COMPLACENCY EXPOSED

A Study of the Book of Malachi

JANUARY BIBLE STUDY 2017
Leader Guide
This January Bible Study 2017 Expository Notes and Leader Helps is intended to help those who will teach JBS. Included in this guide are:

**Teaching Plans**—The teaching plans, beginning on page 3, are designed for six sessions using the 2017 January Bible Study Personal Study Guide, *Complacency Exposed: A Study of the Book of Malachi*. The table of contents shows how the chapters in the Personal Study Guide are distributed among the six sessions.

The Personal Study Guide (PSG) has been designed as teaching resource. Each adult will need his or her own PSG. Each teaching plan suggests ways a teacher can use the PSG during the session.

A variety of questions and learning activities in the PSG will help readers understand and apply the Scriptures to their lives. An alternate plan for teaching this study could consist of short lectures combined with small- or large-group discussion of the questions and learning activities.

**Expository Notes**—The expository notes, beginning on page 23, provide in-depth commentary for a teacher's use.

**Preaching Guide**—The preaching guide, beginning on page 75, provides sermon outlines and ideas for the pastor who wishes to emphasize the theme of JBS 2017 from the pulpit.

**CD-ROM**—The CD-ROM included with this book contains everything in this Leader Guide as well as additional teaching helps such as teaching items, PowerPoint® backgrounds, clip art, *Biblical Illustrator* articles, and planning and promotion ideas.

Do you ever wonder what to do with all this material when January Bible Study is over? Here are some suggestions: Conduct a weekly Bible study for business people or stay-at-home mothers. Conduct a weeknight study for apartment dwellers, mobile home residents, or language or ethnic groups. Or conduct a weekend retreat for singles, students, or an Adult Sunday School class.

Whatever you do in JBS, we pray that these materials will enhance this study and that lives will be changed as a result.
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HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

Life By Design

We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make life work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn’t work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God’s Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don’t have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15; Ephesians 2:8-9; and Romans 10:9.)

When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God’s Design in all areas of our lives. God’s Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it’s because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Meet the Writers

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Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version.
How Have You Loved Us?

Malachi 5:1-5

Before the Session:

a. Read the introduction and chapter 1 of the Personal Study Guide (pp. 4-23), as well as the introduction and Expository Notes on Malachi 1:1-5 in this Leader Guide (pp. 23-34). Be sure to review the two Learning Activities included in the Personal Study Guide (you will be using them as a part of your teaching).

b. Prepare a chalkboard, marker board, or large sheet of paper to record responses to the opening question in the session. Leave these responses up for the entire session.

c. From the accompanying CD-ROM, print off copies of Teaching Item 1: Why Would God Love Jacob/Me? Also, print copies (on card stock if possible) of Teaching Item 2: Beyond the Borders Bookmarks and cut them apart for distribution.

d. Make sure there are enough copies of the Personal Study Guide for each learner. Also provide Bibles and pens or pencils.

Leading the Session:

1. As learners arrive, greet each one personally and welcome them to the study. Begin with prayer, asking God to help learners throughout the six sessions of this study to examine their lives and ways in which they may have grown complacent in their spiritual lives. Thank God for His Word and for the way in which it shines light into our lives. After prayer, ask for a show of hands indicating how many of the learners have children or grandchildren. Then ask: How many of you have ever had your child claim, “You don’t love me”? (Feel free to dramatize this, with the child pouting or stomping a foot to indicate his or her frustration.) Call for volunteers to share ideas as to how children could think that their parents do not love them. (Answers could include the fact that many things parents do for their children go unseen, children are forgetful, children only think about what they want in the immediate moment, what children want is sometimes not what they need or what is good for them, etc.) Using a chalkboard, marker board, or large sheet of paper, record responses. Share that in this first session, we will think about times when God’s people act a lot like children!

Using the material in the Personal Study Guide, as well as the Expository Notes, give a brief survey of the historical events that surround the time of the writing of the Book of Malachi. Help learners to understand the time frame of Malachi’s message to the people of Israel. Without excusing the Israelites’ lack of faith, help learners to sense the desperation that could have led Malachi’s audience to question God’s love for them.

2. Call on a volunteer to read Malachi 1:1. Using the Expository Notes, explain the meaning of the word oracle: a message that is heavy or expressing condemnation. Call for volunteers to answer the following questions: Who initiated this conversation between God and the Israelites? What does God’s giving Malachi this message say about God’s love and care for His people? What was Malachi’s role in the process? Use the material in the Expository Notes at the paragraph be-
gining, “Three things stand out in verse one...” to help learners recognize the love that God showed in initiating this message to His people.

3. Read verse 2a-b (up to the people’s question). Using the responses to the opening question, ask: How many of the answers we listed could have been reasons for the Israelites’ questioning God’s love? Draw attention to How Have You Loved Me? learning activity in the Personal Study Guide (p. 15). Encourage learners to complete the activity and share their answers with a person sitting close to them. After allowing time for discussion, remind learners that God’s Word is not just a recounting of things that happened in the past; it also speaks to issues we deal with in today’s world.

4. Invite a volunteer to read the rest of verse 2 down to the beginning of verse 5 (“your own eyes will see this”). Present a mini-lecture on the relationship between the Edomites (descendants of Esau) and the Israelites (descendants of Jacob), using the Expository Notes. Ask a volunteer to read Isaiah 34:5-17. Point out that Malachi’s words in verse 3 are a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophetic words.

5. Distribute Teaching Item 1: Why Would God Love Jacob/Me? Direct learners to use the left column of the handout to make a list of why Jacob was “unqualified” to be loved by God as the following discussion is taking place. Lead a discussion of the life history of Jacob, including his deception of his brother, his lying to his father, and his playing favorites with his wives and children. Then ask: Why would God choose to love Jacob? Ask four volunteers to read Isaiah 63:10, Isaiah 63:7, Jeremiah 31:3, and Lamentations 3:22-23. Lead learners to list reasons that God loved Jacob in the appropriate section on the left side of the handout.

6. Draw attention to the last part of verse 5. Ask: What does this verse add to our discussion about God’s reason for choosing Jacob and his offspring, the children of Israel? Help learners to recognize that part of God’s plan was that His glory should spread beyond the borders of Israel to the rest of the world. If not mentioned, add “evangelizing the nations” to the list of reasons why God loved Jacob/Israel.

Guide learners to quietly complete the right column of the handout. Encourage learners to be honest in listing reasons why God would have for not loving them. Encourage them to likewise be honest and reflective in listing reasons why He chooses to love them. After allowing adequate time, ask learners if they included “evangelizing the nations” on their lists. Explain that one of the major reasons why God saves us is in order for us to be witnesses “beyond the borders.” Draw attention to Beyond the Borders learning activity in the Personal Study Guide (p. 23). As a group, invite learners to name places within your community, surrounding area, within your state, and beyond that may be considered “beyond the borders.” (Some examples close to home could be a low-income housing area, a prison, an area known as being “rough” and unappealing, or a concentration of residents from other countries.) As places are identified, direct learners to write them on the activity. Then, allow learners to complete the activity.

Distribute the bookmarks that you have cut from Teaching Item 2: Beyond the Borders Bookmarks. Guide learners to read together the words from Revelation 5:9. Remind them that as believers we are to be engaged in reaching people throughout the world with the good news of the gospel.

7. To close, remind learners of the answers to the opening question about why children question their parents’ love. Direct learners to bow their heads for a time.
of reflection and personal application. Ask: When have you had times when you questioned God’s love for you? What prompted you to ask those questions? What has God revealed to you during this session? What can you do in the next few days to reflect your thanks for God’s love that has been showered on you? Lead in a closing prayer of commitment, thanking God for His love for each person present, as well as those beyond the borders.

8. Remind learners of when the next session will be held. Encourage them to read their Personal Study Guides before the session. Let them know that you will be available to anyone with questions. Some learners may be struggling with the realization that they are not worthy of God’s love, or that their salvation carries implications for how they relate to others. Others may have questions about the issue of God “hating” Esau. Be prepared to discuss this based on your reading of the Expository Notes in this leader guide.
Introduction to Malachi

My cousin described another relative as, “A straight shooter. She’ll tell it like it is.” If you have never before studied Malachi, get ready to meet a straight shooter who tells it like it is. He hadn’t graduated from a “How to Win Friends and Influence People” course. But then, Malachi spoke in a day when vast changes had to occur in order to please God.

Baby steps wouldn’t do. The times called for major course corrections. The returned exiles had grown apathetic, taking God for granted. Some doubted He would or could help or even that He cared. They had allowed unfulfilled hopes, poverty, hostile neighbors, Persian domination, and internal injustice to fuel their religious indifference. The time had come for a prophet to call the people to turn back to God.

Author

Two defensible positions over authorship of Malachi have historically emerged from scholarly debate. One recognizes the writer’s name as being Malachi. The other understands Malachi as a title of the book’s writer who was otherwise anonymous.

The word Malachi means “my messenger.” Therefore the author could have described himself as a messenger of God or his actual name may have been Malachi. Malaki (my messenger) is prophesied in 3:1 to “clear the way” for God to come to His temple. Malaki is also the author through whom “the word of the Lord to Israel” came (1:1).

The Targum of Jonathan added to the title “Malachi” the words, “whose name was Ezra the scribe.” Jerome agreed. The Talmud (Megillah 15a) credits Mordecai as the author.1

We know nothing about the author other than from his book. Neither the Bible nor Josephus, who mentioned all the major personages from the period, refers to the man Malachi.

On the other hand, the prophetic books mention their authors in the early verses. If someone other than a man named Malachi wrote the book bearing his name, he would be the only exception.

For the purposes of these notes, Malachi will be considered as a prophet who spoke his words of correction to Israel. The Book of Malachi does not emphasize the messenger but rather the message. Of the 55 verses, God speaks in 47 of them.2

The Times

In Malachi’s day, people had allowed apathy to replace zeal for the Lord. In our day, people have allowed apathy to replace zeal for the Lord. Malachi’s words still speak.

The Babylonians destroyed many of the cities of Judah in 589 B.C. In 586 they completed a long siege, conquered Jerusalem, and deported thousands. Judah became a Babylonian sub-province with a Jewish governor, Gedaliah. Soon Jewish partisans assassinated Gedaliah and a guard of Babylonian soldiers. As a result many of the remaining Jews fled to Egypt. Another deportation to Babylon followed in 582 B.C.

Cyrus, head of Persia, overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C. and issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. Perhaps he wanted a stronger Palestine in order to
thwart the Egyptian desire to expand, or perhaps he choose to reward the Jews for helping in his effort to conquer Babylon. Either way, God answered the prayers of His people and fulfilled the prophecy Isaiah made more than two hundred years earlier. God released the Jews through the benevolence of a non-believer.

More than forty-two thousand originally returned to Judea (Ezra 2:64) and several other waves of exiles eventually came back to Jerusalem. They found great hardship in Jerusalem and Israel.

Antagonistic neighbors, including Ammonites, Moabites, Philistines, Edomites, Samaritans, and Arabians. These surrounding nations delayed the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4:4-5) and tried to keep Nehemiah from repairing the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 4:1-8, 6:1-9).

The people had worked on the temple for several years but had to stop in 526 B.C. because of these outside pressures and a change of Persian leadership. Haggai said if the people would rebuild the temple, God would overcome the drought and bring them prosperity (Hag. 1:2-11). So the people returned to work and finished the temple in 515 B.C.

Poverty and domination by the foreign powers continued year after dreary year. Modern excavations of that time period show the utter devastation of the main cities, revealing the abject poverty. When would God bring the promised help to His people?

Malachi wrote after the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of temple worship (Mal. 1:6-10; 2:13; 3:1,10). Yet, Isaiah’s prophecies of freedom, prosperity, and world dominion had not yet occurred (Isa. 49:22-23; 54:1-3; 61:5-7). The nation had not become powerful and the expected Messiah had not come. Disappointment prevailed.

The fact that Nehemiah and Malachi both picture Jerusalem under the rulership of a governor (Mal. 1:8, Neh. 5:14-15) indicates both ministered when the Persians ruled the nation. The Jews paid tribute to the Persians and to support Persian soldiers in Israel. Drought, plagues, and famine also hit the nation (Hag. 1:10-11; 2:16-17). “Neither man nor beast had wages” (Zech. 8:10). Conditions got bad enough that some had to mortgage their fields and even sell their children into slavery (Neh. 5:1-5).

The state of affairs seemed remarkably similar under Malachi, Nehemiah, and Ezra. Nehemiah and Malachi depicted a time when the people had contempt for the temple (Mal. 1:7-14; 3:3-10; Neh. 13:10-12) and when the priests showed disregard for the things of God. Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah all dealt with the problems of divorce and mixed marriages (Mal. 2:10-16; Ezra 9:1–10:44; Neh. 13:23-27). Because of these factors, most scholars place Malachi as a contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah. He likely preached in Jerusalem shortly before their arrival, around 460 B.C.

To put his preaching in the context of world events, the Persians and the Greeks had fought the battles of Marathon (490 B.C.), Thermopylae and Salamis (480 B.C.), and Plataea (479 B.C.). Malachi almost certainly had heard of the defeats of Persian kings Darius I and Xerxes I. The Hebrews called this Xerxes “King Ahasuerus” (Esth. 1:1) and knew his queen to be the Jewish woman, Esther.

The Greeks stopped the Persian expansion westward. These defeats must have awakened hopes for deliverance among the impoverished Israelites. Yet, the Greek victories did nothing to free Israel.

Malachi’s Message

Malachi spoke not a word about the Greek victories. His message did not touch on political renewal. He knew the answers to life’s ultimate questions are not political but spiritual.
Malachi’s message concerned the relationship of God to His people. The priests needed to change their behavior lest God curse them and remove them from service. The people needed to shake their lethargy, keep their commitments, treat others with justice, and serve God once more with wholeheartedness. If they would do this, God would return to them (Mal. 3:7), pour out a blessing on them (v. 10), write them in His book of remembrance as His special possession (vv. 16-17), and even cause them to playfully jump like calves from the stall (4:2).

**Last of the Old Testament Prophets**

The Old Testament lists Malachi as the last of the Minor Prophets. This minor prophet had a major message—turn back to God. He still loved His people. He remained faithful. They were to lay aside complacency and follow Him with a whole heart.

Like James in the New Testament, Malachi showed the value of inward religion, not just outward ritual. Walking with God (2:6) positively affects how a husband treats his wife and how an employer treats his employees. Following God means being faithful to the marriage covenant. Again, these are words needed today.

Malachi pointed out the many discrepancies and shortcomings of the priests in particular. He directed his harshest words against the careless way priests carried out their duties. Both he and Nehemiah blamed the sorry state of the people on the half-hearted priests (Mal. 2:8; Neh. 13:29).

Malachi pointed to a coming day when God would judge the wicked and refine His people. “The Messenger” (Mal. 3:1) would prepare the way for the Lord. Malachi called the messenger “the Lord” and “I” in 3:1,5. Yet he distinguished the messenger from the Lord by God’s calling him “He” and “My messenger” (v. 1). The messenger therefore seems to have a divine-human nature.

Another passage further developed in the New Testament embraces Malachi’s prophecy that Elijah would come before the Day of the Lord. Jesus indicated that John the Baptist fulfilled that prophecy (Matt. 11:13-14).

God’s Word through Malachi speaks to people today. Many have become complacent in their walk with God. Malachi calls believers to whole-hearted faithfulness in response to who God is and what He has done.

3. Information about Cyrus’ general policy of allowing exiled people to return to their ancestral homes can be read from the so-called “Cyrus Cylinder,” found in Babylon in 1879. His specific policy for the Jewish return is given in Ezra 1:2-4 and Ezra 6:3-5.
6. See *The Holman Christian Standard Study Bible* (pp. 1588-1589) for an excellent timeline of events from 625 B.C. to 425 B.C.
How Have You Loved Us?

In late high school and early college this writer’s faith grew cold. I chose to work on Sundays and therefore missed worship services for about two years. I felt empty as I drifted from God. However, my roommate in college exhibited a strong faith. He rose early each morning to study the Bible. I saw in his life something I missed. Soon I also studied the Bible each day, began to attend Bible studies, and read a series of books on learning to love God, others, and self. I had missed closeness with God. God had never stopped loving me but I had allowed work to crowd out appreciation of His love.

An old quip goes, “When everything’s said and done, there’s usually a lot more said than done.” Fortunately we know God loves us because He not only said it but also demonstrated it. God gave us His Son (John 3:16). Jesus showed His love for us by laying down His life for us (1 John 3:16).

The Israelites should have known God loved them because of His covenant with them and because He miraculously opened the way for their return from exile, a journey which can be called the “New Exodus.” However, after safely making the dangerous, nine-hundred-mile journey to Jerusalem, they found terrible conditions. Poverty abounded. Some had to sell their land and became part of the landless poor. Some mortgaged their land at exorbitant interest rates in order to pay taxes. Some even had to sell their children into slavery to pay debts (Neh. 5:5). Opposition surrounded them on every side. No walls enclosed Jerusalem to offer protection. The people felt desperate. Hope disappeared. They rebuilt the temple but their economic and political conditions had not improved. The Persians, successors to the Babylonians, still ruled the nation. The people felt God no longer cared.

The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. If we believe God loves us, we can bear almost anything and still love Him in return. But does He truly love us? God called Malachi to tell the people that God had not changed in His great love for them.

The Word of the Lord (1:1)

The book begins by expressing that God had sent His word ... to Israel through Malachi. Malachi spoke these words to the returned exiles and their descendants. He may have delivered God’s messages in Jerusalem, but that is uncertain because Nehemiah hadn’t yet returned to rebuild the walls and therefore few of the people lived in Jerusalem.

Oracle described what God spoke through Malachi. Some render that Hebrew term massa as “burden,” from its root meaning “to lift up,” “to heave,” or “to carry.” The verb root can be used when a person lifts his or her voice to speak (Num. 23:7), to weep (Gen. 27:38), or to sing (Isa. 24:14). When used for a prophetic word, massa usually expressed condemnation or threat. Malachi felt a heaviness or a charge given him by God to deliver His words.

Nahum and Habakkuk also began their books with the same word, “burden” (Nah. 1:1; Hab. 1:1). Jerome commented on Habakkuk 1:1 that massa never occurred except when grave and full of weight and labor. Like Jeremiah (Jer. 20:9) who felt compelled to speak the word of the Lord lest it become a fire in his bones that had to come out, so Malachi felt burdened to share God’s word.
Three things stand out in verse one: 1) God charged Malachi with the task of giving His word to Israel. God gave these words. 2) Malachi felt a burden to deliver the messages. Most prophets spoke of the word of the Lord, several listed their prophecy as a massa; Malachi used both terms together. 3) Malachi preached these words to Israel, mostly to the returned exiles from the Persian Empire. Likely a few to whom Malachi spoke descended from those whom Nebuchadnezzar had not taken into captivity.

**The Heart of the Matter (1:2a-2b)**

Malachi began his prophecy in verse two with God’s reminder, “I have loved you.” Hosea, the first Minor Prophet in the Bible, majored on God’s redeeming love (Hos. 3:1; 11:1,4; 14:4). Then Malachi, the last of the writing prophets, openly stated God’s love for His people. In doing so he reaffirmed what Moses had clearly taught in Deuteronomy (4:37; 7:6-8; 10:14-15).

Love is the foundation from which all true Christianity flows. Out of a heart of love God created us. He didn’t need humanity; however love desires to share itself, so He crafted us. God fashioned us to share His great love with us. He sustains us for the same reason. He calls us to receive His Son and live with Him for eternity—why? Because He loves us.

The Israelites had seen God’s great hand during the exodus. They knew of many occasions in their history when God spared them—sometimes miraculously—because of His love. Even during the exile in Babylon, they saw God’s love demonstrated in numerous ways—for instance when God rescued the three “asbestos” Jews from the blazing furnace (Dan. 3). After the first wave of exiles returned in 538 B.C., they continued to hear of God’s great love for His people as shown by Daniel’s deliverance from the lion’s den in 536 B.C. (Dan. 6). The Jewish deliverance from genocide in 474 B.C. through Mordecai and Esther during the reign of Xerxes (called Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther) should have reminded the returned exiles that God cares for His people.

God demonstrated His immense love when Cyrus gave a decree to allow the Jews to return to their homeland and to carry with them the items captured from the temple. Jews in Babylon likely would have known the remarkably specific prophecies of Isaiah (Isa. 44:24–45:13) made some two hundred years before Cyrus’s birth, prophecies that mention him by name. Regardless of who knew of Isaiah’s prophecy or of Jeremiah’s (Jer. 29:10-14; 51:11), Cyrus certainly fulfilled them because God put it on his mind to do so (Ezra 1:1).

The first departure of the exiles from Babylon took place in 538 B.C. (Ezra 1–2). The people finished the Temple around 516 B.C. Malachi spoke to the returned exiles, their children, and their grandchildren fifty years or more afterward. In the meantime, they had struggled economically and politically. Many now doubted whether God cared.

**Questions**

The reminder of God’s love and the dialogue that follows form the first of seven exchanges of ideas between God and Israel in the Book of Malachi (1:2,6; 2:14,17; 3:7b-8,13,14). We do not know if the people actually asked these questions or (more likely) Malachi read their minds and actions and vocalized their inner questions as a rhetorical device. If the latter is true, then Malachi stood as the Hebrew equivalent of his Greek contemporary, Socrates. Although Malachi likely never met Socrates, both used questions to get their points across. Some scholars call Malachi’s approach, “pseudo-dialogue” since we do not know for certain whether the people spoke.
A good question helps people think far more than a simple answer does. With over 3,100 questions in the Bible, God seems frequently to have chosen this method to pique our interest, stimulate our thinking, and challenge our hearts.

Less than five hundred years after Malachi, Jesus also made masterful use of questions to help further people’s understanding and commitment. Such questions as, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” and “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13-15) enabled the disciples to claim Jesus’ divinity. Questions like, “Who do earthly kings collect tariffs or taxes from?” (17:25) allowed the disciples to see they owed a duty to their civil citizenship and also to their heavenly citizenship. The question, “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” challenged Nicodemus (John 3:10).

The people’s question, “How have You loved us?” challenged the fact of God's great love and made clear they doubted it. Like many today, they looked at their present circumstances rather than believing God and appreciating His great acts of the past. Their present circumstances consisted of dire poverty and unfulfilled hopes of freedom from foreign rule. Though undoubtedly freer than when they lived in Persia, they no longer wanted to know, “What have You done for me?” but rather, “What have You done for me lately?”

During Peter’s walk on the water, he took his eyes off the Lord and looked at the waves caused by the wind (Matt. 14:22-33). He instantly began to sink. When God’s people focus more on their current circumstances than on the Lord, they also flounder. The Israelites had trusted God enough to make the lengthy and dangerous journey from Babylon. They trusted God enough to build the temple. When stopped from their efforts in building, they heard encouragement from the prophets and renewed their efforts, finally finishing the temple around 516 B.C. But then many years had passed. Why hadn’t God freed them completely? Why hadn’t prosperity come? Why hadn’t Israel become a ruling nation once again? Often people can rise up for a big moment. It is in the day-by-day waiting and working, though, that God builds character and faithfulness if people continue to trust Him.

They should have remembered Psalm 37:34, “Wait for the Lord and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land.” Yet, let’s not be too hasty to judge. Christians today have the New Testament, the words and example of Jesus, and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. We have far less reason to doubt God’s love than the returned exiles. Yet we also can allow our circumstances to cause us to doubt God’s rich love.

An Example of God’s Care (1:2c-5a)

To cite a specific instance of God’s continuing care, Malachi listed, “I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau.” This fact would have meant a lot to the returned exiles since Esau’s offspring had proved themselves enemies of God’s people (2 Chron. 25:20; Jer. 49:7-22). The nation Israel descended from Jacob and the nation Edom descended from Esau. The Edomites often harassed the Israelites and even took advantage of them when Nebuchadnezzar pillaged the land (Obad. 1-18).

Yet, Esau and Jacob had been twin brothers (Gen. 25:21-26). Esau, the older, should have received a double inheritance and a special blessing under the prevailing practices of that day. Esau, however, despaired his birthright (vv. 29-34; Heb. 12:16). His descendants, the Edomites, worshiped other gods and continued to despise their heritage from the Lord (2 Chron. 25:20). Perhaps the Lord’s knowledge of their hatred of Him allowed Him to say, I hated Esau.

The Edomites, who lived southeast of the Dead Sea in what is today the southern part of the country of Jordan, gave Israel difficulties throughout its history. When Nebuchadnezzar
made three successive waves of attacks against Judah, the Edomites rejoiced and even captured some Israelites trying to escape. In the long run Nebuchadnezzar conquered Edom also. Some of the remaining Edomites fled into the empty country left by the exiles of Judah, especially in southern Judah, an area which became known as Idumea.

Ultimately, an Idumean, King Herod, continued to plague Israel until shortly after our Lord’s birth. To prevent any other “king” from living in his empire, this progeny of Esau tried to kill Jesus and succeeded in slaughtering all boy babies two years old and under in and around Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16-18).

Malachi believed the prophecies of Obadiah (1-21) and Isaiah (34:5-17) had been fulfilled. He stated that God turned Esau’s “mountains into a wasteland and gave his inheritance to the desert jackals.” Historically that happened. Years after Nebuchadnezzar conquered the area, the Nabateans moved in and forced out any remaining Edomites. Many of the Nabateans lived in caves left by the departing Edomites, some of which can still be seen near the city they built in the red rock mountain of Petra. Even today most of the land remains desolate and jackals howl at night. The returned Jewish exiles could clearly see that God had dealt with them differently than He had with Edom. Though poor, God had allowed them to return to their homeland and to rebuild their temple.

The Edomites bragged to Israel, “We have been devastated, but we will rebuild the ruins.” Some scholars believe this reference points to a recent destruction, one lost to history. The fact that your own eyes will see this bolsters the case for some recent catastrophe. Others believe it refers to the devastation inflicted when Nebuchadnezzar conquered
Edom. Either way, the Lord declared, “They may build, but I will demolish.” The fact that God restored Israel but left Edom demolished should have proved to God’s people His love for them.

Some Israelites thought of God’s choosing them as a matter of pride. But God didn’t choose to love Israel because of any goodness on Israel’s part. Jacob swindled and deceived people. He defrauded his brother Esau out of their father’s blessing. His very name meant “trickster” or “cheater.” He favored one wife more than another. He played favorites with his own children. No one could examine his life and say, “Jacob deserved to be picked.” Yet, God chose to bring redemption history through Jacob and his offspring.

Likewise, Israel failed the Lord time and time again (Isa. 63:10). Yet, the Lord loved them with a covenant love (v. 7). When captivity seemed imminent Jeremiah reminded Israel that God “loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued to extend faithful love to you” (Jer. 31:3). Jeremiah went on to promise the return of the exiles. Because of the “Lord’s faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end. They are new every morning” (Lam. 3:22-23). Finally they had returned and Malachi reminded them of God’s steadfast love.

### Beyond the Borders of Israel (1:5b)

Malachi spoke, “You yourselves will say, ‘The Lord is great, even beyond the borders of Israel.’” This phrase beyond the borders of Israel hints at the original design of God’s choice of Israel. Just as the Allies in WWII had to establish a beachhead in Normandy through which troops could enter in order to free occupied Europe, so God chose Israel to be a beachhead of holy people through whom He would reach the entire world. He chose Israel as His witnesses so His name could be glorified by all nations. Isaiah spoke of this when He referred to the Suffering Servant’s being a light to the nations, when he prophesied God’s “house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa. 56:7), and when he predicted nations will come to the light of Israel (60:1-3). Therefore, God’s choosing to love Israel was an evangelistic choice—that through Israel all the nations would come to Him.

Jesus gave Christians the same task in His Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20 and in Acts 1:8. We do not deserve His great love. Like Jacob, we are sinners. We have fallen far short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). God did not choose us because we deserved His love more than other people. He chose us so He could show His great love to us and then through us to a hurting, lost world.

If we accept the calling to follow Christ, we accept a missionary calling to spread His Word and His love to a needy world. The missionary Heavenly Father created the world and placed us in it in order to share His love with us. The Missionary Son left the glories of heaven and came to earth to pay the price for our sin and to make known the Father’s love. The Missionary Holy Spirit empowers us to witness for Christ. We, too, must be missional. To fail to do so is to fall into the sins of many of our Old Testament forefathers who saw their redemption as a prideful thing and not a thing enlightening them so they could share the good news with others.

God’s great vision of people of the world coming to know and love Him finds fruition in Revelation 5:8-10 where John envisioned a heaven filled with folks “from every tribe and language and people and nation” who have been redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ. God’s choice to love us is not because of any specialness we possess. God chose us so that His great love can pour through us to others.
Double-edged Election?

Most of us can understand the Lord’s loving Jacob and his offspring, Israel. Though they didn’t deserve it, yet He loved them. He also loves us though we do not deserve it. “God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). This side of heaven we cannot grasp the fullness of His great mercy toward His children, but we can understand something of it. I’ve heard parents of a newborn say, “I didn’t understand how much God loved me until I had a child.”

How can we comprehend, though, His hatred of Esau (Edom)? Were you to ask 10 people in your congregation if God hates any person, 9 likely would say, “No. God is a God of love.” They might even say something like, “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.”

Yet, in Malachi 1:3 God clearly said, “I hated Esau.” How can we understand this? First of all, God did not choose to love one group in order to populate heaven and choose to hate the other in order to populate hell. God would have accepted any Edomite who repented of his or her sins and worshiped Him (Isa. 56). In the genealogy of Jesus, two foreigners, Rahab and Ruth, hold prominent places (Matt. 1:5). Yet, both Rahab and Ruth came from pagan nations and originally followed pagan gods. God mercifully saved them. God “wants everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4).

God is completely sovereign. Within His sovereignty, God chose to create men and women with the ability to choose. We call it free will. Where the will of an individual and the sovereignty of God meet in salvation, I cannot see, but I know they do meet. One seminary professor explained it as sitting in the corner of a home looking out different windows. If you look out the window on the right, you see some eaves of the home. If you look out the window on the left, you see other eaves. From inside the home you cannot see where they meet but you know they do. Human intelligence cannot resolve how they co-exist. We simply believe what the Bible says, knowing that God will grant us further light in the future.

When we approach these types of passages, we must keep in mind four critical principles. First of all, we must humbly read and study the Bible. Secondly, we must remain respectful and gracious, especially on issues where respected evangelical scholars disagree. Thirdly, we must maintain a teachable heart, continuing to seek to understand the unfathomable depth of God’s Word. Fourth, we must learn to enjoy the mystery of God, realizing that we are finite and He is not.

We tend to think that if A equals B but A does not equal C, then B and C also cannot be equal. Hebrew thought allowed people to hold to truths which seem to be contradictory. They could talk about there being only one God while recognizing that Genesis 1:26 includes the plural pronoun Us. This enabled the Hebrews to maintain the mystery of God without compromising their intellectual integrity.

We can turn to other passages to gain a clearer understanding of the use of the word hate. In Luke 14:26 Jesus said, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be My disciple.” Did Jesus really mean we must hate our family members in order to be His disciples? Of course not, He spoke hyperbolically. Just as we often do, Jesus used a rhetorical device to make His point.

If Jesus really meant we must have the emotion of hate toward our family, then He would have been guilty of breaking the Fifth Commandment (Ex. 20:12) of honoring father and
mother. Jesus meant that if our love for family members exceeds our love for Him, we cannot be His disciple.

A comparison of Luke 14:26 and Matthew 10:37 further demonstrates the use of hyperbole. Matthew used the phrase “who loves his father or mother more than me” while Luke recorded the phrase “hate his own father and mother.”

We should not take Jesus’ words lightly. We must love Jesus above all people and all things. Yet, Jesus also does not want us to hate others. When Jesus is number one in my life and my wife is in second place, she is in a far better position than when I place her number one and Jesus somewhere down the line. Jesus wants us to love our family members, but we can only do that properly when we love Him most and place Him in His proper place as Lord over our lives.

When the Lord spoke through Malachi, “I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau,” He showed how He preferred one over the other in redemption history. Ultimately, however, He wants every
person to be part of His redemption. Consider 1 Timothy 2:3-6, “This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, Himself human, who gave Himself—a ransom for all.” God clearly wants everyone saved and gave Jesus as the ransom for that salvation.

Or consider Isaiah 53:6, “We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way, and the Lord has punished Him for the iniquity of us all.” In this passage reformist and traditional Christians both agree that all have sinned and gone astray. But look at the last part of the verse. The fact that God laid onto Jesus the iniquity of us all (the verse ends dramatically with the word “all”) shows Christ’s atonement was unlimited, that all who come to Christ can be saved and enjoy His love forever. This is the meta-narrative, the story behind the stories of the Bible, the ultimate intention of the Father—that all know and love His Son Jesus.

Or consider John 3:16, “God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.” This verse, the gospel in a nutshell, makes even clearer God’s purposes: that we know and receive His love by believing in His Son. He gave Jesus for anyone who will believe in Him.

In Romans 9:13, Paul quoted Malachi 1, “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.” Here, however, Paul purposed to show that we cannot earn our salvation. It comes to us by God’s mercy. Paul made the point to show that the Jews of his day who had not received Christ had not pursued “the righteousness that comes from faith” (Rom. 9:30) but rather were pursuing righteousness by their works.

God graciously granted His love to us who believe. He has shown His covenant love through the generations of His redemptive family in the Bible. He continues to show it through those who receive Jesus as their Savior and follow Him as their Lord. Let us look not only at our present circumstances but at our priestly Christ. Through Him people can still know the immeasurable love of God.

3. “Love” contrasted with “hate” can mean “prefer,” as on wife could be treated better than another (Gen. 25:28; 29:30-33; Deut. 21:15-16).