

Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation

The importance of respecting God's promises

Intro: This is our sixth 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.

In the fourth dialogue we see that the people had lost faith in the justice of God and thus questioned the benefit of serving Him.

In the fifth dialogue we see that the people had failed to appreciate God's provision for them and thus neglected to give their tithes and offerings according to the Law.

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

Now let's listen in on the sixth dialogue (3:13-4:3)

The sixth dialogue (addressed to all Israel)

"Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?' "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts? 'So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also test God and escape.'"

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name. "And they will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will 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 will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the

*soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the Lord of hosts.
(Mal. 3:13-4:3)*

Thinking through the conversation

This time God's message is addressed once more to the whole nation. It begins with, as we have come to expect, a charge against Israel.

"Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord.

And Israel once more questions how they could have done what the Lord suggests:

"Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?'

Again oblivious to the sin working in them.

God shows the basis for His charge:

"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts? 'So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also test God and escape.'"

Through the centuries God's people have had occasion to question God's justice when they see the evil prosper and the righteous suffer. Again and again God's people have worked out a faithful answer. Think for example of Asaph's psalm #73 in which after reflecting upon the seeming prosperity of the wicked, he reverses his thinking and renews his commitment to God.

But these Israelites have apparently turned from faith to cynicism. Perhaps they are disappointed that the hopeful promises of the return from captivity have not been fulfilled; and they think that God has abandoned His plans.

So their accusation suggests a reversal of what should be: Instead of it being worthwhile to serve God, they affirm that it is empty or futile.

They have presumably obeyed God's laws and mourned their sin (perhaps a reference to the Day of Atonement). Yet it all appear to be in vain. It is the arrogant that God blesses, they think. They are even built up in spite of their repeated testing of God. They do all these things and get by scot free.

But this time something different occurs that has not occurred so far in the book. There is the response of the faithful.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name.

In every age, God also has His faithful people who do not allow their circumstances to alter their commitment to God. They exalt God's name and do not allow the seeming disparities in God's promises and actions to affect their faith negatively.

What they said to one another is not revealed; but we might imagine that they wonder, "Does God not know about us? Does He not see that we have not lost faith in Him?"

God answers, "Yes, I know who you are! I have not forgotten a single one of you;" and He now speaks with both groups in view.

God's response to both the fearful and the irreverent.

A day of judgment is coming in which God will punish the evildoer.

If it has seemed that wicked have prospered it is only a temporary condition:

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

Utter destruction is reserved for the wicked in the day of wrath. "Neither root nor branch" reminds them that the judgment is permanent. They will never arise to do evil again.

A day of judgment is coming in which God will reward the righteous.

First God acknowledges that in the day of wrath they will be acknowledged as His and will be spared when the wicked are punished.

"And they will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

But addition they will experience the exuberant joy of freedom and victory when God's kingdom is established.

But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the Lord of hosts.

(Malachi 3:13-4:3)

Like calves that are penned up skip about when release from the stall, so God's people will rejoice in their newfound freedom.

The sun's rays will not ignite fires that consume, but instead bring the healing light of God's truth and the healing warmth of God's love.

The righteous will be given victory over the wicked and will walk upon the ashes of the incinerated "chaff."

Consequently, Israel will once more distinguish between the righteous and the wicked.

Thus God's responds to the irreverent remarks of some who think it does not matter how one lives by reminding them that they will at last see by His judgment that it does matter how one lives!

Learning from the conversation

Take heart! God knows who His people are.

Life may at times give us reason to think that God's justice is not served in this world. The wicked may appear to prosper, and the righteous may appear to have been forgotten.

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness." (2 Timothy 2:19)

Never doubt that the wicked will receive their just punishment no matter how much they appear to get by with in this life.

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10)

Embrace the respect and faith that waits for God to fulfill His word when things seem impossible.

When the love of many of the people of Israel had grown cold, faithful people like Zacharias (whose name ironically means "remembered by God") and Elizabeth trusted in God and awaited the fulfillment of His promises. God announced to them that they would be the parents of the child who would fulfill Malachi's prophecy to prepare the way for the Lord.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; To give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:76-79)

Remember that God's promises through Malachi find their fulfillment in Jesus and His kingdom.

Zacharias' prophecy indicates that John is preparing the way for the Messiah. John clearly indicates that Jesus is the King God had promised.

As the result of His life, death, resurrection and reign:

There is the joy of freedom.

There is the light of truth.

There is the ultimate victory over evil.

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. We must affirm His justice, even when the world doesn't seem fair. And we must give Him his due in our contributions. And we must never lose our respect for God and our trust in the fulfillment of His promises.