

Malachi

1. Introduction

1. Background

(a) The condition of the Jews

The Jews who were scattered far and wide through the Persian empire had made themselves at home. The Jews who returned to their homeland continued to reveal an openness to the world of the empire: they had lost their consciousness of God's rule and they failed to acknowledge and maintain the spiritual roots of their existence as the treasured possession of the LORD.

(b) The ministry of Nehemiah

Although a handful of Jews had returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC, and had eventually rebuilt the temple (finished 515 BC), the walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt by the time of Nehemiah's first visit 444 BC.

Nehemiah did more than re-build the walls: he also rebuilt the Jewish community: he (i) stopped the rich from oppressing the poor, (ii) implemented a basic form of social welfare, (iii) re-invigorated the leadership, (iv) set up a programme for the repopulation of Jerusalem and (v) helped to reform worship.

The climax of Nehemiah's first term in Jerusalem was the renewal of the covenant, at which time the people undertook to fulfil their obligation for the upkeep of the temple and the priests.

After 12 years in Jerusalem, Nehemiah returned to the Persian court. He was absent for probably one or two years, during which time a number of abuses became common, including intermarriage with pagans, a lackadaisical attitude to worship, and Sabbath-breaking. Nehemiah had to address these when he came back to Jerusalem.

(c) The ministry of Malachi

The prophecy of Malachi is the "last words" of a whole generation of prophets. After the conclusion of Malachi's ministry there would be no fresh prophetic word until John the Baptist burst onto the scene (about 460 years later).

Malachi's ministry fits the situation in which Nehemiah worked, either the period between Nehemiah's return to the Persian court and his second visit to Jerusalem (433-430[?] BC), or the start of Nehemiah's second stint in Jerusalem.

- Before Nehemiah's first visit the temple worship was financed by the Persian government (Ezra 6:6-12; 7:12-26). Nehemiah changed this, leading the people in covenant renewal, which included acceptance of their responsibility for maintaining the temple (Nehemiah 10). This makes sense of Malachi's appeal to the people to bring their tithes and offerings to the temple (3:6-12).
- Mal. 1:8 cannot refer to the governorship of Nehemiah, since Nehemiah voluntarily relinquished the governor's right to be provisioned by the people.

- Malachi speaks against an lackadaisical attitude prevalent among the priests (1:6-2:9) which corresponds better to the second visit of Nehemiah (Neh. 13:28-29) than the first (e.g. Neh.3:1; 8:1-18).
- Malachi's rebuke of mixed marriages (2:10-16) corresponds with abuses which Nehemiah had to address on his second visit (Neh. 13:25-27).

2. Theme: "I the LORD do not change" (3:6)

Malachi's prophecy concern the covenant relationship between God and his people. The message opens with the affirmation of God's covenant commitment ("I have loved you," says the LORD," 1:2). It then moves to a sequence of rebukes for the failure of the people to live up to their covenant responsibilities (in worship, morality and discipline). The prophecy closes with the commendation of those who cared about the covenant, and a call to heed Moses (the giver of the covenant Law) and wait for Elijah (the renewer of the covenant community).

A distinctive feature of Malachi is the dialogues he sets up between God and the people. Malachi's prophecy comprises 55 verses, of which 47 record the direct address of God to Israel. The result is a vivid portrayal of the encounter between God and the people, unsurpassed in the prophetic books. There is a freshness in the lively debates of the book that makes it interesting reading.

God's communication with his people is expressed in terms of human acts and affections: God loves (1:2; 2:11) and he hates (1:3; 2:13, 16); he is angry (1:4) and is wearied (2:17); he has pleasure and displeasure (1:10, 13; 3:4); and he threatens (2:3; 3:11), blesses (3:10-12) and curses (2:2, 9, 12; 3:9).

Malachi's message strikes at the heart of nominal, easygoing Christianity.

3. Structure and Content of Malachi

Superscription (1:1) ***The burden of the Word of the LORD to Israel***

Central Dialogues (1:2-3:14) ***God engages with his people to turn them back***

- A. 1:2-5 God's love for Israel; he distinguishes between Jacob and Esau
- B. 1:6-14 The failure of the priests to bring pure offerings
- C. 2:1-9 The failure of the priests to teach the community
- D. 2:10-16 The broken marriage covenant: mixed marriages and divorce
- E. 2:17-3:5 God will purify the community, removing all who break covenant
- F. 3:6-12 God hasn't moved – the people have moved from him
- G. 3:13-4:3 God distinguishes between those who do/do not serve him

Epilogue (4:4-6) ***Remember Moses; wait for Elijah***

Malachi 1:1-5

2. God Affirms his Love for his People

Malachi's prophecy opens with the most striking affirmation: "I have loved you," says the LORD" (1:2). Israel had broken covenant with God in many ways: in worship (1:6-14), morality (2:10-16) and discipline (2:1-9; 3:6-12). So God is going to have to confront the people with their sinful failure. But before he does anything of this, God first announces the gospel: "I have loved you," says the LORD."

1. The history of God's love

When the people complain that there is little evidence of God's love, God reminds them of their history: "'Is not Esau Jacob's brother?' declares the LORD. 'Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated'" (1:2-3).

The sovereign, free, electing love of God lies at the root of salvation:

- Abraham was "the childless man from the idolatrous city", but God loved him, called him and made covenant with him. He is called "the friend of God" (Isaiah 41:8; Jam. 2:23), literally "the one I love".
- Jacob and Esau were twin sons of Isaac, conceived because Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of Rebekah his wife (Gen. 25:20-21). Why did God love one child and hate the other? Not because of anything they had done, but because of God's purpose in election (Rom. 9:10-13).
- God redeemed Israel from Egypt because of his love: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). See also Deut. 7:7-8, where God is clear that his love is not based on any qualifying characteristics in the people!

There is nothing more basic than the love of God. The Bible never tries to explain God's love in terms of anything else. The apostle John could not explain the love of God in terms of anything else, except that "God is love" (4:8). Alexander MacLaren has written, "God's love is not drawn out by our loveableness, but wells up, like an artesian spring, from the depth of his nature."

2. The dependability of God's love

Love can be fickle – but not God's love. "I have loved you" means that God's love stretches back into the depths of the history of history of his people and remains in force to the present day.

Malachi expresses this negatively: "I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

"Love" and "hate" express how God has dealt with the descendants of Jacob and Esau. Esau was father of the Edomites. They were driven out of their homeland in the 6th century BC by the Nabateans, and they never returned. God's point in Malachi 1:3-4 is that if Israel wants to see what it means to be "not loved" by God, then look no further than the history of Esau.

In contrast, God's love for Israel is stable and dependable: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed" (3:6).

Circumstances may make us doubt the love of God. But Paul is emphatic that nothing "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

3. The demonstration of God's love

Why are we saved? Because of God's love (Eph. 1:4-6)! But also, "How does God demonstrate his saving love?" Actually, in context the question asked by Israel is shocking: "How have you loved us?" But it gives us an opportunity to consider just how great the work of God's love is. This is something beyond Malachi's knowledge: it is revealed only in the New Testament and the gift of the Redeemer.

- "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).
- "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9).
- "...having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).
- "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

Because of God's love we are blessed NOW in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3) and we will be blessed with the full enjoyment of salvation at Christ's second coming.

"The perspective of God's people is not narrow; it is broad and it is long. It is not confined to space and time; it has the expanse of eternity. Its orbit has two foci, one the electing love of God the Father in the counsels of eternity, the other glorification with Christ in the manifestation of his glory. The former has no beginning, the latter has no end" (John Murray).

4. Responding to God's love

- Attend to your heart. We know that when we discipline our children, they sometimes accuse us of not loving them – how wrong they are! But we make the same mistake with God. It is perilously easy to doubt the love of God when circumstances seem to be against us: "How have you loved me?" we ask. The question can be a sign of unbelief and used as a cloak for sin.
- Meditate on God's love. Israel doubted God's love because it had forgotten its history. Remember day by day what God has done in love for your salvation: at what cost it was purchased; how carefully he provided for you to hear about it; the eternal goal at which he aims.
- Imitate God's love. Israel's communal life was falling apart. When the people doubted God's love, they stopped loving one another (2:13-16). "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

Malachi 1:6-3:15

3. *Covenant Love is Spurned*

God loves his people with a sovereign, faithful and demonstrable love: “‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD.” How shocking then when the people reply, “How have you loved us?” (1:2), i.e. “What is the evidence that you love us?”

This is a very “me-focused” view of God. People who ask this question approach their relationship with God with the attitude, “What’s in it for me?” Their self-centredness has killed their love for God, and they bored with him. Malachi’s message strikes at the heart of nominal, easygoing Christianity.

1. **Bored with Biblical worship**

Worship is our “chief end”. In it we glorify and enjoy God. It brings us to the threshold of heaven. The gathering of the congregation on the Lord’s Day deserves to be the highlight of the week.

In the Old Testament the priests were privileged to come closest to God in worship. They were also responsible for presenting the regular sacrifices by which God was propitiated and the covenant relationship maintained.

But the priests were bored with Biblical worship! Any old sacrificial animal would do, just to get the work over and done with as quickly and cheaply as possible. Their attitude is revealed by their words – “What a weariness this is” – and their actions – “you snort at it [the LORD’s table]” (1:13).

Our attitude in worship is very important: reverence rather than familiarity; desire for God rather than boredom; engagement of head and heart rather than dull routine; the focus on the glory of God rather than the pleasing of self.

Obedience in worship is also important: we worship God the way he prescribes in the Word, and not as we think we would like to worship him.

The priests were also bored with teaching the law (2:1-9). The teaching elder must do his utmost to teach the Word of God faithfully, accurately and persuasively.

2. **Bored with Biblical morality**

The Bible reveals God’s will for our lives: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The moral law is summarized by the Ten Commandments. Salvation doesn’t abolish the law – salvation writes the law on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). The law continues to direct our obedience.

Israel was privileged to have the law (Deut. 4:5-8). But the people had become disillusioned with it. There was a number of moral failures in the nation in Malachi’s day. Malachi focused on breach of the 7th commandment: “The LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (2:14).

It seems that some of the men were divorcing their Jewish wives and/or marrying foreign wives. Why is this important?

First, unfaithful, immoral behaviour in marriage strikes at the very root of the covenant community.

Secondly, where the 7th commandment is violated, the other commandments are sure to be broken.

Thirdly, “confining marriage to the limits of the community of faith and remaining faithful within marriage are crucial in the Bible because marriage is the principal metaphor for the relationship of Christ and his church” (Iain Duguid).

3. Bored with Biblical disciplines

God reserves the right to regulate the lives of his people. Two important ways he does this is through the Day of Rest and the discipline of giving financially to support the work of the LORD.

The Jewish people were living in breach of both of these. Neh. 13:15-18 tells us about breach of the Sabbath; Mal. 3:6-12 tells us about failure to tithe. “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you” (3:8-9).

This is a matter of trust. Will I be disadvantaged if I am not available for work on the Lord’s Day? Will I have enough money if I give a significant fraction of my income to the Lord’s work? But if I do not allow God to regulate my life in these areas, can I really say that I am a disciple?

“If in fact I leave God no place to show his care in my life, of what value is my assertion that I trust him?” (John Oswalt).

4. Bored with waiting

We walk by faith and not by sight. But this means having to wait for the fulfilment of God’s promises, especially the promise about the return of the Lord Jesus. Generation after generation of Christians has died, and the Lord appears to delay his return. And we are susceptible to the mocking question, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (2 Pet. 3:4). Waiting is difficult.

This is where the Jews failed: in waiting by faith (like Abraham). “You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, ‘How have we wearied him?’ By saying, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’” (2:17).

God replied that he would come – suddenly and not at all in the way the Jews wanted: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap” (3:2).

How we wait is key: “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace” (2 Pet. 3:14).

Malachi 3:16-4:5

4. *Covenant Love is Embraced*

Waiting is difficult, especially when (i) circumstances appear to contradict your hope, and (ii) you don't know how long you will have to wait. That was the experience of the Jews in the days of Malachi. (i) Circumstances looked contrary (2:17; 3:13-15), and (ii) they did not know how long until the coming of the "messenger of the covenant" (3:1).

This tested their faith. Many failed. But some, like Abraham, "believed the LORD, and he counted it to [them] as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). So our final passage opens, "Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name" (3:16).

The word "then" is important: there were people swimming against the tide of popular opinion by waiting for God. God had affirmed his love for Israel (1:1-5); most had spurned that love (1:6-3:15); but these people embraced it.

1. **Those who wait gather together (3:16)**

"Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another" (3:16a).

"Those who feared the LORD" are people who had remained faithful and people who received Malachi's rebuke and repented (3:7). They showed their reverence by listening to the Word of God.

They "spoke with one another". In other words, they sought fellowship, recognizing that they needed to mutual encouragement of the believing community.

We need to meet regularly to speak about the Word and to encourage one another if we are to wait patiently and faithfully for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

2. **Those who wait belong to God (3:16-18)**

So the LORD paid attention to the faithful waiting of the God-fearers. They had listened to his Word, so he listened to their prayers (3:16b).

The "book of remembrance" is like a census record – these are the people who belong to God. He calls them his "treasured possession" (3:17). This is the word used by God in Exodus 19:5 to describe Israel as his personal property – something so dear to God's heart that he will never give it up.

The grumblers had said, "It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts" (3:14). God replies, "Once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him" (3:18).

This is the encouragement we have as we wait for the coming again of Jesus:

- The Lord Jesus will not give up his people. “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).
- “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’” (2 Tim. 2:19).

3. Those who wait will spared on the coming day (4:1-3)

“For behold, the day is coming...” Judgement is absolutely certain.

“...burning like an oven.” Judgement will be dreadful (c.f. 2 Pet. 3:7; 10-12).

“...it will leave them neither root nor branch.” The judgement will be total.

So who can escape? But God promises to spare those who have waited for him: “I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him” (3:17).

Indeed, the arrival of “the coming day” will mean that the waiting is over. “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall” (4:2).

“The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning” (*The Last Battle*, C.S. Lewis).

4. Those who wait are given a final exhortation...to wait (4:4-6)

The prospect before us is wonderful...but it is also “not yet”. So we have to wait.

Malachi also points the eyes of the faithful backward to Sinai. “Remember the law of my servant Moses”. We are called to wait with covenant faithfulness – no innovations in worship, morality or discipline. The Ten Commandments (fulfilled by Jesus, Matt. 5:17) are still a guide to our behaviour. “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness...Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace” (2 Pet. 3:11, 14).

Malachi also points the eyes of the faithful forward to the coming of “Elijah the prophet”, the harbinger of the “great and awesome day of the Lord.” John the Baptist was Elijah (Matt. 11:14). Thus the first coming of Jesus was the coming of the day of the Lord. But, as we have seen before, the day of the Lord does not come all at once – the grace aspect and the judgement aspect are separated in time. So we continue to wait for the coming of the Lord.

This waiting is an opportunity for repentance (3:6). “The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9); so we “count the patience of our Lord as salvation” (2 Pet. 3:15).

Waiting patiently is how we walk by faith.