

This week we begin a short study of Malachi and you might well be wondering why. There are a few reasons: it is God's word, it is relevant to us today, and we need to read and try and understand OT books.

As I said earlier, we find the people disappointed, disillusioned and despairing. They have been back from exile for around 100 years and they are starting to wonder if it has been worth it. Does that sound similar to another OT story? Why have you brought us into the desert to die? We would have been better off in Egypt!

At least they had learned one lesson – they never changed their faith again. After repeatedly giving up on God and running to local idols they have learned to stick with God this time – unfortunately it had taken at least 70 years in exile to get them to that place.

The problem is that their worship has become a formality. They are still attending the temple but it is now a faith without reality and is no longer a priority. Now what they want to know is the minimum amount of time and money they needed to spend and the services were casual and careless – any old thing would do for God. It is as if they have looked around and decided that God had promised a great kingdom with a mighty king, and they were essentially peasant farmers. The temple was a shadow of what it had been and God's glory hadn't been seen in it, unlike when Solomon built the first temple. They decided that if God wasn't bothering with them, they wouldn't bother with him.

This affected their moral life too because when people question the purpose of bothering about God, it's not long before they stop bothering to be godly.

They ignored sabbath rest and consumerism took over. They found excuses to divorce and they began to marry outwith God's people. They began to blame God for their plight.

Malachi has some unique features:

47 of its 55 verses are the direct words of God – more than any other prophetic book.

Malachi simply means 'messenger' – this is an anonymous author.

He responds to comments made by the people.

This was God's last word for 400 years – and the last word is a curse, promising destruction: Malachi 4:5-6 *"Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. 6 His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse."*

Jewish people don't end with verse 6. They either ignore it or return to verse 5.

There are three sections to the book (although we have four chapters):

1. Past survival (1:1-5)
2. Present sins (1:6-3:15)
3. Future separation (3:16-4:6)

Past Survival (1:1-5):

Malachi announces that God loved Jacob and hated Esau, and that seems strange to us. If God is love, how can he hate? We need to know that these bible words don't carry the same meaning we give them. Here, to love someone is to care for them and seek their best. To hate someone is not to care for them and not to seek their good. Luke 14:26 *If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*

Jesus was not suggesting that we should harbour bitterness and resentment to our parents, but rather that we should care for him more than our parents.

Malachi is also comparing Israel and Edom in his day. He's reminding the people that over the last 100 years God has done nothing but good for his people while punishing Edom. When the Babylonians came to take the Jews into exile the Edomites – the descendants of Esau who lived around Petra in Jordan – joined in and killed Jewish babies by smashing their heads against the city walls. Since then, Edom had been under judgement. What he says is, "I have loved you and haven't cared for them."

Behind Malachi's preaching there is a particular understanding of God that we need to grasp: he, along with the whole OT – and that's why we need to read it! – has three dimensions of God that we sometimes forget. ***God is the creator in our past, the King in our present and the judge of our future.***

Present sins(1:6 – 3:15)

The first people Malachi attacks are the priests – the religious leaders: the ministers and elders today. God should be respected but they are treating him with contempt. Of course, they ask, "How?" and there are two answers, one for this week and one for next week! In the reading we see that they were offering **cheap sacrifices**. Instead of choosing the best lamb, as the Law expected, they were choosing the worst - the blind and crippled sheep. Malachi points out that by not giving God their best they were doing less than they would for the Governor.

The second thing is that they viewed worship and sacrifice as a burden, but God says even the Gentiles will have more reverence for God than they did. God's name will be 'great among the nations' and will be 'feared among the nations'.

This is really a call to authenticity. I believe it is a message God's people today need to hear, as well. For if we were to sum up in one phrase our responsibility as Christians, it would be nothing more, nothing less, and nothing other than to honour God through a commitment that is authentic.

God's expectation is that we honour Him - v. 6a

Just as an earthly father or master has the right to expect honour, our heavenly Father and Master has the right to expect to be honoured in the lives of those who belong to Him. God's expectation that His children honour Him with authentic commitment is echoed throughout Scripture.

"Let all that I am praise the LORD; with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name." - Psalm 103:1 (NLT)

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." - Mark 12:30 (NIV)

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. - Romans 12:1 (Amplified)

The problem with too many of us is that we like to think of the privilege of having God as our Father and saviour, but not of the responsibility that goes along with that special relationship.

God not only makes promises to us; He makes demands of us. As our heavenly Father and Master, He demands that we honour all that He is with all that we are. But too many of us find it easier to "go through the motions" than to authentically, whole-heartedly, honour God with the devotion of our lives.

The bible sets the standard in worship from the beginning and that is God gets the first and the best. The first-born animal, the first fruit from the trees and the field, go to God; and whatever is given to God has to be the best. This is true of physical gifts as well as spiritual service. Our money, our time, our service - God's people must give the best they have to him.