

Malachi 3:16
A Holy Huddle
Jimmy Snowden

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Introduction

This week as I began to prepare for the sermon I came to the realization that I still have much to learn about the book of Malachi. Up to this point I have said that Malachi is conveniently broken up into six different sections, each section being called a ‘dispute’. I would still affirm this fact, but I would like to add something to this. Although I would continue to argue that Malachi is generally broken up into six different sections, I have to add that, technically speaking, there are seven sections in the book of Malachi. The reason I would still affirm the fact that Malachi is broken up into six different sections is because the six disputes of the book of Malachi really do comprise the bulk of the book, and because this last section is really nothing more than a conclusion to the book. So technically speaking the book of Malachi is broken up into six different sections followed by a relatively lengthy conclusion.

Last week I mentioned that it is not always easy to detect when the sections in the book of Malachi end. Some of the disputes in the book of Malachi overlap. For example, it is a near impossibility to tell whether 3:6 belongs to the fourth dispute (2:17-3:6), the fifth dispute (3:7-12), or if the author of the book of Malachi intended it to be a transitional theological comment that both concludes the fourth section and begins the fifth. I had the same question regarding the sixth dispute; I wasn’t sure exactly where it ended.

The Importance of ’az

It is amazing how even the smallest of words in the Bible can be of great significance. Never skip small, seemingly-insignificant words as if they were not worth your time. I have been studying the book of Malachi now for over four years, having read it in its entirety well over one hundred times, having read almost every commentary on it, and I am still learning things. As of this past Thursday I was still unsure where the sixth dispute ended and I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to be emphasizing in this week’s sermon. As I was reading and rereading the passage I saw something that caught my eye; a small three letter word, the word *’az*. What I came to realize was that the reason why I struggled so much trying to figure out where the sixth dispute ended was because I was not paying enough attention to this little word.

’az, translated as “at that time” in the HCSB, can also be rendered as “then” (the NIV, NASB, ESV, NRSV, NLT, and NKJV all translate it thusly) or “after that.” This word, therefore, is used as a “temporal marker;” it is “a marker of time roughly after another point in time.”¹ The idea being that this is the recording of what happened after God finished saying everything that He had to say through His prophet Malachi. *After* (i.e., *’az*) God said everything that He wanted to say to the Israelites through Malachi “those who feared the spoke with one another.”

¹Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. DBLH 255, #2

I am 98% sure that the sixth oracle ends in 3:15. The word 'az solidifies this fact for me. The “oracle” or “burden” (Malachi 1:1) that God gave Malachi to preach began in Malachi 1:2 and continued to Malachi 3:15. What we have after Malachi 3:15 is the concluding section of the book. The sermon has been preached, the smoke is settling, and in 3:16-4:6 we get an eye into the aftermath of how God’s word through Malachi was received by Israel. This section includes (primarily) three different things: (1) the response of the faithful to the word that God preached through Malachi, (2) a final word of warning to the unrepentant, and (3) a final word of hope to the true God-fearers within Israel.

The Conversation of the Holy Huddle

So here in verse 16 we see those who fear the Lord gathered together speaking to one another. What do you suppose they spoke to one another about? Paul Washer suggests that they discussed the promises of God. This could be true, but there is no real way of telling what they spoke about. Without a doubt, their conversation was brought about by the prophetic word of God through Malachi. Thus, I suppose they discussed the relevance, truth, and implications of what God had to say through Malachi. **What we have in Malachi 3:16 is reflection.** Those who feared the Lord gathered together and reflected on and discussed the message that God delivered through Malachi. This is what the people of God do after a hard, convicting sermon; they gather around and discuss the truth of what was said, the relevance of what was said, and the implications of what was said. I am sure that their conversation also involved confession followed with verbal commitments to repentance.

I really believe that some of those who were part of this number got converted under the prophetic preaching of Malachi. I wonder how many people were converted under Isaiah’s preaching, Jeremiah’s preaching, Ezekiel’s preaching. All too often we tend to think that because the prophets were primarily rejected that the Lord did not use their preaching to convert sinners, but we ought not think this way. Surely, the prophets of the Old Testament did not receive the visible harvest that Peter did at Pentecost, but we must not conclude that the Lord was not opening eyes and convicting hearts through the preaching of the Old Testament prophets. Without a doubt, the prophets were treated with hostility, but we must not be dull to the thought that God saved mightily in the Old just as He does in the New.

The Make-Up of the Holy Huddle

First of all, those who gathered together to discuss this oracle, prophetic utterance, sermon (or whatever you want to call it) are identified as “those who feared the Lord.” We actually see them being identified as “those who fear the Lord” twice in this verse. This is Malachi’s primary designation of the true Yahweh worshippers in Jerusalem. Why? Because look at them compared to the great multitude of Israel. What is the one characteristic that seems to stand out among the Israelites? A casual approach to God and His word. The Israelites, on the whole, simply do not fear Him as they ought, and this lack of fear had caused them to say all sorts of evil against him (see Malachi 1:2; 2:17; 3:13-15), and it had caused them to flippantly disregard and disobey His word (see Malachi 1:7-2:9; 2:10-16; 3:5; 3:7-9). Those who gathered together in this holy huddle were in stark contrast to the bulk of the Israelites. Those who gathered in this holy huddle

went against the grain, they swam against the current. Bottom line: they feared God more than they feared man. This is what set them apart from their fellow countrymen.

It is important that you understand the meaning of this word fear. Often times there is a tendency for us evangelicals to water down the force of the word “fear” (*yare*). The word literally refers to fear, and we must not boil it down to some mere reverence. Those who feared the Lord took God’s pointed words of judgment seriously. They knew that God meant what He said, and that He was going to do what He said He would do. If you come to God in the way that He has prescribed, through belief in Jesus, you need not fear the judgment and condemnation of God. But, those who live unrepentant lives of rebellion against God—rejecting His Son, ought to have a true fear, a bone-rattling fear. The thing that set those who “spoke to one another” apart was their true fear of God—they took His word seriously. John Piper explains what it means to fear the Lord. He says; “To fear the Lord is to tremble at the prospect of dishonoring Him by distrust or disobedience”²

I want you to consider two passages of Scripture which prove this. First of all, think about Acts 5:10-11.

10 Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. 11 Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira (husband and wife) lied to the church and ultimately to the Holy Spirit in order to make themselves look super-spiritual. The result of their lying to the Spirit was death—God struck them down! Notice in verse 11 how the New Testament church responded to God’s surprising judgment against Ananias and Sapphira: “Then great fear come on the whole church.” Does this sound like simple reverence to you? No, they were terrified because they had been given visual, tangible evidence that God is not a God to be taken lightly. This does not mean that we ought to walk around in slavish, debilitating fear. But it does mean that we ought to tremble before God if we entertain a lifestyle of habitual unrepentance.

Look with me at Hebrews 10:26-31. It is important to note (before reading the passage) that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote this letter to dissuade Christians were undergoing persecution to not reject Christ for the sake avoiding persecution. One of the common motifs that can be readily seen throughout this letter is that the author motivated his hearers to obedience on the basis of fear. In 10:26-31 the author makes no bones about the dreadful consequence of rejecting Christ even for the sake of avoiding persecution.

For if we deliberately sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries. 28 If anyone disregards Moses' law, he dies without mercy, based on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think one will deserve who

² Piper said this in a sermon that he preached on Malachi 3:13-1. Go to: <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/MediaPlayer/617/Audio/>

has trampled on the Son of God, regarded as profane the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know the One who has said, Vengeance belongs to Me, I will repay, and again, The Lord will judge His people. 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

Does this sound like the language of mere reverence to you? Of course not! Fear ought not be the sole driving factor in the life of the Christian. In fact, if ***the only reason*** you are clinging to Christ is because you are afraid of hell, I would sincerely ask you to reconsider the state of your soul. However, fear is a part of the Christian life. Many people question me on this and say, “Doesn’t perfect love cast out fear?” Yes, I understand John 4:18, but 1 John 4:18 must not be used as a proof text to explain other passages (like Acts 5 and Hebrews 10) away. In 1 John 4:18, John is talking to those who are actively living by faith in Christ. If you live for His glory alone by loving Him (which is evidenced by a love for the brethren), you can have the assurance of the love that can only be found in Christ Jesus. The true believer who is trusting in Christ ought not have a debilitating, slavish fear of condemnation and judgment, but, nonetheless, the true believer in Christ ought to approach the word of God with a sense of urgency and fear knowing that he is only safe so long as He is abiding in Christ. Isn’t this what Paul seems to be saying in Philippians 2:12?

2 So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. 13 For it is God who is working in you, [enabling you] both to will and to act for His good purpose.

The point of all of this is to say that those who “spoke to one another” are characterized as those who “fear the Lord.” They took God’s word seriously—they understood that God was not simply throwing out rash threats when He warned His people of His judgment. The fact is that the judgment of God was coming upon the Israelites, and those who “feared the Lord” knew that it was coming because God had warned them (through His word and through His prophets), and thus they ran to Him in obedience.

Second of all, they are identified as those who “esteem His name.” The word esteem literally means “*to make much account of, to esteem, to prize.*”³ The NKJV really misses the mark on this one by translating it as “those who meditate on His name.” The idea that Malachi is driving home here is that those in this holy huddle are those who think highly of God. They did not see His words as the opinion of a fellow mere mortal. They saw Him as the infinitely glorious One who is due all obedience, worship, praise, adoration, and contemplation.

What does it mean to esteem someone’s name? A person’s “name” refers to his/her reputation or character, and thus to esteem someone’s name is to think highly of his/her reputation or character. These Israelites, therefore, saw God as being much higher than themselves, and thus when He spoke they did not put His words through the silly

³Gesenius, Wilhelm ; Tregelles, Samuel Prideaux: *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*. Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc, 2003, S. 311

little tests of men. They saw Him as their superior and thus when He spoke they did not test the validity of what He had to say; they simply believed and obeyed. They regarded Him highly, and thus when He spoke they took His word as gold, and were quick to belief and obedience.

Living in the Holy Huddle

The question this morning is this, “How seriously do you take God’s word?” Do you fear Him (do you take his warnings of judgment seriously); do you esteem Him (do you see Him as being above your finite reasonings)? Do you fear God? How can you tell? Well... how urgent is your approach to the word of God? When you hear the word of God preached do you casually sit back and enjoy the show or do you listen with intensity? Really, as I have said in the past, preaching is not a one man show, it is a corporate activity. Without a doubt, it is incumbent upon me, the communicator, to do my utmost to bring a stimulating, challenging, and applicable biblical message, but communicating is only half of the battle. You ought to be putting just as much work into the preaching time as I do. Do you labor over God’s word as it is being preached? What we find in Malachi 3:16 is that the work is not done with the sermon is over; rather, the work has just begun. Surely, the work of coding and decoding a message is over when the sermon has finished, but the real work is done after the sermon has come to a conclusion.