



Introduction to Malachi

Invitation to Study

There are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament. The first five books constitute the Pentateuch, books of the Law, followed by twelve books of history, five books of wisdom and poetry, twelve major prophets, and five minor prophets. Malachi is the last of the minor prophets and the final book of the Old Testament. The Minor Prophets are not labeled “minor” because they are less important than the twelve major prophets but simply because their prophecies are shorter in length. The Book of Malachi is only four chapters. But in a mere fifty-five verses, Malachi presents a powerful message -- a life-changing message. And although the message was addressed to the people of Israel over 2000 years ago, the message is applicable and vital to our times. Malachi’s message is simply this: remember God and all He has done for you, repent of your sins, and return to Him.

Will you enthusiastically join in this brief yet powerful study of Malachi with your ears and heart open to receive the prophet’s call to remember, repent, and return to the Sovereign God of the universe who loves you and who has done great things for you? Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s word through Malachi is surely *living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Hebrews 4:12).

Before entering into the study of Malachi, it will be beneficial to begin with some background information concerning the author, time, and message of the prophecy. Also, it will be helpful to point out why Malachi has such great importance for Christians today.

I. The Writer of Malachi

The writer is named in the title of the book, as is true of all the books of the prophets. Malachi is also named as the writer in the first verse of chapter one. Malachi means *my messenger*. However, some scholars have argued that Malachi is not the name of the author, but a reference to an anonymous “messenger”. The Jewish Targum, an ancient Aramaic translation and paraphrase of the Old Testament assigns authorship to Ezra, the scribe, who led a return of Jewish exiles in Babylon back to their homeland in 458 B.C. The Talmud, a Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament, compiled in the late 4th century A.D. credits Mordecai, one of the main personalities in the Book of Esther, with

writing the prophecy. The superscription to Malachi in the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, may be read either “my messenger” or “my angel” which gives another interesting twist to the possible authorship of the book. However, if Malachi is not the name of the author, this would be the only anonymous prophetic book in the Old Testament, which seems highly unlikely. The majority of scholars today agree that the prophecy was written by Malachi.

Nothing is known of the life of the prophet Malachi except that he received and communicated the word of the Lord to the Jewish people of his day who were living in Judah.

The Lord of hosts

Although the prophecy was written by the hand of Malachi, a human hand, the speaker throughout most of the book is God Himself, *the Lord of hosts*. This powerful name of God is used twenty-two times throughout the book of Malachi. *The Lord of hosts* comes from the Hebrew expression “Yahweh Sabaoth” and is used over two hundred times in the Old Testament to refer to God.

The title *Lord of hosts* says several things about the nature of God and about His creation. It emphasizes God’s ultimate power over the whole universe and over every living creature which He has created. The title is a statement not only of God’s ultimate power but also of creation’s subjection to that power. No one stands before God, except by His power, mercy and grace.

An excellent illustration of the magnificence of the name is found in 1 Samuel 17:45 where David approached Goliath the Philistine, responding to the warrior’s taunts with, *You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied*. Although Goliath may have been the superior soldier with better armor and more deadly weapons, David was not fighting alone. He approached Goliath in the name of the *Lord of hosts*, the commander, not only of the armies of Israel, but of all of heaven as well. David faced Goliath with only a sling and a stone but *the battle (was) the Lord’s* (1 Samuel 17:47) and He gave David the victory!

The prophecy of Malachi is the word of the *Lord of hosts* and is backed by His power, the same power

which gave David victory over Goliath and delivered the people of Israel from the Philistines.

II. The Time in Which Malachi was Written

A. Historical Background

Malachi can be broadly dated as being written during the last half of the fifth century B.C. and contemporaneously or soon after book of Nehemiah. The dating of Malachi's prophecy and the conditions at the time can probably be best understood by looking back over the history of Judah from the time of its exile into Babylon. After King David's death, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom retained the name of Israel and consisted of ten tribes. The southern kingdom of Judah included the city of Jerusalem and was made up of the remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin. The northern kingdom immediately began to worship idols and God sent Assyria to invade and conquer them in 722 B.C. After this, the southern kingdom lapsed into disobedience and idolatry also and God sent his prophets to warn Judah that they would face a fate similar to that of Israel if they did not listen. They did not heed the prophets.

In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, after defeating Pharaoh Neco of Egypt, attacked Jerusalem. A handful of princes and nobles of Judah were captured and taken to Babylon; among them was Daniel (Daniel 1:1-2). In 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, then king of Babylon, returned to Judah and after a lengthy siege, his armies entered and pillaged Jerusalem. King Jehoiakin of Judah, his court, and many prominent citizens were exiled to Babylon and Jehoiakin's brother, Zedekiah, was appointed king in his place. Zedekiah eventually rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, but by that time Babylon was the predominant world power. Nebuchadnezzar's army returned to Jerusalem and again besieged the city, rendering utter destruction in 586 B.C. After Zedekiah's sons were slaughtered before his eyes, he was blinded and deported to Babylon along with many others. Jerusalem was left desolate. The city walls, the temple, and the houses of the prominent citizens were all destroyed. Only the very poorest people were allowed to remain, and Judah became a Babylonian province.

From the time of the first deportation, nearly seventy years passed before the exiled Jews, under a decree by Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, were allowed to return home. It all began when Cyrus conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. Out of respect for the lands and the religions of the nations he conquered, Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their

temple. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest, over forty thousand exiles returned to Jerusalem in 536 B.C. From 536 B.C. to 516 B.C., the exiles labored to rebuild the temple and renew the sacrificial system. This history, along with the opposition the Jews faced, is recorded in The Book of Ezra.

In 458 B. C., a second group of exiles returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra. By this time the initial zeal of the people and priests had waned and evolved to what J. Sidlow Baxter termed "slovenly formalism" ([Explore the Book](#)). The Jewish religious rituals, practiced by both priests and people, had become a mere outward show which led to hard-heartedness toward God's love and a sad departure from His law. Ezra had the heart of a teacher and was dedicated to restoring the Law of God and pure worship.

Nehemiah led a third group of Jews from Babylon to Judah in 445 B.C. and dedicated himself to repairing the walls of Jerusalem and the morals of the people. Around 424 B.C., Nehemiah sternly rebuked the Jews for abuses of the Sabbath rest, unlawful divorce, and intermarrying with the Gentiles. This is recorded in the Book of Nehemiah.

Although Malachi does not date his prophecy or refer to persons or events which can be dated, it is probable that Malachi ministered in Jerusalem during the time of Nehemiah, perhaps during a period when Nehemiah had returned to Babylon (433 B.C. to 424 B.C.). Several passages from their writings refer to the same conditions. In parallel passages, Nehemiah 13:29 and Malachi 2:8 refer to a polluted priesthood, Nehemiah 13:23-27 and Malachi 2:10-16 refer to intermarriage with Gentiles, and Nehemiah 13:10-12 and Malachi 3:10 refer to failure to pay tithes.

B. The Difficulty of the Times

At the time Malachi wrote, life had been and continued to be difficult for the Jews. Even though they were back in their own land, the people continued to live under the sovereignty of Persia, ruled by a Persian appointed governor (Malachi 1:8). They faced major opposition from the Gentiles in the region, their harvests were poor, and plagues of locusts were common (Malachi 3:11). Although the people had worked hard to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, most demonstrated cold hearts toward God. They failed to observe the Mosaic Law as God had commanded (Malachi 1:6; 2:10-16; 3:7-12) and they were enticed by the foreign cultures, values, and practices surrounding them (Malachi 2:10-16). Furthermore, they were discouraged. Although God had brought them out of exile and into their own land to rebuild His temple, they failed to recognize

God's presence, God's glory, or the fulfillment of His promises. The people seemed to have lost all heavenly hope.

In Malachi's time, the Jews were in their land and worshiping in their rebuilt temple (Malachi 1:6-14; 2:7-9; 3:7-10). They were awaiting the promise of the Messiah which was not fulfilled until four hundred years later, as recorded in the gospels of the New Testament. Malachi was God's last word to His people before those four hundred years of silence.

III. The Message of Malachi

A. The Burden

As previously stated, Malachi's prophecy addressed the community of Jews who had returned to their land from exile in Babylon. The purpose of the prophecy was to cause them to remember God's faithfulness, repent of their sins, and return to God. Malachi warned the people that they must confront their sins and correct them! He did not try to smooth things over. He sought to make things right (see Eugene Peterson, Run with the Horses).

The Jews of Malachi's time lived their lives imagining that they were all right when, in reality, they were all wrong. They performed their rituals and did what was right in their own eyes, but Malachi measured the conduct of the people by God's law as delivered through Moses.

The burden of Malachi's entire message revolves around God's words to the people of Israel in Malachi 1:2, *I have loved you*. G. Campbell Morgan points out, "Everything that follows is to be viewed in the light thereof. It reveals the perpetual attitude of God and is the wail of wounded love" (The Minor Prophets, The Men and Their Messages). In contrast to God's love, the blindness and hardness of the people is seen in their skeptical question, *In what way have You loved us?* The proof of the people's lack of love is seen repeatedly throughout Malachi's prophecy in six more insolent objections in which they answer back to God.

In what way have we despised Your name? (Malachi 1:6)

In what way have we defiled You? (Malachi 1:7)

In what way have we wearied You? (Malachi 2:17)

In what way shall we return? (Malachi 3:7)

In what way have we robbed You? (Malachi 3:8)

What have we spoken against You? (Malachi 3:13)

Malachi's prophecy clearly shows that God's love never fails! In spite of the failure of His people, God is always faithful. His word is sure. All of His promises are sure. He has promised to destroy evil, to heal those who revere His name and patiently await His

coming. In His perfect timing, the day will come when *The Sun of Righteousness shall arise* (Malachi 4:2). God's people are simply called to love Him in return and to show their love by obeying His commandments (Malachi 4:4), not through rituals and self-centered habits which some call worship. God's people are to love and obey!

B. The Bleak Truth

The sad truth is that God's blessed people who by His grace had returned to their beloved homeland, were miserable sinners who failed to honor God or show any gratitude to Him. Malachi's prophecy reveals seven sins of the people and priests.

1. Questioning God's love - Malachi 1:2.

2. Failing to honor God - Malachi 1:6.

3. Offering defiled sacrifices - Malachi 1:7-8, 12-14.

4. Corrupting the priesthood - Malachi 2:8.

5. Mixed marriages with Gentiles - Malachi 2:11-12.

6. Divorce - Malachi 2:13-16

7. Robbing God of the tithes - Malachi 3:8

Malachi warns of God's judgment upon sin. God promised to send His Messenger (Malachi 3:1) as a refining fire to purify the priesthood and judge those who turn away from Him. In light of this, God calls His people to return.

C. The Bright Future

Malachi's prophecy is not all bleak. Malachi also offers promises and hope for those who repent. He speaks of a *book of remembrance* (Malachi 3:16) for those who fear the Lord, the promise of the *great and dreadful day of the Lord* (Malachi 4:5) and the *Sun of Righteousness* (Malachi 4:2), who *shall arise with healing in His wings*. In light of this, God's people are to remember His Law!

IV. The Importance of Malachi Today

A. Whitewashed Tombs

The original recipients of Malachi's prophecy were people who practiced formal religious ritual and lived as they pleased. They put on a pretense of following the law, but their hearts were far from God. Jesus might have called them *whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness* (Matthew 23:27). God desires not just outward compliance to His law, but inward acceptance and obedience which flows out of love. Malachi charges the people of Judah with lack of love for God and shows how their lovelessness is demonstrated in their lives.

Malachi's message is very applicable to our time.

How many people go to church on Sunday, forget the sermon before even leaving the parking lot, and live their daily lives no differently than the rest of the world? Even worse, how many pulpits fail to preach God's true word which is powerful to convict even the most sinful heart (Hebrews 4:12)? We see in Malachi that God desires His people to be committed to Him and not to their own selfish desires or to the ways of the world. Malachi points out specific ways that you may be dishonoring God and showing lack of love in your life. Malachi will call you to remember what God has done for you and call you to return to Him with your whole heart.

B. Abuse of God's Word

At the present time, much as in the days of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, many people seem to have little regard for the word of God. Atheists and agnostics scoff at the Bible while many so-called religious scholars attempt to undermine it by "proving" that it is really just man's book about God and nothing more. Even Christians misuse and abuse the Bible by taking verses out of context and twisting them to mean what they want. But probably the most common abuse ... is sheer neglect. Even God's people sometimes have a tendency to ignore His word and act as if the Bible doesn't have any bearing on their daily lives. There are also Christians who are thoroughly familiar with the New Testament but have never opened the pages of the Old Testament. Many do not even know where to find the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi. Perhaps you are one of these people. If so, this study will help remedy that and, hopefully, peak your interest in the Old Testament.

Many Christians today who study the Bible concentrate on the last third of the Bible. The only portions of the Old Testament many Christians read are the books of Psalms and Proverbs, even though the Bible that Jesus read was the Old Testament. "In Malachi's day, the Law was in danger of being forgotten. But I'm not sure it's very different today. All of us need to spend

more time in the Old Testament. But don't worry - even though you may find yourself in unfamiliar territory, you'll still find Jesus there. And who knows - you may get as much out of the Old Testament as you now get out of the New!" (www.ezra.mobi)

Applications

1. In her autobiography, Created for Commitment, A. Wetherell Johnson, founder of Bible Study Fellowship wrote, "We believe, we are born again, we sing songs to the Lord in the churches, we bring others in to be saved and enjoy fellowship, we give money to the Lord. Yet one all important ingredient seems to be missing: The majority of believers do not *personally read*, understand, and apply the entire Bible for themselves. They are content to be spoon-fed without taking time to discover for themselves the many facets of God's character, and to obey His specific commandments in the Bible. Our Christian generation has no excuse. We are all literate, but many are *biblically illiterate*, especially in regard to important teaching in the Old Testament."

As you make this four week commitment to study the Book of Malachi, will you ask God to show you new facets of His character? Will you ask Him to give you a deeper understanding of His word, particularly the Old Testament? Will you open your heart and mind to the Holy Spirit and commit to be obedient to the new truths you are learning?

2. The prophet Malachi ministered to a people who went through the motions of worshiping God, but in reality had drifted far from Him, so far, in fact, that they failed to recognize their pathetic plight. Malachi's message was a call to them to return to God. They desperately needed to turn around, take a good look at their lives and lift their eyes to God. In the words of Henrietta Mears (What the Bible is all About), Malachi is calling, "Back to God's house! Back to God's word! Back to God's work! Back to God's grace!" What is God calling you back to?