

God's Holy Love

1:1-5

"The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.

"I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, 'How hast Thou loved us?'" Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' declares the Lord. 'Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation, and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.' Though Edom says, 'We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins'; 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,' And your eyes will see this and you will say, 'The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel!'" (1:1-5).

As the prophecy of Malachi begins, the reason for the prophecy is revealed: Israel had forgotten God's holy love! Such an accusation is sobering when one considers the tenderness bestowed upon the ungrateful nation by God. As a nation, Israel had received so much but acknowledged so little in return. The sharp pain of her ungratefulness was most unpleasant and called for a blunt rebuke. Malachi was called by God and "burdened" with words to correct this failing (1:1). Malachi could not help but speak "against Israel." None today would envy Malachi's task!

The historical background of this period helps to explain the urgency of Malachi's message. The restoration of Israel from the Exile

had promised the fulfillment of other prophetic visions, namely the messianic kingdom and the worldwide acceptance of God's sovereignty (cf. Ezekiel 16:60ff.; 37:16ff.). Israel had returned to the "Promised Land," and after resettlement they had faced constant struggles. Instead of the victory they had anticipated, the returned exiles had found only problems. The temple was finally rebuilt, but the splendor of the prophetic promises had not become reality. The people began to view God's promises as shallow. God's power became limp to them, and God's love became lost! Consequently, Israel became ungrateful. They questioned God's providence, power, and love. Their lifestyle failed to reflect the devotion of holiness because they had lost sight of God's greatness.

God's response to Israel is seen in the book of Malachi. The message is an announcement of how important holiness is to God's people. Without holiness, life becomes ordinary, faith loses its vitality, and daily practices become intertwined with the world. Malachi was sent to complacent Israel with a prophecy urging the restoration of holiness. This would correct the exiles' pathetic condition.

As Malachi began, he addressed the number one problem of Israel's faith: They had lost confidence in God's love for them. The nation felt, and thus acted, as if God's love were absent. Malachi immediately corrected this error in 1:1-5. With penetrating insight, Malachi revealed

the folly of Israel's believing that God's love had vanished from her life.

No greater word describes God than "love." John's simple definition cannot be improved—"God is love" (1 John 4:8b). In our childhood Bible classes, we learned to sing, "Jesus loves me." In the elementary grades, our teachers helped us memorize, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The tenderness of the "Shepherd's Psalm" (Psalm 23) was memorized and is often cited at the death of loved ones as a focal point of God's marvelous love. Once this love of Jehovah is understood, it provides a sturdy foundation upon which all faith and life can rest. If this foundation is shaken by doubt, all of faith's realm will likewise suffer. This was what happened to Israel's faith in Malachi's day. They had lost the firm foundation of God's holy love. This had led her to cynical questions and compromised practices. This foundation needed to be "shored up."

MAN'S RESPONSE TO GOD'S HOLY LOVE

As Malachi begins, he makes an unequivocal assertion from God: "I have loved you!" No question about it! God's love had been demonstrated to Israel, but Israel had not responded appropriately. Israel (and modern man) could respond to God in three ways, but only one is appropriate.

First, *man can respond to God's love with incredulity (1:2a)*. Israel was unconvinced. They saw nothing which they had anticipated. In response to the statement of God, Israel asked, "How?" This response may be similar to Gideon's who allowed the burdens of the world to limit the greatness of his God. In response to the assertion that God was with Israel, Gideon dejectedly replied. ". . . the Lord has abandoned us" (Judges 6:13). It was not a denial of God. It was not a refusal to acknowledge His love in the past. It was a doubt that God really cared about him at that moment.

Israel needed to remember that they were the object of God's covenant of love. God had shown a special favor to Israel because of His love and for no other reason! (cf. Deuteronomy 7:7, 8). Jeremiah had tried to remind Israel that God had

loved the nation with an "everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3, 4). God had declared His love for the nation a number of times. The fact was clear but she began to doubt His declarations.

Ancient Israel is not alone in this respect. Many today question God's love for them. When some physical disease strikes, we wonder what we have done to make God care less for us. We allow life's circumstances to make it hard for us to believe that God still loves us.

We forget God's tenderness of the past and look only to present situations. Then we forget His great love. Let us be careful not to react to God's love with incredulity!

Second, *man can respond to God's love with rebellion (1:2b-4)*. Malachi mentions the nation of Edom, the descendents of Esau and the kinsmen of Israel. Jacob and Esau were different in every respect, especially in how they reacted to God.

Edom is an excellent illustration of how God's holy love is met with stubborn rebellion. Edom had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar just as Israel, but Edom was not allowed to return (Jeremiah 49:7; 25:9, 21). The writer of Hebrews used Edom to illustrate how stubborn rebellion to God's holy love will bring bitterness in life (Hebrews 12:14-17). As a nation, Edom was cursed, arrogant toward God, without repentance, and lacking humility. When confronted with God's will, Edom stubbornly chose self over God. She rebelled against God's love and never recovered her power! (Obadiah 1:7).

Malachi's mention of Edom should cause somber reflection. Is it possible that you have responded to God's holy love with a similar stubbornness? How tragic it is to see one who is the object of God's great love spurn the holy love in favor of self!

Third, *man can respond to God's love with praise (1:5)*. Malachi drew an unbelievable conclusion: Israel was cynical about God's holy love, Edom was stubbornly resistant to God's holy love, but a time will come when God's holy love will be magnified worldwide! Thus, Israel should cease murmuring and join in the universal praise!

This praise is the only appropriate response to Jehovah's holy love. Psalm 106 discusses the rebellious cynicism of Israel, yet it begins with a hallowed note of praise: "Praise the Lord! Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Psalms 106:1). In

this psalm we are told the same message of Malachi 1:5. The only proper response to God's holy love is praise and adoration. In the heavenly scenes of Revelation, we find the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders singing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty" (Revelation 4:8).

Malachi told Israel that they needed to look at Edom's impotence and acknowledge Jehovah as the Almighty God. In doing this she would neither question nor rebel against God's holy love. Surely all can see that this is the only appropriate response to God's marvelous love.

All will respond to God in one of these three ways. Your response to God's commands (either in obedience or disobedience) will reveal your understanding of His love for you. Each time the Lord's invitation is extended, those in the assembly will respond in one of these three ways. Some remain unconvinced and cynical. They doubt that God loves them. They will not respond. Some are guided by stubborn rebellion. They know the truth but refuse to obey it. These will never submit. Some will understand God's love and rejoice because of its invitation. These have confessed Christ's deity (Matthew 10:32), repented of selfishness and yielded their commitment to God (Luke 13:3), and have been born again into God's family by immersion for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:37, 38). They are filled with a joyful confidence as they face life's struggles. Only those in this third category are well-pleasing to God because only they have comprehended the greatness of God's holy love. In which of the three categories are you?

GOD'S LOVING RESPONSE TO MAN

God's great love welcomes man's response. Even in the face of cynicism and stubbornness, God's great love beckons man to change and be saved (cf. Psalms 31:19). From Malachi's text, we see exactly how God responds to each of the three responses above.

First, to the incredulous, God is willing to provide information. Man's questions can be answered. Israel had asked, "How does God love us?" and God gave an answer. The reference to Jacob and Esau was a clear reply. Both nations had sinned. Both nations were punished in the Exile. But Israel was forgiven and restored while Edom was left in misery. This was proof of

God's love. While Israel was allowed to return, Edom never recovered from ruin.

To the modern cynic who questions God's love, this point provides an answer as well. God still wants people to know Him and be assured of His love! All one has to do is look around and observe God's love. It is as Paul said, "He did not leave Himself without witness" (Acts 14:17; cf. Psalms 19:1-4, 7-8; Job 12:7, 8). God's love surrounds us every day we live. His message to modern man is the same as it was to ancient Israel, "I have loved you!"

How heartbreaking it is to observe the multitude who have developed the tragic habit of forgetting God's love. They base God's love upon circumstances of life and fail to see the abundant proofs of His love in our lives! To those who doubt, God's response is certain: "I have loved you, and that love is witnessed by ample evidence!"

Second, to the rebellious, God provides time to come to an accurate understanding. His love is patient. The holy love is willing to accept even the wayward. This divine patience relents only when man is stubbornly resolved to continue in sin (cf. Romans 1:24). God's love was patient with Israel (Psalm 78) and promises a similar longsuffering with people today (cf. Jonah 4:2; 2 Peter 3:9).

Third, to those who praise Him, God provides great peace! God's response to those who return His love is described in a number of psalms:

He becomes their "Rock" (95:1).

He becomes their "Shepherd" (23:1).

He furnishes them "pastures" (95:6, 7).

He fills them "with singing" (96:1-4; 81:11).

He gives "strength and a shield" (28:6, 7).

He enables them to "serve" (100:1-4).

These three points help underscore God's love. He is unwilling that any should be lost. Consequently, He does everything He can to answer our questions and encourage us to obey His will. God's response to man is definitely a "loving" response!

CONCLUSION

Israel had taken God's love for granted; they had become cynical and stubborn regarding the divine favors extended to them. They had willingly taken but had stubbornly refused

to give the grateful praise due Jehovah's majesty. In spite of a divine love shown in unmistakable clarity, Israel refused to love God in return!

The text has a message for us: God still says, "I have loved you." This is the greatest reason for man to respond in obedient faith to the gospel's commands (John 14:15). Heaven has specially favored us. What is the appropriate response? Does your life speak of rebellion, ingratitude, or praise?

Once three sons of an eastern queen tried to show their love for their mother. The one whose gift was judged the greatest had offered her a few drops of his own blood. That gift was counted as a supreme virtue. But God's love has offered us the blood of Christ. And His offering is not just a few drops; His blood was *poured* out on the cross! It is not just for His children, but for His enemies as well (Romans 5:6-8). Surely there can

be "no greater love" anywhere! (John 15:13).

A missionary was reading portions of the Gospel of John to some South Sea natives. One who had listened interrupted, "What words were those you just read? Let me hear the words again." The missionary again read, "God so loved the world. . . ." The native rose to his feet and said, "Can this be true? Did God really love the world when the world would not love Him? Can it be so?" The missionary again read the verse and said that it was true and that was the message God wanted the natives to know. Understanding this incredible love won his heart and motivated him to obey the gospel.

To all who struggle with doubt and rebellion, 1:1-5 holds a great lesson. Understand the magnificence of God's love. Having understood it, respond to it as did those in Acts 2 and be saved by the blood of Christ!

—John Kachelman

Reasons We Should Honor God

1. Because of His great love (1:2).
2. Because of His great power (1:4).
3. Because of His great position (1:6).
4. Because of His great blessings (1:8).
5. Because of His great presence (1:11, 14).

Jacob Loved but Esau Hated (Malachi 1:2)

Here in brief summary is God's scheme of redemption.

1. It was motivated by love.
2. It would separate the godly from the ungodly.
3. It was accomplished according to the Promise.
4. It would demonstrate the grace, mercy, and justice of Jehovah God (Romans 9:11).

God's Great Burden (Malachi 1:1-5)

1. . . . to communicate His word (1:1).
2. . . . to persuade man of His love (1:2).
3. . . . to contend with the obstinate (1:3, 4).
4. . . . to be universally praised and adored (1:5).

4

Rebels' Rewards (Malachi 1:4)

When people rebel against God, there will arise these rewards that are most bitter in life.

1. Their influence will be known as ungodly.
2. Their plans and purposes will always be contrary to God.
3. Their achievements will be destroyed by God.
4. Their entire life consists of building on "ruins."

The Holy Love (Malachi 1:1-5)

1. It strives to make itself known (1:1).
2. It is often met with skepticism (1:2).
3. It is rejected by man (1:3, 4).
4. It will triumph in the end (1:5).

How Some React to God (Malachi 1:1-5)

1. Some view Him as a "burden" (1:1).
2. Some view Him with skepticism (1:2).
3. Some view Him with bitterness (1:3, 4).
4. Some will eagerly accept Him as Lord (1:5).

The God Malachi Knew

1. He was a God who longed to communicate with man (1:1; 2:1-9; 4:4, 5).
2. He was a God who deserved honor and respect (1:6, 11, 14; 2:2, 5; 3:16).
3. He was a God whose wrath was fearful (2:2, 12; 3:1-5; 4:1-3).
4. He was a God zealous of the covenant made with man (1:12; 2:1-9; 3:7; 4:4-6).
5. He was a God of great affection toward man (1:2; 2:6; 3:10-12, 17; 4:2, 3).
6. He was a God of divine judgment (1:14; 2:2; 3:1-5, 9, 11; 4:1-3).
7. He was a God who longed to be understood by men (1:6; 2:7; 3:6, 7, 10).

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