

Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation

The importance of affirming God's love

Intro: One of the challenges all spiritual people face are times of spiritual stagnation. Even when we want to keep increasing in faith, love, and hope there are times when we struggle. One book of the Bible in particular, I think, helps us meet this challenge--the book of Malachi. Since speaking about this book in the Moldovan lectures I've wanted to explore it in more depth.

Let me speak a moment about the background of Malachi that will help us understand why it is relevant to the problem. God's people had returned from captivity and with the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah had rebuilt their temple. However in reading Malachi one quickly senses in the conversations between God and Israel in Malachi's dialogue style that all is not well in Israel. Joyce Baldwin offers this insightful summary of what appears to be the spiritual background of this book:

Whereas most of the prophets lived and prophesied in days of change and political upheaval, Malachi and his contemporaries were living in an uneventful waiting period, when God seemed to have forgotten His people enduring poverty and foreign domination in the little province of Judah. Zerubbabel and Joshua, whom Haggai and Zechariah had indicated as God's chosen men for the new age, had died. True, the temple had been completed, but nothing momentous had occurred to indicate that God's presence had returned to fill it with glory, as Ezekiel had indicated would happen. The day of miracles had passed with Elijah and Elisha. The round of religious duties continued to be carried on, but without enthusiasm. Where was the God of their fathers? Did it really matter whether one served Him or not? Generations were dying without receiving the promises and people were losing their faith.

Sound familiar? What Israel was experiencing, we can experience too! None of us are immune to what Baldwin called "*the imperceptible abrasion of faith that ends in cynicism because it has lost touch with the living God.*" Our vibrant faith can degenerate into spiritual stagnation. The book of Malachi will help us identify how that can occur in our lives; and how can we keep that from happening to us.

How did Israel demonstrate this imperceptible erosion of faith? We can gain insight from each dialogue.

The first dialogue

The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How hast Thou loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation, and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness." Though Edom says, "We have

been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins”; thus says the Lord of hosts, “They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever.” And your eyes will see this and you will say, “The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel!” (Mal. 1:1-5)

Thinking through the conversation

God knows what His people are thinking. They doubt that He has any special love for them as His people. Therefore God affirms His love for them in the first sentence of the book, “I have loved you.”

As expected, Israel responds, “But how have you loved us?” Clearly this indicates doubt about God's love; but why might Israel have expressed such a sentiment?

Perhaps they thought of the many years that Israel had spent in Assyrian and Babylonian captivity; and interpreted these actions of God as a lack of love for them. It had surely been a time of great hardship for the nation.

Perhaps they thought of the more recent conditions in which the promises of God of a king and a glorious kingdom had not been fulfilled; and they interpreted these events as a lack of God's love for them.

But in so doing, they had also forgotten God's fulfillment of the promise to return them from captivity and restore them to their land.

They had interpreted God's delay in giving them a king and a glorious kingdom as an indication that it would not yet happen in the future.

God offers to them an evidence of His love: “I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau.”

God's answer to Israel's skepticism about His love is to take them back to the beginning of their existence as a people. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Both were twins; so presumably each might have had a right to the blessing God had promised to Abraham. But God made the sovereign choice that Jacob (Israel) would be the one through whom the promised blessing would be fulfilled.

This is the gist of God's statement, “*Jacob I have loved.*” It must be understood in light of God's elective grace.

Paul reminds us that God's selection was made “*before either had done good or evil*” (Rom. 9:11).

What God's sovereign choice meant for Israel was that He had carefully watched over them from the time of Abraham to their captivity in Egypt. He had sent Moses to deliver them from bondage and bring them to Sinai where He would enter into a special covenant with them from all the nations on earth. And all of this, God affirmed, was the evidence of His sovereign and gracious love toward them.

Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, (Deuteronomy 4:37)

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:7-8)

But in addition God affirms, "*Esau I hated.*"

Again, we are not to think that God possessed some active hostility against Esau before His birth.

What that meant was that not only had Esau not been chosen to enter into covenant with God.

However it also meant that God had allowed them to experience the consequences of their sinful way of life and their hostility toward the brothers, the Israelites.

By the time of Malachi, the Nabateans had conquered the territory of the Edomites; and they had been driven into the southern part of the land of Canaan.

Yet their boast to rebuild would be in vain. There would be no restoration to their homeland as with Israel; but God pledges that their judgment would be permanent.

Consequently, though Israel had questions or doubts about God's love, God's historical actions had made it clear that they were His covenant people. And though they had experienced His discipline, all that He had promised to them would be fulfilled...if they would fulfill their covenantal obligations to Him!

Learning from the conversation

It is possible for God's people today to develop a similar cynicism about God's love.

It may be rooted in disappointments we've experienced in our spiritual life: unanswered prayers, trials and tribulations, the sheer difficulty of life itself and the belief that God should make things easier for us as His people.

And we may find ourselves secretly murmuring under our breath, "How have you loved us?"

God's people likewise today have clear historical evidence of God's love.

Like Israel, we too have been chosen to enter into a covenant with God. In His electing love, God has given His Son to redeem us from sin. There could be no greater evidence of His love than this.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just 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 to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3-6)

Thus, we are His people, not on the basis of merit, but of gracious choice.

In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. (Rom. 11:5)

God's electing love means salvation for the believing but destruction for the unfaithful.

What that means for us is that, like Israel, we are in covenant with God to inherit His kingdom when Jesus returns. Paul shows that as God's adopted children we are heirs to eternal life.

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:10-12)

Likewise those outside the covenant of God must face the consequences of their sinful life.

Like Israel we may give God two responses.

To question God's love is to fail to give Him the loving response that His love deserves and lose the blessings of His choice.

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. (Jude 20-21)

To appreciate God's love is to honor and love Him for His gracious choice of us to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Our privileged position means that we serve Him with faithfulness.

Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:28-29)

It means that we accept our hardships believing that no trial is ever an indication of His animosity, but rather His love as our heavenly Father.

and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." (Heb. 12:5-6)

It means that we patiently wait for His purposes to be achieved, not losing faith when things don't happen on our timetable, but trusting that all things will work out based on His timetable.

And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Heb. 6:11-12)

Conclusion: If you ever find yourself thinking like ancient Israel, remember God's message through Malachi.