

Tough Love

by Steve Zeisler

In some ways the book of Malachi, the last book in our Old Testament, is a Valentine in that it is a love letter from God to people. But this love letter isn't awash with the hearts and roses we are so familiar with at this time of year, rather it's a letter about tough love, enduring love that never fails.

In this series we are studying the last three books in our Old Testament, the books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These prophets are grouped together by scholars because they were the spokesmen for the Lord during the period following the exile of Israel in Babylon. Haggai and Zechariah were involved in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. It is now some sixty or seventy years later, and that project has been completed. In the middle of the fifth century B.C., Malachi strides onto the scene with a word for his people.

The condition of the hearts of the Israelites at this time was one of deep spiritual malaise. The missing element in their worship experience, as well as in their daily existence, was hope. They had learned in the furnace of Babylon the hard lesson that idolatry would be punished by God—they never again made idols and gave way to the outward experience of idolatry—but internally they were as dry as dust; they felt that the sun had set on them as a nation, that they had little to look forward to. So into these lives, lived in hypocrisy and routine, came the prophet Malachi to speak these words of tough love.

The opening verses of the book could well be described as the central dialogue of all human history. Mal.1:1-2:

The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How hast Thou loved us?"

That interchange between God and man has been repeated over and over again. God inclines himself and declares his love to his people, but every individual in every generation responds by asking, "How have you loved us? Where is the evidence that you love us? Why isn't it obvious that you love us?" Mal.1:2:

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation, and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness." Though Edom says, "We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins;" thus says the Lord of hosts, "They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever." And your eyes will see this and you will say, "The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel!"

We will go on to look at the specific answer offered in this word about Esau and Jacob. As we shall see, the Lord is proving his love in this way. But first, let us examine the main problem behind the dialogue in Mal.1:2. From the beginning, through his intimate walks with Adam in the Garden, through his promises to Abraham, through the law which he gave to Moses, through the hymns of David, through the proclamations of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, from the beginning God has said over and over again, "I love you," to the human race. God has thundered, he has wept, he has whispered the same message, "I love you," and man has replied, "How have you loved us? Why isn't it obvious that you love us?"

The problem that is central to that dialogue is the problem of our expectations. We realize that God is omnipotent, that his power is unchallengeable, that he can do whatever he wills, then we couple that to his statement that he loves us, and our expectations rise: "If you can do whatever you want, and you love me, why am I unhappy? Why don't I get what I want? Why do I have to suffer? Why am I confused? Why am I lonely? Why am I sick?" Certain pressures bear upon us and make us ask God about his declared love for us. Illness is one. The weather is another. Taxes is another. As I was studying for this message last week my income tax documents lay on my

desk in front of me. I kept going back and forth between my sermon notes and my tax information, calling out, "God, how have you loved us?!" These are examples of external pressures.

But more painful and even harder to bear and to answer are the internal struggles we all wrestle with. We feel rising within us self-destructive forces which we hate and long to be free from. I spent some time recently with a man whose wife had just deserted him. In remembering the series of events that led up to his present situation, this man said, "As a child I was raised in the hardest and loneliest of homes. My father treated me cruelly. As a result, I had absolutely no idea of how a man should live with a woman and take care of children. In terms of relationships, my home gave me only the most negative kinds of skills. I left it at the earliest opportunity. When I married I had nothing, no model, to emulate. I didn't know how to relate or communicate, and as a result my wife has now left me. The horror of my childhood has resulted in the destruction of my marriage. My past, my present, are extremely painful, and for all I know the future too will be painful. It doesn't seem fair that the people who had the most advantages as children tend to have the most stable marriages when they are older. It doesn't seem fair that because I suffered as a child I am doomed to suffer now as an adult." Behind all that questioning is the ultimate question, "How have you loved me? Where is the evidence that you love me? Why don't you do something about the self-destructiveness that wells up within me? You say you love me, but why doesn't it feel like it?"

Before we consider Malachi's argument in these verses, let me add that the question of human suffering, the question of evil, is very hard to answer. The Scripture offers no easy platitudes designed to make suffering go away. Essentially, the position of God's word is that his love transcends our immediate circumstances and that ultimately the most sorrowful events—even an event as sorrowful as the death of Christ on the cross—even those have a good purpose; that God will take whatever pain we are undergoing and bring life from it so that the very sorrow itself becomes a source of thanksgiving to us, and therefore good comes from it.

With that, let us look at this unusual statement made by the Lord concerning Esau and Jacob. At first, this looks like a non sequitur; it seems like he is not talking about love at all. In order to get the point of this statement, let us recall some events of Old Testament history. Jacob and Esau, Isaac's sons, were twin brothers. Although Jacob was born after Esau, Jacob was the one designated the child of promise; it was upon him, not Esau, that God's hand rested. Through Jacob (re-named Israel) the nation Israel came into being—his twelve sons were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel—while Esau's offspring became the nation of Edom.

Secondly, the statement, "Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated," needs some comment. Hatred here is not the acidic combination of bitterness, fear and self-centeredness that human beings usually think of when they say they "hate" someone. The Lord does not "hate" people in the sense that he wishes them evil or delights in their hurt; we are told in Scripture that God does not wish that anybody should perish. But God is knitted to, committed to and loyally bound up with Jacob and his children in a way in which he is not committed to Esau and his children. An unbreakable bond exists between Israel and God which does not exist between God and Edom. The difference in his relationship with each of these two nations is so pronounced it can be illustrated in terms of the difference, the chasm, that exists between the emotions of hatred and love. This is exactly the point that Jesus made when he said that, compared to our love for him, we ought to "hate" our mother and father. Certainly Jesus does not want us to wish ill to our parents. Rather he is saying that the quality of our love for him ought to be so radically different than the love we have for our parent, that it, too, might be described as the difference between feeling love and feeling hate.

In the course of my life I have had hundreds of relationships with people. In college I was a member of a fraternity and I played on athletic teams. This presented many opportunities to encounter other people. Like all students, we told jokes, we went places and did things together, we studied together, succeeded and failed together, etc. Of all those people, though, my heart was knit to relatively few who became as brothers and sisters to me. Although we are separated by months and years, when we come back together we find ourselves close friends yet, still of one mind, as if time and distance had never come between us. As far as most of my other acquaintances are concerned, however, I have to honestly say that I have not thought of them once since we finished school. I do not wish any one of them ill, but I am not bound up with their lives. I

do not feel loyalty toward them.

I think that is exactly the condition that obtains here. What the Lord is saying is that for reasons of his own he committed himself heart-to-heart to Jacob and to his children and he has not done this with Esau and his children. And that has everything to do with their future, everything to do with their hope for continued existence.

At the time these words were written, the circumstances of these two nations, Israel and Edom, were very similar. They were both small and set-upon countries. The Edomites had been routed from their territory by the Nabateans, the invaders from the desert, and were now living in the Negev, the wilderness in the southern reaches of Israel. Though they said of themselves, "We will win back our place in history; we won't stay down for long; we are a proud and strong people," God declares through the prophet here that that would not be so, and it certainly was not so. The Edomites never again regained their territory; they finally passed from the affairs of human history, their race diluted by contact with other nations until they had lost their identity. Today you cannot find an Edomite anywhere in the world. The Lord was not committed to them or to their future.

Yet although Israel was also a benighted nation, a nation under the thumb of the world powers of the day, a nation that had been routed from its land and had only recently been allowed to return, a nation without an army, without prospects, without wealth, without hope from any point of view, Israel has not passed from the affairs of human history. Our newspapers last week probably had more column inches written about Israel, about the affairs of the Israeli cabinet and the Israeli legislature than they had about our own Congress. Israel is a remarkable nation. Forty-six million Americans watched "The Winds of War" series on television last week, all of them caught up in the history of the events that brought about the horror of the Holocaust and eventually the creation of the state of Israel.

Israel is indeed a remarkable nation. The most feared army, the most arrogant leadership, the most foolish, the most brilliant, the most remarkable people on the face of the earth are the Jews. Frederick the Great of Prussia once asked a sage in his court to prove with one word that the revelation of Scripture was true, and this philosopher's word was, "The Jews." The one fact that should overwhelm any thoughtful person is to realize that almost four thousand years ago a man was given a promise that his descendants would bless the earth and would live in a particular space on the earth, and today, despite persecution and dispersion, despite the hatred of the rest of humanity, despite their own dumb moves, despite their idolatry and their highhandedness, that nation and its people remain knitted to the heart of God, and he will not give them up. Even the most atheistic, threatened and ungodly Jews of today cannot stop being Jews.

This is the promise of Malachi here: "Your eyes will see this and you will say, 'The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel!' " "I have loved Jacob," says the Lord, "I have loved him in the sense that I am unfailingly committed to him." We can picture these two old antagonists, Israel and Edom, standing shoulder-to-shoulder like two toothless old lions, neither one having any hope for the future. As Malachi spoke, each ought to have expected his early demise. Neither one of these nations had any business imagining itself to have a future. The bright light of history was now illuminating the Golden Age of Greece; other peoples were on center stage. Yet God said that he was committed to Israel and to its future. Today, many centuries later, we find him true to his word.

Consider, too, that if you were to make a graph of Israel's history from the day when Abraham was called out of Ur to the time of the end when Christ returns to set foot on the Mount of Olives, from the obscurity and darkness of Israel's beginnings to the glory of its end, and if you were then to make a graph of your Christian life from the day you were chosen in obscurity and darkness to the day you will be glorified, you would find that the line on each chart would be shaped the same. One would cover a period thousands of years long, the other might cover only ten years, but the pattern would be the same-upward. There would be all kinds of ups and downs, peaks and valleys, horrors and joys, but the line would be going upward to glory.

The question of the people of Malachi's time was, "How have you loved us?" And the Lord's answer was, "My love is found primarily in my unfailing commitment. I will not let you go." God's love is not found in the happy

love is found primarily in my unfailing commitment. I will not let you go." God's love is not found in the happy circumstances of the moment, because the circumstances of this people were not happy at that moment. Your circumstances may not be very happy at the moment either. If you expect God's love to be found primarily in giving you what you want and in taking away your suffering in the short run, then you misunderstand what his love is about. God's love is a tougher love than that. His love is found primarily in the fact that we have a living hope, a certainty that we will be like Jesus Christ some day; that we have stored up for us an inheritance that cannot fade away and that God will even use the suffering of this moment, whatever it consists of, to bring beauty and holiness to us. God's promises will not fail. Even between human beings the greatest test of love is commitment. Husbands and wives who give gifts to each other on Valentine's Day but are untrue to one another, who are good at bringing about momentary happiness but fail at staying committed over the long term, would not be described as people who know what love is all about. We ask the question of God, "How have you loved us?" and the answer finally will be in that we cannot fail to be like our Lord, that we have his word as the seal on us that what he has begun he will finish. What a magnificent promise!

The question asked here is a very proper one. There is no rebuke, at this point, attached to this question asked of God by the people. In fact, it may very well be the case that it is impossible to be really Christian without asking the question, "How have you loved us?" Moses knew depressions, he knew loss, and a sense of failure when he struggled to believe God. David wrote psalms in the very depths of emotional darkness when he had trouble believing God loved him. John the Baptist called out to Jesus from Herod's prison, "Are you the Messiah really?" He knew what it was to doubt, to fear. Most amazing of all, perhaps, is the remarkable word Jesus uttered from the cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Even Jesus at one point asked, "How have you loved us? It's hard for me to believe that you love."

What I am suggesting is this: if we never come to the point where we struggle to believe that God loves us it may very well be because all the circumstances have broken our way; that we do not understand anything about the love of God because we equate it with being happy. You may be one of those rare individuals who has had everything go right for you, who has had all the advantages, who has never had to hurt very much; who has never had to suffer illness, loss and deprivation. As a result, you may think that God loves you because the circumstances have broken right. But I am convinced that the Lord intends to teach his children that his love involves much more than making them happy in the short run, that he intends to teach us that love is about a commitment that can surmount any hurdle, a commitment that can survive any sorrow, a commitment that will last forever. He intends to make our understanding of his love much bigger than it would be if it only meant temporary happiness. "The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How hast Thou loved Us?' " God's answer is "I'm committed to you. " That is how. That is the evidence. That is the note of certainty that ought to buoy us up.

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Steve Zeisler
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