

THE END OF THE OLD, THE PROMISE OF THE NEW

Malachi 3:1–3; 4:1–6 • Brian Brodersen

Introduction: Today, we are going to complete our journey through the Old Testament as we continue to follow the Story of God. There are three names intimately connected with this final period in the ministry of the prophets—Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi. Ezra was a scribe and expert in the Law of Moses, Nehemiah was the governor of Jerusalem, and Malachi was the very last in the long line of the prophets.

The Book of Ezra can be a little confusing because we often fail to realize that Ezra writes the first part of his book as a historian and the second part as an auto-biographical account of his own ministry alongside of Nehemiah. Ezra chapters 1–6 cover the return from the 70 years captivity in Babylon to the rebuilding of the Temple under orders from Cyrus, the Persian King. The time period is 538–515 BC. Ezra 7 chapters–10 cover a period about 100 years later, 458–438 BC.

From 538–515 (23 years), the Temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel and Joshua through the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

Sometime after 445 BC, the city of Jerusalem, with its wall, was rebuilt by Nehemiah with the encouragement and spiritual leadership of Ezra the Priest/Scribe. At some point later, we don't know exactly when (perhaps after the death of Ezra who had preceded Nehemiah in Jerusalem by 14 years), the prophetic ministry of Malachi took place.

Old Testament scholar Charles Feinberg wrote: “Malachi ministered in the time of the governorship of Nehemiah ... He prophesied about a century after Haggai and Zechariah; he sustained the same relation to Nehemiah as they did to Zerubbabel and Joshua. The time would be near the end of the fifth century.” (ca 420 BC?)

I. Ezra & Nehemiah

A. Ezra

“After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah the descendent of Phinehas, the son of Eleazer, the son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him ... Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king ...” with a letter that read ... “You Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.”

Ezra 7

This is what Ezra does from the time of his arrival into the days of Nehemiah.

“All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel ... Ezra the Priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon ... and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion ... Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he

opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded. Amen! Amen! Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground ... The Levites instructed the people in the Law of God, making it clear and giving it meaning so that the people understood what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'"

Nehemiah 8:1–10

B. Nehemiah

As we can see, Nehemiah and Ezra are right alongside each other leading the nation to repentance and a recommitment of themselves to the God of Israel.

"They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. They stood where they were and read from the book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God."

Nehemiah 9

At the end of this prayer of repentance, the people renewed their commitment to the LORD.

"In view of all of this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it ... all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord."

Nehemiah 10

Ezra records a similar experience that seems to precede this one—the people repenting and promising to be faithful to the LORD.

In each case, the repentance was short-lived. Nehemiah 13 records how the people began to break the Sabbath, and the men began divorcing their wives and marrying the women from the surrounding nations.

Nehemiah says, "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name ..." Nehemiah 13:25

Ezra described his own experience with a similar situation earlier. "I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled." Ezra 9:3

The people seemed sincere in their repentance and renewed commitments, but it never lasted.

C. Malachi

By the time we come to Malachi's prophecy, all the heart has gone out of their devotion and there's nothing left but an empty religious shell.

Feinberg says this: "The spiritual life of the remnant who had returned from Babylonian captivity is fully portrayed by the prophet. They were insensible to the great love of God displayed toward them. They were unaware of the enormity of their departure from the will

and way of the LORD. They lacked reverence for the Lord and actually despised him. They were lacking in spiritual perception that, when their deeds were pointed out to them, they saw no harm in them. Their attitude toward the Lord is revealed in the oft-repeated ‘how or in what way?’ The sins of Israel that provoked Nehemiah were the same that stirred up Malachi.”

“‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD. But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’”

Malachi 1:2

“A son honors his father, and a slave his master ... where is the respect due me?” Says the LORD Almighty. “It is you priests who show contempt for my name.” But you ask, “How have we shown contempt for your name?””

Malachi 1:6

“You have wearied the LORD with your words. ‘How have we wearied him?’ you ask. By saying, ‘all who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them’ or ‘where is the God of justice?’”

After all that has happened—the return from captivity; the Temple rebuilt and worship restored; the spiritual renewals under Ezra and Nehemiah; the written pledges on the part of the people to serve the LORD—and this is where they end up. Hard-hearted, indifferent toward the LORD and disinterested in the things of the Spirit. Unbelievable! Yet not entirely unpredictable. This is largely their history.

II. The End of the Old

I’ve entitled this teaching The End of the Old, the Promise of the New, not primarily because we are finishing our journey through the Old Testament, although that is the case. But because we see in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi the END of where the Law and human commitment lead—religious ritual with no power to give true spiritual life. Saul of Tarsus will discover this, and as Paul the apostle, will write about it in Romans.

“So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good ... We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... For I have a desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep doing ... So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! ... So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my body a slave to the law of sin.”

Romans 7

The message of the Law, when properly understood, will bring us to the end of ourselves and into the merciful arms of Jesus.

III. The Promise of the New Covenant-

A. Even though the nation has failed once again, the Lord will not fail.

“For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to my name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD.”

Malachi 1:11 NKJV

“I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His Temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the LORD Almighty.”

Malachi 3:1

The promise of the New Covenant, not predicated on the Law, a covenant not based upon what we can do, but upon what God will do (for us, what God has done). Metaphorically described in the picture of the Sun of Righteousness rising with healing in its (his) wings or rays. The LORD will come like the rising sun bringing healing.

“Hail the heaven born prince of peace, hail the sun of righteousness, light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by, born that men no more my die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.”

Charles Wesley

Close

There would be 400 long, dark silent years before these words would be fulfilled. The Old Testament ends with the promise of the New, and in due time, the messenger (John the Baptist) would appear and the Lord himself (Jesus the Messiah) would suddenly come to his Temple, not in judgment but in mercy, to give his life an atonement for sin and to rise from the dead conquering sin and death, thereby providing eternal life for all who will trust in him.

Communion