

## Malachi (December 29)

### Reading Malachi

Heat and flame from glowing charcoal caress the bottom of a pot full of powdery ore. Slowly the ore begins to weep drops of lead mixed with silver, which flow to the bottom of the pot, lifting the dirt and debris that resist the heat. When the contents are poured out and cooled, the dirt breaks away, leaving a purer alloy that is ready to be heated and refined yet again.

In the heat of suffering and persecution, Malachi saw the Lord at work to refine and purify the Levites, who were the spiritual leaders of Judah. Their unfaithfulness and impurity had the Lord's attention. Because he loved them, he could not leave them as they were.

### Author and Date

The book is ascribed to Malachi, whose name means "my messenger." Since the term occurs in Malachi 3:1, and since both prophets and priests were called messengers of the Lord, some have thought "Malachi" to be only a title that tradition has given the author. The matter, however, remains uncertain, and it is still very likely that Malachi was in fact the author's name.

The similarity between the sins denounced in Nehemiah and those denounced in Malachi suggest that the two leaders were contemporaries. Malachi may have been written after Nehemiah returned to Persia in 433 BC or during his second period as governor. Malachi was likely the last prophet of the Old Testament era (though some place Joel later).

### Themes and Theology

Although the Jews had been allowed to return from exile and rebuild the temple, several discouraging factors brought about a general religious malaise: (1) their land remained but a small province in the backwaters of the Persian empire, (2) the glorious future announced by the prophets (including the other postexilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah) had not (yet) been realized, and (3) their God had not (yet) come to his temple with majesty and power to exalt his kingdom in the sight of the nations. Doubting God's covenant love and no longer trusting his justice, the Jews of the restored community began to lose hope. So their worship degenerated into a listless perpetuation of mere forms, and they no longer took the law seriously.

Malachi rebukes their doubt of God's love and the faithlessness of both priests and people. To their charge that God is unjust because he has failed to come in judgment to exalt his people, Malachi answers with an announcement and a warning. The Lord they seek will come, but he will come like a refiner's fire. Because the Lord does not change in his commitments and purpose, Israel has not been completely destroyed for her persistent unfaithfulness. But only through repentance and reformation will she again experience God's blessing. Those who honor the Lord will be spared when he comes to judge.

In conclusion, Malachi once more reassures and warns his readers that the day of the Lord is coming. In that day the righteous will rejoice, and the wicked will be trampled down. To prepare his people for that day, the Lord will send "the prophet Elijah" to call them back to the godly ways of their forefathers.

### Blessings for Readers

As you read Malachi, consider and answer his questions honestly in view of the Lord's commands and promises and in view of your life. The fire of his teaching will sear the dross of your indifference and bring forth tears of sincere repentance. Treasure most of all his precious word about the appearance of Jesus, our Savior, the messenger of a better covenant.