

There are obvious differences between our day and the day of the prophet Malachi, who lived during the 5th Century BC. There are differences in culture, diet, medicine, and technology, to name a few. But for all the differences, we have something in common with his Jewish audience: we too struggle against hypocrisy – we struggle to live out what we claim we believe.

OT scholar Eugene Merrill wrote regarding Malachi (p.321): *The burden of this, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was the glaring inconcinnity [disparity, dissonance, lack of harmony] between the identity of the Jewish community as the people of God and the living out of all that is required of them. Theirs was not a problem of rebuilding the Temple and holy city, for that had long been done by Malachi's day; rather, it was the issue of holy living and holy service in the aftermath of all the external accomplishments. Malachi, though dead, yet speaks to the modern world about the need to bring performance into line with profession. His message, therefore, is current, especially in light of the coming One of whom the prophet so eloquently spoke.*

[Turn to Malachi 1]

The prophetic book of Malachi, which closes out the Old Testament, opens with these words:

Read v.1

*** The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through [lit. by the hand of] Malachi.**

Malachi probably means “my messenger” or “the LORD’s messenger” (*malach* = messenger + *i* = my or abbreviation for *YHWH*). While some suggest it’s a title for an unnamed prophet, it’s more likely *the name* of this prophet, about whom we really know nothing else.

This book’s referred to as an **oracle**. Some scholars think an **oracle** refers to any kind important utterance or pronouncement, while others suggest it includes a note of doom or judgment. Malachi’s prophecy certainly has a sharp edge to it, but it also offers great hope.

The content of Malachi’s **oracle** is simply **the word of the LORD**. He’s aptly named *my messenger*, because he’s not grinding a *personal* axe but delivering **the word of the LORD** to God’s intended audience. As E. Ray Clendenen observes (p.205): *“The emphasis is clearly on the*

message rather than the messenger since out of a total of fifty-five verses as many as forty-seven are the personal address of the Lord.”

While I can’t say my messages *are* the word of the Lord, I need to make sure they *contain* and *proclaim* the word of the Lord. Whenever we teach the Bible, whether from the pulpit or in a classroom, or whether as a pastor, professor, counselor, evangelist, parent, or friend, its incumbent upon us to do as Paul told Timothy:

Read II Timothy 4:1.2

*** I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.**

The word Paul’s talking about is the Word of God – it’s Scripture – as he made clear in the immediately preceding verses:

Read II Timothy 3:16,17

*** ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.**

All Scripture includes the book of Malachi. Paul, through whom God communicated much NT revelation, knew that God spoke through the OT, and he encouraged Timothy to proclaim the truth of those sacred writings. Though Jesus instituted a New Covenant, the reason we know that is through the prophecies and teaching of the OT. While we’ve been given additional Scripture in the NT, we continue to benefit greatly from studying the OT.

This prophecy was originally given * to **Israel**. **Israel** is used in a variety of ways. Its roots are traced to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. After having wrestled with an angel in Gen.32, this divine messenger said to Jacob:

Genesis 32:28

²⁸ He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel [strives with God or God strives]; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed."

Since the promises to Abraham were passed on through Abraham’s son Isaac, and then through Isaac’s son Jacob (**Israel**), and then through his

sons, the Hebrew people are often referred to as *the sons of Israel*, or simply **Israel**.

Later, **Israel** was used of a *portion* of God's people. After Solomon's death, the nation was divided, with the northern kingdom being referred to as **Israel** and the southern kingdom as Judah.

Following **Israel**'s captivity by the Assyrians, and Judah's captivity by the Babylonians, **Israel** came to refer to those who returned to the land to rebuild the temple and worship the Lord. And it's to these people that Malachi's writing – those living in the Promised Land after their return from exile, who rebuilt the temple and restored worship, and who expressed renewed allegiance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Scholars differ as to exactly when in the 5th century BC Malachi delivered this message. Though it's *after* the rebuilding of the Temple and restoration of worship, it's difficult to determine with certainty a more specific time. It may have been *before* or *during* the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Regardless of the specific decade, we know Malachi addressed issues that repeatedly plagued God's children who'd taken up residence in and around Jerusalem. They had their spiritual ups and downs before the captivity – and they continued on their spiritual roller coaster after their return, as attested to by Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah...*and* Malachi.

Even though the Lord's message through Malachi is directed to **Israel**, we can learn much from what He has to say. God loves Christians today, just as He loved those to whom Malachi ministered. God hates sin and hypocrisy in Christians today, just as He did in the Israelites in Malachi's day. And God provides hope for His own people in any day.

As we walk through Malachi this summer, we'll see God's people once again suffering from spiritual apathy and moral laxity. God's Law was taken lightly, worship had become tedious, and heartless ritual ruled the day. God's children were living the lives of practical atheists.

As you reflect on your own spiritual condition, does that description of Israel hit close to home? Have you found any of those traits creeping into your own life? It happened to them – and it can happen to us – *if* we are not vigilant and humble before the Lord.

Thank God for Malachi's ministry! I don't know how many lives he impacted during his ministry *then*, but I do know that his words can be very effective *today* – *if* our hearts and minds are open to the divine truth he proclaims.

On what note does Malachi begin addressing a cold-hearted, spiritually apathetic people? He begins with a declaration of divine love:

Read v.2a

* **"I have loved you," says the LORD.**

To a people who were struggling spiritually and insulting God regularly, **the LORD** (YHWH, the covenantal name God revealed to Moses) proclaims through Malachi: **"I have loved you."** **The LORD** who made a covenant with their forefathers proclaims His ongoing love for them.

If you're thinking such a declaration of love would immediately soften their hard hearts, *and* warm their cold shoulders, you'd be wrong. The Lord knew them well, and reveals through Malachi what their response to His love was:

Read v.2a

"I have loved you," says the LORD. * But you say, "How have You loved us?"

The Israelites are incredulous to God's claim that He has **loved** them. They've failed to recognize God's ongoing love for them – and *that failure* has impacted everything in their lives.

It's as though they are saying: "*Loved us?! How have you loved us?!*" They feel He's *not* loved them. But as we will learn throughout Malachi, the problem is not God's fault, but their own. While they may *think He* has not loved *them*, it's *they* who've not loved *Him!* They've failed to recognize, appreciate, and respond appropriately to God's ongoing love.

The Lord makes that same declaration to His children today – to those who are His children through their faith in Jesus. He earnestly and accurately proclaims to us, **"I have loved you."**

From that declaration, the rest of Malachi flows – and from that declaration, the rest of *our lives* flow. His love *for us* enables and inspires our love *for Him*, our love *for others*, and our obedience to Him. As the Apostle John wrote:

Read I John 4:19

* ¹⁹ **We love, because He first loved us.**

II John 6a

* ⁶ **And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.**

Much of the apathy and emptiness that marked Israel in Malachi's day (and believers in our day) can be, in part, traced to a failure to recognize, appreciate, and respond appropriately to God's ongoing love for us. On the other hand, those who are overwhelmed by God's love for them are those whose lives are graced with a great passion for God, His will, and His people.

Israel's objection to God's declaration of love reveals they were *calloused* to His loving touch, *blind* to His loving actions, and *deaf* to His loving words. While you might expect sinning people to respond to the love of God with a "**Lord, forgive us for our sins,**" the attitude of Israel is more like "**Lord, what have you done for us lately – what have you ever done for us?**"

Read v.2a

² "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have You loved us?"

How does God respond to their questioning of His love for them? In a few sentences Malachi accomplishes what I'd have struggled to condense into a few chapters. He captures God's love *not* by giving a laundry list of His loving deeds on behalf of His often wayward and ungrateful people, but by choosing as a symbol of God's love – His choice of Jacob over Esau, and its implications for their lives.

Read vs.2b-3

*** ² ... "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob; ³ but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness."**

No, he doesn't give them a laundry list of the myriad of things God's done on Israel's behalf. Nor did he do what Nehemiah did so skillfully in Nehemiah 9, where he gave a wonderful summary of God's loving actions on behalf of His people, from Abraham's call to that present day.

Malachi could have done the same – and more. He could have started with God's calling of Abraham and the covenant he made with him that would result in not only blessing to him, but to his descendants.

He could've spoken of God's faithfulness to Israel as they were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt. He could've talked about God's provision of water, manna and quail as they wandered in the wilderness. He could've spoken

of God's graciousness in not rejecting them outright when they initially refused to follow Him into the Promised Land. He could've spoken of God's faithfulness in the face of their idolatry soon after the Law was given.

He could have spoken of God's love and faithfulness in giving them victory over their adversaries when they entered the Promised Land. And also of God's love and faithfulness in the days of the Judges, and later in the days of the kings, when during both periods *they* were unloving and unfaithful.

Throughout Israel's history God demonstrated He was longsuffering, responding with grace to the sins of His people. Over and over again He showed His love by disciplining, forgiving, restoring, and blessing.

When God's children continued in their sin and rebellion, God disciplined them by sending them into captivity – first the northern kingdom under Assyrian attack, and then the southern, under Babylonian attack. And yet, as Malachi's audience could personally attest, God once again demonstrated His love by restoring them to the land. No matter how unfaithful God's people were, He remained faithful.

No, Malachi did not take that tack and remind them of all of that. He didn't overwhelm them with a laundry list of the many demonstrations of God's love for Israel. He simply says:

Read vs.2b-3a

*** ² ... "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob; ³ but I have hated Esau,**

In saying that, he's in essence recalling everything on that laundry list that he could have written but didn't. All that God has done is tied to that declaration of love. That significant choice of Jacob over Esau had an ongoing impact. He reminds them of God's *love for* and *selection of* Jacob and his descendents, in contrast to God's rejection of Esau and his descendents.

God's promises to Abraham were carried on, *not* through all of his descendants, *but* through Isaac. And those promises were then *not* passed on through all of Isaac's children, *but* through Jacob. God made a distinction between Isaac's twin boys, Esau and Jacob.

In Romans 9, Paul looks back on that choice that's recorded in Genesis. Paul talks about how

not all Abraham's descendants were part of God's chosen race. And then he notes that not all of Isaac and Rebekah's children were part of God's chosen race.

Romans 9:11-13

* ¹¹ **for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."**

[Gen.25:23] ¹³ **Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."** [Mal.1:2b-3a]

In God's infinite wisdom He made a distinction between Jacob and Esau. * Paul points that out by quoting Malachi: "**JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.**"

Sometimes **hate** used in a relative sense, not an absolute sense. An example of this would be these words of Jesus:

Read Luke 14:26

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.**

Scripture teaches us to honor our parents. We should love them, not hate them. But the point Jesus is making is that of *ultimate* allegiance. He wants our *love for* and *dedication to* Him to make all other allegiances *seem* as hatred.

But that doesn't seem to be the point here in Malachi. E. Ray Clendenen (p.251) seems to get the issue at hand when he writes: "**The point is not that God loved Jacob *more than* Esau but that he loved him *rather than* Esau.**" He's not speaking of *love* and *hate* in a sense of *loving one more than* the other, but *choosing* one over the other. Jacob was the object of His divine choice, and Esau was not. God chose to carry on His promises through Jacob and *his* descendants, and *not* through Esau and *his* descendants.

God wanted Israel to know and stand in awe of His sovereign grace. He wanted them to marvel at His love for them that was based on *Him*, not *them*, as Paul wrote in Romans 9:11

Read Romans 9:11b

* ¹¹ **...so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,**

The subsequent history of both Israel and Edom (the descendants of Esau) bear this out. As Malachi was proclaiming this truth, Israel was restored to her land, while Edom was near extinction. While the Babylonians had harassed *both* Israel *and* Edom, Israel recovered because God's faithfulness, while Edom did not due to God's judgment. As the Lord said through Malachi:

Read v.3

³ **but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and *appointed* his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness."**

While the land of Israel was once again being inhabited by God's children, the land of Edom was being inhabited by **jackals**.

It seems some of the few remaining Edomites continued in their proud ways, boasting of their resurgence:

Read v.4a

* **Though Edom says, "We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins";**

But that was a hollow boast. There's a big difference between what *man boasts* and what *God declares*. How did **the LORD of hosts** respond to Edom's boast?

Read v.4b

* **... thus says the LORD of hosts, "They may build, but I will tear down; and *men* will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the LORD is indignant forever."**

Edomite history is sketchy, but historians suggest the final nail in the coffin – and the fulfillment of this prophecy – came a century later when the Nabataeans consumed Edom, by either wiping her out completely, or intermarrying with her people and destroying their identity. The result is, Edom is no more, while Israel remains.

Malachi, as did Obadiah and others, prophesied the end of Edom. And God, through Malachi, says the children of Israel who'd be there to see it fulfilled would be in awe of God:

Read v.5

* **Your eyes will see this and you will say, "The LORD be magnified beyond the border of Israel!"**

The Israelites challenged God's love in v.2

* by saying "**How have You loved us?**" They failed to recognize, appreciate, and respond appropriately to God's ongoing love.

How does the Lord respond to their challenge? In a few sentences Malachi captures the love of God, *not* by giving a laundry list of God's loving deeds on behalf of His often wayward and ungrateful people, *but* by choosing as a symbol of God's love, His divine choice of Jacob over Esau, and its implications for his immediate audience.

He tells them to **look back** to God's choice of Israel and his descendants (of whom they were numbered) – to **look around** them to see where they were (restored to their land) – to **look south** to the barrenness of Edom – and to **look ahead** in faith to the final judgment on Edom. Everywhere they looked, they could find evidence of God's love. How could they doubt His love?! Did He not chose them – and are not blessings of that choice still ongoing?!

The stage has been set for the rest of Malachi's oracle. The foolishness and sinful ways of God's children stand out so clearly against the back drop of God's love and faithfulness.

We may find ourselves labeling these Israelites as whiney, unholy ingrates. But it would be a mistake to not look deep within our own hearts to see whether or not *we* share in their sin. It may be that like them, we are *calloused* to His loving touch, *blind* to His loving actions, and *deaf* to His loving words.

Are you as guilty as the Israelites? Consider God's love for you – God's choice of you:

Read John 3:16,17

*¹⁶ **"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷**
"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

Read Ephesians 1:3-6

*³ **Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us [Christians too, are chosen people] in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind**

intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Read Revelation 3:19

*¹⁹ **"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.**

While author George Bernard Shaw was browsing in a secondhand book store, he found a copy of one of his books. On the flyleaf he had written, "**To _____ with esteem, George Bernard Shaw.**" He purchased the book and returned it to his esteemed friend, adding, "**With renewed esteem, George Bernard Shaw.**"

Israel continually benefited from the renewal of God's love. He kept loving her when she was rather unlovely. And God continues to pursue us with His love. He keeps renewing His love for us...even when to the observing eye we may appear unlovely.

If you know God's love firsthand through your faith in Jesus, keep that in mind. It will help us to appreciate what God has to say throughout the rest of Malachi's prophecy. Even more than that, it will help us to strip away any hypocrisy that might be clinging to our lives.