

Sunday, October 14, 2018—Malachi 1-4

Malachi prophesied to the ones who had returned to Israel and rebuilt the Temple and the wall. The grace of God had restored them, but the lure of sin had corrupted them. Like the generations before them, they had compromised His standards and were offering Him unacceptable sacrifices. They were going through the motions, but they were not worshipping. God wondered how they could treat Him so poorly (1:6).

God made a covenant of life and peace with His people (2:5), but He could not provide either one if the people did not provide their agreed-upon portion of the covenant—faithful obedience. The people struggled to accomplish this because their leaders were setting a poor example. Added to their unfaithfulness to God was their unfaithfulness to their wives. Inner corruption was leading to outward corruption of the highest order.

Like Zechariah, Malachi looked to the distant future and what God was going to do to restore righteousness to His people. He would send His Messenger (3:1) to refine and purify. This process would be hard to endure, but the results would be pleasing both to God and Israel. They did not have to wait for the Messenger to repent, however. They could return to God with their hearts, words, tithes, and offerings immediately. He had not changed (3:6). They had changed, and He was calling them back.

God's desire is for the hearts of parents and children to be in alignment (4:6) just as His children are aligned with Him. Praise God for His righteousness, blessing, and call to holy living.

Saturday, October 13, 2018—Nehemiah 10-13

God doesn't call for mindless obedience. He wants the soul, mind, and body. What He stirs spiritually aligns with the mental processing and physical capabilities of the disciple to produce one who is wholeheartedly devoted to Him. Through Christ, God changes the complete person.

Those who were rebuilding Jerusalem and the nation of Israel saw this as well. They were physically restoring the Temple and the wall, and they were coming to understand the power of the Word to convict and transform, so all those who were able to understand and to separate themselves from the surrounding peoples (10:28) signed the covenant.

They agreed to not form marriages between believers and non-believers. They agreed to honor the Sabbath and prevent anyone from selling merchandise on that day, and they agreed to reinstitute the tithing process so they no longer neglected the house of God (10:30-39). This could not happen unless everyone agreed body, mind, and soul.

When God captures the whole person, there is new life, discipline, and joy. When God captures a whole community, there is celebration. Under Nehemiah's leadership, the people assembled for a great thanksgiving ceremony, where they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy (12:43).

Despite their covenant and celebration, the people sinned. Nehemiah 13 says they profaned the Temple, sold on the Sabbath, and married pagan women. Obedience requires daily repentance and covenant commitment. Pray for faithfulness fueled by joy and conviction.

Friday, October 12, 2018—Nehemiah 7-9

The Founding Fathers knew the nation needed a solid foundation, so they penned the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Only a moral people could accomplish this grand experiment. Only with an understanding of a higher moral authority, God the Creator, would they subject self to law.

Ezra and Nehemiah knew this as well. As they helped rebuild the nation, they searched the genealogical records to make certain where each family was able to settle and begin building a home,

flocks, and fields. Everyone had to agree to this, subjecting themselves to God's Law and the words of history. Instead of everyone's fighting for space, they found life, liberty, and peace in humility and cooperation.

Soon thereafter, Ezra called the nation into a sacred assembly, and he read the Law to the people. Others helped explain the meaning and application of the words to those around them, and they realized how far they were from fulfilling God's wishes. They wept at the thought (8:9), but Ezra told them to rejoice (8:10). The grace of God was greater than their sin. They would find liberty in His mercy and their obedience.

Three weeks later, the people gathered and recounted the powerful work of God through history (9:5-25) and admitted the failures of their ancestors. Now, they themselves were in slavery, but God's desire was for their freedom. They submitted themselves once again to His Law and to one another to find true life and freedom (9:38).

Praise God for the freedom found in submitting to Christ.

Thursday, October 11, 2018—Nehemiah 4-6

The political realm in the United States showed itself to be especially heinous during the 2018 confirmation process for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Tensions flared. Partisan rancor spilled out in the Senate spaces as well as in public places. Some likened the process to a circus, a kangaroo court, or an out-of-control mob.

Adults' behaving poorly is nothing new. When Nehemiah began the rebuilding process, some of the non-Jewish residents of the area took exception and felt sudden, deep emotional distress about the prospects of Israel's regaining her identity, protection, and purpose. Sanballat was furious, and mocked the Jews for their efforts. Tobiah joined the chorus and said the rebuilding effort was weak and ridiculous (4:1-3).

Nehemiah took a two-pronged response to this attack. He prayed against the aggressors (4:4) and stationed people throughout the work to defend those rebuilding the wall (4:13). He reminded the people of the greatness of God and the dignity of the work they were doing (4:14).

The turmoil turned inward in Nehemiah 5 as the people complained about governmental leaders' taking advantage of the common man. Nehemiah urged these men to live self-sacrificially, and Nehemiah set the personal example. A grand vision motivates others to sacrifice self for the common good and the mission's success.

Not being able to discourage the people, the enemies turned their attention to Nehemiah himself, trying to silence him or at least discredit him (6:13). Pray for your leaders to lead with integrity and endurance. Pray for personal discipline to follow well and fulfill your mission.

Wednesday, October 10, 2018—Nehemiah 1-3

Jesus' disciples walked saw Him teach, minister, do miracles, and preach to massive crowds, but they only asked him to teach them one thing—to pray (Luke 11:1). God has woven the need to pray into every human, and Scripture is full of exemplary people and practices of prayer. When he heard the walls around Jerusalem were destroyed, Nehemiah was grief-stricken. He had never been to his homeland, yet he knew the value of the wall from a safety and psychological standpoint. The walls gave people identity and security. God was restoring His people, but the walls were not rebuilt, so the people were vulnerable and disgraced. Nehemiah prayed humbly for God to hear him and use him to rebuild.

Nehemiah began with worship, acknowledging God (1:5). Then, he confessed the sins in his life (1:6-7). Next, he recalled the words and plans of God to restore His people (1:8-10). Finally, he

asked for God's favor as he approached the king (1:11). He did not simply ask for God to give Him things. He worshiped, confessed, and remembered.

When Nehemiah arrived, he assessed the situation and then rallied support by telling what God had done to make this possible. Non-Jews were frustrated by the change this would bring, but Nehemiah trusted in the person and plan of Yahweh (2:20). Nehemiah did not do the work alone. Groups and families all did their part (3:1-32).

Ask God to teach you to pray. Ask Him to use you to inspire and equip others to build the Kingdom and rebuild what has been destroyed.

Tuesday, October 9, 2018—Ezra 8-10

Adults regularly find themselves facing page after page of technical or legal language in some kind of contract or end-user license agreement. Rather than read through these details, they simply sign on the bottom line or click "I Agree" and move on. They may miss important information.

Scripture regularly lists names and numbers that seem dull or irrelevant to modern readers, yet God would not include something He did not intend. Ezra 8 has one of these lists—the genealogical record of those who returned with Ezra. The priests and Levites had specific jobs in and around the Temple. They had to affirm their genealogy so they could properly serve God and His people. Their ancestors had taken His word lightly and suffered for it. They could not make the same mistake.

These men had a holy task set before them in Israel, but they also had the responsibility of transporting all the treasure Artaxerxes had given them for the Temple. Ezra committed their work in prayer, and God provided. They arrived safely in Israel and weighed out all the precious metals, consecrating them for the holy work of the Temple.

Upon arrival in Israel, Ezra discovered those who had remained in Israel and others who had returned earlier had adopted idolatrous practices and some had married pagans (9:1-2). Ezra came before God in prayer, broken and contrite thought he himself was not guilty of this sin (9:5-15). In response, the people vowed to repent (10:4).

Pray for repentance from habitual sin and faithfulness to obey.

Monday, October 8, 2018—Zechariah 11-14

God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt after he had spent 40 years as a shepherd. He had lived in the palaces of Egypt, and he survived in the barrenness of Midian, so he knew the highest and the lowest. In order to lead God's people, he had to understand sheep and have the heart of a shepherd. God prepared him well for the task to which he called him.

The leaders of Israel through every generation needed this same attitude toward the people—understanding their simple, wayward nature and having determination, discipline, and compassion coursing through their hearts and minds. The glory of God and the blessing of the people had to be more important than personal gain or comfort. God lamented to Zechariah that the people were not following Him as their great Shepherd, so He was going to raise up a leader who would not care for them (11:16).

The desperation of the people would then grow, and they would realize how much they needed God's guidance, righteousness, and provision. God would raise up the ultimate Shepherd who would wash away sin and impurity (13:1) and reinstate Israel as God's people (13:9). The Lord Himself was going to rise up and fight against the enemies of His people (14:3). God was going to establish Himself as the great God above all gods, and the world would take notice.

Praise God for being good. Thank Him for Jesus' being the Good Shepherd. Pray for pastors and other spiritual leaders to make disciples and to turn the attention continually toward Jesus and His worthiness.