

Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation

The importance of affirming God's justice

Intro: This is our fifth lesson on Malachi and we have been seen that God speaks to Israel through Malachi during a time of spiritual stagnation and malaise.

In the first dialogue we see that Israel had lost their sense of God's love and thus began to question their special relationship to God.

In the second dialogue we saw that priests had lost their sense of God's greatness and the sense of privilege they had in serving in God's house and in being His messengers to the people.

In the third dialogue we see that the Israelite men had lost sight of God's purpose for a holy people and had divorced their wives and married idolatrous women.

Each of these conditions resulted in dishonor to God in speech, worship, and lifestyle.

Now let's consider the fourth dialogue (2:17-3:6)

The fourth dialogue (addressed to all Israel)

You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them," or, "Where is the God of justice?" "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear 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. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts. "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal. 2:17-3:6)

Thinking through the conversation

This time God's message is addressed once more to the whole nation; but especially to those who question the justice of the Lord.

Malachi, in keeping with the previous pattern, begins once more with a charge:

You have wearied the Lord with your words.

How could human be said to "weary' the omnipotent God?
And Israel once more questions how they could have done what the Lord suggests:

How have we wearied Him?

Once more God answers:

In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them," or, "Where is the God of justice?"

The first statement is a classic expression of cynicism. Imagine God's people making such a blasphemous statement, indicating that the person who sinned, who did evil, is really the one that God considers good and in whom He delights. Such a statement grows out of a bitter heart that feels cheated by God; and consequently blurts out such a statement in anger.

Of course the second statement is a more specific to the issue. The speakers wonder where this "just" God is that they have believed in and hoped in. He apparently does not exist.

How will God respond to such cynical statements about Him?

First God affirms that He will in come in justice.

Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear 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.

Malachi as well as Isaiah portray the Lord coming to his people and in each case they affirm a prophetic herald or messenger who prepares the way (Cf. Is. 40) for the Lord. His role is to prepare the people for his arrival by proclaiming a message of repentance. The prophecy was fulfilled by the role of John the Baptist. In fact, Mark identified his work with the prophecy of Malachi (Mk. 1:3). And Jesus explicitly stated that John was the fulfillment of this prophecy of Malachi:

And when the messengers of John had left, He began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' (Luke 7:24-27)

He is apparently also the one called "the messenger of the covenant" since his role is to prepare the way for the new covenant God will make with Israel. His arrival was considered "a delight" to the people of Israel since it indicated the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.

Interestingly then, John prepares the way for "the Lord," the God of Israel. Yet the one that John points to is "Jesus." He is "the Lord." God literally came to "His temple" in the person of Jesus Christ.

But God questions whether those who are seeking the God of justice are themselves prepared for His coming.

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. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

The coming of Lord will be a coming to judge His people. His effect on some of His people will be like that of a refiner or fuller.

A fuller washes clothes. A refiner purifies metals. Each is a figure of cleansing or purification from sin. The result of God's cleansing will be a people properly prepared to offer worship to God in righteousness like they did during the ancient times when God was truly respected by His priests. This idea should be compared with the way the people of Malachi's day were worshipping God. Thus God's coming will bring needed change to God's people. But note:

Some he will purify and prepare to faithfully serve Him; but the impenitent will face His wrath.

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts.

What is clear is that God expects His people to repent or perish. That of course was the message of Jesus: *Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate. I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:1-3)* Those who persisted in disobeying the Law would face the wrath of God for their sins. This was the message

that John proclaimed to the people, right out of Malachi's play book:

And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Mt. 3:10-12)

And for those who have charged that God is not the God of justice He had affirmed He was, God has a word for them.

For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal. 3:6)

God had not changed nor was there any need for Him to change. It was Israel that had changed in their attitude toward God and it was them who needed to change.

But God is not only a God of justice; but also a God of mercy. His delay in bringing justice serves to give Israel time to repent! Thus, God essentially says, "It is a good thing that I do not change, otherwise you would have already been destroyed."

And so those who complained about the lack of justice were missing an important dimension of God's nature. God was as just as He had ever been. He was not delighting in sinners; instead He was mercifully waiting for His people to repent lest they be destroyed by His coming.

Learning from the conversation

First it should build our faith to see God's plan unfold from Malachi's time. God's last word to Israel was a promise of His coming and its preparation by a prophetic forerunner. Through the gospels, we can see that Malachi's promise is fulfilled in John as the forerunner and Jesus as "the Lord of Israel."

Second as we go through the hardships of life, we may be tempted at times to question God's justice.

We may experience discipline when we expected comfort and prosperity.

We may be disappointed that some good person is going through hard times or even death, while unbelievers seem to escape punishment.

We too may bitterly complain that God seems to delight in the evil person and neglects to bless the righteous. When we think that we probably need to take a harder look at how righteous we really are.

We may not be as ready for this just God as we think. It may only be His mercy that is keeping us from being destroyed.

Third the remedy then for this spiritual stagnation is to constantly reflect upon the justice of God. He is perfectly just; and in His justice all evil will ultimately be punished.

Conclusion: If we are to meet the challenges of spiritual stagnation, we must not only keep affirming God's love for us, reflecting upon His greatness and the privilege of serving Him, but also recognizing that we possess the instruction of our great king and we possess the sacred duty to share His word with others. We must recognize His desire to preserve a holy people and do what we can to protect our faith against the erosion of unbelief. And we may add tonight the importance of affirming His justice, even when the world doesn't seem fair.

This week, when things happen that make you question God's fairness, remember Malachi's message and reaffirm your faith in God's justice.