

REFORMING GOD'S PEOPLE

In our study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, God's people returned to Jerusalem and the land of promise, as the Lord began to fulfill His promises through Jeremiah and other prophets. In the trials and triumphs of rebuilding, with tools in one hand and weapons in the other, God renewed and restored them as they rebuilt the holy city - and God reformed His people.

In the same timeframe, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi called God's people to repentance and faith, to trust and obey Him according to Scripture. Because He's not done with them. And this gives us great hope for our own lives. As we look at the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, God again calls His people to reformation, to turn to Him in trust and obedience.

1- THE ORACLE OF THE WORD of the Lord to Israel by Malachi" opens this book. The prophet's name means "messenger" and God speaks through him with urgency. The message is written entirely in prose, unlike other prophets who alternate oracles of judgment and salvation. Indeed, Malachi uses satire. He gives voice to God bringing His people to conviction of sin, with a call to take personal responsibility for their relationship to Him - as God renews their hope in Him.

Malachi presents an ongoing argument between God and His people in six disputations. The Lord brings charges of indictment, they dispute it, and God replies. He often uses rhetorical questions, a classic teaching method that makes you think more deeply. The title "*Lord of Hosts*" 24 times contrasts the puny ineffective army of Israel with the invincible innumerable heavenly army of God (as in 2 Kings 6:17).

2- HOW HAS GOD LOVED US? In the first disputation, God says "*I have loved you, says the Lord, but you say, how have You loved us?*" The people may not have dared utter these words, but they harbored them in their hearts. The temple had been rebuilt, but much smaller than before, and it did not manifest the *shekinah* glory of the presence of God. A thousand years before, God had brought their fathers out of slavery in Egypt, and gave them a land, nation, and temple. But now for hundreds of years they were oppressed and depressed because of the loss of their glorious future, due to their disobedience.

Malachi notes how God chose Jacob and his descendants but rejected his older twin brother Esau, whose seed becomes the nation of Edom. Neither deserved anything. (As Deuteronomy 7:6-9 notes, Jacob's seed becomes the nation of Israel, as God purposes to deliver His promises to Abraham.

The apostle Paul quotes this passage in Romans 9 as he explains divine election, and how believers can claim no merit in salvation. From human perspective, you most certainly do receive and believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, by grace through faith. But you do not initiate what comes from the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, given by God (Ephesians 2:1-10). In this way the remnant of other nations will also come to true faith (Romans 9-11) as God keeps His promises by grafting in the Gentiles. Malachi says "*your own eyes shall see this and you shall say 'Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel.'*"

3- HOW HAVE WE DESPISED GOD? In the second argument, the people have no claim to question God's love for them. Rather, their love for God was hypocritical, just going through the motions without the heart. The people did not bring pure sacrifices to the altar, and the priests were in league with them, allowing blind, lame, sick offerings. Malachi 1:14 says "*cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock and vows it, yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the Lord of Hosts, and My name will be feared among the nations.*" You would not dare act this way to an earthly governor, so why do you treat the Lord God Almighty, the Lord of Hosts, with such disrespect?

Just as Nehemiah confronted the so-called leaders of Jerusalem who broke covenant with God and led the people astray, so does Malachi. Chapter 2:1-9 expands against the priests and Levites, "*because you do not keep My ways, but show partiality.*" They get the consequences of their actions and attitudes.

Even so today, if God's people do not obey His written-down Word, but dilute it down and distort its teachings, we will be led astray and lead others astray. 2Peter 2 warns against counterfeit Christianity. God's people are chosen by Him to be a royal priesthood and holy nation, "*to proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*" So trust and obey Him!

4- WHY ARE WE FAITHLESS to one another? 2:10-16 speak of fractured relationships. The people were profaning their covenant with God. This always results in breakdown or relationships, with God and with others, due to breaking His commandments. The nation "*has been faithless and abomination has been committed in Israel and Jerusalem.*" They intermarried with people who worshiped idols, and divorced their own wives to do so. These were issues confronted by Ezra and Nehemiah in their campaigns to reform the people's worship, calling them to repentance, faith, and obedience to God.

Jesus in Matthew 19:3-6 makes it clear that marriage is a covenant between a man, a woman, and God, with "*a portion of God's Spirit in their union, for the purpose of godly offspring*" (Malachi 2:15). This is a creation ordinance of God, as family is the first institution of society established by God. Humans have no authority to redefine marriage or family or gender, things that God created. Rather, God has written down His truth and His values for our faith and practice. Things we must trust and obey! ☐