

Lesson 118

Malachi Prophecies of Jesus

In the midst of rebuke, the Lord gives hope of a Savior.

Overview

Lesson Focus

Malachi delivered the Lord's rebuke to the priests in Israel because they were offering imperfect animals to the Lord. Malachi was also given a message of hope, pointing forward to the coming Messiah and the messenger who would prepare the way for him.

Key Passages

Malachi 1:6–8, 2:7–9, 3:1, 4:5; Psalm 51:17; Luke 1:13–17

Objectives

Students will be able to:

Describe the proper attitude of worship.

Explain Malachi's message of hope fulfilled in the Old Testament.

Memory Verse

Jeremiah 33:7–8 I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

The final book of the Old Testament was written by the prophet Malachi. We know Malachi only from this writing; there is no mention of him in any other books of the Old Testament. Based on the themes of his prophecies, Malachi may have been a contemporary of Nehemiah and Ezra, or his ministry may have come shortly thereafter. This places the writing of Malachi between 440 and 400 BC.

Malachi was surely writing after the restoration of the temple since he talked about the role of the priests in offering sacrifices in the temple. Like Ezra and Nehemiah, Malachi confronted Israel's sins: offering improper sacrifices, marrying foreigners, not paying the tithes and offerings, and the leaders unfairly treating the people. The book has two main thrusts: to call the people to right worship and to point forward to the coming of the Messiah.

At the beginning of Malachi, God reminded the Israelites that he chose them as his special people even though they continually rejected him (Malachi 1:1–4).

He then rebuked the priests for their failures in conducting the worship in the temple the way God had commanded Moses. Specifically, the priests were offering blind, lame, and sick animals as sacrifices to God—animals they would not offer to their earthly governors. They either didn't care that they were offering defiled sacrifices, or they were unaware of what God had commanded. In either case, they were responsible for their failure to study and obey the law. God had clearly commanded them to offer only animals that were without blemish, and he clearly described the things that were unacceptable to him (Leviticus 22:18–25).

In Malachi chapter 2, God reminded the priests that he had made a covenant with the priestly line of Levi—Aaron being the first priest of the Levites—and they had broken that covenant. Since they had failed in their duty to teach the people the truth, the sins of the people were also on their heads (Malachi 2:1–8). The people were also divorcing their wives and marrying foreign women, another clear violation in worshipping God as he desired. On top of this, the people were not giving God the tithes and offerings he had commanded the Israelites to give. In this, the people were robbing God, and he was withholding his blessing because of their disobedience (Malachi 3:8–12). These offerings were to support the Levites serving in the temple (Numbers 18:21–32), as well as to pay for the festivals and to care for the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28–29), but the people rejected God's plan and went their own way.

Today, we don't offer burnt offerings, but we do offer worship to God in many other ways. We offer him the praise of our lips (Hebrews 13:15), our good deeds for others (James 1:27), and our generosity to others (Philippians 4:18). But if any of these things are done without a pure heart, they are not pleasing to God. God wants our hearts.

But even as God proclaimed judgment on the Jews for polluting his altar, he spoke of one who would come and restore righteous worship (Malachi 3:3). As he cursed the nation for robbing him, God promised to preserve a remnant who feared the Lord (Malachi 3:16–18). In the final chapter of the Old Testament, Malachi presents the Lord's promise that judgment will be accompanied by healing (Malachi 4:2) and that a messenger would come to prepare the way for the Messiah, thus preventing utter destruction (Malachi 4:6). The promised messenger of the covenant, Jesus Christ, is coming (Malachi 3:1).

Historical/Apologetics Background

Because there are no clear references to kings (or other people) in Malachi's writing, assigning an exact date to his prophecies is difficult. He was surely writing at a time when Israel had forgotten about worshipping God properly and when the teachers had failed to fulfill their God-given role. There are a couple options for the time of writing. One possibility is during the time that Nehemiah returned to Persia after reestablishing the law with the help of Ezra and other teachers. This would date the book of Malachi around 442 BC during a period of backsliding before Nehemiah returned to govern the nation again. Malachi touched on several of the same problems Nehemiah sought to reform, so this is a reasonable conclusion.

The second option for a date of writing is after Nehemiah had died and the people had again turned from truly worshipping God. Malachi may have been reminding the people of the truths Ezra and Nehemiah had taught them, exhorting them to continue to follow the law until Elijah would come to announce Messiah's arrival. This would place the date closer to 400 BC. In either case, the text clearly called the people to worship God as he had prescribed.

Many people today believe they can approach God in any way they want. They fail to recognize that God demands to be worshipped in very specific ways. For the Israelites during the Old Testament period, that involved the law and sacrificial system. But only those who approach God with a pure heart can be accepted. The problem is that no one has a pure heart. Apart from Christ, even our good deeds are filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Today, only in Jesus can we rightly worship God. Those who reject this idea are working against Christ (1 John 4:1–6). As Christians, we must help people understand that they can only come to the Father through the Son (John 14:6). Apart from receiving Jesus by faith, no one will have eternal life (John 5:19–27). Even though the gospel is an unpopular message, it must be taught so that God can be worshipped as he desires and directs. Let's not be like the priests of Malachi's day, but let us faithfully teach what God has revealed to us in his Word.

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