

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Malachi - The Dangers of Spiritual Blindness: Doubting God's love (Malachi 1:1-5)

I think it's probably a safe guess that Malachi is not the most familiar of Bible books for most of us. In fact, it's possible that for some of us this series on *Truth for Today* will be one of the only times in our lives we ever hear a series on the book of Malachi.

With that in mind I have a threefold purpose for our time together today.

1. I want to inform. I want to give you a basic understanding of who Malachi was, what he had to say and how this small book fits in the bigger picture of the Bible.
2. I want to challenge us all. Many of the biblical prophets wrote in situations where the people of Israel were in captivity. They were in a bad **condition** and in a bad **position**, rejecting God and in captivity. But Malachi is different. In Malachi's day, the people of Israel were back in the land of Israel. They were in the right place and, from an outward perspective, everything looked much better. The temple had been rebuilt and religious system restored. Sadly it didn't take long for the same old problems to arise. Had the people learnt their lesson from being shamefully carried off into captivity? Not really! They soon returned to their own sins and so God spoke to the people again through Malachi.

We'll discover in this series some of the things that had gone wrong. As we do so, I hope that we'll be challenged. Many of the criticisms of God's people in Malachi's day, I feel strongly challenged by in my own situation.

3. I want to encourage. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament; both in terms of its actual position and the time it was written. Mankind had been fully tested and found wanting time and time again, and the need for the Saviour had been fully shown. In Malachi's day, things were not good spiritually. But still in Malachi's message we find rays of hope in amongst the gloom.

My plan is to more or less just work through Malachi 1:1-5 today, but specifically I want to say something to you about **burden**, I want to say something about **love** and I want to say something about **adversity**. Those three words will act as headings for our time today and roughly correspond to Malachi 1:1, Malachi 1:2-3 and Malachi 1:4-5.

### 1. **Burden (Malachi 1:1)**

So then let's first say something about burden. Look at the start of the book, "*the burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi*" (Malachi 1:1). Some translations have "oracle" or "message" instead of "burden", but I understand that doesn't catch the weightiness of Malachi's message. Incidentally, it's the same Hebrew word that describes the loads that the Kohathites carried in the tabernacle service as the tribes moved around in the wilderness, and I imagine they didn't feel they were carrying a light load! Malachi was a man with a God given burden. It was a weight on his shoulder as he had a message he had to deliver to his hearers.

Malachi was not the only prophet to feel a burden of God's message for the people. Zechariah felt a burden (Zechariah 9:1, 12:1). Habakkuk felt a burden (Habakkuk 1:1). Nahum felt a burden (Nahum 1:1), so did Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:33) and Isaiah (eg Isaiah 13:1, 15:1, 17:1, 19:1, 21:1). What do we learn from all these prophets with burdens? I'll suggest two things.

- i. God's word is not to be taken lightly. Proclaiming God's message is a serious business. The Bible must never be treated flippantly. As you share the word of God, with your children, your friends, your neighbours and colleagues, do you feel the burden of the message you have to carry? I don't say that to put anyone off speaking about the Lord's things. For certain, the Lord gives necessary help, totally independent of our perceived ability or lack of it. I say it to encourage you, as much as depends on you, to take God's word seriously and feel the burden of Malachi and the prophets.

- ii. I want us to think about the content of Malachi's burden. Malachi's burden contained some solemn statements. As we go through Malachi's burden over the next few weeks, we'll see a people who doubted God's love (Malachi 1:2), whose worship was defiled (Malachi 1:7). We'll read that it would have been better if someone had been willing to shut the temple doors and stop the sacrifices altogether rather than continue with this insincere worship. (Malachi 1:10). We'll see a people who had become weary in their service for God (Malachi 1:13) and begun to forsake justice (Malachi 2:9). Their marriages had gone wrong (Malachi 2:16) and they were robbing God by giving the dregs of their lives (Malachi 3:8). Plenty for Malachi to be burdened about! How much do similar things in our day burden us?

And yet, despite this sombre burden, Malachi's burden actually hints at hope. We've been reminded in today's passage that God loves His people (Malachi 1:2), and seen a hint of future blessing in Malachi 1:5, "*Your eyes shall see, and you shall say.*" We'll hear God promise to send His messenger (Malachi 3:1) and open the windows of heaven and pour out for His people such a blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. (Malachi 3:10). We'll hear God promise to those faithful few "*they shall be Mine ... on the day that I make them My jewels*" (Malachi 3:17). Perhaps most gloriously we'll be pointed to "*the Sun of righteousness [arising] with healing in His wings*" (Malachi 4:2).

Do you see that although Malachi rightly felt the burden of how the people had turned against God and this weighed heavy upon him, he also felt burdened to announce hope for those who were faithful? Isn't that the same message the whole of the Bible tells? Isn't that the Gospel? Malachi was burdened to warn people about their sin and to point them to hope through God. Is that the kind of thing you are burdened about?

It seems to me that we live in a society that is always burdened about something. It seems to be fashionable to be outraged about some cause or other. A politician makes a statement that is perhaps clumsy more than anything else and Twitter erupts in moral outrage demanding apologies. Half the time, all that's happened is that a different point of view has been expressed. Or perhaps we find people are burdened and outraged about the fact we let our children eat fast food occasionally, or let them watch a bit of TV. Maybe you can't believe what kind of coffee someone drinks, or where they shop. Is that what we're to be burdened about?

I want to encourage you to be people with burdens. That's a good thing. Much better than to care about nothing. But be burdened about the right things. Be burdened about the things Malachi was burdened about. Be burdened about sin and lack of sincerity amongst God's people and in the world around us. And be burdened about God's message of hope and salvation. Warn people of their sins and remind them God loves them.

## 2. Love (Malachi 1:2-3)

Now let's look at Malachi 1:2-3 and say something about love. What a glorious start to Malachi's burden! God says, "*I have loved you.*" What a necessary message at the very end of the Old Testament. God's people had been through so many ups and downs but God is quick to announce that He loves them. But quickly we see that all was not well. The people doubted God's love. "*Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?'*"

This clause "*yet you say*" occurs about nine times in various forms through Malachi's four chapters. At each point the people contend with God. They dispute His claim. Evidently some of the people looked at the circumstances around them and saw that things weren't as good as they once were. If God really loved them, wouldn't they be better off? Since things were bad, God mustn't love them after all. So they respond, "*In what way have You loved us?*" (Malachi 1:2) How short sighted they were! It really wasn't that long ago that Israel had experienced something of a revival in the days of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah. And yet already they were beginning to doubt God's love for them. How easy it is to look at circumstances around us and believe the lie of Satan that bad circumstances must mean that God doesn't love us. Do you doubt God loves you? If you do, then what hope can I offer you today? Only the same hope that God here offers to Israel in Malachi's day.

God's response is perhaps puzzling at first. "*... Was not Esau Jacob's brother', says the LORD, 'Yet Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated, and laid waste his mountains and his heritage, for the jackals of the wilderness'*" (Malachi 1:2-3).

To help us understand this response at this point we'll have a quick history lesson. God called Abraham to go to a new land (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham and his wife Sarah had a son Isaac (Genesis 21:1-3). Isaac ends up married to Rebekah (Genesis 24:67). They have two children, Esau and Jacob. This is recorded in Genesis 25:24-26. Esau was a skilled hunter (Genesis 25:27) who apparently had lots of body hair (Genesis 25:25). You might remember that Esau didn't appear to take God's things very seriously and traded away his birthright for some food (Genesis 25:29-34). He married two Hittite girls (Genesis 26:34), which didn't please his parents and was then tricked by Jacob out of the blessing that would normally have gone to the eldest son (Genesis 27:1-40). This event was the beginning of trouble

between Jacob and Esau, a trouble that was to last, not just for their lifetime, but down through the generations for hundreds of years.

Esau heads off to the mountains and develops his household there, leading ultimately to the people of Edom. The Edomites were people descended from Esau. Clearly Esau knew something of God's blessing. Although Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing, Esau still received a small blessing in Genesis 27 indicating he would live off the fertility of the land. When Jacob returns to Esau later on in Genesis 33, it's clear that Esau has done well enough in terms of possessions and wealth. If nothing else, this was evidence of God's "common grace" towards Esau. This is further indicated in Deuteronomy 2 when God commands the people of Israel to move towards the promised land. Listen to Deuteronomy 2:4: *"And command the people, saying, 'You are about to pass through the territory of your brethren, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. Therefore watch yourselves carefully. Do not meddle with them, for I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as one footstep, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession.'"*

Joshua 24:4 also records the fact that God gave Esau land: *"To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I gave the mountains of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt."*

At least at the start of Esau's life, there is evidence of God's protection on him and his family, and to some degree His loving provision for them. Things certainly change when we move through the Old Testament. By Samuel's day, the people of Edom were a regular hindrance to the people of Israel (1 Samuel 14). We learn that the Edomites had their own gods and kings (e.g. 2 Chronicles 25:14, 20) and that they had formed a confederacy against God (Psalm 83:5-6)

God's judgment on the people of Edom is clearly seen in the prophets. Hear the striking words of Isaiah 34:5-6; *"For My sword shall be bathed in heaven; Indeed it shall come down on Edom, And on the people of My curse, for judgment. The sword of the LORD is filled with blood, It is made overflowing with fatness, With the blood of lambs and goats, With the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, And a great slaughter in the land of Edom."*

Jeremiah paints an equally bleak picture in Jeremiah 49:7-10 but I'll leave you to read that when you get opportunity. Finally, the short prophecy of Obadiah is entirely against the Edomites. We don't have time to dwell upon it except to note that in Obadiah 4 we read *"From there I will bring you down," says the LORD.*" That ties in with what we'll consider shortly in Malachi 1:4-5.

So, why this history lesson and long detour into the life of Esau? I thought it was necessary because probably the hardest part in our passage today is the phrase *"Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated"* (Malachi 1:2-3). It's the hardest part, but I think the key to finding help from any of the verses we've read today.

Think carefully with me about what this statement means. Why does God point us to Jacob and Esau to demonstrate His love for the people of Israel?

**i. We are reminded that God's love for Israel was a result of His sovereign and elective purposes.**

We are reminded that God's love for Israel was a result of His sovereign and elective purposes. I can say this with confidence because Paul says so in Romans 9. In Romans 9:13 Paul quotes Malachi 1:2-3 and uses it to argue that God was perfectly righteous and good in electing some for blessing and not others. Further, Paul states that this choosing was done before Esau and Jacob were born, and so in no way was God's choosing based on merit. God's choosing to love Jacob wasn't because of anything Jacob had done or would do. Jacob hadn't been born yet to do anything worth loving. As Paul concludes, God was perfectly at liberty to say *"I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion"* (Romans 9:15, quoted from Exodus 33:19).

So then, in responding to the people in Malachi's day who doubted God's love, Malachi reminds the people of God's sovereign choosing of Jacob to love and His hatred of Esau. God's covenant love for Israel wasn't based on their goodness. God didn't love Jacob because he was better than Esau. The record of Genesis bears that out. God simply chose to set His love upon Jacob in remarkable grace. Jacob was no more deserving than Esau and yet God loved him. Hear the words of Deuteronomy 7:7-8; *"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."*

Do you see? God didn't love the Israelites because they were special. But because He kept His word. The Israelites in Malachi's day were to remember that God loved them because He had promised that He would love them and He

cannot break that promise. The overwhelming proof of God's love for Israel was His choosing them even though they were totally undeserving.

Can we make an application for ourselves today? If you're a Christian, the fact that you are saved is not because you are good or deserving or loveable. Rather it's because God has in His infinite and unexplainable wisdom chosen to set His love upon you and show you mercy and grace. Isn't it humbling? Doesn't it take away any cause for pride or self-reliance in our lives? Doesn't it drive us to bow before God in worship and praise and adoration? If you're ever in a position where circumstances or actions make you doubt that God loves you, remember that God chose you not on the basis of what you do or don't do but on the basis of His sovereign purposes. The overwhelming proof that God loves us, is that He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (see Ephesians 1:4) to show mercy to us, through Christ and has not dealt with us as our sins deserve.

## ii. To show us the great blessing of being God's chosen people.

The second reason that God points us back to Jacob and Esau to show us that He loved the people of Israel is to show us the great blessing of being God's chosen people. "*Jacob I have loved*" is in some sense easy to understand, but "*Esau I have hated*"? That's more difficult. What does it mean? I think from our history lesson it's clear that it's not an absolute term. It's clear to me that there is at least some sense in which we can say that God loved Esau. He showed Him kindness in His provision for Esau of land and in protecting them from various nations around about. In some ways at least God was good and loving to Esau. Certainly the last part of our history lesson ties in well with the statement "*Esau I have hated*" but not so much the first. I think we have to conclude that God's hatred of Esau is relative to His love for Jacob. Compared to how much God loved Jacob, His feelings towards Esau looked like hatred. It's not that God hated Esau and always did evil towards him. Far from it; actually, God was kind to Esau on many occasions. But God loved Jacob so much more. The emphasis in Malachi is on how much God loved Jacob.

## iii. The severity of rejecting God's rule.

Thirdly, even though I've made hatred a relative term we mustn't miss the severity of rejecting God's rule. Look at what God says about Esau in Malachi 1:3. "*But Esau I have hated, and laid waste his mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness.*"

There were serious consequences due to Esau because God hated him. God would lay him waste. Later we'll read that God would throw him down and that the LORD would have indignation against him forever (Malachi 1:4). How serious to fall under the judgment of Almighty God! (see Hebrews 10:31). Not being the recipient of God's sovereign love is a fearful thing. No wonder Malachi was burdened to draw the people back to God. At this point I want to make one final point about Esau. It seems interesting to me that there is no mention of God hating Esau in Genesis. In fact, in Genesis it certainly seems as if Esau is the recipient of many kindnesses and evidences of God's love. It's only at the very end of the Old Testament, that God reveals that He hated Esau, and at this point Esau has been seen to be fully deserving of God's judgment. Interestingly many times when God announces judgment on Esau or the Edomites there is a reason given. That reason is never "Oh well, I just hated him before he was born". It's always linked to the way they treated Israel or their rejection of God. Esau had plenty of chances but showed himself to be fully deserving of God's judgment. If nothing else we admire God's longsuffering mercy in this.

It seems to me that when God talks about His electing purposes He always focuses on the great blessing of being chosen by God, totally undeserved for blessing. When it comes to announcing judgment, it's always on the basis of what someone had done, and not just a consequence of their being unlucky not to be chosen. I'll admit to you that I find this difficult to understand. All I can say is that I've tried to follow the statements of Scripture as closely as I'm able, and not move beyond that. Perhaps we do best to think about God's sovereign purposes as best as we are able and marvel at them, but ultimately admit they are beyond our understanding!

To finish this section I want to leave us with a fresh appreciation of God's love to us. If nothing else, go away today with a fresh enjoyment of God's words "*I have loved you' says the LORD*" (Malachi 1:2). However much or little we understand of God's sovereign purposes may our hearts be lifted to fresh worship as we hear Him say to us, "*I have loved you.*"

## 3. Adversity (Malachi 1:4-5)

So now I've said something about burden, and I've said something about love. Let's finish with Malachi 1:4-5 and say something about adversity.

The peoples of Israel and Edom had both seen better days. How would they respond? Well, Malachi 1:4 describes the response of Edom. "*We have been impoverished*", a reference perhaps to some of the historical raids on Edom known to have occurred "*but we will return and build the desolate places.*" Their response was to try harder. They would

restore the good old days by their own hard work, or so they thought. But God had other ideas. *"They may build, but I will throw down..."* (Malachi 1:4). They would be the people against whom the LORD will have indignation forever. We get a glimpse here of the future judgment of the people of Edom. Look at Isaiah 63 if you want to follow that up more closely. But the key point to notice is their inability to respond to adversity by just trying harder to make their circumstances better. That approach was doomed to failure because God had other ideas.

What then were the people of Israel to do? How were their doubts that the Lord loved them to be put away? God simply says, "Your eyes shall see, and you shall say, *"The LORD is magnified beyond the border of Israel"* (Malachi 1:5). This has to be a link back to the past section and the reminder of God's sovereign love (see Malachi 1:2). The people of Israel would ultimately see God's purposes worked out. God had determined that He would love Israel and so He would bring it to pass that there would be some future restoration and blessing for Israel. It must be so because God's love was based upon His covenant and promise.

It seems a long time ago that I asked what hope this chapter offers to those of us who find ourselves in situations like the people of Israel where we question God's love for us. Let me finish by offering some suggestions.

- a. If you're a Christian, remember that God's love for you is not based on what you do or don't do, but on God's sovereign purposes. Our passage, Malachi 1:1-5, hasn't told us to count our blessings when things are bad, though there is wisdom in that. Instead it's pointed us to something far greater. We've been pointed to the purposes of God, and His promise to love us.
- b. Remember that *"whom the Lord loves He chastens"* (see Hebrews 12:6). If you've faced difficult times over the past year, or when you do face difficult times over the coming year, don't believe the lie of the devil that your struggles are proof that God doesn't love you. He does! He says so in His word. Rather depend on Him in faith and perhaps your faith will be strengthened even during times of adversity.

So then, we're at the end of the first section of our Malachi series. Even though we've only read five verses, Malachi 1:1-5, it feels as though we've covered a lot of ground. May it be that we're challenged to be people of burden, people who treasure the fact that God loves us, and people who when faced with adversity, resist the urge to doubt or try to bring about relief by our own means but instead let us cast ourselves fully upon God and His sovereign love.

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