Malachi – Reconnecting with God's Love

Malachi is the last prophetic book of the Old Testament. It was written around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, after the Israelites returned to their land from exile sometime in the middle of the 5th century BC. Even though they celebrated the rebuilding of the temple, some of the older members of the group wept aloud (Ezra 3:12). This was because this "new" rebuilt temple was a pale shadow of what it was. Life in the land never again reached the zenith like it was during the reign of King Solomon. God's people remained under political control, struggling with economic challenges and felt abandoned by God. How could they not, given the harsh circumstances of their life back in the land? This seemingly resulted in their complacent or even outright "lackadaisical obedience"[1] (Duguid & Harmon, pg 98) to God.

How does God reaffirm his love for his people? As always, God surprises us by the way he answers the Israelites' questions. Along the way, we will attempt to reflect a little deeper upon the difficult doctrine of the love of God.

Launch

1) How do you know someone loves you? What are some signs that will confirm someone's love or cast doubt on it?

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Read Malachi 1:1-5

2) What does the Lord say to his people and what question do they ask of him as a response? (v2)

    a. What kind of answer could the Lord have given to his people?

3) What answer does the Lord give to their question? (v2b-4)

    a. To fully understand the meaning behind God's answer, we need to explore the story of Esau and Jacob. Describe the character of Esau and Jacob. (cf. Gen 25:19ff, Gen 27)

    b. Through whom did the Lord's covenantal blessing go to in the end? Which of the brothers deserved God's blessings?

    c. Based on the idea of covenantal blessing, how would you explain the phrase "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated"?

[1] *Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*, Duguid, Iain M., Harmon, Matthew P., P&R Publishing

d. Based on your answer in Question 3c, compare the history of the descendants of Esau (v3-4) and Jacob. (Where are the descendants of Jacob living at that time?)

4) Based on all your answers to question 3, summarise or explain God's answer to the Israelites' question of "How have you loved us?"

Read Ephesians 1:3-8a

5) How has God love us in the same way today? (v4-5)

   a. Like Esau and Jacob, in what way did we not deserve God's blessing? (cf. Eph 2:1-3)

   b. According to Ephesians 1:3-8, what blessings do we have in Christ?

6) How should that encourage us when we are going through hardships in life?

7) How has God loved you? Write your answer down in one or two sentences based on all your responses to the questions in this session.

"How have you loved us?", the people of Israel asked of Yhwh. Seen from their perspective, it was a very reasonable question. Even though they were back in the Promised Land, they really have not prospered in the same way they did under King Solomon. Economically, they were struggling. Where was God in all of this? Yhwh answered their question in a very unexpected manner. Before we look at Yhwh's answer, it is important to note that the question is directed to "the Lord". In most Bibles, "Lord" is spelt with small capital letters. That means that it is referring to God's covenantal name – Yhwh (hence why Yhwh is used in this paragraph). This is the covenantal name that God revealed to the Israelites through Moses (promised given through Abraham), which signified his covenantal commitment to them, and not to anyone else.

It is important to understand the background, because that is what God's answer is based on. "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" – this is not talking about God's emotions, but rather God's covenantal blessing and commitment to one lineage and not the other. Both of them did not deserve God's blessing, but God was committed to Jacob and his descendants. Despite them sinning and being invaded, they have always been rescued and redeemed. They were back in the land after all when Malachi spoke to them. However, Esau and his descendants experienced something much worse. (Mal 1:3-4)

How has God loved us today? In much the same way! He has chosen us in Christ to be adopted to sonship and received every spiritual blessing! (Eph 1:3-5) We didn't deserve any of those blessings, but yet he chose to give us his covenantal blessing in Christ. Thus, we *know* God loves us in Christ, even though there are times when we don't see or feel it in our own circumstances, like the Israelites.