

MALACHI
Six Dialogues Between God and Sinners
Lesson 62

Have you ever had a truly marvelous spaghetti sauce? One that is so good, you want it on your pasta, on your bread, and even a bit on your shirt, just as a memory of the meal you enjoyed?

Becky and I knew a woman in Lubbock, Texas, who made one of the best sauces that I have ever eaten. I asked her once for her recipe, which she gladly gave me on a typed-out 3x5 notecard. To this day, I regret losing that recipe! The recipe did not match up with my desire for efficiency. As best as I remember, you begin by cooking meat in a skillet, draining off the excess grease. You add that to a pot with tomatoes (paste and sauce), some olive oil, tomato juice, onions, mushrooms, and some spices. You then simmer this sauce for hours (with a splatter guard because it makes a mess!) An interesting part of the recipe is the timing of adding the spices. Some are added early and others late.

Now, my preference would be to dump all the ingredients in at once, set a timer, and then eat spaghetti, but it did not work that way. It seems that spices are sensitive to the timing of their inclusion. Some taste best if simmered for x number of minutes, but get bitter if cooked longer. Other spices take longer to maximize their flavor profile. Who would have thought?

As we look at perhaps the last book written in the Old Testament canon this week, we see the final ingredient added to Scripture until the arrival of God's Final Word (Jesus). Like Ms. Marple's spaghetti sauce, just because the final ingredient was added, it did not mean the sauce was ready! In fact, the conditions involving Abraham's descendants when the Old Testament closed, needed a few centuries to simmer. Time was needed to draw out the profile and flavor, and to set the conditions that would be just right for the Messiah and God's coming kingdom.

In Malachi, we have the final ingredients that, with the right simmering, finish the product that had a purpose of pointing to the Savior of mankind. With Malachi, the ingredients were all in the pot – they just needed time to simmer. In this lesson, we focus on that book, and not surprisingly, we see some important prophecies about Jesus as well as signals of his coming. In typical prophetic fashion, this work was not only about the future, but it also spoke to the Israelites in their own day as they received this oracle from YHWH.

BACKGROUND

The book begins with the pronouncement:

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi (Mal. 1:1).

The reference to “Israel” should not be taken to mean this prophetic book predated the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The book is much later than that time.¹ This reference to Israel focuses on the people’s relationship to the Lord through Israel (Jacob), their progenitor from over a millennia earlier. God called this relationship into existence through his promises, and set the relationship up around the Torah covenant entered into between God and the people.

Malachi is built around six dialogues with God. Each dialogue is a wake-up call, telling the people that their lives need to reflect genuine holiness, not simply a half-hearted effort following certain prescribed rules or laws. These dialogues are built around three elements seen in each, which we will label **Part A**, **B**, and **C**.

Part A is an *assertion* by God or by the prophet that is relevant to the state of affairs in Israel.

Part B is a *challenge* to the assertion in the form of a question by the people.

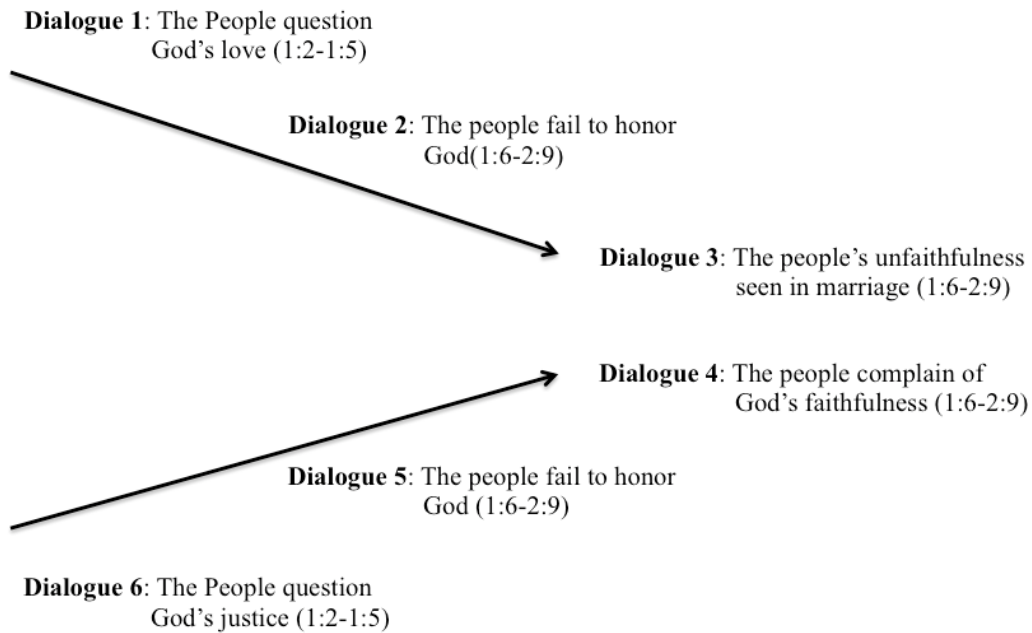
Part C is a *response* to the challenge by God or the prophet.

¹ To some degree, scholars are making educated guesses about when Malachi was written. The language (*i.e.*, the reference to a “governor” as a *pechah* (פּחָה) in Mal. 1:8 is using the term for the regional Persian official at that time), the existence of the second temple (Mal. 1:10; 3:1,8), the descriptions of Edom and especially the list of sins that were so similar to those concerning Nehemiah, give a general consensus among scholars that Malachi was likely written around the time of Nehemiah or shortly afterwards.

For example, Nehemiah 13 wrote up concerns over corruption in the priesthood and proper ritual behavior (“They have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood” 13:29). These same concerns are in Malachi 1:6-2:9. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were pulling out hair over intermarriage with pagan women (Ezra pulled out his own hair, Nehemiah the hair of the offenders!) (Ezr. 9-10; Neh. 10:30; 13:1-3, 23-27). Malachi considered the same problems (Mal. 2:10-12). A third problem area addressed by both was abusing the poor and disadvantaged (Neh. 5:1-13; Mal. 3:5). The times of Nehemiah and the times of Malachi included drought, crop failure, and other economic problems (Neh. 5:1-4; Mal. 3:10ff). Each also dealt with the considerable numbers who were failing to pay their tithes (Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10-13; Mal. 3:8-10). *See, generally*, Peterson, David, *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox 1995), at 5ff.

These three parts are in each of the dialogues. That is not the only structure of the book, however, for the dialogues are set out in a chiasm,² much as we have seen in a number of writings in the Old Testament. In this chiasm, the first and sixth dialogues concern similar matters as do the second and fourth and the third and fourth. The chiasm is so well written that while dialogues 1, 3, 4, and 6 all have the **Part A, B** and **C** in that precise order, the parallel dialogues of 2 and 5 have their own order of **Part A, B**, and **C**, followed by an additional **Part A** and **B**.

Malachi's Chiasm



As we consider each dialogue, our approach will be the same. We will look at the dialogue in overview, consider each **Part A, B**, and **C**, and then apply a Point for Home.

THE DIALOGUES

Dialogue 1 – The People Question God's Love (1:2-5)

In this first dialogue, the people challenge God's love to them. Knowing from the rest of the book that the people suffered economic hardship and uncertainty gives

² As a reminder, a chiasm (named after the Greek letter *chi*, a letter that looks a bit like the English *X*) is a structure coming to a point in the middle then mirrored on the other side of the point.

a little more background to understand their whining about God’s love (or lack thereof).

Part A. The dialogue began with YHWH’s personal affirmation:

“I have loved you,” says the LORD.

The Hebrew word for “love” is *’hv* (אהב). It means “love,” but not simply a post-Shakespeare, gooey, emotional love. It means a devotion of choice. Within the word is the idea of chosen commitment to another. Within the Old Testament framework of God and his people, it is similar to a marriage of covenantal agreement. On Sinai, we see God setting the people out as the chosen recipient of his devotion and obligation, and the response of the people choosing God as the recipient of their devotion and obligation.

Part B. The people challenged God’s love, in essence saying there is no evidence for it:

But you say, “How have you loved us?”

This challenge is short, and can seem innocently inquisitive, but it is not. It shows an ingratitude that challenged the root of God’s behavior toward his people. The people lived in times of famine and pestilence, under the authority of foreign powers to which they had to pay taxes. Their challenge was not unlike that of Tevye’s in *Fiddler on the Roof* (although his is delivered as a humorous line while theirs is not). Tevye looks at his world and his problems and acknowledged it was the life of a chosen (loved) people, but he wonders if occasionally God couldn’t just choose someone else.³

“Love” in Action

Hebrew “love” (אהב) as a choice or action is well illustrated by the poetic passages that present parallel structures. In those passages, one phrase reasserts another, providing a deeper glimpse into the meaning of words. For example, Isaiah 1:23 rephrases “everyone *loves* a bribe” into everyone “*runs after* a gift.” In these lines, “loves” equates to “runs after.” Both are decisions and choices. Love is an action word. So also on other parallel structures where the second phrase is parallel to the first phrase in a way that extends the thought, we see the same idea. Consider Psalm 37:28, “For the LORD *loves* justice; he will *not forsake* his saints.” In the first phrase we have “love,” and the second phrase gives the idea of love being “not forsaking.” This is Hebrew love – a choice and deliberate action.

³ “TEVYE: I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?” *Fiddler on the Roof*, (1971), by Joseph Stein.

Part and parcel of this challenge is one of the scriptural roots of God’s choice/love. In Genesis 35, God instructs the twin Jacob to build an altar at Bethel. Jacob does so and God renames Jacob Israel, choosing to give him the blessings promised to Abraham:

“Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you (Gen. 35:10-12).

The other twin Esau did not get chosen or loved by God in this way. Esau rapidly began intermarrying and went to settle the land that became Edom (Gen. 36). Israel’s brother, Esau, was the progenitor of the Edomites. This is why the Israelites were instructed not to abhor an Edomite:

You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother (Dt. 23:7).

Yet to the people, being chosen over Esau/Edom seemed hollow. Edom was never sent into captivity like Judah. It was Judah who had received the dooming word of the Lord through Jeremiah:

I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant (Jer. 9:11).

These were some key reasons and background behind Judah’s challenge, “How have you loved us?”

Part C. God’s response goes right at the heart of the challenge. God begins by reminding the people of the historical reality of God’s love/choice:

Did God *really* “hate” Esau?

We need to be cautious reading 21st century “hate” into this passage, as if God had the human emotion toward Esau. The Hebrew word for “hate” used here is *sn’* (שנא). It doesn’t always convey a vitriolic hatred or even dislike. It can simply reference a choice for relationship. It is in this sense that Jacob’s wife Leah was “hated” (Gen. 29:31). The Hebrew word more closely associated with 21st century “hate” is *t’b* (תעב), which is typically translated “abhor.” God did not “abhor” Esau. In fact, he commanded Israel, “You shall not *abhor* (תעב) an Edomite, for he is your brother” (Dt. 23:7).

We can see this understanding in Paul as he used this Malachi passage in Romans 9:6-12. Paul wrote that God’s promise to Abraham did not fail. Israel was truly his progenitor of the promise, as God’s “choice.” God did not “choose” Esau as the line for the Messiah and Abrahamic blessings. In that sense Jacob was “loved” and Esau “hated.”

“Is not Esau Jacob's brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert” (Mal. 1:2-3).

Israel's mere existence was proof of God's love and choice. Jacob was chosen as the progenitor of Abraham's prophetic blessing, not Esau. As for the desolation that came to Judah, Malachi used the same language of Jeremiah to show that while the Edomites escaped Nebuchadnezzar's wrath, they would not escape God's judgment on their behavior. The prophetic judgment from Jeremiah is modified only slightly to apply to Edom/Esau. Instead of Jerusalem made “a heap of ruins,” God will “lay waste” to Edom's hill country. Instead of the cities of Judah becoming “a lair for the jackals,” it will be Edom that is “left to the jackals.”

Israel is told that earthly perception of time and reality is not necessarily God's. God sees the future as well as the past, and in time, it will unfold in accordance with God's vision. Israel expected all the ingredients added to the pot at the same time, but God was making the perfect sauce!

Point for Home: “*How have you loved us?*” (Mal. 1:2).

It is easy for us to get caught up in our moment, in the struggles of a difficult season, and to challenge God's love. Maybe we don't do it out loud, but we wonder in our heart, “Where is God? Why is he unjust? Why does he not handle things the way we think he should?”

This needs to give us a moment's pause. Our pledge of faith is a trust in God as God. Our role is not to challenge his timing or planning. After all, he is the chef. It's his sauce; we're just the ingredients! Our role is to seek to live right before him, confident that he works all things together for our good.

Dialogue 2 – The People Fail to Honor God (1:6-2:9)

In the first dialogue, the people challenge God's love to them. This second dialogue sets up a logical twist to the people's complaint. The truth is, as shown here, it is the *people who do not love God!* This second dialogue, like the reciprocal fifth dialogue in the chiasm, doubles up on the **Part B** and **Part C**.

Part A. The dialogue begins with God's affirmation that sons honor fathers and servants honor masters, but God, who is both Father and Lord, is not honored by the priests called to serve him:

A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name (Mal. 1:6).

Part B. The people reply to God’s complaint, questioning his accuracy:

But you say, “How have we despised your name?” (Mal. 1:6).

This question is not an innocent desire to find out errors so they could be fixed. Like each other question in these dialogues, this is a confrontational challenge. It is the disobedient child called on the carpet and responding, in essence, “I didn’t do anything wrong!” These people thought their behavior measured up. They were, after all, offering sacrifices as commanded by the law.

Part C. God’s response is blunt:

By offering polluted food upon my altar (Mal. 1:7).

Rather than have a more lengthy response, this dialogue has a further press by the people with a second **Part B**.

Part B(2). A proper reply for God’s people would be contrition and repentance, followed by greater obedience. Instead, the people push further with the defiant challenge:

But you say, “How have we polluted you?” (Mal. 1:8).

Part C(2). Here, God replies with much more detailed information about their “pollution sin,” followed by a rhetorical question that drives his point home. First, he details that the people have offered their defective animals in sacrifice, rather than their best. Leviticus set out over and over that sacrificial animals were to be those without blemish (see, *e.g.*, Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32, etc.). In spite of this clear instruction, the people were offering animals that were

The Comparison of YHWH and Israel

The language Malachi uses for God includes an amazing 24 references to God as the “LORD of hosts” in just 55 verses! The Hebrew word for hosts is *zb’* (צבא). It means “army” or “troops.” This usage in almost every other verse sets up an interesting contrast between God and Israel. This contrast is especially apparent in this passage, as the sin discussed indicated the lack of honor and appreciation the people had for God. Here YHWH is called, “the Great King,” yet Israel had not even a paltry king. The text indicates YHWH is the LORD of armies (hosts), something Israel did not have either. YHWH’s name would be feared among all nations; no nation feared Israel. The people thought so little of God, a sin magnified by the passage proclaiming his greatness.

blind, lame, and sick. God then sets out the rhetorical question:

Present that [the lame, blind, or sick livestock] to your governor, will he accept you or show you favor? (Mal. 1:8).

It seems rather absurd when put in such a clear way. These animals could not be given to the local governor, lest the giver be punished. Yet they would deem such sacrifices acceptable to the King of Kings! The people are more fearful of the local governor than the Lord of the Universe! God made it clear he did not delight in such sacrifices, but would rather someone shut the door on the temple.

God then sets out the heavenly view as the God who is beyond time. God knew and proclaimed his greater glory, not only compared to the local governor, but also compared to anything the Jews might contemplate:

From the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 1:11).

Enfolded in this proclamation is the prophetic promise that YHWH would have worshipers among all peoples and all nations (once the sauce was done!). Jerusalem and the temple would not be the only place where people were absolved of sin nor seeking the LORD. The people were quite nonplussed about God, beyond the rote of doing what they thought necessary to get by. Even as they were sacrificing, we read they would “snort” and complain “what a weariness this is” (Mal. 1:13). God did not bless these people; they were cursed!

Before leaving this dialogue, the priests are brought in for their role in the pollution. In so doing, God proclaims that the priests will receive back for their own sins in like measure. Because the priests failed to honor God, they are going to be dishonored. Because the priests allowed the polluted offerings, dung would be spread on their faces (figuratively!) The priests were part of the problem in the despising and dishonoring of God, and this would not be without effect:

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger⁴ of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says

⁴ This is one of several puns on the prophet’s name found in this book. “Malachi” means “my messenger.” This verse has Malachi as YHWH’s messenger correcting and reprimanding the priests for failing in their assigned tasks as YHWH’s messengers. For more puns, see dialogue 4 below.

the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people (Mal. 2:7-9).

Point for Home: “*You offer blind animals in sacrifice... You say, ‘What a weariness is this’*” (Mal. 1:8, 13).

This passage should shake us up... all of us. There is no one who really offers to the Lord what he or she should. None of us present our best, and all of us fall short of the glory properly due him. For us to think otherwise is for us to reduce God to something that fits into our brain, rather than to honor him as the God who is far beyond our thoughts and conceptions. The Biblical principal is that we need God’s revelation to get even a rudimentary understanding of him. Yet still he is of a nature and complexion that leaves us doing cartwheels in our minds trying to make sense of him.

Our real goal is not to have a full understanding of the Holy One. Our real goal is first to know and accept his Son as the restorer of the relationship with the divine. Jesus is the only morally spotless lamb that could ever be offered in our stead for our moral ineptitudes. Living in his substitutionary sacrifice for us is but the first step. All of God’s people are to try and walk in his ways, seeking to honor him as we see him and understand him. Relatedly, we are also to try and see and understand him more, so that we can grow in holiness, as he renews our minds.

May God awaken us if we ever offer him less than our best, simply because we do not see him visibly!

Dialogue 3 – The People’s Unfaithfulness (2:10-16)

In this third dialogue, we see God’s concern beyond how Israel was treating him. God was just as concerned about how Israel was treating each other. God was looking at their faithlessness as something more broad-based than simply a failure to honor his own holiness. Because God had called the people to a holy life, their faithlessness was also an offense against God.

Part A. This dialogue begins with an affirmation from the prophet, rather than from God:

Have we not all one Father? Has not God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Mal. 2:10).

The facts are laid out in two categories of faithlessness. First, the people have profaned the sanctuary of YHWH, instead marrying “the daughter of a foreign god” (Mal. 2:11). The people then weep and groan because God “no longer regards or accepts” their offerings with favor.

Part B. The people question this action of God, asking,

But you say, “Why does he not?”

The people did not understand why God would not appreciate their worship. They were, after all, offering sacrifices to YHWH, even as they had married “the daughter” of foreign gods.

Part C. God’s explanation sets out the sanctity of marriage as profoundly as any passage in the Bible. Marriage was never simply a decision and a commitment between two people. Holy Matrimony bears that name because marriage before God is a commitment before God that includes God. This becomes the core answer to the question of why God was not honoring the sacrifices with the favor of his hand:

Because the LORD was the witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? (Mal. 2:14-15).

God is involved in the affairs of man. He is not simply a Creator who has a selective plan for a few folks, leaving others to live as they choose. God’s involvement is on a personal level with everyone. The holy marriages of Israel also served another purpose — keeping a purity that would serve as the channel for the blessings of Abraham and the coming Messiah. From the godly marriages flow godly children!

And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring (Mal. 2:15).

This explanation has a call to action (a Point for Home!). The passage continues,

So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD. The God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless (Mal. 2:16).

Point for Home: “*Guard yourselves in your Spirit*” (Mal. 1:16).

In Malachi 2:16, note that the verse says “guard yourselves in your spirit” twice, once at the start and once at the end. That is an important message that all should take to heart. Sin and faithlessness are rarely the goal of anyone. They sneak in through cracks and crevices, taking root and growing into trees that cast a shadow over the whole of life. The one who takes this seriously, is one who follows the teaching of the prophet and guards himself or herself against any faithlessness and sin, not simply those relevant to marriage. This point is serious enough to make it to the crux of the chiasm. Dialogue three and four are the two center emphases of the structure of this book.

Dialogue 4 – The People Question God’s Faithfulness (2:17-3:5)

In this fourth dialogue, the people, who have just been indicted for a lack of faithlessness, are of the same culture (if not some of the same individuals) that are indicting God as faithless! This is addressed in the same structure as the prior dialogues.

Part A. The dialogue begins with the prophet’s affirmation:

You have wearied the LORD with your words (Mal. 2:17).

The people indicted God with their words. As recited in this dialogue, the people were not making these statements about God to his face. It was something they said to each other. The “weariness” means the complaining was ongoing for some time.

Part B. The people want to know precisely what about their words “wearied” the LORD:

But you say, “How have we wearied him?” (Mal. 2:17).

Part C. The answer is given first, followed by an explanation of the actions God would take. The people have been saying two related things. First, they accuse God of blessing people who do evil. Second, they question how can God be a just God in light of society’s apparent injustices. Malachi 2:17 continues,

But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

All of humanity are “people of the moment.” Our consciousness is limited in space and time to where we are at any particular moment. When we measure events, we do not readily see them through an eternal filter that rises beyond the moment of the day. God is different. God is over history, both past and present. If there is a seeming injustice, then it is a short-term problem that will get resolved in due course. It may not be in our timing, but it will be at the *right* time. This is the spaghetti sauce issue!

The answer that is expounded in **Part C** builds on this with a prophetic promise that God is doing something larger than the moment:

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD (Mal. 3:1-3).

There is another pun here on the author's name, “Malachi,” the Hebrew word for “my messenger.” There are actually two messengers referenced in the verse. The first is “my messenger,” who, like Malachi, is a prophet coming to prepare the way for YHWH to enter the temple and for the second messenger, the “messenger of the covenant.” Most Christian scholars through the ages have understood the first messenger to find fulfillment in John the Baptist and the second minister of the Covenant to be Christ.⁵

The Lord promised to “come into his temple,” and change the world. His coming was to bring judgment and purification. This passage is a bit more understandable if we compare the events around the first temple of Solomon with those of the second temple of Malachi's day. Solomon dedicated the temple with worship, moving in the Ark of the Covenant, prayers of dedication, and sacrifices (1 Ki. 8). After the priests had moved in the Ark, a cloud filled the temple, so thick that people could not stand in it. This cloud was evidence that the glory of the LORD filled the temple (1 Ki. 8:10-11). This is different from the rebuilt temple after the exile. Once the altar was completed, they offered sacrifices, but there was no physical manifestation of the LORD's presence (Ezr. 3:1-6). Once the temple was completed, the people sacrificed, worshipped, and celebrated, but again, there was no physical manifestation of the LORD and his glory (Ezr. 6). Since the inception

⁵ The New Testament combines this passage with Isaiah 40:3 and identifies John the Baptist as the messenger in Mat. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; and Lk. 7:27.

of the second temple, there is no Biblical record or reference to any type of physical manifestation of YHWH.

This adds shock and expectancy to the promise that “the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” We can begin to understand the prophetic depth of Malachi as we consider the messianic fulfillment of these passages. Luke 2 tells the story of Mary and Joseph bringing the Christ child to the temple for the first time. A righteous and devout man named Simeon was in the temple “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” The Holy Spirit had revealed to this man that he would see the Lord’s Christ before he died. When Simeon came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus,” then Simeon lifted Jesus up in his arms and blessed God saying,

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:29-32).

LORD Jesus came into the very temple that Malachi had prophesied about. Jesus, who as Malachi had foreseen, would both purify sinners and judge the rest of mankind, made an appearance in the temple that made the appearance in Solomon’s day pale in comparison. God’s timing was perfect. Jesus was the final justice maker, bringing salvation to those who would receive it and justice to those who would not.

Point for Home: “...*who can stand when he appears?*” (Mal. 3:2).

Malachi emphasized that when the messenger of the covenant appeared, none could stand. Like the refiner’s fire and the fullers’ soap he was coming with a mission. Paul seized on this point in Philippians 2 stressing that we still await the final coming of Jesus, before whom “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:10).

The day will come when this is a visible fact. In the meantime, there are believers, unbelievers, and those who live in the dark about Jesus, not knowing either belief or unbelief. Believers have a supreme opportunity no one else has. We, like Simeon, can choose to worship and adore the Lord now.

Dialogue 5 – The People Fail to Honor God (3:6-3:12)

In the chiasmic structure of Malachi, the fifth dialogue aligns with the second. Both are built around a theme of the people failing to honor God. Both also have the peculiar two level analysis of what we are calling **Part B** and **Part C**. In other

words, the fifth dialogue, like the second, has two questions/challenges each followed by a response.

Part A. The dialogue begins with YHWH's personal affirmation that he is unchanging in his character, and as such he has continued to uphold his faithfulness, even as the Israelites have habitually failed to follow the covenant for generations. Because God never wrote them off, he is able to proclaim,

Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 3:7).

The people turned aside from God. Their actions of disobedience and sin were the root of their journey in a different direction than the fellowship of an unchanging God. God could not change to walk the road of the people's sin:

For I the LORD do not change (Mal. 3:6).

This constancy would not allow God to walk with the people in sinful fellowship, but it also was the very reason God would walk with them if they would change their ways.

Part B(1). The people first probe for more information asking,

But you say, "How shall we return?" (Mal. 3:7).

The people wanted to know exactly where they were failing to honor their commitment to God.

Part C(1). God explains with a blunt conclusionary statement:

Will man rob⁶ God? Yet you are robbing me (Mal. 3:8).

The people were guilty of a serious offense. Robbery of anyone is serious, but robbery of God? Surely this would move a contrite person whose sin was thus exposed to respond with confession and contrition – but not so the Israelites. The dialogue repeats **Part B** and **Part C**.

⁶ The ESV uses "rob" to translate the Hebrew word *yqb'* (from the root *qb'*). This same root is used multiple times in this text also translated "robbing." The word puns off of Jacob's name, *y'qb*. [(י'קבע) and (יעקב)]. Jacob was a fraud and a liar, who cheated his brother out of his inheritance as well as his birthright (See, Gen. 27). It was much later in his life when he changed his walk and began serving and worshipping YHWH. YHWH then changed Jacob's name to Israel and blessed him with the Abrahamic promises.

Part B(2). The people challenge the claim they are thieves of God asking,

But you say, “How have we robbed you?” (Mal. 3:8).

What of God’s did the people take? In their minds, the things they had were theirs, not God’s!

Part C(2). God answers with directness:

In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you (Mal. 3:8-9).

The Jews were not giving their full tithe to God. The Hebrew for “tithe” (מעשר) means “a tenth part.” The tithe of the land, every tenth whether of seeds, fruits, or anything else productive, belonged to the Lord and was to be set apart for him (Lev. 27:30). Truthfully, *everything* belonged to the Lord. Psalm 50 explained that sacrifices were not the people meeting an otherwise unrequited need of God:

Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine (Ps. 50:7-12).

The tenth, as we discussed in the appendix to the previous lesson on Daniel, represented the entirety of a matter. In this sense, giving the tenth to God was recognition that God had all. The people, however, would not give their tenth, and as a result, were coming up short, without enough for their own needs.

Point for Home: *“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse... put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”* (Mal. 3:10).

God lays a challenge that is consistent with his character. He does not say, “pay me what you owe me, and I will write off your debt.” Instead, God offers more. He says, “contribute as you should, quit robbing me, and I will give you tons more!” This is a most unusual response to one who is being robbed. Can you imagine a street thug holding up someone and being told, “You are taking 100 dollars that is mine, but if you will not do that, I will give you 1,000 dollars!”?

The nature of God is not the nature of someone who wants to be left alone. God wants his people to walk in holiness, maturing and growing to be like him. This call is an individual call that applies across the board. It is not a burden; it is an opportunity and a window of blessings.

Dialogue 6 – The People Question God’s Justice (3:13-4:3)

In this final dialogue, the subject again returns to the people challenging God’s justice and right to be worshipped.

Part A. The dialogue begins with YHWH’s personal affront:

Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD (Mal. 3:13).

Part B. The people reply insinuating they have done no such thing!

But you say, “How have we spoken against you?” (Mal. 3:13).

Part C. God’s response comes with a full explanation. He begins by serving up the lines the people uttered, at least with their lives, if not their voices:

You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.’ (Mal. 3:14-15).

This is again, the complaint of the people seeing only the injustice around them, captured in their moment of time. Repeatedly, we have seen the people indicting God and his love because others seem to prosper more, because the Edomites were allowed to maintain a semblance of national heritage, because evildoers are blessed, and more. Yet, these same dialogues show that the people themselves are guilty of many wretched and horrid personal sins and shortcomings. They rob from God, fail to keep marital purity, make a sham of the sacrificial system, and more. There is a strong element of hypocrisy in these people who live like sinners and then complain that their life is not as smooth as other sinners.

Before closing, Malachi draws out a different group of people – those who fear YHWH. To these, life will draw a different close. For the ones who fear God, their name will be written in a book of remembrance and they will be spared the fate of the wicked. The wicked may seem to prosper, but a day is set when burning will reduce the arrogant and evildoers to stubble. For those who fear the LORD, there will be healing as the sun of righteousness rises, but on that day, the wicked will be ashes under the soles of the feet:

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 4:1-3).

Jesus – the Sun of Righteousness

Micah 4:2 promised that for those who feared the name of God, “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” Charles Wesley was not the first to see Jesus as fulfilling this prophecy. His third stanza in *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* recounts the passage: “Hail, the Sun of Righteousness, Light and life to all He brings, Risen with healing in His Wings.” The early church preachers and writers readily saw Jesus as this fulfillment. (See, Allison, Dale “Healing in the Wings of His Garment,” *The Word Leaps the Gap*, (Eerdmans 2008), at 132ff, references at footnote 31.) Allison also explains this as a likely reason the synoptic gospel writers included the detail of healings from touching “the fringe” of Jesus’ garment (Mt. 9:20; 14:36; Mk 6:56; Lk 8:44). The Greek for “hem” or “fringe” (κρασπεδον) referenced the tassels that Jews were commanded to wear in Numbers 15:37-41. The same Numbers passage (15:38), said that these tassels were to be attached to the כנף or “wings” of the garment. The synoptic writers confirm the literal nature of Christ having “healing in his wings!”

Point for Home: “Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them” (Mal. 3:16).

I have options in my life. Do I point my finger at others, frustrated by their lot in life and grumbling about mine? Do I live my life in the circle of things that matter to me, challenging anything that does not go my way? Do I really want *justice* from God?

I hope these questions are answered no, not only by my words, but also by my heart and the way I live. The best way to live the proper option in life is to fear the LORD. By this I do not mean a “run away and hide from him because he scares me” fear. I mean what the Scriptures mean. Our God is an awesome God who takes personal interest in our lives. He has gone to great lengths to educate us on holiness and on his sovereign majesty. He is not reducible to something I can carry under my arms or in a briefcase. He is God of hosts, God Almighty, God of history, Creator, Sustainer, God of

Promise and my Savior. That is something to fear in the sense of awe and astonishment.

Even as I fear God, I can trust that he will work in me to his good purposes.

CONCLUSION

As a final book in the Old Testament collection of Scriptures, Malachi delivers the final prophetic picture of Israel until the Messiah's birth. The road since God's calling of Abram in Genesis 12 has been at best bumpy, more generally, turbulent and tortuous. Scripture bears witness to a few spiritual highpoints along the way, but mostly we see an ugly picture of Israel's faithlessness and spiritual failure. As Malachi closed, he set up a need for the people to focus on purity and a renewed focus on the importance of following the Law/Torah/Divine Instruction of Moses:

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel (Mal. 4:4).

He followed that with a prophetic promise to send the prophet Elijah, whose name means "YHWH is my God."

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes (Mal. 4:5).

These preparations, simmering for several centuries, will produce a people with a Davidic bloodline to produce a Messiah. Then Malachi says the prophet Elijah (John the Baptist for some – Mat. 11:13-15, Elijah himself on the Mount of Transfiguration for others – Mat. 17:3) will appear, followed by the great and awesome day of the LORD! Malachi ends on a high note of expectation for the future. It's like God saying, "This isn't the final picture of my people or the consummation of my promise. One is still to come who ultimately changes this picture of God's people from what it has been into something beautiful. The Jewish Scriptures close, but the Final Word will come soon...once the sauce is ready!