

Introduction to Malachi  
Malachi 1:1-5  
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CenterPoint Church

Read Malachi 1:1-5

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)*

## **Introduction**

The first time that I preached on the book of Malachi, my church in Virginia was doing an overview of the minor prophets. And because many of them are short and we were trying to squeeze it in as a summer series, we did one sermon per prophet. When I started reading and organizing my thoughts for the sermon, I realized what I had gotten myself into: two chapters covering topics like divorce, tithing, wicked priests, half-hearted worship, and Judgment Day all in one sermon. It was a mess of a sermon, hopefully it's buried and no one will ever read it. I'm revisiting Malachi here and now because it's an important and relevant book, and hopefully a six-week deep dive into its topics will do it more justice than the one sermon did.

In Hebrew, the word "Malachi" means "my messenger." So, is it his name or just a descriptive title? We don't know for sure. Some scholars have proposed that the real author was Ezra or some other leader at the time. It's possible that Malachi's parents named him that hoping or knowing that he would be used by God as a prophet. But none of that is explained in the book, we don't know anything about his background or personal life like we do with many of the other prophets. A man at my old church insisted that it was an Italian name – ma-la-chi. But we'll stick with the Hebrew, knowing that he was God's messenger, bringing God's word to the people, as every true prophet did.

The major pivotal event in the second half of the Old Testament is the Exile. If you are one of those Bible readers who starts in Genesis and resolves to read straight through, but you have to struggle through the descriptions of the tabernacle in Exodus, then you force your way through Leviticus, but then you give up halfway through 1 Chronicles... you might not ever get to the events of the Exile. But if you don't understand the conquest of the northern tribes by the Assyrians and the exile of the southern tribes to Babylon, then you won't really understand the historical setting of most of the prophets. Remember that after the United Kingdom of Israel under Saul, David, and Solomon, the nation broke in two after Solomon's death – the north had 10 tribes and the south had 2 tribes. The north had a long series of wicked kings who led their people into idolatry, pagan worship, foreign alliances, and all kinds of evil that God forbid, so He used the Assyrians to conquer them in 722 BC. The south had some wicked kings but a fair number of godly kings, so they prospered for longer, but eventually they so provoked the Lord that their punishment came when Babylon took them into exile in 583 BC. That lasted 70 years and then they were allowed to return to the land to rebuild their homes and the temple. Malachi, as you would imagine from its placement at the end of the Old Testament, was the last of the prophets, 400 years of silence between him and the four Gospels of the New Testament, when John the Baptist would take up the prophetic mantle.

While many prophets of God spoke to the people in times of war and political upheaval, Malachi spoke at a time when very little was happening. And that was the problem, the people were back in the land, the temple had been rebuilt but was nowhere near as glorious as Solomon's temple; they worshipped God but didn't put their hearts into it. So Malachi is, as Joyce Baldwin says, particularly relevant to us and to "the many waiting periods in human history... He enables us to see the strains

and temptations of such times, the imperceptible abrasion of faith that ends in cynicism because it has lost touch with the living God. Even more important he shows the way back to a genuine, enduring faith in the God who does not change.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the things that you’re going to notice as we work our way through this book over the six weeks of sermons is the many places where the people talked back to God in defiance. It seems that every word of God is questioned or contradicted: “How have you loved us?” “How have we despised your name?” “How have we wearied you?” “How are we robbing you?” “How have we spoken against you?”<sup>2</sup> Like a bratty teenager, the people of Malachi’s day continually challenged God. Like a defense attorney, they demanded evidence and explanations when God rebuked them. The picture of the people that we get in this book is that they are going through the motions of following God – they still make sacrifices and vows and go through the motions of repentance. But they are half-hearted, they do not really love Him or show commitment to Him. They think they are doing what they need to do and are offended by the suggestion that they’re not: “What do you mean we’re not worshipping correctly? We’re here doing what you asked. What have you done for us lately, Lord?” And so before we even start the text of the book, we have a challenge to think about how often we question God: “What do you mean that I don’t serve you well enough? How can you say I don’t give enough?” If those sound like your inner thoughts, then you have a long way to go in understanding your role as God’s servant and son or daughter, and His place as your sovereign King and Father. Let us pray that studying Malachi shapes us in that area. Let’s dive into the text, which begins with **I. God’s Love for Jacob and His Descendants (vv. 1-3a)**

<sup>1</sup> *The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.* <sup>2</sup> “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 <sup>3</sup> but Esau I have hated.

When you say to your husband/wife, or your child “I love you,” what’s the most natural response that you expect? “I love you too!” But if their reply is a defiant “How have you loved me?” you just might be in for a long conversation. If they doubt your love, there is some disconnect between you, whether you haven’t really loved them in a way that they understand, or they have taken your love for granted and expect much more from you. Clearly, the Israelites were in that “taking for granted” mode, questioning that God loved them. They might as well have said, “No, you haven’t loved us, we don’t believe you. Prove it.” God could have reminded them of a long list of ways that He loved His people, or He could have answered with how He responded to Job: essentially, I don’t owe you an explanation because I am your all-powerful Creator and I answer to no man. But He simply reminded them of one significant fact: I chose you as my beloved people over the other nations. To do that, He pointed to Isaac’s twin sons, Jacob and Esau, back in Genesis 25.

As most of you know, I have a twin brother named Jonathan. I am nine minutes older than he is. He is also a pastor and knows the Scriptures, and he jokes about loving Romans 9:12-13: “*‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’*” Because he is the younger twin just like Jacob, he likes to assert that the older twin is cursed and hated, and the younger is favored and loved. Thankfully, my parents assure both of us (and our younger brother) that they love all of us equally. So, if my earthly parents can love their sons equally, how is it that God chose one brother to love and one brother to hate? Can we really even fathom the fact that the Bible puts the two words “God” and “hate” together, when our dominant understanding is that “God is love”?

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), pp. 225-26.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Adam, *The Message of Malachi* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), p. 13.

Does God actually hate? I could list off a dozen Bible passages that talk about the Lord's hatred of evil and the wicked; Proverbs 6 alone lists seven things that God hates: "<sup>17</sup> *haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,* <sup>18</sup> *a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil,* <sup>19</sup> *a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.*" Scripture has no difficulty in affirming that God has the ability to hate. As John Mackay says, we need to be careful because "our ideas of hatred are contaminated by the malice and bitterness of its sinful human expression."<sup>3</sup> God's hatred is pure because He is holy and perfect. But I want to compare the statement "*I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated*" with two other Scriptures:

- 1) Genesis 29:30-31 – "<sup>30</sup> *So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.* <sup>31</sup> *When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.*" Did Jacob really hate his first wife, Leah? No, he loved her less; compared to his love for Rachel, his affection towards Leah seemed like hate.
- 2) In Luke 14:26, Jesus said that "*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.*" Did Jesus want us to actually hate our families? No, but when we follow Him, we love and prioritize Him so much that our allegiance to our family seems like very little; it's hatred in comparison.

The bottom line is that God chose Jacob to carry on His covenant promises, to be the line of the Messiah, and He passed over Esau. His love and favor towards the younger twin made His abandoning and rejecting Esau seem like hate. Why did he do that? Romans 9:10-12 gives us an answer: "<sup>10</sup> *...when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,* <sup>11</sup> *though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad...* <sup>12</sup> *she was told, "The older will serve the younger."* God did not wait until Jacob and Esau had grown up and made a bunch of good and bad life choices before He decided to place His favor on Jacob and His disfavor on Esau. If anything, you see that both of these brothers had their sin issues but also their good qualities. Jacob's name meant "schemer" and he was always trying to trick his brother or his father or his father-in-law. He had children from two wives and two maidservants; yet, he was obedient to the Lord later in life. Esau was a brute who married two pagan women; Hebrews 12:16 calls him "*sexually immoral and unholy.*" But decades after he vowed to kill Jacob because he had cheated him out of his inheritance, Esau arranged a meeting with his brother and had mercy on him. But God wasn't weighing their pros and cons. He didn't make His choice based on their character and actions, God chose them before they were born for His own purposes.

So, why was Malachi pointing back to Jacob and Esau, who lived thousands of years before the time he was writing? Because Israel was Jacob's descendants and Edom was Esau's descendants, and God's choice back then was still affecting these nations. Their identities and behaviors were still rooted in their forefathers. How had God loved Israel? By choosing them as His people thousands of years earlier and then guiding, protecting, and caring for them through the centuries. Not because they had earned or deserved it, but because He had chosen them.

The next two verses explore

## **II. God's Opposition to Esau and His Descendants (vv. 3-4)**

<sup>3</sup> *but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.*"

<sup>4</sup> *If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the Lord of hosts says, "They may build,*

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<sup>3</sup> John L. Mackay, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi: God's Restored People* (Glasgow: Christian Focus, 2010), p. 332.

*but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.'"*

When we are tempted to think that it is a contradiction to have a loving God who has destroyed a country and declared that He is "angry forever" with a group of people, we have to remember that God's love does not mean that He is passive and lets evil run rampant. Because God is love, He hates evil and oppression. And the Edomites embraced evil. They were an immoral, violent people who continually oppressed Israel. There are seven times in Scripture where they harassed or fought against Israel – from their battles with King Saul and King David to their joining in the destruction of Jerusalem when the Babylonians captured the town in 586 BC.

As I said, Edom were the descendants of Esau. You see the defiance and arrogance in verse 4 – "*we are shattered but we will rebuild.*" And the Lord said, "you may try, but I will continually oppose you because you are so wicked." Do you know where you would find Edom on a map today? You won't find it because it hasn't existed for over 1,900 years. The Edomites were greatly decimated by the Babylonians in the 500s BC, then ultimately wiped out by the Romans around 100 AD. Exodus 34:6-7 is a good reminder of how God deals with people and nations:

*"The Lord, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will **by no means** clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."*

Our final verse shows

### **III. God's Greatness Over All People (v. 5)**

<sup>5</sup> *Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!"*

I love this verse, because it reminds us that, even though it sounds like God only loves His chosen people, Israel, that He actually had a much greater plan in mind. Later in the chapter we'll hear the Lord say that "*my name will be great among the nations*" twice. God would include all people groups, all tribes, nations, and tongues eventually in the plan of salvation. He had told Abraham at the founding of the Jewish nation that "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3). And redemptive history would see the inclusion of Gentiles and nations, with Jesus sending His disciples all over the world to share the light of the Gospel and God's love. Heaven is filled with people from every tribe and nation of the world because "*Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!*" Yahweh God is no local deity, but the great God of the whole earth. His power extends well beyond the borders of Israel to every corner of the world.

### **Conclusion**

Reflecting on this text, no matter what else Malachi says in the rest of his book, we know up front that his message from God to His people is: "I love you." There will be rebukes, there will be repentance, there will be threats and promises in the chapters that follow. But God tells them up front "*I have loved you*" and everything He says after that is from His Father's heart of love. And if we don't get anything else out of this text, I want us to get this: the appropriate response to when God says that He loves you is not "How have you loved us?" it's "Great are you, Lord!" Too often we are like the Jews of Malachi's day: "How have you loved me, God?" Often, we mean it as "What have you done for me *lately* to show me you love me?" We look around at what our lives have become, that we didn't achieve all of our dreams, we don't have all the jobs, or house, or the charmed lives of our friends and neighbors, and we focus on what we don't have. When what we actually should be doing is echo Psalm 136, saying over and over that "*His steadfast love endures forever,*" quoting

Lamentations 3:22 – *“the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,”* and remembering what God said in Jeremiah 31:3 – *“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”* And most of all, we should be looking at the cross and seeing Jesus hanging there with nails in His wrists and feet giving up His life in our place. 1 John 4:10 – *“In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* Even if God never did a single thing in our lives to show His love beyond what’s revealed in Scripture, He would be the amazing, merciful God. And yet, He does shower His love on His people; we just read in James 1:17 – *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”*

I want to look at Romans 9:10-16 again, because it uses God’s love of Jacob and hatred of Esau to make a deeper theological point:

*“<sup>10</sup> And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, <sup>11</sup> though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls - <sup>12</sup> she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” <sup>13</sup> As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” <sup>14</sup> What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! <sup>15</sup> For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” <sup>16</sup> So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”*

When Paul wants to explain how God has mercy on some people and not on others, he points to Jacob and Esau. He says, “God made that choice before they were born.” Ephesians 1:4 actually says that God’s choices were made *“before the foundation of the world.”* That’s how election works, how God’s appointing and choosing the people that He has decided will be saved works. God has His sovereign will and plans and He executes them. Verse 14 – does that mean God is unjust? “By no means!” Later in the chapter, Paul says that God is the potter and we are the clay, and the potter has every right to make some clay into vessels for honorable use and others for dishonorable use. One way to see it is this: if God only ever showed love to all people, how would we know that He is a God of justice? If God ever only punished people for their sin and showed His justice and wrath, how would we know that He is a God of love?

God didn’t choose Jacob because he was good enough, and He doesn’t choose us because we’re good enough. God didn’t choose Jacob because he was smart enough, and He doesn’t choose us because we’re smart enough. God didn’t choose Jacob because he was more mature, more respectful, better looking, had better manners... nothing! There was no condition that made God look at that wicked schemer and say, “I like the way He’s going to turn out, I’ll choose him.” The same goes for Jacob’s descendants and the same goes for you and me. You are not saved on your own merits but on Christ’s merits. He earned salvation on the cross, and God applies His mercy and pardon on whomever He chooses. *“Salvation belongs to our God.”*

I know a kid who was raised in a Christian home who strayed from his roots and knew he was living a life far from God. And I heard him once say that he must be an Esau, that God must not have chosen him. I’m not sure if that was self-pity, self-justification, or just a way of making his life of pleasure and disobedience sound theologically deep, but he misunderstood this idea, and he misunderstood God. There is no situation where someone wants to be saved but God says, “Nope, sorry, I didn’t choose you, you don’t get to be one of the elect.” If someone desires to be saved, that means that God has changed their heart and is drawing them to Himself in love and salvation. If you’re here this morning wondering if you are one of God’s elect, the one way to know for sure is to place your faith in Jesus and experience His love, mercy, and forgiveness. The Bible says that then you can know for sure the you are eternally secure.

I'll close with a quote from R.C. Sproul's book *Chosen by God*, where he talks about first resisting and hating the idea of God choosing and electing His people to salvation:

"I began to see the beauty of it... I have grown to love this doctrine. It is most comforting. It underlines the extent to which God has gone in our behalf. It is a theology that begins and ends with grace... We praise a God who lifted us from spiritual deadness and makes us walk in high places. We find a God who is "for us," giving us the courage to withstand those who may be against us. It makes our souls rejoice to know that all things are working together for our good. We delight in our Savior who truly saves us and preserves us and intercedes for us. We marvel in his craftsmanship and in what he has wrought... We ponder mysteries and bow before them, but not without doxologies for the riches of grace he has revealed."<sup>4</sup>

If you have been set free by the forgiveness offered to you in Jesus, then God chose you because He decided to love you. Receive and marvel at that wonderful gift of grace. Never question that He loves you and live a life of thankful obedience to Him. Amen and amen!

Benediction - 1 Kings 8:57-58 - *"The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers. May He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Him, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His rules, which He commanded to our fathers."*

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<sup>4</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), p. 213.