there was only one possible ground for divorce: when the husband or wife has broken the marriage covenant through adultery. And even in that case, Jesus preceded His words about divorce with a parable about “unlimited forgiveness” (see Matthew 18:21–19:12). The bottom line is that God’s will is for couples to stay together and prioritize the marriage relationship, in fulfillment of their marriage vows. If those vows have been broken, the best option is forgiveness and restoration of the marriage in a spirit of brokenness and repentance. Only in the case of unrepentant unfaithfulness (which could include betrayal and abuse) should divorce even be considered.

The forerunner to the coming Messiah: 3:1-5

Even as the post-exilic community continued to struggle being faithful to God (and His will for them), God remained faithful to His part of the deal. In chapter 3 we find a clear prophecy of a forerunner who will come and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty (3:1).

This includes two promises: the first was fulfilled by the coming of John the Baptist (in the spirit of Elijah) as the forerunner before Jesus (see Matt. 3:1-3ff, 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27). The second sentence refers to Christ who was “The messenger of the covenant.” Christ alone could fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant, through His pure and spotless life and sacrificial death for the sins of humanity. He ushered in the New Covenant of GRACE by His blood, that He had predicted on the last night with His disciples.

The people were robbing God: 3:6-12

Tithing (giving back to God 1/10th of our earnings or produce) was the Old Testament standard for giving (see Leviticus 27:30-34). Most of the peoples' tithes were used to support the Levitical priests and their families and their duties in the temple. But the people of Israel had repeatedly failed to tithe to God. Hence, the worship system often broke down and, sometimes, came to a complete halt. (See Nehemiah 13:10,11). In this final book of the O.T., God was calling this for what it really was: robbery of Him!

“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (3:8-10).

In this challenge and promise, God was speaking in terms of a national blessing and specifically regarding the literal reversal from the lack of crops and livestock and childbirths, due to their discipline, to an abundance. In application for our times, God still challenges us to “give” and we must leave the ways that He will ‘bless’ completely up to Him, both the ‘when’ and the ‘how’.

Why does God call it “robbery” when people withhold their tithes from Him? Because everything we have is a gift from God in the first place. We are managers of God’s resources, not owners. Just because ‘we earn resources’ does NOT mean that we are entitled to claim ownership of them. Who has enabled the ability for us to work in the first place? When God asks us to give a tithe back to Him (to go toward His work in the world), He is simply asking for what is rightfully His. A ‘tithe’ is 1/10th. In the New Testament we are encouraged to give ‘as we are able’ which is inferring that we could be able to give much more than a tithe. (See 2Corinthians chs. 8,9). Further, God is inviting us to walk by faith and to trust us for His provisions going forward. How about you? Are you faithful in your giving back to the Lord? God challenged the Israelites to “test Him” in the matter of tithing to see how He would faithfully take care of their needs IF they were faithful in tithing to Him. Maybe God is calling you to take a close look at your giving to His work. Are you robbing God? If so, you are robbing yourself of the joy and the reward that God promised to faithful givers.

The scroll of remembrance: 3:13-18

Some people had been quietly “thinking” that it was a waste of time to serve God and that they would be better off if they followed in the footsteps of the godless.

“You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly, evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it’” (3:14,15).

This same sentiment (envy of the apparent prosperity of the wicked) is the subject of Psalm 73. As the psalmist pointed out, to envy the prosperity of the wicked is short-sighted, failing to give due weight to the rewards (in this life *and* the next) that God has in store for the who faithfully serve Him. We should remember Hebrews Ch. 11 where the faithful saints specifically were mentioned as examples of those who would receive their abundant blessing in eternity.

In response to the strong rebukes of God through the prophet Malachi, a group of righteous people put their names on a scroll pledging that they would seek to walk in God’s ways.

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. “On the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (3:16-18).

God reminds us through Malachi that He does see each person individually. He knows who sincerely treasures their relationship with Him, and it brings Him delight. He will claim those who love Him as His treasured possession. A mature believer is one who is MORE concerned with bringing delight to the LORD, than the LORD bringing delight and blessings to him or her. Reverentially fearing the LORD and honoring His name is the greatest gift that we can daily offer to the LORD. It is a bonus to know that He will someday bless us back!

God's final call to covenant obedience: 4:1-6

God's final words in the Old Testament are fascinating. He says three things:

1. The day is coming when He will abolish wickedness and bring in everlasting righteousness on the earth (4:1-3). In that day, the righteous people will be rejoicing that they chose to walk in the ways of God.
2. Remember the Law of Moses! After 1,000 years, God was still calling the people back to covenant obedience.
3. A new "Elijah" is coming to prepare the way before the Lord. As the book of Malachi closed, the people of Israel were left waiting and wondering: *When will this Elijah-like prophet appear?*

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction" (4:5,6).

Matthew 17:11 says *"Elijah will surely come first, and restore all things."* Bible scholars have proposed that just as Moses and Elijah met Jesus on the Mt. of Olives before He entered Holy Week (when He suffered and died for our sins, raised on the 3rd day) the 2 witnesses who will give testimony before the 2nd coming of Christ will be Moses and Elijah (see Rev 11:3-12). (*Weirsbe, O.T. Prophets, Malachi, p. 488*). Irving Jensen notes in his study on Malachi (p.87), that the final word in Malachi is "CURSE". That He would send "a messenger" who will turn people's hearts back relationally, to reflect God's heart for relationship, so that He would NOT have to "curse". Christ "became a "CURSE FOR US". Christ, God's ultimate messenger of hope and redemption indeed came the first time for salvation for anyone who would believe. May we not miss this incredible time of history to believe in Him and be a faithful messenger as we have seen through Malachi and these many prophets and faithful believers throughout the Old Testament!

Discussion Questions

1. As you read Malachi, what stands out to you the most about God's final words to His people in the Old Testament? What do you learn about God's heart?

2. Much of Malachi's message has to do with giving God the honor He deserves. In what ways can you honor God more with your life today?

3. Malachi reveals many questions the people were asking about life. *"Does God really love us?" "Is it worth serving God?" "Where is God's justice in this world?" "What does God want from us?"* Do you relate to any of these questions? Or, do you have your own list of questions for/about God?