

Starting and finishing well are very important. To have maximum impact on its audience, a speech, for example, requires an effective beginning and end. God's revelation, at the beginning of the Old Testament, opens with the account of how he powerfully created all things by his word. He said, at the beginning, that it was very good. However, the ending of this story, as we come to Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, is not so good. God continued faithfully committed to that which he had made. He remained true to his promises to his people - but, unfortunately, they were faithless, they were manipulative and they had tired of him.

But God knew that a small remnant would continue to be faithful. Malachi is really only the end of the beginning - for God has promised a bright future for this remnant. They are to remember what pleases him and they are to repent. God looks for true worship from his people - spiritual worship, which involves being living sacrifices to God. Such a transformation comes about by renewal of the mind and involves non-conformity to the pattern of the world. The fruit of such worship is knowing the will and purpose of God and joyfully doing it.

A careful reading of this book indicates that in Malachi's day the temple was apparently rebuilt (1:13; 3:1,10) which places him after Haggai and Zechariah. Also the Jews were under a civil ruler (1:8), which places him before the death of Nehemiah, who was the last civil ruler. Finally the offenses rebuked by Malachi are precisely the abuses Nehemiah corrected, namely, the practice of mere formal religion, mixed marriages, and the neglect of tithes. Malachi's ministry bears the same relationship to Nehemiah as Haggai and Zechariah's ministries bore to Zerubbabel and Joshua. Malachi returned to Judah from Persia between about 432 BC and 422 BC. Consequently, Malachi prophesied 100 years after Haggai and Zechariah.

Malachi's prophecy records a dialogue between God and his covenant people. Indeed Malachi records six conversations, all of which revolve in some way around the theme of the covenant, by which God binds Israel to himself and himself to Israel. In the first three conversations (1:1-2:16) God's people question his love and in the second three conversations (2:17-4:4) they question his justice. It is like eavesdropping on a conversation of vital importance. We are able to draw conclusions about the character and concerns of each participant. One partner, God, the Lord Almighty, is unchanging and faithful but will not allow himself to be used. The other partner, Judah, God's people, has grown weary of God. They are faithless, contemptuous and unthinkingly manipulative of him. Eight times we find "he (God, the Lord Almighty) says.....but you (God's people) ask HOW?" (1:2, 6,7; 2:17; 3:7,8) or "but you ask WHY....?" (2:13-14) or "but you ask WHAT...?" (3:13). In this respect, perhaps more than any other Old Testament book, Malachi describes that modern attitude of mind that considers man superior to God and that has the audacity to attempt to bring God down to earth and measure him by the standards of human morality and justice - if they do not want to do away with God entirely. Yet Malachi hits even closer to home than this. He not only describes the secular world of our age, but also the secular church (of which we can often be unfortunate examples) - boasting in their knowledge of truth, responding to that knowledge mechanically, technically, but their hearts, their lives, their characters have been a contradiction to the will of God. Or as Paul puts it in his second letter to Timothy: "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5).

1. Conversations 1-3: God's People Question His Love (1:1-2:16)

In the first set of 3 conversations, God's love is doubted. God states his love for his people in vv.2-5 of chapter 1, but they doubt his love: "How have you loved us?" His love was proven by his electing Judah, the descendants of Jacob, as his people. God chose Jacob but not his brother Esau. Esau's descendants, the nation of Edom, were under his wrath (1:4). We remember from Obadiah that God had prophesied a future destruction of Edom for its pride and the accompanying unbrotherly conduct toward the citizens of

(Malachi 1:1-8; 2:10-16; 3:6-4:6; Matthew 11:7-15)

Jerusalem in the day of their misfortune, when besieged by the Babylonian army. This judgment had apparently come to pass by this time and is here declared by God to be permanent. Judah equally deserved God's wrath, but they were his chosen ones and therefore he loved them.

The first conversation continues with the Lord Almighty asking how they have shown their love for him. He says, "Where is the honour and respect you owe me? I am your father, your master" (1:6-14). The priests show contempt for God's name by offering sacrifices which are blemished, which cost them nothing and which they would not think to offer even to the governor (1:8). Although God is the Lord of the nations, he is treated with contempt by his own people. It would be better to shut the temple doors "so that you would not light useless fires on my altar" than to offer God injured, crippled and diseased animals (1:13).

In the second of three conversations God turns his attention to the priests (2:1-9). He reminds them of his covenant with Levi, the head of the priestly tribe. God promised Levi life and peace and Levi in turn was to revere God and offer true instruction to the people (2:5-6). But the priests violated that covenant and caused many to stumble. Because they judged with partiality, they would now be despised and humiliated (2:8-9). The perilous state of Judah was largely to do with the state of her priestly leadership. The priests should have been serving the nation through reverence for God and faithful communication of his word to his people - they were the messengers of the Lord Almighty. Instead, they were faithless to the covenant. This disloyalty to the covenant also showed itself in faithlessness to one another. The priests were leading the people - their fellow Jews - astray and causing them to stumble.

The third conversation in the first set makes it clear that all Judah shared in knowing God as their Creator and covenant keeper. "Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?" (2:10b). They had stopped being faithful to the wives of their youth and married foreign wives instead (2:11,14). By joining in such intimate union with foreign wives they had broken faith with God and with one another. "'I hate divorce'" says the Lord God of Israel" (2:16a). Why does God hate divorce so fiercely? Well, for a start, it is a matter of a man and a woman breaking faith with his or her spouse. God, who is a God of faithfulness and truth, hates infidelity. The marriage vow speaks of union "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health". We cannot guarantee anyone happiness, we cannot guarantee affluence or health. But we can guarantee that we will stick by our word, our vow, that we will not break faith just because fidelity is difficult or because another way or person becomes more attractive. Second, God hates divorce because it is harmful - harmful to the couple involved, generally leaving scars that never truly heal; harmful to society; and above all harmful to whatever children may be involved. In the final analysis, however, God hates divorce because it represents covenant faithlessness. God created marriage to illustrate the most blessed of all spiritual relationships - the union of a believing man or woman with Christ, the divine bridegroom of the church. Divorce must therefore illustrate the falling away of a man or woman from God. Twice Malachi urges the people, "So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth" (2:15,16). God is supremely faithful. Indeed Calvin says that God's faithfulness is "the primary axiom of the whole Christian philosophy". God keeps his covenant with his people and expects covenant faithfulness from them. Faithfulness to God and one another is the hallmark of the people of God and constitutes true worship. As you interact with people - church, family, friends and work colleagues - can you identify areas where you need to repent of unfaithfulness?

2. Conversations 4-6: God's People Question His Justice (2:17-4:4)

In the second set of three conversations, God's commitment to justice is called into question. In 2:17, the fourth conversation, God's people are claiming that he approves of evil and has forgotten justice. The Lord responds by saying that he will come near to his people for a twofold purpose: first, he will purify them ("he will be like a refiner's fire or

(Malachi 1:1-8; 2:10-16; 3:6-4:6; Matthew 11:7-15)

a launderer's soap") (3:2-3) and second, he will judge them (3:5). Previously, God had questioned Judah's love for him in the context of their questioning his love. So now, he questions Judah's commitment to justice, in the context of their questioning of his commitment to justice. He accuses them of robbing him - and, in doing this, they incur his curse (3:6-9). The Lord Almighty calls on them to return to being faithful to the covenant. To do this properly, they need to recognise his ownership of all things and bring their whole tithe into the storehouse (3:10). God calls on them to test him and they will find him faithful: "Test me in this....and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it" (3:10-11). As God had promised through Moses when the people entered the Promised Land of Canaan, covenant faithfulness will lead to blessing (Deuteronomy 30:15-16) whereas covenant faithlessness will lead to cursing (Deuteronomy 30:17-18).

In Malachi's fifth conversation (3:6-18), the people question God's commitment to justice. They say that serving God is pointless, for evildoers seem to be rewarded and the arrogant are blessed (3:15). However, rather than ignoring the righteous, God says that he remembers their reverence for him ("A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name") (3:16). They will be preserved in the day of judgment ("They will be mine", says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him") (3:17). The distinction between the righteous and the wicked is that the righteous serve God and the wicked do not (3:18).

What a predicament Judah find themselves in. They are in decline economically and morally. They question God's love and justice. They are subject to a foreign power - the Persians. And to top it off the covenantally faithful God is against them. Yet God, the Lord Almighty, graciously calls them to return to him: "Return to me, and I will return to you", says the Lord Almighty." (3:7b) And when they do, he will make them the envy of the nations: "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty." (3:12) Only through repentance - "the drainage system of the soul" (as one commentator has called it) - can Judah's robbing and swindling of God (and each other) be dealt with. They must repent for questioning God's love and commitment to justice.

Finally, the sixth conversation announces a coming day in which God's justice will be obvious - the Day of the Lord. Those who revere God's name will know fullness of life - eternal life - while "the arrogant and every evildoer" will become like stubble and be burned in the fire (4:1-3). The Day of the Lord will bring the vindication and triumph of the righteous. If we are God's people, belonging to him in Christ, then surely these words establish us and encourage our obedience. Malachi goes on in 4:4 to encourage us to "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel." God's law is unchanged. Because God remains unchanged in his righteousness, so does the expression of his righteousness in the law remain unchanged from generation to generation. Moreover, not only does God's law remain unchanged, so also does our obligation to live by that standard. This is conveyed by the word "remember". The God who acts for our salvation is also the God who speaks his law that we might be holy as he is holy. If you claim to have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, then you must heed Malachi's warning: "Remember the law" and do it.

3. The Coming of Elijah (3:1, 4:5-6)

Like the prophets before him, Malachi looks forward to God's coming. He is specific. He prophesies the coming of that "messenger" who will prepare the way for God - that is, John the Baptist, who will prepare the way for Jesus. Malachi writes, "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty" (3:1). He ends by saying, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah

before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I would come and strike the land with a curse" (4:5-6). This was the text the disciples were thinking of when they asked Jesus, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" (Matthew 17:10). Jesus replied (referring to John the Baptist): "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But, I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands" (Matthew 17:11-12). John the Baptist came with a message of repentance - a wake up call to the nation, an urgent call to prepare themselves for the Day of the Lord.

The Old Testament began with such promise, as God declared all his creation good. It ends here as Malachi declares that unless they repent, all God's people are under judgment. Indeed "curse" is the last word of the Old Testament canon. The remnant of God's people would continue to wait for God's salvation until "Elijah" appeared 400 years later. At that time a new covenant was inaugurated by the Lord Almighty whereby all who come to Jesus Christ by faith are forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit. Are you one of those who belong to Jesus by faith?

No longer does true worship involve tithes and animal sacrifices - but rather the offering of oneself to God. Romans 12:1-2 defines the nature of true worship for the people of God's new covenant: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will". All the sacrifices of the Old Testament are made redundant by the Lord Jesus offering himself once for all. His atoning death made the old covenant sacrifices unnecessary. Under the new covenant, the offering of ourselves is now the only logical sacrifice. As we resist conformity to the secular world in which we live, our transformed living will come by the renewal of our minds - understanding God's new covenant and his will for us as we sit weekly under the preaching of his Word, as we share in our weekly/ fortnightly Bible study groups and as we read and meditate on the Bible each day in our quiet times. New covenant worship is regarding our whole lives as living sacrifices. Under the old covenant, one day, the seventh, was holy to the Lord. Under the old covenant, one of the twelve tribes - the tribe of Levi - was priests to the Lord. Under the old covenant, one portion in ten, a tithe, recognized God's ownership. But now, by contrast, under the new covenant, worship of God is our whole life - all our days are God's, seven out of seven. Now all God's people are his priests (for Jesus "who loves us and has freed us from our sin by his blood.....has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Revelation 1:5-6), twelve out of twelve. And finally now all that we have belongs to him and is rightfully his, ten out of ten. May the Lord help us to give him true new covenant worship by offering ourselves as living sacrifices to him.

Amen