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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Malachi.

(*The first of a series of three addresses given in Westminster Abbey by the Rt. Rev. H. E. RYLE, D.D., C.V.O., Dean of Westminster.*)

THE Old Testament in our English Bible closes with a short book of prophecy which, from very early times, has been called "Malachi." "Malachi," however, is not a proper name, but only the Hebrew word, meaning "my messenger." Very probably, Malachi, "my messenger," was given as a title to our little group of prophecies, because it is the key, or the most distinctive, word in the central passage of the book, "Behold! I send *my messenger*, and he shall prepare the way before me" (Mal. iii. 1).

If we follow the less probable opinion that it is a proper name, then Malachi must be regarded as an abbreviation for the full name Malachiah, or Malachijah, meaning "The Messenger, or Angel, of Jehovah." It is noteworthy that there is no proper name "Malachi" to be found in the contemporary writings and lists of Ezra and Nehemiah.

We should, therefore, probably regard the book as anonymous. The writer's message, not the writer's name in history, has given this work its place among the Minor Prophets.

It was evidently written some considerable time after the Return from the Exile, and after the completion of the Second Temple. A tone of deep depression had succeeded to the enthusiasm which had accompanied that event. No golden era had yet dawned upon the little Jewish community. Samaritans in the North, Edomites in the South, had omitted no opportunity of harassing the Jews, raiding their borders, intercepting trade, carrying off slaves, and ill-treating innocent people. Agriculture had suffered from a series of disastrous years. The people were threatened with starvation. A spirit of doubt and discontent had become general. There were three evil, ugly symptoms, against which Ezra and Nehemiah had to take action: the neglect of the Temple worship, the corruption of the priesthood, and the gross cruelty of the Jews towards their wives, whom they put away in order to marry the idolatrous daughters of foreigners. All three ugly symptoms are found in the stern denunciations contained in this book.

It is, therefore, practically certain that the writer was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. More than that it would be

rash to affirm. But it is reasonable to assume that the book Malachi was intended independently to give support to the policy which those two great reformers sought to carry out.

"It may be," says Dr. Pusey, "that times like those of Malachi, apathetic, self-justifying, murmuring, self-complacent needed a sterner, abrupter, more startling voice to awaken them."

I like to regard "God's love in dark days" as the Message of the prophet. "I have loved you, saith the LORD" (ver. 1) are the opening words. The people reply, "Wherein has Thou loved us?" Suffering had turned their faith cold. Doubt had given rise to murmuring and despair. Hardship and trouble seemed to them only to prove that God did not love them. The prophet's work is to point them higher. He wishes to show them that God had not ceased to love them, but they had ceased to love God. Their own unbelief, moral failure, spiritual indifference had been allowed to grow up as a barrier, shutting out from their hearts the sunshine of His love and rendering them powerless to realize its blessing.

Our first section consists of the first chapter and the first nine verses of the second.

The first lesson which we should draw from it is that *God teaches mankind by the lessons of history*. In order to meet the people's murmuring question, "Wherein hast Thou loved us?", the prophet points them to the history of a neighbouring people. He bids them contrast the fortunes of Israel with those of Edom. Jacob and Esau were twin brothers. Allied in origin, similar in speech, neighbours in territory, Israel and Edom had for centuries been bitter rivals. Edom had exulted in the overthrow of Israel by the Babylonians and in the destruction of Jerusalem: Edom had massacred the fugitives of Judah, and had pressed up triumphantly to the ruined walls of her hated foe. Nevertheless, Israel had returned from captivity. The temple of Jerusalem had been rebuilt; those city walls had been restored. Jehovah had never ceased to love Israel.

On the other hand, the overthrow of Edom was her annihilation. Her savagery, her pride, her perfidy, her cupidity, pervaded the whole nation. There were no elements of survival in her. She disappeared utterly in the whirlpool of a great catastrophe.

Doubtless, the prophet ascribes to Jehovah the same fierce hatred towards Edom which was felt by the people of Israel. It is a shock to us to find the words, "I hated Esau," put into the mouth

of Jehovah. But the revelation of the Old Testament prophet partakes not of the fulness of "grace and truth" of Jesus Christ. He speaks from a far lower level of moral and spiritual life than that of the New Testament. He bids his countrymen look away from themselves. Look at another nation; look, he says, at God's dealings with the people to which you are akin. The fire of God's indignation against the sins which are hateful in His sight shall utterly consume them. There was ever in Israel the nucleus of spiritual vitality. It was the seed of moral purity, slowly expanding and seeking to throw off the outer sheathe of Oriental corruption. Divine Love ever tenderly watched over the remnant of the true Israel, and saved it from destruction. The history of nations is our warning; it is also our encouragement. There was no history like that of Israel as a proof of God's enduring affection. The Jews could not see that. They were absorbed in little miseries. They could not step back and see themselves in their true colours, or view their shortcomings in their right proportion. The great picture of history, so far as Israel was concerned, might be summarized in the famous words of Lamentations (iii. 22), "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not"; and of the Psalmist (cxlvii. 20), "He hath not dealt so with any nation."

The second lesson which the prophet would convey in the remaining verses of this chapter seems to be that *failure in religious duty brings forfeiture of religious privilege*. Did the Jews complain that they could not see God's love to them, or experience its blessing? What do you expect? says the prophet; you claim to be His sons and His servants, and you give Him neither the honour of a son nor the reverence of a servant. You would not treat your own Persian Governor with such scant courtesy or such discreditable meanness. The Jew offered for sacrifice a maimed, blind, or otherwise defective, animal, instead of one without blemish, as the sacred law required. The Jew said within himself: There is no harm: it will cost less: does God either know or care?

Our little religious duties are the test of religious sincerity. If a man's belief in God's existence or in God's love is failing, he may, indeed, make his offering still, because public opinion will demand it. But, instead of giving of his best, he will give of his worst. In times of poverty and trouble, he will give that of which he will not feel the loss. This is the temptation of the doubter; this is the impulse of

the murmurer. It has, in every age, been the characteristic of the mere formalist, as well in the support of the Church of God and her worship, as in the relief of the sick and needy, when their cause is little known, or not fashionable. He will give a little for appearances; nothing for God. It is not God of whom he thinks.

"It is not surprising," the prophet seems to say, "that you have forfeited the joy of feeling God's love. If you dedicate to His service that which costs you least, you must not expect the fulness of blessing, which only crowns the surrender of that which you will feel the most. The experience of spiritual privilege for which you crave never fails to reward the honest offering of religious duty." It was where there was deadness of unbelief, the Son of God could do no mighty work. But, where there is true sacrifice to God's service, there is always some realization of the blessing of His love.

The first nine verses of the second chapter consist of a vehement indictment of the priesthood. The laity were apathetic and faithless. But the guilt of the priests was far more serious. The lesson which we derive from the passage is that *the faults of the priesthood are the reproach of the nation*. A priesthood, if well and honourably conducted, in the fear of God, and not of man, can confer upon a people untold blessings. But a corrupt or insincere priesthood is the source of moral depravity and national weakness.

The priests, of whom the prophet speaks, are not the ministers of an obscure or intricate ceremonial. They are God's spokesmen, the spiritual guides appointed to give counsel and direction to the people on all questions of perplexity. Their decisions should make for truth and justice, consolation and help, purity and peace. Verses 6, 7: "My covenant was with him of life and peace . . . the law of truth was in his mouth . . . he walked with me in peace and uprightness, and did turn many from iniquity." Observe well the sentences, "The priest's lips should keep knowledge, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts." Are they not great and tremendous descriptions of the priest's pastoral responsibility? They have been endorsed by the experience of Christendom. Whatever the priesthood of Jerusalem should have been, that, and something infinitely more, more efficient and more spiritual, should be the ordained ministry of Christendom. They are more than the executants of a sacred ceremonial; they are friends of the souls of the people, teachers

of morality, guides in the things of eternal life, workers under God for the spiritual peace and happiness of mankind.

Among the causes of infidelity, few have been so fatal as the spiritual deadness and the elaborate unreality of the priesthood. None have given more cause of offence to the weaker brethren than the ignorant priestly counsellor, who has bound on the backs of those who have sought his counsel, burdens too heavy to be borne ; none have brought such reproach upon the Church as the immoral priest, who has claimed that, because he dispenses the sacraments, he is freed from the moral responsibilities of the layman.

We need not wonder that the writer of this little book of prophecy speaks plainly upon a subject of reproach, which was accountable in great measure for the falling off in the people's faith. He faces the displeasure of those in authority. He anticipates the resentment of the clique whom he denounces. The truth must be told. Foremost among the misfortunes of the people, who complained that God did not love them, was this failure of their priesthood to do its spiritual duty. Instead of being the source of inspiration, knowledge, guidance and comfort to the nation, they had led the way in the sacrifice of truth to popularity, in the glorification of their own privileges, and in the degradation of the public conscience.

"Ye are turned aside out of the way," says the Lord's Messenger, "ye have caused many to stumble in the law ; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. ii. 8).

(To be continued.)

