

MALACHI the messenger

Malachi was the last of the Old Testament prophets. After he died there was an interlude of four hundred years with no direct revelation from God. Malachi's last message was that God's people must prepare for the appearing of their King.

Malachi's Hebrew name means "messenger", and his book revolves round that motif. From his comments we can see that he lived after the time of Haggai and Zechariah, because the Temple is rebuilt and the priests are offering the sacrifices commanded by the Law of Moses. But the prophet condemns the attitude of these holy men. They should have been God's messengers, carrying His word to the people, but instead they were only interested in making a profit for themselves.

The prophecy progresses as a dialogue. God makes a statement to the priests, and Malachi imagines their reply. For example, in chapter one God accuses the priests of despising Him. *"How have we despised you?"* they cry. *"Because"*, God replies, *"you have offered blind, lame and sick animals as sacrifices"*. Under the Law only a blemish-free offering was acceptable, because the sacrifices of lambs and goats pointed forward to the death of Jesus, who was to be morally perfect, and sin-free. But it was convenient to dispose of second grade animals as sacrifices, because they could not be sold for breeding. *"Try giving your Persian Governor a present of sick animals"*, says God. *"Will he be impressed? Then how do you think I feel? I am a great King, and my name will be feared among the nations. Cursed be the cheat who has a perfect ram in his flock, but substitutes a reject"* (see Malachi 1:8-14). It is a lesson we need to heed. God is a great King, and we must offer Him our whole heart, not the left-overs of our life.

But the priests were failing on another count, too. In the days before telephones and

e-mails, if you had important news to pass on, but could not travel yourself, you paid a messenger to take it for you. As the wise man Solomon wrote, *"Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the soul of his masters"*. Proverbs 25:13. Back in the time of Moses, God chose the descendants of Levi son of Jacob as the messengers to teach His people about His commandments:

"My covenant with him was one of life and peace", God said *"... true instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts."* Malachi 2:5-7

Sadly, the priests in Malachi's day were no longer running along the road with God's message. *"You have turned aside from the way"*, says the Lord. *"You have caused many to stumble by your instruction"*. v.8. Without the vital knowledge of right and wrong, the people were wandering like lost sheep – a problem we all face today, as our society also has no one teaching our children about God, and they turn to drink and drugs and crime.

However, God was going to act. He was going to send another messenger, He said, the Messenger of the Covenant. He would come suddenly to the Temple, and he would purify the sons of Levi, so that they would offer the proper offerings to God (Malachi 3:1-4). With the New Testament in hand, we can see the promised Messenger was Jesus, who faithfully taught the people the right way to live. He did indeed turn up unexpectedly in the Temple in Jerusalem. With a whip of rope he drove out the evil Scribes and Pharisees who were making big profits from sacrifices and money-changing

in the house of God. It was a final warning. Forty years later the Temple would be burned with fire, and the Law of Moses would come to an end.

Malachi's last chapter looks ahead, as the prophets always do, from the problems of his own day to a future Day of the Lord. Before that "*great and awesome day of the Lord*", Malachi said, God would send Elijah the prophet to prepare the people (Malachi 4:5, 6). These words bridge the Old and New Testaments. We know from the gospels that John the Baptist, the next prophet, would go in the same spirit as Elijah, that lonely figure who battled against apostasy in the time of the Kings. He would prepare Israel for the appearing of Jesus. He was Isaiah's voice in the wilderness, crying comfort to a people who were lost in the grip of sin.

But Malachi's last words look beyond the coming of Jesus in the first century, and the fiery judgment that fell on Jerusalem in AD 70. They speak of the future, too, when Jesus, God's messenger, will come back from heaven to judge the hearts of all men. Those who stubbornly refused to heed his message will be burned up like stubble in the harvest field (chapter 4:1). And those who have listened, and feared God, will greet the Lord Jesus with joy, like calves released from the stall after the dreary days of winter (v. 2). For them, says the prophet, the Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in his beams.

(All quotations are from the English Standard Version)

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