

Malachi Then and Now  
God's Unchanging Love  
i. A Call to Respond to God's Love (Mal 1:1-5)

Cynicism is devastating. The default mode of despair and disillusioned people, it robs one of enthusiasm, commitment and energy. This was the situation confronting Malachi. Circumstances, opposition and adversity had all but destroyed Israel's assurance of God's presence and provision. Their homeland had been devastated by the Babylonian invasion, the temple destroyed and most of the population had been exiled. And now through Persian intervention, the people were beginning to return. The temple had been rebuilt under Haggai but the city walls remained a ruin. Even more galling, their neighbour Edom, descendants of Esau, had escaped unscathed. They had prospered whilst Israel suffered. The fact that Esau had cheated Jacob of their father Isaac's blessing added insult to injury.

So how does Malachi address the problem? He doesn't simply address symptoms. He doesn't use the carrot and stick method to motivate the people out of spiritual lethargy. He goes to the heart of the problem. God's people did not really believe that God did love them or even care about them. Malachi's opening words are startling: "I have loved you", says the Lord. The jaded response "How have you loved us?" elicits a question and explanation in return, "Was not Esau Jacob's bother" declares the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated." Using hyperbole, prophetic exaggeration, to make his point, Malachi insists that God's people were doubting God's special love for them because they were looking at events in the short term. Edom might have escaped the Babylonian invasion. However, they were subsequently overrun by far more aggressive nations. The Israelites had been allowed to return but no such decree had been made for the Edomites. Their land was a ruin and they had no future as a nation. Yes, God had punished Israel for their sins, but he had not destroyed them. He had disciplined them, but he had not abandoned them. "I have loved you" says the Lord. Do not doubt it. To be outside the covenant people of God is to face God's judgement as the Edomites did.

Notice God never tells the Israelites why he loves them. To do so is to reduce the mystery of God's electing love to a matter of debate and dissection. However, he does tell them why he does not love them; "The Lord did not set his affection upon 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." (Deut 7:7) But never, never did he tell them why he had chosen them. We may not understand this love. We must not try to rationalize or justify it, but simply accept it, believe it and trust it.

To answer 'why me?' is to destroy grace. Why does God love me, 'Because I'm a good person, because I go to church and say my prayers. Because I've been baptized or responded to an altar call?' No, no, no. God's love is not a response to any merit found or foreseen in us. It is a unilateral declaration and act of God's own grace, unconditional, free and generous. The only answer to "Why me?" is not any sentence beginning 'Because I...' There is only one correct response. 'Thank you Lord. I did not deserve your love. I had no claim upon it. I could not earn it. I cannot repay it.'

In the words of Isaac Watts' great hymn 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross',

'... my richest gain I count but loss  
and pour contempt on all my pride.  
... love so amazing, so divine  
shall have my soul, my life, my all.'

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