

RETURN TO

God



A SERIES ON MALACHI

Introduction

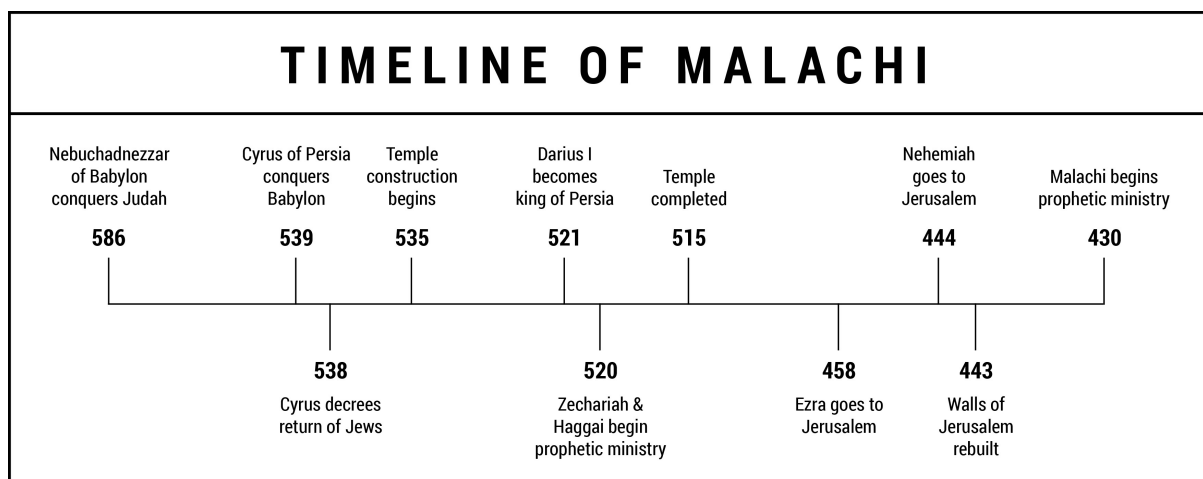
BY LOU DI LORENZO

Malachi is the last of the Old Testament's 12 minor prophet books written beautifully in simple everyday language to the nation of Israel before the 400 years of silence from God and the coming of the next prophet John the Baptist (Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 11:9-11).

AUTHOR AND DATE

The book was written as an "oracle" (burden or heavy message) by the prophet Malachi (meaning "my messenger") to the remnant of Israel - those who had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and were considered the "true Israel".

Malachi was the last of the three post-exilic prophets (after Haggai and Zechariah) during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah (444-420 BC). He probably spoke in Jerusalem around 431-430 BC, when Nehemiah had returned to Persia (Nehemiah 5:14; 13:6-7).



He is not mentioned in any other biblical book (just like Habakkuk), but is referenced seven times in the New Testament:

- Malachi 3:1 in Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27
- Malachi 4:5-6 in Matthew 17:12; Mark 9:11-12 and Luke 1:17
- Malachi 1:2-3 in Romans 9:10-13

CIRCUMSTANCES

Life was a struggle for the remnant of Israel who had returned to Jerusalem. The harvests had been poor with droughts. The temple had been restored and the city walls rebuilt, but they were still under Persian rule.

They had questioned whether God really cared. Their attitude towards God (Yahweh) was cold and uninterested. Foreign peoples living around them had greatly influenced and diminished Israel's religious culture. The people and the priests were not observing the laws of Moses about sacrifices, tithes and offerings (1:8; 3:5, 8-9). The Israelites were intermarrying (2:11). Divorce had become very common (2:16).

"... 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. ... 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 (Ezekiel 43:4). ... Generations were dying without receiving the promises (cf. Hebrews 11:13) and many were losing their faith."

(Baldwin, Joyce G. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1972. Page 211.)

WRITING STYLE

This prophetic book was written in a unique confrontational style (disputation) to charge the Israelites with sin.

Malachi did this by:

- making a statement
- asking a question out of that statement
- answering the question with truth and evidence
- bringing out the implication (rebuke) for the people and the priests.

There are seven of such instances in the book:

1. But you say, "How have you loved us?" (1:2)
2. But you say, "How have we despised your name?" (1:6)
But you say, "How have we polluted you?" (1:7) - *another facet of the question in 1:6*
3. But you say, "Why does he not?" (2:14) - *some dispute whether 2:14 is in this style*
4. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" (2:17)
5. But you say, "How shall we return?" (3:7)
6. But you say, "How have we robbed you?" (3:8)
7. But you say, "How have we spoken against you?" (3:13)

LORD OF HOSTS

The name of God as "Lord of hosts" appears 261 times in the Old Testament, including 24 in Malachi. "Lord" refers to YHWH or Yahweh - God's personal name (Exodus 3:13-15). The Hebrew word "hosts" means armies - referring to the angelic armies of heaven.

Therefore, the name means Lord Almighty or All Powerful who rules over all - emphasising God's sovereignty over all things - particularly when times are really hard as in the post-exilic period for Israel.

ENCOURAGEMENT

We hope you will enjoy this study of the book of Malachi. It is a great book to learn from and apply in your own life. We encourage you to read the whole book in one go (it is only four short chapters) to get an overall picture of its purpose. If you do this before you begin the studies, you will get much more from it.

Return to God: His Love

Context

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac (the son of promise to Abraham) with Rebekah (Genesis 25:19-26). Although Esau was the firstborn, he despised his birthright - God's covenant promise to Abraham (12:1-3) - and sold it to Jacob (25:29-34).

Later, Jacob was renamed "Israel" by God (32:28). His descendants were known as the Israelites - God's nation of promise. Esau's descendants became known as Edom (25:30), who were the enemies of God and Israel (1 Samuel 14:47; Ezekiel 25:12-14). God eventually told Israel that he would condemn and wipe out Edom (Obadiah 1:1-14).

1. What sort of prophecy is an "oracle"? What content and character do oracles usually have (Zechariah 9:1; Acts 7:37-40; Hebrews 5:12)? How does this describe the rest of Malachi?

Observation

2. Why is the contrasting of Jacob and Esau significant? How would this encourage Israel at that time?

Meaning

In 586 BC, the southern nation of Judah was exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:5-20). This caused Israel to cynically question whether God still loved them or if God ever loved them. Many Jews asked the same question and turned away from God after the holocaust of World War II.

3. The contrast between Jacob and Esau (1:2-5) of being loved and hated does not refer to God's emotions. Rather, it refers to his decision to choose Jacob over Esau. How does this show God's love for Israel?
4. The Israelites were waiting for God to act and restore their nation to its former glory. What did Malachi tell his immediate and future hearers (1:5)? What was the significance?

Application

5. How has God shown that he loves you? Have you ever questioned his love and why? What has given you the greatest assurance of his love (John 15:9-17; Romans 5:2-8)?
6. How is God's love in verses 2-5 similar to his love for today's Christians (Mark 1:27; Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 2:14-15)?

Return to God: He Is Lord

Context

In the Old Testament, the Jews had to offer burnt offerings to the Lord (Leviticus 1). Burnt offerings were the complete destruction of an unblemished animal to renew the relationship between a holy God and sinful man. Malachi warned the priests regarding their polluted offerings.

Observation

1. Why did the priests accept polluted animals to be sacrificed (Leviticus 22:18-25)?
2. The priests despised the name of the Lord by offering polluted food upon his altar (Malachi 1:7).
 - a. What are some examples of altars in the Old Testament? What was the purpose of an altar (Genesis 8:20; 22:1-14; Exodus 27:1-8)?
 - b. Should today's Christians build altars to God?

Meaning

3. The priests offered blind, sick and lame animals against God's explicit commands in Leviticus. What does this show about their attitude and reverence towards God? What is the key consideration in determining whether our gifts and offerings are pleasing to God (Mark 12:41-44)?

4. **Malachi asked the priests if their governor would accept blind, lame and sick animals as offerings. Why did he make this comparison? Do we sometimes treat human leaders with more respect and reverence than God (1 Samuel 8:4-9)?**

Application

5. **We do not have to burn animals as payment for our sins. However, our lives should be living sacrifices - holy and pleasing to God - as this is our true and proper worship (Romans 12:1-2). What can we do to fulfil this command and prevent our lives from being a polluted offering (1 Peter 1:13-25; 2:1-5; Hebrews 13:1-19)?**
6. **What are some examples of polluted offerings in today's church? How can leaders discern whether an offering is acceptable or polluted?**

Return to God: His Honour

Levitical priesthood began with Aaron (Moses' older brother) in Exodus 28. Aaron's descendants served as the priests in Israel throughout the Old Testament. There are many instances of God rebuking and punishing the priests for contravening God's law. For example, two sons of Aaron were struck down when they disobeyed the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-2). Malachi warned the priests to listen and provided guidance on what a priest should be.

Context

1. How was the tribe of Levi different from the other 11 tribes? What was the tribe's special role (Numbers 3:5-13; 18:21-32; Joshua 13:14, 33)?

Observation

2. The priests would have dung spread on their faces (Malachi 2:3). Where was the dung of the sacrificial animal burnt? How did this relate to the priests (Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 4:10-14)?

Meaning

3. Malachi 2:1-9 is a warning delivered to the priests to return to God. What does it mean to be cursed by God (Genesis 3:14-17; Matthew 25:41; Deuteronomy 28:15-24)?

4. Malachi held up the Levitical priesthood as priests who feared the Lord and stood in awe of his name. How were the priests in Malachi different (Proverbs 8:13; Deuteronomy 10:12-22; 2 Chronicles 19:8-10)?

Application

5. The Lord commanded the priests to take heart to give honour to his name (Malachi 2:1-2). What are some characteristics of a priest who honours the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:18-20; Psalm 33:1-8; Isaiah 29:13)? What about Jesus as our great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16)? How should a Christian react if their leaders do not honour the Lord?
6. The priest of God's choice not only knew God's law, but also lived it - walking with God in peace and uprightness. What is it like when Christian leaders do so? How can we also do so (Ephesians 2:10; Romans 13:12-14; 1 John 2:3-6)?

Return to God: His Faithfulness

Context

The Israelites were facing famine, economic stress, as well as infighting and opposition from the neighbouring province of Samaria. They were also facing social problems from an ineffective priesthood, including marriage breakdowns where men were divorcing their wives and marrying foreign women who worshipped foreign gods.

These people were breaking the covenant of marriage - and their covenant with God - as they descended deeper into faithlessness and wondered why God would not accept their offering.

1. What are God's plans and purposes as expressed through covenants (Genesis 9:9-17; 17:1-14; Exodus 34:10-28)?

Observation

2. What is the nature of God's covenant and commitment to his people (Exodus 34:6-7; Isaiah 54:8-10; Deuteronomy 32:4-6, 18-20)?
3. How does being faithless to "the wife of your youth" profane the sanctuary of the Lord (Hebrews 10:29; 1 Corinthians 3:17)?

Meaning

4. **What is the covenant of marriage? How does marriage represent faithfulness (Genesis 2:18-24; Matthew 19:4-9)?**
5. **Should a believer divorce an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)?**

Application

6. **This passage shows that marriage with a person of a different faith is not acceptable in God's eyes. Some justify this as ministering to their partner. What is dangerous about this? What are some examples (Ezra 9:2; 1 Kings 11:1-4; 2 Corinthians 6:14)?**
7. **How can singles considering marriage or married couples prevent divorce from happening (Mark 10:2-12; Ephesians 5:20-33)?**
8. **This passage is a call to faithfulness to God (Lamentations 3:22-23). How do we remain faithful in our covenant relationship (John 14:15-17; Hebrews 10:26-31; 1 Peter 2:11-12)? What should we do when we fall short (1 John 1:9)?**

Return to God: His Coming

Context

The Israelites were witnessing a breakdown in their covenant relationship with God. Weak priesthood caused social problems, lack of direction and disillusionment by the “absence of God”. They developed an attitude of cynicism - commenting “everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them” and asking “where is the God of justice?”

1. How did God respond to these words (Isaiah 5:20; 43:24; 2 Peter 3:3-5)?

Observation

2. Who was the messenger preparing the way? Whom was he preparing it for (Matthew 11:10-15; Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 4:5-6)?
3. Was the messenger of the covenant the same person as the Lord who came to his temple (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24)?

Meaning

4. Who would be judged and why (Jeremiah 29:23; Deuteronomy 24:17-18)?

5. The Lord was like a refiner's fire and fullers' soap. What would be the result on the sons of Levi (Isaiah 1:25-27; Zechariah 13:9; 1 Peter 1:6-7)?
6. How are we called into a new covenant relationship with God (Hebrews 10:14-18; 1 Peter 2:9-10)?

Application

7. How can we avoid the cynicism in Malachi 2:17 and 2 Peter 3:4?
8. In what circumstances do we experience disillusionment and doubt God? How can we encourage one another (2 Peter 3:8, 13-15)? Consider the story of Job and others in the Bible.

Return to God: He Does Not Change

Context

During Malachi's time, many of the Israelites were struggling financially. In this passage, God focused on their giving, particularly tithes and offerings to the temple and the priests.

Observation

1. This segment is titled 'Robbing God' (ESV). Instead of starting with "How dare you steal from me" or "You have robbed me", God began with "For I the Lord do not change". How does this relate to robbing God?
2. What are the similarities and differences between Malachi 1:6-14 and 3:6-12?

Meaning

We need to understand the context of a passage when reading the Bible. If we try to apply one part in every situation, it might contradict other parts of the Bible.

3. God encouraged the Israelites to bring the full tithe, and He would bless them back (Malachi 3:7, 10). Is it appropriate to "bargain with" or "expect blessings in return" from God? Are there examples in the Bible where someone voluntarily promised to do something if God delivered them? How did those stories turn out?

4. God said “put me to the test” (Malachi 3:10-11) by bringing the full tithe and offering. In relation to “the cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:6-7), will God definitely reward us if we give an offering?

Application

5. What is the difference between tithing in the Old Testament and giving in the New Testament? What and how should Christians give (Deuteronomy 14:22-29; Acts 4:34-37; Philippians 4:15-16)?
6. What would be a biblical response to the following concerns:
- I do not earn enough to give
 - I am a student and do not have money of my own
 - I do not agree with giving to church. I can freely decide how to use the money I have earned.
 - I feel that the church is not using my offerings effectively or appropriately.

"We should value our riches in Christ in this new covenant relationship so highly, and our freedom from sin so highly, and our gospel so highly, that we would simply love to give. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). And we would be free from a love of things, and a dependence on things, and we would out give those who lived under the law because we have a better covenant and a better promise. Everything is greater with Christ. Why wouldn't giving be greater."

John Piper

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-tithing-commanded-for-christians>

Return to God: His Judgment

Context

God revealed the Israelites' discontent towards him (3:13-18). He had heard all their complaints - things said out loud towards God, among themselves and in their hearts. God then provided a prophecy of Jesus Christ to end the Old Testament (4:1-6). His power was displayed both as blazing fire (judgment) and healing sun of righteousness (salvation).

Observation

1. What are the main complaint and the core issue (3:13-15)?
2. Why is the "book of remembrance" significant (Malachi 3:16-18; Esther 2:23; Daniel 12:1)?
3. Why is it important to remember the law of Moses (Malachi 4:4; Leviticus 22:17-25; Deuteronomy 15:21)?

Meaning

4. What are the differences between the blazing fire on the Great Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:1-3, 5) and the refiner's fire (Malachi 3:2-3)?
5. Who is Elijah in the New Testament (2 Kings 2:11; Matthew 17:10-13; Luke 1:13-17)?

6. What is the meaning of “he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Luke 1:16-17)?

Application

7. Does God let the arrogant and wicked prosper? Why?
8. Why should we be humble and do the right thing when the arrogant and wicked are prospering (Psalm 73)?
9. Hannah was in a similar situation as the Israelites (1 Samuel 1:1-28). However, she acted very differently. What can we learn from her response to adversity and challenges?