

SPENDING TIME WITH THE PROPHETS

the book of Malachi

Malachi: God's Message To A Downcast People

We know nothing of the prophet Malachi other than his name, which would be translated as “my messenger”. This messenger of God spoke to the people after they had returned to the Promised Land following their exile. It may be that Malachi prophesied during the time of Nehemiah's leadership for both are concerned with societal oppression (Malachi 3.5; Nehemiah 5.1-3), proper tithing (Malachi 3.7-10; Nehemiah 10.37-39) and issues of marriage (Malachi 2.10-16; Nehemiah 10.30; 13.23-29). Thus, Malachi's prophecy is typically dated sometime after Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem in 444 B.C., making Malachi the last book of the Old Testament in both organization and chronology.

We may not know exactly when Malachi prophesied, but reading his prophecy gives much insight into the condition of God's people at that time. In short, they were downcast and discouraged. “Whereas most of the prophets lived and prophesied in days of change and political upheaval, Malachi and his contemporaries were living in an uneventful waiting period, when God seemed to have forgotten his people enduring poverty and foreign domination in the little province of Judah. Zerubbabel and Joshua, whom Haggai and Zechariah had indicated as God's chosen men for the new age, had died. True the temple had been completed, but nothing momentous had occurred to indicate that God's presence had returned to fill it with glory, as Ezekiel had indicated would happen (Ezek. 43:4). The day of miracles had passed with Elijah and Elisha. The round of religious duties continued to be carried on, but without enthusiasm. Where was the God of their fathers? Did it really matter whether one served him or not? Generations were dying without receiving the promises (cf. Heb. 11:13) and many were losing their faith.”¹

The Message Of Malachi

The people's discouragement became manifest in waning devotion to both the worship of God and to His will. If they believed God had abandoned them, then they reasoned it was not important to abide by His will. Thus, Malachi's prophecy contains a number of “disputes” between God and His people.

1. A dispute about God's love (1.2-5). God begins with the statement, “I have loved you,” but Israel disputed His claim. “How have you loved us?” God's defense of His love was His choosing Jacob over Esau. This is NOT an example of individual predestination, rather God choosing to make His purposes come about via Jacob's descendants. His hatred was not for

¹ Baldwin, Joyce G. *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 28. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972.

Esau as an individual, rather Esau's descendants had come to represent the evil nations who sought to oppress God's people (cf. Obadiah). God, in His love for Israel, had brought them back to their homeland, but Edom would be destroyed.

2. A dispute about God's honor and fear (1.6-2.9). God says the people had not honored Him, but they disputed His claim: "How have we despised Your name?" God then presents the evidence for how they had dishonored Him. They mocked the sacrificial system by offering the blind, lame and sick (1.7-14). Shockingly, it was not only the people who dishonored God, but the priests as well (2.1-9). The priests who should "preserve knowledge" and give instruction to the people, had actually caused the people to stumble!
3. A dispute about Israel's faithlessness (2.10-16). God says He would no longer accept their offerings (vs. 13) because the people had acted treacherously against each other (vs. 10). The people questioned, "for what reason?" (vs. 14). God provides the evidence of their treachery: they married women from other nations who worshipped other gods (vss. 11-12cf. Deut. 7.3; Ezra 9.1-2) and they divorced their wives (vss. 14-16).
4. A dispute about God's justice (2.17-3.6). God charges the people with wearying Him with their words, but the people dispute His claim: "How have we wearied Him?" They wearied Him by questioning the justice of God! Rather than give examples of His past justice, God looks to the future when His messenger would prepare the way for Him. Then the Lord would appear, purifying His people (3.2-4) and judging those who do evil (3.5). "I, the Lord, do not change, therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." The Lord is always just, and His justice would be fully revealed with the coming of the Messiah and the messenger who preceded Him.
5. A dispute about tithing (3.7-12). God charges the people with failure to keep His will and petitions for them to "return to Me, and I will return to you". Again, the people dispute God: "How shall we return?" They could return by repenting of their actions and giving to God the tithe as required in the Law (3.8-10; cf. Leviticus 227.30). If they would give to God what properly belonged to Him, He would respond by blessing them greatly (3.10-12).
6. A dispute about speaking against God (3.13-4.6). God's final charge against the people is that they speak arrogantly against Him. Yet again, the people disputed God's claim: "What have we spoken against You?" God again provides the evidence as the people claimed there was no profit in serving the Lord (3.14-15). Not only was this untrue, but a day was coming when those who feared the Lord would be remembered forever while the arrogant and evil would be destroyed like chaff in a fire (3.16-4.3). The prophecy then concludes with a call to remember the Law of Moses (4.4) and a promise that Elijah would come (4.5-6). Both likely have Messianic importance. We know John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy (Luke 1.17; Matthew 11.14; 17.10-13) and true adherence to the Law of Moses should also have pointed the people to the Messiah (see John 5.45-47). It was through the Messiah that those who feared the Lord would be saved while those who rejected Him would be punished (4.1-3; cf. Luke 3.15-17).