

“I Have Loved You”

Malachi 1:1-5

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The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

² “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob ³ but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.” ⁴ If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” the LORD of hosts says, “They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called ‘the wicked country,’ and ‘the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.’” ⁵ Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, “Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!”

- Malachi 1:1-5, ESV

I. Overview of Malachi

I love a good cliff-hanger, and I have to confess to being a sucker for them. We sat down as a family and binge-watched the first season of *The Dragon Prince* on Netflix on a Friday night because each 22-minute episode ends with a cliff-hanger. Cliff-hangers got us into trouble before we had kids when we would watch seasons of 24 on DVDs borrowed from the library. We stayed up way too late too many nights watching “just one more” episode.

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament, the final prophetic voice before John the Baptist went out into the wilderness dressed in camel’s hair and eating locusts. And it ends with a great cliff-hanger in the final chapter. Chapters 3-4 in our English translation are together the final chapter of the original Hebrew Old Testament, and so this final chapter begins with –

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

Then, it ends with –

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 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.”

And so at the end of the Old Testament, the people of God were left with this massive cliff-hanger full of questions: Who is the messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord? When will he come? Will Elijah himself really come back? How? Will it be in the same chariot of fire that carried him away? And how long will we have to wait?

Well, for us, all we have to do is turn the page from Malachi to Matthew and we get answers to all of these questions. But for the people of God who heard from Malachi, the wait for John the Baptist would be over 400 years! That’s even longer than waiting for the next season of your favorite show to drop on Netflix.

So, who was Malachi and when did he prophesy? Well, we don't even know for sure that his name was Malachi, because the name Malachi means "my messenger," and so this book could open with "*The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by my messenger,*" which would make this final prophet anonymous. But we have good reason to believe his name was probably Malachi, and so we'll keep referring to him by that name.

Malachi doesn't tell us anything about himself or his historical context directly. We have to read between the lines and figure things out. This is very different from the opening of Jeremiah, for example –

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³ It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Malachi prophesied during a time when the Temple had been rebuilt and Temple worship was happening, and Jerusalem was ruled by a governor from a foreign empire. Given the problems Malachi addresses with marriages and tithing, etc., the best date for Malachi is the time between Nehemiah's first and second terms of service in Jerusalem. At the end of Nehemiah 12, Nehemiah returns to Persia for a period of time, and then returns to Jerusalem in chapter 13. During his absence, Jerusalem backslides into complacency and corruption, which Nehemiah has to address when he returns. It seems like this time period fits best with the message of Malachi, which would date Malachi to around 430 BC.

This means the audience for Malachi's prophesy is the returning remnant of Jewish people who had begun re-settling the land over 100 years before, in 538 BC, under Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the High Priest. This original group heard the preaching of Haggai the prophet, urging them to rebuild the Temple and honor the Lord. They responded to Haggai and rebuilt the Temple, finishing it in 516 BC, exactly 70 years after Solomon's Temple had been destroyed, though it was very humble compared to Solomon's glorious Temple.

Ezra the priest and scribe, one of the most important people in the history of Israel, recorded much of this history and began his reforms of the people, teaching the law in 457 BC, about 25 years before the preaching of Malachi. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and began the task of rebuilding the walls, in the face of fierce opposition, in 444 BC. He returned to Persia in 433 BC, and then Malachi prophesied.

Malachi is thus preaching to a people who were NOT worshipping idols, who had responded to Ezra's teaching and Nehemiah's reforms. They knew the Word of God, worshipped in the Temple, had put away all idols, and had correct theology and outwardly, superficially correct worship. This makes them a much more relatable audience for us than the earlier generations of God's people who were bowing down to statues of Baal and Asherah and sacrificing their children to Molech, consulting mediums and necromancers, etc. We can sometimes look at those Israelites and think we're better than them, that our theology and our worship are more biblical and faithful. Of course, we know this ignores the hidden idols of our hearts, but still, we can look down our noses at people who prostrate themselves in front of statues, can't we? Malachi doesn't let us off so easily. These people are much more like us. Their problems and shortcomings are much more like ours. They are outwardly orthodox and formally faithful, but theirs is a cold orthodoxy and their doctrine is as dead as it is correct.

Through Malachi, God engages in a covenant dialog with His people, engaging in a back-and-forth questioning, calling them to repentance and faithfulness and promising the coming of the day of the Lord. He addresses the purity of their worship, the corruption of their priests, their withholding of the tithe, the corruption of their marriages, and more. But before He engages them with these very important practical issues, He begins by reassuring them of His love and His purposes for them.

2. Beginning with Love

Much like Hosea, Malachi begins by telling of God's love for His faithless people before directly confronting their patterns of sin and calling them to repentance: *"I have loved you," says the LORD.*

Interestingly, in these opening verses, God uses two different tenses of the verb love, even though they're translated the same way in the ESV and in most English translations. At the beginning of verse 2, God says, *"I have loved you,"* in the perfect tense, indicating a settled and completed action that has ongoing effects. God's love here is not in process. Yet at the end of verse 2, when God says, *"Yet I have loved Jacob,"* this verb is in the imperfect tense. This second verb focuses on the ongoing activity of God's love based on His settled resolve.

The word for love has in itself a double aspect as well. It does carry the idea of affection, much like our work love does. In fact, the root focuses on desire, attraction, and affection. And yet the word also carries the meaning of a committed loyalty. So, affection and faithfulness, desire and commitment. This is what true love is, right? I'm not a big fan of the saying, "Love is not a feeling; it's a choice." I understand the sentiment, but it's basically as incomplete as the idea that love is a feeling. Love is more than a feeling, but it's not less. Now, God doesn't experience emotions the same way we do, of course. We respond to situations with our emotions. God is absolutely perfect and unchanging, never wavering like we do. Yet God chooses to use this word for love which carries the ideas of affection and loyalty.

Notice that God's love is a particular love. He says, "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated." He doesn't love Jacob and Esau in the same way. He doesn't choose both Jacob and Esau with His sovereign affection and committed loyalty. He loved Jacob. He chose Jacob. He continued His committed love to Jacob, and not to Esau.

3. Evidence of Love

This is how God answers His people when they "ask" Him, *"How have you loved us?"* This is probably not a record of actual words the nation said out loud, but rather what they were feeling in their hearts. They were doubting God's love, and this seems to be the foundational issue behind their lackluster worship, their stingy giving, their terrible marriages, and all their other problems. They didn't see any evidence that God loved them, and so they doubted His love.

God reassures them of His particular love. He doesn't tell them generic things that apply to all people, such as the sunshine, the rain, their lives, etc. Everyone on earth enjoys these things, which are signs of God's common grace and goodness and love for all people.

In Matthew 5:43-48, in the sermon on the Mount. Jesus says:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you

love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This passage helps us see that when God says He hates Esau, it doesn't mean He's cruel and unkind to Esau. In a general sense, God shows love and kindness and goodness to everyone on earth. Every day that He allows people to breathe His air, walk on His earth, enjoy His food and His water is kindness undeserved and shows the general goodness of God.

But not everyone enjoys God's sovereign, choosing, electing, covenantal, saving love. Not everyone enjoys the blessing of knowing God as their Heavenly Father, as their God and King. And so, God wants His people to know His special, particular love. This is why He responds to their doubts as He does, not with an expression of general love, but with an expression of special, choosing love.

To hear language of God hating someone may be shocking to us, but we need to understand it in context. Jesus told those who would be His disciples, in Luke 14:26, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."* Jesus is obviously not telling us to hate anyone, much less our parents. But our love for Him must be stronger than all other loves. He alone must be our Lord; we cannot share our loyalty to Him with anyone else.

And that's what the Lord means by the word He speaks through Malachi. He has chosen His own people in love, and He has not chosen Esau. God's choice of Israel to be His treasured possession is the evidence of His love for them. This is what God says through Moses in Deuteronomy 7:6-9:

⁶ "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations

And this is what God says to us, too, in Romans 8:28-37 –

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall

separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (ESV)

And we could point to many other passages, too, like Ephesians 1:4-5: “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”

Here’s the point: If you and I are going to grow in holiness and obedience, in faithfulness and love for the Lord, then we need to start by knowing that the Lord has loved us and continues to love us, in a special and particular, saving way. How can we know if He has loved us in this way? Well, do you believe in Jesus? God says, if you believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, risen from the dead and coming again, you will be saved. And the Bible says that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is because you have been given the gift of faith because God chose you before the foundation of the world and predestined you in love to be His child; it is because God foreknew you – loved you before you were born – and predestined you, called you, and justified you. You did not save yourself. God saved you because He loves you. It is as simple, as powerful, and as beautiful as that. And it is vital that you know that God loves you if you’re going to really grow in Him.

God gives Israel further evidence of the outworking of that love: Esau has been made desolate by God’s judgment. They will not be able to rebuild. They will be known as “the wicked country” for all time. The most famous Edomite ruler of all time? King Herod the Great. Yes, he ruled Judah under the Roman oversight, but he was an Edomite, and he is known for all time as an extremely wicked and cruel ruler.

For us, the further evidence of God’s love comes in the benefits of belonging to God that we experience in this life. Earlier in the worship service, we confessed what some of these benefits are –

Q. 36. What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification?

A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification, are, assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

In the Bible, Romans 8 spells out many of these benefits for us – no condemnation, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the promise of coming glory, the abiding love of God in our hearts. These are signs of God's love which we enjoy that the unbeliever does not enjoy, and lest we become conceited, we must remember that God did not choose us in love because we were lovely or good, but His love is freely given and totally undeserved, and it is His love that makes us lovely and good, not the other way around.

If you want to ask why God loved us and chose us, the answer is simply because He loves us. Husbands, if your wives ask you why you love them, be very careful how you answer. The right answer is that you love them because you love them – not because they're beautiful, for beauty may fade; not because they're smart, for their mind may fade; not because they're hard-working or such a good cook, for they may lose those abilities, too. Love that truly loves does not change or fade. God's love is like that, persevering through His people's ugliness and sin, and redeeming us in spite of ourselves.

4. God's Love: Our Only Hope

This is our only hope, that God loves us and has made us His own. And in His love, He has purposed that He will be our God forever. Until we come to really know this, we will not grow in faithfulness and obedience, and we will not know true peace and joy.

So, in closing, we simply ask . . .

Do You Really Know that God Loves You?

If you're not sure, turn to the Lord for salvation and forgiveness. If you have turned to the Lord and you're still not sure He loves you, read and study Romans 8 and Ephesians 1-2 in depth, carefully, line-by-line and verse-by-verse, until your mind understands them and your heart believes them.