

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for the truth of Your Gospel:
We marvel at the wonder of Your love, offered to all who will receive it;
We rejoice at the amazing love You have showed in releasing us from sin;
We delight in the gifts of Your Holy Spirit and the assurance of our salvation;
And we anticipate with joy the feast of heaven when You come again in glory;
Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for the power of Your Gospel: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look at a map of the region around where you live, and let this prompt your prayers for people and places

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you know** *Pray for those in your home church fellowship, that God will bless them and lead them in faith and witness*
- *Pray for the countries of North Africa and their problems with drought*
- *Praise the Lord for those who work tirelessly for justice and peace*

Meditation

Deliver us from evil's allies
From those who try to halt the work of God within our world

Deliver us from false belief
From those who peddle religion instead of the love of God

Deliver us from lying tongues,
From those who lead the church astray by devious words

Deliver us from lovers of war,
From those who choose to fight instead of work for what is best

Deliver us from false accounting
From those who use words and numbers to deceive the faithful

Deliver us from ignorance of sin,
From those who prefer to judge themselves than trust the Word

Make us wise Satan's ways,
And give us wisdom's eyes to see, and ears to hear, Your truth.

Bible passage - Malachi 1:1-5

¹ The oracle of the Word of the LORD to Israel delivered by Malachi. ² The Lord says 'I have loved you, but you ask, "In what way have you loved us?" The Lord declares 'Is Esau not a brother to Jacob? Yet I have loved Jacob, ³ but I have hated Esau; I have given over his mountains to wasteland and his inheritance to desert jackals.' ⁴ Though Edom says, 'we are shattered, but we will return and rebuild the ruins,' this is what the LORD of Hosts says: 'They may build, but as for me, I will demolish. They are spoken of as the Land of Wickedness, a people with whom the LORD is incensed forever! ⁵ You will see this with your own eyes and say, "Great is the LORD, even beyond the borders of Israel!"'

Bible Study

Review

The first verses of a work such as the prophecy of Malachi are often important. What we have read today may seem relatively straightforward, but it reveals far more than a casual glance might suggest. Many Christians know Malachi's prophecy about the return of Elijah (4:5), and some are familiar with his words against complacency urging God's people to tithe and give the Lord His due (3:8f.). Few, however, are aware of its powerful comments about remaining faithful when life is hard, and this is especially important for those who feel that God's great deeds are but a distant memory.

The prophecy of Malachi has been argued about for centuries. Firstly, the book gives no indication of who 'Malachi' is, and secondly, it does not say much about when it was written. However, none of this should worry us. The name 'Malachi' means 'my messenger', which has led some to suggest that the book was written anonymously. But it is generally true of Hebrew names that they had a meaning, and 'Malachi' is no different in this respect, moreover, the meaning of the name adds to our sense of expectation in reading the work of someone who knew himself to be God's 'messenger'. Secondly, a close look at the general social conditions of Israel mentioned by this prophecy suggest that it was written around 500 to 450 AD. This was after the return of the first exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel, Haggai and Zechariah (as recorded by Ezra 1-6), but before the extensive ministry of Ezra himself (Ezra 7-10) and Nehemiah, that re-created the organised religious life of the Israelite community in Jerusalem and rebuilt the walls of the city.

The whole of Malachi reflects a sense of unhappiness and unease within the Israelite community in the days after their return. The Temple had been rebuilt, but it seemed that the glory of the Lord's presence had not yet returned (as in Ezekiel – 43:4f.). Life was hard and the Israelite community was increasingly sceptical about their God. This negativity was what drew Ezra (Ezra 7:1f.) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:1f.) back to Jerusalem from far flung regions of the Persian Empire, but it was also what lay behind the phrase in the opening verses of Malachi that we have read today. The Lord had said to his people 'I have loved you', only for the people to reply, 'In what way have you loved us?' (1:2) and the more you think about it, the more you realise what a heart-rending failure of faith this represents. God's people had lost faith in their God!

God could have done or said a number of things; He could have chastised Israel for her unbelief or shown His power and glory. He did none of these because, the people had endured virtually the complete obliteration of their culture, their nationhood and their faith, through the terror of exile under the Babylonians. So the Lord replied to the awful and depressive state of His people by reminding them of their history. Malachi delivered the message that the Lord loved Israel and had chosen to do so, but not Edom, the nation founded by Esau, Jacob's brother. These two nations had a long history, but verses 3 and 4 reflect the fact that by the 5th century BC the Edom had been wiped off the map of world. Israel, however, still survived. A vast unknown number of Jewish people now lived around the cities of the Persian Empire (as in the book of Esther, for example), and a tiny but disillusioned community existed in Jerusalem. The Lord still had an important work for His people to do, and He needed them to live in the Promised Land according to the historic covenant, because His plan for the salvation of the world had yet to be completed. Malachi was entrusted with a message to challenge Israel to remain faithful.

The book of Malachi consequently has an important place in the history of Old Testament prophecy. It will also speak directly to us today, particularly to people who live at a time when they feel that God is far away and has ceased to work in power as He did many years ago. This is not true of all Christians today, but it describes some very accurately.

Going Deeper

Each of verses 1 and 2 of Malachi has important nuances yielding helpful information about the meaning of the whole of Malachi's prophecy. After this, the section about Esau needs some explanation to be fully understood, before we can appreciate the triumphant comment 'Great is the LORD, even beyond the borders of Israel!'. The rest of our study focuses on these details and nuances of the Hebrew text.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** *'The oracle'* The Hebrew word is 'masha' which means 'burden' as in the pack placed on a mule or a camel for carrying things. It conveys the idea of carrying something for a purpose (see study).
- V1** *'delivered by Malachi'* The expression here is 'by the hand of Malachi', and this is a colloquial way of saying that something has been delivered by someone. Most translations have 'Word of the Lord to

Israel by Malachi', but this does not quite capture the sense of delivery which is also essential to the meaning of this verse. The word 'Malachi' means quite simply 'my messenger'. It is not a name and never was a name (as far as we can tell). For a fuller explanation of this, see the study.

V4 *'but as for me, I will demolish'* Most translations have 'but I will demolish'. However, in the middle of this, the word for 'I' is repeated and emphasized. One of the best ways to generate this emphasis in English is as I have translated.

V4 *'a people with whom the LORD is incensed forever!'* The Hebrew verb here is a general word for being cross or angry; I have translated 'incensed'. Some Bible versions use the word 'wrath' here, but there is a special word for 'wrath' that is not used here, so because of the implications of this word, it is best not to use it unless it is specifically used in the Hebrew.

Going Deeper

The Lord's 'burden' (1:1)

The first word in the Hebrew text of Malachi is 'masha', and is usually translated 'oracle'. This is one of a number of words used in the Old Testament to describe pronouncements delivered through the prophets to God's people (other words indicating prophecy include 'the Word of the Lord', 'Thus says the Lord, or just 'Listen!'). Many ancient pagan religions retained the idea of the 'oracle' or a word from the gods, and these were frequently delivered in the innermost sanctuary of a Temple. Israel's prophets, however, did not have access to the 'holy of holies' unless they were priests, and most of them received and spoke their messages without going to a holy place. This proved to be vital for the continuance of the prophetic tradition in Israel after the Temple had been destroyed in 587BC. For the word of God did not depend upon a building, but on the individual and a relationship with the living God. 'Oracles' were delivered by Isaiah (13:1, 15:1, 21:1,11,13 etc.) as well as Nahum (1:1) and Zechariah (9:1, 12:1), and almost all of them were delivered against nations that had opposed God.

In Malachi, his 'oracle' indicates that God had a complaint against Israel; certainly, something was wrong with the relationship between God and His people and the purpose of the oracle was to bring this out into the open so that it could be tackled and resolved. Some believe that the idea of an oracle or a 'burden' could also indicate that it was something that weighed heavily on the heart of the prophet. This could easily be the case, but a word from the Lord does not need to be called an 'oracle' for this to be the case. Another feature of the word is that a burden was something carried, and a closely related word that sounds almost exactly the same as 'masha' (oracle) in Hebrew means 'to lift up'. The idea of lifting up is frequently used in the Bible to indicate making something known so that something can be done. It is highly likely that this Hebrew word indicated to its first readers that here was something that God was 'lifting up' and making known, so that something could be done about it. As we travel on through Malachi, the truth of this will become very clear.

The other feature of verse 1 is the way that the verse ends. The notes above explain the details, and they make it clear that Malachi was God's 'messenger', because this is what his name means, and also that he was someone whose job was to deliver to others what had first been given to him; hence the expression 'by the hand of ...' as explained in the notes. The task of the prophet has always been that of the 'middle man' between God and His people, and insights such as these are best retained when we discuss the New Testament spiritual gift of prophecy that is now an important feature of the life of the church.

The Lord's love for Israel (1:2/3)

In verse 2, Malachi begins his message, declaring, 'The Lord says ...' and reports a quite astonishing short speech of the Lord to Israel; 'I have loved you, but you ask, "In what way have you loved us?"' Firstly, the beginning to Malachi's prophetic word is typical of what is to come. Most of Malachi is in the form of what is called a 'disputation', in which a question is asked and an answer given. Most of these questions and answers are hypothetical but they arose from real events or real feelings, and they went to the heart of the division between the Lord and His people. The Lord still loved His people, but after what they had been through in the recent years of their history, the remaining Israelites had difficulty believing it. God had abandoned them in their hour of need, the exile in Babylon, so what could it possibly mean now for God to say that He loved them?

The answer to this criticism from Israel comes in the next two verses, but it is helpful to our understanding of this if we look at the word for 'love' used here in verse 2. God had loved His people from the day He chose them through their forefather Abraham (Genesis 12f.), and this was expressed in the historic 'covenant' formed first with Abraham (Genesis 13,15,17). In the Old Testament, this covenant was frequently expressed through the use of the word 'cheseth' meaning 'faithful love', which emphasizes the on-going and never changing love of God. Nevertheless, this was not the word for 'love' used in this passage. Hebrew,

and most other languages have many words for 'love', but English has only one. The Hebrew word used here is 'ahavah' meaning 'undeserved love'. The choice of this word is important in the light of what comes next, which is a comment about God's choice of the nation of Israel over and against the nation of Edom. Israel had to realize that God's choice and His love was undeserved and free. There was no special reason why Israel was loved by God, and consequently, Israel could not point to any merit on their own part. Malachi does not say this here, but the message here is very clear. Why should Israel complain to God when they had done nothing to deserve His love?

The problem with Esau (1:3/4)

The Lord began to explain the nature of undeserved love by giving the example of Israel and Edom and explaining it. In order to understand this part of Malachi, we have to remember that Jacob and Esau were twins, but Esau was the older, but only just (Gen 25:24-26). As a consequence, Esau inherited the birthright of his father Isaac which included the great Covenant with Almighty God. However, Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright not just once (Gen 25:29-34) but twice (Gen 27), and then had to endure many years of hardship before God was prepared to confirm in him the gift of the birthright and the inheritance of the Covenant (Gen 32:22-32) at which point Jacob was renamed 'Israel'. When Jacob met his brother Esau again, the two managed to sustain an atmosphere of peace, but over the following centuries, there was little love lost between these two peoples. Israel's sons became the nation of Israel, and Esau's sons became the nation we call Edom, who live to the East of the Jordan valley and generally to the south of the Dead Sea.

Over the years, Edom made life difficult for Israel (see, for example, Numbers 20 and Amos 1:11-15). However, whilst Israel was being invaded by the Babylonians, the region occupied for centuries by the Edomites was gradually occupied by a large wandering tribal group of people called 'Nabateans' (see a partial reference to this in Ezekiel 32:28-32). So, when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem, they may have found a few Edomite people living in the region around Jerusalem, but only because they had been displaced from their traditional tribal lands. In effect, they were more 'homeless' than the Israelites. At least the Israelites had occupation of their precious Jerusalem.

With this history background, we can now unpick what was said in Malachi's prophecy. When the Lord declared '... I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau', He was saying what was obvious to most people. His faithful consistent Covenant love had remained with the people of Israel, but the nation of Edom had been without this love. The Hebrew word for 'hated' is simply the opposite to the word 'ahavah' (unconditional love), and it is hard to find an English equivalent for it. In some places in the Bible, the word does not mean 'hate' as we would use that word, but refers to someone who has become an enemy due to their own decision to reject the advance of another. Esau, and hence Edom, had always rejected the Godly ways of Israel, and this meant that their relationship with God was 'non-existent', and this is the best way for us to think about what is said here. God was not pursuing Edom with an active or evil 'hate', but Edom had chose to turn away from God's love and had consequently become the object of God's 'non-love'.

The rest of the prophecy in verses 3 and 4 is a matter of historical understanding. When the Lord declared that the Edomite lands had been turned over to 'desert jackals', it has been reckoned by some that this was a nickname for the 'Nabateans', whose primary ability was to occupy desert regions by stealth, like 'jackals'. The Hebrew words for 'desert' and for 'jackal' contain consonants that figure strongly in the name Nabatean'. In addition, the Lord's prophecy was that the Edomites would not be able to recover their lands and rebuild, which they longed to do just as the people of Israel longed to rebuild Jerusalem. The prophecy in Malachi 1:4 was not given lightly or incorrectly; it was a matter of fact. The Edomites had no future, and they have indeed disappeared from history.

God is great! (1:5)

The last part of our passage today prophesies that the people of Israel will see what has happened to the Edomites, their closest relations, and appreciate that God has indeed blessed them in comparison to the Edomites; 'You will see this with your own eyes and say, "Great is the LORD, even beyond the borders of Israel!"' (1:5).

Instead of pursuing Israel's groaning and antagonism, the Lord was content with the truths of history that He believed would become evident in the future. The whole of the beginning of Malachi's prophecy was a statement of confidence that the Lord's would be vindicated; it did not chide or argue, but stated the truth and appealed to God's people to open their eyes and see both what God had done in the past and what He was doing in the present day. Enlightened by Malachi, the Lord wanted His people to perceive that He did indeed love them, and He was to be worshipped, and honoured. As we will find out tomorrow, this is exactly what the prophecy moves on to next. Once they accept that God loves them, the people of Israel must once again show this properly within their worship.

Application

It is almost impossible not to observe that God's people go through phases of unfaithfulness to their Lord even today, and we do well to learn the lesson of Malachi. They speak specifically to people who are asking questions about whether God is really blessing His people, and feel that recent history shows that God has not exactly been active. The truth was that God had not been active in Israel because they had not been doing God's will. No one can read 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles and doubt that these great historic documents of the Old Testament have one thesis, which is that the people of Judah and Jerusalem were taken into captivity by Babylon because despite the love of their God, they acted towards Him with unfaithfulness and sin. The sad and difficult process of rebuilding the nation of Israel after the Exile started with great enthusiasm under the leadership of two prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) and the leader Zerubbabel. However, this was not enough to deal with weight of historic sin amongst the people, and Ezra and Nehemiah had to deal with this through prayer and re-structuring (the general theme of their books). If we now add to this the prophetic word of Malachi, then the picture makes sense; but for us today, all this tells us that if we are to go forward, we must deal with what went wrong in the first place.

If there is one thing we can learn from the opening words of Malachi it must surely be this, that God's love for us does not change, but we must both look to history (1:2) and also open our eyes to what is happening in our own world (1:5) to perceive the way forward. Our Lord does love us, but we will not learn how to go forward in our own strength or by ignoring our past, or by wallowing in the self-centredness of faith that tries to live by questioning God. In my own country, I have seen many people who think it helpful to promote faith as a process of journeying without ever reaching any answers, for example, or they suggest that we must ditch what we have inherited from the past and just follow what the Spirit says to us now.

These are only examples, but they are so sad! Faith without assurance is no faith at all! It may be religion, and it may have a 'spirituality' that appeals to some, especially to those who question God because they think that the world has moved on beyond His ancient revelation! In addition, any attempt to ditch our historic doctrines, the Bible and the practices of our churches is a form of denial. We have received faith from people of faith and others before them, so who are we to say that what they believed so passionately is not good enough for us! It is only with a most extraordinary blindness to our own sinfulness that we stand up to God and say 'we know best', and act like those to whom Malachi delivered his prophetic 'burden', so many centuries ago. Malachi's prophecy has much more to say to us, because the Lord's love for us does not stop, and He will never give up on us!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the parallels between the times of Malachi and our own times. What does this prophecy say to us today?
2. Does God really 'hate' some people? What does verse 3 mean, and how can we reconcile this with the ideas of God's love for all people?
3. If Israel had to perceive the Lord 'beyond the borders of Israel', where might we perceive the Lord to be today?

Personal comments by author

I have been deeply saddened to see people who know that something is wrong with the church attempt to sort out what they think is wrong without any recourse to studying God's Word, the history of the church, or undertaking any form of careful study of God's ways and works at all. Where this has gone alongside a belief that the Holy Spirit is active only in the present and the inspirational, and not through the past or through care and attention to detail, then we have a recipe for disaster. Satan has played all these cards before to try and put God's people off the 'scent' of renewal and revival; surely we must accept that the Lord has already told us how to find our way through the distress of feeling that the Lord is absent? A proper study of Malachi is an important part of preparation for God's renewal, especially for today.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you ever felt that you have a 'burden', a message from the Lord that must be delivered? Have you felt that you do not know how to deliver this message, and struggle to know what to do with it? Then it may help you to know that many Christian people feel the same. Only when we get together, talk about it, and discern between the truth and the devil's distractions will we find the way forward. How can you do this?*

- *Pray for all those who feel that God has abandoned them, especially those who are part of God's church, and do not know how to deal with their feelings.*
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Final Prayer

Holy Lord, great God of wonders and great Lord of all glory; do those amazing feats and signs in our midst that will encourage us to be bold and strong in our faith; prepared to take risks and join the heavenly battle against all evil. Praise You, Holy Lord for Your great power and Majesty! AMEN
