

Malachi 1:1-5 (1984 NIV)
God Begins With Love

- 1 An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.
- 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!'

Introduction

Malachi was an oracle (prophetic message) from God through the prophet Malachi ("my messenger") during a period when life was difficult for God's people. There were much crying and complaining before the Lord. The people were asking, "God, we are your people but you seem to have stopped loving us." Malachi recorded for us a very heavy message from God to His people in response to their crying and complaining.

These five opening verses in Malachi 1 remind me of the testimony of a young pastor who ministers together with me in Myanmar. His name is John Phongshar.

John comes from a Christian family. His father was a former Police Chief and a godly man. But for some reasons, John chose not to walk in the way and fear of God in his early years. Drugs, drunkenness and gang fights were part and parcel of his life, much to the pain and embarrassment of his father.

One time, John got himself into such a mess that his father decided that he had enough of his waywardness. As the Chief of Police, he ordered his own son to be arrested and charged. Subsequently, John was imprisoned. It was during his imprisonment that God dealt with him in a very powerful way. John was convicted that he must break away from his life of drugs, drunkenness and gang violence.

Indeed, after his release from prison, the power and grace of God enabled John to start a new life of walking close with Him. Sometime later, the Lord led him to prepare himself for fulltime ministry. He studied for a while in Yangon and then went to India to complete his theological studies and training.

Today, John is married with two young children. He now devotes his time to pastoring, acting as the principal of a Bible college, and overseeing other ministries—e.g. children's homes, church-planting points, a half-way house to rehabilitate and disciple former drug addicts.

As I was preparing this sermon, my mind went back to the time when I heard John shared his testimony. I wondered what kind of questions he would be asking his own father (the Chief of Police) when he personally ordered his son to be arrested and charged. Maybe John was asking, "Dad, why must you do this to me? I am your son. Don't you love me? Have you stopped loving me?" Today on hindsight, John realized later that it was with much love and tears that his father had ordered him to be arrested and charged that day.

In the same way, the people of Israel were asking God in Malachi's time, "God, we are your people. But why are we going through so much hardship? Why is life not going well for us? Don't you love us? Have you stopped loving us?"

As I have said, the response from God to them through Malachi is a very heavy message. But the intention of God in saying what He's saying is not to bring His people down, but to bring them back.

Let me now give a brief survey of Old Testament history so we can better place Malachi in context.

- After David's son—King Solomon—died, Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom had ten tribes and the Southern Kingdom had two tribes. Because of their disobedience, God used Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king to destroy the city walls and temple in Jerusalem. The people were deported and were forced into 70 years of captivity in Babylon.
- Many of God's prophets predicted that this captivity would not destroy the nation; it would eventually end and the people would be allowed to go back home.
- There were at least three groups of people, leaving at different times, who returned to the stricken city of Jerusalem. It was during this period of last return that God brought His message through a man named Malachi. God's people then were disappointed and discouraged. They had returned to the Promised Land and had rebuilt Jerusalem, replanted their fields, and reconstructed the Temple but life was not going well. Their zeal had fizzled and their faith had turned to an empty formalism.
- God's people had stopped going to the Temple to worship and those who did gave God the leftovers of their lives and love. They blamed God for everything and themselves for nothing.
- Malachi's mandate was to call the people back to a vibrant relationship with the living Lord.

In the first five verses of Malachi 1, God reminds His people the reason life is not going well for them is not because He has stopped loving them. Rather, it is really because they have stopped loving and honouring God. However, God's beginning words in Mal. 1:1-5 strongly reassure His people of His stubborn love for them in spite of their stubborn hearts.

How does Mal. 1:1-5 reassure us today of God's love?

I. God declares that we are His always beloved (v. 2).

I like what v. 2 says at the beginning. Instead of lambasting His people, God declares His love for them—"I have loved you." He doesn't say, "You are guilty and I condemn you for this or that." Rather, He begins with a declaration of His love and not His judgment.

The New Living Translation puts v.2 very beautifully this way—"I have always loved you." There is never a time when God has stopped loving us even though we may not sense it in our difficult circumstances.

The late Whitney Houston sang an all-time favourite in her lifetime titled "I Will Always Love You." But it is a sad song—about someone who cannot be with her loved one and so says these words as a parting farewell.

However, when God tells His people that "I have always loved you", it is not meant to be a sad, parting farewell. It is meant to declare that He loves us with a stubborn love (i.e. a love that will never let go of us) in spite of our stubborn hearts.

God's declared love has one important aspect to it—i.e. it is personal and relational. In other words, God's love for us is primarily person-centred and not performance-oriented. You are loved by God because you exist as a person and not because you can perform. And who are you?

The Bible says that you are created in God's image and you are God's always beloved. You like that? I do.

I once saw a TV documentary about Benazir Bhutto who served as PM of Pakistan from 1988-1990 and 1993-1996. She was later assassinated in 2007 while campaigning for a coming election. There was a recording in the documentary of something she said about her birth in 1953. She said no family members and relatives visited her mum in the hospital for three days after she was born. They were all mourning that a girl (and not a boy) was born into the family.

A lot of times, we don't like who we are because of others' opinions of us—our gender, our looks, our speech, our work, our grades, our neighbourhood. So we try our utmost to change those opinions so that

we can like ourselves better. Sadly, we then measure our significance according to what others say who we are—people like our parents, teachers, friends, bosses, colleagues, and even fellow believers in church.

We need to always be reminded what God is saying to each of us today—“You are created in my image. You are my always beloved in spite of all your imperfections.”

God knows that we are all not perfect. But He loves us all anyway. And His love will not allow us to remain where we are. By His Spirit, God is continually shaping us, transforming us to His character, and helping us to be more and more like Christ.

In light of God’s declared love, it does seem audacious to question His commitment, doesn’t it? And yet, that’s what the people do in the second part of v. 2 - “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’” Put in another way, “If you love us, why are you allowing us to struggle like this?”

What they didn’t acknowledge was that it was their disobedience that was keeping them from the blessings of God.

Before we get too tough on them, let’s remember that we do the same thing. When things get tough, when someone hurts us, when we get sick, when someone close to us dies, when things don’t go as planned, it’s very easy to question God’s love.

Basically, the people of Israel were saying, “God, we don’t think you love us because if you do we wouldn’t be struggling so much.” They had become so indifferent to God that they questioned one of His core attributes—His love.

Why did this happen to me? How could God do this to me? If God is love how could He allow this to happen? These are questions we hear and ask from time to time.

Today, we are reminded that we are God’s always beloved and so we can always trust Him in all of life’s circumstances.

God loves us with a stubborn love in spite of our stubborn hearts. And in His stubborn love ...

II. God will bring justice into our life (vv. 3-4).

Many people have been stumbled by these words of God in vv. 2c-3—“Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.”

Here are a few things to remember that may help us understand the meaning of this strong statement.

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- In his heart, Jacob hungered after God. Even though he was a schemer and a scoundrel, he grew to trust God as he matured in faith in his later life.
- Esau, on the other hand, placed no value on spiritual matters. He despised his birthright and treated God with utter indifference. We read this in Hebrews 12:16 - “See that no one ... is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.”

Many commentators suggest that the word “hate” should be used in a relative sense. In Hebrew idiom, if a father had two sons and gave one the inheritance, it was said that he loved one and hated the other. God loved Jacob so much that, in comparison, it seemed as if He hated Esau.

Esau’s descendants were the Edomites from a land called Edom. In v. 3, God declares that He has “turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals”.

Biblical history tells us that the Edomites were a godless people who continually oppressed Israel and went against God. Because of this, God judged them.

And v. 4 tells us further why God foils Edom’s attempts to rebuild - “They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD.”

The Edomites—descendants of Esau—forget that God has judged them and vow to come back and rebuild. Here is where their pride really becomes evident. They think they can overturn God’s judgment upon them no matter what divine judgment has been pronounced on them. They become set in their mind to be a wicked people; to go against God.

But God says, “They may build, but I will demolish. They may make life difficult for my people, but I will always love my people. The ones who stand against those who stand for me and with me will always be under my wrath.”

So vv.3-4 is not merely a promise that God will judge those who are His enemies. More importantly, it is a promise that God will bring justice to His people (i.e. His always beloved). They don’t have to complain or compromise. They don’t even have to get even. They need only to believe that the God who always loves them will bring justice into their situation one day.

There are some wrongs done to us that will leave indelible scars in our lives:

- We may have been cheated.
- We may have been betrayed.
- We may have been used or manipulated.
- We may have been back-stabbed.

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- We may have been physically or emotionally abused.
- We may have been defamed.

The most human thing to do is not to get mad, but to get even. But the Bible tells us that God will bring justice one day and He will eventually settle all scores for us. That means we don't have to go round trying to pay back everyone for the wrongs they have done to us. We don't have to go round trying to get even with people. God is our vindicator.

Sometimes God allows us to go through certain wrongs to test us. He is interested to see how we are going to respond. Will we become negative, bitter, or angry? Are we becoming vindictive, always trying to pay people back, or are we going to turn it over to Him, trusting Him to make right the wrong done to us? I believe God is very good and accurate in keeping records. So no matter how people are treating us, we must keep doing the right things before God and not return evil with evil. Do not grow tired of doing what's good and go down to the level of the godless. Continue to do what is right in God's sight and we will reap God's righteous fruit for us in due season. For those who choose to be like the Edomites (i.e. God's enemies), God's Word says that His wrath remains with them.

Don't give up when wrongs are happening to us and all around us. Keep doing the right things. God is building character in us. We must trust God to bring justice in His time, not ours.

It was told that Ronald Reagan once recalled an occasion when he was governor of California and made a speech in English while in Mexico City. He said, "After I had finished speaking, I sat down to rather unenthusiastic applause, and I was a little embarrassed. The person who spoke after me spoke in Spanish—which I didn't understand—and he was being applauded about every paragraph. To hide my embarrassment, I started clapping before everyone else and longer than anyone else until our ambassador leaned over and said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you. People may think that you are clapping for yourself. He's interpreting your speech.'"

Very often, we are too quick to vindicate ourselves because we want to save face. What we think is our best defence then backfires and becomes our worst offence.

(<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-white-house-luncheon-for-representatives-the-hispanic-community>)

But we are exhorted today to leave it to God and let Him be our vindicator. Don't go around trying to pay back people, trying to get even. God sees every wrong that's being done to you. God sees every person that's ever hurt you. He's keeping the record, and He's very good at it. Don't avenge yourself. The vicious cycle of evil begetting evil is the result of men wanting to get even with one another.

Let God bring justice into our life—that's His promise and call to us today.

God loves us with a stubborn love in spite of our stubborn hearts. And in His stubborn love ...

III. God sustains His people so that they can see and proclaim His loving greatness (v. 5).

God goes out of His way to let us know how much He loves His people, and yet He doesn't want us to keep that love to ourselves. Look at v. 5 - "You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!'"

God's greatness and love transcend national boundaries. Will you be a conduit so that His love can be shared with others?

Verse 5 tells that the Lord is magnified beyond the borders of Israel. We come to church, we worship, we study, we hear the Word of God proclaimed. But we are reminded that we are not to remain in this building. We are not some closed or secret society where we say, "What is said and done here stays here." God intends for us to go out, share and spread the Good News. As recipients of God's compassionate grace, we in turn are to open our heart of compassion to others so that they too might know and taste of the kindness and mercy of God.

We can sow seeds of God's compassion in various ways.

- One way is to reach out to people with empathy—to feel their pain, their disappointment, their fear. Many people are hurting and discouraged. They need to feel God's compassion. They need people to comfort them with God's love, not criticize them with God's Word. They need people to bring hope and healing to them, and to show them God's great love and mercy. I like to believe that all of us have a heart of God's compassion. The big question—is this heart of God's compassion opened or closed?

Because we are created in God's image, we have the ability to experience God's compassion and the responsibility to share God's compassion. God is calling all His always beloved to open their heart of compassion and make a difference in the life of someone else—to encourage someone, to lift up the spirit of someone. Don't just look out for ourselves, but look out for someone whom we can bless with God's compassion.

Many are not experiencing fulfilment in their Christian life because they rarely do things for others except for themselves. We need to stop focusing on ourselves and start taking time to help others. Otherwise, we are always busy with a self-absolved and self-centred focus. We

are like closed reservoirs that are only recipients of God's love but not open channels that distribute His love to others.

- Another way is to reach out to people with the Gospel. The Bible tells us that God sent His Son Jesus Christ to save sinners, not to condemn them. But when a sinner refuses to believe in Jesus Christ, he is condemned—not by Jesus Christ but by himself because of his own unbelief (John 3:17). But remember this—the best Gospel sharing is that Gospel-directed life you live before others.

One time, I was having a lunch fellowship with some pastors in a café. We also took some time to pray together at the table.

About two months later, I visited the same café for lunch with a Christian friend. We chose our table and then I went to the food station to take my food. When I returned to the table, I could not find my friend there.

A waitress came and said, pointing to another table, "Your church friend has moved to that table over there."

Puzzled, I asked, "Thanks. But how do you know that I am a Christian?"

She smiled and said, "I take notice of our guests. I saw you the other time here with some friends and you were all praying. Are you a pastor?"

That incident cautions me that people are watching me, and they recognize me! I'm glad that I was remembered and recognized that day as one who was praying, and not one who was teasing the waitresses.

The best Gospel sharing is that Gospel-directed life you live before others. People are watching us. Do they recognize us as God's people with what we say and what we do?

Conclusion

God loves us with a stubborn love in spite of our stubborn hearts.

We are imperfect human beings but there is always hope because God chooses to first love us rather than to first condemn us.

How would you respond to God's love for you today?

Reflection Questions

1. If you see yourself as God's always beloved, how does this change the way you perceive and manage your failures and successes in this life?
2. If you believe God will bring justice into your life, how will you handle a difficult situation/person you are facing today?
3. If God sustains you to see and proclaim His loving greatness, what can you do to witness and testify for Him?