

Majoring on the Minors: The Prophet Malachi
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A man stopped by a house with a sign out front that said, "Talking Dog For Sale." The owner directed him to the backyard to see the dog. He was pretty skeptical and called out, "You talk?" "Yep," the mutt replied. The man then said, "So, what's your story?" The dog looked up and said, "Well, I discovered this gift when I was young and I wanted to help the government so I went to work for the CIA. I jetted around from country to country. I've spied on world leaders because no one ever figured a dog could eavesdrop. I was one of their most valuable agents. I uncovered some incredible secrets and was awarded a bunch of medals. I had a wife, a mess of puppies, and now I'm just retired."

The guy couldn't believe his ears! Who ever heard of a dog that talked? He was already thinking of ways he could use an eavesdropping dog. He turned to the owner and said, "How much do you want for him?" The owner replied, "Ten dollars." To which the man replied, "Your dog is amazing. Can I ask why you're selling him so cheap?" The owner just shook his head and said, "Because he's a liar! He never did any of those things!"

That reminds me of the older gentleman who had serious hearing problems for over 10 years. He finally went to the doctor and was fitted for a set of hearing aids that enabled him to hear perfectly. On his follow-up visit a month later, the doctor said, "Your hearing is now at 100%. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again." To which the man replied, "Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to conversations. I've ended up changing my will three times."

As we come to our minor prophet today, Malachi, it's helpful to think of God as eavesdropping on some conversations. He's listening in as two groups of people are talking. The first group is speaking against Him; the other speaks in awe of the Almighty. Group #1 looked around in discouragement; group #2 looked up in faith.

Let's pray: *Father God, we thank you for the ancient words you have long preserved so that we would be able to learn about you and to learn from you. Help us now as we turn to the book of your prophet Malachi. May the message there become very real for us today and begin a refining work in our lives that honors you. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Just as God had told Habakkuk, the people of the southern kingdom, Judah, had been conquered by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. Now, a small remnant of those who were exiled are back at home in Jerusalem. These are folks who would have grown up reading (major prophets) Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel's prophecies of restoration. Some of the people came back under the leadership of Zerubbabel and rebuilt the temple! But it wasn't nearly as magnificent as it had been in the days of Solomon and nowhere fits the description of the glorious new temple that Ezekiel described. Their crops were ok, but not abundantly fruitful. Nehemiah had gotten the walls around the city rebuilt, but it just wasn't as they had hoped. Jeremiah & Ezekiel prophesied that the people would be given new hearts to love and obey the Lord, but to be honest, they had grown weary of the Lord. They were just going through the motions of bringing sacrifices, but they weren't bringing their best. At the time that Malachi prophesied, the people were wondering if being God's people was really worth the effort.

Let's think about it from our current perspective. There are so many people outside church walls right now who don't give a hoot about God and what God says is right to do. Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God? Not even on their radar. And they seem to have plenty of money, plenty of friends, and plenty of eating, drinking, and being merry. And in here, there's someone who is trying to follow God's ways, trying to do life his way, and nothing seems to go right. Job trouble, family trouble, money trouble, health trouble, you name it. And so maybe, sometimes, there's a thought that tries to find its way out, "Is being a faithful Christian really worth it?"

The word of the Lord came to his prophet Malachi. The book begins, *"A prophecy: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi."* This whole book is God speaking through Malachi. This is not a back and forth between God and the prophet as we had last week in Habakkuk. This is not a back and forth between God, through a prophet to the people, and then back to God as we saw in Micah. This whole book, only 4 short chapters, is God speaking through the prophet Malachi, whose name means "messenger." God is speaking to the people who have returned to Jerusalem. He has heard their grumbling. He has been eavesdropping on the conversations they are having with one another about him. Here are the things he has heard.

1. Malachi 1:2, *"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?"*
2. Malachi 1:6, *"Where is the respect due me?" says the LORD almighty. But you ask, "How have we shown contempt for your name?"*
3. Malachi 1:7, *"You are presenting defiled food upon my altar." But you ask, "How have we defiled you?"*
4. Malachi 2:17, *"You have wearied the Lord with your words." "How have we wearied Him?"*
5. Malachi 3:7, *"Return to me, and I will return to you." "How shall we return?"*
6. Malachi 3:8, *"You are robbing me!" "How are we robbing you?"*
7. Malachi 3:13, *"Your words have been arrogant against me." "What have we spoken against you?"*

If someone in authority comes to you, let's just say the 'big boss' at your company comes to you, let's just say the one who has the authority to fire you on the spot comes to you, and says, "Where is the respect due me?" And you know that you have been complaining about this boss to some of your co-workers, or maybe just at home to your spouse, so you know you have been disrespectful, how are you going to respond? Are you going to come back at him or her in confrontation when you know you are guilty? "What are you talking about? How have I disrespected you?" If you still want your job, you probably aren't going to go there.

Our all-knowing God has seen and heard how the people of Judah have been disrespecting him. He is the ultimate eavesdropper! They were being unfaithful in their worship practices, they had unfaithful priests, they were unfaithful in their marriages because they were marrying outside the faith, and they were unfaithful in their financial giving to God's work. And he's calling them on it. The One who holds life and death in his hands, curse and blessing in his hands - He calls them on it, and all they can do is stand there and pretend what he's accusing them of isn't that big of a deal. After all, he's the one who is letting them down, not the other way around. If he would just come through on his promises, if he would have built them another glorious temple as he promised, if he would bless their crops and bless their herds they wouldn't have to skimp on the sacrifices...

John Killinger tells about the manager of a minor league baseball team who was so disgusted with his center fielder's performance that he ordered him to the dugout and assumed the position himself. The first ball that came into center field took a bad hop and hit the manager in the mouth. The next one was a high fly ball, which he lost in the glare of the sun--until it bounced off his forehead. The third was a hard-line drive that he charged with outstretched arms; unfortunately, it flew between his hands and smacked his eye. Furious, he ran back to the dugout, grabbed the center fielder by the uniform, and shouted. "You've got center field so messed up that even I can't do a thing with it!" We are very, very good at blaming everyone, including God, for all the hard stuff going on in our lives.

The people had been overtaken by the Babylonians, just as God had said they would be if they didn't start turning away from worshipping idols and start worshipping him alone again. And now they are home from exile with a rebuilt temple, rebuilt walls, crops in the fields, and animals in the pens, and yet it wasn't enough. It wasn't good enough. God hasn't come through for us, and so we aren't going to cut him out of our lives altogether, we're just not going to go all-out for him, we'll give him our leftovers, we'll give him a second or third thought, but certainly not a first thought. God says, *"I have loved you."* But they ask, *"How have you loved us?"*

Do you remember from last week the illustration that living for Jesus, living a true faith-filled life is like training for a marathon while you're in the middle of the marathon? When you are running a marathon folks, the middle is a hard place to be. The adrenaline you had at the beginning has waned, the finish line is not visible, people around you are making all sorts of odd noises, maybe some have fallen away, some might be sick, and your own body is starting to complain. "How much longer?" Life as God's faithful people can be like that. While we are in the middle of this marathon, we can hear all sorts of things around us. People complaining about their church leaders, people grumbling about the pastor always challenging them to commit more – doesn't she know we're doing the best we can? How have I not given all I can? People complaining about the other people in the church who annoy them. People grumbling that we don't do this enough or we don't do that enough or we do this too much or we do that too much. And God hears all of it. Sees all of it. And loves us through every step of the marathon until we find our way home.

In Malachi 3:1-4, the prophet declares the promise that had been stated and restated since Genesis 3. He speaks of two messengers - one to prepare the way, and one to refine us, to purify us in righteousness. *"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 'But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 'he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 'Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."*

Who will prepare the way? John the Baptist – the forerunner for the Lord Jesus, the promised Messiah. Isaiah wrote (40:3), *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him!"* Malachi wrote, *"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."* This is good news he is declaring to his complaining people. A messenger is coming. But that messenger is just to prepare the way for the second messenger! The messenger of the covenant, the Promised One who will finally fulfill the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob, is coming. He is coming. This is great news! But, there is some hard news in the midst of the good. This second messenger is coming like a refiner's fire and like a refiner himself. Both the refiner and the fire.

Let's think about that for a minute. It does not say that the messenger of the covenant is coming like a forest fire, or like an incinerator's fire. It says that he is like a refiner's fire. A forest fire destroys indiscriminately. An incinerator consumes completely.

Jesus, the promised one, is coming like a refiner's fire. A refiner's fire does not destroy indiscriminately like a forest fire. A refiner's fire does not consume completely like the fire of an incinerator. A refiner's fire refines. It purifies. It melts down the bar of silver or gold, separates out the impurities that ruin its value, burns them up, and leaves the silver and gold intact. Jesus is like a refiner's fire, because he desires not to destroy us, but to refine us. Why? Because we need to be refined. I need to be refined. We all need to be refined.

We were created in the image of God, made to love and serve God with everything that we are. But we were born in sin, we were born with the impurity of rebellion and unbelief. We question God with arrogance and blame others when he tells us we need to clean things up. We need the refiners fire. We need the refiner if we are going to meet together in heaven where there is no sinfulness of any sort. If Jesus was more than a refiner's fire, if he was a forest fire, heaven would be empty. If he were an incinerating fire, heaven would be empty. If there were no fire at all, heaven would be empty. But verse 6 of chapter 3 tells us *"I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed."* If we are trusting in God's promises, if we are trusting in the One who has come and who will come again, we are the descendants of Jacob! And we will not be destroyed. *"I have loved you,"* God says. He has loved us by sending us the Refiner's

Fire – Jesus Christ – who comes to make us new if we will yield ourselves to him. “Oh wash me in his precious blood, my Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.”

The book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, ends with God’s words to the faithful remnant. Malachi 3:16-4:6, *“¹⁶Then those who feared the Lord spoke with each other, and the Lord listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name. ¹⁷“They will be my people,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child. ¹⁸Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. The Lord of Heaven’s Armies says, “The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed—roots, branches, and all.*

²“But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.³ And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture. ⁴On the day when I act, you will tread upon the wicked as if they were dust under your feet,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. ⁵“Remember to obey the Law of Moses, my servant—all the decrees and regulations that I gave him on Mount Sinai for all Israel. ⁶“Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. ⁷His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

The very last word of the Old Testament is ‘curse.’ The story that began in Genesis with God’s blessing ends here in Malachi with God threatening to come and strike the land with a curse. And then there are 400 years of silence. Four hundred years! Four hundred years for God’s people to ponder all that he had said and done. Four hundred years to consider what they would choose – life or death – faith or faithlessness – blessing or curses. What will it be? Will we believe that the sun of righteousness will one day arise with healing in his wings? In the midst of all the heartache, the mass-shootings, the abortions, the wars, the hatred, the sex-trading, the drug cesspool, the floods, the earthquakes, the fires, the tsunamis...

And the first words spoken by an angel of the Lord 400 years later are spoken to Zechariah, the soon-to-be father of John the Baptist, (Luke 1:13), *“Do not be afraid.”* I have loved you. I will always love you. Do not be afraid. The Redeemer is on his way. Amen.

Is He Worthy? By Chris Tomlin. (from *Revelation 5*)

Do you feel the world is broken? We do. Do you feel the shadows deepen? We do.
But do you know that all the dark won't stop the light from getting through? We do.

Do you wish that you could see it all made new? We do.

Is all creation groaning? It is. Is a new creation coming? It is.

Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within our midst? It is.

Is it good that we remind ourselves of this? It is.

Is anyone worthy? Is anyone whole? Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?

The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave, He is David's Root
and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave. Is He worthy?

Is He worthy of all blessing and honor and glory? Is He worthy of this? He is.

Does the Father truly love us? He does. Does the Spirit move among us? He does.

And does Jesus our Messiah hold forever those He loves? He does.

Does our God intend to dwell again with us? He does.

Is anyone worthy? Is anyone whole? Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?

The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave, He is David's Root
and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave.

From ev'ry people and tribe every nation and tongue,

He has made us a kingdom and priests to God to reign with the Son

Is He worthy? Is He worthy of all blessing and honor and glory? Is He worthy of this? He is.