

THE BOOK OF MALACHI - When Spiritual Intimacy Feels Elusive - Pt 1

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WHY GOD SHOWS LOVE TO HIS PEOPLE IN THE FIRST PLACE

Malachi 1:1-5 - "The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. [2] "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 [3] but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert." [4] If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the Lord of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.' " [5] Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!"

Why in the world should we study a book most people have never heard of? What can a book written 2500 years ago, to a Jewish nation, have to do with a predominantly Gentile congregation living in Newmarket in 2022?

To answer those questions I want to look briefly at the setting of the book of Malachi.

Malachi was speaking to a different time of history than most other Old Testament prophets. In years gone by we've studied some of the writings of **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel**. They were warning of the coming judgement of the Lord upon Judah. **Daniel** and **Shadrack, Meshack** and **Abednigo** were all taken away into **Babylonian captivity** as the judgement of God came upon Judah.

Other prophets like **Isaiah** prophesied that God would raise up **Cyrus, the king of Persia** to deliver Judah from Babylon. And then **Ezra and Nehemiah** were used by the Lord to come back and rebuild both the Temple and the city and its walls.

Gradually the people returned. And, in time, life returned to normal. So here they were, back in their own land. They were the clearest example of God's supernatural love and care that the world had ever seen. And they never deserved a bit of it. It wasn't because they were suddenly holy and wonderful that God had done all of this for them. God was showing them what His covenant faithfulness was all about.

And it's right at this point that you get a good picture of what the book of Malachi is all about. It's a study in **contrasts**. God remembers His covenant and they completely forget about theirs. This is the burden of Malachi's prophetic complaint. We know about this. Malachi's basic complaint is one we can all feel the logic of. How can it be possible that even though they are so recently back into their own temple, they are so quickly back into their old ways of sin and rebellion?

That leads into the first part of the text. God goes over a basic word study on the meaning of **love**. What does it mean that God is loving toward us? What should it mean when I say I love God?

This is really what the book of Malachi is all about. This is where it bears fruitful consideration. Out of the 55 verses in the book 47 are direct quotes in the first person from God Himself to His people. Don't take that statistic lightly. No other prophet bears such heavy freight of the mind and heart of Father God. God unloads His heart here as He does in few other places in Scripture.

Here's another reason to study Malachi. It deals with a time in Judah's history I can relate to - perhaps the most like our own. I can't even imagine what Daniel faced in the lion's den. I find it hard to relate to personally rebuilding the walls of the holy city. I can only dream about what it would be like to be yanked out of my dwelling place and hauled away against my own will into pagan captivity.

But that's not what Malachi's writing about. He's talking about people moving into a new temple, with fresh worship, who still live with old hearts, and who are wondering where the blessing of the Lord is.

Fifty years had passed since **Haggai** and **Zechariah** had prophesied about the coming of the Lord in deliverance. All of the big projects - the building of the temple and city walls - were completed. There were no international crises to stir up the hearts of the people. The prophetic word of the Lord was growing rare and dim. All of the hopes of a new world of righteousness and peace had died with the last generation.

In short, the people's spirits were getting dull and indifferent. Nothing much was happening in the spiritual scene. They could only talk about what **used** to happen in the days of Elijah and Elisha. Social values and morals began to slide. The line between the people of God and the people around them began to disappear. Does any of this sound relevant? That's the climate into which Malachi plants his message of warning and renewal.

1) **TERRIBLE SPIRITUAL RUIN TAKES PLACE WHEN PEOPLE FAIL TO TAKE TO HEART THE LOVE OF GOD**

Malachi 1:2 - " 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How have you loved us?'"

Those responding words of the people have to be some of the most ridiculous and perverse words ever penned - "***You have shown love to us? Where have you shown your love to us?***" These are people who, without raising a sword, have been delivered from the strongest empire of the known world - ***Babylon***. They've been brought back into their home land by their enemies. They've been given all the funds and supplies they needed to rebuild their own city and to re-establish their temple and worship to their own God.

These very people are now saying, "Seriously, God, where have you shown your love to us?"

Now something in me just stops short right on the spot. I need to know something. I need to know, how does that happen to a people?

These people go to the temple every day. They offer their sacrifices. They don't even sense the wonder of the unbelievable fact that their God offers pardon and cleansing for their sins. They're going to say later on in this book that their participation in temple worship is a ***bore*** to them - **Malachi 1:13** - "***But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts....***"

There will be many moral and spiritual failures specifically dealt with in this book. But the ***first*** subject the Lord challenges them on is this issue of their awareness of His love for them. Of course, they aren't showing any kind of love for God. But that's not the ***starting*** point in God's reproof. They can't even sense or realize God's love ***for them***.

We need to remember that there is also a reminder of this very danger in the New Testament to the church. The apostle ***Jude*** (brother of James) says we are to "***....keep yourselves in the love of God....***" And I think it's interesting to read this instruction from the Apostle with the book of Malachi in mind. Jude's words have nothing whatsoever to do with ***causing*** God to love us. The apostle is writing on the subject of ***perseverance***. He's talking about ***keeping going and growing*** in the Lord. And he too starts, not with our love for God (as important as that is) but the importance of God's love for us, and how to ***keep going*** in it.

So there is a ***keeping*** involved in my walk with the Lord. And it's something I must do myself - "**Keep yourselves in the love of God.**" This probably shouldn't surprise us. Of all the graces of the heart, love must be most kept and protected. It is hardest to protect over long periods of time. Something that was cherished when it was new and fresh can be ignored or hated after a long

familiarity with it.

I constantly meet with people - **Christian** people - who have to have a divorce or separation. They will find every argument in the book because they can't stand to spend one more minute **together**. But there was a time when they wanted desperately to be married because they couldn't stand to spend one more minute **apart**.

Or think about the Israelites being miraculously fed by God in the wilderness. Hear them grumble to Moses - "**Are you kidding? Manna again. Nothing but this manna!**" But that wasn't their **first** reaction to the manna. At first they all raced out and hogged up more than they could eat and it went bad. They were absolutely delighted with it. But affections can grow deadened after long acquaintance.

"**Keep yourselves in the love of God**" says Jude. Indeed. It's no idle exhortation. Everything will pull your mind in a lower direction.

Faith can't function when love dies. Faith needs the love of God for its fuel. No wonder Malachi writes with broken heart about the spiritual failure of the people and priests. Sacrifices can't keep faith alive. The Temple can't keep faith alive. They didn't keep themselves in the love of God.

2) **GOD REMINDS THE PEOPLE JUST HOW COMMITTED HE HAD BEEN TO THEM**

Malachi 1:2-3 - "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 [3] but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

This reminder about elective work in Jacob over Esau is foundational to a very important point God wants to make. Jacob and Esau were **brothers**. More than that, they were **twins**. More than that, **Esau** was the **older** of the two. That meant that, if anything, he was the one more **entitled** to the inheritance. This is Paul's whole point in Romans 9 through 11. He magnified God's grace and mercy.

Esau might have laid some claim to the covenant blessings of God. He was, after all, the eldest. But Israel had forgotten how **unearned** all her blessings were. All through her history, what should have been a source of constant **devotion** and **humility** became a fuel for false pride,

entitlement, and arrogance.

Remember the Pharisees as they barked out their reason for not hearing the words of Jesus? - **"We're Abraham's descendants! Don't talk to us about you giving us freedom!"** What should have humbled them and opened them up in praise to God made them arrogant and narrow-minded and judgmental. That's what *always* happens them people forget how graciously God has loved them.

And so God speaks through Malachi and stabs their conscience awake. They had been defeated along with ***Edom - Esau's descendants*** - (4) by a common enemy. Why had ***Judah*** been able to rebuild while ***Edom*** never could? Why was Israel back in their land, worshipping in their temple? This is God's way of saying, "Do you think this was all your doing? Or do you imagine that you just happened to strike it lucky?"

They had no excuse for not knowing all of this. God had gone to great pains to drill this concept into their minds right from the very beginning: **Deuteronomy 7:7-8** - **"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, [8] but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."**

Nothing gums up the power and flow of the life of Jesus in His children more than the way we respond to His blessing upon our lives. Eventually it effects every part of your walk with Him.

There are so many examples of this in Scripture. Let me mention just one familiar passage: **James 4:3** - **"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."**

What is really wrong in this person's prayer life? I don't imagine anybody kneeling before the Lord and saying, "Boy, Jesus, all I ever want is gobs and gobs of material goods. And the only person I care about is me. Phooey on the needy, the lost, and phooey on any kind of prayer for spiritual growth. Just gi'me, gi'me. gi'me."

Nobody talks like that to God. The process is much more subtle than that. James says it has to do with the "**passions**" of the heart. This person has come to think wrongly about the goodness of God - the **love of God**. And very gradually, it is shutting down everything that's power generating in his life.

Let me give you a quick heart quiz: Do you read the Bible just to **feel be fed** or **to obey even when you don't feel like it**? Do you want God to **meet your needs** or **glorify Himself in your life even if it's through costly sacrifice**? Do you go to church to **enjoy being blessed** or to **find an ordered, fixed place of discipline and service**?

Now listen, there's nothing wrong with **being fed, or having your needs met, or being blessed**. All of those things are fine and good. But it is very easy, with the passing of time, and with the replacing of certain terms and words, to get to the place in your Christian walk where you actually become described by the very word James uses in the old King James to define that person whose prayer life is described by selfishness. James says he's a **consumer** - "**Ye ask that ye may consume....**"

How many of my prayers go unanswered because I cry out to God to bless me with no real intention of **using** what He **has** already blessed me with to extend His kingdom and reveal His glory? It may be the biggest hindrance to revival in the Body of Christ today.

3) WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S GOODNESS IN MY LIFE

And it's right at this closing point that we see the clearest sign of a new heart. When a heart isn't spiritually right with God there are two responses to God's goodness:

A) BLESSINGS ARE CONSUMED WITH NO THOUGHT OF DEVOTION

You can see God's appeal in the very first words in **1:6** - "**A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?'**"

They have lost sight of how they are despising God because they aren't **cursing** God.

They're despising God far more subtly than that. For a son not to honor another adult may be discourteous. But for a son not to honor his own **father** is wickedness. That's because a son **owes a great deal to his father**. He has received so much that he owes a great deal. The son doesn't have to **curse** his father to despise him.

B) ANOTHER MARK OF A BAD HEART IS THAT GOD'S PATIENCE IS TURNED INTO AN EXCUSE FOR FURTHER REBELLION.

There's something that we no longer think about, but the angels must shake their heads over in disbelief. God, being who He is - the **Creator** and **Owner** of all that is - could make all of us do whatever He wants. But, in truth, He doesn't **make** us do anything.

And the second shocker is, that **God, doesn't quickly judge us for our rebellion**. Now, it isn't amazing that **we** can tolerate our own sin. We're fallen creatures. But **God** is absolutely stainless - unblemished in even the slightest quirk or thought or character.

So cold and distant hearts quickly **take advantage** of such a gracious God. They'll take Him for all they can in terms of self-indulgence and catering to their own desires. That's the way fallen hearts treat the **love and goodness of God**. They milk it.

Now we're ready to wrap this up. First, we need to get to the heart of the issue with the right questions: **Why is God patient and loving to us? What is the proper response to such a God?** And the Bible gives a crystal clear answer to both of those questions: **Romans 2:4** - "**Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**"

If we answer the first question too quickly, we're probably not being honest. **"Don, do you presume on God's kindness and patience?"** And I'd like to think, **"No, I don't."** But I'm not ready to answer the first question in that verse until I've listened to everything the Holy Spirit had to say in the **rest** of the verse.

Is there any point of attitude or ambition or action in my life that doesn't line up very comfortably with what I know to be true of Jesus Christ? If so, am I truly and thoroughly repenting and turning from it? And if the answer I get is either **"No,"** or **"We'll not yet,"** then **yes**, I do **presume** on

God's kindness and patience.

And just to humbly admit that one point of conflict is worth this whole evening's study. Let it bear fruit.