

Exploring Malachi

Rediscovering God's Love

Malachi 1:1-5

Introduction

The Old Testament is OLD. This makes it difficult to access.

- culturally very strange
- language and thought patterns very different
- Historical context not fresh in our minds

The Old Testament is like oat bran in a diet. Difficult to chew but eminently nourishing. One great advantage in Old Testament studies is that as we know it less well it can be freshly revealing to us in ways that are difficult for better known portions of Scripture.

Malachi is not a modern Western Christian. He is an ancient Hebrew Prophet. At times this makes his message full of references that will seem strange. If we allow them to work however they will take us to another time and context where we can hear God's word afresh.

Background

From the contents of Malachi, we deduce that the prophet wrote sometime after Ezra. Zerubbabel, the first governor after the return from the Babylonian exile, had, with the aid of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, encouraged the people to rebuild the temple (515 B.C.). Ezra returned with another group of exiles in 458 B.C. Thirteen years later, Nehemiah returned and led the people in rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem. In the twelfth year of his governorship, Nehemiah returned to Persia for an unknown period of time (cf. Ne 5:14; 13:6). It was during this interim, perhaps in 434 B.C., that Malachi took the helm of spiritual affairs in Jerusalem.

Some of the exiles had returned, the temple had been rebuilt, and the sacrificial system had been reestablished. Indeed, it had been functioning long enough to develop certain abuses against which Malachi contended at some length in his book.¹

Prophets

When we speak of Old Testament prophets many people think of them as a God believing type of Nostradamus. Muttering strange things about the future that other generations have the task of deciphering.

¹ NIV Bible Commentary Malachi Introduction

The Role of Prophet's

God called the OT prophets to speak of Him and heed warnings upon His people if they strayed. In effect they served as His messengers.

So primarily they were giving warnings to turn back to God and trust in him. The future references simply come as warnings of future blessing or punishment dependent upon the peoples obedience.

Thus to read them just to try and predict the future is a little misplaced. They are meant to be read to teach us what God requires and how we should live to please him.

Issues in Malachi 1:1-5

Immediately we start to read Malachi we feel like students in a classroom who missed the first week of lectures and have no idea how to make sense of it.

V1 is fine but we get lost in verse 2.

Mal. 1:2 I have loved you, says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the LORD. Yet I have loved Jacob 3 but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals

This verse should be treasured as an example of how remote we have become in our culture from the language and thought of the ancient world. Who would have dreamed that the answer to a question to God asking him for evidence of his love would be "Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the LORD. Yet I have loved Jacob 3 but I have hated Esau"

Our responses can be:

- so what if Esau is Jacobs brother?
- Why does God hate?
- Why is God playing favourites?
- How does this answer the question about how God has shown his love?

Much easier to turn to the New Testament and read the familiar and comforting words in 1 John 4: 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

But you have done that 100 times already. So maybe its worth struggling with Malachi. How is God's love revealed by hatred for Esau and by his making his heritage a desert for Jackals? Can this be the same God talking?

Some Essential Background

In fact we are students who missed the first few weeks of class. Or more accurately we are well versed in our own culture but have not had the chance to learn some things that Hebrew peoples thought of as part of the furniture.

History

A mistake that we immediately make is to think of Esau and Jacob as individuals. They once were of course but both of them became nations. God is not so much talking about two individuals but two nations.

Read Genesis 25:19-26

Esau is Hebrew for hairy but he was also red in colour. The Hebrew word for red is edom. No prizes for guessing who was the father of the Edomite nation. (Gen 36:1-6)

How did Esau treat the sacred things of his family and their relationship with God? Genesis 25:27-34

The birth right was not just the right to be on their fathers inheritance list. It was to be the recipient of the Covenant that God had made with Abraham. So in despising the birthright Esau was despising God's promises.

Covenant

You cannot read a single verse of Malachi without a background understanding of how important covenant was to his time. Time and again God made covenants in the Old Testament. By the time of Malachi they were a people who thought in terms of a binding mutual pact that was between God and themselves. This shaped even the way they prayed to God. Eg Psalm 44

“Love” is not, in this text, a sentimental notion of undying affection and feel-goodism. Rather, it is the language of covenant. God chose Israel because God loved Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7-11). It is a family word—a word that describes loyal relationships like parents and children (cf. Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:1; Isaiah 63:7-9). To say that God “loves” Israel is to say that God lives in covenant with Israel.

Vice versa, to say that God hates Esau (Edom) is to say that God has no covenant with Esau like he does with Jacob (Israel). The language of “love” and “hate” here are not about feelings and emotions as much as commitment, loyalty and covenant. This is the language of identity. Israel is the people of God while Edom

is not. God is committed to Israel as a people but has made no such commitment to Edom.²

There was a long history of the Edomites opposing God's people. Yet they were forbidden to despise them because they were a 'brother people (Deut 23:7-8) Yet the Edomites committed evil mentioned in places like Ps 137. SO God's justice would now fall on them.

Paraphrase of verses 1-5

How do I love you? Look at your history. I stood by your nation and you have returned even from exile because of my covenant love. The enemy nation of Edom however is smashed and will never rise again. I have shown you my love by caring for you in all of your history.

Application to us

We do live in a different relationship to God than the people of the Old Testament. No longer is God's divine blessing and activity directed primarily at one genetic people living in one geographic land. God's Kingdom is now the indwelling of His Spirit in people of every tribe and every nation. So we cannot say that Australia is more prosperous than Africa so God must have loved us more.

Yet God still shows his love to us in God-like ways and on a God-like scale. We are right to thank him for our daily bread. We are right to thank him for our sunshine and rain. We are right to ascribe great acts of goodness to him as evidence of his care and attention. This is not exclusively done for Christians, God loves all people. Yet even as I may weep at the loss of a loved one, asking God to show his love, he shows it by numerous essential blessings.

If we are humble enough we see in the arrogance of the people Malachi addressed a fair reflection of ourselves. We too are quick to forget that not only did God send his Son because he loved us deeply, he also sends our nation rain, put gold and iron ore in the ground for us to find and continues to bless us with all that is good. God can point to all of history and say "See! How can you even ask how I have loved you. Is it not evidence on every hand?"

We need to see that God's care for us is not only as individuals, but as a community. That actions on a large scale are also for our blessing.

² <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2012/07/03/malachi-12-5-lord-how-have-you-loved-us/>