

**Title: Return to the God Who Loves You**

**Text: Malachi 1:1-5**

There are moments when you can feel the weight of a conversation before it even begins.

A few simple words, and you know, this matters.

That is how the book of Malachi opens.

God's people have returned from exile.

The temple has been rebuilt.

Life has settled back into routine.

But spiritually, something is off.

Their worship has cooled.

Their hearts have wandered.

Their view of God has become smaller than it should be.

And into that moment, God speaks.

**Malachi 1:1 ESV**

*The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.*

This verse serves as the title and introduction to the entire book, and it sets the tone for everything that follows.

**“The oracle”**

This word can also be translated **burden**.

You can feel the weight in it.

God is speaking with purpose, and what He says carries real gravity because His people are not where they should be.

**“of the word of the LORD”**

This message comes from Yahweh Himself.

Malachi is delivering God's Word.

That means what we are about to read carries divine authority.

**“to Israel”**

God is addressing His covenant people.

They are the ones who belong to Him, the ones who have received His promises, and the ones who are responsible to live in light of those promises.

**“by Malachi”**

His name likely means “my messenger.”

God sends His word through His messenger to reach His people.

So before God says anything corrective, He makes something unmistakably clear.

These are His Words.

This message carries weight.

It is directed to His covenant people.

And it comes through His appointed messenger.

Listen, when God speaks like this, we lean in carefully.

We listen closely.

Because what we are about to see is this:

**Main Idea: God’s Covenant Love is Faithful Even When We Are Not**

Everything in this book flows out of that truth.

God is going to confront His people.

He is going to expose their sin.

He is going to call them to return.

But He does not begin with correction.

He begins with love.

Before anything else is said, God wants His people to understand something about His heart.

His love for them has not changed.

So here is the question that rises right out of this text:

How does God respond when His people begin to wander away from Him?

Or even more personally:

What does God say to His people when their hearts grow cold toward Him?

**1. God Declares His Faithful Love (v. 2a)**

**Malachi 1:2 ESV**

*“I have loved you,” says the LORD...*

This is the opening declaration of God to His people, and it is striking.

He does not begin with accusation. He begins with love.

*“I have loved you”*

This refers to God’s covenant love for Israel. This is not merely an emotional statement.

It is a covenantal statement rooted in His choice, His promises, and His faithfulness over time.

The verb is important.

It points to a love that has already been demonstrated.

God is not saying merely, *“I feel warmly toward you.”*

He is saying, in effect, *“My relationship to you has been marked by covenant love.”*

What is a covenant love?

It is a love based on a promise or covenant.

There are five covenants mentioned in the Old Testament.

Across the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants, culminating in the New Covenant, God reveals Himself as a covenant-keeping God whose purposes are rooted in His glory and expressed through His steadfast love for His people.

**Just think about the Abrahamic Covenant**

**The Abrahamic Covenant is God’s unconditional promise to Abraham that He would:**

- 1. (the land of Canaan), Give him a land**
- 2. (Israel), and Make him into a great nation**
- 3. (ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ). Bless all the nations of the earth through him**

In short, God sovereignly promises land, descendants, and worldwide blessing through Abraham, and He guarantees it by His own faithfulness.

This covenant is remarkable because God not only establishes it, He alone is responsible for keeping it.

Here is the point: God loves His people, and He demonstrates that love by binding Himself to them through His covenant promises.

Even when His people are unfaithful, God remains faithful.

And what is the key to all of this?

The next part of the verse sets the stage for the whole book.

The prophet says these words...

**“says the LORD”**

Again, the authority of the statement matters.

This is not Malachi reassuring the people.

This is God Himself declaring His covenantal love.

***What is the significance of this?***

God begins where the people most need to begin.

Their worship is broken because their view of God is broken.

Before He confronts their failures, He reminds them of His covenant disposition toward them.

This is often God’s way.

He does not correct His people apart from the context of relationship.

He speaks as the covenant Lord to the covenant people.

This is not fluffy sentimentalism!

In the Old Testament, divine love toward Israel is tied to covenant commitment.

God’s love is not abstract.

God’s love is historical, pledged, and proven.

When God says, *“I have loved you,”* He is pointing His people back to a long, undeniable history of covenant love.

Listen to how God has spoken about His love throughout the Old Testament.

**Deuteronomy 7:7–8 ESV**

*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, <sup>8</sup> 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.*

God's love was never based on Israel's worthiness.

It was rooted in His choice and His promise.

**Deuteronomy 4:37 ESV**

*And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power,*

God's love is not only declared, it is demonstrated.

He redeemed them.

He delivered them.

He acted on their behalf.

**Jeremiah 31:3 ESV**

*the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

God's love is not momentary.

It is enduring.

It continues, even when His people struggle and fail.

And even in moments of discipline, His love remains steady.

**Hosea 11:1 ESV**

*<sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*

God points back to the Exodus.

That was not Israel earning His love.

That was God initiating it.

He loved them, and He acted on their behalf.

So, when we come back to Malachi 1:2 and hear,

*"I have loved you,"*

God is saying,

Look at My choice.

Look at My promises.

Look at My actions across your history.

My love for you has been steady and proven.

When God says, *"I have loved you,"*

He is not speaking the way we often love.

Dane Ortlund writes,

*"He does not love like us. We love until we are betrayed." - Dane Ortlund*

God's love holds steady, even when His people do not.

If God's love is covenantal, steady, and proven, then this presses on us in some very real ways.

**Do not evaluate God's love based on your circumstances**

That is exactly what Israel was doing.

Things were not going the way they expected, and it shaped how they viewed God.

We do the same thing.

When life is hard, we start to question His love.

When life is smooth, we assume everything is fine between us and God.

But God does not point them to their circumstances.

He points them to His covenant.

Listen, your circumstances change.

God's love does not.

So, when that question starts to rise, *"Does God really love me?"*

you go back to what He has already said and what He has already done.

**Let God's love shape how you relate to Him**

God starts here on purpose.

Their worship had wandered because their view of God had changed.

And that connection is still true.

When you lose sight of God's love, your worship becomes routine.

Your obedience feels heavy.

Your joy begins to fade.

But when you are grounded in this truth, that God has set His love on you,  
your whole posture toward Him changes.

You draw near.

You trust Him.

You worship Him from the heart.

**Let God's love lead you back, not away**

God declares His love to bring His people back to Him.

God's love is not something to take lightly.

It is something that calls you to respond.

When you see that He has loved you,  
that He has remained faithful,  
that He has kept His word...

It should move you.

It humbles you.

It softens you.

And it leads you to say,

*"Lord, I want to walk with You. I don't want to keep walking away."*

And here is where the tension of the passage begins to rise.

God has just made a clear, strong, covenantal declaration:

*"I have loved you."*

But instead of receiving it...

They question it.

And that leads us to the second point.

## 2. We **Doubt** His Faithful Love (v. 2b)

### **Malachi 1:2 ESV**

*“I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have you loved us?”*

With that one question, the tone of the book shifts.

This is the first of six disputations in the book of Malachi.

A disputation is a kind of structured dialogue.

You will see this pattern repeated throughout the book:

- God declares truth
- The people question or push back
- God responds and exposes the issue

This first disputation sets the tone for everything that follows.

*What does their question reveal?*

At first glance, it may sound like an honest question.

But it is more than that.

**This is not curiosity.**

**This is skepticism.**

They are not asking for understanding.

They are challenging God’s claim.

*“How have you loved us?”*

In other words,

“Where is the evidence?”

“We don’t see it.”

“It sure doesn’t feel like you love us!”

**Why are they responding this way?**

We need to understand their situation.

They are back in the land, but life is not what they expected.

- The kingdom has not been restored to its former glory
- They are still under foreign rule
- The promises feel distant
- Daily life feels ordinary, even disappointing

And over time, their circumstances have shaped their theology.

Instead of interpreting their situation through God's Word, they are interpreting God's love through their situation.

### ***What is really going on?***

Their problem is not lack of information.

Their problem is a diminished view of God.

They have forgotten what God has done.

They have lost sight of His covenant faithfulness.

And now they question the very thing that should anchor them.

Listen, this is where spiritual decline leads.

It does not begin with outright rebellion.

It begins with doubt.

A questioning of God's character.

A resistance to His Word.

A growing distance in the heart.

### ***Why does this matter?***

This question exposes the root issue in the book.

Before you ever get to polluted worship,

Before you get to compromised obedience,

Before you get to empty religion...

You find a people who are no longer convinced that God truly loves them.

And once that foundation cracks, everything else follows.

This question in verse 2 is not a one-time response.

It introduces a pattern of disputes that runs through the entire book of Malachi.

Let's take a quick look...

**Malachi 1:2-3 ESV**

*<sup>2</sup> "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?"*

**They question God's love.**

**Malachi 1:6 ESV**

*<sup>6</sup> "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?'*

**They question God's accusation.**

**Malachi 1:7 ESV**

*<sup>7</sup> By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?'*

**They question their guilt.**

**Malachi 2:17**

*"You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, 'How have we wearied him?'"*

**They question God's evaluation.**

**Malachi 3:7-8 ESV**

*Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'<sup>8</sup> Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?'*

**They question their need to repent.**

**Malachi 3:13 ESV**

*<sup>13</sup> "Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?'*

**They question their words.**

Tie it all together

Do you see the pattern?

God speaks clearly.

The people respond with resistance.

They question His love.

They question His authority.

They question His diagnosis.

This is not a people seeking clarity.

This is a people pushing back against what God says.

Listen, when the heart begins to wander, it does not usually say, *“I am far from God.”*

It starts asking questions like this:

*“How have you loved me?”*

or

*“Prove yourself to me!”*

For you and me, this shows up in a much more ordinary way.

Someone prays for God to provide.

God provides over and over again.

But then a season comes that is harder than expected.

And the thought begins to creep in,

*“If God really loved me, this wouldn’t be happening.”*

A small shift in the heart.

Now you are **evaluating** God instead of **trusting** Him.

That is exactly what is happening in Malachi.

God says, *“I have loved you.”*

And instead of remembering His faithfulness,  
they measure Him by their present situation.

Listen, doubts come but be careful - they are a dangerous road to travel.

Because before long, you are no longer standing **under** God's Word...

You are standing **over** it!

If this is how doubt works, then we need to pay attention to it.

**Pay attention to the questions you ask God**

Questions reveal the heart.

Some questions come from humility.

Others come from resistance.

*"How have you loved me?"* is not neutral.

So, ask yourself,

*Are my questions coming from trust, or from doubt?*

**Guard your view of God when life feels hard or ordinary**

That is where Israel was.

They had a life that did not meet their expectations.

And over time, their circumstances shaped how they viewed God.

That still happens.

**If you are not careful, you will interpret God through your circumstances instead of interpreting your circumstances through God.**

**Do not let familiarity dull your heart**

They knew the truth.

They had heard it again and again.

And yet, they questioned God's love.

It is possible to be around truth and lose your grip on it.

And slowly, quietly, your heart begins to stray.

*"Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." - Robert Robinson*

*(Come Thou Fount, 1758)*

**Go back to what God has already said and done**

God does not give them something new.

He points them back.

That is where you go.

When doubt starts to rise...

Go back to His Word,

Go back to His promises.

Remember His faithfulness.

You anchor yourself there.

God has declared His love.

The people have questioned it.

Now God answers.

And this leads us to the third point.

**3. God Revives Our Faithful Worship (vs. 2c–5)**

God now begins to answer the question raised in verse 2:

*“How have you loved us?”*

His answer is not intangible or emotional.

He answers by pointing to His covenant dealings in history.

Let’s walk through these verses.

**God’s Covenant Choice (vs. 2c)**

***Malachi 1:2 ESV***

*“Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob...”*

God begins with Jacob and Esau.

They were brothers, twins, sharing the same family line.

That detail is important because it removes any natural explanation for the difference between them.

If one line receives covenant blessing and the other does not, the explanation is not found in their background or merit.

*“Yet I have loved Jacob.”*

Here, Jacob represents the nation of Israel.

God’s point is that His relationship with Israel is rooted in His choice.

He set His covenant favor upon Jacob and his descendants.

This is consistent with the broader teaching of the Old Testament, where God’s love toward Israel is grounded in His decision to set His love upon them, not in their worthiness.

### **Covenant Distinction (vs. 3)**

#### **Malachi 1:3 ESV**

*but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.”*

This language needs to be understood in its context.

“Loved” and “hated” function here as covenant terms.

They describe selection and rejection with respect to covenant privilege.

Jacob was chosen for covenant blessing.

Esau was not.

Here is how the NLT translates it.

#### **Malachi 1:2–3 NLT**

*...I loved your ancestor Jacob, <sup>3</sup> but I rejected his brother, Esau, and devastated his hill country. I turned Esau’s inheritance into a desert for jackals.”*

The focus then shifts from the individuals to the nations that descended from them.

Jacob represents Israel.

Esau represents Edom.

God points to the historical outcome of His dealings with both nations.

Edom’s land has been laid waste.

Its territory has become desolate.

This demonstrates that God’s covenant purposes have been worked out in history, not merely stated in principle.

### **Ongoing Divine Opposition to Edom (vs. 4)**

#### **Malachi 1:4 ESV**

*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.’”*

Edom’s response to judgment is to rebuild.

However, God declares that their efforts will not succeed.

When you see *“The LORD of hosts,”* God is reminding His people who He is. He is the sovereign ruler over all things, and the One speaking to them carries absolute authority.

Edom’s rebuilding efforts are set against God’s active opposition.

*“They may build, but I will tear down.”*

Edom is also described as *“the wicked country,”* which clarifies that the judgment against them is moral, not arbitrary.

*“The people with whom the LORD is angry forever”* expresses an enduring posture of judgment in contrast to God’s covenant favor toward Israel.

At this point, the contrast becomes clearer.

Israel has experienced hardship, but they have been preserved.

Edom has experienced judgment and ongoing opposition.

This distinction is central to God’s answer.

### **The Intended Response (vs. 5)**

#### **Malachi 1:5 ESV**

*Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, “Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!”*

God indicates that this reality will be visible.

One day Israel will be able to observe His dealings and recognize their significance.

The expected result is a change in perspective.

They move from questioning God's love to acknowledging His greatness.

*"Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel."*

This statement affirms that God's rule and authority extend beyond Israel.

His dealings with both Israel and Edom reveal His sovereignty and His faithfulness.

The point is that God's love is demonstrated through His covenant actions in history.

Israel's error is that they are evaluating God's love based on their present circumstances, rather than on His established covenant faithfulness.

What Malachi is doing here is consistent with how God speaks about His love throughout the Old Testament.

I have already mentioned Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

#### **Deuteronomy 7:7-8 ESV**

*<sup>7</sup> It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, <sup>8</sup> but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...*

God's love is tied to His covenant and His oath.

#### **Deuteronomy 9:5 ESV**

*<sup>5</sup> Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, **and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.***

Again, God's relationship with Israel is grounded in His promise, not their performance.

And look at the Apostle Paul's thoughts on the matter!

#### **Romans 9:10-13 ESV**

*And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, <sup>11</sup> though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— <sup>12</sup> she was told, "The older will serve the younger."<sup>13</sup> As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."*

Paul confirms that this distinction ultimately points to God's sovereign purpose.

So, when God answers in Malachi, He is not introducing something new.

He is reminding them of what has always been true.

His love has been rooted in His covenant and demonstrated in His actions.

God says, *“I have loved Jacob.”*

And that love was not drawn out of Jacob because of who he was.

As Spurgeon said,

*“God did not love us because we were lovable, but because He would love us.” - C.H. Spurgeon*

That is covenant love.

God does not give them something new.

He takes them back so they might remember.

And here is the point:

**God restores your perspective by pointing you back to His faithful love for His people, proven over time.**

God declares His love.

They question it.

God answers by taking them back.

He restores their perspective by pointing them to His faithful love.

And that leaves us with a question:

***Will we trust what God has said... or question it?***

## **Conclusion**

God’s covenant love is faithful, even when we are not.

If you misunderstand God’s love, your worship will dry up and your heart will follow.

This week, when you are tempted to question God’s love, go back to what He has already said and done, and anchor your thoughts there.

God does not ask you to believe in a love that has never been demonstrated.

He has shown it.

Ultimately, He has shown it in Christ.

At the cross, God did not say, ***“I might love you.”***

He made it abundantly clear.

So, when the question comes,

***“Does God really love me?”***

Look back to what He has done,  
and let that settle your heart.

***And Return to the God who loves you!***