

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

G. Campbell Morgan, D. D.

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THIS is the last of the prophetic utterances before the coming of the Messiah. There can be no doubt that the message of Malachi must be interpreted in the light of the work of Nehemiah. While it is true that in the book of Nehemiah, Malachi is never mentioned, it is quite evident that the conditions revealed in that book were practically the same as those with which Malachi had to deal.

Let us turn back to the book of Nehemiah in order that we may compare three passages

therefrom with three from Malachi.

Nehemiah 13:29

“Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.”

Malachi 2:8

“Ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts.”

Nehemiah 13:23-25.

“In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.”

Malachi 2:11, 12.

“Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts.”

Nehemiah 13:10, 11a.

“And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field. Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken?”

Malachi 3:8-10.

“Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”

The reading of these passages is quite sufficient to show that the general conditions described at the close of the book of Nehemiah were identical with the conditions to which Malachi’s

message was addressed. Nehemiah deplored the defiled and corrupted priesthood.

Malachi's central charge was that the priesthood had corrupted the covenant. Nehemiah dealt with the mixed marriages and the evil resulting therefrom.

Malachi's message was directed against the same evil which was cursing the people. Nehemiah charged the people with neglecting to bring the tithe into the storehouse and so making it necessary for the Levites to turn from the service of the house of God to earn their own living upon the soil.

Malachi uttered a complaint in the presence of the same neglect, there being a deeper spiritual note in his word, in that he recognized the spiritual failure involved in the material which Nehemiah deplored, and against which he made his protest.

Most probably as Malachi is not mentioned by Ezra or Nehemiah, he followed closely, but was not contemporary with these men. He found the conditions described on the last page of inspired history aggravated rather than removed when he began to exercise his ministry.

It is very important that we should get into the atmosphere of this prophecy; and the condition of things generally will be best understood by going back over the history of about a hundred years.

- About 536 B. C. there had been a return from Babylon under Zerubbabel.
- A year later the foundation of the temple was laid. The work was soon abandoned.
- Fifteen years later Haggai and Zechariah delivered their messages, and as a result the building of the temple was resumed.
- Four or five years later the temple was finished, in the year 575 B. C.
- In 458, Ezra went up to Jerusalem with a letter from Artaxerxes.
- In 445 Nehemiah went up to Jerusalem, and accomplished his work.

Thus the coming of Nehemiah to Jerusalem was about ninety years subsequent to the return from Babylon. Malachi prophesied in all probability about one hundred years later than that return, and so about ten years later than the period of Nehemiah.

It would seem as though the special evils which Ezra and Nehemiah set themselves to combat still existed, side by side with correct outward observance. The people are seen restored to Jerusalem, their temple built, the services of the temple observed, both special fasts and feasts, and regular seasons of worship.

The condition of the people is revealed by a question repeated seven times in the course of the book.

“Wherein hast Thou loved us?”

“Wherein have we despised Thy name?”

“Wherein have we polluted Thee?”

“Wherein have we wearied Him?”

“Wherein shall we return?”

“Wherein have we robbed Thee?”

“What have we spoken so much against Thee?”

Malachi charged the people with seven sins, and in reply they said **“Wherein?”**

They did not admit that they had failed, as he declared they had.

The prophecy reveals a sensitive God, and a stultified people.

Malachi declared the sensitiveness of the Lord, and charged the people with lack of sensitiveness, hardness, callousness. The people were not conscious of their own shortcoming. They imagined they were perfectly satisfying the Divine heart, and fulfilling the Divine requirement.

The book presents the picture of a people having a form, while they are devoid of power; fulfilling all the external requirements of religion, but being utterly without the internal experience; maintaining the sacramental symbols, while destitute of the spiritual grace of which those symbols should be the sign.

It should be remembered that this message was delivered not to Judah, and not to Israel, if by Israel we mean the Northern kingdom. The burden of the word of the Lord was to Israel. Malachi spoke not to the ten tribes or to the two; not to the North, or to the South, as in separation from each other, but to the whole nation. When these people had returned from Babylon under Zerubbabel, and when later another contingent had returned in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the returning remnants were made up of members of all the tribes.

In the last book of the inspired history of these people, the book of Nehemiah, we saw them without a king, without a priest, and without prophet; and moreover, without any Messianic hope. To people in that condition Malachi delivered his message.

As the book of Nehemiah was the last page of inspired history, the book of Malachi is the last page of inspired Hebrew prophecy.

This book is different from those of Haggai and Zechariah.

- The first business of Haggai was that of inspiring the people to be strong and build the house of God. It was local, practical, immediate, important.

- The business of Zechariah was that of inspiring the people to the selfsame activity; but also that of leading them to look at things unseen.

The master thought of Malachi is that of fellowship with God. He had to deal with a people whose glorious history was that of their fellowship with the Lord, whose shameful history was that of their infidelity to that fellowship.

If that be recognized, we shall find the threefold permanent value of this book.

- It is first, a revelation of the unfailing love of the Lord.
- It is secondly, a revelation of human infidelity.
- It is finally, a revelation of the secrets of strength in an age of failure.

Let us take these in order.

First, its revelation of the unfailing love of the Lord. If we read this prophecy, listening for the master tone of it, we shall find it to be that of love, the love of God. Its opening words are almost startling,

“The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. I have loved you, saith the Lord.”

That is the whole burden.

“I have loved you, saith the Lord.”

It is a declaration of the continuity of His love. That is the opening statement; the burden of the book is that of the constancy of the love of God. God sent that message to His people, when the nation was without king, priest, or prophet, when the nation consisted of a remnant satisfied with formality and lacking power, when the spokesmen of the nation answered the prophet by denying his charges, so callous had they become. There was to be no other voice until the herald should announce the Advent of the King. The last message of Isaiah’s thunder had died away. Jeremiah’s lamentations were almost forgotten.

Malachi, the last prophet, came declaring, **“I have loved you, saith the Lord,”** and right through the prophecy that is the master note of the music. It rises high above all the other notes. Whether we listen to the thunders of judgment, or to the plaintive complaint, we hear the great love-song of the Lord.

Malachi charged the people with profanity, sacrilege, greed, indifference; he charged them with perversion of the moral order, calling good evil and evil good; he charged them with robbing God in that they did not bring the whole tithe to His altars; he charged them also with blasphemy, in that they said, There is no value in serving God. These charges reveal in every case the consciousness of love in the presence of sin. It is love that is wounded.

The book, therefore, is a revelation:

- Of the constancy of love,
- The consciousness of love, and
- The courage of love.

The chief sinfulness of form without power is that it hurts the heart of God. The one master note of the message which God sends to every age of failure is that which affirms the constancy of His love.

Then, in contrast, we have the revelation of human failure.

This prophecy teaches that all motives other than love fail to produce maintenance of true relationship to love. It is possible to attend the temple, bend the knee, and make an offering regularly, but unless there is love in the heart there is no communion with God.

- To go to the temple merely as a matter of duty is to blaspheme.
- To carry offerings to the house of God simply because it is commanded, is to be guilty of sacrilege.

There is only one motive sufficiently strong to maintain the relation between the heart of God and the heart of man, and that is love. When these people lost their love for the Lord, all their religious observances became as tinkling brass and a clanging cymbal, noise without music.

The death of love issues in callousness. Think how surprising a thing it is, that when the last prophet came with his message, **“I have loved you, saith the Lord,”** the people answered, **“Wherein hast Thou loved us?”**

That is the inspiration of all sin, and when we consider it, and wonder at it, we have no astonishment at all the other charges which Malachi brought against these people. The hour in which we cease to love God is the hour in which we begin to wonder whether God loves us. Then form is robbed of power, and form without power is not only useless, it is paralysis, blight, mildew; and when the matchless music of the Divine love is declared by the messenger of love, the formal religionists will say **“Wherein?”**

There is yet another value in this book.

It reveals the secrets of strength in an age of failure.

“Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.”

Here are revealed the secrets of strength in an age of failure; they **“thought upon His name.”**

The Hebrew word translated thought is elsewhere translated *regard*. When Paul wrote **“If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things”** he used the same Greek word which in the Septuagint version is employed here, they **“thought upon His name.”** Thus the Hebrew word, illuminated by the Greek word, helps us to understand what otherwise might appear a shallow statement.

The Greek word means *to take an inventory*; they **“thought upon His name,”** that is, they took an inventory of the wealth they had in His name, JEHOVAH-JIREH. JEHOVAH-NISSI. JEHOVAH-SHALOM. JEHOVAH-TSIDKENU. JEHOVAH-SHAMMAH.

These people had nothing left to think of, other than the name.

- The grandeur of their nation was perished.
- The prophetic voices were silent.
- The priests had corrupted the covenant.
- The kings had passed away.
- All about them was formality devoid of power.

But there was left them the real value of life. It was the name. They thought upon His name.

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it and is safe.”

When the king has failed, the priest is corrupted, and the prophet is silent; when the national power has declined and we are bewailing the failure of our age, then let us think on the name, take an inventory in the name, count it as our wealth, take time to go over our wealth in order to discover how rich we are.

Then again they **“spake often one to another.”**

The speaking together may be repeated, but when we say they spoke often we admit times of silence. That is not what the prophet said. He described constant, continuous, unbroken fellowship with each other, based on thought centered upon the name of the Lord.

This is followed by another unveiling, **“The Lord hearkened, and heard.”** Both these words are pictorial.

“Hearkened” is a word suggesting *the action of a horse at the sound of its master’s voice*, the pricking of the ears. It is only a figure of speech. The horse is arrested by the voice it knows.

“They spake often one with another, and the Lord hearkened.”

“Heard” means *bending over patiently listening that no syllable may be missed*. When His people spake one with another - not when they spoke to Him - the Lord hearkened, and heard. They thought on His name and talked to each other thereof, and He hearkened and heard. God always attends to the conversation of those who are bound together by their loyalty to His name, and their consciousness of the wealth of their possessions in Him. Two or three of His people never meet together to speak of the deep things of His name and all the name means to them, but that He hearkens and hears.

The final secret is that of hope in the coming One; in the dawning of that new day which is to have two effects.

“The day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.”

That is not two days, but one. When that day comes, and the Sun arises, it will burn or it will heal. It will burn the plant that has no roots and no river resources; but it will heal the tree

planted by the river.

The present position of Christendom is vividly portrayed by Malachi.

Let us draw a very sharp line of distinction between the Church and Christendom. The terms are not synonymous.

The Church consists of those who are His own.

Christendom is the external appearance in every form. Christendom is characterized by formality devoid of power. Formality is not peculiar to one section of the Church. The form may not be the same. It may be stately ritual, or it may be of the simplest. Formality is the result of a conception that religion consists in external observance. To that condition the message of Malachi is: The day is coming which will be a day of healing, or a day of burning according to the condition of those who come to its dawning.

What is our attitude towards that day?

That is the supreme test of our position. As the last word of the Old Testament economy was a word declaring the coming of that day, so also is the last word of the New Testament economy. The attitude of men towards that day determines their ultimate relation thereto, and their ultimate destiny.

Let us live, putting all our trust in the name, in holy and unbroken fellowship with each other around our possessions therein, waiting for the daybreak, that so we may not be ashamed from Him at His coming.

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