

'I Have Loved You'

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Date: 05 November 2017

Preacher: Paul Brennan

- [0 : 00] Good, well we turn now to our reading for this evening, which is in the book of Malachi. You'll find that on page 801, just before the Gospel of Matthew.
- So beginning a short series in the book of Malachi, we'll be running through it these Sunday evenings in November. And this evening we're looking at just verses 1 to 5 this evening, but I'll read all of chapter 1 just to give us a bit of a sense of how the book of Malachi works.
- It's really a series of six disputations between the Lord and his people. Six times the Lord says something that is true of the people, and each time they respond, how?
- They disagree, they argue back with the Lord in terms of his assessment of them and what is true of them. And so really it's a book to expose God's people at that time, how they truly think and feel about the Lord.
- So read chapter 1, but we'll be focusing on verses 1 to 5 a bit later on. So Malachi chapter 1, the oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.
- [1 : 24] 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, but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage jackals of the desert.
- 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.
- Your own eyes shall see this and you shall say, great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. A son honors his father and a servant his master.
- If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? Says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name. But you say, how have we despised your name?
- [2 : 35] By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, how have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised.
- When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor.
- Will he accept you or show you favor? Says the Lord of hosts. And now entreat the Lord the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you?
- Says the Lord of hosts. Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the doors. That you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain. I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts.
- And I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations. And in every place, incense will be offered to my name.

[3 : 37] And a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it. When you say that the Lord's table is polluted.

And its fruit, that is, its food, may be despised. But you say, what a weariness this is. And you snorted it, says the Lord of hosts.

You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick. And this you bring as your offering. Shall I accept that from your hand, says the Lord? Curse be the cheat who has a male in his flock and vows it.

And yet sacrifice to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great king, says the Lord of hosts. And my name will be feared among the nations.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Very good.

[4 : 41] Well, please do turn back to Malachi, chapter 1. It would be good to have that open in front of us as we spend a bit of time looking at it together. Malachi, chapter 1, page 801, if you're using one of the visitor Bibles.

Does God really love me?

Does God really love his church? Such thoughts might well be crossing your mind at the moment. Or if they aren't, then perhaps such thoughts have crossed your mind in the past.

Or maybe one day they will. And even if those thoughts don't come to the fore in your thinking, then the roots of such thoughts may well bear fruit in your life.

Maybe you look at your circumstances. You look around yourself at the church. You look at the trajectory of where things seem to be headed.

[5 : 52] And you ask, does God really love us? The book of Malachi is a book aimed firmly at the questioning God's love sort of church and Christian.

A church that has settled into the humdrum routine. The fire and energy of past days has dissipated. The horizons perhaps lowered.

The realities of day-to-day life fill the vision. And if you're honest, the Christian life has become complacent, half-hearted, a bit discouraging.

Real doubts about God's love toward you emerge as you look at your daily life, as the circumstances that fill the grid through which you look at life.

You wonder, does God really love us? That is the situation in Malachi's day. Writing in the middle of the 5th century BC, a small remnant of God's people have returned from exile.

[6 : 58] They were in Babylon. But now a small group of returns. There was initially great joy at the return to Jerusalem. Great anticipation for the future.

But the great high hopes of the return from exile have by this point, some many decades later, turned to disillusionment and discouragement.

The people remember the great and hopeful words spoken by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Words like this. I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy.

My house shall be built in it. My city shall again overflow with prosperity. The people remember those words. And what wonderful words they were to God's people as they returned to the promised land from exile.

And yet, by the time we get to Malachi's day, some decades later, things haven't quite turned out as they expected. Yes, they were living in the land of promise.

[8 : 03] But they were ruled by a foreign power. Yes, the temple had been rebuilt, but it was no way near as impressive as the one that used to be there. Nor were they experiencing overflowing prosperity.

On the one hand, they had great promises from the Lord. But the daily reality was a long way off that.

And so as time went on, as the years rolled by, their love for the Lord cooled. Their obedience became routine, half-hearted.

And the book of Malachi is here because that is such a dangerous position for God's people to be in. The people are offering God's second best, giving him only partial obedience because they think that's what he deserves.

They observe the evidence around them. They look at their ramshackle temple. They look at their small numbers. They look at the vast land of Canaan that used to be theirs, and they conclude that God mustn't love us very much.

[9 : 15] Their heart of worship reveals what they really think and believe about the Lord. Their lives, as Malachi goes on to evidence, their lives betray their hearts.

And their hearts doubt God's love for them. Peter Adam puts it this way. What we see here in the collective life of God's people is the painful, gray response of indifference and disbelief to God's word.

Practical atheism is on display. Knowing God exists, they behave as if he doesn't. And the Lord speaks these words through the prophet Malachi, so that his people, whom he loves, would realize their true plight and return to wholehearted service and love of the Lord.

And for God's people today, Malachi is here to achieve those same ends. It's here to expose half-heartedness and doubts about God and his love for his people.

It's here to drive churches and people that think and act like that to repent and turn to him. To live lives that honor him through wholehearted obedience.

[10 : 38] Because they know God's love for them. And his faithfulness. So friends, if you doubt God's love this evening, know that God loves you.

These words, first spoken through Malachi, he speaks also to you. I have loved you. So the book of Malachi is here to bring real repentance to the Lord where we've grown cold.

To bring lives of wholehearted obedience to him. And Malachi does two things to bring that about, to achieve that end.

First, Malachi brings great reassurance. Most especially seen in our verses here this evening, verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1. Malachi brings great reassurance.

But Malachi, secondly, is also a shot across the bowels. As you read on through Malachi, and we've got a flavor of it later in chapter 1, didn't we?

[11 : 45] Again and again, Malachi exposes the failings of his people. He exposes their true attitude and heart towards him in terms of their worship, their wedlock, their work, and their words.

He exposes what they're really like. And God's people are called then and now to faithful, wholehearted obedience to the Lord.

But only in response to his astonishing, faithful, overflowing love. It's not an ethereal, vague sort of love.

But a love demonstrated and promises made unkept. And so God says to you, his people this evening, I have loved you.

Four words that change everything. So let's look more closely at these first five verses on the two headings. So firstly, and more briefly, the foolishness of God's people who doubt God's love.

[12 : 46] The foolishness of God's people who doubt God's love. We see here in verses 1 and 2 that the questioning of God's love is not just some doubt over his emotional state, but rather a fundamental distrust of his covenant faithfulness to his people.

Look what it says. The Lord says to his people by the prophet Malachi, I have loved you. Those are astonishing words.

Especially when you think about who they are addressed to. God's people in Malachi's day and in every day before and since have been, from a human perspective, not up to much.

Just read through the scriptures. It is a catalog of human failure. But it is a catalog of human failure against the unchanging backdrop of God's unfailing faithfulness, his steadfast love.

That is the story of the Bible. God is faithful. And he's faithful to a rather unimpressive looking people. And what words of extraordinary grace and gentleness and kindness these are.

[13 : 59] Especially when we read on in the book of Malachi. As we see what these people are like. What grace he shows. That gives me a little comfort at least.

I'm sure it does you too. But the Lord says to his people, I have loved you. Where do you begin to unpack a statement like that?

God from the very beginning of the Bible has showed abundant blessings to his people. Again and again he showers blessings upon them. From creating Adam and Eve. Setting them in the Garden of Eden.

The paradise. Giving them that task of ruling and filling the earth. His graciousness to them immediately after the fall.

By not destroying them. But graciously promising a serpent crusher who would one day destroy the enemy. Looking on through the Bible account.

[14 : 57] We see God's love demonstrated again and again. His choosing of Abraham. His promises of a people. Place and blessing. His redemption.

From Egypt after years of slavery for his people. His giving of his law to his redeemed people. Again and again and again throughout history. God has in real ways demonstrated his love for his people.

But Malachi focuses us on one particular aspect of his love for his people. And that's unpacked for us as we see in a moment from verse 3.

God declares his steadfast love for his people. But what's more astonishing is the people's response.

But you say, how have you loved us? How? That's the sort of response that destroys a relationship.

[15 : 58] Imagine if my daughter, 15 or 20 years down the line, responds to my words of affection. I have loved you. With the question, how?

How have you loved me, Dad? Prove it. It's devastating, isn't it? All the provision. All the early mornings. All those changed nappies.

All those bowls of porridge made. I think it's approaching a thousand already. Clothes bought. Baths run. Hospital visits made. A shoulder to cry on.

Years of love demonstrated. And yet, to turn around and say, how have you loved me? It's shocking, isn't it? And here, the people of God say, how?

How have you loved us, God? They demand proof. Show us. Prove it. Now, it can be quite easy, can't it, to condemn them.

[16 : 59] To stand back and think, how could they do that? But a moment of self-reflection would expose our own hearts to similar sentiments from time to time. Perhaps not at this very moment.

But perhaps at moments in the past or moments yet to come. Your circumstances are such that you doubt God's love. You say, you love me, God? Prove it.

Prove it. Prove it. Prove it. Prove it. And the people at this point, as we've seen, consider their circumstances and they conclude, God doesn't or mustn't love us very much.

They forget all that God's done for them. All that he's spoken to them. All those promises. And instead, they look at their surroundings, their immediate situation. They draw conclusions about God from that.

It's very easy to do that, isn't it? I know I do. We relate to God according to what he's revealed, don't we? We relate to God about what he said about himself, not according to our assessment about our own situation.

[18 : 03] But God responds to their doubts. He brings words of great reassurance of his continued and unwavering love for his people here. And it's an assurance that his people need in every age because we're forgetting, doubting people.

So let's look on to our second point, verses 2 to 5. We see the faithful God who demonstrates his love for his people. The faithful God who demonstrates his love for his people.

The Lord declares to his people here, I have loved you. But the evidence he gives is perhaps not where you or I might go if we're looking to defend God's love for his people.

The Lord says, Is not Esau Jacob's brother? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.

Jacob and Esau, they were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. And before their birth, the Lord declared that the older son, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob.

[19 : 13] Now normally, the pattern of hereditary follows the older son, but here, the line of promise would run through the younger. The choice of the Lord to bless the younger rather than the older is not based on anything inherently good or virtuous about Jacob.

But rather, it's on the Lord's sovereign election of one and his rejection of the other. Neither Jacob or Esau were deserving of God's grace, were they?

Come to think of it, is there anyone in the Bible that is deserving of God's grace? Anyone in human history? Anyone in this room who is deserving of God's grace?

And the answer is no, not one. It is only because of God's grace and mercy. Only because of his sovereign choice and grace that Jacob has chosen.

And as we trace the story on, we know that Jacob's line becomes Israel, the people of God. And we also know that Esau proved to be a real thorn in the side for Israel.

[20 : 24] Esau's line becomes Edom. The Edomites, in Numbers chapter 20, they try and prevent Israel from occupying the land God gave them. In 1 Samuel, they are listed among with all the other nations as major enemies of God.

And through the prophets, again and again, they are seen as a symbol of enmity between God and Israel. The conflict that began in Rebekah's womb continues down through the generations.

And really, it's a small part of the conflict that runs right from Genesis chapter 3 to the end of Revelation. The great conflict between the seed of God's people and the seed of the serpent.

It is a conflict that's played out in every age. A conflict that God's people experience down through the ages. But it is a conflict that God wins.

And here in Malachi chapter 1, we are reminded again of God's victory over his enemies and over his people's enemies. The Lord reminds his people what he has done to the descendants of Esau.

[21 : 39] He has laid waste Edom's hill country and left his heritage to the jackals. They have been destroyed just as he promised. Even if they try to rebuild themselves, they will fail.

Unlike Israel, there would be no return from exile for the Edomites who, like Israel, had been oppressed by Babylon. I have loved you, says the Lord.

And just look back in history. I've kept my promise to you. You are no longer exiles. And your enemy is Edom. I have wiped off the map.

I've done this so that you will know and be able to say, verse 5, Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel.

The words and actions of the Lord confirm to his people in Malachi's day. It reassures them of his love for them. He has destroyed their enemies.

[22 : 42] He has kept his ancient promises. Promises stretching back hundreds of years. Right back to Jacob and Esau. God has kept those promises.

And despite Israel's sin, they were no better than Edomites. Despite their sin, God did not remove his long-term plan to bless his people.

And to bless all the nations through Israel's Messiah. His people are to be assured of God's love. Because of his mercy shown to them. He spares them.

And these are reassuring words for us today. God demonstrates his love for us by defeating our enemies. That is the emphasis here in Malachi chapter 1.

God demonstrates his love for us today by defeating our enemies. Our enemies today are not other nations. We don't have the Edomites as our enemies.

[23 : 44] But our enemies are the spiritual forces of evil. Forces that manifest themselves in opposition to the gospel in all sorts of ways. Both within and without the church.

The great enemy, the seed of the serpent, will use all sorts of tactics. To disrupt and discourage churches and individual Christians. And we know that through his death on the cross, the Lord Jesus has triumphed over those very enemies.

It is a victory already won. But not yet fully seen. We know that our enemies will in the end be destroyed. Look on to the end of Revelation chapter 20.

And we read about the final destination of Satan thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur. And it's shocking, isn't it, as we read that. But it's not just Malachi here that speaks of the destruction of enemies.

Nor is it a quirk of Revelation. The Lord Jesus himself speaks more clearly and strikingly than anyone else speaks of the coming destruction of God's enemies. Matthew chapter 51.

[24 : 58] Jesus speaking of the coming judgment. We'll say on that day. Depart from me, you cursed into the eternal fire. Prepared for the devil and his angels.

These will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous into eternal life. The Lord's chosen people.

He will protect. He will keep. That is how you know God loves you. He defeats your enemies.

And he doesn't destroy you. We may not see that now. But one day we will. We will see it to be so.

The victory that Jesus decisively won on the cross will one day be seen when he comes to consummate his kingdom. His people will realize their salvation. And those who are not his people will be destroyed.

[26 : 01] And that is sobering, isn't it? It's deeply sobering. If you are here this evening and have not trusted in the Lord for your salvation, then you are an enemy of God.

There is no third way. And that is the Bible's testimony from beginning to end. By nature, all of us are alienated from God.

Hostile in mind toward him, says the Apostle Paul. And it's only by his grace held out to us in the gospel that you or I have any hope.

And so the question is not, am I one of the chosen? But will I trust in him for salvation? We know that on merit, God's people are no better off than Edom.

God's people don't deserve anything less than what the Edomites get. But God, because of his astounding, astonishing grace, he does not treat us as our sins deserve.

[27 : 08] Rather, he makes us, even people like us, his people. He has mercy on whom he will have mercy.

That makes no sense to us, does it? If we're honest, we would fail completely to make a convincing case as to why we should be chosen by God and not somebody else. But that is how God works.

It is how he's always worked. And his grace, in the same moment that it brings us to our knees as it humbles us, it also gives great reassurance. He has chosen you.

Nothing will change his mind. He will never leave you nor forsake you. And he will destroy your enemies. Now, sobering, isn't it, these words in Malachi chapter 1?

Sobering what we read about God's enemies. But for God's people, this is greatly reassuring. God loves you. It's not because of anything good about you, no merit in yourself, but he's chosen you.

[28 : 20] Jacob I have loved. Esau I have hated. So, if you feel, or have ever felt, or one day will feel, that God does not love you, then these verses are the tonic you need to hear.

God has loved you. He chose you through no merit of your own. He chose Jacob, a very undeserving sort of chap.

And to Jacob and all his descendants, the people of God, ancient and new, God has made sure and certain promises, a steadfast love that endures forever, no matter our circumstances, no matter how things might look.

He has loved you. He does not subject you to eternal judgment because, in his mercy, he saves us from the judgment we deserve.

And he destroys his enemies. The only man who ever lived and deserved God's mercy, the only one who perfectly obeyed, he took upon himself the destruction that we deserved.

[29 : 37] Jesus Christ died in our place. The Lord's right anger at our sin poured out on him and so that we might experience the love that he merited.

The overwhelming and convincing proof of God's love is that he has not dealt with our sins as we deserve, but has had mercy on us in Jesus Christ and his atoning death.

That is how you and I know God loves us. Not by looking at our circumstances, not by judging if our felt needs have been met.

If I go on those things, then God will always end up seeming to be a stooge and not doing enough for us. But if we remember his grace and mercy to us, knowing what we really deserve, then we will know that God loves us.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

[30 : 53] I have loved you, says the Lord. Jacob I have loved through no merit of his own, nothing virtuous about him, but only by the sovereign choice of the Lord.

And what God chooses, he does not let go. And that is greatly reassuring.

It was greatly reassuring to the readers of Malachi's day, knowing that they could look back on all that God had done for his people through the past, unfailing promises. I have loved you, says the Lord.

And how are we to respond? Well, we're to be encouraged.

We are to know God's love towards his people. Be reassured. And let me read and close with some words of tender grace from the end of the book.

[32 : 06] Malachi chapter 3, verse 16. This is the intended response Malachi hoped for, and that he intends from the church today. And this is to be our response always to the word of God, and to the knowledge that he has loved you.

Malachi chapter 3, verse 16. Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another, and the Lord paid attention and heard them.

And a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasure possession.

I will spare them, as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

The Lord's people, his treasure possession, he has loved you. Do you know that? He loves you.

[33 : 15] Let me pray. Let me pray. Our Father God in heaven, we thank you for your word to us this evening.

We thank you that you are a God, rich in mercy, overflowing with grace. How we know our own hearts, how we know we're undeserving of your grace.

But we thank you for the great reassurance of your word, that you have loved your people, and that you have demonstrated it in real ways. So, encourage our hearts, assure us, for we ask it, in Jesus' name.

Amen.