
Small Group Discussion Guide

Text: Malachi 1:2-5 - [2] "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob [3] but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert." [4] 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.'" [5] Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!" (ESV)

Theme/ Big Idea: Israel seriously doubts whether God loves them and they wonder whether God has forgotten his promises and forsaken his people. Into that context God speaks through his messenger Malachi and reminds his people that he has been faithful, is faithful, and always will be faithful.

Context/ Background Information: Immediately, in verse 2, God's unconditional steadfast love and faithfulness regardless of circumstances is proclaimed. The word love in the Hebrew is "ahab" and it means to have a great affection and loyalty towards a person. Here, God declares his great affection and loyalty to Israel. The tense in the original language is both past and present. He has been loving and faithful and is loving and faithful. His past and present faithfulness ought to give strong evidence that he will always be loving and faithful. However, due to their circumstances and their spiritual decline Israel has lost perspective. In their spiritual amnesia they now look towards God in disdain blaming him for their conditions.

Malachi knows his audience well and put's their attitude to words saying, "But you say, 'How have you loved us?'" They seriously doubt God's love for them. Israel is looking at their circumstances, what they see as unfulfilled promises, and are wondering "How have you loved us?" In essence, Israel is saying, "Prove it, show it, display how you have loved us!" Walter Kaiser descriptively points out, "So insensitive were they to God's magnanimous declaration of love, and so hardened had they become through their own sinfulness, that they brashly demanded that God condescend to prove what He so generously claimed. Amazingly, God condescends to answer their impudent question, thus further illustrating His patient love."¹

Like a patient teacher and a loving father God answers their question with another question asking, "'Is not Esau Jacob's brother?' declares the LORD." With one simple, powerful, and gracious question God reminds them of the long history of God's faithfulness towards Israel. Implied in his question are a host of other powerful questions: "Was not Esau born first (**Gen 25:25**)? Were you not born second (**Gen 25:26**)? Should I not have loved Esau rather than you (**Deut 21:17**)? How did you come into being as a nation (**Deut 7:6-8**)? Did I not call Abraham out of nothing (**Gen 12:1-3**)? Did I not promise and provide a son to barren Abraham (**Gen 15:2-4**)? Did I not provide two sons and two nations to barren Isaac and Rebekah (**Gen 25:20-23**)? Did I not choose to show grace to the second son, Jacob

(from which Israel became a nation)? Did I not establish Israel out of nothing? Did I not call Israel my own people and treasured possession (**Deut 7:6-8**)? When you were in slavery in Egypt did I not hear your cry, rescue you, and provide for you every meal and every step of the way (**Ex 2:23-25; Ex 6:2-8; Ex 12:33; Ex 13:21-22; Ex 16, 17, & 18**)? Did I not show immense grace and patience when you abandoned me for foreign God's (**Jer 2:13**)? Have I not been faithful to Israel before, during, and now after the exile? Are you not standing once again in the land that was promised? Who has given you all that you have? Who is sustaining you in this very moment?" For Israel to ask "How have you loved us?" is mind blowing. God has loved them from the beginning, he has never stopped loving them, and never will. Yet, because of the common tendency in the human heart to have spiritual amnesia to God's many blessings, Israel is measuring God's faithfulness by their current circumstances not by His past and present faithfulness.

The good news of God's steadfast love and faithfulness does not stop in verse 2a-b, it continues like a drum beat through verse 5. **Genesis 25:19-26** provides the helpful backdrop to **Malachi 1:2c-5**. There, we see that Isaac and Rebekah were barren yet God heard Isaac's prayers and graciously blessed them with twins. Through the story we learn that "two nations are within" Rebekah and that the second, younger, and lesser son, Jacob, will rule over the older Esau and graciously receive the blessing of God. According to the law of primogeniture (a word derived from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for firstborn) the firstborn male was highly esteemed, received a double portion of the inheritance, and received the family blessing (**cf. Deut 21:17 & Ex 13**). "Yet," God powerful reminds in **Malachi 1:2c-3a**, "I have loved Jacob [3] but Esau I have hated." With one powerful question and answer Israel's attention is captured and proper perspective is provided. God has been gracious to Israel from their beginning. They would not exist were it not for his love and grace. This is exactly what Paul picks up on in **Romans 9:16**. Namely, that God's choice of Jacob, and thereby Israel, was prior to his being born, prior to his doing anything "either good or bad," and apart from "human will or exertion." Instead it is strictly by God's grace. This is the same sentiment expressed in **Deuteronomy 7:6-8** in the choosing of the nation of Israel. The language of love verse hate in **Malachi 1:2-3** and quoted in **Romans 9:13** on the surface seems startling. But it is best to interpret the words here as choose or choice. For example, on their wedding day a husband and wife say, "I do to you" and I don't to all others." In other words, a husband chooses to love his wife and hate all others. This does not mean he literally hates all other women, but that he does not choose them. It is a matter of prioritization and faithfulness to one above all others (**cf. Luke 14:26**).

To further highlight and illustrate his faithfulness towards Israel God contrasts it with his treatment of Edom. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau. Esau "despised" and rejected his birthright "and the tokens of covenant relationship with YHWH" (**Gen 25:34; Gen 26:34-35**).² Edom was "noted in the Bible for its pride, treachery, greed, and violence."³ Therefore, Edom "enjoyed independence and used every opportunity to assert itself against Israel (**2 Kgs 8:20, 22**). At the fall of Jerusalem, Edom sided with the Babylonians and helped cut off those Judeans trying to escape from the Babylonians. This unbrotherly action is recalled bitterly in the prophets (e.g., **Ezek 25:12-14; Obad 10-14; Ps 137:7**). It is, therefore, predicted that Edom will be destroyed once and for all and incorporated into the kingdom of Israel (e.g., **Obad 18-21; Mal 1:4**). That would represent the ultimate fulfillment of the prediction that "the older will be slave of the younger."⁴

Even though Israel did nothing to earn God's favor, even though they repeatedly did nothing to maintain his favor, and even though others may stand against God, his redemptive plan will not be thwarted. It may appear delayed, it may feel as though it has derailed, it may seem impossible but God has been faithful, is faithful, and always will be faithful to his own glory and to his own redemptive plan. As he says to Israel in **Malachi 1:5**, "Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!" Thanks be to God that we can see and understand these words through the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross. "The cross stands as a historical landmark to the bold declaration with which Malachi opens his prophecy: God has loved us. Jesus Christ is the pinnacle display of God's sovereign love."⁵ Furthermore, Jesus is the means by which those beyond the borders of Israel might experience the greatness and the grace of God.

Discussion Questions:

1. Imagine a parent telling their child, "I love you" and the child responding "Prove it!" What type of attitude does this display? How might you respond? How does this compare with God's response?
2. How often do you find yourself in a similar position to Israel with a similar attitude?
3. How does God's past and present grace give you hope for the future?
4. Consider this truth: All that God is, he is perfectly, infinitely, and immensely. This applies to all of his attributes. What does this mean, then, regarding his goodness, his faithfulness, and his love? What encouragement and hope does this give to the circumstances of your life?

Worth Further Study:

Genesis 25:19-26; Deut 7:6-8

Footnotes:

1. Walter C. Kaiser and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, vol. 23, The Preacher's Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1992), 460.
2. Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 291. Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, The New American Commentary 21A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 250-251.
3. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 180.
4. Micah Fries. *Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (B&H Publishing Group), 210.