

The Undaunted Prophet

1:1

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“The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi” (1:1).

Johnny Maynard was well known as a God-fearing pilot on Lake Erie. He had charge of a steamer from Detroit, Michigan, to Buffalo, New York. One summer afternoon as he was sailing, smoke was seen coming from below. The captain called out, “Simpson! Go below and report on that smoke!” Simpson returned and his face was pale as he said, “Captain, the ship is on fire!” “Fire! Fire! Fire!” was instantly heard in all directions. All hands were called up. Buckets of water were dashed on the flames, but in vain. Large quantities of rosin and tar were on board. It was useless to try to save the ship. The passengers rushed forward to inquire of the pilot, “How long before land?” “Seven miles.” “How long before we can reach it?” “Three-quarters of an hour at our present rate of steam.” “Is there any danger?” “Danger enough here! See the smoke at my feet? The fire is directly below. Go forward if you want to save yourselves!” Passengers and crew all crowded to the forward part of the ship. John Maynard stood at his post. The flames burst forth in a sheet of fire; clouds of smoke arose. The captain cried out through his trumpet, “John Maynard!” “Aye, aye, sir!” he replied. “How does she head?” “Southeast by east, sir!” he reported. “Head her southeast and run her on shore!” the captain told him. Nearer, yet nearer she approached the shore. Again the captain

cried, “John Maynard!” This time the reply was feeble: “Aye, aye, sir.” “Can you hold on five minutes longer, John?” he asked. “By God’s help I will.” The old man’s hair had been scorched from his scalp, one hand disabled, and his teeth were set; yet he stood firm as a rock. He beached the ship. Every man, woman, and child was saved. As the ship touched shore, John Maynard dropped overboard dead.

Something about a genuine hero stirs deep emotions within us. The Purple Hearts, Bronze Stars, and Congressional Medals of Honor are badges of heroic feats deserving special honor. It is sad that heroic honors are not given to every hero, for reading such presentations would make an inspiring narrative.

Another aspect of heroism is often without badge or medal. It is a heroism of devotion to spiritual principles—honor to God, dedication to God’s will, and sacrificial service in His cause. Spiritual heroes have the capacity to enthrall our hearts, capture our imaginations, and prod us to greater service. These “heroes of the Faith” are a great encouragement to us as we live the Christian life (cf. Hebrews 12:1). One who is certainly among this saintly throng is the Old Testament prophet Malachi.

The biography of this “Minor Prophet” is short. In fact, Malachi 1:1 is all of the data that is supplied to us about him. But as we read his prophecy, we see a broader picture of his character.

Malachi was a fearless reformer . . . without hesitation or embarrassment . . . he was a strong, vigorous, clearcut personality who was strongly opposed to any person who entreated [God] with indifference and carelessness. He was on fire with spiritual zeal.¹

In *Portraits of the Prophets* we read,

Undismayed by his adversaries, with indomitable bravery Malachi guarded himself for what the hour might bring forth. He feared no man because he feared God so much. With rapier thrusts he struck home. Skillfully he stripped off the hypocritical vesture.²

Malachi was a “hero” in every sense of the word. He was a prophet full of courage. He had an enthusiasm for righteousness that stood out in a society where God was indifferently treated. He was controlled by an invincible faith. This hero of biblical prophecy was probably a priest. He lived in the period of history immediately following the Exile. He saw Israel as a nation who had lost her living faith. He was a righteous priest among an unrighteous priesthood. The priests of his era were greedy and godless. His society had become skeptical and cynical. The people wanted the benefits of religion without paying the costs. Consequently, the priesthood had become corrupt; the people were satisfied with a mere pretense of religion. At this tragic period of Israelite history, the Word of God came to Malachi. This man responded in a manner becoming a genuine “hero.” Consider the following features about him and his marvelous message.

THE CHARACTER OF MALACHI

From various texts in his book, we are able to piece together a portrait of the heroic prophet Malachi.

First, he had a willingness to be used by God. The word “messenger” is the literal rendering of the Hebrew word. This was suitable to the man. It indicates that he was willing to be used to carry God’s holy message. As the call of God came to Malachi, he was willing to obey even if it meant accepting an unpopular position and becoming

the object of general resentment. The short book which bears his name indicates that Malachi was willing to speak God’s message without hesitation!

Second, he showed great courage to confront error (1:6, 14). The message he spoke was a condemnation to those who did not want to listen. It was very unusual for one to address the manner, attitudes, and practices of society in the blunt terms used by Malachi. Malachi’s message was a complete exposure of Israel’s hypocrisy. But Malachi did not hesitate to speak God’s Word. Consider these topics which Malachi addressed: corruption in the priesthood, disrespect to God, profane living, prejudice, divorce, and pride. These topics are avoided in modern times. Many preachers are scared to preach sermons on these topics. But Malachi did not hesitate to confront them.

Being from the priestly order, Malachi was well aware of the corruption that raged in Israel’s worship practices. He did not shy away from exposing even the grossest evils. Malachi 1:10 can be interpreted to mean that the priests were so corrupt they would not do anything without first being bribed! These ungodly practices continued until God’s message came to Malachi. This Old Testament “whistle-blower” had the courage to confront the evils of his day!

Third, he exhibited sensitivity regarding departure from God’s will (1:12; 2:8; 3:9). Throughout the fifty-five verses of this book, the reader frequently notices Malachi’s sensitivity for Jehovah. Malachi was deeply hurt by Israel’s failure in questioning God’s love (1:2), the corruption of the sacrificial practices (1:7, 8, 14), and her non-existent respect for God (1:6). Everywhere Malachi looked he saw error and evil, and this pricked his sensitive spirit. His heart must have been heavy (cf. Jeremiah 5:21; 6:10-11a; 9:1; 2 Peter 2:7, 8).

Fourth, he displayed boldness to demand repentance from the nation of Israel (4:1f.). Malachi was not timid. He boldly published God’s will. As he walked among his friends and neighbors, he was unafraid to present God’s commands to them.

Perhaps one of the factors responsible for this boldness was the “vision” Malachi had of the future. He knew God’s salvation was coming and that Israel needed to be prepared for the

¹Kyle M. Yates, *Preaching From the Prophets* (New York: Harper Bros., 1942), 215.

²J. W. G Ward, *Portraits of the Prophets* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930), 327.

Messiah (3:1-3). Malachi knew the only way that Israel could be ready for the Messiah was for them to allow genuine holiness to dwell within. This demand for holiness was a message that could not be kept silent. The boldness and courage of Malachi would not allow him to be silent.

THE CHALLENGES OF MALACHI

Every hero inspires imitators. Such is true with Malachi. Actually his entire life challenges modern saints. Let us observe three specific challenges.

Let us *possess Malachi's courage to confront error*. Most of us are more like timid Timothy than courageous Malachi (cf. 2 Timothy 1:7)! We must be courageous when tempted to shun confrontation with error.

Christians today must be courageous when surrounded by evil. About 1645 Dr. Harris, minister of Hanwell, England, frequently had military officers quartered in his home. A party of them indulged in much swearing. The doctor noticed this and on the following Sunday preached from these words, "Above all things, my brethren, swear not."

Courage to confront error and uphold truth will be stimulated, first, by appreciation for all God has done for us. A poor boy was attending school with a large patch on his knee. One classmate nicknamed him "Old Patch." "Why don't you fight him?" cried his friends. "I'd give it to him!" "Oh," answered the boy, "you don't suppose I'm ashamed of my patch, do you? For my part, I'm thankful for a good mother to keep me out of rags. I honor my patch for her sake."

A second incentive to courageous faith is a steadfast devotion to God's holy will. One cannot help but gain courage when reading about saintly Micaiah's response to Ahab (1 Kings 22:14) or the action of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3:16-18). Many Christians lack courage today because they lack these two incentives. They fail to appreciate all God has done for them, and they are ignorant of the courage manifested by past heroes of God's people.

Let us *follow Malachi's willingness to serve God*. Someone once asked a famous conductor of a great symphonic orchestra which orchestral instrument was the most difficult to play. The

conductor said, "Second fiddle. I can get plenty of 'first violinists,' but to find one who can play 'second fiddle' without complaint is a great problem. If we have no 'second fiddle,' there is no harmony." This applies equally to the Lord's church.

If Malachi preached during Nehemiah's time, he was among those characterized with these words—"The people had a mind to work" (Nehemiah 4:6b). Malachi would fit neatly into that willing mindset. How many people share his willingness today? (cf. Titus 3:1b; Hebrews 10:35, 36; 12:3b).

Let us *focus with Malachi's vision on God's salvation*. There was no doubt in his mind about the future. This prophet knew that God's salvation would come to the righteous. He was convinced that God's holy justice would confront the sinner (3:1, 2).

Christians need to share Malachi's vision. By looking with eyes of faith, we can find hope for the future. Two were traveling homeward: One was to receive honor for service rendered abroad, and the other was a prisoner to be arraigned for treason. They journeyed with different emotions. Such is true with the virtuous and the wicked on earth. The faithful think upon the day of death as deliverance, and they leap for joy. But the profane fall into melancholy at the thought of death's doom. By looking with eyes focused on faith, we find a great motivation to steadfast labor.

A teacher of the freedmen in one of the southern states was sitting at the window of her room watching two freed slaves load goods onto a wagon. One was disposed to shirk. The other stopped and looked sharply at the indolent. He said, "Do you expect to get to heaven?" "Yes," the other replied. "Then take hold and lift!" he told him. Such common sense counsel applies to believers. If we expect to get to heaven, then we must be active! (cf. John 4:34-38).

CONCLUSION

Centuries ago Malachi lived in Palestine. His birth was not unusual, and death claimed his body. He lived and walked and talked. But what a difference this heroic man made! He is forever remembered as a "fearless reformer . . . undismayed by his adversaries, with indomitable bravery."

If you want to look at a genuine hero, look at Malachi! He was a prophet undaunted in faith and practice. Because of his heroism, we are challenged to . . .

Be Courageous!
Be Willing!
Be Visionary!!
—John Kachelman

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