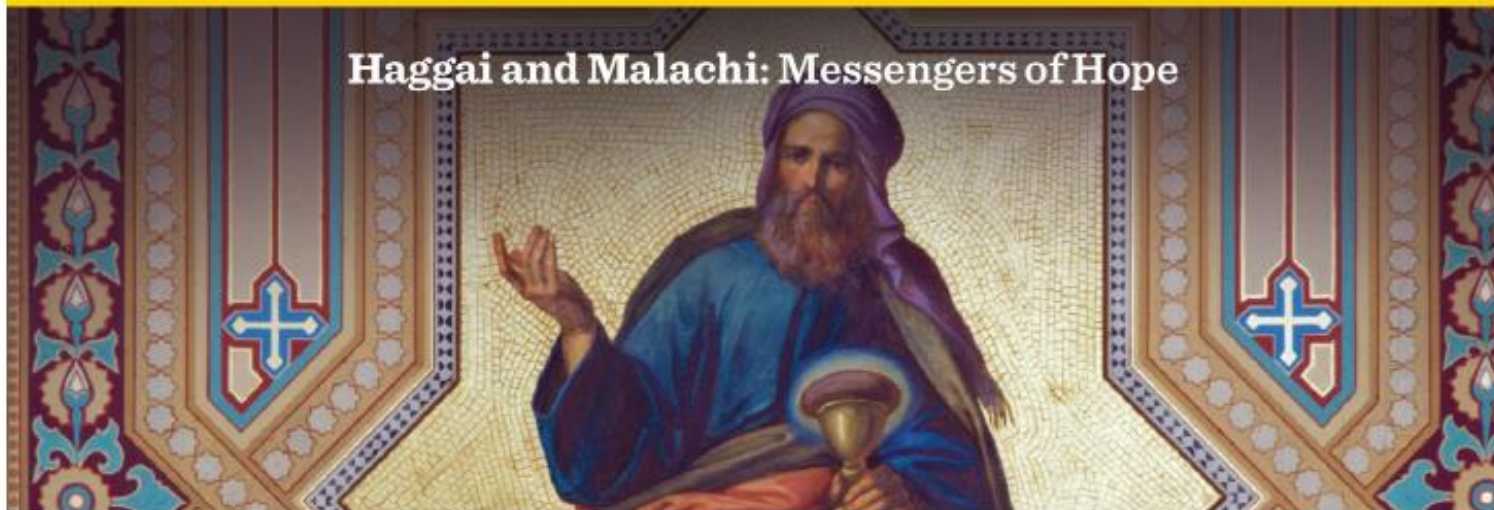


Session Nine

Haggai and Malachi: Messengers of Hope



The Prophet Malachi by Carl Mayer

A. Establish the Context

Perhaps the most important building project during the challenging decades of Judah's return home from exile involves not a stone structure but the people of God themselves. They have returned home, but the reality of their situation does not match up with the glorious promise of restoration. For one thing, the land they return to is not "theirs." What once was Israel and Judah remains a province of Persia, with local authorities under the control of the Persian king. The promised restoration under a Davidic king has not begun. Understanding and living in this "already but not yet" state of affairs is a challenge as they must continue to live by faith, waiting.

Three prophets give voice to God's Word during this post-exilic time period. We will look at two of them in this session: Haggai and Malachi. The tiny book of Haggai provides our first window into the Return. Seventeen years after returning from exile, this prophet paints an anything-but-rosy picture of the situation. Poor harvests, misplaced priorities, lackluster devotion, and poor morale have led to a kind of spiritual paralysis. Haggai (with his partner prophet, Zechariah) "builds up" the people of God as they work to complete the long-stalled Temple building project. Haggai and Malachi are prophets of hope who encourage their contemporaries even as they point to something in the future that will be greater than the physical Temple—a full and glorious restoration of the Davidic throne and a messianic age to come.

Our second window into the Return is Malachi, whose book completes the Old Testament prophetic age. Nearly a century after Zechariah and Haggai (c. 433 BC), Malachi battles priest scandals, rampant divorce, religious indifference, day-labor wage controversies, and oppression of the poor. Does this sound familiar? Though he lived nearly 2,500 years ago, his message remains contemporary and convicting. The text is shaped around a series of disputes between the people and God. Like his predecessors, Malachi closes with a promise of Elijah's return and a powerful image of the LORD, pictured as the "sun of righteousness" returning to his earthly Temple (see Malachi 4:2, 4:5; NAB 3:20, 3:23). Malachi's emphasis on the constant, undergirding love of God forms a fitting close to the Book of the Twelve, which opened with God's call of love through Hosea.

B. Read the Story

Read Haggai and Malachi before you answer the questions (both books are very short). Along with Zechariah, they can be found in the RSV-2CE right before 1 and 2 Maccabees, which bring the Old Testament to a close.¹ In the NAB and New Jerusalem versions, they can be found at the end of the Old Testament.

Make sure you can locate Haggai and Malachi in the Return (yellow) portion of the *Timeline Chart*, paying attention to the historical context and pertinent events.

Going Deeper (optional): To get the entire story and message of these prophets, read the historical background found in Ezra 1–7 (for Haggai) and in the entire book of Nehemiah (for Malachi).

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

Haggai

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FROM THE BOOK OF EZRA

1. All three prophets of the Return should be read in the context of the historical background conveyed in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra 1–6 tells of the first return (under Zerubbabel) and of the building of the Temple.
 - a. Read Ezra 1:1–2:2. How does God bring about an end to the time of Babylonian exile?
 - b. The people do not return to an empty land. Judea is now a province of Persia, administered from Samaria and populated by the unskilled, uneducated people the Babylonians have left behind. In the countryside to the north are the descendants of exiles from other lands (moved there by the Assyrians). These have mixed Israelite practices with the worship of other gods.² Read Ezra 4. Briefly describe how the returned exiles fare as they work to build the Temple.

¹ 1 and 2 Maccabees follow Esther in the NAB.

² See 2 Kings 17:24–41.

THE WORD OF THE LORD COMES BY HAGGAI (BOOK OF HAGGAI)

Sixteen years after construction is stopped, Haggai comes on the scene. His little book covers the final months of 520 BC during the second year of the reign of the Persian king Darius I. Addressed to the Judean governor, Zerubbabel, and to the high priest Joshua, the message comprises a series of four “words” from the LORD.

2. Read Haggai 1, which describes the first “word” or message from God.
 - a. The Temple has lain in ruins for decades. What have the people been doing? Where have they placed their priorities?
 - b. Has focusing on their own priorities paid off for them? Explain (see Haggai 1:5-6, 1:9-11).
3. a. Although they are back in the land, blessings do not automatically follow. Read about the covenant promises and curses God gives them through Moses in Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 28:15-19. What do you learn?
 - b. What is the solution to their struggle? (See also Haggai 1:8.)
4. Given the determined opposition the people face, one might be tempted to excuse them for letting the Temple go until a more opportune time. Read 1 Kings 6:11-13, 8:41-43. Why is it so important for the LORD to have a “house” in the world?
5. Review Haggai 1:12-14. When Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people respond in obedience, what message and concrete help does God give them? (See also Haggai 2:4-5.)

6. Ezra 3:10-12 describes how those who are old enough to remember the original Temple weep at the sight of the new foundation. Solomon had vast resources at his disposal, and the original Temple was glorious. It is obvious, even at this early stage of building, that the new structure is no match for the first. According to Haggai 2:4-9, should they be concerned? Why, or why not?

7. The theme of “considering” runs through Haggai. In just two chapters, the people are asked three times to consider how they have fared as they have pursued their own priorities to no avail—because they have failed to return to God (Haggai 1:5, 1:7, 2:15, 2:18). Read those verses and Haggai 2:18-20. What encouraging thing should they “consider from this day onward”?

THE THIRD PROPHET OF THE RETURN: ZECHARIAH

Zechariah, whom we will not have time to study, enters the picture at the same time as Haggai. His name means “Yahweh remembers,” and he bears a message of hope: God has not forgotten his people, however it may seem. He has a plan. The promised restoration is on the way. Through Zechariah, God calls his people: “Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you” (Zechariah 1:3).

Zechariah speaks not only of the Temple that is being restored, but also of a glorious Temple of the future. In a series of dramatic visions, he looks through the current situation to reveal what the temporal realities represent, a true and final restoration: not only a new Temple, but a New Jerusalem that will abide in peace; the day of the LORD and the end of the opposing nations; a restored priesthood; and the coming messianic Servant, the future Davidic king, who will remove sin from their midst.

“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for behold, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the LORD. And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. And the LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem” (Zechariah 2:10-12; NAB 2:14-16).

Despite these hope-filled words, the question lingers long after Zechariah: When will this “day” be, and when will the LORD return to his Temple? For even though the Temple is built and the people respond to God’s call, Scripture never records the filling of this rebuilt Temple with the Spirit of God’s presence. All will remain in a state of “already, but not yet” waiting until one day when a young woman will take her child, Emmanuel—“God with us”—to be presented there.

Not surprisingly, Zechariah’s prophecies figure heavily in the Gospel accounts of the final week of Jesus’ life, the time we call Holy Week. From Zechariah, for example, comes the prophecy that Jerusalem’s King comes “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). Some of the imagery in Revelation is drawn from his visions, along with those of Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. See the chart on pages 11-12 for some of the images from Zechariah and other prophets that are taken up by the Gospel writers to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah.

Malachi

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FROM THE BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

The second half of Ezra picks up in 458 BC (years after the building of the Temple) when Ezra himself goes to Jerusalem. Sent by King Artaxerxes to check on things and to take with him provisions for the Temple, Ezra is accompanied by nearly two thousand returning exiles. He is a priest and a scribe, “skilled in the law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6), and he instructs the people in the Law and brings about reform. Then in 445 BC, there is a third return: Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king, is distressed by reports of the broken, fire-ravaged state of the walls of Jerusalem. He asks Artaxerxes to send him to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He returns, and under his leadership, the wall is rebuilt in fifty-two days in spite of severe opposition from their neighbors (see Nehemiah 4:7-9; NAB 4:1-3).

8. Read Nehemiah 13:4-31, which describes the state of Judea when Nehemiah returns after an absence. Describe briefly the four things Nehemiah finds that trouble him.

THE WORD OF THE LORD COMES BY MALACHI (BOOK OF MALACHI)

Around 433 BC, toward the end of Nehemiah's term as governor and before a series of reforms enacted by Ezra and Nehemiah, the Word of the LORD comes to the people through a prophet called Malachi (in Hebrew, “my messenger”). In a series of six disputations, Malachi calls the people back to covenant faithfulness to a God who has always loved them and who offers the future hope of a glorious day of the LORD.

9. “I have loved you,” says the LORD in Malachi 1:2. Yet the people do not see it. They are blinded by their own sins. Read the following verses and note the ways the covenant is broken.

MALACHI	COVENANT BROKEN	BREACHES OF THE COVENANT
2:1-9	The covenant of Levi, “a covenant of life and peace” (2:5)	
2:10-11	“The covenant of our fathers” (2:10)	
2:14-16	The covenant of marriage (“between you and the wife of your youth,” 2:14)	

10. In Malachi 2:17, we read that the people protest this characterization of themselves. They wonder how it can matter whether they follow the Law, when it seems as though lawbreakers get away with wrong and are blessed by the LORD.

- a. To those who believe God does not act when his Law is broken, Malachi 3:2 talks about, “the day of his coming” in judgment, but asks, “who can endure” that day? Read the following passages and tell what that day will bring.

- Malachi 3:1-5:

- Malachi 4:1 (NAB 3:19):

- b. In light of God’s coming in fiery judgment on that day, is there hope for anyone? Read Malachi 3:6-7, and record what you learn.

11. Malachi 3 (NAB 3:1-18) and Malachi 4 (NAB 3:19-24) speak of someone who will come just prior to the day of the LORD. What do the following verses tell you about this person and his purpose?

VERSES IN MALACHI	PERSON AND DESCRIPTION	PURPOSE
3:1		
4:5-6 (NAB 3:23-24)		

12. Now read Malachi 4:1-6 (NAB 3:19-24).

- a. While “all the arrogant and all evildoers” will be as though burned to stubble at the day of the LORD, what can be expected by those who fear the LORD?

- b. Compare Malachi 4:5-6 (NAB 3:23-24) with Luke 1:17, which is part of the angel Gabriel's message to Zechariah. (For context, read Luke 1:8-17.) What interpretation does the angel give to Malachi's prophecy?
- 13. Read James 4:6-9. What does this add to your understanding of God's love and judgment and how we can approach him, even now?

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

In our time, Pope Francis has renewed the call from Jesus, originally heard by St. Francis of Assisi, to "rebuild my Church." What spiritual building projects does the Church face today? What are the challenges? How are you participating?

Dear Lord ...

SESSION NINE TALK NOTES

Haggai and Malachi: Messengers of Hope**I. Setting the Stage****A. Background of the Return**

1. Three “waves” of return
2. Exiles return to three building projects
 - a. Rebuild the Temple (Zerubbabel 538 BC)
 - b. Rebuild the people (Ezra)
 - c. Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah)
3. Opposition
 - a. Interior (personal sin, laziness)
 - b. From without (Samaritans)
 - i. *Shatan* (Satan): “adversary, accuser”

B. God’s messengers of hope: Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi**II. Haggai****A. With Zechariah, God’s messenger at start of Return****B. 520 BC, fifteen years after work stopped on second Temple****C. Ezra 5:2: Prophets help rebuild**

1. Hebrew, *seh-ad'* (to sustain, support, encourage, strengthen, refresh)
 - a. Used to God helping us
 - b. Psalm 94:18 – If my foot slips, God’s loving kindness will hold me up (*seh-ad'*)
2. God sends prophets to hold them up, encourage

D. God’s message: They are building their own homes instead of God’s house

1. “Consider how you have fared” (three times)
 - a. Literally, “Apply your hearts to your paths”
2. Notice lack of blessing, result of covenant unfaithfulness
3. Be faithful and I will bless
 - a. Matthew 6:33 – Seek first the kingdom, and all shall be added
 - b. Matthew 6:21 – Where your treasure is, your heart will be

E. The people obey and the LORD is with them (Haggai 1:12-13)

1. Experience of his presence follows faithful obedience

- 2. The LORD helps them overcome acedia (spiritual apathy)
 - a. The LORD “stirred up the spirit” of leaders and people (Haggai 1:14)
 - b. They came back and built God’s house
- 3. Pattern: God prompts, we respond in faith, he supplies the strength
- F. The people face discouragement
 - 1. The Temple falls short of the glory of the original
 - 2. God meets them where they are, gives hope (Haggai 2:4-5)
 - a. Be strong, I am with you
 - b. Your past efforts led to nothing, but from now on I will bless you
 - c. Their preparations will prepare the “house” for a King coming in glory

III. Zechariah

- A. Series of visions, single message
 - 1. God working out his purpose
 - 2. Apocalyptic imagery
- B. Points to future fulfillment of what the Temple symbolizes

IV. Malachi

- A. Background
 - 1. Sixty years later, another wave of exiles return under Ezra
 - 2. Zerubbabel returns but no king; rebuilding, but promises seem forgotten
 - 3. Malachi the last of the Old Testament prophets, c. 430 BC
 - 4. Malachi means “my messenger”
 - 5. Message prepares for Messiah during time of waiting, speaks to us
- B. Structure: series of six dialogues
- C. Problems addressed
 - 1. Types of problems apply to us as well
 - 2. People doubt God’s love and faithfulness (Malachi 1)
 - a. God’s love in spite of appearances
 - b. God is almighty
 - c. God is faithful
 - i. Can they be faithful during time of waiting?
 - ii. Can they return his love in true worship, obedience?

- d. They are not faithful to God or his covenant
 - i. Reflected in unfaithfulness to marriage covenant
 - ii. "I hate divorce" (Malachi 2:15-16)
 - iii. Marriage: a sign of God's covenant love
 - iv. Divorce: a "countersign" of unfaithfulness
- 3. Why should we serve God when the evil prosper?
 - a. Judgment is coming to reward good, punish evil
 - b. God will come with purifying fire (Malachi 3:1-3)
 - i. Fiery language continued in Malachi 4:1-3 (NAB 3:19-21)
 - ii. In the meantime, remember the law (Malachi 4:4; NAB 3:22)
 - c. God sending Elijah before the future "Day of the LORD"
 - i. Quoted in reference to John the Baptist (Luke 1:17)
 - ii. He will turn the hearts of fathers and children to each other (Malachi 4:6; NAB 3:24)
 - iii. Preparing the way for a New Covenant family of God
 - iv. "Return to me and I will return to you" (Malachi 3:7)
- 4. The "Return" is just a beginning

V. Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal³

³ For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.

New Testament and Modern Prophets

INTRODUCTION TO SESSION TEN

Before we continue beyond the Old Testament era, it will be helpful to briefly recall some of the prophetic messages we have heard.

Hosea: The marriage-like covenant between God and Israel has been violated by the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and that nation is being “destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6) of God. Hosea lives out his message, marrying a prostitute to show how God’s merciful love is more powerful than any sin. God promises “tough love” should his people not return: judgment with the ultimate aim of restoring them to blessing in an intimate relationship with him.

Jonah: Jonah’s life proclaims a startling message to an Israel that feels it has a corner on God’s favor: God has merciful compassion on everyone who turns to him, whether Jew or Gentile. Even the wicked Assyria is shown mercy; because the people repent, they are saved for a time.

Isaiah 1–39: Sometimes called the “Book of Woe,” the first half of the book of Isaiah is full of warning. The Southern Kingdom of Judah may be ruled by David’s heirs and may house the holy Temple, but it has lost the bloom of its first love. It has become sinful and corrupt and is in danger of turning to other gods. In the days of the Assyrian threat leading up to the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Isaiah calls the people to repentance and warns of impending exile for the south as well. The land will be destroyed along with the earthly throne—but God will remain faithful. A remnant will be saved, and a child who will be born to a virgin will restore and establish God’s kingdom.

Isaiah 40–66: Often called the “Book of Consolation,” the second half of the book of Isaiah peers into the future and proclaims a message of comfort set during the time of Babylonian Exile and beyond. The situation will seem bleak. But punishment, even though deserved, is for but a time and is meant to restore. Through Isaiah, God promises the restoration of the nation (even naming Cyrus as agent of their return) and bids them look forward to a glorious future kingdom when all will be healed. Part and parcel of that is the coming of God’s “Servant” who will bring justice, speak God’s Word, and bear the people’s sins: not only those of Israel, but those of the world.

Jeremiah: For four decades leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah is a prophet of both doom and restoration. God has been patient, but the time for judgment has come. The existence of the Temple does not protect them from enemies. Jeremiah announces judgment to people who have forsaken God and do not want to listen—all the while proclaiming God’s merciful plan to restore them.

Ezekiel: Exiled to Babylon, Ezekiel brings a vision of God’s continued presence with his people. He is a “watchman on the wall,” warning them of Jerusalem’s destruction and promising a new, everlasting covenant in which they will be raised as from death and replanted in Israel to be shepherded by God himself and his Anointed One (the Messiah). This has the “already but not yet” nature of an initial, physical return to the land followed by a future, “internal” return when new hearts and spirits will enable them to walk in obedient love.

Daniel speaks prophetically of the future even as he models the way to live a faithful life under foreign domination. In spite of appearances, God has a plan, and everything is under his control. Ultimately all kingdoms will fall before the just and righteous kingdom of God, whose universal reign will last forever.

Haggai reprimands the returned exiles for neglecting their task of rebuilding the Temple and focusing on rebuilding their own homes instead. They are not being blessed, because even though they have returned to the land, they remain spiritually far from God. He exhorts them to take courage and work to build God's house, and then they will be blessed.

Malachi assures a people who have broken God's covenant in many ways that God loves them and is coming to refine the priests and to judge those who oppose him. The same fire that burns the proud and evildoers will heal and restore those who fear (revere) him. They should walk in obedience and wait patiently for the LORD's messenger, Elijah, who will prepare the people for his coming.

DID PROPHECY END WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT?

In our final session, we will consider ways in which Jesus fulfills the prophetic expectations of the Old Testament as the ultimate, promised Prophet, and we will see how the prophetic witness continues in the Church.