

# Why we need Christmas

---

*A series examining the book of Malachi*

## The big idea for this series

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, the last words in our bibles before the coming of Jesus. Malachi was a prophet, someone bringing God's word to his people Israel at this particular point in history some 400 years before Jesus. So what did he have to say?, The picture is not pretty and shows us why we need Christmas, why we need a Saviour to come. The first two studies show humans' failure to keep the two great commandments: to love God and to love others. The third study has a focus on injustice and how God's people need to act rightly and fairly. The last study contains a prophecy about God coming into his world to put things right. A prophecy that we find fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus, the one who gives us mercy and forgiveness. We need a Saviour, we need Christmas, and thank God, he provides us with Jesus.

## The topics (and dates that sermons will be preached)

2 Dec	Malachi 1:1-14	Why we need Christmas: We don't love God
9 Dec	Malachi 2:1-16	Why we need Christmas: We don't love others
16 Dec	Malachi 2:17-3:15	Why we need Christmas: We need justice
23 Dec	Malachi 3:16-4:6	Why we need Christmas: We need mercy

## Some Background

Malachi is living and prophesying after the Exile – a key defining event in the history of the nation of Israel. In 587BC Judah, the Southern part of Israel, was defeated by the Babylon army, the temple was destroyed and the people were taken into exile into Babylon. This was devastating for the Israelites as they have lost their place of worship, they have lost their land and they are aware that this all came as a result of their disobedience to God and their fail to live and care for others, to show justice and mercy as God's law required.

The Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persians in 539BC and their ruler Cyrus started sending conquered people back to their homelands and even permitted temples to be rebuilt. This history of the return to the land of Israel is covered in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Malachi is set in the period after this return from exile. You would think that after all of the devastation of the exile and now being able to return home that the people of Israel would have changed hearts and attitudes. You would think that they would now love God more fully, love their neighbours as themselves, show justice and mercy to those around them. The words of Malchi demonstrate that this is not the case. A more radical solution will be needed: we need a Saviour who will come and provide a thorough-going reform of the world and our hearts. We need Christmas.

## Study 1: Why we need Christmas: We don't love God

### Background

- In order to help set the context to these studies you might like to read and talk about some of the material above
- You might also choose to watch this helpful video which gives an overview of Malachi (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPGShWZ4Jvk>)

### What is prophecy?

- What do you think about when you hear the word 'prophecy'?
- What examples of prophecy have you read about in books or watched in movies? (Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, the Matrix)

Malachi is a book of prophecy, that is, God speaks to Isaiah and he takes God's words and delivers them to the people of Israel. Prophecy is not just about predictions about the future but also include God speaking about the present day as well.

- Imagine that you have spent a long period of time in jail and you have finally been released. What would you do first? Who would you see? What would you eat? Would you rush out to commit the same crime that saw you convicted and sent to prison in the first place?

### Read Malachi 1:1-14

- The exile in Babylon was like a prison sentence for Israel but now they have been released and sent back home. Make a list of the things that they have been doing which God brings to their attention in this passage
- Do the people realise that they are doing anything wrong? Why or why not?
- Who were Jacob and Esau and why are they mentioned here? Has God loved Israel even though bad things have been happening to them?
- What is the problem with the sacrifices that Israel has been bringing to the temple? What does this demonstrate about their attitude to God?
- Why is God worthy of honour?

### Application

- In Luke 10:27 Jesus says that the first of two great commandments is 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'. Why is this our main responsibility in life?
- Why is God worthy of such love in your life?
- Like Israel what are the ways that we might fail to honour and love God as we should?
- Spend some time confessing this to God and thanking him for his complete forgiveness in Jesus.

## Study 2: Why we need Christmas: We don't love others

### Background

- What complaints did God bring against Israel in the previous passage?
- How might a lack of love for God impact our ability to show love to other people?

### Read Malachi 2:1-9

- What charges does God bring against the priests, the religious leaders of Israel?
- What is a covenant (verse 3)? Why is God's covenant described as a covenant of 'life and peace'?
- How do sins amongst leaders cause other people to stumble and fall? (verses 7-9)

### Read Malachi 2:10-16

- Divorce is a complex issue and the bible has a variety of things to say about it. The specific context here seems to be idolatry and divorce: Israelite men who are chasing after women from other nations and worshipping their gods and abandoning their Israelite wives in the process.
- The words faithful/unfaithful fill this passage. Why does faithfulness in marriage matter so much to God?
- What biblical and theological arguments does God bring to emphasize the importance of loving others and being faithful to our promises?
- What hope is there in what God says for the person who has been wronged by someone else's unfaithfulness?

### Application

- In Luke 10:27 Jesus says that the second of two great commandments is 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. Why is this such a good summary of what God calls us to do?
- How does a lack of love for others demonstrate a lack of love for God?
- Like Israel what are the ways that we might fail to love and be faithful to other people as we should?
- Spend some time asking God to help you to love others and to be faithful to them. Pray specifically for those who are married and for those who are not as you all live out your love and faithfulness in the different relationships you find yourselves in.

## Study 3: Why we need Christmas: We need justice

- What are the issues of injustice in the world that most upset and frustrate you?
- Do you ever wonder where God is in the midst of these injustices?

### Read Malachi 2:17-3:15

- What complaint are the people bringing against God in 2:17?
- God responds to this complaint by saying that he will send his messenger. What will the messenger do?
- How does the phrase ‘who can endure the day of his coming’ challenge us in our indignation about injustice?
- Do any of the things listed in 3:5 challenge you individually or us corporately (as a church, a society, a nation) about our involvement in injustice?
- In light of the injustices you highlighted above how might you put into practice the challenge of 3:7 “Return to me, and I will return to you”
- When you see and experience injustice are you ever tempted to despair or feel that serving God is futile (see 3:14-15)? What helps you in these moments?
- In what ways did Jesus fulfil this prophecy of “the messenger” in his earthly ministry? In what ways are we still waiting for Jesus to bring this to fulfillment when he comes again?
- Pray
  - Name before God any particular injustices that are on your heart
  - Spend time in silence confessing any part that we play in perpetuating injustice
  - Thank Jesus that he will put an end to all injustice at his return and conclude together with the prayer ‘Come Lord Jesus’

## Study 4: Why we need Christmas: We need mercy

- Is the return of Jesus to deal with all sin and injustice a source of fear or of comfort for you personally? What makes the difference to how we might answer this question.

### Read Malachi 3:16-4:6

- When is 'the day when I act' (3:17)? Hint: you may like to look back to 3:1-3 and also at 4:1
- What is the outcome for the wicked on this day?
- What will be the outcome and the response of the faithful remnant on this day?
- What troubles you about this outline of God's judgement? What brings you comfort?
- Who is the prophet Elijah who will come before the day of the Lord? Read Matthew 17:9-13
- Has 'the day of the Lord' already come, or are we still waiting? How do we reconcile this prophecy in light of Jesus' first and second coming?
- As followers of Jesus, those who 'fear the Lord and honour his name', what cause for boasting or pride do we have in receiving God's mercy?
- How can we guard ourselves against pride and arrogance on the one hand and complacency and indifference to injustice and the other hand?
- Pray
  - Give thanks for God's mercy expressed to us in Jesus
  - Pray for friends and family by name – those who do not know Christ and have not received his mercy in light of the coming 'day of the Lord'
  - Pray that this Christmas would be a time when the good news of Jesus and his grace and mercy would be spoken and received in people's lives.