

# Editorial: Reading and Apply Malachi Today

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Reading and applying the Old Testament (OT) to today's church is not always well done. Our tendency either is to allegorize OT stories so that they have some direct relevance for us, or merely to read the OT to draw various moral lessons for us today. No doubt, especially in regard to the latter, all of Scripture, including the OT, is for our instruction including our moral life. However, the problem with both of these approaches is that they fail to interpret and apply Scripture in its canonical context and thus miss how the OT unfolds God's glorious plan of redemption now brought to fulfillment in Christ.

In truth, as Christians, we stand in the second most significant place in all redemptive history. The best place to be is still future to us, namely, the second advent of our Lord Jesus. The great hope and longing of the church is for the day when our Lord returns to consummate what he began in his first advent and to bring all of history to its God-appointed end (Eph 1:9-10). Yet, today, living between the advents of Christ, we live in the next best place in history. Why? Because we live after the first coming of our Lord

who has ushered in God's long-awaited kingdom, and by his life, death, and resurrection, has inaugurated the beginning of the new creation and the new covenant age.

In Matthew 11:13-15 Jesus makes this very point. Our Lord views John the Baptist as the last of the OT prophets and, amazingly, the greatest man born among woman up to that point in time. Jesus views John this way because he views John in relation to himself! John is so great because he had the supreme privilege of serving as Christ's forerunner, and unlike any OT prophet, he had the glorious privilege of directly pointing out who the Messiah is. Yet, we, who are least in the kingdom, because we live after the cross and know of Christ in terms of his death and resurrection—something John did not experience in his life nor any other OT prophet or saint—are greater than John, and by extension any other person in the OT era.

One entailment of our privileged place in redemptive history is that we should be able to grasp better what the OT is saying, where it is pointing, how it has reached its fulfillment in Christ, and thus how to apply it rightly to our lives. Yet, as I noted above, we often do not do this well, and as such, one of the significant goals of this issue of *SBJT* is to help the church read and apply the OT better, especially the prophecy of Malachi.

The book of Malachi, which is the last book of the Minor Prophets, unfortunately, is often neglected in our preaching and teaching. If we do preach from it, it is usually to encourage people to give more money to the church (Mal 3:8-12) or to address the issue of marriage and divorce (Mal 3:16). Although both of these areas are important, there is much more to the book than these two points. In fact, the book rightly placed in its canonical context reminds us of crucial truths central to the gospel and which we must take to heart today. Specifically, I want to focus on three truths which the book of Malachi teaches us today—truths that are foundational to our understanding of the gospel and essential to Christian theology, life, and hope.

First, Malachi reminds us of the sinfulness of the human heart and that apart from God's covenant promises and determination to redeem his people we have no hope or salvation. The best illustration of this is the nation of Israel. Malachi, by a series of six disputations (1:2-5; 1:6-2:9; 2:10-16; 2:17-3:5; 3:6-12; 3:13-4:3) along with its conclusion (4:4-6), describes the sad state of the nation of Israel. Although God has brought them back from the Babylonian exile and restored them to their land with a rebuilt temple, the

return from exile has not changed their hearts. One would think that after experiencing the curses of the covenant in exile, the people's hearts would not remain the same, but, sadly, this is not the case. Malachi reminds us that the priesthood is corrupt (1:6-2:9), the covenant has been violated through intermarriage (2:11-12), there is marriage breakdown in the people (2:13-16), God is being robbed (3:8-10), social injustice is taking place within the nation (3:5), and there is an overall cynicism towards God and his promises deep within the hearts of the people (2:17-3:15). The people's hearts have not changed. What the previous prophets had anticipated in terms of new hearts, the dawning of the new creation, and ultimately the establishment of a new covenant (Isa 65-66; Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:25-27) has not taken place. God will have to do something more than merely bring the nation back from exile; he will have to provide a better servant, an obedient Messiah, who will usher in the Day of the Lord in judgment and salvation. Apart from God initiating to save in this latter sense, there is no hope for the nation of Israel, and by extension to the entire human race.

Second, Malachi reminds us that it is only in God's provision of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of God's promises and new life results. In describing the desperate situation of Israel, Malachi also points forward in hope to God's sovereign action to redeem. How will this come about? Consistent with the teaching of all of the prophets, it will come about by God himself bringing salvation and judgment. In judgment, God will defeat our enemies, purge his people, and accomplish our salvation in his Messiah (2:17-3:5; 3:13-4:3). In this way, Malachi looks forward to the coming of his messenger—Elijah (3:1; 4:5-6)—who will ultimately prepare the way for the coming of the Yahweh himself (3:1; 4:1-3). In the NT, these prophetic anticipations come to fruition in the coming of John the Baptist (Matt 11:14-15; Luke 1:17; John 1:21) who prepares the way of the Lord Jesus who is nothing less than the eternal Son made flesh (John 1:1, 14). From Malachi and the entire NT, we are reminded that it is only by our triune God acting in sovereign grace to provide his own Son that we have salvation. All of God's OT promises are only truly and fully fulfilled in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Third, in light of these truths, like the people of faith described in Hebrews 11, we, as the church, learn to trust God's promises more now that Christ has come. As we read Malachi, we can see how God has kept all of his covenant promises perfectly in Christ. We gain confidence that just as God kept his

Word in terms of Christ's first coming, we, in greater confidence than OT saints, can know that all of God's promises for the consummated end, will assuredly be fulfilled. No matter what is going on around us in the world, we can trust God's promises because our triune God is completely trustworthy in all he says and does.

Malachi, if properly read and applied, is a precious book for the church today. The goal of each contributor to this issue of *SBJT* is to enable us to understand and apply Malachi to us today for the good of the church and for the glory of Christ. My prayer is that this issue on Malachi will encourage the church today to live in greater confidence in the gospel, and to learn anew how *all* of Scripture is for our correction and instruction (2 Tim 3:1-17), and that by God's Word our hope will be renewed in confident trust, obedience, and service.