

YOBL

Year of Biblical Literacy

Week 32: The Remnant of God in the World - Malachi

Daily Reading for Week

- Zechariah 5-8, Psalm 61
- Zechariah 9-14, Psalm 62
- Malachi 1-2, Psalm 63
- Malachi 3-4, Psalm 64
- 1 Chronicles 1-10, Psalm 65
- 1 Chronicles 11-14, Psalm 66
- 1 Chronicles 15-17, Psalm 67
- Read Scripture Videos: Malachi, 1-2 Chronicles

Focus of time together

To understand the mindset of Israel in the post-Exile period and to notice the repeated patterns we have seen throughout the history of Israel through the entire Old Testament.

Connecting Exercise

Malachi is the last prophetic book in the Old Testament that we will read. Share in a word what your experience of reading and trying to understand all the prophets has been like over the past several months.

Opening Prayer

Read Psalm 63 to open your time in prayer.

Intro to Discussion

Over the past 8 months, we have read through the story of God and His people, Israel, as told in the Old Testament. We have journeyed through thousands of years of Israel's history, learned about the events, memories, figures, victories and failures that shaped their story. In these next three weeks, we will be reflecting on the story as a whole, identifying the repeated patterns of both Israel and God and pondering what we have read before entering into the New Testament writings.

We begin our final three weeks in the Old Testament with Malachi, the book that ends the OT in our Christian Bible (the Jewish Bible ends with 1 & 2 Chronicles). Malachi takes place in the post-Exilic period after the Persian king Cyrus allows Israel to return to the promised land to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. After the Temple is rebuilt, there is a renewed fervour in Israel for worship of God and covenantal faithfulness. But this newfound enthusiasm does not last, and Israel soon drifts into the apathy and covenantal unfaithfulness that seems to be their default setting throughout the Old Testament. God, through Malachi, is in dialogue with a people whose worship is cold, whose faith is apathetic, and whose hearts are sarcastic, cynical, and hard. Again and again in Malachi, Israel, spurning the loving promises of God, replies to God's repeated questions with the sarcastic, mimicked replies of a child. "I have loved you," says the Lord. "How have you loved us?" they reply. "Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord. "How are we to return?" they reply. "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me," says the Lord, "How do we rob you?" they reply.

God's posture towards His people is one of pleading and mercy. His first words in Malachi are heartbreaking, the words of a spurned lover trying to make sense of a spouse's unfaithfulness: "I have loved you." Later in Malachi 3, God again pleads with His people: "I, the Lord do not change... ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you." In these two verses is the whole of Israel's history, indeed of humanity's. The first chapters of the Old Testament, Genesis 1-3, tell the story of the first humans who spurned the love of God, prompting God's heartbreaking question, "Where are you?" By the last chapters in the Old Testament, not much has changed.

Whole Group Discussion (40 minutes)

Questions for Basic Understanding

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

Read Malachi 1-4 (it's not long).

1. How would you describe the posture of God towards Israel? Of Israel towards God?
2. What is God promising Israel? What is God requiring of them?

Questions for Listening to Scripture

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. How is God's language similar to other points in the Old Testament? What parts of Israel's history do God's words here remind you of?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

Imagine you are living in Israel at the time of Malachi's prophetic ministry and attempt to empathise with the Israelites' circumstances.

After a generation in exile, you are allowed to return to the land that God promised you and rebuild the Temple as well as to begin Temple worship once again. But you are still under the rule of the Persian Empire, and you're still poor and powerless as a nation. You have just experienced a period of enthusiastic renewal of Temple worship to God, which over time has faded into the familiar pattern of covenant unfaithfulness, apathy, and cynicism.

1. What kind of questions would you want to ask of God in this moment?
2. What would your honest response be to God's words through Malachi?

If needed take a few minutes to reflect before answering.

Small Group Discussion

Questions for Self Examination

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware of who we are in the light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.

1. Are you able to identify with Israel's cynicism and even sarcastic defiance towards God? Or have you had a similar experience of disappointment at having deep hopes and prayers go unanswered for a long time? If so, what emotion did that evoke in you?
2. How did you express that feeling toward God? Or if you didn't, what kept you from expressing that feeling toward God?

Closing Prayer

End your time in prayer, giving space especially if there is anyone who needs to express these feelings toward God. Then, close your prayer by reading Malachi 3:6-12 to remind each other of God's promises.