



Lesson 26 / October 29, 2017

MALACHI'S LAST WORD

Malachi 4

Key Verse

“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

Malachi 4:2

Discussion Questions

1. What is the historical situation in Malachi's day?
2. What grievances does the LORD have against his people in Malachi 1-3?
3. What grievances do the people have with the LORD? (e.g. 2:17; 3:14-15)
4. Why does Malachi remind the people of the day of the LORD? (3:1-5; 4:1-3)
5. Why do you suppose Malachi concludes with a reminder about the law of Moses (4:4)?
6. What is the promise of a second Elijah (4:5-6)? How is this promise fulfilled in the New Testament?
7. What do you make of the two final words of the Old Testament: “utter destruction”? Why end with such a dire warning?
8. Do you think Malachi's final words are a fitting conclusion to the Old Testament? Why or why not?
9. How does Malachi prepare the way for what will come in the New Testament?

Question 51: What is the final command of the Old Testament?

Short Answer: *God commands his people to remember the law of Moses.*

Full Answer: *God commands his people to remember the law of Moses, in which God has made himself known, that they might know God and be faithful to observe his commands.*

Question 52: What is the final promise of the Old Testament?

Short Answer: *The Old Testament concludes with the promise of a second Elijah to come.*

Full Answer: *The Old Testament concludes with the promise of a second Elijah to come, who will preach repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord and his salvation, that we might be saved.*

Summary

All good things must come to an end, and so we now come to the end of the Old Testament. What a journey it has been, full of intriguing stories and profound lessons about God and his work among his people. Hopefully you will find yourself returning often to the Old Testament to read and reflect on these precious Scriptures.

Malachi is both the final book in the Old Testament and the last Old Testament prophet to Israel. Malachi prophesied in the years after the exile has essentially ended (ca. 450BC), when many Israelites had already returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and the temple under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah (see lesson 15) and admonishment from the prophet Haggai. The Israelite people expect these to be the days of final restoration foretold by the prophets, when God would place his glory upon Jerusalem and Israel would dwell happily ever after in faithfulness to her LORD (e.g. Zech 8:1-23).

Sadly, however, we find in Malachi the same old story of Israel's unfaithfulness arousing the ire of the LORD. The LORD has several grievances against his people, including that they fail to love him (Mal 1:2-6), they insult him with their pitiful offerings (1:6-14), their priests are corrupt (2:1-9), they are unfaithful to their marriage covenants (2:10-16), and they deprive his temple of their tithes (3:6-12). In short, their worship is pathetic and their faith is apathetic. Their exile may be over, but their hearts remain unchanged.

Thus Malachi concludes the Old Testament by calling Israel to remember God's past words so they can remain faithful in the present even as they hope for God's future arrival (4:1-6). More specifically, Malachi reminds Israel about the future day of the LORD, he calls them to remember the law of Moses, and he prophesies the coming of Elijah the prophet.

First, Malachi reminds Israel that the day of the LORD spoken of by other prophets (especially Joel; lesson 24) will indeed come. In that coming day, the LORD will address the injustices of the world by making a clear distinction between the wicked and the righteous; and the wicked will be destroyed by fire and the righteous will be healed and set free to dance with joy before the LORD (3:18-4:3). But Israel must take warning, for not necessarily all of Israel will be counted righteous in that day, but only those who fear the LORD and esteem his name (3:16-17). We play a risky game when we presume ourselves to be righteous even as we live in unfaithfulness to our God.

Second, Malachi calls Israel to remember and to obey the law of Moses (4:4). Malachi thereby reminds the people of their own history, when about 1000 years earlier God first made his word known to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exod 19-20ff.; lesson 9) and then continued to reveal his law through Moses (i.e. Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy; lessons 10-12). These ancient words remain relevant for Israel in Malachi's day and they will prove to be invaluable in the days to come, for following the prophet Malachi, Israel will descend into 400 years of silence in which God does not send a new prophet to his people. During this time of divine silence and international chaos, their faith will not be sustained by any repeated instances of new prophetic revelations but by the ongoing significance of ancient recorded revelation from God. They must now become students and teachers of the written word from the past.

Malachi's final words in 4:5-6 are also the final words of the entire Old Testament. He prophesies a future day when Elijah the prophet will come. The past Elijah was one of the first prophets in Israel back in the days of the kings (see 1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 2), and now Malachi speaks of a day when another "Elijah" will come as God's messenger to turn the hearts of the people back to their God in preparation for the coming of the LORD himself (Mal 4:5-6; cf. 3:1). Malachi's final word of "utter destruction" creates a sense of extraordinary urgency: that this new salvation *must* come or the LORD will bring final destruction upon his people for their sin. Thus, Malachi draws upon Israel's deepest hope as their *only* hope, the hope of a promised Messiah who will save his people and fulfill God's promises once and for all.

When we turn just one page from Malachi to Matthew, we also turn the page on 400 years of history during which Israel longed for this Elijah to come. In Matthew 3:1-12, we find John the Baptist preaching repentance and preparing the way for the LORD to come, and he is the second Elijah (Matt 11:13-14). Behind him will come our long-awaited Messiah, the LORD Jesus, our king and our hope who will accomplish the salvation we so desperately need. So the Old Testament ends not by ending, but by anticipating a new beginning, a new testament that will tell the story of God's work through Jesus Christ. To the New Testament we now turn.