

HOW GOD LOVES

The year is 440 BC. The setting: Jerusalem. Israel is back in their homeland after a long captivity in Babylon. Israel's catastrophic destruction began a century and a half earlier when King Nebuchadnezzar swept down from the north, subdued Judah's King Jehoiakim and made Israel a vassal state. When Judah rebelled against Babylon in 586 BC, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar returned, leveled Jerusalem, killed many of her leaders and military officers, and carried off most the rest of the population to Babylon.

The conquest was a severe discipline ordered by God himself. His people had forsaken the covenant they made with him after the Exodus and had given themselves completely to idolatry of every sort. Injustice, greed, violence and infidelity had become the norm. God's holy people had utterly and unrepentantly defiled themselves, and in so doing, forced God's hand.

The judgement was breathtaking. Jerusalem was left a city without walls, totally defenseless. The temple, lavishly built and furnished by King Solomon, had been looted, burned and pulled down. Everything and everyone of value was gone. Nebuchadnezzar left only a few scattered remnants—the poorest people in the land.

For seventy years Israel languished in Babylon, sustained only by God's promise to bring them back and restore them. And then, in 516 BC, with a decree from King Cyrus, Israel began to come back. Under the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and in the face of much local opposition, they rebuilt the temple. Some sixty years later, Ezra led a second group of Jewish repatriates back to Jerusalem. Ezra was instrumental in restoring worship and instructing repatriated Jews in the Law of Moses. And in 445 BC, Nehemiah returned as governor to lead the nation in rebuilding the city walls.

But in spite of being back in the land with a new temple and secure walls, Israel was tired. They had returned expecting a golden age with Messiah to lead them. It had been eighty long years since the first repatriation, and expectations were wearing thin. Worship had become dutiful, burdensome. God got the scraps and leftovers. The priests dishonored God. They barely disguised their contempt for worship, and had lapsed into self-interest and personal favoritism. The tithes and offerings that sustained temple worship were redirected to personal use. Many of the men had succumbed to the temptation of non-Jewish, trophy wives. They had abandoned their families and were being seduced by the idolatries their new wives brought to the marriage.

The general popular sentiment was that serving God wasn't worth it. Evil people got away with their wickedness—they prospered. Obedience didn't seem to be paying off. Israel had become disaffected: bored with their faith, lax in their responsibilities, wearied with the long, hard process of recovery, and enamored with immediate self-interest.

They sound very much like many American Christians.

During the time of Nehemiah, God sent a prophet, the last writing prophet he would send until Jesus came. The prophet's name was Malachi, which means "My Messenger."

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. It is, Malachi says, an oracle. An oracle was a word from God that was ominous. When you received an oracle, you knew you were in the tall grass. God was about to have words with his disaffected people. The words are argumentative, a verbal dispute in which God takes on their complaints and rebukes them with complaints of his own. Listen to how it begins: Mal. 1:1-5.

If God showed up in your presence and said: “I have loved you and always will,” what might be your response? You might be overwhelmed with joy and gratitude. But if the circumstances of your life have been tough and discouraging—if you have been out of work for a long time, if chronic health problems have nagged at you for some time—you might feel like challenging God’s affirmation. Israel asked: “How have you loved me? Things have been going badly for a long time. Do you really love me?”

Ever been there? What might convince you of God’s love?

If you were a contemporary of Malachi, would you be at all encouraged by God’s proof of his love? It’s as if God said: “You want proof of my love? Look at how I treated Esau?” Now there’s a warm affirmation of affection!

Assuming that God has a serious point to make, what’s going on that we’re missing?

We need to fill in some historical blanks. Esau and Jacob were Abraham’s grandchildren—twin brothers born to Isaac and Rebecca. While Rebecca was still pregnant, she asked God about her difficult pregnancy. God told her: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other and the older will serve the younger.”

In other words, God revealed his choice of the second-born over the first-born. Esau, born first, was the rightful heir. But Jacob, born after Esau, would become dominant. Jacob would receive the promises and blessings of the covenant God made with Abraham.

As the two boys grew up, Jacob was favored by mom and Esau by dad. Jacob heard from Rebecca what God had said about the elder serving the younger—Esau would serve him. And—schemer that he was—Jacob took matters into his own hands. He caught Esau at a weak moment and bargained for his birthright. Later he tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the family blessing. Jacob became the heir but not as God intended.

Esau was furious. Jacob ran away to his mother’s family to escape Esau’s anger. The two never really reconciled. Neither did their descendants. From Esau came the nations of Amalek, and Edom, whose land bordered the southern edge of the Dead Sea.

During the Exodus, the Amalekites attacked Israel as they made their way to Mt. Sinai. Later, when Israel was traveling toward the east bank of the Jordan to begin their conquest of Canaan. They asked permission to take the direct route through Edom. They even offered to pay for the privilege. Edom responded with force and would not allow any incursion of their borders. So Israel had to take a long detour around Edom.

Throughout the reigns of both Saul and David, Edom was a bitter enemy. David finally sent the army under Joab to end the threat. Edom was soundly defeated and lost eighteen-thousand troops in the Valley of Salt. The remnants licked their wounds and vowed to get even. That opportunity came when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Israel.

The Prophet Obadiah tells us that Edom allied itself with Babylon to exact their revenge. They helped plunder and destroy Jerusalem. They annexed territory. They even set up roadblocks at fords and crossroads, killing or capturing Jews fleeing the destruction.

Psalms 137 is a lament on the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. In verse 7, the Psalmist pleads with God: “Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’” Edom’s rage against Israel during the conquest was seared into the national memory.

Now let’s look at Malachi again—v. 2-5.

What’s the difference between Jacob and Esau? By birth, both shared equal rights to the

promise to Abraham. Neither was particularly virtuous. The only difference between them was God's choice to love Jacob and hate Esau.

We need to hear those words, love and hate, as Israel would have heard them, not as we hear them. We think of "hate" through the filter of emotions and find it both odd and offensive that God hated Esau. Israel would have thought in terms of God's sovereign choice and covenant. God made his covenant with Jacob and passed over Esau. He chose Jacob to stand in a unique, privileged relationship to himself. Through Jacob would come the twelve tribes of Israel. God set his covenant love upon Jacob. Esau could have had access to the covenant blessings but only through Jacob.

Four centuries after Jacob and Esau, Moses would tell Israel: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you..." (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

God's love is expressed first and foremost in his redemptive faithfulness to his people.

Esau was outside God's covenant—not a participant in it. He chose to worship and serve the gods of Canaan, taking pagan wives and becoming indistinguishable from the peoples around him. God had no ties of loyalty to Esau. Hatred was the comparative term that described alienation more than animosity.

Because God had no covenant obligations to Esau, his judgement on Esau for their treatment of Israel was both just and implacable. God set himself permanently against Edom. He would resist their best efforts to rebuilt.

During this very time period in which Malachi wrote, God used the Nabateans to drive Edom out of their ancestral lands. The survivors moved west into the Negev, the southern wastelands of Israel. They created a district called Idumea. During the time between Malachi and Jesus (called the intertestamental period) Idumeans were forcibly converted to Judaism. The Herods were from Idumea. Eventually they disappeared and faded into history. Edom ceased to exist as a country and as a people.

By contrast, Israel had been restored to the land of promise. God had disciplined them severely, but he had *not* treated them as their sins deserved. He had preserved them as a people in Babylon and brought them back once again to possess the land. He still held out to them a hope and a future. Messiah would come. Malachi would finish his prophecy on that high note.

It is God's covenant faithfulness to Israel that he offers as proof of his love. It stands in stark contrast to his total rejection of Edom. Edom got what it deserved. Israel did not. When Israel saw God's judgement on Edom, Malachi says, they would understand God's love and honor him with praise: "Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel."

Up to this point, Israel had missed it. They were fixated on their immediate circumstances. They didn't have everything they wanted or felt they deserved. Life was tougher than they had imagined. So they questioned God's love for them.

Have you ever done that? The Bible describes that as a kind of spiritual myopia. It's the condition of one who "...is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins" (2 Peter 1:9).

God's enduring, unwavering, ultimate expression of his unbounded love for us today is the cross. Not our immediate circumstances—no matter how difficult or painful. The measure of

God's love is not our physical health, nor our financial wealth. God's love is not primarily found in our successes, our social acceptance, the integrity of our families nor the quality of our marriages.

The measure of God's love for us is the cross. At the cross we discover that God has not treated us as our sins deserved. What we deserved fell on Jesus. He received in full the condemnation that rightfully should have fallen upon us. And because of Jesus, God has redeemed us and given us a new and living hope. Not of parking spaces close to the doors of the mall; not of physical or material prosperity. God gives us the hope of a redeemed world where Jesus will make all things new. It's a world in which God will lavish on us openly all the riches of his grace, and where sorrow and pain have been banished to the old order of things. God is faithful to his promises.

This hope came at enormous cost. The holy Son of God would bear our world, take up our infirmities, and carry our sorrows. He would be pierced for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that would bring us peace with God would be laid upon him (from Isaiah 53:4-5).

God loved the world this much: that he gave his only Son to bear our sins.

"I have loved you," says the LORD.

But you ask, "How have you loved us?"

Today, for us, God points to the cross. If you are ever tempted to doubt God's love for you, go back to the very beginnings of your faith in Jesus and become amazed by grace all over again. Remember your first love when you discovered that you were loved, and that the measure of God's love was the cross.

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).