

Malachi: A Declaration of Love

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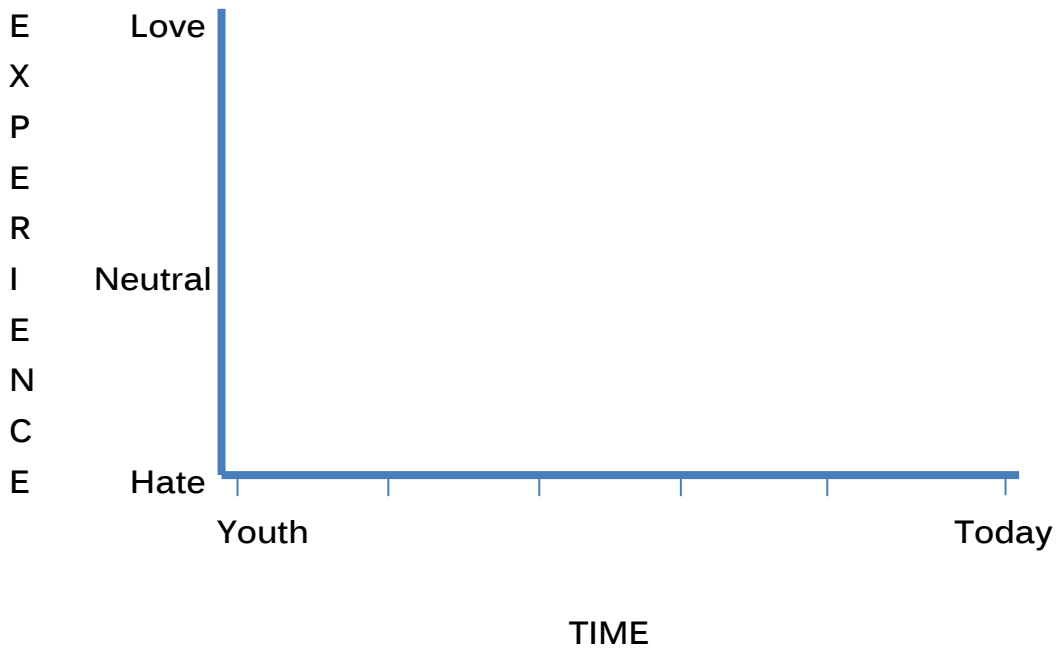
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Week 1: Love in Question

From Genesis to Revelation God's love for us is written on every page of scripture. The way each book of the bible is composed differently highlights how that love takes a number of forms. The Lord's tough love in Job has a distinct ring to it compared to his tender encouragement in Philippians, and even more discernable is God's longsuffering love in books of the Minor Prophets like Haggai and Malachi. The way we experience God's love changes over time according to how we view him at various points in our lives. As the Israelites of Malachi's time discover, our perception of God can work either to our benefit or detriment, but no matter what our idea of him is, we can be sure his love for us remains constant.

Part 1

1. How would you describe God? Is your idea of him today different from your idea of him five, ten, fifteen, or twenty plus years ago?
2. How has your view of God changed? What happened to change it?
3. Graph a chart depicting your spiritual walk. Label highlights, low points, significant events, and how you felt toward God at the time. Points could include moment of salvation, loss of a loved one, a trip, birth of a child, etc. Use the model below or create your own. Feel free to get creative. Use images, symbols, or anything else you'd like to help tell your story.



How does this visual help you see God's constant love for you? Do you notice any patterns? Looking back, how do you see God's love at work during difficult times in your life?

4. Take some time to ask God to expand your idea of him and his love for you. Thank him for the ways he has revealed himself and remained faithful to you throughout your spiritual journey. Invite him to deepen your experience of his love and expose any false beliefs you may have about him.

Part 2

The book of Malachi begins with Israel questioning if God loved them at all. God patiently points out that his love has always been evident, but the people's selfish perspective clouds their vision. After 70 years of exile in Babylon the people of Israel return to Jerusalem expecting to pick up right from where they left off. Instead, they are met with a jarring sight of total destruction. The once glittering city with its golden temple has fallen in utter ruin. Thus begins the cross-

questioning between God and his disgruntled nation. The prophet Malachi serves as God's mouthpiece for the back-and-forth dialogue that characterizes this book.

5. Read through all four chapters of Malachi to get a feel for the dialogue between God and the returning exiles.
6. How would you characterize Israel based on their responses to God? What gives you that impression?
7. What sort of tone does God use in speaking to his people? Do you think it changes over the course of the conversation? If so, where does it change and why do you think he changes tack?
8. Does God ever change his tone toward you? If so, how?

Part 3

You'll notice as you read through Malachi that the people question every assertion God makes about them. Whether they are truly ignorant of their sins or simply trying to evade punishment we can't be certain, but the way God patiently responds to them over and over again gives us a glimpse into his special love for difficult people.

9. Why do you think the Israelites question God?

10. Can you remember a time you seriously questioned or doubted God? Perhaps it was about something he asked you to do, a promise he made, why something happened, or an aspect of his character, etc. Why did you question him? How did he respond?

11. Do you think it is okay to question God? Is it ever not okay? Are there any benefits to questioning him?

12. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18), and Gideon (Judges 6) are just a few biblical characters out of many who questioned God's plans for them. Take a look at their stories. Consider their reasons for questioning and how God responded. What similarities and differences do you notice?

13. Based on what you've read and your own experience, how do you think God feels about being questioned? Why? Why do you think he allows people to question him?

14. What does God's response to questioning and doubt tell us about his love?

Your Questions: