

Testing by Obedience Malachi 3:7b-3:12

Introduction

This section provides a contrast with the parallel section in 1:6-2:2. There, the Lord accuses the priests of their disobedience in bringing foul offerings. They sought to bribe and manipulate God to get His blessing. Here, the Lord invites all the people to test His promises by their obedience with their tithes and offerings. Instead of bribing God with as little as possible, God teaches His people to test His promises by walking in obedience.

Outline of the Text

We come now to the B¹ section (3:7b-3:18) of the whole prophecy, a parallel to B (1:6-2:2). This whole B¹ section can itself be seen as a chiasm:

- A – God calls the sons of Jacob to return to Him. (3:7b)
- B – Those who rob God are cursed. (3:8-9)
- C – God calls them to test Him with obedience. (3:10)
- D – God will defend them and bless them with fruit. (3:11)
- E – The fruit of obedience will make them delightful. (3:12)
- D¹ – The people say it is useless and fruitless to obey God. (3:13-14)
- C¹ – The people say the wicked test God and go free. (3:15)
- B¹ – God will be merciful and gracious to those who fear Him. (3:16-17)
- A¹ – They will return and discern between the righteous and the wicked. (3:18)

The two halves of this section are marked off by the interchange between the Lord and the people/priests (vs. 7b-8, 13-14). Taking the first of these parallels, we can see yet another chiastic structure that centers on the Lord's invitation to test Him:

- A – Return to Me (v. 7b).
- B – You have robbed Me in tithes and offerings and are cursed (v. 8-9).
- C – Bring your tithes: test Me to see if I do not flood you with blessing (v. 10)
- B¹ – I will stop the devourer (reverse the curse) and bring the harvest (v. 11).
- A¹ – You will be a delightful land (v. 12).

Return to God (A, A¹)

Remember that Malachi is writing after the return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple. Whether Malachi was a contemporary of Nehemiah and Ezra or if he comes later, the Jews likely would have been surprised by the Lord's call to return to Him (v. 7b, cf. Zech. 1:3). They would think that they had returned to Him. Yet God makes very clear that coming back to the Temple without coming with clean hands and clean hearts is no real return. You do not return to the Lord with hypocritical and half-hearted worship and repentance. As Creator and Redeemer, He deserves and demands our whole selves (Deut. 6:5, Mark 12:30). This matches with God's promise that, having returned to Him in obedience, they will be called blessed by all nations because they will be a delightful land (v. 12). Whereas God had declared He had no pleasure (Heb., *hephetz*) in them (1:10), their return to God, because He deserves all glory and honor (cf. 1:6, 11, 14), ends with them being called pleasant (*hephetz*). We turn to God because He is God, but in so doing His glory and honor returns upon us. God demands our honor, and the fruit is we are honored.

Robbing and Blessing (B, B¹)

God accuses the people of robbing Him by not bringing in their tithes and offerings (v. 8). The tithe (a tenth of the increase) is required in God's law (e.g., Lev. 23:9ff, Deut. 14:22-23), but it also predates the giving of the law. For instance, Jacob had instituted a tithe in his covenant with God at Bethel (Gen. 28:22), but now his sons (v. 6) rob God. While the NT does not explicitly command tithing, the practice of cheerfully giving back to the Lord because everything is from Him is part of Christian living (1 Cor. 4:7, 2 Cor. 9:7, Mark 12:41-44). If tithing is an offering of the firstfruits of your increase, then we need to understand that tithing is not something you choose to do or not. Rather, tithing is something that everyone does. The question is simply, to whom do you tithe? The answer identifies who your God is. The tithe is owed to God as God, and so not bringing it to Him is robbing Him. Withholding what is owed to God brings a curse (v. 9). Before the Temple had been rebuilt, the Lord sent the prophet Haggai to rebuke the people for neglecting to rebuild the Temple while concerning themselves with their own houses. Because of this, the Lord cursed the land and all the work of the people. The heavens were closed up and the earth did not yield crops (Hag. 1:2-11). In Malachi's day, similarly, because the people would not serve God rightly, they were cursed. But God calls them to return, to bring in the tithes, promising that when they do so He will flood them with blessings, rebuke the devourer, and make the earth fruitful (vs. 10b-11, cf. Hag. 2:15-19). Though they are cursed because of their rebellion, God will reverse the curse.

Testing God (C)

At the center of this passage, God invites the people to bring in the tithes and offerings and test Him to see if He does not overwhelm them with blessings in response (v. 10). The call to test God seems contrary to other parts of Scripture. For instance, Jesus rebukes Satan in the desert for encouraging Jesus to tempt God by throwing Himself down from the Temple (Matt. 4:5-7). Jesus responds to the devil by quoting from Deut. 6:16, which in turn is referring to the story of Israel tempting/testing God in Ex. 17. The difference between this and what God says in Malachi is that the Israelites tested God by doubting Him, trying to manipulate Him into action. In Malachi, God calls on His people to test Him by walking by faith in obedience. Give to God in obedience, and He will give you blessing beyond what you can handle (cf. Ps. 23:5, Luke 6:38). This is no prosperity gospel. God is not a vending machine. But He is a good Father who delights in outgiving His children. It is all in His timing and in His own ways, which we may not recognize at first. But this is the pattern of God's economy—He gives and we give back; He gives more so we can give more.

Conclusion

This passage deals particularly with testing God in obeying Him by bringing tithes and offerings. This is just one example. God desires you to test His promises by walking faithfully with Him in all things. What has God called you to? What does He require of you? You may be tempted to think that you can give God less than He demands or think that His commands are capricious. But withholding from God only brings a curse. On the other hand, faithful obedience to Him, walking in His ways, brings blessings. Bring in the tithes and offerings. Bring in yourself as a living sacrifice and test the Father who can do exceedingly abundantly above all that you ask or think (Eph. 3:20). Just try to outgive God.