# Malachi

**Background:** Around year 425-450 BC. Israel has returned from captivity in Babylon, rebuilt the city walls, and rededicated themselves to God. But after some time had passed, their faith wavered and doubts about God’s love and presence have festered. If the Babylonian captivity was a judgment on Israel for straying from God’s commands and worshipping other gods, then they have fallen back into these sinful patterns.

Enter the prophet Malachi who reminds them they are God’s chosen people and that he has done mighty works and given gracious promises. Malachi’s book follows a question-and-answer format where God makes a claim followed by Israel’s disagreement with the claim and concluding with God’s response citing evidence. This happens six times in Malachi. The book opens with God’s pronouncement of his love and ends with a promise of great joy for the faithful remnant that honors him. Of critical importance is that of a coming messenger who will be like Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord and a coming Messiah who will prepare the world for judgment.

This is the message for God’s people, preparing them for 450 years of silence. A silence that will be broken by John the Baptist’s pronouncement of the coming Messiah.

Malachi 1:1-5.

**What’s going on in this passage?** The dialogue between God and Israel’s priestly leaders begins with God’s claim that he’s always loved them. Let this statement sink in and set the tone for the entire book. If you need to, come back to this opening and be reassured by this clear declaration of God. Israel’s response (how have you loved us?) should give you a clue that their relationship with God is not healthy. To show how God has loved them, God picks an example that sounds rather insensitive to our modern ears—he compares them to Esau/Edom. But for the Jewish people who had just returned from captivity in Babylon and were surrounded on all sides by potential enemies, this was a rather apt example. (Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac. In a bit if trickery, Esau ended up selling his inheritance to his brother Jacob. The Edomites were Esau’s descendants and the Jews were Jacob’s descendants).

The Edomites had a long history of animosity toward the Jewish people. Three examples can be drawn from history. (1) In the book of Ester, the man named Haman was an Edomite who wanted to eliminate the Jews completely. (2) Another descendent of Esau was Antiochus IV Epiphanies, the king of the Seleucid Empire who, in 168 BC, entered the Jewish temple, slaughtered a pig on the alter, and spattered its blood over the interior of the temple, desecrating it. The cleansing of the temple is still celebrated by Jews annually at Hanukkah. (3) King Herod, an Edomite, ordered the slaughter of baby boys in response to his fear and jealousy that a new king of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem. The point is not that every Edomite wanted to exterminate the Jews. God is trying to remind Israel’s priests that they have God’s blessing and they carry God’s covenant promises, not the Edomites. In turn, they should rejoice and live as though God’s love is with them.

**Group Questions:**

1. Relegating an entire people group as being forever hated (or not chosen) by God is a tough saying in the Bible. As you consider the context of this passage, the Bible’s periodic usage of hyperbolic language, and God’s character as revealed throughout scripture and especially in Jesus, how does this section sit with you?
2. We can sympathize with the Israelites complaints—they wanted to see and know the constant love and presence of God. Such a plan was, of course, underway. But it would be another ~400 years before, in the fullness of time, Jesus would come to answer these prayers. Have you ever prayed for something in which God’s answer wasn’t “yes” or “no,” but a rather frustrating version of “not yet”?
3. Despite repeated rebellion against God’s commands, the Jews remain his chosen people—just as you and I have been chosen since the foundations of the world, and in spite of our repeated failings. My, how he loves us. When was a time in your life that this undeserved love overwhelmed you?
4. What's one area where you struggle to believe God loves you?
5. Israel has forgotten what God has done for them. A recurring theme in the Bible is to remember the past—to strive not to forget our history and what God has done. The Old Testament feasts and holidays were often meant to celebrate historical events and encourage the retelling of those stories to pass them along to the next generation. Is it any wonder that marriage counselors have both spouses recount the story of how they met? A simple retelling of the story can often help reset the relationship. Photo albums are another great method for celebrating the past. Can you remember how you felt when you first understood God’s love for you? What was it like and how old were you?

Malachi 1:6-14.

**What’s going on in this passage?** God is being disrespected in many ways but Israel’s priests have difficulty seeing it. To demonstrate his point, God provides examples of halfhearted sacrifices (even sacrifices that were stolen!) that work to insult God instead of honor him. Earlier books in the Old Testament (e.g., Leviticus) explicitly request unblemished animals for sacrifice. A sacrifice that is without defect is an allusion to the future sacrifice of the sinless Jesus. Israel’s response in v13 (it’s too hard to serve the Lord) reveals a continued disrespect for God as being the one who is above all holy and should be revered. It also reveals their hypocrisy because, as God points out, the priests would never dishonor a local official in the same way as they’re doing to him.

Can you imagine inviting a foreign dignitary over to your house for dinner and then serving them last week’s leftovers? For the local canned food drive, would you donate only the cans that were past their expiration date? This is analogous to what Israel was doing with their sacrifices to God, as if he wouldn’t notice or care. In the end, God was getting less than he deserved. (Meanwhile God was working on a plan that would result in the most perfect and honoring sacrifice imaginable.)

**Group Questions:**

1. As you reflect on your personal relationship with God, where are you most susceptible to giving half-hearted devotion? Examples: your time, your finances, Bible study, prayer, relationships, your body, time spent in church (singing; sermon reflection), outreach to non-Christians, fellowship with other Christians, serving others, etc.
2. Which areas represent your strongest connection to God? Where does God tend to speak to you?
3. Do you feel like God is calling you to give back (sacrifice) in a new or different way? If not now, has God ever laid a burden on your heart that involved sacrifice?
4. Verse 10 talks about worshiping in vain and one could make the connection here to the 3rd commandment. Taking the Lord’s name in vain is like hollowing out its meaning or removing the honor deserving of our Lord and Savior. God would rather have no worship “shut the doors” than to have hollow worship. What are some reminders or tips that you would give to help others with a more whole-hearted devotional time? In other words, what works well for you?
5. Notice how Malachi looks back to God’s previous actions and also forward to God’s future promises. For example, it hints that worship for God won’t be confined to the nation of Israel but will spread throughout the whole earth and it will be a pure offering (v11). Paul picks up this theme in Romans 12:1-2 as offering “our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.” How does this idea motivate you to be less conformed to this world and more transformed by the Holy Spirit?

Malachi 2:1-9

**What’s going on in this passage?** God continues his harsh words for Israel’s priests because of their contempt for him and his commandments. The people were just going through the motions of their religious rituals but these acts weren’t transforming their hearts. To demonstrate his point, God compares the current priests with their Levite ancestors who greatly revered and honored him. The Levites stood in awe of God’s name instead of disrespecting it. The fruit of this behavior was not only a deep relationship with God but a life that persuaded others to turn away from sin. This contrasts with the current priests who aren’t following God, causing many others to stumble into sin.

**Group Questions:**

1. Leaders come in all shapes and sizes. There are quiet leaders whose impact can be enormous though few words are expressed. There are those who lead by example while others tend to lead through verbal or written communication. But let’s face it, we’re all leaders in some way. A bad leader can cause many to stumble. Where there is great power, there is great responsibility. God holds leaders, especially spiritual leaders, to a higher account. Unfortunately, the church is no stranger to bad leaders, and worse still, the wolf in sheep’s clothing. How have you been impacted by bad leaders, particularly bad *spiritual* leaders? What lessons did you learn about what not to do?
2. To show the Jewish priests how they’ve gone astray, God (once again) reminds them of the past. The Levites of older days had a relationship of life, peace, and reverence. On your spiritual journey, how have you been impacted by good spiritual leaders?
3. What are some attributes of good leadership you see described in this passage?
4. As Malachi explains, one of the job requirements of a leader is to teach the truth (v.6). Another Old Testament prophet, Micah, would add that good leaders act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. As you survey these (and other) leadership skills, what are the areas in which you feel that God has uniquely gifted you with? And what areas do feel called to make improvements?
5. Leadership can oftentimes be challenging, complex and overwhelming. How might you encourage and spur on the leadership of our church to remain strong in their faith and persevere in doing good?

Malachi 2:10-16.

**What’s going on in this passage?** The dialogue moves from God’s covenant with the priests to the covenant of marriage. Not only are some Jewish men marrying women who do not worship God, but others are cheating on their Jewish wives, dishonoring their marriage vows. The men who are doing this know better, but they are blinded by temptations. The fact that their worship is no longer accepted (v.14) is a clue to they’re internally struggling to live with one foot in the world and one foot with the divine. To be a member of the Jewish people meant to be set apart, both in terms of the God they worshipped and in the way they acted (including their family life). In both examples, faithful devotion to God and to spouse was the covenantal vow. The marriage vows, when honored, served as the best protection for the spouse and the children against exploitation and abandonment. The gold standard is a lifelong devotion to covenantal promises.

**Group Questions:**

1. The theme of marriage permeates the Bible. In the Old Testament, God makes several covenants with his chosen people. In the New Testament, there are allusions to the future spiritual wedding of Jesus to his church. What are the characteristics that you think make for a healthy marriage? And how should we apply those in our relationship to God?
2. Some marriages falter because of infidelity. Indeed, the most common failing we see throughout the Bible, and if we’re honest, in our own spiritual lives, is unfaithfulness to God. We don’t keep our side of the covenant. The dissolution of marriage is called divorce and God detests it because he knows how awful it is. But God doesn’t hate divorced people. And sometimes divorce is necessary. One could argue that the book of Revelation is a divorce decree to the nation of Israel as God seeks to make a new covenant with those who accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. How has divorce impacted your life?
3. God’s advice is to “guard your heart” and it’s listed twice in this chapter. What do you think is meant by this phrase?
4. As you reread verse 2:15, what do you find unique about the marriage relationship?
5. In the Old Testament, God gives numerous “second chances” for repentance and recommitment. In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles encourage people to repent, to forgive, to turn away from evil, and turn toward God’s promises. As you ponder the character of God, particularly his patience and longsuffering, how does that inspire you in your own relationships? (If you feel like you’re falling short here, then seek the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. Let us not be so bold as to assume we can have successful relationships on our own, without the Holy Spirit’s help.)

Malachi 2:17-3:5.

**What’s going on in this passage?**God discloses a glimpse of his restoration plan. First, a messenger will prepare the way. In ancient times, before a king entered a land, it was customary to have a delegate announce that the king was coming. Among other reasons, this gave the people some time to prepare themselves and their households for the king’s presence. In the New Testament, John the Baptist was such a messenger who proclaimed that the Messiah was coming and that the people should prepare themselves through repentance and baptism.

Then, the God the Jews so earnestly sought, will walk the earth and enter his temple. This person is called the Lord and the messenger of the covenant. These are references to the coming Messiah who also would be God in the flesh because he would visit his temple (see also Zech 8:3 and Ezek 43:1-5). This person will purify and bring judgment. The New Testament makes the clear connection that this person was Jesus of Nazareth.

**Group Questions:**

1. Upon learning of the messenger that will prepare the way of the Lord, the Jewish leaders’ next question is fascinating. Instead of asking when this will take place or how it could be that the all-powerful God would walk the earth, they ask a more pressing question—who can survive his appearance? What does this question reveal about their concerns and about the nature of God’s holiness?
2. Consider the moments in the Bible where God’s holiness is revealed (e.g., Isaiah 6, Moses in the cleft of the rock seeing God’s glory pass by, the Transfiguration, etc.). What is it about God’s holiness that is both awe-inspiring and utterly frightening?
3. The Jews were a people set apart for God. They were to think, act, speak, and worship differently than their non-Jewish neighbors. This included laws of cleanliness and purification—a major focus of the Jewish leaders and some of them made it an obsession. Then comes Jesus, the sinless son of God. He was clean himself and had the power to make others clean through curing diseases, physical healings, driving out unclean spirits, fixing blood issues, touching and resurrecting dead bodies, etc. How does the life and work of Jesus (with a specific focus on cleanliness) hint at what it’s like to be accepted into the kingdom of God?
4. It’s not just the outward appearance that matters. Repeatedly, Jesus hones in on the inner thought life of a person. He wants the person’s heart to be cleansed. Consider the work of the silversmith who removes the lead and other metals from the silver through a process called refinement. This process may take several attempts before they’re left with pure silver. Like the work of the silversmith, Jesus can see to the depths of our character and wants to refine us. What are the areas in your heart, or in your thought life, that need to be refined and surrendered to God?
5. The topic of judgment can be hard to swallow sometimes. We yearn for it when we see terrible injustices and we despise it when it implicates us. What is your reaction to the topic of judgment?

Malachi 3:6-18.

**What’s going on in this passage?** Many people just want clear and simple directions. Well, the first two sentences of this section have it: God says he does not change and the people should return to him. The reward is blessing (v.12). If this was a map, then no-nonsense statements like this would be the compass. Next, is to put this into practice, which for the Jews meant following God’s commands from the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Among those commands was to donate a tenth of their earnings to the Temple which was the sole source of income for the entire tribe of Levi, who were responsible for running the sacrificial system and all operations surrounding the Temple and festivals.

Despite God’s insistence that Israel will be blessed if they follow his commands, the people are cynical. They argue that it is vain to serve God and that they’d be better off not tithing or praying to God. They go so far as to praise the self-centeredness of the arrogant and evil person (v.15). Perhaps this is where Malachi’s story hits its lowest point. This was clearly too far for some Jews, who recognized the folly of running from God and worshipping idols (like greed). A group of people who truly honored God gathered together to praise and serve him. God sees this and calls them righteous and his treasured possession.

**Group Questions:**

1. God is the creator of all things and the giver of all gifts. There’s nothing we have or that we can accomplish that can’t be credited to his goodness. And yet we, just like the Israelites of Malachi’s day, hold back tithes and offerings, giving less than what God commanded. Discuss your giving strategy (money, gifts, time, talents) and how it has evolved over time.
2. The Israelites reveal their ambivalence when they ask in verse 14: “What do we gain by obeying his commands or trying to show God that we’re sorry for our sins?” Have you ever felt this way?
3. What about when you see success and prosperity for those who don’t believe in Jesus? Does it make it harder for you to tithe or give up your Sunday mornings?
4. Times were tough in Malachi’s day and while it may seem like the whole nation went astray, there’s always a remnant of true believers. Malachi 3:16-18 describes how a small group of those who revered God banded together in fellowship to honor God by remembering his deeds and promises. We all need the fellowship and encouragement of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. How are you surrounding yourself with peers, mentors, and mentees in the faith?
5. Those who serve God can be considered righteous (thanks to Jesus) and his treasured possession. Do you find this easy or hard to remember?

Malachi 4:1-6.

**What’s going on in this passage?**  Whenever you see the “day of the Lord” in the Bible, it’s referring to judgment. There are “minor” versions of the day of the Lord in which judgment is on a particular nation and then there is the great day of the Lord which refers to the final judgment. Malachi 4 is referring to the final judgment in which the righteous will be separated from the wicked. Those who serve God will be separated from those who do not. Malachi has more to say about the consequences for the wicked, including several allusions to fire (e.g., burning, ablaze, ashes, destruction). Essentially this is the direct answer to the questions posed in 3:14-15. But for those who serve God, there will be joy, freedom, health, righteousness, and light because we’re God’s treasured possession.

**Group Questions:**

1. The book of Malachi started with the people questioning God’s love (Mal 1:2). Fast forward to Mal 2:17 and 3:15 and the people question God’s justice. If love and justice are two of God’s attributes, how can they coexist? (Consider how a parent uses love and justice in raising children.)
2. What is God’s answer to whether evil will have the final say?
3. The great day of God’s judgment is coming. What emotions does this stir up for you? Does this future promise give you joy, does it strike fear, produce assurance, create thoughts of regret, motivate you to share the good news, etc.?
4. Malachi compares heaven to a calf who goes out leaping from a stall. How do you interpret this and what type of imagery does it generate in your mind?
5. Once more God implores the Israelites to *remember* the past (Mal 4:4) with the goal of turning hearts toward him (Mal 4:6). He then alludes to future events that will bring glory and judgment (some of them are listed below). As you consider the past, present, and future actions of God, as mentioned in the book of Malachi, how has your faith been impacted?
   * A prophet like Elijah will come to prepare the way (3:1) and encourage repentance (4:6)
   * God will come to the temple (3:1)
   * The Messiah (messenger of the covenant) will purify the sacrifices, the priests, and the nation (3:1-4)
   * He will witness against evildoers (sorcerers, adulterers, liars) (3:5)
   * God’s name will be honored throughout the world (1:11)
   * There will be a judgment between those who serve God and those who don’t (3:18)