

Exploring Malachi

Rediscovering Passion for God

Malachi 3:6-12 The Challenge

The people in Malachi's day complained "Where is the God of justice?", thinking that God does not deal with evil in the world. (Mal 2:17) They questioned: if God is here, why doesn't he do something? God replied in Mal 3:1: "See!", "Behold (me)!" i.e. "I'm right here!". Malachi insisted that the Day of the LORD is coming and those who practice evil will be subject to judgement. (Mal 3:1-5).

"On the one hand, we (all) want justice. We say that we are eager for the world to be set straight, for the good to be rewarded and the guilty punished. Yet the reality is that we ourselves can't possibly handle the full implications of such justice. ... another name for the coming of complete justice is "judgement day." ... It means equal and comprehensive judgement for all, without partiality for any."¹

READ: Malachi 2:17-3:12

Old Testament commentators agree that there are six disputational speeches in the book of Malachi. However, they disagree on where the fourth speech finishes and the fifth speech starts. The standard paragraph 'break' in English translations is before Mal 3:6. However, Anthony Petterson believes that the fourth speech is Mal 2:17-3:7a and the fifth speech is Mal 3:7b-12.² As we focus on Mal 3:6-12, the context is the theme of justice: both the justice of God and our responsibility to act justly (towards God and others). We must keep in mind that what was 'right' and 'just' vis the obligations of that these people had to God and to each other was defined by Old Testament law and the covenant they had entered into with Yahweh.

- In Mal 3:5, God uses courtroom language: "judgement", "bearing witness"/ "testify against". What sins did God 'call out' among his people? How were each of these behaviours acts of injustice?

In Mal 3:3b-4, God expressed a desire that his people present offerings to him "in righteousness" and that "will be pleasing to the LORD." A major criticism in this passage is that the people are not bringing "the full tithe into the storehouse". (Mal 3:10) God was radically generous towards his people, but they were mean and tight-fisted when it came to giving to God, failing to pay a 10% "tax". The law also required that people provide for people who lacked financial resources. Another criticism voiced by Old Testament prophets, was a lack of integrity in their business practices and failure to look after the needy.

- Look back at Mal 3:5. Which of these behaviours/ sins had a financial motive? What motives are behind these behaviours? What would have been the impact on the people who were on the receiving end of these particular sins?

In Mal 3:13-15, we get to hear some of the frustration the people were experiencing. They could see that the wicked seemed to be getting away with profiteering from their wickedness and were arrogant about their prosperity, while those who were trying to be faithful seemed no better off for their trouble/ obedience.

- Read Mal 3:13-4:3. What do we discover about how God will ultimately deal with (firstly) the wicked and (secondly) the righteous?

Mal 3:6a is frequently used as a proof text for a doctrine referred to as "the immutability of God". God does not change and is constant. Millard Erickson warns us about how we are to interpret this verse. Scripture is clear that God is active in our world. Unchanging does not mean immobile, sterile, static and inactive.

"What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised. He will fulfil his commitments. The believer can rely on that."³

God's character is consistent. He keeps his promises. God is committed to justice. Smith puts it this way: "God is not stating an abstract theological principle concerning the immutability of his nature. He is simply denying the charge of his disputants that he is unreliable, undependable, capricious. The question (here) is about Yahweh's fidelity, not his nature."⁴

- Read Mal 3:16. Read it aloud again. Then read it aloud again. What two things did the LORD do? Why do we need to know that God sees, hears and records our words, thoughts and actions?

Even Abraham knew that God rightly judges both the righteous and the wicked. (Gen 18:25) In Mal 3:7a, the prophet highlighted that the descendants of Jacob (the Jews) had perpetually broken God's statutes (ie the law of Moses). Yet, they had not "come to an end." (Mal 3:6b) In Mal 3:6-7, God effectively told the people: 'Don't accuse me of being unjust. If it weren't for my commitment to the covenant, I would have directed my justice towards you and destroyed/ wiped out the whole nation as punishment for your sin.'

- Read Is 59:12-15. What do these verses say about our innate human condition and how sin impacts our ability to act justly, rightly and truthfully? Why do we need to repent of our own unjust acts?

¹ Duguid, I.M., & Harmon, M.P. (2018). *Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*. (R.D. Phillips, P.G. Ryken, & D.M. Doriani, Eds.) Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. p149-150.

² Petterson, A.R. (2015) *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary. Nottingham, England: Apollos, p309.

³ Erickson, M.J. (1988) *Christian Theology*. Second Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 301-308.

⁴ Smith, R. L. (1998). *Micah-Malachi* (Vol. 32). Dallas: Word, Incorporated. p331.

This passage is grounded in the Mosaic/ Sinaitic Covenant. It refers to the sin of the people, which went right back to the 'forefathers'/ 'ancestors'. (Mal 3:7)

- Read Gen 17:7 and Ex 6:7. Why do you think that God maintained his commitment to his chosen people for generation after generation, if they kept of sinning and breaking his statutes?
- Read Lamentations 3:22-23. The word for 'steadfast love' has connotations of God being committed to his covenant relationship with his people. What do these verses remind us about the character of God?

A critical role of the Old Testament prophets was to remind the people of their sinfulness. Jeremiah had told the people in his day that they had "a stubborn and rebellious heart (and they had) turned aside and gone away." (Jer 5:23) In Isaiah, we are likened to sheep who have gone astray. (Is 53:6) In Mal 3:7, we read the call to 'return to me'. The people responded with the question: "how are we to return?" In NLT, it is translated as 'How can we return when we have never gone away?' Petterson comments that "this may have been asked in ignorance or in defiance (or a mixture of both), but, in any case, it portrays the people as unaware that their lives are out of step with the covenant requirements of Yahweh."⁵

- Read 2 Peter 3:8-9 and Rom 2:2-5. What word does Peter use for 'return'? What do we learn about why God has delayed his judgement? In what way is God's patience an act of grace and kindness?

In Mal 3:8-9, God accused the nation as a whole of robbing him by failing to bring their tithes and offerings. This passage is not talking about money that Christians donate at church. These were specific obligations mandated by the Sinai Covenant. The "tithes and offerings" weren't an 'optional extra' for God's people. They were used for very specific purposes to support the temple ministry and the less fortunate.

Joyce Baldwin provides the following explanation:

One-tenth of all produce was given to the Levites, who then gave one-tenth of that to the priests. (Lev. 27:30, Num. 18:24, Num. 18:28). "Offerings were the portions of sacrifices set apart for the priests (Exod. 29:27, 28; Lev. 7:32; Num. 5:9) and the voluntary gifts for a special purpose (Exod. 25:2-7)." "When no gifts were brought the Levites had no option but to give up their ministry and earn their own living by farming."

*"Every three years a community feast was held at the time of offering the tithes, to which the needy were invited as well as the Levites (Deut. 14:28, 29). When tithes went unpaid, the widow, the fatherless and the sojourner were amongst those who suffered (cf. verse 5)."*⁶

As Christians, we often forget the role and significance of the temple in the Old Testament. Firstly, it was referred to as God's dwelling place. God dwelt in and among his covenant people. The temple was a perpetual reminder of their status as God's chosen people and that they were bonded to obey his laws and statutes. Secondly, the covenant included the means by which the people dealt with their sin, which included offering sacrifices, originally at the tabernacle, and later, at the temple. Sin separates us from God. (Is 59:2) But God set aside a group of people (the priests) who would mediate on behalf of the people.

- God put in place a support system to provide for the priests. As a church we support Christian workers in different ministries: some receive a set wage and others rely on some model of faith-based giving. The apostle Paul made a point of being self-supporting when working in certain places. In what way should full-time workers be remunerated for their work?
- Our government budget includes social security payments to the needy, which come out of our taxes. Does this mean that, as Christians, we don't need to intentionally give to the needy?

God calls us to a life of blessing, but we sometimes scorn that blessing. In Deut 28, we read a list of blessings that God wanted to endow on the people and curses that they faced, if they were disobedient.

- In Mal 3:10-11, what indicators are there in these verses that a curse was on the people and their agricultural produce?

The people in Malachi's day lived off the land and were living a 'hand to mouth' existence. If the rain didn't come and/ or their crops got destroyed by pests, they would be scraping to find food to eat. If they didn't have food, giving to God's work was not a high priority. But if they didn't give to the temple, the priests wouldn't have the means to work in the temple and administer the sacrificial system. Yet God laid the blame on the people: he said that "you are under a curse ... because you are robbing me." (Mal 3:9)

- Read the following two passages. What do they tell us about the connection between God's blessing on their harvests, adverse conditions which affected crops and their attitudes to God?

⁵ Petterson, A.R. (2015) *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary. Nottingham, England: Apollos, p371.

⁶ Baldwin, J. G. (1972). *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 28). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p268-269.

"Do you not fear me? says the LORD; Do you not tremble before me? ... But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, "Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest." Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have deprived you of good." (Jer 5:22-25)

"Thus Solomon finished the house of the LORD and the king's house; all that Solomon had planned to do in the house of the LORD and in his own house he successfully accomplished. Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place." (2 Chron 7:11-15)

The July 2018 Seasonal Update issued by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries stated: "Drought conditions are being experienced across most of NSW with 100% of the state in one of three drought categories. The latest estimate of drought intensity at the end of July 2018 places up to 48% of the state as Drought Affected, 37% in Drought and 15% in Intense Drought. The dry conditions that were reported in June have extended through July, with limited rainfall recorded across NSW this month. The drought has persisted in some regions since October 2017, with the event duration now ranging from 6 to 12 months."⁷

- What does 2 Chronicles 7:14 tell us, as the people of God, about how to respond in this situation?

When we read Mal 3:10, we may be reminded of the verses that say: "do not put God to the test". (Deut 6:16, Matt 4:7, Luke 4:12) However, the context of these particular verses were situations where Scripture/ God's promises were being cited, while the people were either acting in disobedience or there was a challenge/ temptation to act in disobedience to God's word.

By contrast, in Ps 34:8, the people were told to "taste and see that the Lord is good." In Mal 3:10, God issued a challenge to the people, to bring ten percent of their produce to the temple. Here, "the Lord promises them that He will bless them if they act on his word. When he adds the words, "test me now in this", He is encouraging them to prove his faithfulness to his promise."⁸ These verses are not proof texts for any form of prosperity gospel. They are a challenge to radical obedience.

"In the face of their economic struggles, he calls them back to covenant obedience. He calls them to repentance. He calls them to commit themselves anew to faithfully trusting him. ... as here, God actually invites his people to test him. He invites them to trust his Word, to act in faith, to step out and see whether he keeps his promises. Faithless testing asks God to make the first move, delays obedience, and seeks to make the Master our servant. ... Faithful testing, on the other hand, involves the believer's making the first move, embracing obedience to God's call even if it seems counterintuitive or foolish. Faithful testing reflects a truly reciprocal relationship. God is actually always the initiator, having first pursued and established a relationship with his people and having made glorious promises of his goodness. God thus challenged the people of Malachi's day to do something profoundly counterintuitive. In the face of dire economic straits, he called them to be less attached to what they had rather than more. The Lord told them to loosen their purse-strings rather than to clench tight their fists. Yet the motive he put before them was quite surprising. He invited them to trust and obey him in their tithing so that he might shower blessings on them."⁹

- What thoughts stand out for you, from the above quote?
- In Mal 3:10-12, what promises did God make to the people, if they were obedient to him?

CHALLENGE: Today's passage provides us with many challenges:

- To repent of our disobedience, including things that are not just or right in God's eyes;
- To trust God to provide for us;
- To trust that God will "bring forth justice" (Is 42:1,3) in whatever situations you're facing;
- To give and obey, even when that seems counterintuitive.

Share: what has challenged you? Then, pray for each other.

⁷ New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. (7 August 2018) NSW State Seasonal Update - July 2018

<https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/climate-and-emergencies/droughthub/information-and-resources/seasonal-conditions/ssu/july-2018>

Thomsen, S. (8 August 2018), "NSW is now 100% in drought."

<https://www.businessinsider.com.au/nsw-is-now-100-per-cent-in-drought-2018-8>

⁸ Blog. (18 April 2016) "Answers from the Book."

<http://answersfromthebook.net/what-does-it-mean-to-put-the-lord-our-god-to-test-in-matthew-47-and-deuteronomy-616-it-is-said-do-not-put-the-lord-god-to-the-test-niv-and-in-malachi-310-the-lords-says-test-me-in-this/>

⁹ Duguid, I. M., & Harmon, M. P. (2018). *Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. p166.