

God's Love for His People

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Date: 27 October 2024

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[0:00] Well, imagine with me, if you will, a wedding service. But bride and groom are standing at the front of the church.

The groom has scrubbed up pretty well for the day. Welcome has been given, songs have been sung, prayers have been offered, and the vows have just been taken.

And as they're at the front of the church and have finished taking their vows, just before the minister pronounces them husband and wife, I want you to imagine in that moment that the bride turns to her husband and says, just hang on a minute, I've got something I want to say.

As I took those vows there, in front of this congregation, and before God, as I took those vows to you, I want you to know that although I spoke those words, with my lips, in my heart and mind, I was actually thinking about someone else.

Okay, we're married, and yes, I've just spoken those words, those vows, but actually, in my heart, it isn't really yours anymore.

[1:17] Honestly, I'm pretty disappointed. I'm pretty disillusioned with you. Okay, let's carry on with the service.

What would you think? What would your response be? If you were at a wedding and you heard that exchange between a bride to her groom, a wife to her now husband, it would be pretty shocking, wouldn't it?

Outwardly, externally, we've heard her make a commitment to this man. But then she's just told us moments later that actually in her heart and in her mind, she doesn't mean it.

She's really just given up on him and is actually thinking about someone else. Dear friends, welcome to the world of Malachi.

Welcome to the world of Malachi. Welcome to the situation of God's people as we open and turn up to the book of Malachi. Except in this story, the bride and the groom are God and his people.

[2:22] The Bible uses in a number of places language of bride and groom to talk about the relationship between God and his people. God, the faithful husband and groom.

God's people, the often faithless bride. And that is the situation right at the end of the Old Testament. Malachi, meaning messenger, that the last of God's prophets to speak.

After him, it's 400 years of, well, silence. Until we hear of a voice calling in the wilderness. And this is how God's people are living.

Just like that bride. Externally, I suppose, okay, God, we need to kind of keep to this relationship we have. But inside, they're heartless, loveless, faithless.

Malachi speaks and is sent by God to be a prophet of God in a time where God's people are living out lip service religion. Lip service religion.

[3:29] Let me show you this from Malachi. If you have a physical Bible, you might find it easier to flick a little, but I'm sure it'll work well on a phone. Let me just show you a few verses to show you that. Look down to chapter one, verse six.

The very end of chapter one, verse six. God says to them, you have despised my name. Look down to verse 12, to verse 12.

It says in verse 12, but you profane it. They are profaning God's name. That is, they're blaspheming his name. If you go over to verse 14, you see they're cheating God.

Go down to chapter two and verse eight. God says to them, you have turned aside from my way.

Go down to chapter two, verse 16.

The very last word of verse 16. They are faithless. Faithless in marriage and faithless towards God. Then look at verse 17.

[4:34] God says, you've wearied me. You have wearied the Lord. He's tired of them. Chapter three, verse seven. If you turn over to chapter three, verse seven.

This is a beautiful invitation and we're going to return to it a little bit later. But what does God say to them? He says, you need to return to me. You only say to someone to return if they've left, if they've departed.

Chapter three, verse eight. They've robbed God. You are robbing me, says God. Chapter three, 14. This is the last one we'll look at. Chapter three, 14. They're saying it's vain to serve God.

What profit is it? And God goes on to say they're calling evil good and good evil. They're saying this is pointless. Why are we here?

What's the point? It's quite an indictment, isn't it? There's a lot of charges that God has to bring to his people here. It's lip service religion. They haven't totally given up, but they're just about given up.

[5:39] They're at church. They're gathering to worship, but they do not want to be there. And in their hearts, they're a million miles away doing something else. They're the bride who says to the groom, okay, we're married, but I don't even really care.

And so what does God do? What does God say? How is he going to bring them back? Well, it's into this setting of faithless people that God once again comes to show his faithfulness, his faithfulness to them and his love for them, his love for them.

And that brings us to our first point this evening. Into that world, into that situation, God speaks through his messenger. Malachi means messenger. It is his name, but he's a messenger. He speaks through Malachi to his people and declares his love for them.

That's our first point this evening. God's love declared. God's love declared. What does God say there? Chapter one, verse two. I have loved you, says the Lord.

I have loved you, says the Lord. And who is God speaking to? Verse one. The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. Israel meaning God's people.

[7:01] Into that mess and muck and mire, God comes through Malachi and says to his people, I love you. We live in a day, don't we, where there's lots of kind of confusion or the very best mixed messages about love.

We're told love is love. But if you ask someone to define that, well, they normally can't. Or we are often tempted to say, or we certainly hear that love is kind of a purely emotional thing.

We tell people that we love them to kind of give them a warm, fuzzy feeling for 20 minutes. It functions like kind of emotional caffeine. We can kind of hold on to a bit. It wears off.

I need it. I'm going to get it from somewhere or from someone else. But the love of God, the love of God for his people, it is greater.

It's of a different order than our love because God is of a different order. It's higher, wider, deeper than any kind of love. We've sung about some of that already this evening. So how so?

[8:05] How is God's love different? Well, we'll see some more later. We're going to see some more later in the passage. But surely one way it's different is God's sheer and utter commitment to love his people.

His love's sheer resilience and endurance, his ever-present and steadfast nature. I love you, says God to his people. We're at the end of the Old Testament, as we said.

This morning we were in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. This evening we're in the last.

This morning we were in the narrative of Jacob. And Malachi comes to speak to God's people about 1,300 years after that.

About 1,300 years have passed. And a lot has happened in that time in the kind of 37 books that go between Genesis and Malachi. God's people have gone down into Egypt.

They've prospered. They became slaves. They've been taken out in the Exodus, haven't they?

They've gone into the land under Joshua. They've lived in the land. They've been given kings to rule over them.

[9:14] They've rebelled against God. And nations were taken into exile. Remember, the kingdom splits. Out goes Israel to the north. Then the two tribes left. Judah and little Benjamin get taken a little later.

And now they're back in the land. Again, we'll think a little bit more about that later. But they're back in the land. So much has happened in redemptive history.

Kings have come and kings have gone. Prophets have come and prophets have gone. Nations have risen. Nations have fallen. Ages have passed on the earth. And through it all, even when sin has been a closer friend to God's people than God, God has loved his people with a steadfast, unbreakable, unwavering love.

And friends, we actually get that in verse 1. What does verse 1 say? That the oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

Friends, when Malachi and the people here, they aren't actually in Israel. They're in Judah. At this time, after the exile, Israel as a nation, it doesn't actually exist.

[10:28] They get carried off and really never fully come back to the land. So what is it saying there in verse 1 when it's the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi?

It means that God remembers his people. He remembers his people. He's saying, you're my people, my people. And it actually chimes and strikes a note of hope.

A note of hope that God loves his people and he will see them safe. In his love. Because the question really here at the start of Malachi is, why does he start his prophecy here?

We're going to see over the coming weeks that six times in this prophecy, God kind of brings charges to his people. A little bit like a courtroom or a legal setting. He brings charges to his people. God brings a charge. They ask a question back. And God kind of defends himself. And in a sense, those could be dealt with in any order. You're going to see as we go through the book, or if you read it a little later yourself, it's not very long.

[11:34] You'll see in some sense it could come in any order. But why does he start here? Why does he start here with his love? Because it's as his people understand and remember and hear God say he loves them, that their hearts will be warmed to come back to him.

One commentator says this letter is kind of like a valentine. I love you. And God says there in chapter 3, verse 7, the great invitation, come back to me.

I love you. Return to me. And I will return to you. It's true that all of us at certain times can forget God's love.

We can all be prone to spiritual amnesia. Maybe some of us this evening, we've forgotten God loves us. And as the result, we're actually all at sea in the Christian life.

Waves of sin have washed over our hearts, and we're kind of hollow inside. We're kind of like the bride to the husband, but us to God, we're kind of like, all right, God, I'm doing this Christianity thing.

[12:46] But inside, we're all over the place. Our lives tell a very different story. We know at times our hearts can stray, and we can have lip service religion.

So how do we come back? Dear friends, it is to gaze at and to remember and marvel at the love of God. The love of God that never departs or leaves his people.

The door is always open. Chapter 3, verse 7 is such a key verse. Return to God, and he will return to you. That is the invitation of Malachi.

So dear friends, this evening, if you find yourself in an ocean or a sea of sin, the gospel invitation of Malachi is to return to Jesus, and he will wash you clean.

He will. But the love of God is a heavy, weighty, somber, it's a serious thing. It is an awesome thing.

[13:53] And it does remand a response. You see, right there in verse 1, what do we see? That this is an oracle of the word of the Lord. It's an oracle, or it can be translated burden.

And often these oracles or burdens, they're actually not normally given to Israel or given to God's people. They're given to the nations as a word of judgment. You see, that this is an oracle tells us that God's love is an awesome thing and that God is not to be trifled with.

We're going to see that later on in this short prophecy, that judgment is coming to those who reject God's love. That Israel here, that Judah here, God's people, they can't keep kind of toying with God's love and playing around with it and being faithless as if it'll kind of just be okay.

No, they need to return to God. It demands a response of our hearts to wholly come to God again.

So, dear friends, if you know that you have wandered from the Lord Jesus, return to him and he will return to you.

But many of us do know God's love. And Malachi this evening, and Malachi, I trust, over the coming weeks will encourage us again to stay in God's love, to remember it, to live our Christian lives out from there, from the love of God that we have in Christ.

[15:13] Jesus tells his disciples in John chapter 15, he says to them, Abide in my love. Live in my love. Stay in my love. Be glued to my love with a glue that will never, ever move you.

Let it anchor you in the Christian life. If you want to see what happens, if you move away from the love of God, if you drift from that safe harbor, read Malachi, and you'll see what a disaster it is. So, dear friends, this evening, if you know the great love of God in Christ, stay there. May that be your anchor, knowing that Christ will hold you fast there. Remain in his love. Look to his love. Abide in his love. And that brings us to our second point, and our second point, God tells them he loved them, but they doubt it. God's love doubted. God declares his love. He assures them of his covenant, unbreakable love. And they speak right back. What do they say in verse 2? How have you loved us? How have you loved us?

[16:15] That's the people returning a question to God. How have you loved us? Now, I want us to know that this is not a kind of genuine question, really.

If you're here this evening with genuine questions, please always bring your genuine questions. But from their tone and from their behavior, we know that this is a question really born of pride. It's a deflecting kind of question. If you've been in a school classroom for more than about 45 seconds, you have heard a question like this from someone in class who does not want to get to work. They know exactly when the homework's due, exactly when the exam's coming, but they're just going to keep asking the teacher to put things off. Because they don't want to deal with the reality of what's in front of them. That is this kind of question. They're throwing God's love back in his face. The pain of it is a little like this. Some of you have been dropped off recently, maybe to Aberdeen, or some of you have done the dropping off of college, university students at university, moving to a new city or town for university or work.

[17:20] Well, imagine that day you are dropped off, or the day you drop someone off, drop off your son or daughter. You've unpacked, you've got already, they've got their place in their new flat or halls or whatever it is.

And you're all ready for the day. It's four o'clock, time to make the long journey home. And mum and dad stand there and they say to their son or daughter, in this great kind of momentous moment after 18, 19, 20 years, whatever it is, they're going to leave them to make their way in the world. And they say to them, we love you. Imagine in that moment their son or daughter turns around and says, yeah, how have you loved me? How have you loved me? Imagine the pain of that, 18 years of providing for them, feeding them, caring for them, pouring your life out into them, and all they can say is, yeah, how have you loved me? That is how God's people are treating God here.

It's pride, it's blindness to what God has done in caring for and blessing his people. So the question is, why are they doubting? Why are they doubting?

[18:25] Why are they prone to ask it? Why are they so lost and faithless? Well, I think part of that answer is because they're reading God's love through their circumstances.

They're trying to understand the love of God through their circumstances. Remember some of the history. We've been over a little bit of it already. God's people were in the promised land. They were in the promised land, but they turned from God. They sinned, and they were taken out of the promised land. And then Judah, under Ezra and Nehemiah, they've been brought back into the promised land.

And we're about 80 or 100 years after Ezra and Nehemiah come back. And life for God's people, it isn't up to very much now.

It pales in comparison as to life as it was before. But politically, Judah is weak. They still have Persian overlords. There's no king on David's throne.

[19:25] God promised a king on David's throne forever. Where is he? Religiously, the temple, which was built under Solomon, it was destroyed.

It's been rebuilt, but it is not as impressive as it was under Solomon. Do you remember some TV reboots you get? Kind of some old classic from the, well, for me, a classic's kind of from the 90s. Okay, maybe some of us, it's a little further back. You get a classic TV program. It gets rebooted, and you think, that just isn't as good as it was before. That's what the temple's like. It's just not the same.

They're waiting on God's promises to be fulfilled. And as they wait, they think God has failed them. Homes have been torn down. Jerusalem was looted.

Promises seem unfulfilled. God, how have you loved us? Circumstances aren't as they would like. They were disillusioned, and it's turned to disobedience, and it's turned to denial of God's love. [20 : 28] We can do that too, can't we? We can read God's love through circumstances. Do you know how you sometimes get a flower or a daisy? You pick it out, the grass, and you pull the petals off.

He loves me. That things are going well. Oh, things aren't going so well. He loves me not. I got a new job. He loves me. Oh, I lost my job.

He loves me not. My computer worked today. He loves me. My computer crashed at 9.30. I got nothing done. He loves me not. The kids slept through the night.

This is the one that you can see is close to my heart. He loves me. The kids didn't sleep through the night. He loves me not. And we come to ask ourselves, based on our circumstances, does God love us?

Friends, Malachi, in these verses this evening, are going to be a reminder that we should read our circumstances through the love of God and not the other way around. Circumstances don't dictate God's love for you.

[21 : 31] God dictates God's love for you. God does not love you less because you got a P45 in the post this week or got sick. God does not love you more because you got a new job and got through the interview or haven't needed a GP for a year.

Now, that isn't to say there aren't seasons in life where we need to cry to God for help or we praise him when things are going well and prayers are answered. But it is to know that the yardstick, the tape measure, the plumb line of God's love for you is God in Christ crucified.

John writes this in his first letter, 1 John chapter 4, in this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world that we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Dear friends, whatever circumstances you find yourself in this evening, if you need assurance of God's love, look to Christ, look to the cross, to sins forgiven, to new life in Christ.

[22 : 47] It's what we're thinking about this morning, the treasured, eternal inheritance we have in Jesus. That is the measure of God's love for us.

Look to Christ and all that he has done for us. God then responds to their question and demonstrates how he has loved them.

He demonstrates, he tells them his love, they doubt his love, but thirdly, he demonstrates his love. And this is our third and final point. And he does this in two ways. First, God says he chose them. His first point is he says he chose a people. Just go to the middle of verse two there of Malachi. I have loved you, says the Lord, but you say, how have you loved us? God's response is this.

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

[23 : 43] We see God's love for us in that he chose Jacob and hated Esau. Now that's quite surprising, isn't it?

That's to be not necessarily where we would think to go about how God might demonstrate his love. What would you have guessed? How have you loved us?

What would we put in there for how God has loved his people? Remember, he's got all the other 38 books of the Old Testament, basically all of redemptive history to choose from of how he demonstrated his love.

Oh, I called Abraham. That's how I loved you. Oh, I rescued you from Egypt when you were in slavery. I gave you the promised land. I brought you back to the promised land. So many ways, but God chooses this.

Chooses these offense from Genesis, Jacob and Esau, the twin children of Isaac, Abraham's grandchildren. So why this?

[24 : 42] Why this as God demonstrates and shows his love? Because it is an example of utterly undeserved love. Utterly undeserved, unconditional love.

You see, they're twins, aren't they? But born at the same time. And as we heard from Romans, as it was read earlier, God chose Jacob, but before he'd done anything or before him or Esau had done anything.

It is undeserved, unconditional love. You see, even as you read through Genesis, as we've been working through in the mornings and you go through the narrative, you're really left thinking neither

deserves God's love.

And you would be right. Esau's off doing his kind of bare grills bit, isn't he? Hunting and fishing and doing all those kind of things. And Jacob is kind of a home bird. But we see both of them, aren't they?

They're deceitful. They're liars. Do we either deserve God's love? No. But God chose Jacob and hated Esau. It's strange to our ears when God talks about hating Esau.

[25 : 54] But the language of love and hate here is the language of covenant. The closest maybe we can think, think marriage. Think marriage.

A husband says to his wife, and a wife should say to her husband, I choose you. And what is the implication? By forsaking all others. Forsaking all others.

It's the language of exclusivity. Think about our illustration at the start. What's wrong with what the bride does? Well, there's lots of it. But the main thing, her vows are meant to be an exclusive commitment to her husband.

Forsaking all others. I'm yours. And this is God saying to his people, saying to his people, forsaking all others. I am yours, and you are mine forever.

This topic, and the way God chooses to show his love here, God's choosing of Jacob, and his rejecting of Esau, and the Edomites, his descendants, can get us in knots.

[26 : 56] It is difficult. And there is a sense, of course, as we think about God's choosing, or we think about election, that part of it is a mystery.

But think about what God is saying here, and think about the alternative. What's the alternative? Imagine God saying to Jacob and Esau, or saying to Isaac, listen, these twins are going to be born. I don't know which one to choose, so I'm just going to see how they get on. Let's just see if they're up to the mark. I'm going to make them earn it. Jacob and Esau grow up a little bit.

They're out of high chairs. They're toddling around. Their dad sits them down and says, boys, it's actually a competition to earn God's love. And God is going to check in with you in 20 years to see how you're getting on.

Can you imagine the fear? Can you imagine the doubt, the lack of assurance? Have I done enough? Actually, have I done enough more than him? Am I worthy enough? None of them would be worthy enough to earn it.

[27 : 59] So the good news of God's choosing and of God saying, I've loved you this way, is that salvation doesn't rest on us and what we do. That is what Rob prayed earlier.

That is what Paul writes in Romans 9 and Ephesians 1. It doesn't rest on what we do. It rests on the utter mercy and sovereignty of God. The good news of salvation is that God's love doesn't need to be provoked.

It doesn't need to be stirred up by us. God loves us and has chosen a people because that's who he is. It's not about being worthy enough or good enough.

It's actually that God saw our unworthiness and our unloveliness and said, I'm going to set my love on you because that's who I am. It's not because God was lonely.

We worship a triune God. God wasn't lonely. He didn't need the attention. It's that that who he is. He sees sinners and he wants to set his love on them.

[29 : 03] Do you see how free it is? Do you see how undeserved, unmerited, while they were in the womb, before they were born, God set his love on Jacob? The 19th century free church minister, Horatius Bonner says this, nothing in us, nothing in the world, nothing in heaven or earth, nothing in men or angels can produce the love of God.

It was uncreated, unbought, undeserved, unfathomable. God loved the sinner because he was God and because the sinner was a sinner.

As God says to his people here, I've chosen Jacob. That is his language of saying, I've chosen a people. I've chosen a people. And often as we focus on this, yes, part of it is a mystery, but we can often get in knots because actually we often focus on ourselves, don't we?

We can default to the question, well, am I chosen? But actually as we see God's choosing or election spoken about in the Bible, that that's not how it's ever framed.

It's always framed as, well, what is God like? What is God like? Who is God?

[30 : 21] Who is God? He's one who freely offers and sets his love on those who do not deserve it. That's part of what Paul writes in Romans 9 that was read earlier.

He says this, when they were not yet born, Jacob and Esau, and none had done either good or bad, he called Jacob because of him who calls, because of what God is like, because he's so full of love for the unlovely.

And therefore, the doctrine of election, of God's choosing, is not meant to baffle us as much as it's meant to drive us to our knees in humility. Think about God's people here.

They're heartless. They're faithless. They're not following God, but when they see God come and say, I loved you. I chose you. It's meant to drive them to their knees on humility.

Really, us. Us. Yes, you. You. Oh, that God would choose us and bring a people to himself through Christ. What grace.

[31 : 21] What grace. And often if we don't see it, it's because we don't see the size of our sin.

Often we can reduce our sin and think, yeah, God really ought to love us.

But no, our sin is so great. Our wrong, it is so vast. That it is an awesome thing that God would set his love upon us in Christ.

God's choosing floodlight set a spotlight on God's mercy and should stop us thinking we have any merits or pretense that we should have God's love.

That he owes it to us. He doesn't owe it to us. He gives it to us freely. And that ought to drive us to our knees. It should humble Israel to return to God. And it should humble us to worship and praise God.

That he would choose a people. That he would send a savior. And he would invite us to come to him. Secondly and finally, our final point. How else does God show his love?

[32 : 18] In that he defeats our enemies. Verse 4. If Edom says, We are shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins. The Lord of hosts, that is the Lord of armies, 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. So at this stage, at this stage, Edom is destroyed.

And there's obviously a bit of rumor there, isn't there? That they might rebuild. What if they say, Oh, we're just going to rebuild the ruins. Well, God says, No, they will be destroyed.

And Edom is destroyed even today, isn't it? You hear plenty of other places that are mentioned on the Bible in the news, don't you? You hear of Lebanon. You hear of Syria.

But when did you last hear of Edom? Why do you not hear of Edom? Because God said it would be destroyed. A wicked and evil people who rejected the Lord.

[33 : 21] And so they were destroyed. God defeats and destroys his enemy. But part of knowing we're loved is knowing that harm won't come to us.

That harm won't come to us. What dad who says he loves his children intentionally let harm come in their way? No, he doesn't.

He protects them and looks after them. Love protects. And God's love will forever protect his people from harm. He will see us safely home.

What did we hear this morning? We truly are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus. Nothing can separate us from his love. So who are our enemies today?

Well, God's people today are enemies. Our enemies are not the Edomites. No, who are our enemies? The devil, the flesh, sin, and hell, death itself.

[34 : 18] And they are defeated in Christ. On the cross of Christ, he defeated our enemies. They are defeated, awaiting final destruction. And it will be decisively seen when Christ returns.

And what's the result of all this? Verse 5, what's the result? Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall see, great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. Part of knowing God's love is knowing God reigns, even beyond the border of Israel.

God is sovereign. And his people will say, how great is our God. We're about to sing as we close. Love divine, all love's excelling.

And that is that God's love is greater than any other love. Dear friends, this evening, if you don't know the love of God, then come to him and let him show it to you. But if you do know the love of God, then abide there both now and always.

Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your love. Your love that sent your one and only son to be our savior.

[35 : 26] Your love, which from all eternity set to choose a people in Christ who adopt sinners into your family and make us your own. May both this evening and always our response to your love be

one of praise and wonder and wanting to swim ever deeper in the waters and in the knowledge of your love for us.

May we forever marvel and turn to you with faithful hearts, full of love in response to your great love for us. And we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.