

REKINDLE

THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI



This Book Belongs To:

Preface:

This study guide can be used for individual Bible Study, small group curriculum, or family studies.

Small Group Leaders Note:

The purpose of this study guide is to draw you and your group into conversation and discussion of God’s Word and its application to our lives. The questions are posed in a specific order and each of the questions has a specific purpose. As you are familiar with the purpose of each question, this will help guide the flow of the discussion.

A high-level view of the five basic questions and their functions:

1. Introduction (lean in). The goal of this first question is to get everyone in the group to “lean in” and get involved. It is normally easy to answer, fun and creates a sense of energy—so much so that you’ll see group members sometimes physically lean in as they engage in the discussion.

2. Observation (look down). This is an observation question. It is designed to help group members “look down” and see the relevant details and facts in the Bible passage being studied. This question establishes a solid foundation for the rest of the study. Regardless how much time someone has spent studying God’s word in their lives, everyone in the group can get involved simply by taking an observant look at what the passage says.

3. Evaluation (look up). What do we learn about God from this passage? This is the ultimate goal of every Bible study—to get a clearer picture of the God we worship, so that we can serve and love Him better.

4. Understanding (look out). This question helps group members “look out” and see the principles of the Bible passage through the lens of the world today. It builds a bridge between the facts of the passage and our understanding of it as it relates to our lives and culture.

5. Application (look in). Here is where group members begin to “look in” and see what God might be nudging them to change in their lives. During this part of the study, group members move from “knowing” to “doing” what God’s word says. It’s the final step of all Bible study: life change—of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Adapted from the Liquid Curriculum Series

5 Transformational Activities

We have a new feature we are now including in our Study Guides. This will be an opportunity for you to take additional steps in growing deeper in your faith and drawing closer to your Creator. We believe there are five transformational activities that can deepen your time with God—in whatever Bible study setting you find yourself. These are also great practices we are asking all our small groups to incorporate into the life of their groups.

We will be recommending one of these activities each week for you to integrate into your study and devotional time—with your family, or small group, or any place you engage with these study guides. Here is a list of these transformational activities as well as a brief description for each. At the end of the study questions, you will find each week that we have included a suggested activity. We pray that this may this deepen and enrich your time with God and that you may you draw closer to the God you love.

1. Bible Study — We seek to learn more about the triune God with the goal of knowing Him better and applying His will in our lives.

2. Prayer — We seek to learn how to have a deeper and richer prayer life that is consistevnt and meaningful. We will practice this both individually and corporately.

3. Community — We grow more when we are together than in isolation. We want to have a place to love and support each other and encourage one another in the faith. “From Jesus, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

4. Worship — We seek to incorporate into our study of God an element of worship. Knowing about God is different than knowing and worshipping God. This may or may not include music. Worship is a response to all that God is with all that we are. All of life is worship.

5. Outreach — We seek to be healthy in our spiritual growth by avoiding insulation and isolation—which comes from a loss of vision and passion for reaching out and ministering to those around us.

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Introduction

Malachi is an important book for more than just the amazing content it holds. It serves as a transition book in the story of God’s unfolding revelation of Himself. It presses pause on the written revelation God gave His people in the Old Testament, and prompts us to not only wait for God to begin speaking definitively again, but also to ask “why”? Why did He stop sending prophets for a time? What is God up to? Was He finished with the nation of Israel? It even tempts us to question whether or not God will keep the promises He made to Israel. It is only when we take time to step back and look at the bigger picture that the answers to these questions start to fall into place.

From that big picture perspective, we understand that the nation of Israel was singularly in focus all throughout the Old Testament—and was still the primary target of attention in the first half of the ministry of Jesus. At the beginning of His time here on earth, Jesus set about the task of proclaiming to Israel that He was the long-awaited Messiah. But when Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom Messiah gave them (seen in Matthew 12), a radical shift took place. We have discussed before how everything changed in how Jesus did ministry after that rejection. It is that shift to a new phase in the outworking of salvation history that the New Testament highlights for us.

But it is also that shift, as well as the connection between the makeup of the family of God in the Old Testament, and the makeup of the family of God in the New Testament, about which so many people in the church today are confused. Clarity on that question will help us understand much more precisely what was happening in the New Testament—both in the theology being taught, and in how we see the history unfold in the early church.

The purpose of the introductions in this study guide

will be to explore the history leading up to the time of Malachi, in order to set it in its context. But we will also explore the history that followed the time of Malachi—which will help us better understand the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. Thus, the introductions will not mirror the passages being studied each week (as we normally do), but will cumulatively develop an historical overview surrounding the book of Malachi that will hopefully help tie the Old Testament and New Testament together more clearly, as well as give us the context that will help bring the world of the New Testament to life.

As we start down this path, we must avoid falling into the trap that much of Protestant theology has fallen prey to—namely, thinking that just because inspired writings were no longer being produced after Malachi, and because God chose to stop sending prophets to His people for a time, nothing important was happening in the unfolding of God’s plan through His people Israel in the time between the testaments.

It is here, at this point in history—just after Malachi leaves the scene—that we venture into unfamiliar territory for many people. Protestant theology has historically (and unfortunately) put a period at the end of the sentence when the Old Testament canon closed with Malachi, and, in essence, teaches that nothing further of significance happened until the New Testament age begins. This period of time is even sometimes called the “400 silent years.” And that’s a shame.

Regardless of whether or not there were inspired writings being produced, much was happening during this time that helped set the stage for the New Testament era—events that continued to shape God’s people Israel. This essential background helps us understand the meaning behind so many of the teachings of Jesus. It is this background that explains what the hearers of Jesus’ message were thinking when He said what He said—as well as the nuances of what He really meant.

Some of you may be history buffs like me, and enjoy

digging around in the historical context of what was happening in the various time periods in which the Bible takes place. But others of you may be thinking: why does it really matter whether or not we know the history leading up to Jesus? Let me ask you this question: If someone in the future were to look back and study

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your life and try to understand what you might be thinking—what your presuppositions were—how your culture has shaped your worldview—what things were most important to you—do you think it would be helpful for them know what happened in the last few hundred years in your country and how your world developed, in order to understand you more

accurately? If they were to study letters you wrote to others, would it help them to understand how you viewed the world and what had shaped your thinking?

Absolutely! There is no way to grasp who I am and what my worldview is without understanding how my culture has evolved over time: who my teachers were, what my lifestyle was like, and what was most important to me. If you don't understand the origin of my nation and how various events and movements have shaped how I approach life, then you won't understand me at all.

That is why looking at the history of Israel between the testaments, as well as the origin and development of the religious leadership during the time when Jesus came on the scene, is absolutely essential. It helps us to crawl inside the mind of a first-century Jew—and paints a picture of the world of Jesus in full, living color.

Unfortunately, when we read scripture, we tend to read it through the lens of our own time and our own worldview. When we fail to recognize the time-bound and culture-bound lenses through which we naturally read the Bible,

we invariably end up with ethno-centric, myopic, and actually imprecise interpretations of scripture.

Our current, modern, westernized, anglicized lens for reading scripture sometimes leaves us with only a faint reflection of all that is truly there. Yes, in many churches today, we will see snippets of Jewish background information in sermons and commentaries. But this is only a fraction of all there is to explore.

I'd like to begin this Malachi study where we ended our study of Acts. There, we began to lay out the rationale for more fully developing and exploring the Jewish historical context of scripture. Some of the things we discussed there are worth repeating. We saw that in addition to the literary context of a passage, another equally important element of context to be familiar with when studying scripture is the historical and cultural context.

There is a time and place in which scripture was written—and specific audiences for whom these individual writings were intended. When we take scripture out of that specific historical and cultural context, we not only lose much of the richness, but also the precision of what these passages actually mean. The original recipients of scripture had the same vocabulary and cultural understandings as the authors. They shared a common upbringing in Jewish teaching, expectations, and lifestyle—a perspective that is foreign to us here in the 21st century.

As we study scripture, we must continually ask how the recipients of the writings of the New Testament would have heard these teachings. What were their presuppositions about these topics? Where did the authority come from of those doing the teachings? What was the worldview grid through which they heard these truths? What had they been taught their entire lives about how to approach God? Asking those kinds of questions will help us unlock so much more of the precise meaning of the text.

We also discussed the paramount importance of acknowledging that Jesus was Jewish. The culture He grew up in and the recipients of His message were almost exclusively Jewish. The entire New Testament presupposes familiarity with truths taught all throughout the Old Testament. If we do not understand how Jewish thinking (read that as rabbinic thinking on occasion), Jewish culture, and Jewish presuppositions undergird everything in scripture, we are handicapping ourselves from the very start. We need to be seeking out sources and helps that elucidate the Hebrew roots of our faith.

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With all that in mind, our task will be to unpack a bit of history in this study guide. In the first half of the guide, we will look at the history that led up to the Babylonian Captivity. The fallout and aftermath of that 70-year exile was so great that it defined the world in which the “post-exilic prophets” ministered. Malachi was one of these prophets. We will then describe the background of the book of Malachi itself. Then, in the last half of the study guide, we will explore both the historical and religious developments that followed the time of Malachi, which definitively shaped the world of the New Testament.

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Week One

Our goal in these introductions to our study in Malachi is to lay a foundation—a foundation for how to think about scripture—by understanding the importance of examining our presuppositions when reading scripture. We want to lay a foundation that takes all of the important aspects of context into account. So, what does laying a foundation look like?

I have never had the experience of buying a brand-new house and building it from the ground up—but I have had several friends do that. And when you go through that process, what is the really fun part? It's picking out the color of the walls and carpet. It is designing how the family room looks, and deciding if you're going to have an island or a bay window in the kitchen. And for the guys, figuring out how to convince your wife that you really do need a man-cave. It's picking out the drapes, and furnishing the house how you want.

But what do you *need* to do before all that? You need to dig a hole. You need to pour concrete. You need to lay a foundation. And laying concrete and rebar is not nearly as exciting as designing the entertainment center that will go in your man-cave—but it is absolutely essential. That is what exploring the context of the Bible, both historical and cultural, is very much like. It involves getting behind the text to see that the truths we read in scripture were not taught nor written in a vacuum. They were communicated by specific people, to specific people, with a very specific meaning. We will never truly understand that meaning without knowing as much as possible about who those people were and how they viewed both God and the world.

The goal of this guide is to encourage you to look at the New Testament, and especially the Gospels, in a new way. I grew up being taught to read the Gospels as four different accounts of the life of Jesus. It was said the

brilliance of that approach is that we are given a fuller, multi-faceted view of who Jesus was—as seen from four different perspectives. And that is all true. But the Gospels are so much more than that.

Each gospel does come at the story of Jesus from a specific (and different) perspective, each with a specific agenda. And most of us have been taught that before. Thus, the genre of “gospel” is not just a recounting of history: a mere biography. The gospels are more precisely “theological histories”: histories with an agenda. Matthew goes out of his way to present Jesus as the Messiah, the king of Israel. Mark clearly presents Him as the suffering servant...and so on.

But what I want us to learn to do is to read the Bible through specific lenses—and to understand that the lens we choose will color the ultimate meaning we land on. But to do that, we need to lay a little bit of groundwork and foundation—and perhaps zoom out a bit. So that’s what we will be doing for the next few weeks.

We will be going on a bit of a journey—a journey through history. When you do that, it’s sometimes easy to get lost in all the names and dates. You have battles here, and generals there, and empires rising and falling. It’s often difficult to keep track of it all. So I would like to break it down in a simple way. My goal in these first few introductions is to try and set the stage for what takes place in the time period leading up to the Babylonian Captivity—and describe how monumentally significant that event was in shaping Israel’s identity from that point on. The Babylonian Captivity shaped not only the nation as a whole, but also the mindset and worldview of the post-exilic prophets (including Malachi), and eventually individual Jews like Jesus and the Apostles.

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I hope to paint a picture of not just what happened, but why it happened. As this picture comes into focus,

we must keep at the forefront of our minds that God is in control of history. Things don't just happen. They happen for a reason. There was a reason Israel and Judah were overthrown and conquered. There was a reason Babylon came to power—and a reason it was conquered.

In Jeremiah 25:8-9 we see an example of this. Here, God reveals to Jeremiah (and thus Israel) a bit of what He is going to do and why He is going to do it:

“Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will send to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land and against its inhabitants and against all these nations round about; and I will utterly destroy them and make them a horror and a hissing, and an everlasting desolation.”

Jeremiah was a prophet who spoke to the people for God during the final days leading up to the Babylonian Captivity. He also ministered throughout the exile from Israel, not having been deported to Babylon like Ezekiel, Daniel, and so many others. In this passage, God is revealing to Jeremiah the shocking reality that shortly, He was going to allow His beloved people Israel to be conquered by the evil empire of Babylon. God then flips the script in verses 11-12 and points out that this judgment also has another component:

“This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,’ declares the LORD, ‘for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.”

After Babylon served its purpose, the twist is that God will then proceed to judge them for *their* wickedness as well. The point is that all of these events didn't just happen. These battles and victories didn't take place merely because one nation happened to be stronger

than another. There was a reason Israel was judged. There was a reason God used Babylon to do it. And there was a reason God then judged Babylon. God is in control. He raises up nations for His purposes.

We start to get a better picture of who God is as we grow in our awareness of what sovereignty looks like. As we ride along on the journey with these characters down through history, we see how the chess pieces are being moved into place. Then not only the “what” of history, but the “why” comes much more clearly into focus. So, our first task will be to give an overview of this history as we set the stage for the Babylonian Captivity. But even before we do that, it’s important to see *why* God caused all of this to happen. In order to do that, we will need to rewind back to when Israel was founded.

Ignoring God’s laws and His repeated warnings is what caused the horrors of the Babylonian Captivity.

In Leviticus chapter 26, Moses is giving God’s Law to the people and describing what they should expect. There is quite a bit of detail here about how God will bless His people Israel for walking in His ways and keeping His commandments. God says He will give them rains in their season and their trees will bear fruit. Their enemies will flee from them and they will have peace in the land. This Mosaic Law (the Mosaic covenant) is a contract the people are entering into with God. He says He will be their God. And they say they will be His people.

But in this crucial chapter, God also describes in detail what will happen when Israel disregards His laws and breaks this conditional covenant. He warns that when they ignore His command about letting the land rest for an entire year every seven years, He will eventually allow them to be conquered by their enemies and their land will lay desolate—while it enjoys the Sabbath rest Israel should have observed. This is described in detail to the people *before* they have even occupied the land under

Joshua. But God obviously knows what will happen in advance. Here, God looks forward a thousand years and says *when you do these things, when you disregard my law, when you forsake the Sabbath for the land, this will be the consequence.*

So how does this background help us understand what is going on in Babylon? Well, this passage, written by Moses nearly a thousand years prior to the Babylonian Captivity, lays out with painful clarity precisely what will happen when the people eventually reject God. In Deuteronomy, Moses reiterates these exact same warnings for the next generation (Deut 4:25-28, 28:62-65). Not only here at the beginning of their history, but in generation after generation, God sent Israel prophet after prophet, giving the people warning of the impending judgment for their sin and rebellion.

And even just 130 or so years prior to the Babylonian Captivity, in the most catastrophic warning of all, God allowed the Northern Kingdom of Israel to be conquered for their sin and idolatry and scattered across the known world by the brutal Assyrians. But even with such crystal clear and constant warnings, the people of God in the Southern Kingdom of Judah continued in sin and did not repent. Ignoring God's laws and His repeated warnings is what caused the horrors of the Babylonian Captivity.

With an overflowing heart of love, God created the people of Israel and grew them into a nation. He rescued them from slavery and brought them into a land which was already built and developed. God conquered the idol-worshipping, child-sacrificing, pagan peoples in that land—the land He had promised to Abraham over 400 years earlier. He provided for them and they promised to be His people. When they entered into this contract with God, there was no bait-and-switch. He told them what to expect and what the consequences would be for abandoning Him. Yet they still did. The Babylonian Captivity (which we will explore over the next few weeks) was the result of Israel forsaking their creator God.

DID YOU KNOW...

The history of the Old Testament ends with a curse—known as a *cherem*. It was the worst type of curse—one of total destruction. When reading the book of Malachi in the synagogue, the rabbis did not like to conclude with a curse. So, after they read verse 6, they would go back and re-read verse 5, so the last thing in their ears was not a curse. Yet this curse sets the stage for the coming of the blessing as the New Testament begins.

Discussion Questions

1. Exodus 4:22 says that Israel is God's firstborn son. What was the firstborn in your family like? Was he/she strong willed or compliant? Did they require more disciplining than other children? Why or why not?

2. In the introduction to this week we looked at Jeremiah 25:8-9, where God revealed to His people that He will allow them to not only be conquered, but be conquered by a wicked, evil, idol-worshipping people—Babylon. How do you think God's people would have reacted to this news? Do you think this news caused them to take responsibility for their actions and disobedience to God? Why or why not? Why do you think God was exercising such severe discipline with His children?

3. Read Jeremiah 25:11-12. What details do you notice there? Why will the Southern Kingdom of Judah be taken captive for 70 years? What do we learn about the sovereignty of God in how He is bringing about judgment (on both Israel and on her enemies)? How does the Babylonian Captivity reveal both God's judgment and mercy?

4. As the judgment of the Babylonian Captivity drew near, we see that for hundreds of years, ever since their founding as a nation, God had given Israel innumerable chances to repent. He sent them prophet after prophet, warning them of the consequences of their rebellion and disobedience. How is it possible they still not turn from their wickedness? What is it about human nature that is so stubborn and rebellious? Where have you seen this in those around you?

5. God exercised unimaginable restraint in holding off for so long the promised (and deserved) judgment on His people. This demonstration of God's longsuffering and patience is often overlooked, and we can tend to only focus on the severity of the punishment. What do you focus on when times of discipline come into your own life? How has God gotten your attention in the past in order to redirect the path down which you were heading?

Going Deeper

1. After returning from the Babylonian Captivity, the people of Judah were different. How would this time of judgment have shaped their worldview? How would it have changed how they worshipped God? In what ways did they learn their lesson? In what ways did they not? How does the Babylonian Captivity help us understand what is happening in the book of Malachi?

2. The theme of the book of Malachi can be seen as the final call to Israel to repent before the first coming of Messiah. Israel had entered into a covenant with God when He created them as a nation. They promised God their whole heart and promised Him lives of obedience. Because of their disobedience to the Law God had given them, the promised curses had come—instead of the promised blessing that would have come with obedience. Malachi is a call to remember. What might God be calling us to remember in our lives? What is the contract we entered into with God, and what are the provisions of that contract?

Transformational Activity

Prayer

Let's perhaps take this week to reflect on areas of our lives where repentance is due. Where have we taken for granted the overflowing grace of God? Where have we taken God for granted? Let's spend some time this week repenting for all the ways we regularly fall short of living up to what God would have us be and do, and then transition to a time of gratitude for God's longsuffering patience, kindness, and mercy in how He gently draws us back to Himself time and time again. If you would like, come back next week and share some truths about God that He revealed to you through this process.



**The Babylonian
Captivity was
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of Israel
forsaking their
creator God.**

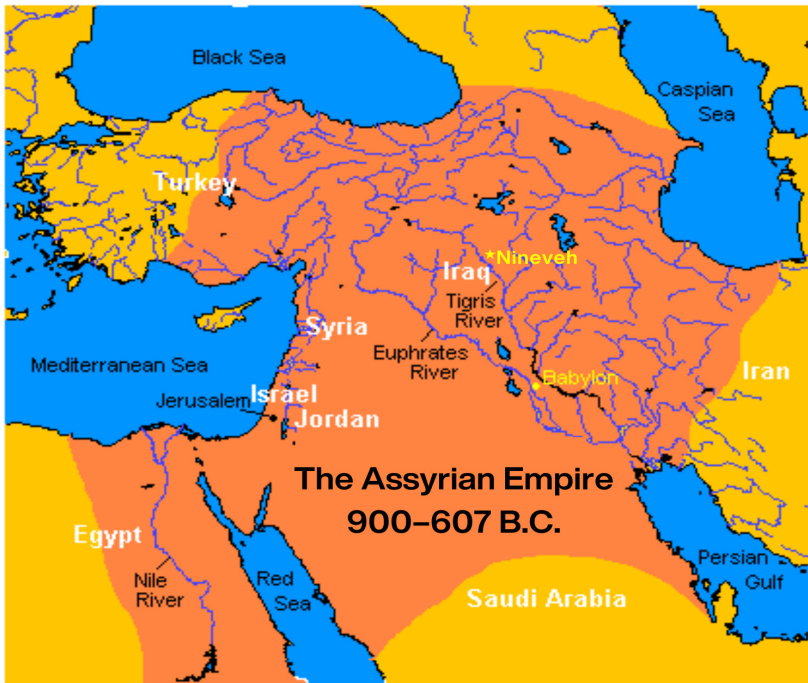


Week Two

As we seek to explore and unpack what the Babylonian Captivity was all about, how it affected the heart of the nation of Israel and how it shaped their identity moving forward, we need to know a bit about some of the major players on the scene during this time.

Assyria

Assyria was a kingdom located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that dominated the ancient world from the ninth century to the seventh century B.C. Its massive and historic capital was Nineveh (with which we are familiar because of Jonah). Here is a map of the general area of the Assyrian empire—locating it alongside the modern-day countries in the area.



The early inhabitants of Assyria were ancient tribesmen who probably migrated from the area of

Babylonia. Assyria grew powerful enough around 1300 B.C. to gain dominance over Babylonia. For the next 700 years they were the leading power in the ancient world, with their leading rival, Babylon, constantly challenging them for this position.

Assyrians were great warriors. Most nations during that time period were looters, building their state by robbing other nations. Assyria was the most ferocious of them all. Their very name became a byword for cruelty and atrocity. They skinned their prisoners alive and cut off various body parts to inspire terror in their enemies. There are records of Assyrian officials pulling out tongues and displaying mounds of human skulls, which had the intended effect of instilling abject horror in their enemies as well as generating wealthy tribute from surrounding nations. Nowhere in history is there recorded such savagery as was perpetrated by the Assyrians. Is it any wonder why Jonah wanted nothing to do with the Assyrians receiving God's mercy? Although they were dominant in this region, they were never really considered a world-ruling empire. Yet it was their downfall that triggered a new era in world history—an era where Babylon became the head of gold (Daniel 2).

**The Bible is
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Babylon

Babylonia was an ancient people group that grew into an empire in the Near East in southern Mesopotamia (also between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers), just a little to the southeast of the heart of Assyria. In fact, Mesopotamia means, “between the rivers”. Throughout much of their history, their main rival for supremacy was their neighbors to the northwest, the Assyrians.

The earliest known inhabitants of Mesopotamia were the Sumerians, whom the Bible refers to as the people of the “land of Shinar” (Gen 10:10). Sargon, a legendary ruler from one of the Sumerian cities, united the people of

Babylonia under his rule about 2300 B.C. Many scholars believe that Sargon might have been the same person as Nimrod (Gen 10:8), the great-grandson of Noah.

The Bible reveals quite a bit about the Babylonians all the way back from the time of Hammurabi and Abraham (2000 B.C.) to the fall of Babylon (about 500 B.C.). Throughout the Old Testament there are many references to the Babylonians: their people, culture, religion, military power, etc.

Babylonia was a long, narrow country about 40 miles wide at its widest point and having an area of about 8,000 square miles. It was bordered on the north by Assyria, on the east by Elam, on the south and west by the Arabian Desert, and on the southeast by the Persian Gulf.

The city of Babylon was the capital of Babylonia. It was situated on the Euphrates River about 50 miles south of modern Baghdad, just north of what is now the modern Iraqi town of Al-Hillah. It is very near Ur of the Chaldees, the hometown of Abraham. In fact, it is thought that Abraham left Ur right about the same time that the early Babylonian leader Hammurabi was writing his code. Early on, the nation was called Babylonia. After it became a world-ruling empire, it took on the name of its capital city, Babylon.

The Babylonians were not a primitive culture by any means. Babylon was the center and capital of the world at the time. They were the pioneers of much of our modern calendar system. They mapped out the stars and basically invented astronomy—which mutated into astrology (but only later became the occultic astrology we have today). They used a sexagesimal number system (base 60), developed by the Sumerians and Babylonians, which is where we get 60 minutes to an hour, 360 degrees to a circle, etc. We sometimes get the impression that these were nomadic, tent-dwelling tribes living in the middle of the desert. This is not the case. Babylon was a very advanced civilization, with indoor plumbing and even a

form of air conditioning.

The tremendous wealth and power of this empire, along with its monumental size and appearance, was long considered a biblical myth until its foundations were unearthed by archeologists during the 19th century. Once again, the Bible is proved to be true through every turn of the archeologist's spade.

As we approach the latter part of the 6th century B.C., Assyria had ruled over Babylonia for well over a century. Ashurbanipal, the king of Assyria, appointed his own brother as viceroy over the region of Babylonia, but this brother provoked a rebellion for an independent Babylonia. When this rebellion was crushed by Assyria, a new Babylonian dynasty arose and started another campaign to free itself from the Assyrians, led by Nabopolassar. Seeking assistance, he joined forces for a while with the king of the Medes. Babylon's able general and future king was Nebuchadnezzar son of Nabopolassar.

Around 626 B.C., Babylonian independence was finally won from Assyria by Nabopolassar. Under his leadership, Babylon again became the dominant power in the Near East and thus entered into her "golden age." In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar became ruler and reigned for 44 years. Under him, the Babylonian Empire reached its greatest strength. Using the treasures he took from other nations, Nebuchadnezzar built Babylon, the capital city, into one of the leading cities of the world. The famous hanging gardens of Babylon were known to the Greeks as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Egypt

Although suspicious of Assyria as a military partner, Egypt had a greater fear of the upstart Babylonian army—probably because of their alliances with the Medes and the Scythians. Egypt felt (correctly, as it turned out) that Babylon posed the greater threat. Pharaoh Necho had done quite a bit of work building the nation of Egypt,

concentrating on growing two fleets for his navy: one to cruise the Mediterranean and the other over in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. He even sponsored a two-year expedition that successfully circumnavigated Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope over a thousand years before Vasco de Gama. Although disease halted its completion, Necho actually began the monumental work of building a canal linking the Mediterranean and Red seas. It was not until the nineteenth century that the 103-mile long Suez Canal was actually built.

Egypt had a loose alliance with Assyria just prior to the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.), the battle that finally gave Babylon dominance over Assyria. But Egypt also had a vested interest in keeping control over the strategically located nation of Judah. After Egypt battled with the Southern Kingdom of

Judah at Megiddo, where King Josiah was killed (2 Kings 23:29), Pharaoh Necho captured Josiah's younger son Jehoahaz, who had only reigned for 3 months, and installed the older brother Jehoiakim as king in his place.

In seeking to re-establish control over the strategic land of Judah, Egypt drew the attention of Babylon, who was vying with Assyria for dominance in the region. Egypt wasn't really a major player during this time period, but their regional alliances forced the nations of Assyria and Babylon to deal with them. This afforded these military powers occasion to travel through Israel in their dealings with Egypt. Thus, it was on the way back from an engagement with Egypt that Nebuchadnezzar stopped by and conquered Jerusalem—beginning the Babylonian

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Doubt is a natural part of life. Have you ever doubted God's love for you? What were the circumstances? How did you work through this time of struggle? What did God reveal about Himself to you through this situation? What did you learn about yourself? What Bible passages or stories helped you in this journey?

Captivity.

Judah

Just prior to the Babylonian Captivity, Judah was ruled by the godly king Josiah, one of the most righteous kings in their history. Through this prosperous time, they experienced a great religious reformation, which included the reestablishment of the Passover sacrifices (for the first time since the period of the Judges), and also the repair of the temple. But militarily, Judah was not a strong power, and had entered into a defense alliance with Egypt. This may be why Pharaoh Necho felt safe taking his soldiers overland (through Judah) for the 600-mile journey to Carchemish rather than using only his fleet to get there.

Although we might not call Judah a major player in the region, they were the nation around whom all of this history revolves. Not to mention, Judah was ripe for judgment. As we saw, God had been warning them ever since the Exodus about the consequences for sin. And even though they had a couple of good kings in their

Although we might not call Judah a major player in the region, they were the nation around whom all of this history revolves.

recent past, Hezekiah and Josiah, the worst king in their history, Manasseh, reigned for 55 years—in between these two good kings. And, the last 4 kings of Judah, coming right after Josiah, were all wicked.

Now that we have the major players described, the stage is set for the promised judgment of God to fall on Israel. I don't know about you, but when reading through Old Testament history, a lot of these names start to run together. The important nations to keep in mind are: first, Assyria, who conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and scattered them across their empire, and next, Babylon, who conquered Assyria (605 B.C.), and then as a bonus, stopped by Jerusalem and pilfered all its wealth—destroying Jerusalem and the temple in

the process. This unfolded in three stages: 606, 597, 586 B.C. At this point, Nebuchadnezzar took the Southern Kingdom of Judah as captive back to Babylon for 70 years. This began the time known as “The Babylonian Captivity.”

Discussion Questions

1. In addition to your salvation, what are you most grateful to God for in your life?

2. In the book of Malachi we see the Socratic Method being used. In this communication technique we see a statement, followed by an objection, followed by the answer to the objection. What statement do you see in verses 2 and 6 of chapter one? What are the objections mentioned in those same verses? How does God answer these objections?

3. What are some of the examples of God's love for His people throughout their history that they are obviously ignoring by asking this question? In light of the historical situation at the time of Malachi, what do you think is behind this question regarding how God has loved His people? What do we learn about God from this section?

4. Where do you see ingratitude toward God show up in our lives today? Why do you think ingratitude is so commonplace? What do you think God thinks of our worship today when we come with self-centered, ungrateful hearts? How can a simple attitude of humble gratitude actually change us and our outlook on life?

5. What steps can you take this week to intentionally steer away from ingratitude and toward a heart that honors the Lord for what He has done? What would it look like to honor God as father and master in your life?

Going Deeper

1. What does it mean when God says “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”? How does God use this phrase here in Malachi 1:2-3? How does Paul use this phrase when he quotes it in Romans 9:10-13? Is this more about emotional reactions or about God’s choice? Read Luke 14:26 and Matthew 10:37. How do these verses help us understand what is meant here in Malachi?

2. Read Malachi 1:6-8. Here the people were bringing God completely unacceptable offerings. God asks us to bring Him our best—the firstfruits of what we produce. What does it look like today to not bring God our best? How are we treating God when we offer Him our leftovers?

Transformational Activity

Worship

It has rightly been said that “all of life is worship.” We sometimes relegate worship to a brief time on Sunday mornings when we sing songs together with other believers in a church service. But properly understood, worship is a response to all that God is with all that we are. What does worship look like in your life? How do you transform the mundane into opportunities for praising God? What are some examples of worship you engage in outside the realm of singing? Come back next week ready to share some of your heart for worship.



Week Three

As we begin to discuss the importance of the Babylonian Captivity, it is necessary to quell a persistent rumor about what happened to the twelve tribes of Israel as a result of this turbulent time.

When Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they implemented their typical policy of mixing their various conquered peoples to keep them from organizing a revolt. Many Israelite captives were deported and mixed with Persians and others, and strangers from far-off lands were resettled in Samaria along with the remaining Jews. This forced the intermingling and diluting of the cultures. The resulting mixed, quasi-Jewish populations left in the land became known as the “Samaritans” (2 Kings 17:24-26, 34). This was the reason the Samaritans were so hated by the post-captivity Jews: they were not pure-bred Jews. This was one lesson Judah had actually learned in captivity, and also afterward, through Ezra and Nehemiah. They had learned it was imperative that they stay separate and distinct from the peoples around them. Historically, most of their problems could be traced back to their failure to heed God’s warning about keeping themselves set apart from their pagan neighbors. But this important priority ended up fueling their hatred for the Samaritans when they returned from Babylon.

Babylon dealt with their conquered peoples in a different way though. They took the conquered nation as a whole off to Babylon and trained the best and brightest young men, and even brainwashed them in their culture and ways, so they would serve Babylon faithfully and not rebel.

And here is where we get to this persistent and faulty rumor. Some people today teach that when the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah were conquered, the ten tribes in the north were lost to history, and only the 2 tribes in Judah (Judah and

Benjamin) were preserved. This theory is called the “ten lost tribes of Israel.” But this is simply not true. Before the fall of the Northern Kingdom, those who were faithful followers of God from those ten northern tribes migrated south, escaping the idolatry, to join the Yahweh worship of the southern two tribes—thereby preserving a remnant from all twelve tribes (2 Chron 11:13-16). Josephus confirms this as well in his work *The History of the Jews*.

Also, the idolaters from the south eventually migrated north so they could participate in that wicked, pagan lifestyle. In other words, there are no “ten lost tribes of Israel”—regardless of whatever crazy theories are floating out there. God always preserves for Himself a faithful remnant (1 Kings 19:18; Rom 11). Descendants of all twelve tribes of the Jews were among those sent as captives to Babylon with the rest of the nation in 586 B.C.—and were among those who returned when the captivity was over. There have never been ten lost tribes because God promises to always preserve a faithful remnant of Israel, which includes representatives of all twelve tribes.

Leading up to the captivity we see a surprising incident involving one of Judah’s better kings—an incident which will prove to be pivotal just as the nation is about to fall. As we discussed earlier, after the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria, the people continued to sin in Judah as well, ignoring the warning of the prophets. The king who reigned in Judah at the time Israel fell was Ahaz, one of the worst kings Judah ever had. His son was Hezekiah, and although Hezekiah is considered a good king of Judah, he allowed pride to cloud his judgment. So much so, he made one of the worst decisions he could have made.

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As the story unfolds, we see that Hezekiah did not trust God when God told him he was about to die. In response to his weeping, God gave him 15 additional years. And it was during this 15-year extension of life that his wicked son Manasseh was born. And it was also during this time that for some unknown reason, Hezekiah decided to show off the wealth of Judah and Jerusalem to some visiting nobles from Babylon. Babylon was not yet the world power it would soon be, but this event would eventually come back to haunt Jerusalem.

Spiritual revival did come to Judah briefly during the reign of Hezekiah, but it was immediately swept aside by his son Manasseh, Judah's most wicked and longest ruling king. The nation never recovered from the effects of this evil king. Manasseh's son Amon continued in his father's depravity, but he was soon murdered. Amon's successor Josiah (about 640-609 B.C.) ignited a spiritual revival which restored the worship of God in Israel. This revival was prompted by the Book of the Law having

Why do I not listen when God is speaking loudly and clearly to me about my sin? Why do I ignore Him? Why can't I learn the lessons He has for me the first time around?

been newly discovered in a temple storeroom (2 Chron 34:14). Many of the people did not follow Josiah's example, however, and the prophet Zephaniah foretold disaster for the nation. Josiah's reforms were too little, too late. After Josiah, there was no hope for Judah. The final 4 kings were all evil.

So in 605 B.C., God raised up the nation of Babylon—led by general Nebuchadnezzar—for the purpose of disciplining His people. Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and conquered it. This followed closely after the battle of Carchemish—the decisive battle of that period that established Babylon as the dominant world power.

The battle of Carchemish essentially changed the history of the world. It began the fulfillment of one of

the longest prophecies in the Bible—the reign of the four universal empires that both Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel saw in visions (Daniel 2 and 7)—and introduced the “Times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24). This battle marked the end of the Assyrian empire (which was really more of a regional empire like Egypt rather than a world ruling empire), and saw the beginning of the dominance of these four major world empires, a period that will last until the second coming.

The fall of Jerusalem did not take place all at once, but happened in 3 stages. The first stage came in 605 B.C., right after the battle of Carchemish. The (then) general Nebuchadnezzar was chasing the Egyptian army back down to their land, and on his way back, stopped by Jerusalem to take some spoils. The question is, how did the folks in Babylon know about all the riches in the temple in Jerusalem? That’s right! Hezekiah showed them 100 years earlier! His pride really cost the nation in many ways. If he had only trusted God, the evil king Manasseh would not have been born, and Babylon may not have even taken notice of Israel.

But this siege in 605 was just the first step. There was a second stage in 597, and a third one in 586. As the armies of Babylon conquered Jerusalem for the first time in 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar got the word that his father, Nabopolassar the king, had just died. As the new king, he hurried back home to take control of the kingdom, but he left a vassal king in charge of Judah and took children of the nobles and princes as hostages. Theoretically, this would ensure the new captive nation’s cooperation. Included in this group were Daniel and his three friends: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (better known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego).

Unfortunately, this vassal king, Jehoiakim, ignored the advice of Jeremiah, who was telling the people that this captivity was a judgment from God and that they should obey Babylon. Thus, seven years later, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon. So, in 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar laid a

second siege to Jerusalem and once again conquered it. This time, he took over 10,000 people captive, including the prophet Ezekiel. By the time the armies had arrived, Jehoiakim had died and his son, Jehoiachin was in charge. He was taken captive and his uncle Zedekiah was placed on the throne as king, swearing allegiance to Babylon. All this time, Jeremiah was warning the people that this was truly a work of God and that they should repent. But still they didn't listen.

Finally, twelve years after that, Zedekiah also rebelled and in 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar came and leveled the place. Take a moment to read 2 Chron 36:11-21, which gives a succinct overview of this fall of Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city and the temple and took all the remaining people back to Babylon (except a few poor people). This destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar was one of the most horrific events in human history. It began with a dreadful siege that lasted 18 months.

The Jews inside the walls during the siege were desperate to resist and hold out, and chose to starve rather than surrender. It is almost impossible to imagine the horror that happened during the Babylonian siege. It is described that young maidens of the city were crawling over mounds of dung and refuse to find the tiniest piece of food, even eating bird dung—which was actually being gathered and sold for

STUDY TIPS

Doing a word study of certain biblical ideas can help give us a solid foundation in our walk with God. Do a word study on “worship” this week. This is a topic you can spend months on, but at least make a start. What do you see as proper worship in scripture? What are examples of wrong methods of worship? What did worship consist of in the Old Testament? How is worship described in the New Testament? What new insights did you glean from this word study?

extremely high prices. The Nazarites with their shining white garments were straggling around in filth, and the intelligent, religious, or educated had barely any meat on their bones. The hunger was so fierce that history records desperate mothers were boiling their own children for meat. As a result of the siege, the city was completely destroyed and the temple was burned to the ground.

It's important to note why the nation went into captivity in the first place, as well as how long they were sentenced to be there. One reason they were taken captive was their idolatry. The people and priests were unfaithful and apostate. They defiled the temple, and refused to heed the warnings of the prophets.

But an even more significant reason that's important not to miss is found in 2 Chronicles 36:16-21 and in Leviticus 26:27-35. In these passages we see that since entering the land, the people had failed to keep the Sabbath of the land for 490 years. Just as they were required to keep a Sabbath for man of six days of work and the seventh of rest, they were also required to keep a Sabbath for the land. They were to work the land for six years and let it rest on the seventh (Lev 25). So, for each of the 70 Sabbaths they neglected, God was requiring a year for the land to rest. Way back in Leviticus 26, the passage we started this series with, God warned His people that if they did follow His instructions (on this specific issue), that He would curse them. Yet, they still did not obey. This 70-year punishment (70 years to the very day) began in 605 when the nation was conquered and lasted until 536 when Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian empire (who had just conquered Babylon), let them return.

What can we take away from this history that we have covered so far? Just as the prophets were speaking to the Jews back then, can we not hear the voice of God calling out to us today? And the issues we are grappling with sound very much the same. Why do I not listen when God is speaking loudly and clearly to me about my sin?

Why do I ignore Him? Why can't I learn the lessons He has for me the first time around?

We sometimes look back at the foolish decisions people in the Bible made—different ways they ignored God as they continually fell into sin—and we don't realize that we are doing the exact same thing. We are no different. We have even less of an excuse than they did. We have the fully revealed Word of God before us. We have the witness of thousands of years of God's saints, testifying to us of its truth. And we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, prompting us in ways that the people of Israel did not have.

Discussion Questions

1. What is an example of sacrificial giving that you have either been part of or witnessed?

2. Read Malachi 1:10-14. What is the issue over which God is admonishing the priests? Why is this important? Read Leviticus 22:20-25 and Deuteronomy 15:21. Why does God ask us to give of our best to Him? What does this kind of sacrificial giving reveal about our hearts? What does it reveal about us when we do not give in this way? How can giving be a barometer of our devotion to God?

3. Why does God want His name to be great among the nations (v. 11)? If we tell others how great we think we are, is that not disparaged as vanity? Why is it different for God? “That the world may know...” (how great God is) seems to be a consistent theme throughout scripture. Discuss what you think about this statement: “God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the highest virtue and the most loving act.”

4. How does the world define greatness? What standards does the world use to measure it? How do these standards compare with how God defines greatness? Why do you think the world’s standards and God’s standards are so different? What does it mean to be “in the world, and not of the world”?

5. What would people understand about the greatness of God by the way your church worships and serves? What would they learn about the greatness of God by how you live your life? What are some activities or actions you participate in that might not serve to put God's greatness on display? What are some concrete steps you can take this week to make the greatness of God famous in the world?

Going Deeper

1. Malachi 1:11-14 says that God's name will be great among the nations. That word "nations" would be better translated "Gentiles." Why would this statement be taken as an insult by Israel? What was Israel doing with their God-given responsibility, as revealed in this chapter? How does this compare with how the Gentiles will respond? Read Luke 4:24-29. How do the Jews react when Jesus sets up the Gentiles as examples of faith rather than them? Why would this be such a sore subject for the Jews?

2. In the introduction to this chapter, we discussed the issue of keeping the Sabbath. Why was keeping the Sabbath important to God? What did it display in His people that God values? What is the Sabbath for the land, and why do you think it was so difficult for Israel to observe it? How does Sabbath-keeping relate to us today?

Transformational Activity

Worship

The issue of worshipping God in the way He desires to be worshiped flows throughout the early part of Malachi. The sacrifices the people were bringing to God were from the worst of their flock rather than from the best. This revealed that they were going through the motions. They were focused on externals rather than the substance of what God truly desired. What does rightly worshipping God look like today? How might we ourselves be engaging in worship that does not reflect God's desires? Do we sometimes go through the motions in our worship? Take some time this week to re-examine the heart behind your worship. Come back next week with one nugget or truth that God revealed to you about worship.



Week Four

Much of what we learn about the history leading up to the Babylonian Captivity comes to us via the book of Daniel. In this masterpiece of literature is chronicled a pivotal moment in not only the life of Israel, but in all of redemptive history. There is a seismic shift and historical, cultural, and even governmental groundswell that begins here and grows in power and intensity, the consequences of which reverberate all the way down to us today.

What does this shift look like? In the grand redemptive narrative of the Old Testament, the focus has been on God setting into motion the plan to redeem the world back to Himself. But it is a story told on a small scale, specifically through one family. Early on in Genesis, we see God choose a man through whom He will accomplish this plan. From then on, the narrative has focused on, in one way or another, this peculiar little family, and then tribe, and then nation—a nation that God set apart to be His hands and feet in the world. Israel is the lens through which the majority of the Old Testament views the world—and then presents the world to us, its readers.

Israel is the lens through which the majority of the Old Testament views the world.

But as things went from bad to worse in the history of this chosen nation—as generation after generation proved unfaithful—it came time for the narrative to change. God is patient and longsuffering, but the time for judgment will eventually come. And for Israel it came in the Babylonian Captivity. This catastrophe in the life of Israel marked a significant turning point in the storyline God was writing. Here we see that Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. The people of Israel are taken captive to a foreign land. The nation, for all intents and purposes, had ceased to exist. We now enter into a time that Jesus calls the “Times of the Gentiles” (Luke

21:24). Even the title itself should grab our attention. The “Times of the Gentiles”—as compared with what? The times of the Jews?

Yes—and this is what is so pivotal. Israel had been a sovereign nation up to this point. But from here on out that would no longer be the case. They forfeited that right. They had the opportunity to be faithful stewards of what God had entrusted to them. And a few kings and a few generations were. But overall, Israel was the unfaithful wife of Jehovah (Ezek 16:8, 15-34; Jer 3:1-5, 20; Hos 2:2-5). Thus, this sovereignty was taken away. They would now be ruled by others.

Israel was also the mediator of God and His plan to the world. If you notice, God always seems to use a mediator. He could very easily do whatever He wants done Himself. But He chooses not to. When God accomplishes just about anything, He uses an intermediary to bring it about. Ever since God chose Abraham and formed from him a people and eventually a nation, Israel was that mediator. In His covenant with Abraham, God took the first step in implementing His plan of salvation. In making this covenant, God established a foothold among men from which to launch His offensive against sin. The entire outworking of God’s plan was funneled through Israel. And it is here in this season in Babylon that we begin to see the groundwork being laid for a coming seismic shift in how God operates in the world.

The “Times of the Gentiles” is a new era in the outworking of the plan of God. And this is what Daniel has the privilege of explaining, both to God’s people and to Nebuchadnezzar. This is why the book of Daniel is so critical. It is the segue into the next phase of God’s redemptive narrative. It is not just a book that contains some fun little children’s stories about a lion’s den and a fiery furnace. It’s not merely a collection of strange visions and dreams that are all but impossible to figure out. No, it is a doorway. It is the passageway through which Israel is forcibly taken to the next phase of their

existence. From here on out, everything will be different. And our gracious God does not turn this significant corner in history without providing some road signs. He lays out for Israel in the book of Daniel what this new phase will look like—both in terms of Gentile world rulership as well as the upcoming history that their nation will encounter.

It's important to make sure we grasp the significance of what is happening. The "Times of the Gentiles" is a new lens through which the Bible will present information to us. The lens used to be Israel. But now the scope of what is in view is broadened. There is a clear move as we transition to the New Testament from the particular to the general, from the local to the global. The people

The Babylonian Captivity changed everything for Israel. Not only did their worldview change, but their identity itself began to change.

of God were originally comprised of a nation called out from among the nations. Israel was commissioned to be a bright shining light on a hill, drawing all men to God. They were set apart by God for service to Him.

As time progressed, though, Israel's sense of "set-apartness" grew into a sense of privilege and exclusivity. They had ostensibly forgotten that they were set apart in order to be that light unto the nations—to draw all nations to the glory of the One who called them. Instead, to a great extent, they ended up doing what the Law had prescribed in order to display, or even flaunt, that set-apart status rather than to live truly holy lives. This segregated Israel even further from the nations around them. This sense of privilege and pride prevented them from fulfilling the role God had intended them to fulfill. This, too, played into the judgment that had come upon them.

So, when Messiah came and instituted the New Covenant by the sending of the Holy Spirit, the makeup of the people of God changed. The family of God was no longer merely a distinct people called out from among

the nations. It was now also comprised of individuals called out from many nations. The people of God were no longer just a nation, a monarchy (or theocracy) ruled by God. They were now many peoples from many different nations, comprising this new organism called the church, the bride of Christ.

And to be perfectly clear, the church does not replace Israel as the people of God. Gentiles are grafted into the family, of which Israel was (and continues to be) the primary member. It's just that the overall makeup up the family of God is now expanding. It used to be a national ethnic identity. We see now in the New Covenant that it is broadened. The council in Acts 15 makes that clear. Gentiles do not have to become Jews to join God's family. God will now use the primarily Gentile church as His mediator in the world throughout this next phase of His plan. However, God will once again in the future use Israel as a primary player in His plan. He has not forgotten them or the promises He made to them. And the promises He made to Israel will be fulfilled with Israel—not with the church. If we miss that important point, we will miss much of what is happening in the New Testament.

The book of Daniel is the first step in the preparation for that broadening. God always prepares us for what is coming—and He prepared Israel for this change through the captivity and the history that followed. The lens through which we are exposed to the narrative of God's redemption is now no longer just the lens of the nation of Israel. It's like the camera is being pulled back to enable us to view things from a broader perspective. It is in the book of Daniel that we notice that camera starting to pull back.

One way to conceptualize this change is to recognize that the world itself was changing. For a long time, the world was made up of nations that ruled themselves and warred against each other. Occasionally you would get a powerful nation that would conquer a region. But now (according to the visions in Daniel 2 & 7), starting in the

time of Babylon, there are nations that actually rule the entire world. And from the time of Babylon on (all the way until the return of Christ), there will be just four of these empires. So, in this chain of events we are examining, the lens is zooming back. In the storyline of the Bible, from this point on, we are no longer just looking at one nation. We are looking at the whole world. In the book of Acts we see this widening movement even more clearly. We observe the move from Jerusalem to Judea, and to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the world.

But how would this change make sense for the nation of Israel? Their very identity was intimately intertwined with being God's only set-apart people. This is one of the purposes of the book of Daniel: to instruct and admonish the people of God in the midst of a crisis of faith that things were changing. And this is the main point that all of the history we have covered in the study guide so far has been leading up to. The Babylonian Captivity changed everything for Israel. Not only did their worldview change, but their identity itself began to change.

We must try to put ourselves in their shoes and attempt to empathize with what they would have been feeling. This captivity was the most devastating thing that could possibly have happened to the people of God. This was the most disheartening chain of events in the history of their chosen nation. They thought that their

DID YOU KNOW...

The book of Malachi begins by saying the word of the Lord came to "Israel". This should catch our attention—because ever since the time following the civil war after the reign of Solomon, God's people had been addressed as "Israel and Judah." But now, following the Babylonian Captivity, there were no longer two separate kingdoms. Members of all 12 tribes had returned from Babylon, so the term "Israel" could now once again refer to a united nation of Israel.

God had failed them or abandoned them.

They were sitting in captivity in Babylon and were distraught over not only the loss of their homes, their freedom, their city and nation, but most importantly, their temple. The prophet Ezekiel described with excruciating detail how the Shekinah glory of God slowly left the temple as these events approached. God's very presence would no longer be with them.

They were doubtless even thinking the inviolable Word of God had been broken. That was inconceivable. God's faithfulness was tied to His Word. Thus, the Word of God was the ultimate rock and foundation for His people. In His Word, God had promised to protect them and preserve them in the land. God had promised in Jeremiah chapter 31 that as long as the sun, moon, and stars were in the sky, Israel would be a nation. The Jews were beyond devastated. They hadn't just lost their land, they thought their God had failed them. So there they sat, in captivity, in Babylon, with their worldview, their faith, and their trust in God completely shattered.

Amidst the cultures of the nations surrounding Israel it was believed that the kingdom with the more powerful gods would triumph in battle. This is why they would take the idols of a conquered people and place them in the temple of their own gods—to demonstrate this superiority. The people of Israel would have been thinking that perhaps the gods of Babylon were indeed more powerful than their own God. Perhaps Yahweh was not the one and only true God. Maybe they had been lied to. Maybe they had been myopic and naïve, believing their prophets, when a more powerful nation had just proven them wrong.

How do you come back from something like that? After they returned from Babylon, things were different. They no longer had a temple to worship in. And even if they did, God's presence was no longer there. Their people were now scattered: in Egypt, in Babylon, and only about 50,000 back in Israel. This captivity was THE

defining moment for the nation of Israel. And this is the setting when Malachi comes on the scene.

Discussion Questions

1. In this passage, we see the role that peace played in the life of Levi. What does “peace” mean to you? Describe a time in your life when you really felt peace.

2. We are in the midst of a section where Malachi is describing how the priests have been unfaithful, in that they were holding the sacrifices and altar in contempt. There were three ways they were guilty of dishonoring God: God’s altar had been profaned (1:8-10), God’s name had been profaned (1:11-14), and the priests had been disobedient (2:1-9). What contrasts do you see in this section being made between the priests of Malachi’s time, and what is highlighted about Levi?

3. What do we learn about the tribe of Levi here (v. 5)? What else do we know of this priestly tribe (Ex 32:25-29; Num 3:45, 8:14-16)? What does this tell us about God?

4. A priest is to be a messenger of the Lord—a source of instruction for the people. Yet the priests in Malachi's day were showing partiality and causing the people to stumble. Seeing that believers today are called a kingdom of priests, what is our role in being messengers of God? In what areas of life does this show up? How well do you think we do in treating this responsibility with the seriousness and soberness it requires?

5. Where are you being fed? Many of us rely on the Sunday morning sermon to be our source of God's Word to us. But where else do you seek out spiritual nourishment? If we only ate physical food once a week, we would not do very well. What sources have you designed into your life and schedule that allow you to hear from God? Where are you able to be a source of spiritual nourishment for others? Over whom are you a leader? In what areas can you set a good example for them to follow?

Going Deeper

1. In this chapter, Malachi is giving the people a warning about what will happen when they do not honor God or give Him what He is due. But we need to recognize that it is a warning. God does not strike us down for the first sin we commit. He is a gracious and patient God. Although God is not required to give multiple chances before judgment comes, He does give us multiple chances to learn the lessons He has for us. Here God is warning and reminding the people. He is even pleading with them to turn back. Read 2 Peter 3:9. What do we learn here about God and His heart for us—and how do we see this reflected in Malachi chapter two?

2. Read Numbers 18:5; Ezekiel 22:26; Numbers 18:7; and 1 Peter 2:9. What were the priests to be about in service to God? What was their role and what were their responsibilities? What does that role look like today?

Transformational Activity

Community

We grow more when we are together than in isolation. There is a shared responsibility when it comes to the teaching of God's Word. Leaders and teachers are responsible to faithfully and accurately teach the Word. But those they teach must also hold them accountable by testing everything they hear by scripture. In Malachi, these leaders were a cause of stumbling for their people. They had a duty to not lead the people astray, yet the people also had a duty to not follow poor leadership. This week, think and pray about what this truth might look like in your life: do not become a cause of stumbling for others. Instead, use your influence to keep people from stumbling. Come back next time ready to share what God revealed to you.



Week Five

We have spent time laying out the historical background to the Babylonian Captivity, a devastating time of judgment on the people of Israel. We have seen that after this exile, nothing would ever be the same again in life of Israel. Yet we also have seen that as the people returned from Babylon to a city and temple in ruins, God still had a message for them.

God provided both political and spiritual leaders for the return to the land. From 536 to 332 B.C., the people returned in several different waves. In terms of political leaders, the first return was led by Zerubbabel. His primary purpose was to rebuild the temple. The temple was the most important thing in the world to Israel. It was even more important than the safety that secure city walls would provide. Rebuilding the temple took 20 years to accomplish, due to opposition from the Samaritans living in the land. The second return was led by Nehemiah some 100 years later. He led this return around 445 B.C., and his purpose was to rebuild the wall of the city—which was still in disrepair.

For the spiritual leadership of those returning, there were two main priests during this period. The first was a priest to Zerubbabel named Joshua. He returned to the land in 536. The spiritual leader for the second return was Ezra. He was the priest to Nehemiah, and returned around 458 B.C. We will have much more to say about Ezra as we move forward. There were also three prophets that God sent after the exile. Two of them ministered around the same time period: Haggai and Zechariah, who were prophets to Zerubbabel. The final prophet was Malachi, a prophet to Nehemiah.

The book of Malachi is the final call to Israel to keep the Law so that the curses could be removed and the blessings of the Law could be restored.

The book of Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. It is also the last warning by the last writing prophet to a disobedient people. And in some senses is the last straw as well. God seems to be saying, “your disregard of me and my desires for you, and your lack of acknowledging the abundant blessings I have poured out on you reveals that you really want nothing to do with me. Since that is the case, I will leave you to yourself for a time. I will withdraw my hand of protection and blessing from you. You will no longer experience my presence with you. And you will not hear my voice.” The book of Malachi is the final call to Israel to keep the Law so that the curses could be removed and the blessings of the Law could be restored.

A foundational passage for understanding God’s relationship with His people is Leviticus chapter 26—the passage we looked at in week one. In this chapter, both the blessings and the curses of the Law are spelled out. In chapter 26, God is in the middle of laying out for His people Israel what it will look like to be in a contract—or covenant—with Him. He had promised to be their God, and they had promised to be His people. That relationship came with responsibilities. These responsibilities comprise what is known as the Mosaic covenant, or Mosaic Law.

Here God details what the blessings will look like when they obey and honor Him. But He also describes in detail the consequences when they disobey. God not only lays out what this discipline will look like, but in the description, He gives them a clear preview of what the Babylonian Captivity itself would look like—a thousand years in advance. Both here in Leviticus 26, and in the restatement in Deuteronomy chapter 28, God’s message is that when Israel falls into periods of disobedience, they will experience three different types of divine discipline: first subjugation, then exile, and finally dispersion. These different types of discipline will increase in severity, as the people continue to not listen and not learn the lessons God has for them.

The first type of discipline for disregarding the commands of God would come in the form of *subjugation*. We saw this happen to Israel early in their history during their disobedience throughout the period of the Judges. The book of Judges describes five different times when Israel was in sin and God punished them by causing them to be subjugated by other nations. These include servitudes: to Mesopotamia for 8 years, to the Moabites for 18 years, to the Canaanites for 20 years, to the Midianites for 7 years, and to the Philistines and Ammonites for 40 years—for a grand total of 93 years of subjugation. Even though it may have seemed to the people to be a difficult and frustrating time, this was the mildest version of correction God would be providing for His people. Yes, Israel was a subjugated people, but they remained in the land.

Since subjugation didn't quite get the message across to this stubborn and stiff-necked people, God's message through Moses was that the discipline would then escalate to *exile*. This is what happened with the Babylonian Captivity. Exile was much more severe than mere subjugation. Israel was actually removed from the land for 70 years. This is the further carrying-out of the judgment of the Mosaic covenant—specifically, the provision for the Sabbath of the land. God had proscribed a period of time every seven years for the land to rest, but the people failed to trust God in this. Thus, God forcibly removed them from the land so that “the land could enjoy its Sabbaths.” We will have more to say about this in a moment.

The third and most severe discipline would eventually come in the form of *dispersion*. Even the horrendous 70-year exile did not motivate the people to turn their hearts to God. Disobedience still reigned supreme and the book of Malachi details much of this. The final form of discipline (dispersion) began in 70 AD and lasted all the way until 1948—a period of nearly 2000 years where Israel had no homeland or national identity. This period culminated in the Holocaust, the birth pangs that ushered

in the new birth of Israel becoming a nation again. This regathering was foretold by Ezekiel in chapters 36-37. The dispersion, along with the horrors of the tribulation period, will finally cause the people of Israel to “look upon Him whom they have pierced, and mourn for Him.”

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with a question. What is the chief end of man? This is basically asking what the purpose of life truly is. The answer given is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. What does each aspect of this answer mean? How are we to live this out in a practical way? What happens when we seek for purpose or meaning in other places?

They will acknowledge their sin of rejecting Messiah, and will finally seek Him, petitioning (and ushering in) His return (Hos 5:15-6:1; Zech 12:10). This overview of God’s dealing in judgment with His people is foretold in Leviticus chapter 26, and we see it played out in their history.

Returning for a moment to the 70-year Babylonian Captivity, we see illustrated the principle that God lays out in Leviticus 26—namely, not only a promised time of discipline for disobedience, but further, more intense consequences for not obeying under the initial discipline. Four different times in Leviticus 26, God tells His people that if they do not obey, He will increase the punishment seven-fold.

A widely misunderstood aspect of this prophesied period of 70 years of exile has to do with its timing, and will illustrate this principle of more intense consequences for not initially obeying. This will take a bit of explaining—so stick with me.

God clearly foretold that this exile would be 70 years in length. Way back in Leviticus 26:34-35, before Israel even became a nation, God previewed for them this Babylonian Captivity. Then in four additional places, scripture describes that this punishment by God (of

exile) would be 70 years long (Jer 25:11, 29:10; Dan 9:2; and 2 Chron 36:21).

For in the 800 years since Israel entered the land, the nation had failed to keep the Sabbath of the land for 490 of those years. Just as they were required to keep the Sabbath designed for man (six days of work and the seventh of rest), they were also required to work the land for six years and let it rest on the seventh (Lev 25). So, for each of the 70 Sabbaths of the land they neglected, God was requiring a year for the land to rest. Way back in Leviticus 25-26, God warned them this was going to happen. Yet they still did not obey.

We discussed previously how Babylon's conquering of Israel came in three stages. Nebuchadnezzar initially besieged and conquered Judah and Jerusalem in 605 B.C. He returned in 597 to quell an uprising, and then came for the last time in 586 and leveled the place. Now take note of these dates.

This prophesied 70-year punishment began in 605 when the nation was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and lasted until 536 when Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian empire (who had just conquered Babylon), let them return. This punishment is specifically in regards to the land and is known as the "servitude of the nation."

This initial 70-year punishment (605-536) should not be confused with a second 70-year period that begins with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple at the third siege of Nebuchadnezzar in 586, and lasts until 516 when the temple is rebuilt under Zerubbabel. What most commentators miss is that this separate punishment has in focus the temple and city (as opposed to the nation in general) and is known as the "desolations of Jerusalem." The potentially confusing aspect is that while both are 70-year periods, they overlap, with one starting 19 years later than the other. There were two separate manifestations of God's dealing in judgment, the first regarding the nation, and the second regarding the city.

If one reads the text carefully though, it is discovered that the “desolations of Jerusalem” is a further punishment for not obeying God and serving Babylon under the “servitude of the nation” (Jer. 27:6-8, 17). Jeremiah tells the people that God has given their lands over to Babylon and declares that, “the nation which will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let remain on its land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and they will till it and dwell in it” (Jer 27:11). But God also says that, “the nation or the kingdom which will not serve him, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and which will not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence,’ declares the LORD, ‘until I have destroyed it by his hand” (Jer 27:8).

God gives His people the opportunity to obey Him and accept their punishment following the God-ordained first siege in 605. But He warns them that if they do not “put their neck under the yoke” of Babylon and humble themselves under this discipline, then He will punish them much more severely. And that is exactly what He did with the third siege and subsequent captivity. The first siege of Nebuchadnezzar and resultant servitude of Israel was merely an occupation of their land by a foreign nation. But the third siege completely destroyed the city and temple and saw the entire nation taken captive back to Babylon.

Israel did not obey under “the servitude of the nation” when the nation was taken captive, so God punished them further through the “desolations of Jerusalem”—just like He warned them He would do in Leviticus 26. God tells His people that the temple did not need to be destroyed, nor the city leveled. But because of their failure to submit, this further punishment came upon them. If they had only obeyed the voice of God through the prophets and humbled themselves under the rule of Babylon, this could have been avoided.

It’s important to see that this punishment operates

on the exact framework God established in Leviticus 26—namely, further punishment for not obeying under the initial judgment. The amazing thing to discover is that both 70-year judgments foretold by God turn out to be exactly 70 years—to the very day. God is very precise when it comes to numbers.

As the people of Israel received the writing of Malachi, about a century had elapsed since the nation had returned from captivity. Yet already, moral laxity had settled in. God had judged the nation with plague and famine, and they were becoming discouraged and discontented. The sins listed by Malachi had not only affected the people

God is going to send Elijah before the arrival of the Day of the Lord in order to bring about the repentance that will lead to Israel's national salvation.

but had permeated the priesthood as well. The theme of this book concerns the love of God for his sinning people. Malachi's purpose in writing this book was to beseech the leadership, as well as the people, to repent from their sinful ways and turn from their apathy toward God.

The theme of the book of Malachi is the final call to Israel to return to God before the coming of Messiah. Malachi was the last of the Old Testament writing prophets. No more would appear until the promised forerunner to Messiah would arrive—to whom Malachi points. In chapter 3, he points to a forerunner appearing before the first coming of Messiah. In chapter 4 he points to a forerunner preceding the second coming.

The Old Testament ends with a curse and the New Testament begins with a blessing. The curse that closes the book of Malachi is known as "*cherem*"—the worst kind of curse, one of total destruction. God is going to send Elijah before the arrival of the Day of the Lord in order to bring about the repentance that will lead to Israel's national salvation—which is the ultimate prerequisite to

the second coming.

In the coming weeks, we now shift to the exploration of the background and history that follows the book of Malachi, which sets the stage for the coming of Messiah.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when a girlfriend or boyfriend broke up with you. Why are these such painful times? What does it say about our human nature that it hurts so much?

2. In the previous section, Malachi details the unfaithfulness of the priesthood. He goes on in this section to extend that unfaithfulness to the people as well. What sin does Malachi point out in v. 11? Why is this considered a detestable thing? What dangers did this unfaithfulness hold for the people of God? Read Ezra 9:1-2 and Nehemiah 13:23-27. Just like in the first few generations of those who had returned from Babylon, here God was trying to protect His people by forbidding marriage to foreign women—unless of course they converted to the God of Israel as did Rahab and Ruth (Ex 34:11-16; Deut 7:3-4). What judgment does God mete out to those who were committing this sin (Mal 2:12)?

3. Not only were the men of Israel marrying foreign women, they were leaving their Jewish wives to do so. To divorce a Jewish wife who was faithful to Yahweh in order to marry a pagan Gentile wife was considered spiritual high treason. What does God say about this in v. 15? What are the ramifications of these two becoming one? Why do you think God says in v. 16 that He hates divorce? What does this tell us about His character and how He views the sanctity of a covenant?

4. What kinds of things compete with our devotion to our Savior today? Would it be fair to characterize any of these things as spiritual adultery? Where do you see the church today falling short when it comes to the passionate pursuit of Christ, her groom?

5. What does this passage teach us about marriage? What does it highlight regarding how we are treating God? Read Psalm 37:4. What does it mean to delight ourselves in the Lord? How does being both *in* the world and *of* the world betray a kind of spiritual unfaithfulness? What is one way this week that you can seek to honor God with your wholehearted devotion? How might we take a step toward seeking our delight in Him rather than in the world?

Going Deeper

1. In v. 11, Malachi goes beyond just castigating individuals for this sin; he broadens it by characterizing the nation itself as having committed spiritual adultery. This is a powerful and all-pervasive theme in the Old Testament. In scripture, God uses two different images to picture His relationship with His people. In the Old Testament, God described His people Israel as the adulterous wife of Jehovah. In the New Testament, God calls His people, the church, the virgin bride of Christ. In fact, read from a Jewish perspective, the book of Deuteronomy can be seen as a marriage contract with Israel, and the book of Jeremiah as the bill of divorcement. Read Deuteronomy 6:10-15; Ezekiel 16:8; and Jeremiah 3:1-5. How does this wedding imagery help us understand how God views the sacredness of our worship? What is spiritual adultery and how does this help us understand the heart of God even better?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-27; and Revelation 19:6-8, and notice the wedding/marriage imagery in John 14:1-3. What does it mean that the church is the bride of Christ? How is it that we will have no spot nor blemish? What does being washed by water with the Word mean? What is the process by which God is preparing us, His bride, for the wedding ceremony? Why is it important to see that the imagery of the church (a pure undefiled virgin) is the antithesis of the image God uses of Israel (an adulterous harlot)?

Transformational Activity

Bible Study

Consider doing a deeper study on the topic of Israel as the unfaithful wife of Jehovah. What do the books of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea have to say about this important theme? What can we learn about the heart of God through this idea, in that He characterizes His love for and relationship with His people in such powerful and emotional terms? How might we view our relationship with God and how passionately we are pursuing Him in these same terms? Come back next time ready to share any insights you gleaned from this study.



Week Six

When we get to the time of the New Testament, all of creation (and especially the nation of Israel) had been waiting and waiting and waiting for the Messiah to come and set up His kingdom. Yet when He finally arrived, He and His offer of the kingdom were rejected. How can this be? That is the question so many people ask when they study the ministry of Jesus. If Jesus was all that He seemed to be—if He truly was God in human flesh—how could Israel have missed it so badly? The simplistic answer we are often given is that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they were looking for. But the answer goes much deeper than that. Exploring the history that preceded the time of Jesus and the apostles helps make sense of this challenging question.

We have already explored how Israel's history leading up to the Babylonian Captivity set the stage for the monumental shift in the identity and makeup of the nation of Israel in the time of Malachi—and really defined who they would be moving forward. We have also seen how this cessation of revelation by God after Malachi penned his work began the build-up of anticipation for the arrival of Messiah.

But it is in the history between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament where we begin to get some clarity on what was truly happening in the time of Jesus. So, we will now shift gears and focus our attention on describing the historical and cultural landscape that developed in Israel following Malachi, as well as correct some of the pictures of the Sunday School Jesus we may have picked up along the way. Yes, Jesus was humble and kind. He was gentle and gracious. He did call the children to come unto Him. But the nature of His ministry can also accurately be characterized as one of conflict.

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He was in constant conflict with the forces of Satan, who had been preparing for this moment ever since God fired that warning shot across his bow in Genesis 3:15, revealing that one day, the offspring of the woman Eve would be Satan's demise. This conflict with the forces of Satan is one of the most important lenses through which to read both scripture and history.

The arena of conflict where Satan was warring with God during the time of Jesus took shape in the religious leadership of Israel opposing everything Jesus did. We need to begin to see the gospels as the story of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Why the Pharisees? Because they were the religious leaders who controlled everything the people believed. They formed and shaped the very view of God for these first century Jews.

The Pharisees represented what is called “Rabbinic Judaism”—something we’re going to spend a lot of time discussing. Rabbinic Judaism is the version of Judaism that Jesus and all His generation were brought up learning in synagogue. It is the skewed approach of how the people were taught Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), which added layer upon layer to what God had given them through Moses. Most of us have heard about these layers before—how the rabbis built a hedge around the Law of Moses that added requirements and burdens to the Law that God never intended. But what exactly were these layers, where did they come from, and how does understanding them help clarify what was happening in the New Testament?

Our task in the next few weeks will be to explore how Rabbinic Judaism came to be, and how it is significantly different from Mosaic or biblical Judaism—which is what God gave to the people through Moses. We are going to see Jesus contrast these two forms of Judaism all throughout His ministry. And THIS is the precise conflict we see playing out in the gospels. This is what Jesus was doing literally all the time. He was correcting the people's understanding of the Law of God, because

their understanding of the Law was based only on how the Pharisees and scribes had presented it. These teachers had “set themselves in the seat of Moses,” and programmed the people to look to them as the only authoritative interpreters of the Law.

Yet what did Jesus constantly say: “You have heard it said ... but I say unto you.” As we go, we’re going to explore more about this revolutionary statement Jesus was known for, and how radical and groundbreaking it was.

When we read the teachings of Jesus as truth nuggets written to us in the 21st century, we are missing out on what He was really saying.

But briefly, what Jesus was doing in making this simple statement, was telling the people they had been lied to their entire lives.

We began this study guide setting the historical stage for what happened leading up to the time of Malachi. Then we laid out the background of the book itself. In the rest of this study guide, we will explore the fallout from the closing of the canon of the Old Testament that the writing of Malachi accomplished. The reason we are examining the history which followed Malachi is because this sets the stage for, and helps us understand so much more clearly, the world of the New Testament. It also brings into clearer focus what Jesus was teaching and what His agenda truly was.

When we read the teachings of Jesus as truth nuggets written to us in the 21st century, we are missing out on what He was really saying. In context, He was saying, “The Law of God given to you (Israel) through Moses has been twisted and perverted by the rabbis. And I (Jesus) am here to cut through that error and tell you what God really meant.”

What do you think the Pharisees thought when Jesus actively, purposefully, and strategically undermined both their teaching and their authority? They freaked out! Jesus was declaring war on them. Thus, we get non-

stop conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders all throughout the gospels. We see that same conflict all throughout the book of Acts as well.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What does it mean that God does not change? What ramifications does this monumental truth have with regards to: God's character, His love, His justice, the security of our salvation, the promises He made to Israel, the promises He makes to the church, as well as the promises He made that suffering is a necessary part of this life? It is the only way to grow in our faith. If God does not change, then when He feels distant, who moved? How can this truth be a comfort to us?

The Pharisees believed and taught that when Messiah came, He would be a Pharisee and would continue to spread *their* message and continue *their* task of building fences around the Law of Moses, and would then work to plug the holes they continually found in those fences. But what did Jesus do? He burned their fences to the ground.

We need to move beyond reading the words of Jesus as nuggets of truth, or wise sayings, or even as platitudes, as some might teach them. They were revolutionary, combative declarations of war on the kingdom of Satan—as personified in the religious institution Satan had coopted and developed into rabbinic tradition. We are going to seek to read the New Testament through the lens of the offer of the kingdom to Israel, as well as through the lens of the ongoing conflict between Jesus and the religious institutional leaders—and see how that helps make these teachings quite a bit clearer. We are laying a foundation of setting the New Testament in a clearer and more robust context—both historical and cultural.

But before we go any further, we must pause. Especially in a study like this that is so information driven, we must clarify our purpose. It is crucial to understand

why we are laying this foundation. Is it so that we can add to our storehouse of biblical knowledge with simply more and more information? Is it so that we can become smarter about and master what the Bible says? No... absolutely not!

We began our previous study guide on the book of Acts by highlighting the truth that information is not transformation. And whether or not we realize it, we can very often believe that it is simply more and more information that we really need. We sometimes think that if we learn enough about God, we will be motivated to follow Him with our whole hearts.

We went on in that Acts study guide to see that, yes, we do need information. We need to begin with a deepening knowledge of God and His Word. But knowledge alone simply puts us in the starting blocks. What we do with that information is what is truly important.

So why are we laying a foundation? So that when we study God's word, we will be able to hear what God is saying to us. We are doing our best to remove the cultural and historical barriers that prevent us from accurately seeing what scripture says—SO THAT we can truly marvel at His Word, and at God Himself. It is not information for information's sake, but it is information as a vehicle or conduit for God to change us—by exposing us to who He truly is. Transformation is the goal!

But transformation doesn't always happen, does it? The difficult truth is that very often our experience when reading the Bible falls short of what we are hoping for. And it falls short for a very specific reason.

Let me quote something from one of the best Christian books ever written. And I do not exaggerate when I say that. This is from *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer:

They tell us that the Bible is the word of God—a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. They tell us that we shall find in it the knowledge of God and of his will for our lives. We believe them;

rightly, for what they say is true. So we take our Bibles and start to read them. We read steadily and thoughtfully, for we are in earnest; we really do want to know God.

But as we read, we get more and more puzzled. Though fascinated, we are not being fed. Our reading is not helping us; it leaves us bewildered and, if the truth be told, somewhat depressed. We find ourselves wondering whether Bible reading is worth going on with.

What is our trouble? Well, basically it is this. Our Bible reading takes us into what, for us, is quite a new world—namely, the Near Eastern world as it was thousands of years ago, primitive and barbaric, agricultural and un-mechanized. It is in that world that the action of the Bible story is played out.

He goes on to say, “*It is all intensely interesting, but it all seems very far away. It all belongs to that world, not to this world. We feel that we are, so to speak, on the outside of the Bible world, looking in. We are mere spectators, and that is all.*”

Again, biblical truths can very much seem very far away. He says, “*it all belongs to that world and not to this world*”. Because that world is far enough away in both space and time, it can seem unreal—a made-up world of fantastic stories that don’t seem possible today. And thus, we face a significant challenge in simply reading the Bible.

We first need to put in the time and do the work to understand what scripture means in its context, because if we do not examine it with the correct lens, we will miss the actual meaning altogether. That is why we are immersing ourselves in the world in which Jesus and the Apostles lived and taught. When we know what scripture truly means, that world no longer seems so foreign to us. It no longer appears to be unreal. When it is closer

to us and more accessible, then we can do the work of applying it to our lives.

That is why we are laying a foundation. We don't want that world to be as far off any more. We want to bring it near. We want to understand it better so that we are no longer puzzled, and no longer spectators. When the setting of the Bible begins to make more sense, it draws us into the action. We begin to see ourselves as participants in the story. And THAT is what energizes us to action. To take up arms in the conflict of the spiritual battle that is happening all around us. To begin to see this life as merely prelude to the one to come. To set our eyes and our hearts on things eternal. To truly go hard after God. It is no longer just a story on a page when we make the connection between the world of the Bible and the world we live in.

That can be a most powerful engine to drive us forward in our quest to live godly lives and dedicate every moment to serving HIM, not just ourselves. Thus, transformation is the goal. And that is why we will focus so much on background and history.

Discussion Questions

1. One of the most powerful and far-reaching statements about God is made in this passage: “I, the Lord, do not change.” What is one truth about God that you treasure and cling to?

2. The next section in Malachi explores the fourth use of the Socratic Method here in this short book. God says that Israel has wearied Him with their words. His reply to their answer points out their skepticism. They are basically asking, “Where is the God of justice?” They did not see God interfering with all the injustice around them. This question is still with us today. Its form today is: “If God is good, why is there suffering?” This is otherwise known as “the problem of evil.” How would you answer that question? In light of all the seemingly senseless suffering in the world, how can we still argue for a God who is good? Next, how do we see God answer this objection here in 3:1? How does the coming of Messiah reflect the coming justice of God?

3. The first of two forerunners Malachi points us to is mentioned here in 3:1. This forerunner will accompany the first coming of Messiah. Who is this first forerunner and what is his job? Read Matthew 11:11-15; Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17; and John 1:21-23. Jesus seems to identify John with Elijah, yet John denies it. How are we to understand this? What does the phrase “in the spirit and power of...” refer to? (Peek ahead to Malachi 4:5 to see a second forerunner mentioned—which will be Elijah.) How are we to put this all together?

4. One of the most iconic sayings of John the Baptist was that he must decrease so that Christ can increase. What does this look like in a practical way for us today? Where do you see people around you doing this? Why do you think that the message we hear from the world is basically the opposite?

5. The role of the forerunner was to prepare the way of the Lord and to point people to Him. How is that our job as well? Where in your life are you pointing people to Jesus? Are there activities and actions in your life that work against that priority? What is one way this week that you can be more effective when it comes to pointing people to Jesus?

Going Deeper

1. What is the “day of His coming” mentioned in 3:2? Why do you think Malachi switches from the first coming in 3:1 to the second coming in 3:2? While Malachi will deal with the idea of the coming day of judgment more a bit later, here he gives us a preview. How does scripture describe “The Day of the Lord” (Isa 13:6-13; Joel 2:30-31)? Read 2 Peter 3:3-13. What is the difference between the first world-wide judgment and the second (v. 7)? Who is in focus in the coming judgment of the Day of the Lord, believers or unbelievers (1 Thess 5:9)? Why is this an important distinction when discussing the coming judgment?

2. In this context, the refiner’s fire references the coming judgment upon the usurpers of this realm in the Day of the Lord. But this image is also used in the life of the believer as well. What does this refining look like? What does it accomplish? Why is it necessary? What are some other images scripture uses to describe this sanctifying process?

Transformational Activity

Outreach

What messages in this passage prompt us that outreach should be a priority in our lives? What is the role of the forerunner? What ought the coming of the Day of the Lord motivate in us, and in the world? What will the refiner's fire accomplish? How does the truth that God does not change touch on the purpose of His return? There are many different reasons to be motivated to design "outreach" into the rhythms of our life. Meditate on this passage this week and see what God says to you about how this priority might become more pronounced in your daily walk—and share what you discover when we come back together.



Week Seven

In our study guides, we have explored extensively the need to read scripture through specific lenses—so *that* important ideas come into focus. Last week we began to show that what Jesus was fighting against was a completely different Judaism than what God had given the people through Moses. This is an absolutely crucial truth to get our minds around. When Jesus spoke about the Law, what did He really mean? When He lambasted the religious leaders, what was Jesus really saying—and why was He saying it? What were the disciples hearing, and how had they been conditioned to look at God's Law? These questions must flavor our study of the New Testament.

The first lens through which we need to read the New Testament is the offer by Messiah of the long-awaited kingdom to Israel. And the second lens we only introduced last time is the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. When reading the gospels, it is pretty apparent that there was always *some* kind of tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. But I don't think we really understand how deeply rooted it was, how organized it was, and how central it is to the action that happens in the Gospels.

Sometimes, we single out the Pharisees as being the religious leaders Jesus battled with. But there were actually several groups that were involved. Understanding the origin of these groups and why they developed will help us go a long way toward understanding the conflict itself, as well as the background of so many of Jesus's teachings. And it will make clear what the recipients of the message of the New Testament were actually hearing—and thus what the text of scripture actually means. All of this involves diving into the history that follows the book of Malachi.

So, what did this tension look like? There were three

major areas of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The first had to do with His claim to be the Messiah. Jesus spent the first half of His ministry openly demonstrating to Israel His messianic credentials. There was significant fallout from Jesus making this claim to be the Messiah, and He was making this claim by doing specific miracles (which will need to be a study for another day).

What Jesus was fighting against was a completely different Judaism than what God had given the people through Moses.

The second conflict had to do with the authority of the Mishnah—we’ll talk about what the Mishnah is more as we go. But suffice it to say, it was basically the oral law the Pharisees had developed, which consisted of their commentaries on the Law—commentaries that formed the basis for their authority in teaching the people. This involved their authority over things like fasting, dietary laws, and eating with unwashed hands—things that affected the everyday life of the Jews. This was how these leaders exercised control over the people.

The third area of conflict had to do with the proper way of observing the Sabbath. I don’t think we have any idea how important the Sabbath was to the Jews. We get glimpses here and there in scripture, but when we read the Mishnah, we see that the rabbis taught that Israel was created in order to honor the Sabbath. That seems almost too bizarre to believe! They actually argued that the reason God created Israel was so that the Sabbath would receive its due honor. The Sabbath was described by the rabbis as “the bride of Israel” and “Jehovah’s queen”. That is how obsessed the Pharisees were with observing the Sabbath—so much so that they turned it into an idol.

But to really understand the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel, we need to rewind back to the time following the Babylonian Captivity—

the era leading into the time of the intertestamental period, which naturally and historically follows the book of Malachi. Understanding what comes before and after Malachi helps set it in its historical context, but also helps us see more clearly the unfolding of the plan of God through salvation history. Much of this information is material we have covered briefly before in our study of Acts. But here we can explore it more fully, and cover the ramifications in more depth.

At the end of the 70-year Babylonian exile, and as a result of this punishment by God, we see essentially the end of widespread Jewish idolatry by those who returned to the land. We remember reading about Israel's struggles with idolatry all the way from the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai through just about every new king they had. But, because of the devastating nature of the Babylonian Captivity, the people had, in effect, learned their lesson, specifically regarding the issue of idolatry. However, the fallout from the Babylonian Captivity cannot be ignored. Things were clearly different now. Jewish life, and even worship, would never be the same.

There were significant developments within the life of Israel during this post-exilic period, which help make sense of many New Testament stories. We see the temple laid in ruins when the people returned from Babylon. The temple was their life. And when it was rebuilt (536–516 B.C.), it was a mere shadow of its former glory. This is where we see the rise of the synagogue system. Although the temple was supposed to be the only place of corporate worship for the Jews, regional synagogues began to spring up. These synagogues began simply as places for Jews to gather, but eventually became centers of worship and teaching as well.

Where did this synagogue notion come from? When the Jews were in Babylon, they had to adapt, as a matter of survival. God had told them that the temple was to be the center of their worship, but that was no longer an option for this displaced people. Yet the Jews understood

how rapidly cultural assimilation could occur. Thus, they set out to intentionally and strategically educate their children in the ways of God and of Torah—and thereby preserve their culture in this foreign land.

On their one day off from work each week in Babylon, they set up religious classes for their children. The most knowledgeable individuals about the Law of God became the teachers (rabbis). Over time, these rabbis grew in importance, as there was no one else to interpret the teachings of God. These centers of learning became known as “synagogues.” Because of this survivalist mentality, and because of the spreading out of the Jews in places other than just Israel, the synagogue became an anchor for the religious life of God’s people.

Now that the people in Babylon had rabbis and houses of prayer, worship, and teaching, what this accomplished was to make Judaism portable. It was no longer tied to the temple. This is a fundamental shift in the worship of Yahweh that occurred because of the Babylonian Captivity. Once that cat is out of the bag, it’s not going back in. When the Jews returned to the land after the captivity was over, this was the only style or flavor of Judaism that they were familiar with. So, it continues. We will discuss Ezra more fully next time, but as the return from Babylon developed, Ezra was the one responsible for allowing synagogues actually into the land of Israel.

After the captivity, there were now three main centers of Jewish population: Babylon, Egypt, and Israel. Only about 50,000 Jews had returned from Babylon to Israel after their 70 years in exile. Many had grown accustomed to Babylonian life and were quite comfortable there. Also, many of the Jews who had fled to Egypt when Jerusalem back in 586 B.C. likewise stayed there in Egypt. This spreading out of the population also led to the further growth and expansion of the synagogue system, in that Jews were no longer able to come to the temple for their corporate worship.

The importance of the rise of the synagogues and

how it affected the life of Israel cannot be overstated. Why? Where do we see Jesus do much of His teaching?

STUDY TIPS

When you come across an issue that engenders widely varying viewpoints within the church, it bears looking into. This would be a good opportunity to do a word search on the term “tithe” throughout scripture. There is a lot of sloppy theology out there regarding what tithing is all about, and how this Old Testament concept applies (or does not apply) to us today. What does tithing mean for us today, who are not living under the dictates of the Mosaic Covenant? And what universal truths can we draw out of this practice?

Where did Paul go first in every city on his missionary journeys? To the synagogue. Prior to Babylon there were no such things as synagogues. Before Babylon, the temple was the center of their life. But after Babylon, the synagogue was now the heartbeat of the religious life of Israel.

In addition to the rise of the synagogue system, another significant development in this period was the emergence of certain attitudes and practices that laid the groundwork for the rise of rabbinic authority and tradition. All throughout the Old Testament, we see prophets and priests, but no rabbis. By the time we get to the New Testament, rabbis are clearly playing a significant role in the life of Israel. How did this come about?

In these emerging synagogues, the more prominent teachers began to be called “rabbi” (meaning teacher). But where did they get their authority? It really began in Babylon with the new office

or role of Rabbi being created. But this authority also came later via the desire to add additional fasts to their calendar after their return from Babylon.

After the Babylonian Captivity, certain memorial fasts were added to the Jewish liturgical calendar. These were

fasts that remembered and honored the devastation of their 70 years in captivity. These fasts were initially optional, but eventually became obligatory via rabbinic decree. Slowly, the idea of accepting the authority of the rabbis as binding took root and grew, again, having its origins both in Babylon and here in this post-exilic world.

In summary, the Jews were forced to become extremely adaptable. They had experienced so much hardship and persecution, they became survivalists. They did what was necessary to survive. After the captivity, they devised a way to make Judaism mobile. Prior to this, Judaism was inextricably tied to the temple. All of the corporate worship and teaching occurred at the temple. But with the spread of the Jewish population in these three areas around the world, that was no longer possible. So, the Jews figured out a way to maintain

Slowly, the idea of accepting the authority of the rabbis as binding took root and grew... having its origins both in Babylon and here in this post-exilic world.

their culture, teach their children, and continue at least a form of the worship they knew by creating these synagogues, and by empowering these rabbis to teach their children about Torah. Over time, these rabbis set themselves up as the authority on God's Word, and thus, the people believed they had to come to the rabbis to truly understand what God's Word meant.

Both the rise of the synagogue system and the rise of rabbinic authority were extremely significant shifts in the world of Judaism, and would shape and dominate Jewish life for hundreds of years—really extending all the way through today.

All of that background was leading up to this important point. Because of these beginnings, we will eventually see two completely different versions of Judaism emerge: biblical (or Mosaic) Judaism, and Rabbinic (or Pharisaic) Judaism. If we don't recognize these differences, then we

have no chance of understanding much of what Jesus taught. There were two different Judaisms competing in the New Testament times. And when we unpack the differences, that is when both Jesus' teaching and actions become so much clearer.

Discussion Questions

1. In a world where change is the only constant, what does the phrase “I, the Lord, do not change” mean to you personally?

2. In this famous passage, we see God—through Malachi—challenging the people regarding tithing. This passage holds elements that many of us have taken to be universal truths—when they are not. Are there any elements of timeless truths here that are applicable in all ages? What was the tithe under the Mosaic Law? What purpose did it serve in the life of Israel? How does that law apply to us today? What universal application does Malachi make in verses 10-12? How might that indeed apply to us today?

3. How is our giving to God a trusty gauge of the state of our faith and trust in God? What is it about our bank account balance that makes it so easy to trust in ourselves rather than in God's provision? How does giving reveal where our allegiance lies—in this world or in the next? How does God establishing the Sabbath (for man) as well as the Sabbath for the land reveal God's desire that we fully trust Him? Why do you think God values faith above all things?

4. What are some common excuses people make for not giving regularly to God? How would you answer these excuses?

5. God is the owner of everything. Why would He give us something only to then ask us to give some of it back to Him? What does it mean to be a good steward? When have you tested God with regard to giving? What was the result? What is God communicating to you today regarding faith/giving/trusting Him? Spend some time this week evaluating your heart toward giving. In response, what change do you think might make in your giving patterns?

Going Deeper

1. What does it mean to rob God? (Where did the Levites get their sustenance?) What does it mean to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse? What does it not mean? Why do you think God goes so far as to say, “test me in this?” How might we, in the New Testament church, apply these admonitions? What does the New Testament say about giving? Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; and Philippians 4:19. How might we apply this passage in Malachi to our lives today in light of these verses?

2. How have some sectors of Christianity misused this idea of testing God to promote unbiblical ideas about giving to their ministries? What does this materialistic mindset reveal about their priorities? Does God ever promise to make us rich? Why or why not?

Transformational Activity

Worship

One foundational definition we should get locked into our mind and heart is that worship is a response to all that God is with all that we are. All of life is worship. It then follows that when we engage in giving to the Lord, it is an act of worship. Take some time this week to pray about what this area of worship looks like in your life. When you are giving, does it affect you the same way a powerful worship song does? Why or why not? When you do your financial planning for the month, does the idea of worship enter into the equation? In your prayer time (which is also worship), talk to your Father about how you might begin to see giving differently. Come back ready to share any insights you gleaned from this.



Week Eight

We are continuing to explore the history that unfolded after the time of Malachi so that we can more fully understand the mindset, the worldview, and what life was like for those in the time of Jesus—so that we can read the New Testament in a more informed way. We discussed how the Babylonian Captivity changed everything for God’s people. The first step was that they now had rabbis firmly established as their authorities and teachers, and synagogues in place as their centers of worship. Yet, interestingly enough, the priest Ezra inadvertently became responsible for additional significant changes to Jewish life and worship that accelerated this move toward Rabbinic Judaism. It is the shift away from Mosaic Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism that really defines post-exile Israel. This shift is one of the most important developments in understanding the mindset, culture, and learning that first century Jews would have had. But how did it all begin? Where did Rabbinic Judaism come from?

Ezra was the leader of the second wave of exiles returning from Babylon in 458 B.C. and was concerned with the spiritual welfare of the people. He realized that idolatry and disobedience of the Mosaic Law was the cause for the Babylonian Captivity, so he began to passionately teach and expound the Law for the people upon their return. He began a school to help accomplish this goal. It was called the School of the Sopherim—or the School of the scribes. Their goal was to go through each of the 613 commands God had given to Moses and explain them to the Jewish people—a very noble goal indeed. Ezra’s burden was to make the Law so clear that there would no longer be a danger of God’s people breaking it—and thus avoid any need for another exile.

We must understand how devastating the Babylonian Captivity was for the psyche of Israel if we ever hope to grasp the history that unfolded in the intertestamental

time, which then defined the Judaism of Jesus' day. Avoiding the possibility of the judgment of God falling on them again became the driving force in their spiritual lives.

In setting up this system of scribes, Ezra inadvertently laid the foundations for the Mishnah. The Mishnah was the vehicle through which Rabbinic Judaism grew to become the all-consuming power and authority it eventually was in the life of Israel.

Ezra and his scribes (the Sopherim) taught the Law of Moses in detail. But the generation that followed Ezra took the job of explaining and protecting the Law of Moses to the next level. For them, it was not enough to expound the Law, they wanted to protect it. Thus, they set about building a fence around it. This fence would consist of new rules and regulations that logically flowed from the original 613 commands. In this way, one would not be able to even approach breaking the Law itself. This is the origin of the Mishnah.

Ezra's burden was to make the Law so clear that there would no longer be a danger of God's people breaking it—and thus avoid any need for another exile.

Another term for the Mishnah is the “oral law.” In order to legitimize their work, these scribes began teaching that God actually gave Moses two laws on Mt. Sinai: the written Law and the oral law. They argued that this supposed “oral law” was memorized by Moses, who would have passed it down through Joshua, then through the Judges, then through the prophets, who passed it on to the Sopherim—who then taught it to the people.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum describes it this way: “Originally, the purpose of this oral law was merely to explain the Mosaic Law and nothing more. The Mishnah later developed into a system of laws. The idea was to build a fence around the Mosaic Law so that it would be protected from being broken.” The Mishnah would

be similar to what we call “commentaries” today. But they were commentaries that eventually held the same weight as the Law itself.

This was the idea that drove the development of the Mishnah and Rabbinic Judaism. The Sopherim thought they must, at all costs, prevent the Mosaic Law from ever being broken. This was surely a laudable goal and came from a place of devotion to God. But as with everything man touches, it became corrupted. This oral law essentially and eventually replaced God as their object of worship. The strangle-hold these religious leaders held on the authoritative (or perhaps “authorized”) interpretation of God’s Word gave them license to grow that fence larger and larger. As it grew, their power grew as well.

The principle they developed said that “a Sopher (scribe) may disagree with another Sopher but he may not disagree with the Torah, which is sacrosanct.” In making these new laws they could disagree with each other, until they came to a majority—at which point

It is sadly inevitable that fallen mankind will eventually corrupt every good thing and turn it into something evil.

these laws became mandatory for all Jews to follow. This oral law was then passed from rabbi to rabbi—which preserved an element of subjectivity.

The power that this subjective oral law gave them enabled these leaders to wield significant control over the people. They were the ones crafting these commentaries on the Law. And they taught the people that they were the only ones who were authorized to interpret it. Thus, the people were forced to come to them to understand God’s Law. This eventually grew into a mindset where, if you asked a Jew what something in the Torah meant, he would respond, “I don’t know...let me ask my rabbi.” That is masterful brainwashing!

The system of the Sopherim lasted from 450 B.C.

until the famous rabbi Hillel came on the scene in about 30 B.C. This marked the completion of the first layer of fence around the Law. Then a second school of rabbis developed called the Tannaim. The Tannaim looked at the work done by the Sopherim and said there were still too many holes in this fence.

The Tannaim now argued, “a Tanna (instructor) may disagree with another Tanna, but may not disagree with a Sopher”—whose laws now also became inviolable, just like the Law of Moses. This is both diabolical and ingenious. What this process did was to elevate these laws of men to be equal with the Law of God given through Moses. Do you see how this works? Layer upon layer is added, and gradually each of these layers is granted the same authority as God’s written Law.

The result was that by the end of the period of the Tannaim in about 220 A.D., when they finally got around to writing this oral law down on paper, even the writings of the Tannaim became inviolable. The oral law had grown in importance to rival, and even surpass the written law in authority. Jesus came along right in the middle of this period of the Tannaim.

This combined work of the Sopherim and Tannaim is called the Mishnah. But again, it is the diabolical genius of claiming that God gave an additional oral law on Mt. Sinai that empowered their theft of the authority of God’s word, and provided them a monopoly of control over the people. It is easy to see Satan’s fingerprints in all of this.

Stepping back, we can see that it was the veneration of the Law by Ezra, later corrupted by succeeding generations, that evolved into the “traditions of men” for which Jesus condemned the Pharisees. When Jesus lambasted the Pharisees, saying that they broke actual commands of God for their man-made traditions—the teaching of the Sopherim and the Tannaim (the Mishnah) is specifically what He was talking about. These teachers nullified the Word of God (Mosaic Judaism) for the sake of their traditions (Pharisaic Judaism). Jesus said they

were teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.

When the people went to synagogue, the Law of Moses was read aloud, but then the people were taught by the scribes their own interpretations of what the Law actually meant. And what the scribes taught them was the Mishnah, not the Mosaic Law itself. This perpetuated the brainwashing and control over the people they had systematically acquired.

It is sadly inevitable that fallen mankind will eventually corrupt every good thing and turn it into something evil. Ezra's passion for keeping the Law sacred and protecting the people from having to experience again the horrors of the exile turned into something vile that Jesus detested. This fence that developed to protect the Law of Moses from being violated became the focus of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees all throughout His ministry. Whenever man adds to God's Law, we inevitably run into trouble. No matter how well-meaning, our "helps" always become hindrances to the actual purposes of God.

Thus far we have seen two different versions of Judaism come into focus. There was a God-given Judaism, and then there was a manmade perversion of it that the people were being taught. When we recognize this fact, then Jesus' agenda becomes more apparent.

For example, when Jesus healed the man lying by the

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

In Malachi 3:16a we read a powerful and profound statement: "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it..." Take this sentence apart and describe each part. What do each of these phrases mean? How does this beautiful statement of love and affection stand out in a book full of rebuke? Despite the nation as a whole wallowing in a sinful state of rebellion, what does God state here?

pool of Bethesda in John chapter 5, He intentionally did it in a way that violated the Mishnah's teaching about the Sabbath, but did not violate the Mosaic teaching on the Sabbath. He did this specifically to provoke the Pharisees and forced a response from them. Understanding how the Mishnah came about and how it was the center of power for the Pharisees helps us understand what is really going on—in these particular miracles by Jesus, and in His ministry in general.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when pride really characterized your life. Describe a time when humility characterized your life.

2. This Socratic interchange continues here in 3:13 as God declares that the people had spoken arrogant things against Him. When they ask how this could be, God replies to two different groups. What does He say in 3:14-15 to the non-remnant—those God calls the “wicked” and “those who do not serve Him” (v. 18)? What does God say in 3:16-17 to the believing remnant—those God calls “righteous” and “those who serve Him” (v. 18)? What will be the various results of their obedience?

3. What do we learn about the heart of God in His reply to the believing remnant? How does He view these servants of His? What do we learn about God's character and His plan from 3:16-18?

4. What are some of the ways pride rears its ugly head in the world today? Why do you think pride is such a central part of the ethos of the world? What do you think God feels about the times pride seeps into the worship of the church?

5. How do you typically respond when you are confronted—rightly or not? Is your natural reaction to defend, deny, or criticize? What ought our response be? What would it look like to humbly confess, take responsibility, and be open and teachable—and give up the right to be correct? What situations facing you right now might serve as an opportunity for you to practice this humble kind of response?

Going Deeper

1. What does it mean to be God's own peculiar possession (Ex 19:4-6; Deut 7:6-8, 26:18)? What are some of the benefits of this relationship (Isa 61:6-7)? How does this make you feel about your Heavenly Father?

2. What is your reaction when the wicked appear to prosper? Read Psalm 37. What is God's response? What does it mean that God is a righteous judge (Ps 7:1-11)? What does it mean that vengeance belongs to the Lord? How might these truths help us in how we view seeming injustices in the world?

Transformational Activity

Prayer

Although the charge by God here in Malachi chapter 3 regarding the people speaking arrogant words against Him was leveled against those He says are wicked, and who do not serve Him, this is an attitude we ourselves must always guard against when approaching the throne of the Almighty. Take some time this week and ask God to reveal to you whether you have been guilty of approaching Him in any way other than sincere, humble, contrite, and wholehearted. Have we placed our own sense of justice above His in how we view how He works out His will in His time? Have we come to God with an entitled or demanding heart? Ask Him to reveal to you what you are not seeing. Let's come back together and share what we learned.



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Week Nine

We've come to the last week of this historical survey. We spent the first half of our study guide exploring the history that led up to the Babylonian Captivity, and the last half describing the history that followed it. The goal is to help us understand both the setting for the book of Malachi and the role it plays as the transition from one era or dispensation to the next. This history also helps paint for us a clearer picture of the world of the New Testament.

So, again, let's briefly rewind back to the time just after Ezra—when the Mishnah began. During this intertestamental time, Israel was primarily ruled by the high priest. In the absence of a Davidic king, the high priest served as a de facto political ruler. Also, in the place of the prophet, they now had the scribe. Initially, scribes simply made copies of the scriptures. But, as we have seen, their role changed over time so that they became interpreters of the Law—even for the purpose of formulating new laws. With these scribes, we see the growth, dissemination, and normalization of the supposed “oral law.” It was this oral law that became the primary point of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees—because it was the power base of the Pharisees, and was the perversion of God's Law that Jesus spent so much time correcting.

So to review a bit... At the beginning of the intertestamental period, the two main factions of religious leaders were the priests and the scribes. The priests were the aristocrats, and the scribes were the scholars and teachers. Initially they were united, but later would divide. From the priesthood arose the Sadducees—the ruling class of politicians. From the scribes arose the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the ones who demanded strict adherence to the Law and had the masses of the Jewish population supporting them.

The Sadducees were from the upper crust of society,

and they controlled the temple and often dominated the Sanhedrin—the ruling Jewish council. They were the wealthy aristocracy that were always in the minority, but they had control of the temple treasury and wielded significant political power. They did not consider the oral law authoritative, only the five books of Moses. The Sadducees did not survive the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Pharisaism was the group that did survive, and evolved into what we know today as Orthodox Judaism—also known as Hasidic or Rabbinic Judaism.

The other two significant groups in the time of Jesus were the Zealots and the Essenes. These were both factions of the Pharisees and had no theological differences with them. Yet the Zealots separated from the Pharisees over the issue of Roman occupation. The Zealots believed in active resistance, and some would even participate in assassinations of both Romans and the Jews who supported Rome. The Essenes believed in withdrawing from the world and did not support the Sadducean-controlled temple. The Essenes comprised the community where the Dead Sea scrolls were found in Qumran in 1947.

So what was it that drove the wedge between the Pharisees and the Sadducees? It all revolved around pressure from the Greek governing authorities to succumb to the influence of Hellenization. Hellenization was the philosophy that originated with Alexander the Great, which was expanded by the rulers that succeeded him. Its goal was to transform the world into a reflection of Greek ideals. If you recall, Medo-Persia had conquered Babylon. And under Alexander the Great, Greece conquered Medo-Persia—and ruled the world for several hundred years. After Alexander had conquered the known world, he enforced Greek as the official spoken language of commerce. He also desired to export Greek culture, ideals, and values to all these conquered peoples as well. This desire to make the world look like Greece became known as Hellenism. Interestingly enough, Greeks don't

call themselves “Greek.” They call themselves “Hellenes.”

As this Hellenization pressure made its way to the conquered people of Israel, the different factions of Greek overlords implemented Hellenization differently. When Alexander died, he was asked who would succeed him. He replied, “Give it to the strong.” Not surprisingly, this led to a protracted civil war amongst his strongest generals. Eventually, four factions, led by four generals divided the Greek empire between themselves: Lysimachus, Cassander, Ptolemy, and Seleucus. It was the Ptolemies and the Seleucids that warred over control of Palestine.

When the Ptolemies (from Egypt) were in control of the land of Israel, they allowed the Jews a fair amount of freedom when it came to exercising their religious practices. When the Seleucids took over, that is when the Hellenization pressure became fierce. This all came to a head in 175 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes was the Seleucid ruler over Syria and Palestine. He was so brutal in his hatred of the Jews for resisting this Hellenization that he eventually outlawed most of the most sacred Jewish practices, like temple sacrifices and even circumcision. He went so far as to sacrifice a pig on the Jewish altar, and forced the priests to eat it.

This outrageous act became known as “the Abomination of Desolations” and is a preview for what the antichrist will do at the mid-point of the tribulation period in the future. This supremely offensive move by Antiochus precipitated a rebellion against Greek rulership, which became known as the Maccabean revolt. The Jews actually threw off the mantle of Greek rulership for a time. The champions of this revolt were called “the Hasidim” (the pious ones). They were called “the mighty warriors of Israel” in 1 Maccabees. They were devoted to obeying God alone in

It’s important to note that Jesus was still teaching Orthodox, biblical Judaism to the people, not New Covenant church theology like we sometimes think.

all that they did.

Unfortunately, the Maccabees' successors, the Hasmoneans, gave into the Hellenization pressure—which presented a problem for these zealous followers of God. This violated everything they believed in. Some of the Hasidim chose to follow the path of violence and rebel against any and all of their overlords. They became the Zealots mentioned earlier.

DID YOU KNOW...

In the Hebrew culture, the authority someone possessed was reflected in the hem, or fringe, of the garment they wore just like today we see the authority or rank of an airline pilot or military officer reflected on their shoulders, or epaulettes. Back then, it was sewn into the hem of their garments. In Matthew 14, people were reaching for the hem of Jesus (His authority), and as many as touched it were healed. Here in Malachi we learn why. It says that the Son of righteousness will arise with healing in His wings (His hem).

Others decided that violence was not the answer. They considered their oppression to be the result of the people's failure to follow God's Law. They taught that one should devote oneself completely to every detail of the Law, and to separate from anything that would distract from that devotion. These Hasidim became known as the "separatists" (perushim)—or "Pharisee" in English. This issue of whether to give in to the pressure to be like the world can be seen as the origin of the Pharisees. This was the issue that separated them from the priests, who would eventually become the Sadducees.

So that sets the stage a bit for who these religious leaders were in Jesus' time, and what the conflict was really about.

The people were being taught Rabbinic or Pharisaic Judaism—and Jesus rejected this teaching and was

teaching Mosaic Judaism.

But we can also now more clearly understand the anger of the Pharisees at what Jesus was doing. In their minds, He was attacking the Law of God, and even God Himself. They felt this way because they had elevated the oral law to the same level as the written Law. They were so zealous for the Law that they had no problem killing someone they thought was a false Messiah.

It's important to note that Jesus was still teaching Orthodox, biblical Judaism to the people, not New Covenant church theology like we sometimes think. The Law of Moses did not end as the rule of life for God's people until the death of Messiah. Jesus was Jewish through and through. He was simply undermining the perversions of God's Law that the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Sadducees were teaching.

In summary, when Jesus came to offer the kingdom to Israel, because He was the Messiah—and was not a Pharisee, and had no plans to join them in plugging up the holes in the Mishnah—the religious leaders opposed everything Jesus did. Especially since Jesus was declaring that their teachings were not from God.

So, putting this all together, what have we seen through this study guide's quick survey of background history? We've seen that when we read the Bible with specific topics in mind, or specific lenses, we are able to make more sense of the plan of God—and see what He is doing even more clearly.

We've explored the challenges we face in the 21st century. We must step outside our own frame of reference and see that what the original recipients of scripture heard and understood is quite often not what we assume. We need to do the work of putting ourselves in their shoes so that the precise message of scripture comes through.

We also saw how the Babylonian Captivity changed everything for the Jews. Because of it, both the synagogue system and the class of teacher known as Rabbi came into being—and this new system is what gave birth to the Pharisees and the Sadducees as the ruling religious class in Israel when Jesus came onto the scene.

We saw how, in order to validate their interpretations of the Law, these religious leaders concocted the idea of the oral law that God supposedly gave to Moses. This gave them license to construct fences around the Mosaic Law to protect people from even approaching breaking the Law, but which is what gave them their power, as well as the ability to control the daily lives and behavior of the Jews.

Understanding the history and origin of the various religious groups in Judaism, as well as how their theology developed, really brings Jesus' teaching so much more

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into focus. His statements are not nearly as much “nuggets of truth” for our 21st century ears (as we may have thought), but are more like precise daggers meant to correct the bad theology the Jews of His day had been taught, and undermine the self-appointed authority of the Pharisees and scribes.

We discussed how this oral law determined what righteousness looked like for the Jews in Jesus' day. What righteousness actually was, is what Jesus focused so much of His messages on. In fact, this was the entire purpose of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was undermining the authority of the Pharisees and scribes, and pointing people back to God's actual Law as their standard for living.

All of this background leads to the realization that Jesus came to offer the kingdom to Israel, yet they

rejected the offer. Because of this rejection, everything in Jesus' ministry changed. And because Jesus was all about pointing people back to the true Law of God—the Law He gave them through Moses—His ministry became a declaration of war against the power base of the religious leaders. This is more precisely why Jesus was not recognized or accepted as Messiah when He came. It was not simply because He was not the kind of Messiah who would throw off their Roman oppressors (He actually was). It was because He threatened the power and control wielded by the religious leaders—the ones who determined what the people believed.

Where that brings us is to the place where we are now seeking to read the New Testament through two specific lenses: the lens of the offer of the kingdom, and through the lens of this battle between Jesus and the Pharisees. It really was a strategic chess match—and when we see it as such, then *why* all the players did *what* they did makes so much more sense. This enables us to be on the lookout for what the Jewish recipient of scripture would have heard in the 1st century—which then unlocks a more precise meaning of the text. Then we can really unpack some amazing truths God has for us in His Word, and be transformed by them as well.

Discussion Questions

1. We have reached the end of the story of the Old Testament. What is the most memorable ending to a story you have heard?

2. One of the most common images the Old Testament uses for the coming Day of the Lord (what we commonly call the Great Tribulation) is a fiery furnace. Fire is a common theme through all the judgments detailed in Revelation: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls. Why do you think fire will be the primary means of judgment in The Day of the Lord? What will happen to the wicked during this time? What will happen to the righteous? (What happened to the three friends of Daniel in their fiery furnace?) What other uses of the image of fire do you recall in scripture? What is the difference between the refining fire God uses with His people and the burning fire He employs with the wicked?

3. In addition to the destruction of the wicked, the second point of this conclusion in Malachi is the preservation of the believing remnant. What phrase does God use to characterize these followers of His in 4:2? What does it mean to “fear His name”? Why is this an appropriate thing to point out about those worshipers of God who come to faith during the tribulation and endure that terrible time? Malachi goes on to say that God will heal them, will free them, and will give them victory. What do all these actions reveal about the character of God?

4. One of the primary messages of Malachi is that judgment is coming. How do you think people outside the church hear that message? Do they believe it? If so, do they think it is far off, or that it doesn't apply to them? How have you tried to communicate that truth to unbelievers? Do you think the idea of coming judgment is motivating? Why or why not?

5. Where do you see God’s mercy on display in this passage? What promises do you notice? Where does this passage—and the book of Malachi in general—speak to you? What truths has God highlighted in this study of Malachi? What changes do you desire to make because of what the Spirit has taught you?

Going Deeper

1. The fact that the wicked will be judged is a promise God makes all throughout scripture. Why do you think God poses this as a promise? What do we learn about the character of God through this truth? What other passages in scripture do you recall focus on this promise? Is this source of comfort or discomfort for you? Why?

2. In the final section of Malachi (4:4-6) we see two primary messages. The first message is the final call to Israel to keep the Law of Moses. The second message is the announcement of the second forerunner mentioned in the book. The first forerunner preceded the first coming of Messiah (3:1), and was not named. But here, the second forerunner is named: Elijah. What was the purpose of the first forerunner? What will be the purpose of the second forerunner? Why, at this point in the history of Israel, do you think God would be communicating this message about keeping the Law of Moses?

Transformational Activity

Bible Study

This would be a good opportunity to do a word study on the very important topic of “The Day of the Lord.” Grab a concordance or use your favorite Bible app or website and search this term. Spend some time exploring what God’s Word says about this issue. Why do you think this is such a prevalent theme in scripture? Did you come across anything surprising? Come back ready to share what you discovered.



REKINDLE

THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI



These resources were very helpful in the creation of this study guide: background material from Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum (much of this study guide information comes directly from this very learned scholar), and “Serendipity Bible for Groups.” For helpful answers to many of your Bible questions, the website GotQuestions.org has often proven to be useful.