

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY OF THE MINOR PROPHETS - PART TWELVE - THE BOOK OF MALACHI

Malachi means 'my messenger'. Every Bible writer was a messenger of God to man but Malachi had a special responsibility to round off the message of the Old Testament and leave everything ready for the next messenger who would introduce Jesus Christ and the New Testament. He also completed the final series of minor prophets which began with Zephaniah - when will He come? Haggai - why will He come? Zechariah - how will we recognise Him when He comes? Malachi answered the question - who will introduce Him when He comes? But before he introduced the introducer he dealt with some fundamental problems between man and God, and man and man.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND is found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Just as the Jews had been exiled to Babylon in several groups in 605, 597 and 586BC so their return was in several stages. The first group returned after the decree of King Cyrus in 536BC and started to rebuild the temple. Haggai and Zechariah were sent to encourage them to complete this work, which was done by 516BC. A second group returned with Ezra in 458BC but they too lost heart. The final group returned with Nehemiah in 445BC and in the remarkably short time of 52 days had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Again a lethargy set in and so about 10 years later Malachi was sent by God to refocus the hearts of His people on Him rather than empty religion. God knew that only then would social issues be dealt with. After Malachi, 400 more years were to pass before the Christ of whom he spoke finally appeared on the scene.

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES are to a variety of people - Esau/Edom and Jacob; Levi; Moses; Elijah; all are examples of God's choice of those who would be His messengers. Jacob rather than Esau was chosen by God even before he was born.(Gen.25) Levi was chosen to be the tribe who could come into God's presence with sacrifices on behalf of the people.(Num.3:12) Moses was chosen to lead God's people and to receive God's law.(Exod.2) Elijah was chosen to be God's mouthpiece to a godless king.(I Kgs.17) Levi handed over his task to Jesus on the cross. Moses passed leadership to Joshua, whose name was the same as Jesus. Elijah was preparing the way for Elisha, whose name meant 'God saves', and who was also a remarkable picture of Jesus.

Malachi frequently referred back to the law regarding sacrifices and the role of the priests,(Lev.3:2; 6:6; 22:2) to tithes and offerings,(Lev.27:30) to God's instructions regarding divorce,(Deut.24:1) to God's people being His possession,(Deut.7:6) and to the great and terrible day of the Lord.(Isa.13:9; Joel 2:31; Zeph.1:14-16) The first half of the book was addressed primarily to the priests who were responsible both for the conduct of worship and sacrifice, and for teaching the people what God expected. As so often before in the minor prophets it was the leaders who had failed and who faced the judgement of God.

NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES centre mainly around the promise to send God's messenger,(3:1) who would prepare the way for the Lord, and who would be another

Elijah. The New Testament clearly identified this messenger who would prepare the way for Jesus as John the Baptist.(Lk.1:76; Mark 1:2; Matt.11:10-14) Believing Jews in the New Testament were looking for the return of Elijah and associating him somehow with the coming of the Messiah.(Matt.16:14) Malachi himself was developing the prophecy in Isaiah of one who would come to prepare the way.(Isa.40:3) The emphasis on the messenger makes this book the natural link between the Old Testament and the New.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK could be as follows.

1:1 Malachi introduced his message.

1:2-5 People were doubting the love of God. They should compare the histories of Israel and Edom to see how much He had loved them.

1:6-14 Surely the real problem was with their love for God as shown by the inferior sacrifices they offered Him.

2:1-9 The priests faced God's judgement because they had failed to teach the people properly how they might have a relationship with Him. In the New Testament all Christians are priests, so we all share that responsibility.(I Pet.2:9; Rev.1:6)

2:10-17 Our lack of love for God is shown by our lack of love for our wives whom we so readily divorce when it suits us. Our marriages are to be a mirror of our relationship with Christ, our 'bridegroom'.(Eph.5:23-33; Rev.21:2)

3:1-6 The coming of the messenger of God will be to restore our relationship first with Him through a true sacrifice, the cross, and then with each other in caring for the needy.

3:7-15 When we return to God we will stop robbing Him and each other as we have done in our arrogance. He will then bless us beyond our imaginations.(Eph.3:18-20)

3:16-18 As Malachi spoke, some responded and were described as having their names written in a book of remembrance, presumably the book of life referred to in Isa.4:3 and Dan.12:1, and in the New Testament.(Rev.3:5)

4:1-6 The day of the Lord is coming. For those who trust Him it will be a new day of light and healing. For those who do not, it will be a day of judgement. The coming of one like Elijah will introduce those last days.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does the name Malachi mean? What clue does his name give to his message?
2. When is this book likely to have been written? What therefore would be the historical and spiritual background to Malachi as seen in other Old Testament books?
3. Much of Malachi is addressed to the priests? Who are priests in the New Testament church? What is Malachi's message for today's priests?
4. The Jews were back in Jerusalem, the city had been rebuilt and the temple was functioning again. What now was wrong with - the whole nation?(1:1-5), the spiritual leaders?(1:6 - 2:8), husbands?(2:9-16) In each case - why had this happened? How did it show? How does it show today? What is God's answer?
5. Wrong actions towards God and man are due to wrong ideas about God. Pick out from throughout the book every example of a wrong idea about God. With each idea consider - how is the same idea believed today? What is God's answer to this wrong idea? What does He promise if we turn from error to truth? And what if we do not?

6. What will happen on 'the day of the Lord' to believers and unbelievers?(4:1-6) To what extent have these things already happened? What is the link between freedom and obedience? How would you explain this concept to a teenager who was 'doing his own thing'?
7. What is the book of remembrance? What else does the Bible teach about it? How can you be sure your name is written in it?
8. What else does Malachi promise about the coming of (a) John the Baptist and (b) Jesus Christ? Look up the places in the New Testament where these promises are referred to. How does the NT context in each case help to explain the appropriate passage in Malachi? How did John the Baptist resemble the person Malachi compared him to? How therefore are we to prepare the way for Jesus to come into people's lives and problems?
9. How does Malachi sum up the messages of the previous minor prophets? And how does he introduce the next book, Matthew?