

The Problem of Shallow Worship

Summary and Goal

Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him, or perhaps more specifically, how they *shouldn't* worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry or heretical doctrine, their worship had grown stale and lifeless. The word delivered to Malachi was a wake-up call to a people who were halfhearted in worship, and Malachi's message resonates with us still today.

Main Passages

Malachi 1:6-14; 3:7-12; 4:1-6

Session Outline

1. Shallow worship trivializes God's greatness (Mal. 1:6-14).
2. Shallow worship minimizes God's worth (Mal. 3:7-12).
3. Shallow worship deserves judgment (Mal. 4:1-6).

Theological Theme

True worship magnifies God's great worth and brings blessing to the worshiper.

Christ Connection

After Malachi, the prophetic word of God went silent for four hundred years. But Malachi prophesied about a messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah to bring God's kingdom. Centuries later, John the Baptist arrived as the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus. The last word of the Old Testament is "curse," a reminder of the consequence of our sin. But in the New Testament, one of the first words we hear from Jesus is "blessing." The One who bears our curse is the One who brings us blessing.

Missional Application

God calls us to take worship seriously, to magnify His great worth so that all people everywhere will know His name.

The Problem of Shallow Worship

? For Further Discussion

Why do we expect “secular” success to require hard work and significant amounts of time but tend to think “spiritual” success comes about more passively and abruptly?

Point 1 Option

Assign five group members each with one of the passages listed from the New Testament regarding what we are to offer to God (leader p. 156; PSG p. 121). Ask them to read the verses aloud, and then pose the following questions to the entire group:

- What do these verses together tell us about the extent that worship should have in our lives?
- Specifically, how can we worship God with our bodies? Our finances? Our praise? Our works? Our witness?

Introduction

Start with Malcolm Gladwell’s assessment of the correlation between hard work and success—one must put in 10,000 hours to be successful (leader p. 154; PSG p. 119).

- ? Consider someone whose success you admire, an athlete, musician, or writer whose abilities you appreciate. How would you describe that person?

In light of answers to the previous question, transition from devotion to a craft to our devotion in worship, and ask if the same sort of adjectives would hold for us. Then summarize this session on the Book of Malachi and the halfhearted worship of God’s people (leader pp. 154-155; PSG pp. 119-120).

1. Shallow worship trivializes God’s greatness (Mal. 1:6-14).

Connect the commandment to honor our parents with how we are to honor God as our spiritual Father (leader p. 155). Then read Malachi 1:6-9 (leader p. 155; PSG p. 120).

- ? What actions of the priests demonstrated their lack of respect and honor toward the Lord?

Explain the two indictments God declared against His people: they neither honored nor feared Him (leader p. 155). Then read Malachi 1:10-14. Note that God was angry because of how flippantly the priests (and the rest of Judah) treated Him in their sacrifices. Bring up the five things Scripture encourages disciples of Christ to offer up to God (leader p. 156; PSG pp. 120-121).

- Our bodies (Rom. 12:1-2)
- Our finances (Phil. 4:14-18)
- Our praise (Heb. 13:15)
- Our works (Heb. 13:16)
- Our witness (Rom. 15:16)

- ? In what ways does our worship of God through these five “sacrifices” display God’s greatness?

2. Shallow worship minimizes God's worth (Mal. 3:7-12).

Use the “Noah’s Ark” story to illustrate the motivation that often characterizes our hearts when it comes to God; then ask a volunteer to read Malachi 3:7-12. Show how the Israelites’ question was insincere (leader p. 157; PSG p. 122).

- What types of things might we take pride in as evidence that we are close with God when actually we are not?

Draw a parallel between the Israelites’ straying from God and our own straying in worship. Say that *the heart of the problem is a problem of the heart*. Specifically note that giving is an indication of the state of our hearts and a thermometer for how we value God’s worth (leader p. 158; PSG p. 123).

- How do our spending habits and our hearts relate?
- How does this passage relate to Jesus’ teaching about our hearts being where our treasure is (Matt. 6:19-21)?

Speak to God’s invitation to test Him and how trusting Him financially demonstrates how worthy we believe God to be. Highlight the three things we can learn from Malachi 3:7-12 (leader pp. 158-159; PSG p. 124).

- How should Christians understand and apply God’s promise of blessing for obedience in light of what Christ has done for us?

3. Shallow worship deserves judgment (Mal. 4:1-6).

Read Malachi 4:1-6. Comment on the coming Day of the Lord in Judah’s expectation and reality, and connect this to our need to be prepared for Christ’s second coming. Then explain the cliffhanger to the Old Testament that is the final two verses of Malachi—the promise of “Elijah” before the Day of the Lord, followed by God’s silence (leader pp. 159-160; PSG pp. 124-125).

- How would you instruct someone who sees the promise of judgment and responds by trying to get his or her life together? What is the proper biblical response?

Conclusion

Point to Zechariah’s words in Luke 1:78-79 as most likely being a direct reference to Malachi 4:2. Close with how Christ the Son is “the sun of righteousness” (*point to this connection made on Pack Item 4: Seeing Jesus in the Exile and Return*). He is “the light of the world,” but has the Light entered into your heart? (leader p. 160; PSG p. 126) *Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission”* (PSG p. 127).

Point 2 Option

Distinguish what Malachi 3:7-12 teaches from “prosperity gospel” teaching that sees the benefits of Christian faith primarily in terms of financial and material blessing. Show the video “John Piper—Prosperity Gospel” to help assist in contrasting the prosperity gospel with the biblical gospel as well as to exemplify the type of worship and devotion that God desires.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-V_91c5ojU

Christ Connection: After Malachi, the prophetic word of God went silent for four hundred years. But Malachi prophesied about a messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah to bring God’s kingdom. Centuries later, John the Baptist arrived as the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus. The last word of the Old Testament is “curse,” a reminder of the consequence of our sin. But in the New Testament, one of the first words we hear from Jesus is “blessing.” The One who bears our curse is the One who brings us blessing.

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Missional Application: God calls us to take worship seriously, to magnify His great worth so that all people everywhere will know His name.

Expanded Session Content

The Problem of Shallow Worship



Voices from Church History

“It is possible to worship God with our lips and not worship God with our lives. But I want to tell you that if your life doesn’t worship God, your lips don’t worship God either.”¹

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

Introduction

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that overnight success is rare. It is more frequently spelled with the letters W-O-R-K. His book examines the lives of successful people and groups: J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Beatles, Bill Gates, and so on. He shows how these people were not instantly successful; they became so by dedicating at least 10,000 hours to their particular crafts—programming, practicing, and putting in hours when nobody was looking.



Consider someone whose success you admire, an athlete, musician, or writer whose abilities you appreciate. How would you describe that person?

If you focused on a professional athlete, you might have responded with words like “excellent,” “devoted,” “committed,” and “passionate.” The same adjectives would apply to a prominent entrepreneur, a successful businessman, or a talented actor.

Now let’s change the question. This time, instead of describing an athlete or businessman, what if we asked for adjectives describing your devotion to and worship of the Lord. Would you give the same adjectives in order to describe your worship?

Given the pervasiveness of human sin and the hardness of the human heart, it is not surprising that the Israelites lacked “devotion,” “passion,” and “commitment” in the time of the prophet Malachi. God had given His people the best: He had redeemed them from the Egyptians, led them through the desert, shown them the land, promised the basic necessities for life (i.e., milk and honey), marched them into the promised land, and conquered their enemies.

But what was their response to His steadfast love for them? While one might expect extravagant praise and loving obedience, they instead offered Him what can only be described as *worthless worship*. And on this sad note, the Old Testament draws to a close.



Session Summary

Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him, or perhaps more specifically, how they *shouldn't* worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry or heretical doctrine, their worship had grown stale and lifeless. The word delivered to Malachi was a wake-up call to a people who were halfhearted in worship, and Malachi's message resonates with us still today.

1. Shallow worship trivializes God's greatness (Mal. 1:6-14).

When we think of biblical commandments, we tend not to think of the 613 commandments given in the Old Testament (according to Jewish tradition) but of the "Big Ten," which we see on posters and learn about in church. One commandment explicitly tells us to honor our parents. Is it any wonder, then, that God expects obedience and honor as our spiritual Father? Look at how God addressed His people through His prophet Malachi:

⁶ "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' ⁷ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. ⁸ When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts.



What actions of the priests demonstrated their lack of respect and honor toward the Lord?

Notice that God handed down two indictments against His people at the beginning: they showed Him no honor, and they showed Him no fear. And not only did they *not* honor and fear Him, but they *despised* His name.

"Despising" means having an attitude of ongoing disrespect for someone or something. It refers to the act of conveying insignificance or worthlessness upon an object, idea, or individual. The text shows us that the people did this to God by offering crippled, lame, or blind animals to the Lord rather than the perfect, spotless sacrifices He asked for. He even asked them, "Do you think that if you gave the governor what you're giving Me that he'd be okay with it?"



Further Commentary

"In his second disputation [1:6–2:9] Malachi turns the tables on the complaint treated in the first [1:2–5]. What should be questioned is not God's love for Israel but Israel's love for God. Malachi recognizes that all the people were guilty of dishonoring God, as revealed in their begrudging offerings (1:14). Nevertheless, he focuses on Israel's priests (2:1–9) because it is their responsibility to guard the sanctuary from defilement and to inspect all sacrifices so as to exclude, for example, blind, lame, or sick animals (1:8; Lev. 22:17–25; Deut. 15:21; 17:1)."²

—Gordon P. Hugenberger, *ESV Study Bible*



Voices from the Church

"Make your life one unflinching gaze at the glory of God. This is why you exist. This is the only addiction that can finally set you free. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Look and live."³

—Matt Papa

Further Commentary

“A time is coming when even Gentiles everywhere will recognize Yahweh’s greatness and worship Him (Isa. 59:19; Ezek. 36:20–36; 39:7; Matt. 8:11–12; Rom. 11:11–12). But God’s own children, His kingdom of priests who were to mediate His grace to the nations, were profaning His name. God’s ‘name’ is His nature, character, and worth as He reveals it in His words and acts (Gen. 16:13; 17:5; 22:14; Ex. 33:19; 1 Kings 8:43). Those who claim to belong to Him (‘are called by [His] name’; Deut. 28:10; 2 Chron. 7:14; Isa. 43:7) proclaim His character in both their worship (the phrase ‘call on the name of Yahweh’ [Gen. 4:26; 21:33] refers to praise or worship [Gen. 12:8; Deut. 32:3] as well as petition) and their behavior. If their worship or behavior misrepresents God’s holy character, it ‘profanes’ His name. This desecrates Him, damages His reputation, brings Him disgrace, and will not be tolerated (Lev. 22). This is what Israel had done before the exile and was doing again.”⁴

—E. Ray Clendenen,
HCSB Study Bible

Voices from Church History

“Purity of heart constitutes prayer more than do all the prayers that are uttered out loud, and silence united to a mind that is sincere is better than a loud voice of someone crying out.”⁵

—Aphrahat (circa 270–350)

¹⁰ *Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand.* ¹¹ *For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.* ¹² *But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised.* ¹³ *But you say, ‘What a weariness this is,’ and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD.* ¹⁴ *Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.*

We could try to put this into perspective for a 21st century audience by saying: “Shut the doors to every church in the world. No more church buildings. No more meetings. It’s over.” But that analogy breaks down significantly because the Israelites were dependent upon the temple *for everything*. They were dependent upon the temple for their sacrifices. They were dependent upon the temple for the forgiveness of their sins, for their festivals, for their feast days, and for their offerings. Without the temple, the nation would cease to function.

Because of how flippantly the priests (and consequently, the rest of Judah) treated Him, God’s anger against them was kindled. This is not an image of an unjust, angry God. He is asking for the honor that is rightly due Him. It was the lack of respect from the people that ignited His anger against them because it minimized His worth. The greatness of God should drive us to our knees and cause us to give the absolute best of everything we have in adoration to Him.

The apostle Paul later instructed believers: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). Peter supported the same notion by stating: “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

Scripture encourages disciples of Christ to offer up five things to God:

- Our bodies (Rom. 12:1–2)
- Our finances (Phil. 4:14–18)
- Our praise (Heb. 13:15)
- Our works (Heb. 13:16)
- Our witness (Rom. 15:16)



In what ways does our worship of God through these five “sacrifices” display God’s greatness?

2. Shallow worship minimizes God’s worth (Mal. 3:7-12).

Once, a little brother and sister were playing “Noah’s Ark” in their bathtub with an old shoebox. After the floodwaters receded, the children decided to present an offering to God. The boy, playing the part of Noah, said to Mrs. Noah, his sister, “Let’s offer one of your toy animals as a sacrifice.” “No,” she protested, “let’s use one of yours instead!” After a time of disagreement, the girl ran into their attic. Moments later she emerged with an old toy lamb. It was dingy and dirty. Its head was smashed in, and its tail was severed from its body. “Here,” she said, “let’s use this as our sacrifice. We will never play with it again anyway.”

Sadly, this story exemplifies the motivation that often characterizes our hearts when it comes to God. We offer God what’s left, not what’s best.

In the first half of the Book of Malachi, God questioned the quality of the people’s sacrifices. Next He questioned the quantity of their sacrifices.

⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. ¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

Upon hearing from God, the Israelites demanded a roadmap for reconciliation with Him: “How can we return?” But their question was less than sincere. They were not expressing a desire to return to Him but denying that they ever left in the first place. After all, they were still sacrificing to Him, right?



What types of things might we take pride in as evidence that we are close with God when actually we are not?



Further Commentary

“God promises to bless (as he knows is best) generous giving to his purposes, and also to bring consequences upon the miserly (vv. 8-12)... Our giving is also a diagnostic window into how we view God. If we see God as the gracious giver of all good gifts, we will desire to excel in the ‘grace’ of giving (cf. 2 Cor. 8:7). If we view him as a hard taskmaster whose service is a burden, however, it will be visible in our reluctant giving. The issue is our attitude, not the amount (Luke 21:1-4). Through it all, we remember Jesus, who ‘though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich’ (2 Cor. 8:9). We are cheerfully generous not in order to pay God back, but in light of his great and lavish generosity toward us.”⁶

—Iain Duguid,
Gospel Transformation Bible



Voices from Church History

"[A]lthough He has revenge in His power, He prefers to keep patience for a long while."⁷

—Cyprian (circa 200-258)



Voices from the Church

"Any attitude other than our best for [God] is lame. It's a form of godliness without the power."⁸

—Michael Catt



Further Commentary

"It's common to hear the word *tithe* used as a kind of shorthand for giving and generosity. The word itself literally means 'tenth' and comes from the Old Testament, where tithing was one of several regular offerings...In all, the Old Testament mandated giving 25 percent or more of one's possessions to various purposes and causes...So, as we look to the Scriptures, both in Old Testament laws and New Testament encouragement, we commend tithing. (Note that Jesus acknowledged the Pharisees' act of tithing though the heart behind the act was lacking; Matt. 23:23.) We encourage people to tithe in our churches. But we encourage those not tithing to give generously and proportionally from their income and encourage people who are tithing to grow their generosity even more."⁹

Before we cast stones, we must remember how easy it is to wander ourselves. "Far from God?" a churchgoer might say, "I am not far from God! I go to church every week! My kids are in a Christian school. How can you say that I am far from God?" Yet many are blinded to the fact that they are blind.

God could reply to this in the same way He replied to the people of Judah: "You may not think you are far from Me, but you are." God had challenged the Israelites previously for their poor sacrifices, their lack of worship, their idolatry, and their faithlessness. But here He gets to the root of the problem—*The heart of the problem is a problem of the heart*. Specifically, they had misallocated their funds, choosing selfishly to keep and use what they had instead of honoring God with it. You see, giving is an indication of the state of our hearts and a thermometer for how we value God's worth.



How do our spending habits and our hearts relate?



How does this passage relate to Jesus' teaching about our hearts being where our treasure is (Matt. 6:19-21)?

God actually told His people that they were to test Him in this. This is a remarkable concept—God said, "Try Me!" If the people would test Him financially, He would provide protection from those who sought to devour them, He would meet their physical needs, and He would prosper their reputation among the nations.

Trusting God financially demonstrates how worthy we believe God to be and reveals the level of our trust in Him. The quickest way to understand where somebody's heart lies is by looking at their bank account. Weekly giving is a visible display of trusting God on a regular basis. Where does your money go? How do you spend your time? What do you do with the things that have been entrusted to you?

We can learn three things from Malachi 3:7-12 about our actions and God's reactions. *First*, as with much of Malachi, we learn that if we obey the mandates of God in humble and faithful service, we can expect God to act. This does not mean He rewards us immediately or even financially; however, when we trust God with our finances, we experience His blessing.

Second, we learn that what defines us is not what we have or think we have earned. Rather, it is what we do with the resources God has provided.

Third, we see in this passage that God is faithful to keep His covenant, even when the people are not. Judah failed once again, but God never does. In the life of Christ, we meet One who gave generously of Himself out of obedience to His Father and, in His death, became the generous outpouring of heavenly blessing that God bestows on all who believe.



God has blessed us to be a blessing to others. Give the Lord your time, talents, and treasures. Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”¹⁰



How should Christians understand and apply God's promise of blessing for obedience in light of what Christ has done for us?

3. Shallow worship deserves judgment (Mal. 4:1-6).

¹ *“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”* ² *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”* ³ *“And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.”*

⁴ *“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”*

⁵ *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”* ⁶ *“And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”*

Judah expected unending blessings because of their position as God's chosen people. What they received, however, was a warning. “Like an oven,” God would come to set all wrongs right—even if it began with them for their apathetic, lukewarm worship of Him. They looked forward to the day when the Lord would repay the wrongdoing of their enemies, but they did not realize that it would be a day of judgment for themselves too.

When the Lord returns again, the same conditions apply: The Lord will exact justice, and it is up to us to be prepared for it. The question we must ask ourselves is “Am I ready for this second coming?”

We can be sure of our standing on that day because the Lord tells us in verse 2: “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.” Those who fear the Lord, who have faith in His Son sacrificed for us, demonstrated through faithfulness to God's commands—these people can look to that day with joy in their hearts, for they will be insulated from the impending destruction.

“Remember the law,” God said. “If you want to know what it is I want from you, then read it for yourself.” Success is realized when we get into the Word of God and the Word gets into us.

Further Commentary

“Malachi now looks forward to the great and terrible day of the Lord, an expression used in Joel 2:31. There will, however, be a warning first. The choice of Elijah to typify the coming prophet may have been suggested by the mention of Horeb, for, like Moses, he had a revelation of God there (1 Kings 19:8-18). Then again Elijah served as a moral catalyst to the nation. No other prophet so dramatically changed the attitude of his contemporaries, nor so influenced the destiny of the nation. If the messenger of 3:1-3 was in mind, Elijah had called down fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:38), had witnessed the Lord's wind, earthquake and fire at Horeb (1 Kings 19:11,12) and had been taken from Elisha in a chariot of fire. The fact that he did not experience death suggested that he still lived to carry on his work (cf. 2 Chron. 21:12). Whatever may have been the truth about John's understanding of his role, he believed that the Messianic age was being ushered in, and that only through a process of testing by fire could anyone escape final judgment (Matt. 3:11,12). He undoubtedly knew the message of Malachi and was profoundly influenced by it. In the life of Jesus the expectation of John was not fulfilled. An interval separated the first and second comings, and the day of grace was extended to delay final judgment. This does not mean, however, that judgment has been averted. The warning that ends the Old Testament is not absent at the end of the New (Rev. 22:10-15), but the difference is that there grace has the last word (verse 21).”¹¹

—Joyce G. Baldwin

Voices from the Church

“‘Returning to God’ means living the kind of lives that reflect truth about God.”¹³

—Michael Williams

Voices from Church History

“Worship is giving to God the best He has given us, and He makes it His and ours for ever.”¹⁴

—Oswald Chambers (1874-1917)

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

89. *Worship*

While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the exact due of praise and adoration that He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only at a personal level within a Christian's life but also in joining with other Christians in the corporate act of worship and stewarding our gifts for the glory of God. Corporate worship serves to edify and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to non-believers of the greatness of God.

The final two verses of Malachi are the ultimate cliffhanger to the Old Testament. The prophet ended with a promise of someone to come to herald the coming Day of the Lord and a warning of a curse if repentance did not have its way in the community and the family. Jesus Himself made it clear that this “Elijah” was John the Baptist, who preached a message of repentance for the people of God (Matt. 17:10-12). But from this prophecy forward until his arrival, God was silent.



How would you instruct someone who sees the promise of judgment and responds by trying to get his or her life together? What is the proper biblical response?

Conclusion

In the New Testament, Zechariah, a priest, was struck mute for his disbelief in an angel's words that he and his wife would have a son in their old age. When that son, John the Baptist, was finally born, Zechariah's tongue was loosed to the praise of God, and filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied that John would prepare the way for “the sunrise...from on high” (Luke 1:78-79), most likely a direct reference to Malachi 4:2. The “sun of righteousness” was the Messiah to come; the “sun” is the Son—Jesus Christ.

Aren't you glad we don't have to wait 400 years for the coming Messiah? Instead, we look back to Jesus as our Messiah who came to redeem us from our sins. He declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). The question for each of us today is “Has the Light of the world entered into your heart?”

A selfish man asked his believing friend, “What advantage has a religious man over any one like myself? Does not the sun shine on me as on him, this fine day?” “Yes,” replied his friend, “but the religious man has two suns shining on him at once,—one on his body, the other on his soul.”¹²

In Christ, the sun shines upon us. And the next book of the Bible begins the story of the Son of God's arrival on earth.

CHRIST CONNECTION: After Malachi, the prophetic word of God went silent for four hundred years. But Malachi prophesied about a messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah to bring God's kingdom. Centuries later, John the Baptist arrived as the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus. The last word of the Old Testament is “curse,” a reminder of the consequence of our sin. But in the New Testament, one of the first words we hear from Jesus is “blessing.” The One who bears our curse is the One who brings us blessing.

Additional Resources

The Problem of Shallow Worship



Get expert insights on weekly studies through Ministry Grid at MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject. Grow with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog at LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry.

Study Material

- “Malachi: Honor God”—Chapter 36 from *How to Read the Bible Through the Jesus Lens* by Michael Williams
- “A Kingdom Story Waiting for an Ending”—Interlude from *The Drama of Scripture* by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “Repentance in the Old Testament,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator. Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

Sermon Podcast

David Platt: “Make the Most of Your Worship”

Find a link to this at GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

Tip of the Week

Learning by Doing

“People learn best when learning is applied. When a person responds to God, he discovers that truths he has learned in [the group] help him live successfully as a Christian. Such a person comes to [the group] motivated, ready to learn...An effectively motivating [group] should encourage the [group member] to respond. There is something about actually applying a truth in life, seeing our lives change, that keeps us coming back for more. As [group members] apply biblical truth to life, they are motivated to go further in their understanding of the Word of God.”¹⁵

References

1. A. W. Tozer, quoted in *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, comp. James L. Snyder (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread Publishers, 1997) [eBook].
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