



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Malachi 1:2, 6, 7

“The Last of the Prophets”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we again thank Thee for the privilege of the study of Thy word, and we ask again that Thou would give us direction and guidance. Enable us to understand the prophecy of Malachi. Enable us, Lord, to enter into the true spirit of this prophecy, and enable us to apply the prophecy to ourselves through the Spirit's guidance. And enable us to profit from the application of it. We commit this hour to Thee and the hours that we shall spend in the study of the prophecy. And we also commit the classes that follow to Thee. May this be a time of spiritual profit and blessing for each one of us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] For our next series of studies on the Wednesday night Bible study we're turning to the last book of the Old Testament, at least the last book of the English Old Testament, it is not the last book of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Book of Malachi. And we're going to study this book.

And I hope, that as we study the prophecy of Malachi, to study it in a little bit more detail than we have been studying some of the others. And so, I will try to do a little exegesis here and there in order to develop the significance of this really great little book. And I hope that you will do me the favor of reading the book at least once a

week. I think if you read it once a week, you can sit down and read it through in fifteen or twenty minutes, you will profit much more from our studies. And so, why don't you put this down as one of the things that you're going to do over the next weeks as we study the prophecy? Read it through. And of course, if you can read it more than once, fine. Read it several times, once a day, once in the morning and once at night, and also once on your lunch hour. And when you get through you will probably know more than I know about this book. [Laughter]

One might ask the question, Why study a book that was written over two thousand years ago? What value could there be in the study of so ancient a book as that? Well, I suggest three reasons why it is important for us to study a book like this. And the first, as you might expect, is a theological reason. The message of the Book of Malachi, contrary to all other literature, is still vital for us today. If you were to remove all of the biblical literature from consideration and consider simply secular literature, you would have to reach the conclusion that though secular literature is very interesting, it can be very revealing, it can make very suggestive, give us very suggestive insights in our own life and in our dealings with men, but nevertheless, there is the same difference that there is between night and day, between secular literature and the literature of the word of God.

One of the outstanding students of the word of God has said, The finest literature the world has produced apart from the literature of the Bible, while it will remain interesting for long years, even though the conditions of the age to which it appealed may have changed, will not have a living and practical application to any age save that in which it was penned. The writings of Chaucer are of absorbing interest to Englishmen today because they reveal to us the age in which they were produced, but they have no vital message to the men of today. In that particular, this whole book of God is in entire contrast to all other writings. All Scripture written afore time had a local application and a

distinctive message to the times in which it was written, but it was written also for our learning.

Now, the Apostle Paul is the one who has given us that comment that the Scriptures of the Old Testament were written for our learning. And that is, I think, important. I know that people say that if we simply study history, we note that history keeps repeating itself. Now there was a great philosopher who said maybe if we listen to it, history would stop repeating itself. And that great philosopher, incidentally, was Lily Tomlin. [Laughter]

There is an element of truth in that, but when it comes down to the final analysis, there is a distinct difference between every other form of literature and the Bible. And though the Book of Malachi was written two thousand years ago, it is still a vital book with a vital message for us. It doesn't simply give us good advice. It really gives us something that pertains to us today.

Then I think there is a spiritual reason why we should study a book such as this. In it we find in very beautiful form the distinguishing love of God for Israel. In fact, I think we could just say that the distinguishing love of God because the distinguishing love of God for Israel is the same kind of love that he has for us as the Apostle Paul makes plain in the 9th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. It is from this book that he derives his great text, and I do think it's a great text, "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated."

Now this is a great book of the love of God, but it is also a book of the distinguishing love of God. And you'll have to pardon me that in our very next study we'll have to consider that question, because that's the citation with which this book begins, " "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau." "

Now, what a problem. But aside from the problem, let's think about it as an expression of the distinguishing love of God. It is true that he has loved believers in a sense that is different from his love for all other men. We cannot escape it. It is there in

holy Scripture. And so the love of God for Jacob or the love of God for the believer is beautifully expressed in this great Book of Malachi. And it evidently was that upon which the Apostle Paul himself fed to strengthen his own spiritual life.

I don't want you to think that when I say something like that that I understand every facet of a statement like that. But here it is in the word of God and we must accept it.

Then there is, finally, an ethical reason for studying the Book of Malachi. There's a great stress in the Book of Malachi on the need for reality in our spiritual activity. I think this is one of the greatest of the lessons that appears in the book, that the things that we do which we do in the service of God are things that are to be done from the heart in the Spirit. And they are not to be done as simply acts of profession, outward acts, ritualistic acts, acts that we do merely by form.

Malachi stresses that the things that we do in service for God should be things that proceed out of the heart and specifically out of a fear for the Lord. That is one of his great words. In other words, there is a lot of stress upon true Christian character, vital Christian character.

G. Campbell Morgan was said in one of the biographies of his life to have been riding along with Mr. Moody one day in the Northfield lanes. And they were great friends, and in the midst of this day in which they were riding over Northfield, Mr. Moody turned to Mr. Morgan and said, What is character anyhow? And Mr. Morgan said that he knew that he had something on his mind, so he said, Well, what is it? And Moody said, Character is what a man is in the dark. Someone else has said, When a grocer sells you a barrel of apples, you find his profession on the top, but as you work down, you discover his character.

Now Malachi, I feel in the things that he is saying here, would like to see believers be individuals who truly serve the Lord in vitality and in reality. And he has some very

harsh things to say about those who make a profession of spirituality but who do not have any spirituality at all.

I have a good friend; he preaches the word of God. And he has often spoke very strongly in favor of the capitalistic system. One day I was talking to him, and in the midst of our conversation, he made a statement that concerned his insurance policy. And I said, What insurance policy is that that you mentioned? And he named the name of a mutual insurance company. And I said, Well, how does this comport with your statements so often in favor of the capitalistic system? Here you affirm a capitalistic system and affirm the legitimacy of a profit motive and you yourself buy a mutual insurance policy. I never have asked him what he's been doing since that time, but it seemed to me that that was a patent contradiction. So, when we in our spiritual life make great professions, Malachi would have us be sure that the things that we profess are really true in our lives.

Malachi, first of all, is placed in the cannon, as you can see, as the last book of the Old Testament in our English Bible. It is not the last book of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Old Testament concludes with 2 Chronicles. But Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets. It is the last word in our English Bible because it is the last book of the Old Testament to be written. Its date is later than the others.

It's a rather striking thing the way this prophecy ends, too. Have you ever noticed it? In verse 6 of chapter 4 we read, "And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse."

Now, the Bible begins with man in the Garden of Eden created by God and placed there, you know. It also, in the 3rd chapter, describes the fall of man. So almost the whole of the Bible is the story of the history of fallen man.

Now the end of the Book of Genesis ends with a coffin. Have you ever noticed that? In the last verse of the 50th chapter of Book of Genesis, Moses says. I'll turn to it.

He says, "So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years: and he was embalmed, and placed in a coffin in Egypt."

Some Bible teacher has made comment upon the fact that the Book of Genesis after the fall of man ends with that comment about a coffin in Egypt, that the Old Testament ends, our English Old Testament ends with the word of the curse upon the nation that does not return to the Lord. But the New Testament ends on the note of grace, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all," suggesting that in the Bible we have the story of fallen man, and in the New Testament we have the story of the grace of God by which fallen man is restored. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It's very fitting in our English texts that it should end with that note of the curse.

Now let me speak secondly a word or two about the prophet. We read in verse 1, "The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi."

Now we do not know a single thing about the Malachi or his family beyond that which is found in this book. There are differing views about who Malachi was or what this name really means. For example, some have said that the term Malachi is probably a title. The Hebrew word *malack*, now you could transliterate that something like m, a, l, a, c, k. That's a very poor transliteration but that's close enough, malack.

Now, Malachi is m, a, l, a, c, h, or c, k, i. Malachi. The Hebrew word *malack* means simply a messenger. It's the word for angel, malack. So malacki is my messenger.

Now some have said Malachi is simply a title; all it means is my messenger. And in fact, some have said that Malachi would be an abbreviated form for malacki yah, that is, the messenger of Jehovah. And in that case, we're not to think of an individual but we are to think of a title. And we do not know at all the name of the person who may have written the book.

In chapter 3, verse 1, he says, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me." In that sentence we shall learn when we get there, if you don't already know this, that's a reference to John the Baptist. "Behold, I am going to

send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant (That's the Lord), to whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts."

So, the term Malachi, according to this view, is simply a title. And we do not really know the name of the prophet. It is said in support of this, that since we don't know anything about him, Malachi being a title is a natural thing to expect. But then we didn't know anything about Obadiah either, nor did we know anything about Habakkuk, but they were certainly not titles. So that's not a convincing reason.

It is also true that the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Targums, the Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament, the Targum of this particular book, Jerome and Calvin thought too that this Malachi was simply a title. The New Testament never cites Malachi by name and it is the opinion of those who hold this view, that therefore Malachi probably is a title. We just don't really know the name of the author of this book.

On the other hand, the great majority of the commentators have thought that Malachi was a personal name. And even though we don't know anything about him, still we are to think of a person. If it's an abbreviated form, it's an abbreviation of the messenger of Jehovah, as I said, malachi yah.

I think it would be natural to expect that this should be a man, a certain specific man, because there should be some authentication of a message. And the prophets were men who had been set apart as God for specific work. They were similar to the apostles in the New Testament in that they both were prophetic so far as the word of God was concerned. And it would be expected, I think, for us to have an authentication of their message. And personal identity would certainly seem to be involved in it. We don't have any other analogy to anonymity in the Old Testament so far as the prophets are concerned either.

Now then, if we assume that his name is really Malachi, he is a person who has concealed from us the facts about his life and ministry. And I guess that that's really a good idea, because he's a true hidden messenger as one should be. Someone who comes with the message of the Lord should not intrude himself so much into the situation that those who listen do not hear it as a message from the Lord. That's one of the great dangers that preachers have. They tend to sometimes unconsciously so intrude themselves into the message that they are preaching that you forget about the message and forget about the one from whom the message is come, and think about the preacher instead of what he is saying, instead of the message

Now Malachi is certainly not guilty of that. "The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi." In this he's like the one of whose ministry he writes: John the Baptist who was simply "a voice of one crying in the wilderness."

Third, notice the people to whom this prophecy is addressed. It is addressed to Israel. Therefore, if this is the last of the books of the Old Testament written, the last of those books, this prophecy is addressed to the nation that had returned under Zerubbabel and also under Ezra. And the picture of the audience is found in passages such as the Book of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah.

Fourth, the period of time in which the book was written and about which it is written. Evidently Malachi was written after the exile of the children of Israel to Babylonia, because the temple has been restored.

Remember our important dates that we looked at when we were studying Haggai. In 586 BC Jerusalem was captured and the temple was destroyed. Fifty years later in 536, Cyrus granted the rebuilding of the temple and there was a return of the children of Israel, a little under fifty thousand of them, under Zerubbabel. And then in 520, after the delay, after they had come back to the land and had refused to do what they had come back for, Haggai and Zechariah urged the people to rebuild the temple and they set about their

work and finished it around 515 BC. Then in 458 BC, there was a return of another group under Ezra.

Now the story of that is told in Ezra chapter 7. In 445 BC, thirteen years after the return under Ezra, Nehemiah, a high-ranking official of the Persians, a Jew, received permission to rebuild the walls of the city. Nehemiah came to Jerusalem and the walls were completed, he says, in fifty-two days. They agreed on certain reforms; certain things were set out as moral reforms necessary in order to prevent the spreading corruption. Malachi will write about a great number of them. We will talk about them when we get to them in the context.

After Nehemiah had been there for twelve years he had to return to Persia. And while he was there, he stayed there evidently for several years, the people violated every one of those agreements that they had made, which was evidence of the fact that they really did not have a relationship with the Lord that was vital in the heart. And so shortly after that, well I guess three or four years after he had gone back, Nehemiah came back. We do not know the exact time when he came back but perhaps around the year 430 BC.

It is the opinion of many of the commentators on this book that Malachi was written shortly after Nehemiah came back to the land. The reason that they think that this was the time that it was written is because when Malachi begins to write, he writes about the same conditions that are set forth in the book of Nehemiah, the conditions with which Nehemiah was concerned. It is possible that it was written twenty or thirty years later, perhaps as late as 397 BC. But sometime during that thirty or forty year period of time, the Book of Malachi was written. The last of the books of the Old Testament.

Fifth, the purpose of Malachi. The purpose of Malachi is therefore to correct the abuses and the corruption among the people. And so this book is a strong word of exhortation by which the prophet seeks to have the children of Israel turn in repentance, in confession and also to come to a relationship to the Lord that is vital and saving.

Sixth. I know you're surprised that I have made six points already, but perhaps you're saying, They weren't such strong points, Dr. Johnson, I'm not surprised.

Now Malachi, let me speak a word about the plan of Malachi. Malachi is one single prophecy beginning in the first chapter and the first verse and concluding in our English Bible in the fourth chapter and the sixth verse. But there are three divisions in it.

The first division is a division in which Malachi speaks of Israel's contempt for God's name. This division begins in verse 1 and concludes with chapter 2 and verse 9. Chapter 1, verse 1 through chapter 2, verse 9. And in it, as you read, and I hope you'll read it this next week, as you read it you will see that God speaks in this section to the priests. And notice that the first person is used in this part of the prophecy. So Israel's contempt for God's name.

Then the second division begins in chapter 2, verse 10 and concludes with chapter 2, verse 16, the next to the last verse in the second chapter. And here Malachi writes of God's condemnation of Israel's impiety. And notice in this section, the prophet instead of addressing the priests, addresses the people. And if you'll look carefully at the prophecy, you will see that it is written in the third person through this section. So we have the first person as God addresses the priests and now the third person as the prophet addresses the people.

And the final section begins at chapter 2, verse 17 and does not conclude until chapter 4, verse 6, the end of the prophecy. And here he expatiates on the subject of the coming day of the Lord. And here he answers the question that he asks in chapter 2 verse 17, "Where is the God of justice?" And he will show that the God of justice is a God who will come and at the day of the Lord set things straight.

Now in this last section, you'll see that it is God who speaks to the people. And if you'll watch carefully, the prophecy is again in the first person. So we have God speaking to the priests in the first person in the first section. We have the prophet

speaking to the people in the second section in the third person as you might expect. And then in the third section, we have God speaking to the people in the first person.

Now one of the striking things about Malachi is what I want to say a word about right now. Every one who has ever read and studied Malachi has noticed that Malachi is the Hebrew Socrates. He is the prophet who teaches by asking questions and answering them.

Now there is a great difference between Malachi's way of teaching and the teaching that we frequently call the Socratic method. Only a Socrates can really teach using the Socratic method with great success. Unfortunately, a lot of people who don't have the intelligence of Socrates, that Socrates had in his little finger, attempt to teach by the Socratic method. And it usually is about as dull a teaching method as you could possibly find. But with Socrates who used it and knew how to use it, it was something else.

Now Malachi has been called the Hebrew Socrates because he asks questions and answers them. Incidentally he didn't throw out questions for them to answer. He answered them. That of course is much the best way to teach. I never have felt it was very much fun or very enlightening to gather and to have a discussion hour in which we share our ignorance. [Laughter]

Now he did not do that. He was a man who asked questions, but then he answered them. Now I want you to notice the questions. This is something and when you read Malachi you will be particularly impressed with.

Now let's look at the occurrence of these questions. There are as you might expect seven of them. The first one is in verse 2 of chapter 1. "I have loved you." Incidentally, the pattern of this is: God makes a statement, an affirmation. Then there is a question that God or the prophet offers. And then thirdly, there is a refutation of what is implied in that question.

Notice, "I have loved you,' says the Lord." That's the affirmation. And this one comes from the Lord. And then there comes the interrogation, "But you say, 'How hast Thou loved us?'" You see the question is put in the mouth of the people or the priests. "I have loved you,' but you say 'How hast Thou loved us?'

And then there comes the answer in the form of a refutation of the attitude of mind reflected in their question, How? Now if you have an Authorized Version, all of the 'how's are rendered by wherein. So books on Malachi have been written with the title Wherein: An Exposition of Malachi.

In the American Standard Bible, all of these "wherein"s have been rendered by "how", except for the last of the seven. And incidentally, in the last of the seven, in the Authorized Version it too was rendered differently, rendered by "what", the same thing that we have in this. We'll see that in a moment.

So here, I have loved him, says the Lord. But you say, How hast Thou loved us? Evidently they doubted the love of God because of their history. And then the answer comes, "'Was not Esau Jacob's brother? " declares the Lord. "Yet I have love Jacob; but I have hated Esau.'" And then the answer is given.

Now in the 6th verse, we have another one of these questions. " 'A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the Lord of hosts to you," There we have the affirmation. Now we have the interrogation, "But you say, 'How have we despised Thy name?'" " 'Wherein have we despised Thy name?' " And then there follows the answer.

Notice the 7th verse, "You are presenting defiled food upon My altar," affirmation. Interrogation, "But you say, 'How have we defiled Thee?'" Answer, "In that you say, 'The table of the Lord is to be despised.'" That's the refutation.

Now notice chapter 2 verse 17, that's three of these "how"s. Chapter 2 verse 17, "You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied Him?"

In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them," or, "Where is the God of justice?"

And then chapter 3 verse 7 is the fifth of the "how"s, "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept them. (Affirmation) Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. (Interrogation) "But you say, 'How shall we return?'" And then there follows the refutation of the attitude expressed in their question.

Verse 8, "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and contributions."

And verse 13, " Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What (or how or wherein) Wherein have we spoken against Thee?'"

So you can see then that this book is really a book that is filled with this question and answer method of teaching. This was a recognized Hebraic method of teaching. And this Semitic method became very prominent after the time of Malachi, in fact, it was so overdone that it became very tedious kind of reading. But Malachi was a master of it.

Now let me in the concluding time that we have say a few words, seventhly, about the pertinence of Malachi for today. Next week we want to look at those opening words about he distinguishing love of God and the meaning of the expression "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. " But today, tonight, let me say a few final words about: Why is this book pertinent for us?

Now as I said in speaking of the minor prophets before, the book is addressed to the nation Israel, is it not? The very first verse says, "The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi."

Now, who is Israel? Well, Israel we all know is the chosen nation. But now Israel at this time is a nation that obviously is in a backslidden condition. As a matter of fact, there is good reason for thinking that they were largely apostate. But the important thing about them is that they were those that knew a great deal about truth. They knew a great

deal of truth. They had been exposed to the divine revelation. They illustrate for us people who know truth, so far as the outward expression of it is concerned, not really.

No one ever knows truth except they truly know truth. You cannot stand off from Christianity and know Christianity. There is no way to know Christianity until one has become a Christian. And even then, it's a long process of growth in grace.

But it is possible for people to be able to express the phrases, to know the system, to know a great deal about that which makes up the organization of Israel, for example. It was possible for them to know a great deal about the priesthood, to know a great deal about the sacrifices. It was possible for them to bring sacrifices. They knew all of the sacrifices. They brought them. It was possible for them to know a great deal about the priesthood. And so it was possible for them to know a great deal about truth. But they didn't have the truth. They had not really responded to the truth. The truth was not a reality with them.

Now if there's anything that characterizes large sections of professing Christianity in the western world today, it is just that. We have a great deal of outward knowledge, superficial perhaps, but outward knowledge, formal knowledge of Christianity. Many of our great denominations that have been in existence, for some of them hundreds of years, are organizations that were founded upon biblical principles largely. We have a series of creeds that express the vital truth of Christianity, but the people don't know anything about it. We have large groups of professing Christians who meet who do not really know what Christianity is. If you were to ask them: What is Christianity? They do not know what Christianity is.

So this book is written to a people who know a great deal about truth but have become apostate. It is very pertinent. It may be very pertinent to some of us in this auditorium. It's very possible that you should be in this auditorium and thinking that you know a great deal about Christianity, but really all of your knowledge is the knowledge of form and ceremony and ritual, the attendance at church services, the attendance at

meetings, the service in the meetings, the kinds of things that make up a great deal of our Christianity. So the very fact that this is addressed to Israel in the day of their decline and departure from the faith makes this a very pertinent book for us today.

There are certain abuses here that I think are very important too. Let me mention just three of them. There is the abuse of formalism. This formalism which the prophet denounces so strongly in the Book of Malachi is the forerunner of the Phariseeism which appears in New Testament times. And it's the forerunner of the kind of formalism that we have today.

We have a great deal of this in the Christian church in which we go through the motions. And even in our churches that are evangelical, we find this. A lot of people are going through the motions in Believers Chapel. They're saying to their friends, We attend a church where the Bible is preached. And they come. They attend the meetings, but as far as any real vitality in the Christian faith is concerned, they have very little. The vitality they have is the ability to get out of bed on Sunday morning and arrive here around the time for the meeting to begin and to sit through the meeting, and that is just about all that Christianity means to them.

I read an amusing story about a man who was fishing in my hometown of Charleston. And he was sitting on the battery and had his fishing line out over it. And there was a convention of church members in Charleston. And they were Baptists. And during the course of one of the intermissions, one of the Baptist preachers was walking along the battery. And he saw this man fishing, and he stood and watched him for a while. And finally he saw him have something on his line, and the man then pulled in his fish.

And as they looked at the fish, he said it appeared to be a cross between a toad and a bullhead. And knowing very little about fishing, the Baptist preacher said to the man, What kind of fish is that?

And the man said, That's a Baptist fish. He said, A Baptist fish?

And he said, Yes, they calls them that because they spoil so fast after theys taken out of the water. [Laughter]

Now I don't mean to attack the Baptists when I say that, but that does express the experience of a lot of Christians it seems. They have made a profession of faith. There is a kind of an opening vitality in Christian things and an initial interest. And then they drift into the kind of existence that I was describing a minute ago. Formalism, Malachi has a great deal to say about that.

Then secondly, he has a great deal to say about immorality in the second chapter. And we're certainly living in a day of immorality. And finally, in the last part of the book he has a great deal to say about skepticism, unbelief. And in this what he attacks is the forerunner of Sadduceeism, and of our Protestantism, and some of our materialism too.

But the prophet in this epistle makes an extremely strong appeal. In fact, someone has said, the Book of Malachi is one long lengthy appeal, a powerful passionate pleading appeal, an appeal to repent of sin and to return to God, an appeal accompanied by a rich promise if the people respond and by stern warning if they refuse. He will tell about the day of the Lord and warn them that at the day of the Lord, the Lord is going to judge the guilty. But after the day of the Lord he will bless and reward those who have the fear of Jehovah.

Well, it's time for us to close and I want to urge you now to study this book, read it, and I'm sure you'll get a great deal more out of our studies of it if you'll do that.

Let's bow in a closing word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the prophecy of Malachi. And we do ask that as we study it together, Thou wilt enable us to grasp its central message. And above all, Lord, may the things that Malachi attacks so expressively be things that do not characterize our lives. For Jesus' sake. Amen.