

## **Lessons from Malachi**

Malachi's name means my messenger. We know nothing about him except that which we can glean from his short book, which brings the section of the Old Testament called the Minor Prophets (or The Book of the Twelve) to an end. His is also the last book of the Old Testament.

The central message of Malachi is that while God had revealed His love for His people throughout their history, that love also made His people accountable to Him. The Lord expected the chosen nation and its leaders to obey His commands. Though open idolatry apparently had vanished (the book appears to have been written for Jews who had returned from Babylonian captivity), the people were not living up to the expectations of the covenant. Though they were going through the motions of religious observance, it was a dry formalism without heartfelt conviction.

### **Great Is the Lord**

Read Malachi 1. What problem is the prophet addressing? How, today, might we be guilty of the same attitude that led to this rebuke?

Malachi contrasts God's love for His people with the attitude of the priests, whom he charges with the sin of contempt for God's holy name. When performing their duties in the temple, these descendants of Aaron accepted lame, blind, and sick animals for sacrifices to the Lord. In this way the people were led astray into thinking that sacrifices were not important. Yet, God had instructed Aaron and his sons in the wilderness that sacrificial animals should be physically perfect, without blemish (see Lev. 1:1-3, 22:19).

The prophet then lists three important reasons why God deserved to be honored and respected by the people of Israel. First, God is their Father. Just as children should honor their parents, so the people must respect their Father in heaven. Second, God is their Master and Lord. Just as servants obey their masters, so God's people should treat Him in the same way. Third, the Lord is a great King, and an earthly king would not accept a defective or sickly animal as a gift from one of His subjects. So, the prophet is asking why the people would present such an animal to the King of kings, the One who rules over the whole world.

What, of course, makes their actions even more heinous in the sight of God is that these sacrifices were all pointing to Jesus, the spotless Son of God (John 1:29, 1 Pet. 1:18-19). The animals were to be without blemish because Jesus had to be without blemish in order to be our perfect sacrifice.

"To the honor and glory of God, His beloved Son—the Surety, the Substitute—was delivered up and descended into the prisonhouse of the grave. The new tomb enclosed Him in its rocky chambers. If one single sin had tainted His character the stone would never have been rolled away from the door of His rocky chamber, and the world with its burden of guilt would have perished."—Ellen G. White, Manuscript Releases, vol. 10, p. 385. Is there any wonder, then, that the sacrifices which pointed to Jesus had to be perfect?

### **Loving and Respecting Others**

God's voice, which dominates Malachi's book, is the voice of a loving father who pleads with His children. When the people raise questions and make complaints, He is ready to

dialogue with them. Most of the issues discussed by God and His people have to do with a few basic attitudes.

Read Malachi 2. Though a number of issues are dealt with, for what practice is the Lord especially condemning them? See Mal. 2:13-16.

While all the Jews recognized God as Father and Creator in their worship, not all of them were living as if God was the Lord of their lives. Malachi takes marriage as an example to illustrate lack of faithfulness and commitment to one another. According to the Bible, marriage is a sacred institution established by God. The people of Israel were warned against marrying outside the faith, because by so doing they would compromise their commitments with the Lord and fall into idolatry. (See Josh. 23:12-13.)

God had intended that marriage should be a commitment for life. In Malachi's time, however, many men were breaking the vows that they had made early in life with, as the prophet said, the "wife of your youth." Seeing their wives grow older, the husbands would divorce them and marry younger and more attractive women. For this reason, God says, he hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). This strong statement reveals how serious God is about marriage commitments, which so often people take very lightly. The strict rules in the Bible about divorce show just how sacred marriage is.

Because divorce was legal in Israel (Deut. 24:1-4), some men did not hesitate to break their marriage vows. Toward the end of the Old Testament period, divorce appears to have become common, somewhat like many countries today. Yet, in the Bible marriage is consistently presented as a holy covenant before God (Gen. 2:24, Eph. 5:21-33).

Read Malachi 2:17. What warning should be taken from these words, especially in the context of the day's lesson? Or even in general? How could we be in danger of harboring that same attitude, even subconsciously?

### **Tithe in the Storehouse**

Read Malachi 3:1-10. What is God saying to His people here? What specific elements are found in these texts, and why would they all be tied together? That is, in what ways are these things all related to each other?

With these verses, God restates the basic message of the Minor Prophets: His love remains constant and unwavering. In verse 7 God's call is heard once more: "Return to me, and I will return to you". The people then ask: "How shall we return?" (RSV). This question is similar to the one in Micah 6:6, about the bringing of sacrifices to God. In the case of Malachi, however, a specific answer is given, and, surprisingly enough, it has to do with the question of their tithing, or lack thereof.

In fact, they are accused of stealing from what belongs to God. This happened because they were not faithful in the returning of their tithes and offerings.

The custom of tithing, giving ten percent of the income, is presented in the Bible as a reminder that God owns everything and all that people have comes from Him. The tithe was used in Israel to support the Levites, who ministered in the temple. To neglect the returning of one's tithe is, according to Malachi, the same as robbing God.

Malachi 3:10 is one of the rare Scriptures in which God challenges people to put Him to the test. At the waters of Meribah in the wilderness, the children of Israel repeatedly "tested" God's patience, something that He was angry about (Ps. 95:8-11). Here, however,

God is inviting Israel to put Him to the test. He wants them to see that they can trust Him in this matter, which, according to the texts, is something of great spiritual significance.

How does the act of tithing (and of giving offerings, for that matter) strengthen you spiritually? In other words, when you cheat on tithe, why are you cheating yourself, not just God?

### **A Scroll of Remembrance**

In Malachi 3:13-18, the people complain that the Lord did not care about the nation's sins. Those who practiced evil and injustice appeared to escape unnoticed, and thus many wondered why they should serve the Lord and live righteously when evil seemed to go unpunished.

Read Malachi 3:14-15. Why is it easy to understand that complaint?

How does the Lord respond? (Mal. 3:16-18)

It is easy in this world, where so much injustice exists, to wonder if justice ever will be done. The message here, however, is that God knows of all these things, and He will reward those who are faithful to Him.

The expression "a scroll (or, a book) of remembrance" is found only here in Scripture. What do the following passages teach about God's books in which are recorded people's names and deeds? Exod. 32:32, Ps. 139:16, Isa. 4:3, 65:6, Rev. 20:11-15.

The bottom line is that the Lord knows all things. He knows those who are His (2 Tim. 2:19) and those who are not. All we can do is, as sinners, claim His righteousness, claim His promises of forgiveness and power, and then—relying on Christ's merits—die to self and live for Him and others, knowing that in the end our only hope is in His grace. If we place our hope in ourselves, we are sure to be disappointed, one way or another.

### **The Sun of Righteousness**

On a previous occasion the people asked, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17, NKJV). In the beginning of chapter 4, a solemn assurance is given that one day God will execute His judgment on the world. As a result, the proud will be destroyed along with the wicked, just as stubble is consumed in fire. Stubble is the unusable part of the grain, and it lasts only seconds when thrown into a blazing furnace. On the Day of the Lord, fire will be the agent of destruction, just as water was in Noah's day.

Read Malachi 4. What great contrast is presented here between the saved and the lost? See also Deut. 30:19, John 3:16.

While the fate of the wicked is described in verse 1, verse 2 focuses on future blessings of the righteous. The question "Where is the God of justice?" is answered again, but this time by the assurance of a coming day when the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. The rising of the "sun of Righteousness" is a metaphor for the dawn of a new day, one that marks a new era in the history of salvation. At this time, once and for all, evil will be destroyed forever, the saved will enjoy the ultimate fruit of what Christ has accomplished for them, and the universe will be rendered eternally secure.

Malachi closes his book with two admonitions that characterize biblical faith. The first is a call to remember God's revelation through Moses, the first five books of the Bible and the foundation of the Old Testament.

The second admonition speaks of the prophetic role of Elijah. Filled with the Holy Spirit, this prophet called people to repent and return to God. Although Jesus Himself saw John the Baptist as a fulfillment of that prophecy, (Matt. 11:13-14), we also believe it has a fulfillment at the end of time, when God will have a people who fearlessly will proclaim His message to the world. "Those who are to prepare the way for the second coming of Christ, are represented by faithful Elijah, as John came in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for Christ's first advent."—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health*, pp. 72, 73.

How are we to fulfill this sacred role? How well are we doing in this task?

Further Study: "God blesses the work of men's hands, that they may return to Him His portion. He gives them the sunshine and the rain; He causes vegetation to flourish; He gives health and ability to acquire means. Every blessing comes from His bountiful hand, and He desires men and women to show their gratitude by returning Him a portion in tithes and offerings—in thank offerings, in freewill offerings, in trespass offerings. They are to devote their means to His service, that His vineyard may not remain a barren waste. They are to study what the Lord would do were He in their place. . . . They are to take all difficult matters to Him in prayer. They are to reveal an unselfish interest in the building up of His work in all parts of the world."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 707, 708.