

Malachi 1:1-5 — When Times Are Tough, What Should I Do When I Don't Feel God's Love?

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It is fun to be at church and worship God. It feels right to sing about God's love.

Until life falls apart.

When someone you love dies unexpectedly, who among us doesn't say, "God, why didn't you stop this? I thought you loved me." When you are happily married but over time your spouse drifts away from you and divorces you for someone else, as you face heart-rending pain, singing about God's love has a hollow ring. When there is a downturn in the economy and we go from comfortable jobs with decent pay to unemployment or underemployment, we can't help but start to wonder about God's love. "God, if you love me, why won't you help me?"

If you have ever faced hard times that went on for a long time so your heart began questioning God's love, this morning's study is for you.

Today, we start a new series in the book of Malachi. Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. While it is an Old Testament book, it has contemporary messages we need to hear. It talks about the danger of spiritual compromise, empty routine worship and hidden sin. Most importantly, it talks about the danger of a heart that has grown cold, cold toward God because it doubts his love.

Before we study Malachi, it will be important for me to set this book up in the history of the Old Testament. I want to do a quick flyover of the Old Testament storyline then drop the book of Malachi into the time when it was written.

What is the background of Malachi?

The story of God's people begins in the book of Genesis. God called Abraham from the land of Ur to bring him to the Promised Land in Canaan. Abraham traveled to the Promised Land, but he waited forever for God to give him a son. It was only when his wife's body was as good as dead that God finally gave her a child whose name was Isaac. Isaac means laughter, which is a reminder that God always gets the last laugh.

Isaac had two sons named Jacob and Esau. God chose to work through the second son named Jacob and not through the firstborn named Esau. Jacob had 12 sons. Due to a famine in the land, the family went to Egypt to survive the famine under Joseph. While in Egypt, the 12 sons grew to become 12 tribes. Four hundred years later God brought them out of Egypt under Moses. Under Moses and Joshua they went back to the Promised Land and slowly conquered it. While in the Promised Land, they wanted a king, so God gave them a king named Saul. He was eventually replaced by David. Under David, Israel became a prosperous and powerful nation. Under David's son Solomon, the temple was built, and Israel became a light to the nations. Even rulers from foreign lands, like the Queen of Sheba, came to learn from Solomon and God's people. Solomon's reign was not just the high point of God's people. It was also the beginning of their decline. God promised his people that when they sinned, they would suffer. Solomon loved many foreign wives and their godless ways. The more he leaned

into sin, the more the kingdom began to decline. When Solomon's son Rehoboam took over the kingship after Solomon's death, he set off a civil war that split the nation in half. There was a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. Rehoboam ruled the southern kingdom which held the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Jeroboam, who was not related to the royal family, ruled the northern 10 tribes. The civil war between the northern and southern kingdoms lasted for generations. The northern kingdom of 10 tribes was known as Israel. The southern kingdom, which consisted of two tribes, was known as Judah.



God promised Moses on Mt. Sinai that if his people consistently fell into sin and did not repent, they would be conquered and taken captive. That is exactly what happened. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, taking it into captivity as a consequence of its sin. Not learning from her northern sister, Judah — the southern kingdom — continued in sin. God sent the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Judah and take it captive.

It looked like the end of God's people. The northern and southern kingdoms were both taken into captivity. Like many times before in the history of God's people, all hope was not lost. God promised the people of Judah he would take them out of captivity after 70 years. He prophesied this through Jeremiah the prophet.

For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.
Jeremiah 29:10 (ESV)

This is exactly the way it unfolded. King Cyrus of Persia conquered the unconquerable nation of Babylon. King Cyrus was a benevolent dictator who allowed people to return to their land of origin. King Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return from Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. but the people didn't rush back. Many of the Jews were content living in Babylon.

In 536 B.C., two years after Cyrus issued his decree of freedom, the first 50,000 Jews returned. They were led by Zerubbabel, the grandson of King Jehoiachin. They began the job of rebuilding a completely destroyed nation. They rebuilt the temple and restored the sacrificial system but the nation still languished in fear and weakness. It took them 20 years to rebuild the temple. It wasn't finished until 516 B.C.

A second group of Jews returned to Jerusalem 58 years later in 458 B.C. Finally, Nehemiah led another group. Almost a hundred years after the reconstruction project began in 445 B.C., Nehemiah returned to rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes even appointed him governor of the land. There was rapid progress in the rebuilding of a nation under his leadership. Nehemiah was governor of the land for 12 years. Unfortunately, Nehemiah was called back to Persia on business and was absent from Jerusalem. When he was gone, even though the nation was physically rebuilt, the morale of the people fell apart. They began lapsing back into a sinful lifestyle. While worship at the temple was still taking place, it was empty routine. The heart of the people grew cold to God. The book of Malachi was written during the time

Nehemiah was gone. The people were discouraged from all the setbacks they faced in rebuilding the nation. Worship was empty and routine. They didn't feel loved by God.

Why were they discouraged?

One of the reasons for their discouragement was 80 years before this the prophets Haggai and Zechariah had encouraged the rebuilding of the temple with the promise that God's blessings would be restored and prosperity would return to Israel. The nations would once again view Israel as a light to the gentiles like they did in their heyday under King David and King Solomon. What was especially enticing about Haggai's and Zechariah's prophecies was the prophets had foretold that God's own glorious presence would once again fill the temple like it did in the days of Solomon. Look what Zechariah prophesied.

Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again. Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem. Zechariah 1:16–17 (ESV)

The problem is the people didn't see Zechariah's prophecies taking place. These predictions felt like cruel mockery. Instead of economic success, the Israelites faced drought and crop failure. While the Persians allowed them semi-self rule and religious freedom, there was the ever-present awareness they were not free. As for size, they were only a nation of 20-by-30 miles with 150,000 people. The book of Nehemiah gives us a window into life in the days of Malachi. God's people lived in constant fear from the neighboring nations.

Worst of all was the spiritual destitution. While the temple was rebuilt, it was much smaller than Solomon's temple. When Solomon's temple was dedicated, the very glory of God filled the temple.

...and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord), and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever," the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. 2 Chronicles 5:13–14 (ESV)

With this new temple, when it was dedicated, there was no visible manifestation of the presence of God. The people had high expectations for a restored life, a restored temple and restored national prosperity, but it felt like none of those hopes and dreams were taking place. These people were disappointed with God. They were angry at God. "God, if you really love us, why is life so hard? Why is worship so empty? Why aren't you showing up like you did in the days of Solomon?"

Let's step out of the story for a moment. What was God doing? He was calling his people to live by raw faith and trust in his word. He was not giving them powerful manifestations of his presence along the way. This is the same place we find ourselves. Many times we don't have visible manifestations of God's power and blessing, we just need to trust his word.

Not only were God's blessing and presence absent, but as we study this book in the following weeks, we will see what was happening in their lives that caused God to withdraw his favor.

This morning, as we start the book, we are going to examine just the first five verses. In these verses, God addressed the burning question in their hearts: When times are tough, what should I do when it doesn't feel like God loves me?

What do I need to know about God's love when times are tough?

God loves me, even when my circumstances don't leave me feeling loved.

The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. "I have loved you," says the Lord... Malachi 1:1–2a (ESV)

Malachi gave these words from God. The first thing God wanted his people to know was, "I have loved you." God says, "I love you." Looking at your circumstances, you may not feel loved, but God says, "I do love you."

This is not the first time God had told his people he loved them. Malachi reminded them God said this in the past. When did God say this?

When their ancestors were in Egypt, they were being worked to death making bricks and gathering straw. Their male babies were thrown in the Nile River. The nation of Egypt was destroying them. They didn't feel loved by God in that moment.

God came to their rescue. He sent Moses as a deliverer. God took them out of Egypt. God sent plague after plague on Egypt. He parted the Red Sea. He brought them through the wilderness. Twice he gave them water from a rock. He gave them manna every morning, yet they kept rebelling against him. Finally, when they came to the edge of the Promised Land, God would not let them go in because of their constant rebellion against him. It was the next generation, their children, that went into the Promised Land. In the book of Deuteronomy, when

Moses gave the law to the people for a second time so the next generation would know God's Word, God spoke to this next generation with these words.

...but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.
Deuteronomy 7:8 (ESV)

Moses reminded the people that God loved them. When they doubted that love, the proof of God's love was to be seen by looking in the past and remembering what God did to save their parents from Egypt and how God provided for them in the wilderness.

In a similar way, God showed his love for the people of Judah in Malachi's day. Their parents were taken into the land of Babylon like their ancestors were taken into the land of Egypt. They were slated to be absorbed as a nation, just like their ancestors in Egypt. Just like God brought their ancestors out of Egypt after 400 years he brought the Israelites out of Babylon in just 70 years, just like he promised.

The first thing we learn is it is a regular pattern for the people God loves to face circumstances where they don't feel loved. That is always the history of God's people. God chose to love Abraham but there were years when he felt unloved by God because of a lack of a son. God loved the Israelites in Egypt, but there were years of hardship until God sent Moses as their deliverer. Just like them, there will be times when we face hard seasons in our faith before God shows his love and comes to our rescue.

God loves his people so much that his love for the rest of the world is like hate.

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.” Malachi 1:2–3 (ESV)

God’s people said, “If you love us so much, prove it. Show us your love.”

What God did is he went back to their history. In Genesis, Abraham had a son named Isaac. Isaac had two sons named Jacob and Esau. They were fraternal twins. Esau was born first. He had the right to the family birthright and the family blessing. Even though Esau was born first, God chose to love Jacob and carry out his plan for a people of God through his life.

Esau was red and hairy. He looked like Elmo. He was a Duck Dynasty man. He was a hunter and a fisherman. He wore camo and smelled like the woods. His brother, Jacob, was a mama’s boy. Jacob hung out with his mom and watched the Cooking Channel instead of football. His hobby was knitting, not NASCAR. Not my kind of guy. Even before they were born, God chose to set his love on Jacob instead of Esau.

Some people think God chose Jacob because he was a good guy that deserved God’s favor. Not true! Neither of the boys were good guys. Esau was a vengeful man. Jacob was a liar and a schemer. If anything, Jacob was more wicked than his brother, Esau. Jacob manipulated Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. Jacob stole the family blessing by tricking his father. Jacob was such a cheat he had to run from his home to keep from losing his life.

In spite of his messed up life, God chose to love him and to not let that love go even when Jacob sinned.

When Jacob eventually returned to the land of Canaan, he found his brother, Esau, had also done well for himself. He had lots of earthly possessions. Here is the difference. On the surface, it looked like God loved Jacob and Esau the same way. They were both earthly successes. God actually loved Jacob so much more than Esau that God's love for Esau looked like hatred in comparison to how much he loved Jacob.

Don't get confused by this language. The purpose of this language is to show a comparison and demonstrate the greatness of God's love for his people. We see this linguistic tool being used in other parts of the Bible.

When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Genesis 29:31 (ESV)

Did Jacob hate Leah? No, he was married to her. The point is Jacob loved Rachel so much more than Leah that his love for Leah was like hatred in comparison to his love for Rachel. This also happens in the New Testament.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:26 (ESV)

Jesus' point is not to hate our fathers and mothers. The point is that being a disciple of Christ is a much higher priority than even love for our closest family members.

Malachi's point was God has chosen to love his people. There is nothing in us that makes us better or more deserving, just as there was nothing in Jacob that made him better or more deserving of God's love than Esau. Nevertheless God has chosen to love us, and we don't deserve it. Like Jacob, even when our circumstances don't leave us feeling loved, we are loved. Abraham didn't feel

loved without a child, but God eventually blessed him. The Israelites didn't feel loved by God when they were oppressed in Egypt, but God eventually came to their rescue. The Israelites in Malachi's day were not deserving of God's love and their circumstances were hard, but God chose to love them. How much does God love us? He loves us so much that his love for the rest of the world is like hatred when compared to his love for us.

How does this apply to us?

The book of Malachi was written to the Old Testament people of God. As Christians, we are the New Testament people of God. Just like the people of Malachi's day, there are times in our lives when situations are tough. There are times in our lives when we feel forgotten by God and don't see his love. We need to know the truth. God loves us. He loves us so much that his love for the rest of the world is like hatred in comparison.

Look how the Bible describes God's love for us through Jesus.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)

What an amazing description. Through Jesus we are God's personal possession. For all of eternity our job is to speak about the greatness of his love for us.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. Ephesians 1:3-6 (ESV)

Our identity as Christians is to be the most blessed beings in the universe. Before we had done anything good or bad, God chose us as the objects of his love. Our identity is the sons and daughters of God. Jesus took on flesh to become one of us so God could adopt us into his family. Our purpose for all of eternity is for the praise of his glorious grace. That means for all of eternity we will never stop thanking God for loving us beyond our comprehension and beyond our imagination. Everything else God created in the universe, every angelic being, will look at you and me as a living example of what it looks like to see God's love in maximum display. God cannot love anyone or anything more than he loves you and me right now through Jesus Christ.

That is the truth. Are there times we don't feel loved? Yes. Know the truth, like Malachi said, "Jacob your ancestor was the one I chose to love. I loved him so much my love for Esau was like hatred." As Christians, we are God's chosen people today, and his love for us is beyond our imagination.

What do we do when we doubt that love? Like Malachi called the people in his day to look at the past, he calls us to look at the past as well and see God's love for us in history. Instead of looking at the Exodus to see God's love in action, we look back at something greater, the cross.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20 (ESV)

The truth of God's love for us will always be seen over time.

In Malachi's day, God's people didn't feel God's love because life was hard. One particularly hard spot for them were the Edomites. Jacob's descendants were the Israelites. Esau's descendants were the Edomites. The

Edomites ruled the hill territory to the southeast of Judah. The Edomites and the Israelites were blood brothers. The important story to know is that in 586 B.C., when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took the Israelites into captivity, instead of the Edomites helping their blood brothers in their day of disaster, they actually went out of their way to help the Babylonians.



The Edomites celebrated the Israelites' deaths. The Edomites stopped the fleeing from the Israelites. They captured Israelites and turned them over to the Babylonians. They looted the land of Israel when the Babylonians left. One verse in the Psalms describes it well.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" Psalm 137:7 (ESV)

It is hard to forget your flesh and blood relatives turning against you and stabbing you in the back. There is an entire Old Testament book dedicated to the judgment of God on the Edomites because of the heartless way they treated their blood brothers during the Babylonian invasion. It is the book of Obadiah.

What happen to the Edomites? From the years of 550-400 B.C., the Nabatean Arabs, which was a people group immediately to their east, began ransacking their homeland. Some of the Edomites were forced out of their land and began moving north into Israel. The Edomites who moved to the border of Israel were called Idumeans. Just like the Israelites were trying to rebuild Israel after the Babylonian invasion, the Edomites were trying to rebuild their land after the Nabatean Arab invasion. It looked like things were going well.

While the Israelites struggled to rebuild, it appeared the wicked Edomites would be successful as they rebuilt. That hurts. Have you ever been frustrated watching the wicked prosper while you follow God and suffer? That is what the Israelites were feeling.

Here is the difference. God was not committed to the Edomites' success. God promised to destroy their attempts to rebuild their nation.

If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the Lord of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.' " Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!" Malachi 1:4–5 (ESV)

While the Edomites were excited to rebuild, look who promised to fight against them, "The Lord of hosts." That is a reference to the commander of God's heavenly armies. God promised to fight against their rebuilding efforts!

What happened to the Edomites? As God promised, they were never able to rebuild their nation. The Nabatean Arabs continued to conquer their land. They intermingled with them to such an extent that they ceased to be a nation. In 100 A.D., the Romans destroyed what was left of the Edomites. The Edomites that moved to the southern edge of Judah became known as Idumeans and some of continued to exist even into the time of Jesus. For example, King Herod was an Idumean. The Edomite nation was destroyed, but the nation of Israel has continued to exist even to this day.

How does this apply to us?

The extent of God's love for us is not always apparent in the moment. God's love for his people is often seen over time, not in the moment. The point is

as more time passes, the truth of God's love for God's people becomes visible. This is not just true for God's people in the Old Testament, it is true for us today. As Christians, isn't it true the more time passes the more we realize how God loves us and cares for us?

Even if we have faced hard times for all of our earthly lives, when we die, we will see the full extent of God's love in the next life. There are only two places in eternity. One is the lake of fire, which is the place where everyone gets what they deserve for their sin. The other place is heaven and the new creation where we are with Jesus and get the exact opposite of what we deserve for our sin because of God's love. In eternity, how much God loves us will be visible, but right now, it may not always feel that way.

Today, if you are in a time that is tough and it doesn't feel like God loves you, first, know he does love you and we don't deserve it. Second, know he loves you as his adopted child so much that the kind of love he has for other people isn't like hatred in comparison to how he loves you. Third, over the passing of time the truth and extent of God's love for his people will always become visible. Even if it isn't in this life, it will be for sure in the next life.

Today, if you are discouraged and don't feel loved by God because you are facing a hard time that has lasted for a long time, these are God's words to you: "I love you. I love you so much that my love for the rest of the world looks like hatred compared to how I love you."



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