

“Questions and Answers”

Malachi 1:1-4:6

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A belated happy resurrection Sunday to you! He is risen! How cool is that? The Scriptures tell us that where two or more are gathered in His name, He is with us. Our risen Lord is with us right now! Let's pray to Him.

Carol titled this lesson “Questions and Answers.” Carol’s a much nicer person than I am. What I read is God had disputes with the Jews, and the Jews were so immersed in their sinful ways, they not only were challenging God’s disputes with them, but also, they were challenging God’s character. I am always amazed by people who arrogantly say something like, “*When I die, I have some things to talk to God about!*” Please forgive any offense I commit in what I’m about to describe, but I’m only presenting this to make a point. Plus, I have a twisted sense of humor. Imagine this prideful person thinking he’s going to confront God when he meets Him.

He first has to go through a couple of Biblical heroes of faith before he gets to the Lord. First, he comes upon the Apostle Paul, who was beheaded for his faith. The guy comes up to Paul, who is holding his head in his arm, says to the guy, “*What’s your problem, pal?*” If that doesn’t humble the guy, he then goes to Isaiah, who was believed to be sawn in two from top to bottom. Isaiah looks at this guy from both sides, “*So, I hear you have a bone to pick with the Lord....*” Again, please forgive the imagery of these great men of faith. The point I’m making is we humans can get so full of ourselves that we fail to face the truth of our place before God Almighty.

The book of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It will be another 400 years before God’s voice is heard again – at least documented in Scripture. That’s a long time – there’s no greater deafening sound than God’s silence. At the time of this book, it’s been around 100 years after the return from the Babylonian exile. The audience is the people living in Jerusalem. Even after all their years in exile, as a result of their sinful and rebellious ways, they hadn’t learned a thing. The people were just as corrupt and unfaithful as their ancestors. This had resulted in poverty and injustice in the city. Accordingly, we have a series of six disputes, or as Carol says in a nicer way, exchanges of questions and answers between God and the people.

The first exchange has God affirming His love for the people in chapter 1, verses 1-5. He says in verses 2-3, “*I have loved you,*” says the *LORD*. “*But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ ‘Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the *LORD*.*” “*Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.*” God’s proof of His love for the people is that He chose Jacob’s line to carry out the covenants as opposed to Esau’s family tree, which would ultimately end in ruin.

But, wait a minute, do we find a conflict in the Lord regarding His opinion of Esau versus how the Apostle John described Him – God is love? The short answer is, “No;” however, some context to this alleged contradiction is warranted. God is, indeed, love. There can be no mistaking that truth – just look at the cross. Only an intense and passionate love can motivate the kind of sacrificial act of Christ crucified. Yet, how can this loving God also claim to hate someone? We were given feelings, so it is only logical to conclude that, if we’re made in His image with feelings, He must also be a Being of feelings. Love and hate are polar opposite emotions. That being said, imagine, if you will, looking at a pencil. One end is the lead or graphite while the other end is an eraser. They both do very different things, but they are both part of the same thing – a pencil.

The journey from love to hate can either be a slow drip or virtually instantaneous. Typically, an offense, or series of offenses, is the trigger to go from one to the other. Regarding God expressing hate for Esau, what was, or were, Esau's offense or offenses? You'll recall Esau was the older twin brother of Jacob – the sons of Isaac. He sold his birthright for a pot of stew. Now this act may, at least in today's societal norms, seem like not that big of a deal. Spiritually, the firstborn was to be the one to inherit the greatest spiritual and material blessings. What this scene revealed about Esau was that he was more interested in the things of this world – namely filling his stomach – than he was treasuring all God had given him that came with being the firstborn. Notably, after he had filled his stomach, he immediately despised his birthright. In other words, he not only rejected what God had given him, but also, he despised, or hated, it. If there is hatred for the gift, then it's a short trip to develop a hatred for the Giver of the gift.

Esau was the father of the tribe of Edomites. Esau's hating ways were filtered down through multiple succeeding generations. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the Edomites ended up being adversaries of the Nation of Israel – the name God gave to Jacob. I believe God loved Esau just as much as He loved Jacob. A loving God loves all that He creates in love. Love, though, is a choice, and Esau's continuous choices of rejecting God's love brought God to the point where no one wants to get to with Him. God's patience and forbearance are far greater than any of us can extend on our own. However, God does have His limits. Repeated rejections of His offers for forgiveness reach a point where God will honor the repeated choices as, in Regis Philbin's words, "*Your final answer.*" At that point, redemption is not possible and one's eternal fate is set in stone.

For the rest of chapter 1, we move onto the second exchange: God accuses the people of defiling and despising His name through ignoring the commandments regarding suitable sacrifices in the Temple. The length of the people's wandering away from God's ways has gotten so far that it has left them clueless regarding God's accusation. This is what prolonged unconfessed, unrepented sin does to us. Sin is rooted in deceit, so the deeper we come into agreement with these deceptions, the more blind we are to the truth.

Verses 6-9 show God is not happy with the quality of the sacrifices the people are offering. From Exodus 12:5, God decreed that the only acceptable sacrifices would have to be without blemish. Why would the Lord put such a restriction on a sacrifice? Consider the word "sacrifice." Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines sacrifice as, "*an act of offering to a deity something precious.*" The key word in this definition is "*precious.*" A true sacrifice should cost us something. If Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, and one of the wealthiest men in the world, put \$1,000 in the offering plate, that wouldn't seem like much of a sacrifice to a multi-billionaire. Remember the story of the poor woman who gave two mites? What was Jesus' response to this comparatively [to others] small giving, "*Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all.*" A sacrifice to God should cost us something. He deserves our best.

This accusation isn't just with the people, it's also with the priests – the very people who are supposed to be representing Him. In verse 10, God says, "*I am not pleased with you,*" says the LORD Almighty, "*and I will accept no offering from your hands.*" This verse is one of the more chilling verses in all of Scripture. Why? What is God saying here? – as I mentioned earlier, He has His limits. We read throughout the Bible that God is longsuffering, patient, merciful, and full of grace. These are absolutely true – I'm living proof of this in that he put up with my unbelief for 35 years to allow me to finally wake-up to my need for a Savior. Yet, I do believe that if I had continued to reject the truth of my need for a Savior – my need for Jesus, God would have honored those continuing rejections, and permanently shut the door to any hope for salvation.

This is what Malachi is speaking to here in verse 10. Praise be to God, when Jesus died on the cross, the temple doors were opened to anyone. The veil separating people from the holy of holies – God's

presence, was torn from top-to-bottom by God Himself. This act and His Son's resurrection is the proof that God will accept His offering – Christ crucified, not ours – to make a way for all people to be reconciled to Him through faith. For those who choose to take this step of faith, they won't hear God say to them, "*I am not pleased with you.*" When they die, they will hear, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*"

The Lord pronounces a heavy burden on these people in verse 14, "*Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,*" says the LORD Almighty, "*and my name is to be feared among the nations.*" You may have heard of the distinction between sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission are those things that we do that offend God. For example, violating one or more of the Ten Commandments. Sins of omission are not doing the things that demonstrate obedience to God. God commands us to love and forgive. If we're choosing to hate or not forgive someone, then we're willfully choosing to not do what God clearly states we are to do. Sin is sin, so in God's eyes, a sin of omission is no less an offense to God than a sin of commission.

The apostle Paul declared a powerful truth in Galatians 6:7: "*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*" There are consequences to sin. The cross is the ultimate proof of this. Don't think that God can't see your secret sins. Jesus said in Mark 4:22: "*For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light.*" There's a lot of condemnation in these two verses, and that is exactly the fruit of unconfessed and unforgiven sin. Yet, that is not the state God wants you to be in. He didn't have to, but He chose to make Christ crucified the way for us to have forgiveness and freedom from the bondage of sin. Therefore, whether our sin is one of commission or omission, they are our choices to offend God and, therefore, our condemnation is of our own doing.

The third exchange is covered in verses 10-16 of chapter 2. This exchange has to do with God accusing the men of treachery against Him and their wives. Once again, their depravity has disconnected them with reality - they don't know what God is talking about. The Lord's issue is with the toxic combination of idolatry and divorce. The Israelite men were marrying non-Israelite women and adopting their pagan gods. These verses speak to God's intolerance for the person – man or woman – who wants to check out on their marriage. His words in these verses are clearly meant for the husband, and, sadly, history is littered with marriages shattered by men who abandon the commitment they made to God and their wives at the altar. Women, though, don't get a free pass even though these words are not directed at them.

Verse 11 speaks to the story from Genesis 38:2, where Judah, one of Jacob's sons, married a Canaanite woman, Shua. The Jews were only to marry within their nation. God knew the temptations that come from those who worship foreign gods or idols. Even the most devout Christians who marry a non-believer are putting themselves in potential jeopardy as their spouses love for all things, other than God, can be infectious. The apostle Paul encouraged us to not be unequally yoked in 2 Corinthians 6:14.

Marriage can be a wonderful thing, but it can be challenging at times. Today's society is so quick to "cancel," or dispose of, pretty much anything. This mindset has tragically defiled the concept of the marriage covenant and made divorce way too easy. We hear reasons for divorce such as "irreconcilable differences" or "consciously uncoupling." God does provide a rightful out of a marriage, but that is limited to infidelity. Whatever the reason for divorce, the damage it leaves behind can be extremely painful. For those of you who have suffered a divorce, please know that God's love for you is no less than it was when you were married. Yes, verse 16 clearly states God hates divorce, but I believe that hate stems from His deep understanding of the pain and heartache that come with it – especially if there are

children involved. There are special blessings that God makes available inside a marriage, but that does not mean blessings are not available after a failed marriage. They just are going to be different.

In verses 2:17-3:5, we arrive at the fourth exchange – this time the Israelites are accusing God of being unjust. In verse 17, the people put false words in God’s mouth as if He is saying “*All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them.*” They then ask, “*Where is the God of justice?*” Jesus said in Matthew 7:14, “*Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*” All who do evil are not good in the eyes of the LORD. Does this mean He doesn’t love them? Absolutely not – read John 3:16 – do you see any exceptions in those words? The subject of one’s sinfulness is the fork in the path of every person’s life. If we choose to deny the existence of sin or our accountability to God because of it, then that path we choose will lead to destruction.

As for the question of “*Where is the God of justice?*”, I see Him on the cross. Psalm 7:11a tells us God is a just judge. God must judge sin to demonstrate and validate His holiness and righteousness. Every human being will be judged by God – no exceptions. Praise God, we get to make the choice as to when that judgment happens and what it will look like. For those who choose to believe that God’s only begotten Son hung in our place on that cross and paid the price – the judgment – for our sins, then by that faith, we are judged and declared righteous in the eyes of God. That declaration is an eternal declaration. We do have an appointment with God at His bema seat when we get to heaven. However, while we will be held accountable for our life, the judgment for those sins will have been handled by Jesus. What’s left in our appointment with God will be our rewards for our acts of faith.

For the non-believer, while it may look like their choices to live a life of unbelief and self-centeredness are going unpunished, that will all change when they die and are in front of God on His throne of judgment. In their denials of Christ, they denied their option to let Jesus handle their judgment.

One final comment about God’s response to the people’s claim God is not just. His response to this claim is in Chapter 3, verse 1, “*I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*” says the LORD Almighty.” This messenger is John the Baptist. He describes this messenger as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

For those of you who may not understand the purification process of gold and silver, getting familiar with it will shed some light on the reason Malachi chose this analogy in terms of God’s plans for the Levites – the priestly tribe. The only way to purify gold and silver – to take out the flaws – is to turn the heat up on them. What Malachi is describing in terms of the refining process of gold and silver can be also applied to the sanctification process of the believer. The Hebrew word for sanctify is qâdash. In consideration of its various stem forms, the term can be generally understood as “set apart to or for God” which imparts a quality of being holy or of being sacred. The noun, sanctification, essentially means the state of being clean or holy. Upon confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior, each person is declared forgiven and righteous in the eyes of God the Father. He sees us as spiritually and permanently cleansed of all of our past, present, and future sins by the precious and holy blood of His only begotten Son. That’s amazing news, but that is how God sees us. But He doesn’t stop there. Each of us is given the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the best multi-tasker there is, and one of His tasks is to convict us of our sin and help us in our repentance of those sins. In doing this, He is nudging, or in some cases for those of us more hard-hearted and hard-headed folks like yours truly, shoving, us down the sanctification path.

These convictions of sin are very much like turning up the heat as in the gold and silver purification process. They can be very painful. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase, “The truth hurts.” Well, a lot of sin

is rooted in deceits and lies we've come into agreement with. The reason the truth hurts is it exposes these lies. This is why so many people reject Jesus, who is *the* Truth. His holy presence is just too painful as it exposes the lies people believe. The shame and embarrassment of confronting their sins is just too much to comprehend. This is why I came up with the saying, "*The truth only hurts if you're not living in the truth.*" God loved us enough to send Jesus to the cross to pay the price for our sins. One of the countless reasons Jesus was resurrected was that He would be a living God interacting with each believer through the Holy Spirit to guide us on our sanctification paths.

The fifth exchange starts with God calling the people back to Him in verses 6-12 of chapter 3. The hard-headed and hard-hearted people once again don't realize they are far from God, and ask how are they to return. In verses 8-10, the Lord points out the reason they need to return to Him is that they have not been tithing. Before I continue on with this section, I want to make something very clear. Please, do not take my comments as any direct, indirect, or subliminal attempt to get you to give more money to People of the Word, your church, or to anything else. You have been very generous in your giving to this Bible study. On behalf of the Board of Directors of People of the Word, I want to thank you for your faithful giving. I'm happy to report that we are on solid financial ground. That being said, everything I'm about to say should not be construed whatsoever as a solicitation or appeal for you to give more money to People of the Word.

Verse 10, our memory verse, in my opinion, is one of the most abused verses in all of Scripture when it comes to encouraging people to give their tithes. Giving campaigns are launched off of this verse. Pastors point out the Lord says in Deuteronomy 6:16, "*Do not put the LORD your God to the test.*" These same pastors then point out Malachi 3:10 provides the *one* exception to this warning – to test Him in our giving our tithes. They then pollute God's promise that says, "*and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.*"

Regarding tithing, Leviticus 27:32 notes that it is to be 1/10th, or 10%, of what the Lord provides. I believe tithing is a form of worship to the Lord. Worship is an act of faith. I believe God designed us with a yearning to worship Him – it's how we are wired. The Hebrew word for the word worship in the Abraham/Isaac story is "*shachah*." This means to prostrate, or bow down, in homage to royalty or God – do reverence. Worship can take on many forms in prayer, singing, service, and giving. The foundation behind worship is a willingness to sacrifice something of ourselves in exchange for giving that something of ourselves to God. While we worship together in church, worship is designed to be very personal. I believe God designed it to be a vehicle of intimacy between each of us as His creations and Him as our creator.

This is why I am so offended by pastors from the pulpit using Malachi 3:10 to coerce, guilt, shame, and leverage people to give more to the church. Moreover, the emphasizing of the second half of this verse to be the motivation to give to God is a corruption of what worship should be. According to Jesus, worship must be done in spirit and in truth. If giving is a form of worship, then the motivation to give should be a movement of the spirit – not a relentless pounding from the pulpit. I have good news for each of you who are feeling guilty about either not tithing at all or not giving enough. This good news is God does not need your money. Don't you think the Creator of and God of the universe is doing ok financially? I was in banking for 20 years, and He never approached me for a loan – not once!

Will God financially bless you if you faithfully tithe? Yes, He may indeed. However, I believe those blessings coming forth from the floodgates of heaven could take shape in other forms. It could be more of His presence. It could be healed relationships once feared lost forever. It could mean restored health. Whatever God says He will do, that should never be the reason we do something for Him. Our motivation to worship in the form of giving should always be in gratitude for what God has already done. That's pure worship – not tainted with a mindset of "if I do this, God will give me that."

The sixth and final exchange is in chapter 3, verses 13-15 where we have the Lord echoing the complaints of the Nation of Israel. As is so often the case, we find the truth of our own character flaws in our complaining. The Lord says the people are wondering what they gain by carrying out – or being obedient – to His commandments. In other words, what's the point in serving Him? The Lord is saying that all the people are thinking is in their alleged faith is what do they get out of it. Moreover, their complaint is shedding the light on the type of “faith” they have – they see their acts of obedience to God as tantamount to mourning.

I want to conclude with revisiting the earlier discussion on the supposed disconnect of God being described as love vs. hating Esau. I noted there typically has to be an event, or events – offenses that take someone from a place of love to the other end of the pencil – to a place of hate. For those that are in a place of hatred of something, such hatred is corrosive to the heart, mind, and soul. Left unchecked, we can end up in the same place as Esau. However, God's grace offers the option to reverse the journey to hatred. As opposed to the more typical journey to hatred which are a series of offenses, the option to reverse the course is a singular event – Christ crucified.

At the cross, we see God's powerful display of love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace as clear as a human being can comprehend. Sin is an offense to God, but He made the choice to make a way for that sin to be forgiven. The fact that it would take the death of His only begotten Son to be the sole mechanism to make such forgiveness possible should make two things clear. First, this mechanism should tell us how serious sin is to God. Only the sacrifice of His beloved Son would provide the perfect, complete, and permanent atonement. Secondly, this mechanism should tell us how serious forgiveness is to God. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were *still* sinners, Christ died for us! While hate led to Christ's death on the cross, love led to His resurrection and new life. This completely undeserved act of love is the event that each human who is on a path towards hate has available to reverse their course and return to their original Designer and Creator.

Our original design was to be loved by God and to love God and others. When sin entered the world, deceitfulness, fear, doubt, hatred, and seemingly endless anti-God things slowly began tarnishing the goodness of what God had created. These terrible things have accelerated into the world we live in today. There is coming a day, and I believe it is coming very soon, where this acceleration of anti-God will hit the impenetrable wall of God. He will righteously judge and right every wrong. He will make it abundantly clear what is the truth – that He is the truth. Until then, we must do our best to, through faith, lean not on our own understanding, pick up our crosses daily, and follow our beloved and glorious Lord and Savior via the indwelling Holy Spirit. He will lead us in our reverse course back to our original design – to be in arms of God's love.

Each of you likely knows at least one person who is on the wrong path – moving away from God and heading towards hatred. Love is more contagious than hatred. Let them know there's another way to live by the way you're treating them – through love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. If you do this, you are obeying the great commission. Moreover, some may make the choice to trust in Jesus and join you on your journey back to God's love. It's a lot more fun to travel with company. Let us stand as traveling companions in faith and sing the Doxology.