

Route 66

Malachi: The Last Word on Worship

Part 39 – June 6, 2010

Malachi is a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. He's the final voice of the prophets (for 460^{+/-} years) until John the Baptist preaches repentance in preparation for the Messiah.



Yardenit (a.k.a. "Little Jordan")

This is Yardenit, the traditional location where John baptized Jesus. Later, Jesus would announce that John the Baptist was *more* than a prophet:

This is the one about whom it is written (*in Malachi 3:1*): "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." – *Matthew 11:10 NIV*

And when Malachi ends his brief book (and the Old Testament), he reveals something astonishing about this precursor messenger:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. – *Malachi 4:5 NIV*

Elijah never died; he's the prophet who was taken up to Heaven in a whirlwind. (*2 Kings 2:11*) And the Jews were (and *are*) convinced that he would/will come as the "advance man" for the Messiah. In fact, at modern-day circumcision ceremonies, a chair is traditionally reserved for Elijah (in case he comes to announce that this particular boy will grow up to become the Messiah).

But the prophecy *was* fulfilled, both symbolically *and* literally:

1. Symbolically, Jesus said that John fulfilled this role.

And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. – *Matthew 11:14 NIV*

Notice that this is a *symbolic* role. Jesus doesn't say that John the Baptist "*is* Elijah"; He says that John is: "the Elijah".

2. Literally, Elijah appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus transformed in view of Peter, James, and John.

His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. – *Mark 9:3-4 NIV*

And so, Malachi ends with the world waiting for the Messiah; and Matthew begins with the arrival of the newborn, baby Jesus. And as Christians, we challenge *our* people to put their faith and trust in a Messiah who has already come to us, long ago. But Malachi is challenging *his people* to put their faith and trust in a Messiah who *was* to come to them ... in the *future*. Trusting He *will come* is no easier than trusting He *has come*.



SW side of the Temple Mount

Here's where they were at: 50,000 Jews had returned from their exile in Babylon. And, with the drive of Haggai (*the motivational prophet*), the inspiration of Zechariah (*the prophet of visions*), and a load of gold and silver and supplies (from the Persian King Darius), they rebuilt the temple. (*Ezra 6:1-10*)



60 years later, Ezra arrives.

He brings 7,000 additional men, women, and children, as well as a load of gold and silver and supplies (this time from the Persian King Artaxerxes I), to beautify the temple and restore the Jew's religious identity. (*Ezra 7:13-22*)



13 years after *that*, Nehemiah (Artaxerxes' cupbearer) rides into town with a load of timber and supplies (again from Artaxerxes I) and spearheads a project to rebuild the city's walls and gates.

And then Nehemiah serves as governor for 12 years.

During this time, all the gold and silver and supplies run out, and with it, the enthusiasm and spiritual passion of the people. Their goals have been achieved: they're home, the temple is restored and functioning, the city is fortified, and they're safe from the surrounding nations ... They're bored! And even worse, they're growing cynical. You see, faith won't remain stagnant. It'll either be growing or shrinking.

If you're not moving forward, you're moving backward. It's the second law of thermodynamics as applied to humans! Our default tendency is complacency ... *unless* we're facing a challenge from without, or challenging *ourselves* from within.

They thought all the promises of prosperity, and prophecies of a Messiah would pay off when they finished the temple - but it's been 80+ years; and they're disappointed and disillusioned. And they're wondering whether it's worth serving God after all.

Have you ever set up an expectation of God, and He didn't come through, and instead of evaluating the desire (in light of His Word), you just got mad at Him for "failing" you?! We tend to do that. We tend to call *God* into question instead of *our assumptions*.

"I have loved you," says the Lord. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the Lord says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." - *Malachi 1:2-3 NIV*

“Jacob” was the forefather of the Jews. “Esau” was the forefather of the Edomites. In this context “hated” means rejected as a chosen people and punished for their sin. (In fact, in Deuteronomy 23:7 God forbids any animosity or hostility toward the Edomites.) And in this context, “loved” means chosen (as a means for God to bring the Messiah), and restored *in spite of* their sin.

But you can see their bad attitude: “How have you loved us?” We like to define how God’s love *should be* expressed, even though He’s told us how it *will be*: He’ll never leave us or forsake us, and will work all things out to our eternal best. “But I want a new car, and my arthritis healed, and *that* job!”

Complacency always leads to contempt. We backslide in our complacency and then blame God when we start experiencing the negative consequences of our own actions.

“It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. ... When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty. – *Malachi 1:6b; 8 NIV*

They show more fear and respect to Nehemiah (their governor) than to God Himself!

They blame their problems on God’s lack of concern *even as* they block His blessings with contempt, complacency, and compromise. I see this in the church when someone justifies living in an ongoing pattern of unremorseful sin and then grouses at God for the inevitable consequences that come their way. It’s outward observance without wholehearted love. This attitude arises when our chief desire and greatest joy is misplaced into what God can *give* us instead of God *Himself*.

They were required to offer God their very best!

Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf. ... Do not offer to the Lord the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as an offering ... – *Leviticus 22:20; 22a NIV*

These people were giving God their leftovers and their refuse and getting angry at *Him* for failing to fulfill *their* wishes.

When you and I give God our *leftover* time or money or energy, we repeat this same sin of holding back that which we value most. What we offer to God defines how we really regard Him. How cheap of an investment is your faith? God can’t bless complacent faith because it would be *unloving*. The consequences are built into the system to drive us back to the only source of true joy and peace: intimacy with our Creator.

If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,” says the Lord Almighty, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. – *Malachi 2:2 NIV*

Have you set your heart to honor Him? Is He worth setting aside some valuable time each day just to tell Him you love Him and how grateful you are? Is He worth the effort and energy to gather *regularly* together to uplift one another and to praise His name? Is He worth giving cheerfully, consistently, and sacrificially?

On the way home from church the father was grumbling about the sermon, the mother was griping about the music, and the daughter was grouching about the people. The young son pipes us, “Yea, but ya gotta admit, it's not a bad show for a buck!”

The Lord practically pleads with His people to test His goodness:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ “In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse — the whole nation of you — because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. — *Malachi 3:8-10 NIV*

No one robs God without cheating themselves in the bargain. One of the temple ministries was to distribute part of these supplies to the poor in the community (like widows and orphans). They were literally robbing God’s method for caring for *them*.



And don’t mistake this promise for a spiritual “pyramid scheme” where I put a dollar in the basket and find two in my paycheck! That would defeat the whole purpose of giving to God. The error of the prosperity doctrine is not in having an eager expectation that God will bless us in response to obedience. The error is in *dictating* what the blessing will be.

The *greatest* blessing is intimacy with our Father. Then it’s peace and joy and healthy relationships. And possessions and physical blessings are at the bottom. We tend to reverse the order of the greater gifts, like a child disregarding a great gift and playing with the box it came in.

The happy news is, amid all the hypocrisy of Malachi’s day, there were the few who feared God and remained faithful.

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. — *Malachi 3:16a NIV*

They set their hearts to honor God, they put their faith in an unseen Messiah, and they refused to offer lame worship.

Let’s agree to be part of the few.