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Four Little Words

Malachi 1 v 1-5

Introduction

What can you tell me about the book of Malachi? If the answer is "not very much" you would be in good company. We may know that it is one of the minor prophets, it is famously the last book in the old testament, but it's not a greatly studied book. In fact I looked up a YouTube video on the book and most of the comments on the video weren't about the topic, the style or the message of the book, but many were of the form "Hey, I've finally finished reading through the Bible."

We're going to sort that at Harper though, as we look at the book of Malachi over the next few weeks.

Book Summary

The book of Malachi was written about a hundred years after the Jews had returned from exile, about 400 years before Jesus was born. The name Malachi translates to "my messenger", and the book is a message from the Lord to his people. It's a message largely of disappointment, but finishes with a promise.

Did you ever say to yourself: "If only…"? For instance:

- If only I had a fresh start I'd be a better Christian
- If only I knew my Bible better I'd be a better witness
- If only I was rich I could give more to the Lord
- If only I had the time I'd study my Bible more

It's a dangerous start to a sentence, firstly because it gives us an excuse, but secondly because it often turns out not to be true. When we suddenly find ourselves with lots of time, do we use it for Bible study? When we start college, or start a new job, do we strive to be a better Christian? Maybe we do, but far too often it doesn't turn out the way we thought.

The same was true for the Israelites. The southern kingdom of Judah had seen their brothers in the Northern kingdom taken away by the Assyrians for their unbelief and following after false gods. Instead of buckling down and being faithful, they strayed themselves, time after time, and God sent the Babylonians to carry them off into exile. While they were in Babylon the Jews mourned for Jerusalem. If only they could be back there they would worship God as they should.

Well here we are, 100 years after they returned, and the same old problems crop up. And so God sends his messenger with a series of declarations. You'll see the pattern: God makes a statement, the people question the statement, and God fully explains it. Most of the

statements are accusations about the Jews, but the book starts with a claim by God. Let's look into it:

I Have Loved You

> *The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. "I have loved you," says the Lord.*
>
> *[Malachi 1 v 1-2a]*

Now I looked up the top 10 most commonly used phrases in the English language. In the article I found the top 5 were:

- Thank You
- I'm Sorry
- Hello
- How Are You?
- I Love You

It's nice to know that politeness isn't totally gone from society, but it's maybe surprising that "I love you" is so high in the list of commonly used phrases. We don't say it to everyone, after all. For most of us it's something we'd only say to a select few people. People we have a depth of feeling for. And they're perhaps words that people long to hear more than any other. They even get referred to as "those three little words."

But God doesn't say "I love you". He says "I have loved you". What's the difference?

Well, God isn't referring to a feeling here. He's not saying he has an affection for the Israelites. Love here is an action. God has demonstrated his love to them over and over again. He has shown them his love in the past, he loves them still and will continue to love them.

And what is their response?

> *"I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How have you loved us?"*
>
> *[Malachi 1 v 2a,b]*

If I were God at this point I'd be throwing the book at them. Literally, because this is the last section of the old testament we're reading. They had all this, and they could read in every page how God had shown his love to his people, despite their waywardness, their selfishness and their grumbling. Even in their recent past God had brought them back to their homeland, they had rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Wasn't this living proof of God's great love?

Well, God is more gracious than I am, and he lays out how he has loved them.

A love that is not earned

> *"Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.*
>
> *[Malachi 1 v 2c-3a]*

That's right! Jacob and Esau were brothers. In fact they were twins. And God has chosen Jacob rather than Esau. Why did he do that? Traditionally the firstborn gained the

inheritance, but Jacob isn't the firstborn. We might think that Jacob earned God's love by his faithful character, but if you read the story of Jacob he's far from the ideal man. What we have here is God's sovereign choice. We often don't know why God chooses someone but we can trust that he chooses well. God spoke to Rebekah even before the twins were born. Let's read that from Genesis 25:

And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger."

When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

[Genesis 25 v 21-26]

So before the boys were born, God had reversed the roles so that the younger one would be the stronger one and the older one would serve him. We later see that Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew, so maybe this shows God's wisdom in his choice.

God's love is not earned. The Israelites were God's chosen people, not because of their character but despite their character. How does that make us feel about our own relationship with God? It should humble us. We don't have any reason to believe we deserve the mercy, grace and love that God has given us through his son. We can't approach him relying on our deeds, our character or our faithfulness, but only on the righteousness we have from Christ.

A love that is not capricious

I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert." 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.'"

[Malachi 1 v 3b-4]

God's choice of Jacob over Esau, and the love that he showed to Jacob, didn't stop at the individuals. As he told Rebekah, both Jacob and Esau would father great nations, and God's love would continue to rest on the nation of Israel, from Jacob.

God's love is not capricious. He doesn't change back and forward, but continues to love Israel despite all the times they failed to follow him. That doesn't mean he smothers them in cotton

wool though. When the Babylonians came through they swept up both Israel and Edom. But God's purpose for them was different. For Israel it was discipline. He wanted them to learn to trust and follow him and he always planned on bringing them back out of exile. For the nation of Edom it was punishment. He had said in Obadiah:

The vision of Obadiah.

Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom:

We have heard a report from the Lord,
and a messenger has been sent among the nations:

"Rise up! Let us rise against her for battle!"

Behold, I will make you small among the nations;
you shall be utterly despised.

The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,
in your lofty dwelling,
who say in your heart,
"Who will bring me down to the ground?"

Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
from there I will bring you down,
declares the Lord.

[Obadiah 1 v 1-4]

We're going to read in Malachi 4 about the Day of the Lord. In Malachi this is seen as a great event for God's people, where they will see victory and joy. The same Day of the Lord is mentioned in Obadiah, but for the Edomites it means destruction and judgement.

Do you ever feel that you've disappointed God? I hope you do because we'd be lying to ourselves if we thought we were living perfect lives. But the love of God is not capricious. He continues to love us even when we sin. We find ourselves with the same troubles and struggles as those who don't believe, but God means these for good for his people. They are sent to discipline us, not to punish us.

A love that is not limited

Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!"

[Malachi 1 v 5]

And finally in this short section, the Lord tells his people that they will witness the downfall of Edom. And in doing so they will praise the Lord. They will see that his power and his love are not limited.

Many nations in these days had their own gods. They often considered their god to be limited to their own people. But the Lord is showing his people that he isn't just the god of Israel. He is God of the whole world, who has chosen Israel.

Does it seem strange that he should demonstrate his love for Israel by punishing Edom? Perhaps he's helping them to see the acting-out of a popular phrase we hear today: there but for the grace of God go I. It was only because of God's mercy, grace and love that Israel wasn't going to be destroyed. They deserved it. But god loved them.

As we think about the extent of God's reach, and his love, it should encourage us to reach out, to those we think have no hope of being saved. After all if he can reach us in remote Scotland, he can reach people anywhere.

Our Response

We're going to hear many more of God's declarations in the coming weeks, and most of them will be unpleasant to hear. But contemplate on this first one: *"I have loved you"*.

Because God's love is not earned, we should come to him humbly.

Because God's love is not capricious, we should come to him with confidence.

Because God's love is not limited, we should come to him with expectation.

And let's not wait for the "If only"s in life. Let's give our all to him now, knowing that he loves us, and gave his Son for us.