

Introduction to Malachi

Malachi 1:1-5

Introduction

Malachi (meaning “my messenger”) is the last prophetic word from the Lord to Israel for some 400 years until the time of the Messiah. Malachi was likely a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah and is writing probably sometime in the fifth century BC, after the Jews had returned from the Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Like Ezra and Nehemiah, Malachi writes concerning the need for reformation among God’s people.

Overview of Malachi

Malachi’s prophecy can be seen as a chiasm. At the center (2:10-2:16), Malachi calls Judah to repentance for their treacherous dealings with one another and with God’s covenant, identifying also a major theme of God’s fatherhood (2:15). Moving out from the center, God addresses the sins and corruption of the priesthood (2:1-9) and tells of the coming of One who will purify the sons of Levi (2:17-3:6). Moving out again, God accuses Israel of despising His name (1:6-14) and of turning away from Him and robbing Him (3:7-12). The chiasm begins and ends with a defense of God’s justice, first through His sovereign love (1:2-5) and then through His separating the righteous and the wicked (3:13-4:3). The book ends with an exhortation to remember the law of Moses and to look forward to the coming of Elijah (John the Baptist, Luke 1:17) in the great and terrible day of the Lord (4:4-6). The final word of the book (and of God’s revelation in the Old Testament) is “curse” (*cherem*)—God is going to judge Israel in holy war. Will the people remember and understand the Law and the Prophets and the One to whom they point (Luke 24:27)?

Malachi uses a question-and-answer literary device throughout the prophecy. Many times, the Lord declares something and then puts His people’s response as a questioning complaint (1:2, 1:6, 1:7, 2:17, 3:7, 3:8, 3:13). The Lord then proceeds to answer the complaint, laying out His case before His people. One of the things this shows is the spiritual blindness that has descended upon Israel as they have again turned away from the Lord and His Word. So, the book of Malachi is a fitting warning to God’s people as He closes His revelation to them until the coming of the Messiah. But with the warning come reminders of the promises of blessing God has for those who follow Him and keep His commandments (1:5, 1:11, 1:14, 3:10-12, 3:17, 4:2).

I Have Loved You

The first and greatest commandment, Jesus tells us, is to love the Lord our God with our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37-38, cf. Deut. 6:5). One thing that Scripture makes clear is that, since our first parents, mankind is incapable of keeping this command. Adam and Eve chose to disobey God’s command to them, and in doing so chose not to love God with their whole selves, to devote themselves entirely to the One who gave them life. Obedience and love go hand in hand (John 14:15). We always obey the one we love most. Given our sinful nature, we cannot love God left to ourselves. We cannot initiate love toward God. However, we do love God if and only if He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

The prophecy of Malachi begins with the Lord's declaration that He has loved Israel (1:2). Why is it that God interacts with Israel, speaks to them, commands them, disciplines them, blesses them, guides them, delivers them? Why does He show special attention to Israel? Because He has loved them. God loved Israel with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3). He loved them, not because they were impressive, but simply in His own love (Deut. 7:7-8). God loved Israel. Why? Because He loved them. And because He had loved them and called Israel His firstborn son, He had brought them out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1). When we reflect on all the stories of God's provision for Israel in the Old Testament, His longsuffering with them, His pursuit of them over and over, we understand the ridiculous and complaining nature of Israel's response to God's declaration: "In what way have you loved us?"

Jacob I Have Loved

God called Abraham out from among the pagan nations, promising to bless him and to bring blessing to the world through his descendants (Gen. 12). God continued this covenant with Abraham's son, Isaac. Isaac had twin sons, but from before they were even born, God made clear that He had chosen Jacob over Esau, the firstborn (Gen. 25:23). And this is God's answer to Israel's question. "How have you loved us?" "Jacob I have loved; but Esau I have hated" (1:2-3). Israel and Edom were at odds since Israel settled in the land of Canaan. When the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem, Edom joined in, and because of this, they fell under God's judgment (1:3; Joel 3:19, Ezek. 35, Obadiah). Edom's response to this was to try to rebuild (1:4), perhaps having also seen the Jewish temple rebuilt. But if the Lord does not build the house, the builders build in vain (Ps. 127:1). God destroyed Edom, and any rebuilding He would throw down. When God's love for Jacob and hatred for Esau are demonstrated in this, His name will be magnified beyond Israel (1:5). God's election is an evangelizing truth.

Paul quotes from Malachi in his defense of God's electing love (Rom. 9:10-13). God's love in choosing those He will save does not depend at all on the object of that love, any more than His creation depends on the creature. We tend to find this offensive. We say that this doctrine of God's sovereign election makes God capricious or arbitrary. We must notice, however, that God states this ("Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated") as a defense of His love. This shows that our offense is because of our pride, because we want God to choose us for some good, some small merit, in us. But God chose Abraham from the nations for no merit, chose Jacob before he was born. He loved Israel because of His love. And if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is only because "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:4-5).

Conclusion

Like Israel, all our sin as Christians stems from a neglect of this gospel truth. This truth ought to humble us. When we forget God's saving love, His electing grace, we think we are entitled to something, pride sets in, and we soon turn from obeying God. But if we love God, humbly acknowledging that we do not deserve His love in any respect, we keep His commandments. We follow God because we love Him, and we love Him because He first loved us. It is His love alone that sets us apart. By grace you have been saved.