

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Messages from some Old Testament Prophets: Malachi

Before the days of Health and Safety, a professor was showing his friends various experiments with X-rays. Many beautifully dressed ladies were present, wearing, to all appearance, rare and costly jewellery. "It is really wonderful," said the professor, "the effect these rays have on diamonds." So lowering the lights in the room, he turned the X-rays on the sparkling gems which the ladies wore. Immediately, the real diamonds flashed in all their full brilliance; but, alas, the beautiful paste imitation diamonds had lost all their lustre. The X-rays identified the real and the imitation, much to the dismay of some ladies present!

In the book of Malachi, we see God's X-rays, His omniscient eye, searching the hearts of the people of Israel in order to sort the genuine from the imitation. "I the LORD," He says, "search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:10).

The name Malachi means "My messenger". He was the last prophet of the Old Testament and provides the last utterance of God until the appearance of John the Baptist in the New Testament. He wrote about 100 years after a remnant of the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Unfortunately, in the main the people and the priests had fallen away from God. They only paid lip-service to the Law of God and its observation. Malachi was raised up to rebuke the people for their neglect of the true worship of the Lord and to call them to repentance.

In his book, he identifies the same sins that had been committed earlier by Israel. These included: the corruption of the priesthood (1:6 to 2:9); intermarriages with Gentiles - involving divorce from their previous wives (2:10); lack of support for the priests and Levites (3:10); and, oppression of the poor (3:5). It seems that every Old Testament revival of Israel was marked by a subsequent ever greater decline because they seemed oblivious to the grief which they caused God. Sadly, the effect of all the work and ministry of Nehemiah about 440 BC did not last very long.

The book takes the form of questions and answers. Malachi asks questions of priests and people which would be audaciously disputed. He then offers proof that God's charges and corrections are justified. The revelation consists of seven main messages.

The first message is found in Malachi 1:1-5 where Malachi states that the people of Israel should love God.

These verses show us that Israel had not only failed to respond to God's love, but were oblivious to it. The discussion begins with the statement, "I have loved you, says the LORD." (verse 2) The words are tinged with sorrow and tempered with affection. Yet he continues, "But you ask, How have You loved us?" showing how blind they were to His past mercies. The Lord replied with the statement, "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated". These words must be understood as a relative statement in the sense that God, choosing between the two, chose Jacob. So God's love for the nation that sprang from Jacob was proved in that God chose him to be the heir of the Messianic promise even before he was born. On the other hand, Esau was the father of Edom and the Edomites (Genesis 36:1). As a consequence of the disdain of Esau for God, he is hated and Edom is laid waste (verses 3-4). Though Edom may boast that they will rebuild, God will demolish their efforts. By contrast, Israel was promised to be a nation forever (Jeremiah 31:35-37). As the chosen people, Israel should have recognised God's love for them. They had been separated to the counsel and purposes of His will. We also learn from Edom, that unless God builds the house, they labour in vain that build it. Let us always keep close to the Lord and do His will.

As Christians today, we are in a much better position to appreciate the love of God. We were chosen in Christ by God before the foundation of the world. His love for us was proven in the giving of His well beloved Son to die on our account and by His many additional mercies. These mercies should cause us to yield our bodies to Him as living sacrifices as Paul says in Romans 12:1-3. Primarily, our love for God is shown by our love for Christ. He ought to be our chief love. (Revelation 2:4)

The second message is aimed at the priests. They are told that they should give God the honour and reverence due to Him (1:6-2:17).

In spite of all that God had done for them, Israel had failed to honour God. The priests were mainly responsible in producing this lack of respect. The Lord stated that as a son honours his father and the servant reverences his master, so God, as both Father and Master, should receive the respect due to Him (verse 6). The priests asked how they had despised His name. The Lord answered them saying that they had offered "defiled food on My altar" (verse 7). They were informed they had brought animals for sacrifice that were blind or crippled or diseased. This showed complete disobedience to the manner in which God wanted men to approach Him (Deuteronomy 15:21). He told them that they would not dare make such a gift to a political ruler because it would belittle him. How much more was God belittled by their imperfect offerings (verses 8-9)! In fact, the Lord declared that it would be better to shut the temple's doors and not have sacrifices on the altar at all if they were not going to do it according to the His Law which demands perfect offerings (verses 10-13).

How important it is today for Christians to worship in the way that God has outlined in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... but the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24). Today, we need three things to be able to worship freely. Firstly, we need the revelation of the Father in the New Testament. Only then can we worship in accordance to the truth. Secondly, we need a devoted heart. Hence, we can worship in spirit, that is to say, without the need of artefacts, appointed priests or even special places. Thirdly, we need (or, rather, as Christians, we have) the Holy Spirit who prompts our worship of God (Philippians 3:3). In this way, we should find no hypocrisy, dull formality or wilful ignorance in our worship.

God challenged the priests of Israel to correct their ways or else He would show His utter contempt for them by spoiling their faces with the dung of their own sacrifices (2:3). He would judge them. This reminds us of two things. First, those who are closest to the Lord have the greater responsibility to act according to His will. Failure, on their part, is met with more severe chastening. Second, He expects us to gather with those who are Bible-believing and calling upon His name out of pure hearts.

The Lord then indicates that the priests should be the fountain of instruction in the truth of God (2:7). Instead, they caused the people of Israel to stumble (2:8). In so doing, they had made the Lord's Table contemptible to the people. The result was that they themselves were despised by the people (2:9).

In Christendom today, there are denominations which should be fountains of teaching in the truth of God; but because of a desire to bring religions closer together they are forfeiting the truth and adopting lies. Examine these denominations. Do these priests honour and respect God? Is the Bible (in its original form) upheld as being the inspired word of God? Is the Gospel of salvation scripturally set forth by them? Do they adhere to the doctrine of Christ, His Deity, His Sonship, His virgin birth, His death and resurrection and His exaltation? If not, then depart from their iniquity. Do not be partakers of their sins.

The third message concerns the thoughts of God on the intermarriage of Israelites with the heathen (2:10-16).

Not only had the Israelites sinned against God, they had sinned against each other in desecrating the covenant that God had made with their forefathers (verse 10). Marriage with non-Jews violated the special relationship which God had with them as the Father of the nation (Exodus 4:22). Such marriages were prohibited (Exodus 34:14-16). Not only had they sinned against each other, but they had sinned against God by introducing the idols of heathen gods into Jewish homes. It's as though the heathen woman would say, "Marry me and marry my god." Judah desecrated the Lord's holy institution by "marrying the daughter of a foreign god (verse 11)." It was a mark of unfaithfulness which Israel was not to imitate.

Today, it is wise for the Christian to follow the exhortation, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Marriage is one of many such yokes. It is formed by a binding contract. A Christian should, therefore, marry another Christian.

When God would not accept the offerings of the Israelites, they were distressed and wept. But they refused to confront the seriousness of divorce, so breaking the pattern God established at the time of creation when He made only one wife for Adam, besides breaking His established laws with the people themselves. The Lord commands them to remain faithful to the wives of their youth in order that their offspring be brought up in a godly manner (verse 15). God hates divorce because it takes away the wife's protection. The result is that she is treated cruelly (verse 16).

The fourth message teaches them that they should hope in God (2:17-3:6).

The people had said, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and He is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17). The reason for the statements was that the wicked seemed to prosper without any restraint from God. But Scripture shows that they prosper only for a time and, ultimately, the judgement of God will fall upon them. Scripture also refers to the fact that God will bring in His righteous kingdom as the climax to human history in the period following the appearing of Christ, that is the time when He comes back with the church in order to set up His kingdom on earth.

Malachi 3:1 tells of the messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord to come. This is a clear reference to John the Baptist (Matthew 11:10). He prepared the way of the Lord - the Messiah - who is referred to in the next sentence as "the Lord you are seeking" and the "Messenger of the covenant". Interestingly, the "Lord you are seeking" is not quoted in the references referring to the first advent of Christ. Although Christ was found in the temple just after His birth in the arms of Simeon and, also, at the age of twelve seeking to do His Father's business there, the scripture really relates to His appearing as King of kings and Lord of lords to set up the millennial kingdom. He will then be King and Priest. Likewise, the Lord Jesus could speak of the New Covenant during His first coming; but the literal fulfilment is still future when Israel will be born again spiritually (Matthew 26:28).

The appearing of Christ will be preceded by the beginning of the Day of the Lord which includes the judgments leading up to it (Isaiah 2:12; Joel 3:11-16). Well might the question be asked, "Who can endure the day of His coming" (Malachi 3:2). The answer was that only those whom God had purified and cleansed. Hence, the use of the figures of a refiner's fire (purifying) or a launderer's soap (cleansing). God will cleanse the Levites, and they will once again bring acceptable offerings to the Lord (3:3-4). The offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will also be pleasant to the Lord. In that day of judgment those who are adulterers, perjurers and oppressors will be easily identified (verse 5). By contrast, God Himself will not change. He is immutable in His Person, perfections, purposes and promises. He will ensure that Jacob is not destroyed.

In the fifth message the people are commanded to return to God (3:7-12).

Israel had a long history of disobedience to God. So God pleaded with them to return to Him and promised He would return to them. But they ask, "How are we to return?" (verse 7). They had moved so far from God's way that they didn't know what was expected of them. As Christians, we sometimes turn away from God. Then we need a living ministry of Christ to our souls. This will cause us to confess our sins, knowing that God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God then accuses the whole nation of Israel of robbing Him (verse 8). When they asked how they had robbed Him, He told them that it was because they had not fulfilled their commitment in tithes and offerings. Hence, they were under a curse. He told them to prove Him in that once the whole tithe was brought into the storehouse, and there was food in His house, then He would throw open the flood gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that they would not have room enough for it (3:8-10). If they obeyed God, then He would remove the curse (the devourer) and bless the harvest of the land. So much so, that all the nations would call them blessed, and their land would be delightful. The promises of blessing and cursing are fulfilled in history and prophecy; but the glorious fulfilment of this blessing on the land will be seen during the millennial reign of Christ.

As Christians, we need not tithe. We give to the Lord according to our means and abilities. We are to be good stewards of time and energy as well as money. Neither should we expect more in return for what we give, for our treasure is stored in heaven, not upon earth. Nonetheless, we do well to remember that the Lord is no man's debtor.

The sixth message is that they should fear God (Malachi 3:13-4:3)

This section begins with Israel speaking harshly against God saying that it was pointless to serve Him to no profit when the arrogant and wicked were prospering and even those who tempted God seemed to be free from judgement. But Malachi notes that there is a godly remnant who feared the Lord (3:16). They meditated upon the things of the Lord. They met together and spoke to one another of the Lord's things. God was fully aware of them and a book of remembrance was written for them before Him.

As Christians, we are to do likewise. In these last days prior to the coming of Christ, let us meditate upon God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; let us speak one to another about the Lord's things; let us not forsake the gathering of ourselves together with other Christians.

"They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them, as a man spares his own son who serves him. Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him." (3:17-18). Those who fear God will be seen to be His special

treasure. They shall be treated as sons. The righteous shall stand out from the wicked and be blessed. Those who do not serve God will be judged in the Day of the LORD. They will have no place in the kingdom. They will be judged by fire, and the faithful will have a hand in the judgement (4:3). It does make sense, therefore, to serve the Lord. The end for His servants is one of blessing. The end for the unbeliever is one of torment.

The Sun of Righteousness shall arise upon the faithful with healing in His wings. Just as the sun is the ruler of the day, so the Sun of Righteousness will be the Messiah who returns to set up His kingdom. He brings with Him light and life. His rule is marked by righteousness.

The final message concerns Moses and Elijah (4:4-6)

It prepares Israel for the future by reminding them of the past. They are reminded of the Law of Moses which included the commands to do righteousness and to avoid evil. They were given the promised blessing if they kept the Law but cursing if they rejected it. The history of Israel is proof of the truth of this promise.

Furthermore, the coming of Elijah is predicted. He is to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord. "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else the Lord would come and strike the land with a curse" (4:5-6). This prophecy was partially fulfilled in John the Baptist. As already mentioned, the messenger of Malachi 3:1 was specifically stated to be John the Baptist who prepared the way of the Lord in His first coming. It had been predicted before John's birth that he would operate in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Christ even called John "the Elijah who was to come," with the stipulation "if you are willing to accept it" (Matthew 11:14). However, in Matthew 17:11-12 Christ affirmed, "Elijah comes and will restore all things." In other words, because Israel in general did not receive the message of John then another Elijah is to come. It is difficult to determine whether the future one will come in the spirit and power of Elijah or be Elijah himself, but the outcome will be the restoration of all things. God be praised! The book itself ends with a threat of the land being cursed. This seems to have been the case since Israel's rejection of Christ. It is only in the last sixty years that we have seen the re-emergence of Israel as a nation and fruitfulness returning to the land. Is this not a herald of the glorious coming of the Sun of righteousness?

Christians know that the Lord Jesus is that morning star which has risen in their hearts. The morning star appears before the sun rises. We believe that the next major prophetic event will be the coming of Christ for those that love Him. Oh, what a happy and secure hope! However, if you have not yet put your trust in the Son of God, then come in repentance before God confessing your sinfulness and ask the Lord Jesus Christ to be the Lord of your life. Do this sincerely and you will go to be with Him when He comes.

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