

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

October 23, 2022 | *Compromising Faith, Deceiving Ourselves (Malachi)*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Describe a time you thought you were doing well spiritually only to discover some hidden issues were eroding your faith?

Read Malachi.

Ask God to help you identify which of the areas covered in Malachi are a struggle for you or pray that He will help you extend the logic of Malachi's message to something you struggle with.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The people had deceived themselves into thinking they were walking according to God's statutes, but they had compromised the basics of their faith.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

We often live more morally compromised than we realize. We have surrendered so much moral ground that we often fail to see how things we find normal are offensive to God.

MEDITATE

"They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17).

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces Malachi and his ministry context.

Q: *Although the people had returned to the land, they remained under foreign control. Why would this have been difficult for the people spiritually?*

Q: *Do you think it would have been more challenging to minister immediately after the return from exile (Haggai and Zechariah) or after some time had passed (Malachi)?*

Most scholars agree that Malachi ministered after the return from exile, during the mid- to late fifth century BC. The superscription to his book contains no historical or personal information (Malachi 1:1), but the use of the word “governor” (Malachi 1:8) is how provincial leaders were referred to during the Persian empire. Malachi’s concerns also overlap significantly with those in Ezra and Nehemiah. So, Malachi likely ministered one or two generations after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, when the people had been returned from exile for some time.

Malachi ministered during a time of spiritual indifference and compromise. Throughout the book, it is evident that his audience believed themselves to be in good standing with God, but they failed to see how they had exchanged true faithfulness for comfortable religion. Their historical context was partly to blame. The exiles had big expectations when they returned to the land. Isaiah declared the desert would bloom (Isaiah 35); Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–40); Ezekiel foresaw a new temple with flowing waters restoring the land (Ezekiel 47:1–12). But a generation after the return, the people had settled into a ho-hum existence. The pain of exile and the newness of the return had faded. They continued to live under the rule of foreign empires. They knew they were God’s covenant people, but they had grown accustomed to keeping Him on the margins of their existence. Malachi confronted their lackadaisical approach to God.

Q: *How does Malachi’s ministry context feel similar to today? How are you like his audience?*

Q: *What are the differences between Malachi’s religious context and ours?*

APPLICATION POINT – In many ways, Malachi’s audience seems like us. The promise of returning to the land was wonderful, but it fell short of their expectations. Perhaps there would be more to come, but in the meantime, the people had settled into the day-to-day monotony that characterized their lives. Christians today know Christ died for them, was raised again, and ascended into heaven while promising to return. And in the meantime, Christ’s followers are called to live faithfully for Him. But that was all a long time ago. We have been waiting for Christ to return for nearly two thousand years. The life we have in Christ is wonderful, but it is challenging to live

always in light of His imminent return. As with those returning from exile, it is easy to become wrapped up in our day-to-day existence and give a nod to God when it is convenient. If this feels familiar, Malachi was written for you.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Malachi has a unique prophetic style. He makes an accusation or state a claim and then anticipates an objection in return. Then he explains his original statement in further detail. In this way, he engages in a type of hypothetical dialogue with his audience. Even with this recognizable structure, there is some variation in how studies of Malachi are organized. This study will examine seven of Malachi's conversations.

CONVERSATION 1: HOW HAS GOD LOVED US?

CONVERSATION 2: HOW HAVE WE DESPISED GOD'S NAME?

CONVERSATION 3: WHY DOES GOD NOT REGARD OUR OFFERING?

CONVERSATION 4: HOW HAVE WE WEARIED GOD?

CONVERSATION 5: HOW CAN WE RETURN TO GOD?

CONVERSATION 6: HOW HAVE WE ROBBED GOD?

CONVERSATION 7: HOW HAVE WE SPOKEN AGAINST GOD?

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each of Malachi's conversations and draw applications from them for modern audiences.

CONVERSATION 1. HOW HAS GOD LOVED US?

▣ MALACHI 1:2-5

Q: *Who were Jacob and Esau?*

Q: *Why would the people have doubted God's love for them?*

The first conversation requires us to fill in some blanks. It begins with God declaring His love for Israel. Most of these initial declarations are accusations against the people. We cannot be certain whether this first declaration simply differs from the rest or if the declaration of God's love is made in response to the people's apathy toward Him. Whichever the case, the objection Malachi presupposed on behalf of the people was to question how God had loved them. They could not see it. They were disappointed in their lack of prosperity and the slow-moving promises of God.

God responded by pointing to His election of Jacob, Israel's patriarch, over his brother, Esau (Malachi 1:2). This references Genesis 25:19–26. God's election is the perfect demonstration of His love for Israel. Israel was allowed to return from exile and rebuild their land. Such an opportunity would not be given to the Edomites because God had not elected them to become His covenant people. Instead, God would only frustrate the Edomites' efforts to rebuild. God worked for Israel but against Esau. Rather than languishing in their own self-pity and doubting God's love for them, the people should have looked at what God had done for them and recognized the evidence of His love.

Q: *How is God's love evident in your life?*

Q: *Why is election a more certain indication of God's love than our current circumstances?*

APPLICATION POINT – Malachi's opening dialogue challenges some of our basic assumptions about life. We assume we are unbiased in evaluating how our current circumstances reflect God's attitude toward us. Compared to the Edomites, God's love for Israel should have been obvious, but they could not see it. Our tendency to self-pity and self-righteousness creates a sense of entitlement within us, and when that sense of entitlement is not met, we think God no longer loves us. Nothing could be further from the truth! We assume that our current circumstances are a better indication of God's love than His election. The Israelites looked at their situation and assumed God did not love them, but they were looking in the wrong place for His love. They should have looked to God's past commitment to them. The same is true for Christians today. We should never allow our current situation to make us question God's love for His elect people. Finally, we assume God cannot use discipline to transform us into what we are called to be. That is why challenges and difficulties in our lives can sometimes make us question God's love for us, even if these challenges emerge from our own sin. God can use the things we consider most unfortunate and undesirable to transform us into the image of His faithful Son (2 Corinthians 3:18; Hebrews 12:7–11).

CONVERSATION 2. HOW HAVE WE DESPISED GOD'S NAME?

☐ MALACHI 1:6–2:9

- Q: *What group is this second conversation focused upon?*
- Q: *Why would offering unauthorized sacrifices jeopardize God's reputation among the nations (Malachi 1:11)?*

The second accusation and anticipated objection do not explicitly identify the spiritual issues Malachi addressed. He accused the people of despising God's name, and they objected by asking how (Malachi 1:6). Malachi then explained his reasoning, which focuses on the failure of the Levites to adhere to the sacrificial guidelines given in the Mosaic law. Rather than offering God an unblemished sacrifice, the priests sacrificed animals with obvious deformities, subverting the entire purpose of the sacrificial system. Sacrifices were intended to appease God's wrath by offering an animal as a substitute for sinful humanity. Sacrifices also revealed the esteem the one making the sacrifice held for God. By offering lame animals as sacrifices, the priests set the whole system in reverse. They did not esteem God much at all, so they offered a lame sacrifice. Their sacrifice revealed the lack of esteem they held for Him and incited His wrath even more. Instead of an act of worship securing the blessing of God, the sacrifices were an embarrassment and brought curses upon the Levites (Malachi 2:2–3). All of this was played out among the nations. Israel's sacrifices should have revealed God's glory among the nations. Instead, His glory would be revealed in His judgment against this wayward people.

- Q: *Christians confess the centrality of God for all of reality. What causes us to treat Him as though He were peripheral in our lives?*
- Q: *Christians do not offer sacrifices as in the Old Testament, but that does not mean our behavior has no parallel to theirs. How do we dishonor God by offering less of ourselves than He deserves?*

APPLICATION POINT – Paul commanded us to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). By “living sacrifice,” he meant living in complete submission and devotion to God's will. We give up living for ourselves. We allow God to define who we are and how we live. To the degree that we are

unsuccessful in carrying out Paul's command, we are like the Levites Malachi described. We are telling God to be satisfied with less than He is worthy of. We do this because we do not esteem God to the degree that we ought. We have pushed Him aside to make room for ourselves. We have failed to grasp the significance of living in His presence. We might think pushing Him aside is the only way to secure our happiness, but we are robbing God of His worship and thus robbing ourselves of true joy.

CONVERSATION 3. WHY DOES GOD NOT REGARD OUR OFFERING?

■ MALACHI 2:10-16

Q: *What did the people's relationship with God and the relationship between husbands and wives have in common?*

Q: *Why were foreign marriages a persistent problem for God's people in the Old Testament?*

In his third hypothetical dispute, Malachi declared that God would no longer accept offerings from the people (Malachi 2:13). His hypothetical opponents asked, "Why not?" in Malachi 2:14, but he had been building his case against them since 2:10. God would no longer accept their sacrifices because they had failed to maintain faithfulness to their covenant relationships. The people's common ancestry and mutual covenant with God meant they should have been committed to one another, but instead they had been faithless (Malachi 2:10). Their faithlessness to one another was matched by their faithlessness to God (Malachi 2:11). Malachi said they had married the daughter of a foreign god, a reference to their intermarriage with people who worshipped gods other than the God of Israel. Such action naturally compromised the people's faithfulness to God. Finally, Malachi accused them of being faithless to the "wife of your youth" (Malachi 2:14). Marriage is a covenant relationship between husband and wife. It parallels the relationship between God and His people. Certain men were divorcing their wives to marry foreign women. This final accusation ties all three together. These men were marrying foreign women, which introduced foreign gods among the people, which enticed everyone else to sin. How could God accept the offerings of a people so unfaithful to their covenant commitments?

Q: *How does your faithfulness to family testify to your faithfulness to God?*

Q: *What other relationships could reflect your covenant relationship with God?*

APPLICATION POINT – There are certain relationships that reflect our relationship with God. Paul utilized the same idea in Ephesians 5:22–6:9. If we are incapable of being faithful in these relationships, we will struggle to be faithful to God as well. If you struggle to love and remain faithful to your spouse, you will struggle to remain faithful to God. If parents and children cannot mirror the love between God and His covenant people, they will also struggle to retain a faithful relationship with God. The bondservant-master relationship is not exactly like a manager-worker relationship, but to the degree they are similar, they reflect your faithfulness to God. If you struggle to maintain your human relationships, you will struggle to maintain your relationship with God.

CONVERSATION 4. HOW HAVE WE WEARIED GOD?

■ MALACHI 2:17–3:5

Q: *Why would the people say, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord”?*

Q: *What is the implication of Malachi 3:1-5 for the second question in Malachi 2:17?*

Malachi’s fourth dialogue begins with an accusation that the people had wearied God. When his hypothetical opponents challenged this assertion, Malachi replied, “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?’” How does Malachi’s response pertain to the accusation? The key is found in the words Malachi put in the mouths of the people, which were excuses to disregard God’s commands. The people accused God of approving of those who did evil by allowing them to prosper. If He allowed the wicked to prosper, then “where is the God of justice?” The people’s misunderstanding of God became their license to disobey Him themselves. If God allowed the evildoer to prosper, why not do evil and prosper?

Malachi responded by saying the people were wrong to assume God would allow evildoers to continue in prosperity. God was preparing to send “the messenger of the covenant” (Malachi 3:1). This messenger was

coming in judgment. Like a refiner who removes impurities from metals, the messenger would remove evildoers from among God's people (Malachi 3:2-4).

♀: *What are the other logical flaws in the people's reasoning?*

♀: *How else do people try to excuse sin?*

APPLICATION POINT – People are often at their most creative when they attempt to justify their behavior. The people Malachi addressed are a perfect example. They blamed God for their sinful behavior and then questioned His commitment to justice! We can never rationalize sin by thinking that God is unjust or that He will let us get away with it. Such an excuse even reveals the problem with our obedience. If we take this attitude, when we obey, we are not doing it from a desire to please God but in an attempt to earn His favor. When you get one part of the gospel wrong, you will eventually get everything wrong.

CONVERSATION 5. HOW CAN WE RETURN TO GOD?

■ MALACHI 3:6-7

♀: *Why is God's unchanging nature crucial to understanding the people's repentance?*

♀: *Why would the people question whether they could return to God?*

Malachi's fifth conversation is the shortest. Many scholars do not treat these verses as a separate unit, but they do contain the assertion-hypothetical objection pattern evident in the other sections, even if the conversation is abbreviated. Malachi's call for the people to return to God sets this conversation in motion (Malachi 3:7). The people could not understand how they could return to God after all they had done. Malachi tied God's commitment to His people to His unchanging nature. If God changed, the people would have met their demise long ago, but God was committed to Judah. Nothing would change this. Not even the people's sin against Him.

Q: *How does God’s faithfulness give you confidence to approach Him in repentance?*

Q: *Have you ever felt as though God would not forgive you?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our unfaithfulness does not change the faithfulness of God. Our forgiveness does not rest on us getting back to where we need to be. Forgiveness rests in God always remaining where He is. He is always ready to forgive repentant sinners. The people Malachi addressed were audacious sinners, but if they returned, God was ready to forgive even them. God has not moved. He is ready to receive you as well.

CONVERSATION 6. HOW HAVE WE ROBBED GOD?

■ MALACHI 3:8-12

Q: *How does Malachi use the word “rob” differently than its typical use? What effect does this have for his oracle?*

Q: *In withholding their tithes and contributions, how were the people actually robbing themselves as well as God?*

In his sixth conversation, Malachi declared that the people had robbed God (Malachi 3:8). His accusation was ingenious because it would naturally be regarded by the people as false. As bad as they were spiritually, they were not stealing money from the temple treasury. Malachi’s accusation leads to the anticipated “how have we robbed God?”, to which Malachi responded by arguing they had not robbed Him by taking money out of the temple treasury but by keeping out what should rightfully go into it. The people were failing to tithe and make offerings from their possessions. Although this is not technically robbing, the result is the same. They would be cursed by God just as if they had stolen money from the temple.

The worst thing about the people’s unfaithfulness in giving to God is that they were only harming themselves. God’s storehouses are infinite. If the people would be faithful to give, God would be faithful to provide abundantly for them (Malachi 3:10). He even invited the people to put His generosity to the test.

♀: *In what ways are you holding back your financial resources from God? What about your service? Your talents?*

♀: *How have you seen the principle in Malachi 3:10, that God will bless faithful givers abundantly, at work?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus taught that there is a direct link between what we spend our money on and what we treasure most (Matthew 13:44–46). Malachi exhorts us to invest our resources and talents in the things of God. It will not diminish our net worth, but it will clarify what we think is worth most. Furthermore, we cannot overlook Malachi’s claim that God will provide for those who give faithfully.

CONVERSATION 7. HOW HAVE WE SPOKEN AGAINST GOD?

■ MALACHI 3:13–4:3

Malachi’s final conversation is like the fourth. The people saw the arrogant and evildoers prospering and escaping God’s judgment. Rather than using this as an excuse to engage in sinful activity, as in the fourth conversation, the people were on the verge of giving up their faith. What was the point of being faithful to God if the wicked prospered? Malachi treated this as a word spoken against God (Malachi 3:13).

Malachi’s response is similar to what he declared in the fourth conversation. Although the wicked may prosper and get away with their sin for a time, a day is coming during which God will recognize the righteous and hold every evildoer accountable. Malachi referred to a “book of remembrance,” written of those who fear God and esteem His name (Malachi 3:16). The wicked will meet their judgment on the day of the Lord (Malachi 4:1–3)

APPLICATION POINT – It is often hard to maintain our faith when we struggle to see God at work while the wicked prosper. We are easily caught up by the monotony of our daily struggle and act as though God were not there. Our solution is the same one Malachi pointed to during His time. We have to look to the future and see what God will do for those who maintain their faith in Him. The key to understanding our present reality is to view it through the lens of the future God has prepared. When we do that, we will see that today’s monotony is in fact the ground upon which the battle for human souls is taking place. Will we be found faithful at the day of the Lord or not?

NEXT STEPS

The people addressed by Malachi struggled to see how God was active in their world. So, they were often spiritually indifferent and compromised their faith when convenience dictated. The same can often be true for us. We do not fully appreciate the things God is doing to restrain evil and hold the world together. We need a greater appreciation for how He is at work in the world today.

For the next month, commit to completing one of these prompts each day:

Today, God protected me when ...

Today, God gave me comfort when ...

Today, I was reminded of the importance of gospel when ...

Today, I was encouraged when ...

You may wish to develop additional prompts. The key is to see how God is at work in ways we often take for granted.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, forgive me for becoming accustomed to going through life with you in the margins. You are the center of my life and the rest of creation.

Jesus, may the wonder of the gospel never fade for me. Help me to always keep you at the forefront of my thoughts.

God, help me to live in light of Christ's return and His kingdom.

Father, I praise your unchanging nature. I have hope because you refused to give up on lost sinners.

