

Title: Closing the Book on the Road Trip
Date: September 2, 2018
Subject: How live our lives so as not to be like the people at the end of the Old Testament era
Scripture: Malachi

We began part 2 of our Summer Road Trip with the Old Testament Saints and Ain'ts during the time of the judges. The last judge, Samuel, paved the way for the first king. His interaction with Saul showed the importance of obedience. Saul's hatred of David vividly portrayed how anger, bitterness and jealousy can take over the landscape of a person's life. David as king was a signpost for Jesus who would be known as the Son of David and be the King of kings who brings salvation and security. The heyday of the kingdom continued as we explored just how wise Solomon wasn't and how relationships can build or destroy. Then the kingdom started downhill like a runaway semi as it divided into two during the conflict between Rehoboam and Jeroboam. There were good kings and evil kings, most being evil. The Lord sent prophets like Jonah, Isaiah and Hosea as his messengers with instructions and warnings to the divided nations and its enemies. Sometimes the enemy was more responsive than the "people of God" as was the case with Jonah's message to Nineveh. The two nations were taken into captivity were they languished. A remnant returned to rebuild but were met with opposition. The people followed the Lord, for a while, and then returned to complacency and mixing the things of God with the things of the world system that appealed to them. In other words, they followed their normal pattern.

This brings us to the closing chapter of the Jewish people. But it won't be the final chapter for Israel. There was more to be written but that wouldn't come for a long time. Up next is the 400 plus years, the so called silent years because there's nothing recorded in the Bible about it.

The last word from the Lord is the book of Malachi. Much of the book is composed of people asking accusatory questions of the Lord and his response. They weren't requests spawned by curious minds that wanted to know or because they were going through troubling times and crying out for reassurance. It was a prosecuting attorney who saw no evidence to support what the witness was saying and was zeroing in for the kill. They were a small group in the backwaters of an anti-God nation. The glorious promises of restoration and God coming to his temple hadn't occurred. They demanded proof from God as to how he had loved them (1:2). They self-righteously wanted to know how they had shown contempt for his name (1:6) and why he didn't accept their offerings (2:14). The people were quite snippy.

Sometimes their questions were triggered by the Lord's accusations. In response, they want to know how they've wearied God (2:17), how they're supposed to return to him (3:7), how they've robbed Him (3:8) and what harsh things they've said about Him (3:13).

Let's read a couple verses from the middle of the book that could be a summary of their attitude toward the Lord. **READ 2:13, 17**. They wearied the Lord with their words, actions and attitudes. It was all show and no substance. They engaged in a bunch of meaningless rituals. It was... lip... service.

(Act out – answer phone) “Hello?... Oh hi... No problem. Not really doing anything special. Just kinda hanging out doing the normal Sunday thing. You know -- sing a little, pray some, something with the Bible, yadda, yadda, yadda. And you?... That's nice... Yeah, well, I suppose I should get back to it.”

That wasn't a real call. That's how casually the people of Malachi's day treated the things of God. And that's the attitude of millions of people in America who call themselves Christians. They simply go through the motions as actors. They give lip service to spiritual matters.

The people in the last Old Testament book aren't presented in a positive light. They were messed up, led by spiritual leaders who were a mess. The leaders sniffed contemptuously at the things of God by offering severely blemished sacrifices (1:13). They should have preserved knowledge and given instruction since they were messengers of the Lord Almighty (2:7). It didn't happen. They were self-serving.

The whole group doubted God. They felt he was unjust. They considered following him was such a burden (1:13). They cheated God out of what he was due (1:14). They thought it was futile to serve God, that they gained nothing from the relationship (3:14). They exhibited a cluelessness which is surprising and alarming since the Lord had communicated what he expected. They arrogantly thought the happiest people were those who ignore the Lord.

God presents himself in several ways as the solution to their spiritual malaise. **READ 1:6**. He's a Father. Not just any kind of father but one whose actions are Love. His words are Love. His name is Love. He longs to act according to his nature. He uniquely called Israel to be his people, his kids. He established a covenant relationship with them. Yes, it had rules and commands, but it essentially was one of love, his love for them. He exercised infinite grace in that, time and again, he didn't destroy them (3:6). His goal was to “spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him” (3:17).

Second, he's the master. He's a kind, benevolent master, not a mean ogre. He sought to protect his people, to keep them under his care. He showed them the best way to live.

Third, He's the Lord Almighty (also 1:4). Nothing comes close to equaling Almighty - not part-mighty, or some-mighty, or half-mighty or mostly mighty. There's nothing as high or higher than Almighty. He uses the term to remind people of his power and authority. He ties it to his ability to demolish and the unleashing of his wrath. People will see the demonstration of his might and be so amazed that they'll proclaim “Great is the Lord.”

He's the great king (1:14). He's the ruler. He's sovereign meaning he's independent, self-governing, self-determining, autonomous, supreme and much, much more. I'm reading in Ezekiel and the idea of the Lord's sovereignty is ever present. He repeatedly says, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says” and “Then people will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.”

He's unchangeable (3:6). Unchangeable means that what you see is what you get and what you'll always get. That can be bad if we're in the middle of winter and it's 30 below. Nobody wants that to be unchanging. However, with someone who is Love and Almighty it's a good thing, a really good thing. He's never any other way. He's the same yesterday, today and forever. His word and promises can be counted on. There is the flipside of God's unchangeable nature that will be experienced by those who aren't his children. Don't go there... yet.

What does the Lord desire? He craves a relationship. The first thing the Lord says in the book sets the tone. **READ 1:2.** He loves and wants to be loved in return. As a Father, he wants to be honored (1:6; 2:1). He argues that children naturally honor or want to honor their dads. He wants the same. As a master, he wants to be respected which includes following him.

He's fully prepared to bless (3:10). In Malachi's day the Lord said he was ready and willing "throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it" if the people would give the Lord what rightfully belonged to him – the tithes.

I don't think most of the people in Malachi could be classified as true followers of the Lord. They may have thought they were because of their ethnicity or because of their quasi-interest or because they would do good things. They probably thought things would just go on. They were mistaken.

The prophet Ezekiel lived prior to Malachi, at the same time as Jeremiah. He witnessed the end of the southern kingdom. He tried to move people toward the Lord but it was a losing battle. The Lord delivered harsh messages through him. One of the sternest is this unequivocal message to the city of Jerusalem– "You have become guilty because of the blood you have shed and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come" (Ezekiel 22:4).

Now, under Malachi, years later, after the return from exile and the revivals under Ezra and Nehemiah, the end was not just near, it was present. **READ 2:2.** They would face judgment for the way they lived.

Malachi points to a greater display of God's judgment – the coming Day of the Lord (3:2; 4:1, 5). It will be a time of terror for those who don't know the Lord. It's described in horrifying details like everlasting torment, weeping, wailing, gnashing of teeth, burning fire and total darkness. The power outage gave us a glimpse of what it's like to be in total darkness. Jean and I both woke up during the middle of the night, probably hoping power and therefore some light had been restored. It hadn't been. We put our hands in front of our faces and couldn't see them. It was an unsettling other worldly sensation of what hell will be like.

There were some people who feared the Lord. **READ 2:5, 6.** Turn ahead to 3:16. **READ.** They were interested in God's Word, in giving and receiving instruction. They desired to walk in accordance with the Lord's ways. They turned from sin. They honored God by their trust in him. They encouraged each other as they got together with others who feared the Lord. They offered to the Lord what was acceptable to him. They didn't try to cheat him.

Those who feared the Lord had their names in a scroll of remembrance, which sounds a lot like the Lamb's Book of Life which records the names of those who truly know Jesus Christ as their Savior. There was

good news for those who feared the Lord. They will be delivered on the Day of Judgment (3:16-18; 4:2) which includes trampling down the wicked (4:3). And then there's the picturesque language "But for you who revere my name, the sun or righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall" (4:2).

There were those spring days on the farm when the young stock got outside for the first time. At first they didn't know how to act in their freedom. They'd sniff the air and tentatively step out of the heifer barn. It didn't take long for them to cut loose. They'd run and kick up their heels driven on by the sun's warmth on their backs. That's the promise – freedom to run and leap in the S-O-N Son's warmth.

In spite of the accusatory questions and the lip service, incredible hope is offered. The closing verses point to the coming day of Christ, the one who would bring salvation. He would restore Israel and all people to God. It's possible for all but a reality only for those who come to Christ to save them.

What insights can followers of Christ gain from the way people in Malachi treated the Lord? God craves to have a relationship with people. He wants to show his love and has through giving Jesus as a sacrifice for sins. He continues to show his love through giving air to breathe and lungs to receive it. Believers can rob God by failing to give him the honor and worship and fear and time he deserves as well as through withholding their finances. They may focus on life around them and the circumstances of this world instead of raising their gaze to look at Him. They might give blemished or halfhearted effort or worse, no effort. They may think following the Lord is a futile burden and that little or nothing is gained from the relationship. And there are some who weary the Lord by giving lip service to their commitment to him.

Each of our lives is writing a book. Some might consider each birthday as marking the end of a chapter. Let's put it in terms of this past week as being the cut off. How did your last chapter end? On a high note? On a low note? Maybe you're glad that it's over and can finally turn the page.

More important is what the next chapter of our lives will be. How will we write it? Will it be filled with epic adventure as we traverse the hills and valleys of this life? Will it describe our trust in the Lord as he leads us on the journey of the upward climb to heaven through the pot-holes, mountain meadows, raging storms, glorious vistas and even the valley of the shadow of death? Will it echo with our cries for him to guide us and be near us as a shepherd? Will we run to him as Father, master, Sovereign King, the Lord Almighty, the love of our lives?

The Lord is coming back and he has his book of remembrance in which he has written those who are in right relationship with him. And he keeps record of what we've done for him.

We should keep going back to the first thing the Lord said in the book. "I have loved you." And if we should manage to ask "how?" understand he is ready with the answer "Jesus."