



Overview of Malachi and God's Love for Israel Malachi 1:1-5

Introduction

God's word, spoken through Malachi, is addressed to *Israel*. Specifically, these were God's people who had returned to the city of Jerusalem, in the region of Judah, from exile in Babylon. They were men and women who professed love for God. They had exhibited their love by returning to their homeland to rebuild God's temple which had been laid waste by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, nearly seventy years before. The entire city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. It was not a beautiful or pleasant place to return to.

Most of the Jewish people had become quite comfortable in Babylon. They had become business and professional people and for many it was difficult to leave the comforts of their new home for the unknown future in Israel. The fact is that most chose not to return. It was a small remnant of the Jews who packed up a few of their belongings and made the long journey back to the land which God had promised to them generations before (Genesis 12:1-3). And although it was the "Promised Land," it offered nothing initially but hard work and a difficult life for those who went to rebuild. Their comfortable homes, their friends, and their worldly security were left behind.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they had begun to build with much enthusiasm. However, as time wore on, the work seemed never ending and they faced much opposition from the pagan people who inhabited the area. Discouragement and disillusionment set in. The people began to question God's love for them. They began to long for the creature comforts of Babylon. Sadly, they settled into a worldly lifestyle which continued even after the temple was restored and the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt. This displeased God, who loved them. God raised up Malachi to confront the people with their wayward attitudes and actions, to call them to repentance, and to give them hope for the future.

This lesson will present a brief overview of the Book of Malachi and then cover the first five verses of chapter one, in which God declares His love for His people.

I. Overview of the Book of Malachi - Malachi 1-4

A. Outline of the Book of Malachi

For the purposes of study, Malachi may be divided into three parts. The prophecy begins with God expressing His love for His people. Secondly, God confronts the

people with their sin and the grievousness of it. Finally, God displays His justice, declaring judgment upon the wicked who fail to return to Him but unfailing mercy to those who turn and honor Him. In this study, the Book of Malachi will be divided as follows.

- I. God Proclaims His Love for Israel - Malachi 1:1-5
- II. God Points Out Israel's Sin - Malachi 1:6-2:17
- III. God Pronounces Judgment - Malachi 3-4

In the first verse of Malachi's prophecy, it is announced that this *oracle* or *burden* is *the word of the Lord*. It is delivered *to Israel*, and it is delivered *through Malachi*. This book is the Lord's word, and not Malachi's. Malachi is simply the conduit for God's pronouncements.

Notice that the name for God used in verse one is *the Lord*. This is the Hebrew YHWH (YAHWEH), the personal covenant name for God, "I Am." It is the name by which God identified Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14 and it embodies the self-existent, all sufficient personal Creator who never changes. It encompasses not only "I Am," but also the past, "I Was," and the future, "I Will Be."

- B. God Proclaims His Love for Israel - Malachi 1:1-5

In these verses, God declares His love for His people. But they had the audacity to question His love, asking, *In what way have You loved us?* God patiently presents the proof of His love using the example of Esau and Jacob. Esau was the firstborn (although he and Jacob were twins) of Isaac and Rachel. By the customs of the ancient east, Esau was the favored one, the one with the birthright, and the one who would receive a double portion of the inheritance. Yet God had blessed Jacob (also called Israel) and his descendants (Israel) and cursed Esau and the land of Edom where his descendants settled. What better proof could be offered of God's love for Israel!

- C. God Points Out Israel's Sin - Malachi 1:6-2:17

God looked upon Israel as His children. He had treated them as His beloved children, but they had not honored Him. In fact, they had despised His name.

In this section, God addresses the grievous sins of the people and the priests. The priests had defiled

God's altar by sacrificing lame and sick animals. They had corrupted the priesthood by not keeping God's law. They had been a stumbling block to the people by not teaching God's truth. Other sins of both priests and people included marrying women from idolatrous nations, divorcing their wives, not giving the tithe to God, and speaking arrogant words against God. Very simply, the people of Israel did not revere God. But God promised to change all that. He promised to send *the Messenger of the covenant* (Malachi 3:1) who would purify the priests and judge the wicked. Although Israel was unfaithful, God does not change and He is always faithful to His people.

D. God Pronounces Judgment - Malachi 3:16-4:6

The hard message of Israel's insolence and their multiple iniquities now softens into words of comfort for those who listen to God, fear Him, and meditate on His name. They will be God's *jewels* (Malachi 3:17), and He will have compassion on them as a father has compassion on his own son. The great day of the Lord will come when the arrogant ones are totally consumed while those who have turned to God are healed and exalted by the *Sun of Righteousness*.

God's closing admonition to Israel is, *Remember the Law of Moses*, so their hearts may be right on the coming *great and dreadful day of the Lord* (Malachi 4:4-5).

II. The Lord's Love for Israel - Malachi 1:1-5

The heavy *burden* or *oracle* (NASB) of this prophecy is God's love for His chosen people, as expressed in the opening sentences. The Hebrew word for *oracle* is "massa," a word which commonly introduces messages of a threatening nature, as in Isaiah 13:1, Habbakkuk 1:1, and Zechariah 9:1. In the first verse of Malachi, it sets a tone of foreboding for the people of Israel and intimates that the message will concern the covenant God had made with them. God had been faithful to the covenant, so the burden must be centered around the unfaithfulness of Israel.

A. The Word of the Lord - Malachi 1:1-2

God's declared word to His people is *I have loved you*. These words are specifically directed to the chosen people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham whom God had chosen and called out of the land of Ur in order to bless him, make him a great nation, and bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:1-4). God had called the nation of Israel into existence. He had nurtured Israel and ruled Israel, and He had often expressed His love along the way. See Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:6-9; Isaiah 43:4; Hosea 11:1 and 3-4.

God's love for Israel was evident in His sovereign and gracious election, identifying her as His own possession. Love was the heart of the covenant relationship. Since God *set His love* (Deuteronomy 7:7) on Israel, it should only be natural for Israel to acknowledge and return that love through obedience to Him. *Hear oh Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be on your heart* (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

B. The Retort of the People - Malachi 1:2

In response to the Lord's affirmation of His love, the people of Israel only expressed doubt and unbelief. Instead of recognizing all that God had done for them in choosing them, leading them, caring for them, and keeping His promises to them, they dwelt only upon what they had lost. They were so engrossed with what God had taken away by exiling them to Babylon that they failed to have gratitude for all that He had given in restoring them to the land He had promised and enabling them to rebuild the temple and their beloved city of Jerusalem.

Merrill Unger ([Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament](#)) notes that the people were insensitive to God's love because they were insensitive to their own sin. Their sin blinded them to God's love. And so it is with us as well. When you think that God has mistreated you or forsaken you, it is best to take a close look at yourself. God never changes. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). We are the ones who move away and disobey.

C. The Plain Truth - Malachi 1:2-5

God graciously explains His love for Israel by giving historical evidence and prophetic promises. The people of Israel, as descendants of the patriarch, Jacob, need only to look back on their history to see clear evidence of God's love for them. When contrasted with God's dealings with Jacob's brother, Esau, His love for Jacob (Israel) is made even more evident. God's love was expressed 1) through His choice of Jacob and 2) through His dealings with Israel, past, present, and promised.

1. God's free choice of Jacob - 1:2

Through His prophet, Malachi, God reminded Israel of their ancestry and His love for Jacob. Jacob was the son of Isaac, and grandson of Israel's great patriarch, Abraham.

Abraham's son, Isaac, had married Rebekah, who gave birth to twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Before the babies

were born, God had told Rebekah that the children in her womb would be two nations, one would be stronger than the other, and the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23). Esau was the firstborn and therefore would traditionally have been the favored son. However, God had chosen Jacob, whose name he later changed to Israel. Jacob is the one who came to inherit the promises of God which had been passed down from Abraham and Isaac. Jacob also became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

God's statement in Malachi 1:2, *Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated*, is not an emotional statement. The Hebrew words used for *love* and *hate* do not refer to God's emotions but to His sovereign election of Jacob as the heir. The Hebrew "aheb" which is the word used for *loved* in Malachi 1:2 is a technical term that was used in both biblical and secular treaties and covenants in the ancient Near East. "Aheb" is a word which refers to choice or election to a covenant relationship. God's love for Jacob was His choice of Jacob as heir of the covenant He had made with Abraham (Genesis 17).

God loved Jacob through sovereignly electing him and his descendants for a covenant relationship with Himself as His special possession.

2. God's historical dealings with Israel - Malachi 1:3-5

The people of Israel needed to recall their past, recognize God's hand in their history, and consider what their fate would have been if they were not chosen by God as His elect people. Simply considering the fate of Esau's descendants should have filled their hearts with gratitude.

a. Past dealings - 1:3-4

There is a striking contrast between God's historical dealings with Jacob and Esau and their descendants, Jacob (also referred to as Israel) and Edom. The prophet Obadiah had prophesied the future destruction of Edom because of their pride and mistreatment of their brothers, the people of Judah. God had fulfilled that prophecy by laying *waste his (Edom's) mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness*.

Both Edom and Israel had received judgment from God at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, as prophesied in Jeremiah 27:3-6. But while God promised to restore His covenant people, Israel, He condemned Edom to total destruction. Indeed, the remnant of God's people had returned and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple, but the Edomites were forced out of their land and eventually suffered complete destruction at the hands of the Nabatean Arabs. Although prideful

Edom had determined to return to build up their ruined territory, God had overruled (Malachi 1:4). The mountainous region of Edom was left as an inheritance for the desert jackals.

b. Future dealings - 1:4-5

God promised to frustrate any attempt by the Edomites to rebuild their territory. Ultimately, Edom would be known as the *Territory of Wickedness*. The Lord would never relent in His judgment of Edom. His sovereign dealings with Edom are a clear illustration of His glory and greatness as *the Lord of hosts* over all the earth.

In contrast to Edom, God's dealings with Israel had been in love. "When they were ignorant, He blessed them with a true knowledge of Himself. When they were weak and defenseless, He empowered them and shielded them from enemies. When they strayed, He disciplined them. When they persisted in wickedness, He eventually sent the Babylonian captivity, as the prophets had warned He would do over many generations. Then He brought them back to Judah, established them within the walls of a refortified Jerusalem, and allowed them to rebuild the temple. There was blessing and judgment, building and destruction. But in all these things God had loved them and was continuing to work with them in order that they might be a precious and holy people while Edom perished utterly" (*The Minor Prophets, Volume 2*, James Montgomery Boice).

Applications

1. God had made a covenant with His people. All of the blessings He had promised were theirs. But they failed to enter into relationship with Him on the basis of His covenant. They were waiting for God to do something more while they were doing nothing, and waiting for God is unbelief. Waiting shows a lack of faith in God! If you don't believe God unless He gives you something tangible by which you can say, "Now I believe," there is no faith. Faith is looking to God, trusting and obeying, and then letting Him prove Himself true. How strong and mature is your faith?

2. Have you ever asked God, "How have You loved me?" Will you look at your life and recognize that God has dealt with you in love just as He did with Israel, blessing you with a knowledge of Himself, strengthening you when you have been weak, protecting you, comforting you in sorrows, disciplining you, and drawing you nearer to Him by bringing you to Bible study? Will you now recognize the greatness of God's love for you as you humbly confess the smallness of your own love for Him. Will you determine to live your life in obedience to Him and to His glory so that you may shine as a light of His grace to the world around you?