

A Call to Repentance
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We're at the end of our summer study project. We have worked our way through...in a survey fashion...through the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, all those little books at the back of the Old Testament with funny names like Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Nahum, and Obadiah, and all those funny little names. We started at the beginning of that section of the Old Testament and we worked our way through, kinda survey-fashion, taking one at a time throughout the summer. And we're taking the last one today. It's introduced with this statement; the title line goes like this:

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

We simply call the book 'Malachi.' It's the last book of the Old Testament, and I wanna encourage you to turn in your bibles to there right now. If you have a hard time finding it, just find Matthew and go left, ok? It's the very last book of the Old Testament; it's only four chapters long; it's very short, it's very small.

As you turn there, I wanna...I wanna kinda prepare you for what we're gonna be looking at today. This is not, for me, an encouraging book. In fact, if anything, it's a bit discouraging. When I read this particular letter, this particular prophet writing, it's a little bit like going through this summer we've been going through in Alaska where it's just been kinda drizzly all along. And then you come to the last weekend, and instead of having sunny weather you have a downpour of rain. That's what this book is like. You've been workin' through the Old Testament, you've gotten into the Minor Prophets, and these were individuals that were calling a nation to repentance. So their message is heavy, and it's a challenging message. And you're ready for somethin' different, you hit the last chapter, and it's there again—a call to repentance. And it's a call to repentance that is not...is not filled with a whole lotta hope. It's a discouraging letter; it's a discouraging prophecy.

But you know, if you read it right you'll see the glory, and the wonder, and the mystery of Jesus in a very special way. That's my desire. So let's pray towards that end and then we'll start our study.

Our Father in heaven,

Our desire is to gain a better clarity with respect to Jesus—who He is, what He's done, what He will do; most of all, Father, the hope, and the wonder we have in Him. And I pray today, as we look at this Old Testament prophecy, and as we read and just survey it, that You'll help adjust our eyes to see the glory of Jesus.

We pray this in His glorious name, amen.

The book, as I said of Malachi, is written as a call to repentance—looking at a nation and saying, 'we have a problem here; we need to change.' It's about four hundred years before Christ comes, and the nation of Israel has been established in the land once again after a long exile. They've rebuilt their temple, and life is kinda getting normal, but it's not exactly what the people had hoped it would be. They had a renewed temple, but it wasn't as glorious as Solomon's day. And not only did they have a new temple, they were getting established with their businesses and their local farms, and things like that. But they weren't as prosperous as they'd dreamed and hoped they would be. And their government was established in a provincial sort of way, but they definitely were not the world power they were hoping to be. And so there is a...there is a...almost a depression in the land. There's an attitude in the land. And Malachi addresses it. And he's going to address seven specific things as he goes through this book.

He's gonna address the nation about the fact that they were questioning God's love, His commitment to them. And he quotes it. He says, God says to the nation of Israel,

"I have loved you," says the LORD.

'I really have cared for you.'

Their response to Him is

But you say [the nation says back to Him] "How hast thou loved us?"

'How have You cared for us, God? You say You love us, but *how have You?*'

Interesting response at this point; the way God handles that is rather than trying to give instances of where He's loved them, He points at a nation that has challenged Him, confronted Him, and that He has come to hate, and He says, 'Listen, look at how I've treated them. That's what I do when I'm upset with something. That's what I do when I hate a people and a nation. And let Me tell you, I haven't done that to you.'

There's another issue that Malachi raises. Not only are they questioning God's commitment to them; they have...he says...he uses the word 'despise'...they've despised God. They show Him no respect. Now, the challenge here, and this comes a little later in chapter...chapter 1...the challenge here is the fact that it revolves around the temple and the priests that are leading worship at the temple. And that was a place where people were supposed to bring offerings and sacrifices in the Old Testament system. And they were called to bring the best of the flock, the best of the herd. You were supposed to take the best animal God had given you, and you would sacrifice that within that Old Testament system to show your allegiance, to seek forgiveness, those sorts of things. And you used the best because God called for it, and it was an act of faith; because the attitude was 'you know, I can give You my best and I know You'll take care of me. And You'll still provide for me.' But instead of doing that they were, as Malachi points out, they were bringing the blind animals, the lame animals, the sick animals. They were bringing the worst of their flock, the worst of their herd, the ones they were gonna cull and get rid of anyway. And they were bringing them to the temple.

And the challenge that Malachi gives them, he says, 'Listen, would you offer this to your governor? Is this what you would give your governor? And if you did, would he be pleased with you, and would he receive it?' It's all rhetorical questions. They're sayin', 'You wouldn't treat your governor this way. And yet, this is the way you're treating...this is the sort of sacrifices you're bringing to the all-holy God of the universe, the creator-God of all. You're bringin' Him this...the sort of stuff you wouldn't even bring to your governor.' 'You despise Me. You're showing Me no respect.'

There's a third thing that Malachi raises, and that's the issue of...he says, 'You're desecrating God's sanctuary.' He speaks to that a little later, in chapter 2, when he says...he says...he's speaking of the nation when he says

"...Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD which He loves..."

...temple, the holy place that was devoted to God and the worship of God. He says "you profaned it." And we're kinda...we don't use words like 'profaned' and 'desecrate' that much anymore. The idea is to pollute something, to take something pure and pollute it and make it offensive. And God says 'that's what you're doing to My holy temple, the place that's dedicated to Me, that's to honor Me...you've polluted it.' And the question is how did they do that? What were they doing? Their particular problem at that point is given in the next line, and it's a little bit confusing when you first read it. He says he's

"...married the daughter of a foreign god."

The issue was this: God had told His people, Israel, to marry within the faith. 'Marry within the faith; marry people who share an allegiance to Me.' The men of Judah, at that time, were marrying women who did not share the faith; women from other nations, other places that were committed to other gods, to idols of other gods. And they were marrying outside the faith. It wasn't a racial thing, it wasn't an ethnic thing; it was an issue of heart-faith commitment. And God had said, 'Marry within the faith.' And these people, at that time, were not. And as a result they were coming in to worship God with a mixture. They were coming in mixed with belief in Moloch and Astarte and Baal and other gods, and God says, 'No, that isn't what My temple's about. You come here as a people committed to Me...husband, wife, children. You're polluting the worship that goes on here.'

There's another problem that he raises issue with in the land. He says...the best phrase I can put it here is Malachi basically points out 'You've pained God. You've pained His heart,' is the best way I can put it. Actually, when you start reading it, it looks like what they've done is they're the ones in pain...starting about chapter 2, verse 12-13, right in there of Malachi. They...they're looking to God and they're saying, 'Listen, we're weeping; we're crying; we're praying out to You at the altars. We're begging, God, that You would answer to us. We are hurting. We are in pain. And You're not answering us, God! You're not answering us. Why?'

And God's response and summary statement is 'You're not treating your wives right.' That's exactly what He says.

"You are dealing treacherously with the wife of your youth, your companion by covenant."

What was happening is the men of Israel were marrying their wives when they were young; they were sweethearts, they were getting married, they were making commitments and promises, marriage vows to 'em. And then, later on, as they got older and the wife got older, they were divorcing 'em! And they were leaving 'em without ability to provide for themselves. They were leavin' the kids stranded. And they were goin' with other women. At the same time they're cryin' out, they're begging, they're weeping before God, sayin' 'Answer my prayers!' And God says, 'Not the way you're treating your wives.'

And then He makes this statement in that section. He says

"I hate divorce."

He says, 'I just *hate* divorce.'

I don't know anybody who doesn't. The pain that goes on in divorce... And God says, 'I hate it! People stand, and they make these commitments to each other, and they promise before Me to love and to honor and to cherish. And years later they're shouting, they're cursing, they're ripping each other apart, they're destroying their family, they abandon their kids, turn 'em into a tug-o-war...' God says, 'I hate this! But that's what you're doin'. You can weep, and you can cry, and you can pray all you want. You treat your wives that way, I'm not answerin'. I'm not listenin'.

Next thing that Malachi points out—and like we say, this is just a quick survey; we're runnin' through it—is that they wearied God. And this you gotta picture. Toward the end of chapter 2 you got this...God says, in verse 17, he says

You have wearied the LORD with your words.

Now imagine...this is the Lord God of hosts, and twenty times in this little letter God refers to Himself as the Lord of hosts; in other words, the Lord of the great armies of heaven, the Almighty. And He says 'You wore Me out! You've worn Me out. I'm weary of you.' And then He gives the words that are wearing Him out. He says, 'You keep sayin' "Where is the God of justice?"'

Now understand, they weren't asking that question as people wrestling with the great philosophical issues of 'how can God be good and there still be evil.' They...they're not wrestling with these great questions of philosophy at this point. They're simply pouting like little kids, stomping their foot and saying, 'God isn't fair! They get this and we don't.' The almighty God of the universe, the LORD of hosts, says, 'You're wearin' Me out with your words. I'm tired of it.'

He goes on, as the book goes on...as I told you, this isn't the most uplifting book you're gonna read...He goes on and He challenges the nation. He says, 'You're robbin' me.' And He says

"Will a man rob God? You are robbing Me!"

Their immediate response is

"How have we robbed You?"

'How have we taken anything that belongs to You, God, and held it our own and not let You have it? How have we stolen from You, God?' And God's response is

"In tithes and offerings."

At that time in the Old Testament the national government was supported, and the worship center of the temple was supported, through the tithes and offerings of the people. God said, 'I will bless you. I will provide for you. I'll put bounteous resources in your hands. Your challenge, then, is to use those resources for your good, for your benefit, for the benefit of those around you, and yes, to pay for the government, to pay for the worship that takes place. You need to do that.' And they're saying, 'We'll take care of everything else but that.' And they began to hold back in tithes and offerings. And God said, 'You're robbing Me!'

And lastly, end of chapter 3 he comments the fact...he says, 'You speak against God.' Actually he says

You speak arrogantly against God.

And he quotes Him at this point. He says, 'You've said "It's vain to serve God."'

Typographical error there. He didn't say 'It's vain to serve, to serve...' ok? He said, "'It's vain to serve God.'" That's what you're sayin'. You're sayin' it doesn't pay; it really doesn't pay to devote yourself to serving God. Better just take care of yourself.'

Those are the seven things Malachi challenges them with. The thing that, as he goes through this challenge, the thing that you recognize as he makes this call for repentance, is the nation was doing all these things, but they were doing it with attitude. And that's probably the most discouraging part about this book, is there's an attitude there. Every time Malachi says something, there's a response. He says, "You've loved Me," and they say...or God says, "I've loved you," and they come back with, "How have You done that?" He says, "You've robbed Me," and they say, "Where have we robbed You?" He says, "You've despised Me," and they say, "How have we done that?" There's an attitude. It's combative. It's written in a disputive form, where the prophet gifted by the Lord speaks in terms of what God's sayin' to the nation, and then he's also gifted at being able to recognize the attitude of the nation and give the articulation to that, to communicate it. And he does that. He voices the nation's attitude in his writing.

That's what makes it so discouraging. At this point in biblical history, that the nation would be doing this with such an attitude... Think about this nation and where it had been. It had been almost 1700 years since Abraham had been called by God and given the promise. God says, 'I'm gonna take you, I'm gonna bless you, I'm gonna make a great nation out of you, and all the other nations of the world are gonna be blessed through you.' It had been 1700 years since that grand and glorious promise. And think of what the nation had been through after that. They had Joseph rescuing them from the famine through God's divine intervention. They had Moses leading 'em out of captivity in Egypt, and taking 'em out into the desert where they were fed, and crossing the Red Sea. And then they have Joseph leading them...Joshua leading them into the Promised Land, and where the walls of Jericho fall down, and they're able to take possession of the land God had promised them.

And then you have the stories of men like Gideon that stood up and had faced the invading hoard and pushed them back with only three hundred soldiers. And then you have the great king David that came up and established the nation and gave it a place in the land that was firm and established; the greatest of all of Israel's kings—followed by his son, Solomon, who established the nation in prosperity and peace, and built the glorious and wonderful temple. And then, when the other kings began to fail and falter, God brought in people like Elijah—the amazing prophet who called down fire from heaven, who shut off the rain, who addressed and challenged the kings. And you have people like that coming in the national history. You have a king like Hezekiah coming in, the great reformer who brings in the nation and turns it around, who is able to stand and go head-to-head with the kingdom of Babylon. It is amazing what happened with this nation!

And then you come to the exile. And this is one of the most astounding things, where God, at an appointed time, says, 'I'm done working with you right now.' 'I'm gonna put you in time-out' is kinda the idea; 'I'm gonna put you in the corner. You're gonna have to...you're gonna have to bear some trouble, a burden here, because you've been so unfaithful.' And He sends 'em into exile. And for seventy years, *seventy years*, the nation ceased to exist, living as refugees in other lands. And their nation is desolate. But as God sends 'em into time-out, He puts 'em in the corner, He says, 'Listen. It's gonna be seventy years...seventy years, and I'll bring you back.' And, amazing thing, seventy years later we have the return. And God moves on the international scene to bring His people, Israel, back to the land; a nation that ceased to exist is brought back and given its place once again. It is amazing!

But after a history like that, in which God had provided both deliverance and discipline, times of astounding victory and unequalled blessing, at other times bringing disastrous defeat and struggle of famine to try to get their attention and correct them... I mean, he's like a father who is using positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. He's workin' with them throughout the generations, trying to encourage and develop and bring them forward. They had it all from God. In fact, the most powerful thing—they had revelation.

This was a nation...imagine this. This was a nation who had heard God speak out loud. In the Sinai wilderness, at the base of Mount Sinai, they had actually heard the God of the universe speak out loud! And when He gave His first ten commandments it was so terrifying for them...the earth shook, there was cloud, there was lightning, there was thunder...they said, 'We've heard enough. Moses, you go up and get the rest.'

In the generations that followed He sent them prophet after prophet after prophet that gave them clarity about what was going to happen, what God's view was, and read their heart and their attitudes with such clarity. And after all of that, with 1700 years of being nurtured, cherished, fathered, cared-for by the God of the universe, *spoken to*, they end that time saying, 'It's vain to serve God. It's empty.' In other words, what they're saying is 'We've got better things to do than serve that God who has done so much in our life and history.' And that's where the Old Testament ends. 'It's vain to serve God.'

What a contrast... What a contrast, coming to the New Testament. The little letters of the New Testament have funny names, like you find at the end of the Old Testament, only these are names like Galatians, and Ephesians, and Corinthians. And you find a whole different attitude, a whole different perspective in terms of the spokesmen for God. Instead of Malachi the prophet, for example, you have Paul the apostle, writing to the Philippian church; and he says to them, 'I'm confident of this very thing. I am sure of this...that He, God, who began a good work in you, He is gonna perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ.' What confidence! He's sittin' there sayin', 'I know God's gonna do somethin' great with you! And He's gonna perfect you! And He's gonna bring you to completion. It's gonna be great!'

You say, 'Well, that's just because He's dealin' with the Philippian church, and they were a church that was specifically devoted to Paul, they had supported him, they had stood by him in the worst of times. What about the other churches?'

Go to 1 Corinthians. This is a church that was so divided; and they were a church that had actually begun to attack Paul in various ways and speak of him in disparaging ways. And we're told Paul, in 1 Corinthians though, as he writes an opening letter to them, verses four through eight he introduces himself, and he greets this church—this divided, jealous, competitive church. And he says to them...this fascinates me...he says

I thank my God always concerning you.

'I look at you and I am so thankful.'

And he goes on and he elaborates on that, the gifts they'd been given and the way God's blessed 'em. But he wraps up that section with this statement, speaking of God

...who will confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

'Yeah, you've got your faults, you're struggling. But you know what? You're gonna stand without fault in the end. I know God's gonna do that with you.' What a great attitude! What a great hope!

Let's give you my favorite. This is a little portion you'll find in the little letter of Jude, way near the back, the last letter in the New Testament. It's a tiny little letter; in fact, it only has one chapter, so we just go to verse 24 and 25 at the end of it. And you have a doxology here, and it's where the writer's closing and he's gonna speak well of God as he closes. And I want you to see how he closes, speaking of God and His relationship with His people in the New Testament. He says this. He says

Now to Him [speaking of God] who is able to keep you from stumbling...

He's able to keep you from stumbling...

...and to make you stand in the presence of His glory...

...the glory of the all-holy God. He says He's able to make you stand in the presence of His glory...

...blameless...

...without fault...

...with great joy.

Now remember, Jude is talking to ordinary sinners like you and I; and he's sayin', 'Listen, let's praise God who can make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless and with great joy.'

...to the only God our Savior...

And then he finishes in the doxology

...through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

He can make you stand in the presence of His glory, *blameless*, with great joy.

What's the difference? What's the difference? That as the Old Testament closes, it closes with a people of attitude being told, 'You need to repent; you need to repent,' and the closing statement being, 'I'm gonna call you to repentance again, as they say, "It doesn't pay to serve You."'

How is it, when you come to these little letters, they're so filled with positive expectation? You're gonna stand before God blameless, with joy.

One, and be clear about this, it's not because those Old Testament Israelites were worse than New Testament believers. It was just the opposite. It was just the opposite. It wasn't the fact that He had found a better people to work with...He hadn't. He just expanded workin' with Jews and Gentiles together; and they were all still sinners. What's the difference?

Let me give it to ya. First Timothy, chapter one, and I'm just gonna close with this last quote. 1 Timothy 1...the Apostle Paul is writing to a younger minister, a younger pastor, about the ministry. And he says something at the very start that just stands out. And I just finished that thirtieth year of preaching here, and it was just so cool last week—the celebration you guys gave me—and I wanna say thank you to you for that...it was a special time with you as a people. And one of the things I've done as I've hit that kind of milestone, I look ahead; I've pulled out First and Second Timothy and said, 'You know, I'm gonna read through the instructions Paul gave to that pastor so long ago, and review those and keep track of 'em, and make sure I'm following that same pastoral road that the Bible maps out.' And I was reading this, and right at the start there's an introduction; and Paul introduces himself, and he greets him. And then he makes this statement to Timothy, and you need to picture this. This is an old pastor talking to a young one. And he says this...he speaks of Jesus Christ and he simply says this—"Our hope."

That was the only difference between the Old Testament prophet and the New Testament apostle...is in the New Testament we have Jesus Christ, our hope. For 1700 years it was made very clear that God thundering from heaven the Ten Commandments doesn't change attitudes. Prophets stopping the rain and calling down famine and fire don't change attitudes. Powerful, great leaders like David don't change attitudes. What breaks through a people, what impacts their attitude, what gives us hope...is a person named Jesus. And oh, we need that hope—'cause pastorally, personally, congregationally we struggle with the same attitudes that those Old Testament saints did. We find ourselves questioning the love of God. We find ourselves holding back from God. We find ourselves in our casual, careless worship showing no respect for God. We find ourselves speaking arrogantly against God. We find ourselves giving pain to God's heart. And we have to say, 'What hope is there to break through our attitudes?'

And there's only one. His name's Jesus. And that's our hope.

Go with whatever attitude you came in with, with the hope and the reality that Jesus will address it and deal with it in His grace. Amen.