

"God, How Have You Loved Us?" Malachi 1:1-5

Introduction

- Is it okay to question God? God, why me? Why this? Yes and no. I know some of you have some really good, tough questions for God as to why you are facing some of the circumstances you are facing right now. Long-term unemployment. Relationship discord. Physical illness. Financial stress. And you're like, why God, why now, why me? For me, one of the questions I've had for God is about my back. "God, I love playing basketball so much. Why did you take that from me?" Is it okay to question God like that?
- If your questions have to do with being perplexed about God's ways and not understanding, then yes, questioning Him is okay.¹ There are times when we simply cannot offer a reasonable human explanation of God's ways. And for this kind of questioning there is good biblical precedent. *Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*² *Why have you rejected us forever, O God?*³ *Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?*⁴ These kinds of questions are okay because underneath is this implicit trust of God's character.
- However, there is a second, different kind of questioning that crosses the line. For today, let's call it a category two type question. When in our questioning we also begin to question God's character, that's a cross of the line.
- This little book that we're going to look at for the next few weeks, Malachi, is a book of questions and answers. That's all it is. Ten burning questions posed by God's people to God with His answers. And there are both kinds of questions in the book. Malachi won't answer all the questions you have for God. How many angels can fit on the head of a pin? Could God make a rock so big he couldn't pick it up? Sorry. The scope of the questions posed in Malachi is a bit narrower.
- However, if some of your questions for God relate to why you struggle spiritually, this is your book. In other words, the thread that unifies Malachi and these ten burning questions has to do with spiritual struggle and feeling spiritually destitute. If you've ever felt like the Christian life should be something more than what it is, then Malachi is your book.

Transition

¹ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2008/11/12/is-it-legitimate-to-question-god/>

² Psalm 10:1

³ Psalm 74:1

⁴ Psalm 88:14

Let me set this up for you. Open your Bible to Malachi; last book in the Old Testament. Let me try to explain to you why God's people felt the way they did and set up the first question asked in **Malachi 1:1-5**.

- By the time of Malachi, God's people were languishing spiritually. They weren't on fire for God. They were coasting; going through the motions. Their religious life was a dead orthodoxy. They weren't shining brightly for Him. They were dry, they were dusty, and they were lifeless. They were spiritually asleep.
- By the way, do you know do you realize when you're asleep? We know the sensation of falling asleep. We know what it is to wake up and so we have this sense that we have slept. But normally, to be asleep is to be unaware. Might it be the same way spiritually? Might it be possible to be spiritually asleep and not know it? Just a question.
- In this state of spiritual slumber Israel felt that God was distant, a million miles away from them. And the question they had for God was, why? God, why are you so far off? Why are we like this?
- How did Israel get to this point? Let me back up a few years before Malachi comes on the scene.
- The history of God's people before Jesus is tied to the land. For Israel the land was a physical, tangible representation of God's blessing. Read the papers, watch [CNN](#), it still is. God loved Israel. How? He made them a nation and gave them a place, land. But in the year 586 BC God did the unthinkable. Like ripping a tablecloth out from underneath the china place settings, God ripped the people from the land. God evicted Israel from the land he prepared for them. God's eviction of Israel is the low point of the Old Testament.
- For seventy years God said Israel would be homeless, landless, captive in a foreign land. Israel's hope during this seventy-year exile was that one day God would return them to the land.
- Some words from **Jeremiah 24:4-7** summarize this hope. Listen. *Then the word of the LORD came to [Jeremiah]: ⁵Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. ⁷I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.*
- Can you imagine how these words would have sounded if you were in exile, year 69 and 11 months? God's words are life giving, aren't they? It

sounds like upon coming home from exile Israel would be in a good spot spiritually cooking based upon what Jeremiah says.

- And after the seventy years are up God does exactly what he said he would do; he brings Israel home and replants them in the land. But, like a transplanted tree that hasn't been watered, they struggle.
- Israel's return to the land was supposed to mean great things. Her hope was in a renewed material prosperity mentioned by another prophet, Haggai. But the material prosperity talked about by Haggai didn't happen.⁵ Her hope was in a rebuilt Jerusalem and a rebuilt temple. But years after the return the capital city was still mostly in ruins. The rebuilt temple was a sham of its former glory. The old-timers who remembered the first temple wept when they saw the second temple. And their penultimate hope was that the Messiah would come. And yet by the time of Malachi, no Messiah.
- So Malachi comes on the scene with a message, an oracle as [verse 1](#) says. The word oracle means burden. Malachi has a burden for his people and their struggle. "Israel's decimated population lived a hardscrabble existence on marginal land" eking out a living.⁶ As a nation, they remained a small struggling insignificant spec in the vast Persian Empire. And they begin to question. What's going on? Why are things like this?
- What was supposed this turning of the corner, this bright future, this time of spiritual renewal turned into a period of decline, apathy and disillusionment. And the people were like, what? How? When did this happen? How did we get like this? Why are we struggling like this? They felt like God had made promises to them that He hadn't kept. And Malachi's got a word for them.
- [Malachi 1:1-2](#), [question #1](#). Look at the text. *An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"*
- Category one type questions of God are okay. But there is an element to this question that's a tad insidious. This isn't a normal question, is it? [Malachi 1:2](#) is a category two type questioning of God. Based upon their circumstances they have serious doubts about God's character. "Oh, yeah, you love us God? Really? You love us? *How have you loved us?*"
- From what I've gathered, this question has everything to do with where the blame should fall for Israel's struggles. This question, *How have you loved us*, is their trying to make God the scapegoat, the root cause of their spiritual struggle. In other words, "God, we are struggling, yes, we agree.

⁵ Haggai 2:6-9

⁶ Douglas Stuart, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 1283.

But it's your fault. We are in the mess we're in because of you. You put us in these circumstances, you allowed these things to happen to us and, yeah, we're spiritually cold and dead because you made us struggle. You didn't love us enough." That's what they're saying.

- Have you ever felt like that? Like you theoretically know God's love for you but in the practically speaking, in terms of your circumstances, you're like, God, how have you loved me? Have you ever felt if you were to have a different set of circumstances then you really would be a spiritual giant?
- Do you know what God's response is to Israel? Hogwash. He has loved them with an everlasting love. God rejects their blame shifting. The reason this question is the first question is because God has to clear something up with his people right from the very beginning if his people are to wake up from their spiritual lethargy. He has to get them to see that if they are struggling spiritually, He is not to blame. The blame lies elsewhere.
- Maybe you find yourself in a set of circumstances similar to Israel. Maybe you thought God's love for you meant something easier than what you're dealing with. Maybe your experiences, your struggles have caused you to start questioning. At first it was an innocent questioning. "God, why? Lord, I love you, but why?" And maybe, over time, the heat from those circumstances has been turned up from a toasty warm to a burning crucible.
- Maybe the crucible of those circumstances has coincided with growing struggles spiritually. Reading your Bible everyday has slipped to a couple times a week. Whatever. Fill in the blank. You sense a growing coldness in your heart that wasn't there before. And part of you thinks, if God would just give me a different set of circumstances, if he just loved me a bit more, I could recapture that flame for God and be a light for him.
- You know what? God says, if that's the case, if that's what you think, you're wrong. He's not the reason you're a dim light. Quit blaming him.
- In [verses 2-5](#) God reminds his people that He has made an eternally binding, lasting agreement to do good to them and through them. God answers this first burning question with a rhetorical question in response. "How have you loved us" gets the response "Isn't Esau Jacob's brother?" That rhetorical response is almost like God's saying, duh. I'm going to answer your dumb question with another dumb question. "Isn't Esau Jacob's brother?" Of course I love you. I chose you. Not because you were better, more spiritual. Different. I just chose you. Israel cannot say they are struggling because of God. The fact that they were dim lights to the nations around them had nothing to do with a lack of God's love.
- [Verse 2](#). *"I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved*

Jacob, 3 but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." 4 Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. 5 You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD--even beyond the borders of Israel!'

- Let me help you wade through the tangle of these verses. God's declaration of commitment to Israel is represented by his treatment of twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. For Malachi's purpose what's important is not that they were brothers but that these brothers also represented nations. Jacob fathered the nation Israel. Esau fathered the nation of Edom. The focus of this section is not personal love, hate but international. Can we agree on that?
- Moreover, this love, hate language has nothing to do with affection verses animosity. Jacob I loved, Esau I hated is not meant to be taken as God only loving one nation, Israel, and not the other, Edom. God loved both.
- This love, hate language has everything to do with God's sovereign choice to bring about his blessing through one and not the other. This is treaty, covenant, alliance kind of language. God could just as easily have said "I made an alliance with Israel but not with Edom."⁷ In other words, God chose one, Israel, through which he was going to bless every nation on the earth. It is in that sense he has loved Jacob and hated Esau. You tracking with me?
- The problem was, Israel had returned from the exile and they wasn't blessing nobody. In a verse that we'll look at next week, **Malachi 1:11**, God says *My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun.* And in order for that to happen God had to get his people's attention.
- Malachi, as a book, has everything to do with God's international reputation and Israel's failure to fulfill God's mission to be a blessing to the nations around them. Their failure to be light had nothing to do with their hard circumstances or a supposed lack of love on God's part. The immediate cause of their dim light and God's distance had to do with their disobedience.
- And the same is true for us. God has made an eternally binding, lasting agreement to love you, to do good to you and through you through Christ. He chose us through Christ! How God feels about you and your status with him is secure through faith in Christ. You need not wonder how God feels about you; his love is not like the way you love. Up and down. Changing

⁷ Douglas Stuart, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 1284.

with the tides. His love can't be questioned. Our failure to be light, to fulfill God's mission to be a blessing to those around us has nothing to do with our hard circumstances or a supposed lack of love on God's part. It has everything to do with our disobedience.

- *But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him. Psalm 103:17.* He has and does love us. We cannot, in good conscience, sit here and say that we struggle spiritually because of God, our circumstances or because he hasn't loved us enough.

Conclusion

- Remember the simple kindergarten stuff God's been teaching me? *Jesus is the light of the world, John 8:12. You are the light of the world, Matthew 5:14.* The purpose of Malachi is to call us to repentance so that His light might shine more brightly through us and His name might be great among the nations.
- Over the next few weeks, through the burning questions posed by Malachi, God's going to address issues like corrupt clergy, divorce, pathetic, lukewarm, contemptible worship, the failure to tithe.
- What I need you to do is to prepare your heart. What has to change in me God? What has to change for me to shine more brightly? Prepare your heart, not for the pain of being bludgeoned by guilt. No. Prepare your heart for the skillful work of a surgeon who uses a scalpel called grace. Two weeks ago I said that I believe I believe God has a usefulness, a purpose in store for you and me this year that exceeds the light output we've had in the past. I still believe that with all my heart. And I pray that God might accomplish his magnificent purposes in your life and in mine for his glory.