

Lest We Forget! (Malachi)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Malachi 1, Lev. 1:1–3, Malachi 2, Eph. 5:21–33, Malachi 3, Exod. 32:32, Malachi 4.*

Memory Text: “My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty” (*Malachi 1:11, NIV*).

Key Thought: Malachi teaches us the extent of God’s commitment to His people but also points to their sacred responsibilities.

Malachi’s name means “my messenger.” We know nothing about him except that which we can glean from his short book, which brings the section of the Old Testament called the Minor Prophets (or The Book of the Twelve) to an end. His is also the last book of the Old Testament.

The central message of Malachi is that while God revealed His love for His people throughout their history, that love also made His people accountable to Him. The Lord expected the chosen nation and its leaders to obey His commands. Though open idolatry apparently had vanished (the book appears to have been written for Jews who had returned from Babylonian captivity), the people were not living up to the expectations of the covenant. Though they were going through the motions of religious observance, it was a dry formalism without heartfelt conviction.

May we as a church take heed!

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 29.*

Great Is the Lord

Read Malachi 1. What problem is the prophet addressing? How, today, might we be guilty of the same attitude that led to this rebuke?

Malachi contrasts God's love for His people with the attitude of the priests, whom he charges with the sin of contempt for God's holy name. When performing their duties in the temple, these descendants of Aaron accepted lame, blind, and sick animals for sacrifices to the Lord. In this way the people had been led astray into thinking that sacrifices were not important. Yet, God instructed Aaron and his sons in the wilderness that sacrificial animals should be physically perfect, without blemish (*see Lev. 1:1–3, 22:19*).

The prophet then lists three important reasons why God deserved to be honored and respected by the people of Israel. First, God is their Father. Just as children should honor their parents, so the people must respect their Father in heaven. Second, God is their Master and Lord. Just as servants obey their masters, so God's people should treat Him in the same way. Third, the Lord is a great King, and an earthly king would not accept a defective or sickly animal as a gift from one of His subjects. So, the prophet asks why the people would present such an animal to the King of kings, the One who rules over the whole world.

What, of course, makes their actions even more heinous in the sight of God is that these sacrifices were all pointing to Jesus, the spotless Son of God (*John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19*). The animals were to be without blemish because Jesus had to be without blemish in order to be our perfect sacrifice.

“To the honor and glory of God, His beloved Son—the Surety, the Substitute—was delivered up and descended into the prison-house of the grave. The new tomb enclosed Him in its rocky chambers. If one single sin had tainted His character the stone would never have been rolled away from the door of His rocky chamber, and the world with its burden of guilt would have perished.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 10, p. 385. Is there any wonder, then, that the sacrifices that pointed to Jesus had to be perfect?

Loving and Respecting Others

God’s voice, which dominates Malachi’s book, is the voice of a loving father who pleads with His children. When the people raise questions and make complaints, He is ready to dialogue with them. Most of the issues discussed by God and His people have to do with a few basic attitudes.

Read Malachi 2. Though a number of issues are dealt with here, for what practice is the Lord especially condemning the people? See *Mal. 2:13–16*.

While all the Jews recognized God as Father and Creator in their worship, not all of them were living as if God was the Lord of their lives. Malachi takes marriage as an example to illustrate the people’s lack of faithfulness and commitment to one another. According to the Bible, marriage is a sacred institution established by God. The people of Israel were warned against marrying outside the faith because by doing so they would compromise their commitments with the Lord and fall into idolatry. (See *Josh. 23:12, 13*.)

God had intended that marriage should be a commitment for life. In Malachi’s time, however, many men were breaking the vows that they had made early in life with, as the prophet said, the “wife of your youth.” Seeing their wives grow older, the husbands would divorce them and marry younger and more attractive women. For this reason, God says, He hates divorce (*Mal. 2:16*). This strong statement reveals how serious God is about marriage commitments, which so often people take very lightly. The strict rules in the Bible about divorce show just how sacred marriage is.

Because divorce was legal in Israel (*Deut. 24:1–4*), some men did not hesitate to break their marriage vows. Toward the end of the Old Testament period, divorce appears to have become common, somewhat like in many countries today. Yet, in the Bible marriage is consistently presented as a holy covenant before God (*Gen. 2:24, Eph. 5:21–33*).

Read Malachi 2:17. What warning should be taken from these words, especially in the context of the day’s lesson? Or even in general? How could we be in danger of harboring that same attitude, even subconsciously?

Tithe in the Storehouse

Read Malachi 3:1–10. What is God saying to His people here? What specific elements are found in these verses, and why would they all be tied together? That is, in what ways are these things all related to each other?

With these verses, God restates the basic message of the Minor Prophets: His love remains constant and unwavering. In verse 7 God’s call is heard once more: “ ‘Return to me, and I will return to you’ ” (*NIV*). The people then ask: “ ‘How shall we return?’ ” (*RSV*). This question is similar to the one in Micah 6:6 about the bringing of sacrifices to God. In the case of Malachi, however, a specific answer is given, and, surprisingly enough, it has to do with the question of the people’s tithing, or lack thereof.

In fact, the people are accused of stealing from what belongs to God. This happened because they were not faithful in the returning of their tithes and offerings.

The custom of tithing, or giving 10 percent of one’s income, is presented in the Bible as a reminder that God owns everything and all that people have comes from Him. The tithe was used in Israel to support the Levites, who ministered in the temple. To neglect the returning of one’s tithe is, according to Malachi, the same as robbing God.

Malachi 3:10 is one of the rare Scriptures in which God challenges people to put Him to the test. At the waters of Meribah in the wilderness, the children of Israel repeatedly “tested” God’s patience, which made Him angry (*Pss. 95:8–11*). Here, however, God is inviting Israel to put Him to the test. He wants the people to see that they can trust Him in this matter, which, according to the texts, is something of great spiritual significance.

How does the act of tithing (and of giving offerings, for that matter) strengthen you spiritually? In other words, when you cheat on tithe, why are you cheating yourself, not just God?

A Scroll of Remembrance

In Malachi 3:13–18, the people complain that the Lord did not care about the nation’s sins. Those who practiced evil and injustice appeared to escape unnoticed; and thus, many wondered why they should serve the Lord and live righteously when evil seemed to go unpunished.

Read Malachi 3:14, 15. Why is it easy to understand that complaint?

How does the Lord respond? *Mal. 3:16–18.*

It is easy in this world, where so much injustice exists, to wonder if justice ever will be done. The message here, however, is that God knows of all these things, and He will reward those who are faithful to Him.

The expression “a scroll [book] of remembrance” is found only here in Scripture. What do the following passages teach about God’s books in which are recorded people’s names and deeds? *Exod. 32:32, Ps. 139:16, Isa. 4:3, 65:6, Rev. 20:11–15.*

The bottom line is that the Lord knows all things. He knows those who are His (*2 Tim. 2:19*) and those who are not. All we can do is, as sinners, claim His righteousness, claim His promises of forgiveness and power, and then—relying on Christ’s merits—die to self and live for Him and others, knowing that in the end our only hope is in His grace. If we place our hope in ourselves, we are sure to be disappointed, one way or another.

The Sun of Righteousness

On a previous occasion the people asked, “ ‘Where is the God of justice?’ ” (*Mal. 2:17, NKJV*). In the beginning of chapter 4, a solemn assurance is given that one day God will execute His judgment on the world. As a result, the proud will be destroyed along with the wicked, just as stubble is consumed in fire. Stubble is the unusable part of the grain, and is consumed in only seconds when thrown into a blazing furnace. On the Day of the Lord, fire will be the agent of destruction, just as water was in Noah’s day.

Read Malachi 4. What great contrast is presented here between the saved and the lost? See also Deut. 30:19, John 3:16.

While the fate of the wicked is described in verse 1, verse 2 focuses on future blessings of the righteous. The question “Where is the God of justice?” is answered again, but this time by the assurance of a coming day when the “sun of righteousness” will rise with healing in its wings (*IV*). The rising of the “sun of righteousness” is a metaphor for the dawn of a new day, one that marks a new era in the history of salvation. At this time, once and for all, evil will be destroyed forever, the saved will enjoy the ultimate fruit of what Christ has accomplished for them, and the universe will be rendered eternally secure.

Malachi closes his book with two admonitions that characterize biblical faith. The first is a call to remember God’s revelation through Moses, who wrote the first five books of the Bible and the foundation of the Old Testament.

The second admonition speaks of the prophetic role of Elijah. Filled with the Holy Spirit, this prophet called people to repent and return to God. Although Jesus Himself saw John the Baptist as a fulfillment of that prophecy (*Matt. 11:13, 14*), we also believe it has a fulfillment at the end of time, when God will have a people who fearlessly will proclaim His message to the world. “Those who are to prepare the way for the second coming of Christ, are represented by faithful Elijah, as John came in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for Christ’s first advent.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health*, pp. 72, 73.

How are we to fulfill this sacred role? How well are we doing in this task?

Further Study: “God blesses the work of men’s hands, that they may return to Him His portion. He gives them the sunshine and the rain; He causes vegetation to flourish; He gives health and ability to acquire means. Every blessing comes from His bountiful hand, and He desires men and women to show their gratitude by returning Him a portion in tithes and offerings—in thank offerings, in freewill offerings, in trespass offerings. They are to devote their means to His service, that His vineyard may not remain a barren waste. They are to study what the Lord would do were He in their place. . . . They are to take all difficult matters to Him in prayer. They are to reveal an unselfish interest in the building up of His work in all parts of the world.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 707, 708.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Dwell more on the Bible and marriage. Because marriage itself is so sacred, something created by God Himself, it comes with some very strict guidelines about what is biblically permitted to dissolve it. After all, how sacred, how important would marriage be were it easily ended? If you could get out of it for the most trivial of reasons, then marriage itself would be trivial. How do the strict rules against ending a marriage prove just how special it is?
- ❷ As a class, carefully go over Malachi 2:17. What do we, as Seventh-day Adventists, with our understanding of the pre-Advent judgment, have to say to those who might be uttering the same sentiments expressed in this verse?
- ❸ Malachi 4 talks about the ultimate destruction of the lost. Nothing remains. How does this teaching contrast with the idea of an eternally burning hell-fire? Why is the contrast between these two views a good example of the ways in which false doctrine can lead to a false understanding about the character of God?
- ❹ In his classic work “The Grand Inquisitor,” Russian writer Dostoevsky depicted the institution of the church in his time as having things so well under control that it did not need Christ anymore. Are we facing that same danger today? If so, how so? How might this danger be more subtle than we realize?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Malachi 1:11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that God’s commitment to His people will result in the glorious manifestation of His presence and in certain prophetic activities at the climax of the world’s history.

Feel: Appreciate the Lord’s vast blessings that await His followers as they also appreciate His gifts.

Do: Lead a responsible life celebrating the greatness of God’s name.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s Commitment to His People

- A** What does it mean that God loves His people in their everyday lives?
- B** Why does God engage Himself in different dialogues with His people?

II. Feel: Appreciation for God’s Blessings

- A** How does giving your tithe and offerings help you to appreciate God’s blessings?
- B** What relationship is there between our lifestyles and our faith?

III. Do: The Responsible Life

- A** How does your faithfulness to your spouse reflect on your faithfulness to the Lord, and why?
- B** As a church, what can you do to encourage people to think about the needs of others and not be selfish?
- C** How rich would you be if God gave you double the amount of money you gave to the poor and needy? Why is giving more valuable than keeping or receiving?

► **Summary:** God is in dialogue with His people so that they can realize how deeply He loves them and is concerned about their well-being. He calls them to be faithful in all the spheres of their lives. He puts the emphases on marital faithfulness, parenting, leadership, and tithing.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Malachi 1:2*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God assures His people that He loves them. They doubt it, and, as a result, they live their own selfish and wicked lives. This means that our spiritual lives and growth depend on our picture of God. When we fully believe that He wants our best, then we yield our lives to Him in complete trust, live in total dependence upon Him, and follow His will out of gratitude. Only then can we prosper.

Just for Teachers: This week's lesson focuses on God's love for His people and His coming on the day of the Lord. Emphasize to your class that, as His followers, we are strongly admonished to do what is right because the day of accountability is near.

Opening Discussion: How often we take for granted many precious blessings that we experience in life. Consider carefully the following question: how can we learn to appreciate and be more grateful for all the blessings that God is constantly giving us?

Questions for Discussion:

1 According to the book of Malachi, how many questions did the people ask God? These questions will help you to discover the different topics with which the prophet is dealing. (See questions in Mal. 1:2, 6, 7; 2:14, 17; 3:7, 8, 13.) Pay close attention to God's answers. God answers our questions when we are confused in our understanding of the real issues of life. In His love He dialogues with His people, even though He could rightfully command our obedience.

2 How are we to understand God's call to people: "Return to me, and I will return to you" (NIV)? Who is making the first move? Who is calling? (See Mal. 3:7, NKJV.) Note that people should return to God because He lovingly and patiently invites them to do so.

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. God Loves You. Are You in Love With Him? (*Review Malachi 1:2, 3 with your class.*)

The book of Malachi opens with a difficult divine statement: “ ‘I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated’ ” (*Mal. 1:2, 3, NIV*). How should we understand this statement, which is one that goes against God’s nature? What does it mean that God “hated” Esau? Does He not love all people?

God reassures His people of His covenantal love and invites them to look back and see the historical difference between them and the descendants of Esau. This contrast is explained on the basis of election to service and has nothing to do with the idea of salvation; instead, it is established on God’s foreknowledge of Jacob’s and Esau’s decisions, life perspectives, and spiritual orientations.

The word *hate* in Hebrew sometimes has a different meaning from our understanding of the word today. Consider the following two examples: (1) Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (*Gen. 29:30*), but the biblical text describes this preference with the colorful word *hate*: “When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb” (*Gen. 29:31, ESV*). (2) Jesus stated the conditions under which His followers should “hate” even those who are closest to them: “ ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple’ ” (*Luke 14:26, NIV*). This hatred has absolutely nothing to do with emotional animosity toward the beloved ones; rather, it means that Christ’s disciple needs to love Christ more than his or her parents, spouse, children, or other close relatives (*see Matt. 10:37, Deut. 6:5*). Christ needs to be our number one priority. Thus, the word *hate* may refer to an idiomatic expression meaning “not being preferred,” or “not being an object of personal choice (for a special task),” as Leah was not Jacob’s preferred wife, even though he had six sons and one daughter with her.

Consider This: How are we to understand the statement that God loved Jacob but hated Esau? Similarly, what did Jesus mean by His words that if His followers came to Him but did not hate their loved ones, then they were not worthy of Him?

II. God Is Faithful. Are You Faithful to God? (*Review 1 John 4:7–12 with your class.*)

Our faithfulness to God is shown in a tangible way by our respect for His law and in the ways that we conduct our human relationships. (See *John 14:15, 1 John 4:7–12, 19–21*.) John wonders, How can people claim to love God, who cannot be seen, when they do not love their neighbor who lives beside them? If we do not show in a practical way our care, respect, and love, then we lie to ourselves. Consequently, our relationship with God is not genuine.

Consider This: What is true faithfulness? How does God demonstrate His faithfulness to us? How are we to demonstrate it to Him?

III. Are You Faithful to Your Spouse? (Review *Malachi 2:10–16* with your class.)

Our faithfulness to God is shown foremost in our faithfulness to our spouses.

The literary and thematic center of the book of Malachi is chapter 2:10–16. This theme is strong: “Stop being faithless!” Sin is defined in this passage as breaking faith: “‘So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless’ ” (*Mal. 2:16, ESV; see also Rom. 14:23*). The word for “breaking faith” or being “faithless” (*ESV*) or “deal[ing] treacherously” (*NKJV; in Hebrew bagad*) occurs in this short passage in Malachi (and only here in this book) five times (*vss. 10, 11, 14, 15, 16*), and it plays a key role. God is coming in judgment, and He will call people to be accountable to Him; therefore, they need to keep faith and cultivate right relationships, which come from faith. In the book of Malachi, having faith means to be faithful to the covenant we made with God and also with our spouses.

The faith relationship should be lived in our marriages. Here we cannot lie; we are either faithful to our spouses or we break this intimate covenant relationship. A loving spousal relationship will have a lasting and positive influence on our children.

Discussion Question: Why does God hate divorce? What is so damaging about it? How does it affect the spiritual lives of the involved couple, children, and the future? What are the legitimate causes for divorce? When can it be justified? See Jesus’ response to the question posed by some Pharisees: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” (*Matt. 19:3–9, NKJV*).

Discussion: Malachi uses a strong and graphic illustration in his teaching of what it means to live a life dedicated to God. Tell others of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His promises regarding tithe. How is it that nine-tenths always leaves more in your income than ten-tenths? Encourage others to be faithful to the Lord in the financial sphere of life so that they can also experience God’s special blessing (*Mal. 3:10–12*).

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: In order to better understand the questions the people had and the answers that God gave, invite class members to participate in the following activity.

Look at all of the questions that people asked in the book of Malachi and think about why the people asked these questions. Then explain the answers that God gave to each question or to some of them. Here are the people’s eight questions, prefaced by God’s statement, “you ask”:

1. “ ‘ “How have you loved us?” ’ ” (*Mal. 1:2, NIV*).
2. “ ‘ “How have we shown contempt for your name?” ’ ” (*Mal. 1:6, NIV*).
3. “ ‘ “How have we defiled you?” ’ ” (*Mal. 1:7, NIV*).
4. Why do You not pay attention to our offerings and accept them with pleasure from our hands? (*Mal. 2:13, 14*).
5. “ ‘ “How have we wearied him? . . . Where is the God of justice?” ’ ” (*Mal. 2:17, NIV*).
6. “ ‘ “How are we to return” ’ ” to You? (*Mal. 3:7, NIV*).
7. “ ‘ “How do we rob you?” ’ ” (*Mal. 3:8, NIV*).
8. “ ‘ “What have we said against you?” ’ ” (*Mal. 3:13, NIV*).

In what ways are these issues still relevant to us in our postmodern world? How are we grappling with similar questions?

Thought Question:

Why do we have such a hard time appreciating the love of God, who loved us so much that He even died for us?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Outline, in your own words, the main themes or literary structure of the book of Malachi. It will help you to discern the main issues that God presents to His people in the time of Malachi.

Activity: Create a picture of an ideal family. How should parents treat each other, and what kind of relationship should they cultivate with their children? How can they show their love so that their children not only know that their parents love them but feel it and are sure of it? How can parents respect their children’s individuality and help them to grow in their talents and interests? What things can they do together?