

Text: Malachi 1:1-5

Title: “Return to Me ... With Your Love”

Let’s open our Bibles to the last book of the OT, the book of Malachi. We typically pronounce it *Malchie*; the Hebrew pronunciation is *Malachee*. Because it’s the last book of the OT its message is significant. **Read Malachi 1:1-5.**

ILLUSTRATION – The final scenes of the movie *Apollo 13* show the crippled spacecraft’s dramatic and dangerous reentry into Earth’s atmosphere. Mission Control knew there would be period of time during reentry that a “communications blackout” would occur. But because the spacecraft was damaged, its reentry wasn’t normal and the blackout lasted longer than they expected. The silence was deafening as they waited to hear if the reentry was successful and the crew was safely home. Sure enough, after that long silence the voice of Commander Jim Lovell crackled over the intercom that they safely splashed down in the Pacific Ocean.

The book of Malachi is God’s last word of revelation through a prophet or through the Scripture for 400 years ... 4 centuries until God spoke again in what would become our NT. This “communications blackout” is a mystery to us, but God is always working even when He is silent. He was preparing, not for a reentry, but for the entry of His Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. So this last word in the OT is very important.

What an amazing time in Bible history! We’ll get the most out of this book if we understand where it fits in the history of God’s people. God always speaks in context. So here are some important dates to jot down in your notes:

722 BC – The Northern Kingdom (called Israel) was carried away by the Assyrians, never to return.

586 BC – The Southern Kingdom (called Judah) is destroyed by the Babylonians and most of the remaining inhabitants are carried away into captivity. But God had already promised through the prophet Jeremiah that this would not be permanent. God’s people would return. And they did!

538 BC – The Persians, who had conquered Babylon, released the Jews to return to their homeland. And over the next several years waves of Jews returned to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and reestablish their faith. But there was still much to be done.

458 BC – A priest by the name of Ezra led another wave of Jews back to Jerusalem and under his teaching there was a great revival. But still the city of Jerusalem was in shambles.

445 BC – Nehemiah came to Jerusalem as the new governor. He rallied the people to rebuild the walls of the city. During that time there were prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who supported the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, promising the return of the glory of God to His people. It was an exciting time to be alive.

432 BC – Nehemiah was called back to Persia on official business and was gone for about seven years. It is probably in this interval that the prophet Malachi, was called by God to speak to His people.

From the four chapters of Malachi we gather that the people of God had grown complacent and apathetic. Gone were the days of the excitement of rebuilding the Temple and the walls of the city. Gone were the charismatic leaders Ezra and Nehemiah. Gone were the thrilling prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. It had been many years since the Jews had seen any fresh activity of God. Doubts began to creep in. Had God just given up on them? The “glory days” and the “golden years” were way in the past.

And in times like that it is so easy to grow careless, casual and complacent about the things of God. And we’ll see in Malachi that this complacency resulted in half-hearted worship, indifference to the truth of the Word of God, marital unfaithfulness and selfishness in their offerings.

The fact is that life is often that way. Most of us don’t go from one exhilarating season of life to another. There are seasons of life that are just flat hard and routine and, yes, a drudgery. It happens in marriages where we often battle complacency and boredom. We go through seasons where the spark isn’t there. We find ourselves just going through the motions. We start taking one another for granted. We buy into the lie that there’s greener grass on the other side of the fence. We’re vulnerable to unfaithfulness. We’ve taken everything out of it, but we haven’t put anything back into it. And our marriages can become just an empty shell.

And that so easily happens in our relationship with the Lord. But God in His mercy and love comes to us to say, “Return to Me.” That’s the message of Malachi:

Malachi 3:7a - Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.

That’s the message of God to apathetic, discouraged, bored, unhappy Christians ... return to Me. We’re talking here about revival. It was God’s remedy for Israel in 450 BC and it’s God’s remedy for His people in 2016. If we return to Him He will return to us. The fact that God speaks into their complacency is the evidence that God is eager for the relationship to be renewed so that the spiritual apathy in our lives can be reversed and the passion restored. So we have...

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

God has put this word on Malachi’s heart. But it is a heavy load. In fact, the word “oracle” means a “burden.” It lay on his heart like a heavy weight. The only way he could get any relief was to declare it. He had seen the will of God and he had also seen the people of God, and the two were very far apart.

Malachi means “my messenger.” He is God’s messenger. Interestingly, 47 of the 55 verses in Malachi are a direct, personal address of the Lord to the people. God is speaking! When Israel heard Malachi they were hearing God. And when we hear Malachi we are hearing God.

This all starts with...

1. A GRACIOUS AFFIRMATION

Malachi 1:2a - “I have loved you,” says the LORD.

The way God says this through Malachi means this: “I have loved you in the past, I love you now completely and I will love you in the future.” It’s what is called a perfect tense verb. God’s love is perfect. What an amazing way to start!

This is *relationship* love. That’s the basic meaning of this word in Hebrew. It’s like the love you have for your kids or your spouse or your parents. So it shouldn’t be hard for us to grasp. This is also *redemptive* love. It is love that takes us as we are but doesn’t leave us as we are.

But surprisingly this gracious affirmation is followed by...

2. A SKEPTICAL QUESTION

Malachi 1:2a - “I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’

In fact, in the book of Malachi the people are having an ongoing argument with the Lord. (I can tell you this: It’s not good to argue with God!) Just like here in our text God says, “I have loved you.” And the people say, “Oh yeah? How have you loved us?” And that happens six times in the Malachi’s prophecy. And that becomes the outline of the book ... those six skeptical questions of the people of God in the grip of spiritual apathy.

You see, in times when God seems far away we are vulnerable to skepticism and unbelief. We’re convinced: “If God is really there He doesn’t care. He’s not working in my life like He is in others. Maybe God has just given up on me. What’s the use?”

So this gracious affirmation is followed by their skeptical question, which is answered then by God with...

3. A SOBERING MYSTERY

Malachi 1:2b - “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” the LORD says. “Yet I have loved Jacob,

Now these next few verses are some of the most difficult in the entire Bible. For us to understand God’s line of reasoning here we need a little refresher course from Israel’s history. This all started when God called Abraham and promised him that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the beach and the stars in the sky. Furthermore through His descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. A great nation would come from Abraham. Abraham had a son named Isaac, so the promise of God is slowly moving forward. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. The practice

was that the privileges (the blessing) of being the leader of the family passed to the first-born son, which happened to be Esau. But God shocked everyone by determining that Jacob, the second-born of the twins, would become the heir and the leader of the family and of the nation.

Now the Jews of Malachi's day were the descendants of Jacob, not of Esau. They were God's chosen, loved, covenant people. This love was unconditional love. Jacob didn't deserve to be blessed like this, but out of love God chose to do so.

This was an astounding revelation for me when I was a young man. I had grown up with a strict disciplinarian of a father. Any affection shown to us was based upon performance. Did I do well in school, as an athlete, in doing my chores? If so, dad showed his love; otherwise not so much. As a believer I found myself thinking God related to me the way my dad did. "I love you if you act in way to deserve my love." That's not a healthy way to think about God, and I struggled with that until one day I was reading in Ephesians 1. **Turn and read Ephesians 1:4-6.**

The Spirit of God showed me that God loved me before I ever had a chance to prove myself or to do anything to deserve that love. I tell you, that changed my whole relationship with God. I live my life not *so that* God will love me. I live my life because God *has* loved me in Christ. There's a huge difference.

Notice how God answers their question, "How have you loved us?" He shows them:

- **GOD'S LOVE EXTENDS TO THE PAST.**

The Lord said, "The descendants of Jacob I have loved..."

Malachi 1:3 - but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

The Lord says, "Israel, look at the way I have dealt with you compared to how I have dealt with Esau. Yes, I have had to discipline you. I allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed by your enemies, but in My grace and mercy I allowed you to return and to rebuild. That's my blessing upon you. Not so with Esau and his descendants." Esau became a nation known as Edom ... the Edomites. They settled in a place called Edom, the region immediately to the south and east of Judah. And while the land of Israel had been blessed, Esau's land (Edom) had become a wasteland. Why? We learn in the OT that Esau's descendants rebelled against the Lord and attacked Israel on numerous occasions. The Edomites came to represent the epitome of evil. And for that God judged them and their land was desolate.

Now what are we to make of these words of the Lord, "Esau I have hated"? That phrase may bother you. Doesn't God love everyone? Well we need to understand that this expression was not a statement of feeling like "I hate snakes." Rather it was a legal term. In those days when a father designated one son to inherit the blessing, to become the leader of the family, that son was considered to be "loved." And the other sons were considered to be "hated." Again, it was legal term,

not an emotional term of sentiment. Esau (the nation of Edom) was not judged because God hated them. They chose to rebel against the God of Israel, and for this they were judged.

Perhaps you wonder, “Does God hate me? Is there any hope for me to be saved and to escape the judgment of God that is to come?” The answer is absolutely yes. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. If you understand today that you are lost in your sin and that the only way you can be saved is to turn to Jesus, God is calling you to Himself. He loves you, but He loved you before you could ever do anything to earn or deserve His love. He set His eye on you in love before you were ever born. This love extends into eternity past.

- **GOD’S LOVE SUSTAINS IN THE PRESENT.**

Malachi 1:4 - 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.

Remember God is illustrating His love to Israel by contrasting it to His rejection of His enemies, Edom. “Edom is under the wrath of God (presently), but you (Israel) are under His covenant, sustaining love (presently). God is showing you (Israel) grace in enabling you to rebuild. But His judgment continues to rest on Edom because they reject and resist His plans.”

Has it gripped you, child of God, that you, in the grace and mercy of God, have been spared His wrath?

Romans 1:18 - The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

Romans 8:1 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

Are you in Christ? If so, His love sustains you today. There’s nothing you or I can do to cause us to be condemned. What grace! So this love of God extends to the past, it sustains in the present and...

- **GOD’S LOVE ENDURES INTO THE FUTURE**

Edom’s future was hopeless. Nothing awaits them but judgment and wrath. But for God’s chosen and loved ones, they will see God’s love proven in the future.

Malachi 1:5 - You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!’

You’re going to *see* something that will cause you to *say* something. You’re going to see God displaying His sovereignty and power, not just over Israel, but beyond the borders of Israel. God is orchestrating all the affairs of every nation, every king and every kingdom. He is Lord over Israel and over the US and over Iran and over Russia and China and every other nation.

And here's where you and I come into the picture. Out of all of these nations God will redeem people. This is the Good News of the coming of the Messiah. And the very fact that you and I are here today to honor Christ is the proof that this promise is being fulfilled even in our day. And one day the redeemed of all ages will gather round the throne of God praising God for His redemption and His love. We will *see* it with our very eyes and *say* together, "Great is the Lord!"

So God says to us, "I have loved you." There will never be a time in your life, child of God, when He will stop loving you. You don't have to live *for* that love. Live *out* that love. But we can't take His love for granted. That's what happened in Malachi's day. Their love grew cold. When we understand how much we are loved by God it will humble us and strip away our pride. It will take away any bragging. It will cause us to tremble in utter amazement that we could be loved in this way. And it will change the way we look at others, for God intends for His love and name to be revered beyond just us.