

Do you remember the cowboy song, maybe Roy Rogers? "We are heading for the last round up". That is true of your present Bible Study series of the Minor Prophets. Today we look at the last of these, at the end of the Old Testament, "The Book of the Prophet Malachi".

Some Christians have great difficulty with the Old Testament. This maybe because they have not learnt that the key that unlocks the Old Testament is the History of Israel. Know the history and you slot the books in. It is very important to know the situation when you read the prophets in order to understand what is being said. This maybe *foretelling* the future or *telling forth* to a present situation. Malachi is no exception. History is the key. Hence let me begin by looking at

1. ITS POSITION IN HISTORY

This, for many reasons, is reckoned to be about the time of Nehemiah who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem after the Jews returned from Babylon in the 5th Century B.C. Let's just try to slot it into Israel's history. From the time of Abraham through to the time of King Solomon the nation of Israel was one. But at the death of Solomon there was a split and the nation was divided into 2 sections, Israel in the North (10 tribes) and Judah in the south (2 tribes). On the world stage there was a power struggle between Assyria in the North and Egypt in the South with the Jews in the middle. Eventually the Assyrians captured Israel and deported all the people to Assyria. The Assyrians in turn were swept aside by the Babylonians, captured Jerusalem and deported the people to Babylon. In turn the Persians rose to power and under Nehemiah and Ezra the Jews were allowed to return, build the walls of Jerusalem, and eventually a small-scale Temple. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah slot into the history round about this time and so does Malachi. That's its position in history. Now secondly:

2. ITS POSTION IN THE BIBLE

Those of you who know Grey's Elegy, "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" by Thomas Grey know that a bell is tolling marking the end of the day. Malachi is also tolling a bell noting its position at the end of the Old Testament. An age is passing and though all is wrong with this people and their priests, something better is on the way:

This is how one commentary puts it: "Malachi reassures and warns his hearers that the day, the dreadful day of the Lord is coming and that it will be like a furnace. In that day the righteous will rejoice and trample down the wicked". Then, it quotes Chapter 4v4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel"

So, we see its position in History and the Bible, and now let's look importantly at:

3. ITS MESSAGE

It is important first to see that we have here a group of protesters! They are not going to be told where they are wrong! So you have a key word "How"! occurring 6 times.

1:2 addressing God "How have you loved us?"

1:6 "How have we despised your name"?

1:7 "How have we defiled you?"

2:17 "How have we wearied you":

3:7 "How are we to return to you"?

3:8 "How do we rob you"? referring to tithes and offerings.

How difficult it is to correct those who always have an answer! OR those who under no circumstances will acknowledge that they have been wrong or who are acting wrongly! Unfortunately, that can happen amongst Christians and their leaders.

In Malachi these protesters are arrogant, and formal in their worship. They pollute the priesthood, contract mixed marriages, offer to God the second best and fail to pay their tithes and offerings. The Lord is

incensed and speaks directly to the people. It's interesting that out of a total of 55 verses, 47 are of God addressing the people.

What then is the essential message of Malachi? Simply this: God loves and always loves His erring people, but He expects them to listen, obey and return to Him for there is going to be a day of judgement and separation. 4v1-3 Now, as we think of this Minor Prophet, we need to look at:

4. ITS NAME Malachi

Is a person named Malachi the name of the prophet who declared this Word of the Lord? The answer is No! It is a pseudonym! Malachi is not a name at all. It simply means `messenger`. It is never used as a name in the Old Testament, but it is frequently used to mean `messenger`. Hence, here in this last book of the Old Testament he is a nobody who brings God's last word to His people Israel. In 3 v1 we read, "See I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me". So here we find someone who is prepared to be the Lord's messenger.

I find it very humbling and ask myself the question, "Am I prepared for my name not to be known, but simply to be faithful in bringing God's message. Do I seek fame? To be taken note of? Is this true of you or do you just want the Lord's commendation. "MALACHI" = messenger.

I remember the poem:

"Father, where shall I work today
And my love flowed warm and free.
Then he pointed me out a tiny spot,
And said, "Tend that for me!"
I answered quickly, "Oh, no, not that.
Why, no one would ever see,
No matter how well my work was done.
Not that little place for me!"
And the word He spoke, it was not stern,
He answered me tenderly,
"Ah, little one, search that heart of thine;
art thou working for them or me?"
Nazareth was a little place,
and so was Galilee." (Author unknown)

We are making progress so now let us look at:

5. ITS DIVISIONS

There are 3 Major divisions:

1. THE FUNDAMENTAL DECLARATIONS Chapter:1:1-5
2. THE FORMAL ACCUSATIONS Chapter:1:6-2:17
3. THE FINAL ANNOUNCEMENTS Chapters 3&4

There is a lot here so to conclude we will only look at:

THE FUNDAMENTAL DECLARATIONS Ch.1:1-5

After the heading 1:1 An oracle: "The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi" we come straight away to some fundamental or basic Declarations. The first of these declarations is:

1. THE WORD OF JEHOVAH "I have loved you says the Lord". Everything here depends on this declaration – God offering His love for His people. "I have loved you!" Don't you think that is a lovely statement! Too often we think that the love of God is only expressed in the New Testament, but this division of the Old and the New Testament has no foundation. e.g. the book of Deuteronomy is full of God's love for His people

e.g. Deut. 7:7, 8 also Isaiah 54:10

Bearing in mind this disobedient, stubborn people, whom the Lord was addressing, this first fundamental declaration is fantastic in its warmth. You might have expected a real outburst expressing the righteous indignation of the Lord, but No – the Lord speaks to them in accents of real tenderness, “I *have* loved you!” That could make it look like love in the past but the Hebrew means, “I **have** loved you” – “I **do** love you” - “I **will** love you”. In other words, in spite of everything there will be a continuance of God’s love.

Do you see the implications of this for each of us? It means that you and I are situated within the circle of God’s love and you can never step out of it. We should constantly remember the tenderness of those words, - “I have loved you!” see also Isaiah 49:14-16

Do you remember the old hymn:
Loved with everlasting love,
Lead by grace that love to know;
Spirit breathing from above –
Thou has taught me it is so.
Oh, this full and perfect peace!
Oh, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His and He is mine”

But how do they, thinking of these Israelites, treat the love of God?
Well, we must turn to the second declaration

2. THE QUESTION OF THE PEOPLE – “How have you loved us?”

You see how insolent and ungrateful is their reply and you have to ask “Why were they like this?”

As you read the history of the Jews you cannot help but realise that they have always been through bad times and the Lord has had to discipline them. But instead of looking to their wickedness and disobedience as the root problem of their adverse conditions they shook their fist at the Lord who loved them. They felt that they were hard done by and unjustly treated.

Unfortunately, there are times when we may find ourselves in the same boat. Trouble can make us “*bitter*” than “*better*”. It is too easy to moan and groan and see no evidence of God’s discipline in our circumstances. I have to be careful of that and I’m sure you do. It is too easy to feel hard done by.

You may well ask why God has made things hard for them? It is because their worship, in some way, is corrupt or incomplete. We find an example in Chapter 3 with their Tithes and Offerings, and we also see this in chapter 1:12,13. The people in Malachi’s day were insensible to their sin and the love of God.

Let us remember St. Paul’s words in Romans that these things were written for our learning. This is true of Malachi’s prophesy. Though our circumstances may be difficult may we see beyond them to the loving hand of God and voice the faith of Habakkuk 3:17-18.

When I was Chaplain to the London Chest Hospital I used to give out a Card with these words:

“God is faithful,
NOT He has been,
NOR He will be,
BOTH are true,
BUT TODAY in this sore trial:
God IS faithful NOW to you” (Anon)

When the Lord says , “I have loved you!” look to Calvary and say: “Jesus, my Lord, I thee adore – help me to love you more and more”.

Let me not leave Malachi on a negative note, but point you to his wonderful words - for amongst the wrong doers there is always a faithful remnant 3:16,17.

Malachi 3:16-17 Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name. "They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.

Malachi 1:1-5 An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.
2 "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'
3 "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob,
4 but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his inheritance into a wasteland and
left his inheritance to the desert jackals."
5 Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But
this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They
will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD.
6 You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD—
even beyond the borders of Israel!'"

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 The LORD did not set his love for you above all peoples,
because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of
all peoples.
8 But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your
forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from
the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Isaiah 49:14-16 But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has
forgotten me."
15 "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the
child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!
16 See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever
before me."

Malachi 1:12-13 "But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,'
and of its food, 'It is contemptible.'
13 And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the
LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer
them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 (ANIV)
17 Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though
the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in
the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in
God my Saviour.

Malachi 3:16-17 (ANIV) Then those who feared the LORD talked with each
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Isaiah 54:10 Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my
unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,"
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

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