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Malachi 1:1-5 ESV

1 The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

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!"

Malachi 3:10b–12 ESV

Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

Pouring down a blessing.

Ever been truly frustrated at something that seems to never work? You try over and over and over, and you keep failing. Finally, you take your time, and try really hard to do it right, and you give it a shot, and the odds look very much like they are in your favor, and you're sure it's going to work this time, and then... You fail again. When I was getting corneal transplants to restore my vision, my left eye was fixed easily, but my right eye proved very problematic. Multiple transplants

failed, and that is very scary. It has to do with the extreme risk of a devastating infection when a cornea fails. There is virtually no blood supply to the corneas. So, the corneas have to get their oxygen from the outside world because they have no blood supply. The tradeoff is this: with no blood supply to the cornea, we are looking through a perfectly clear surface. But in return, because the corneas have no blood supply, the immune system is not delivered to the corneas, making it extremely difficult for one's eyes to fight an infection. To have three transplanted corneas completely fail and to have the eye exposed each time to the outside world – without getting a permanently blinding infection – was amazing. One of those near miracles, quite literally. During the months that spanned the loss of these multiple corneas, I was constantly nervous. All of us have had experiences like this, and many people have had far more frightening periods than I have had – in the hospital, I see people who have had to wait while they go through multiple forms of chemotherapy, waiting for one that can finally knock down a cancer. When the fourth transplant surgery was finally declared a success, I felt an incredible sense of relief – and gratitude to God. In a moment, I'll tell you what I did to thank God for this blessing.

In our first passage, we are looking at the opening lines of Malachi. Malachi is one of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament. Why were they

considered minor? First of all, the prophets were intermediaries between God and humans; God spoke through them, and often, through visions, the prophets conveyed God's unhappiness with a people who had lost their way and offered a promise of hope for those who had found their way. The so-called minor prophets are minor simply because their Books in the Bible are so short. Even the longest of the twelve Books of the minor prophets is very short compared to the books of the three major prophets, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. Malachi's book is near the end of the Old Testament, and it represents the last prophetic words in the Old Testament, as the events described in this Book also take place the latest in time. The Book covers events that occurred somewhere after the completion of the second Temple in 515 B.C. Five hundred years later, Jesus would be born.

The Book of Malachi tells of a time when many Israelites were disillusioned with their fate and their faith. The Israelites had returned from exile in Babylon in 539 B.C. Then, after the second Temple had been built in 515 B.C., they had expected an abundant life. Remember that the focus of the Israelites was on God providing them a good life on Earth, not with an afterlife. But they were under the thumb of yet another colonial empire, this time the Persians. Crops were poor. The economy was terrible. Prosperity did not come. Many Jews, including priests, turned away from their faith. Malachi calls on them to renew their

commitment to God. From a spiritual perspective, the people were deeply unmotivated, and it threatened to tear their community apart. The Temple rituals were continuing to be held, but people felt that if God wasn't going to provide for them, if there was no profit in following their faith, why should they bother? People neglected the Sabbath and turned it into a business day, instead of a day to honor God. Business cheating was rife. People stopped paying tithes to the Temple, so priests had to leave the Temple and work in the business world. Leadership and morality broke down. The Book of Malachi teaches the importance of both living by a strong moral code and taking part in faith services. In the end, Malachi captures God's never-ending love for God's people. That is the story of Malachi – that no matter what, God is there for God's people.

The quote begins with a statement that this is a prophesy made by Malachi, as he spoke for God **1** *The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.* 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!" What is this stuff about Jacob and Esau? This is God, speaking through Malachi, and saying that God's caring relationship with God's people is like God's caring relationship with Jacob – and is very different to the negative relationship between God and Esau. Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac, as we read about it in Genesis. Jacob became the ancestor of the chosen people, while Esau became the ancestor of the Edomites, who turned away from God. Esau had shown disdain for this birthright. By remaining true to God, Jacob was promised vast lands and many blessings from God. However, for a while, it seemed like the Edomites, the people of Esau, were coming out ahead. They plundered Israel, stealing land while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. Malachi is predicting that the Edomites will eventually be punished, and that the Israelites will once again regain their kingdom. And indeed, it would not be long before the Edomites were destroyed by an invading army, one of the many times that an alien army is seen as acting as the punishing hand of God in the Bible. God never breaks that promise given in the second verse: *I have loved you*. The Israelites had to be patient, but God did protect them in the end. By having faith, they win in the end.

So, what did I do to offer my thanks to God? First of all, I had long periods of great doubt, just like the Israelites did – I was not so sure at all that my right

eye would be healed. But, remember that during this entire time, my left eye had already been healed and was giving me 20/20 vision. So, I decided to give thanks to God by giving thanks to the family who gave me that cornea that sat in my left eye and gave me vision all during the period of doubt while my right eye was losing cornea after cornea. I wrote an anonymous letter to the family of that first donor, someone I only knew to be a very young woman or an older girl. I said that I deeply appreciated them helping me improve the quality of my life and helping me continue working so that I could serve my family. What I got back was a letter where the author clearly identified herself not just as mother of the donor, but as a believer herself. In response to my statement that as the cornea from her daughter continues to heal within my eye, my vision had been getting better and better, she wrote: *"I pray that your vision continues to improve. God bless you and your family."* God bless you and your family.

When one gets a corneal transplant, the bandages come off the very next day. Your eye is swollen and raw, and the donated cornea is inflamed and damaged from being harvested, transported, and implanted. One's vision is far from good, but still, overnight, one goes from being legally blind to having enough vision to walk through a doorway without using your hands or eat without touching what's on your plate. You can't cross a street unaided, but you can

watch the traffic swish by. I had serious doubts about the fourth transplant working. I suspected that I was going to live the rest of my life with only my left eye. But for some reason, when that bandage came off, and I felt a stabbing pain from the blast of light in the doctor's office, I felt a surge of optimism, something that I hadn't felt on the days after the first three transplant surgeries on that eye. That optimism stayed with me during the months that passed as the doctor checked me frequently to see if this cornea, unlike the three before it, would heal properly. As those months went by, it was clear that this transplant would be successful. It's now been about a decade – and the cornea is still doing great.

But let's be honest. God left me off easy. The hard part is when we finally have to completely give up on something. If that fourth transplant had not worked, I don't think the surgeon would have been willing to give it a fifth try. That would have been it. That is when I would have had to truly confront my trust in God. When Malachi confronted his people, telling them that God had not abandoned them, and in fact, would never abandon them, they had a lot to complain about. They had been subjugated by one invading empire after another. There would be more to come, like the Romans who would someday rule over Israel during the time of Jesus. They had a lot of reasons to question their faith. How can we rationalize our trust in God when things do not work out?

Well, as it turns out, later in Malachi, God says this: *Put me to the test, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.* What God is saying here is “How dare you question my loyalty?” But to fully appreciate this passage, we need to look at it in context by looking at what comes just before this: ⁶ *“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ ⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. ¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.* What this says is that God first asks us to give God our unwavering faith, and only then can we count on God to pour a blessing down on us. We cannot bargain with God. I can’t say hey, heal my eyes, both of them, and you will have my faith forever. It also means that if something does go wrong, and I never get the result I want, I can’t withhold my faith. My faith has to be unconditional. But it does NOT mean that if my faith is unconditional, I will get what I want. But I do have to be open to the possibility that God will indeed pour a blessing down on me – and I don’t realize it. That’s

what faith is all about: trusting God fully, even when things don't go right. I spoke with a man recently who was in the hospital after suffering major orthopedic injuries in an accident. He had been driving drunk. But being in the hospital caused him to go through alcohol withdrawal and get clean. And that period of many years I went through when I couldn't see through either eye? All those years of having to painfully rotate my head a hundred and twenty degrees so that I could see if it was clear to make a righthand lane change? I was forced to turn to God to support. It was the best thing that ever happened to my soul. Quite literally. You see, it was very good that I had to wait so long for my right eye to feel. It pulled me toward God. Maybe I would have been even better off if that eye had never healed at all. Please pray briefly with me.

God, there are many times in life when we are anxious. We don't know how something is going to turn out. It could be a medical diagnosis, a surgical procedure, an experimental treatment. Or it could be a business venture or an investment. It could be problems with a marriage. Please let us never fall prey to that age-old temptation to hold our faith hostage, to refuse to truly believe until we get what we want – and then to withdraw our faith again, the next time we are in need. May we give our faith to you full and forever. You do know what is best for us. Amen.