

Talk: Malachi 1:1-5 (page 960)

In our culture, January is a time for getting tough with ourselves; new resolutions are often made to try harder, be better etc.

We've had the excess, and now we pay the price!

It felt appropriate, then, for us to spend this month in one of the toughest books of the Old Testament, one which is all about preparing for the coming of Jesus, the Promised One; the last one, in fact,

Read Malachi 1:1

An oracle; literally, a burden

The LORD's word!! That is pretty important

His word *to Israel*!! His people – us.

Through his messenger, Malachi!

Nothing else told us about this prophet.

His name simply means 'my messenger, even, my angel, suggesting the prophet is nothing compared with the message he brings.

Serious stuff, then!

It is thought most likely that he was given this message during the period after the return from exile.

First Ezra then Nehemiah had inspired the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but after some time Nehemiah had returned to Persia.

Without Nehemiah's leadership, within a few short years the Israelites backslid: tithes ignored, Sabbath broken, people intermarried, priests were corrupt.

Isn't this all so typical?

You know that feeling I really will start exercising, cut down on chocolate, address that issue I have with my sister, read my Bible every day...

but then it's only a few weeks into the NY before we realise those good intentions are ignored, nothing has changed! We are all so fickle!

They were also, falling away so quickly.

And so this prophet is raised up; the final message from God before a long silence of over 400 years!

Needless to say, with the problems which had emerged so quickly among the Jews of Jerusalem, we would expect

Malachi to have stern words for them, and as we shall see over the next few weeks, that is certainly the case.

That isn't how he begins, though, and I am thrilled that our focus this morning is wonderfully positive.

Yes, to follow the Lord, to be his people is a matter of holy living, of obedience, of humbling ourselves before him.

The problem throughout history, though, has been that that is where people have started.

'Christianity is all about rules and regulations, about duties, about guilt feelings...'

Malachi is totally in line with the rest of God's Word, though, when he stresses that, important as those things are, that is not where it all starts.

Always, before the Law, we have the Gospel.

It was the case with the 10 Commandments (**Exodus 20**); not, 'live like this and I will save you.'

Rather, 'I have saved you, so this is how you should live!!!'

We don't tell our children: 'If you are good, I'll be your Dad!' But, 'I am your Dad, so be good!!!'

The starting point for everything God does with men and women is not: 'they must earn my favours', but, 'I love them!' (**Deuteronomy 7:6-8**)

And that is the great reminder with which Malachi begins his prophecy, and it is the context we need to bear in mind for all his criticisms which will follow.

1) God's love declared (Read v2a)

'I have loved you!'

Aren't those amazing words to hear from the mouth of the living and true God?

Especially when we bear in mind their failure and faithlessness.

The Hebrew structure makes it plain, too,

not *'I used to love you'*, but *'I have, and still do love you!'*

That must be the case, because we shall see later that he

declares the absolute truth: **3:6**

Now, I don't know how you are feeling this morning.

Perhaps you came thinking,

'back to these minor prophets: all doom and gloom,'

Or maybe it is more personal.

You came aware of how weak your faith is, how miserably you have failed to follow Jesus this past week, how deeply you must have offended God.

Perhaps you come expecting and even wanting to be made to feel bad, a failure, no use...

Well, I call you to look up, the message God's Spirit would declare to you this morning before anything else is this one:

'I have loved you!!!'

Remember, these are not *my* words, me being nice in the after-glow of Christmas, this is **God's** eternal word to his people: **'I love you!!!'**

Isn't that tremendous???

(Where is the 'Amen!?!')

So that is the place we must always start.

However, unfortunately it rarely is.

Was it your thought as you settled down last night, as you opened your eyes this morning, as you sat down when you came in?

Malachi knew it wasn't a natural thought for his listeners, and, in the style which is peculiar to him, he imagines their response to God's declaration of love:

2) God's love doubted (Read v2b)

'How? In what way?'

Isn't this tragic?

They question the statement of their God, who has saved them, been so patient with them down through so many years.

The trouble is with that fickle nature we were mentioning before.

They aren't looking at history;

this isn't an intellectual interest being expressed in their doubt.

Rather they are looking around, and moaning:

'Life is tough, people make fun of us, worshipping you seems all cost and no gain... what difference does your love make to us?'

We might not be as honest, but there can be times when we have this attitude –

'huh, strange sort of love which doesn't deal with my health problem, sort out my relationship issue, find me a job, get rid of that awkward boss, do my homework for me...'

'Where is the evidence of God's love in my life???'

And so, Malachi brings the Lord's answer

3) God's love demonstrated (Read vv2c-4)

This is where we run into real problems.

It seems that God is saying:

'you should know I love you by the way I hate someone else!!!'

How can God say he hates someone?

Let me try and explain.

This mention of Jacob & Esau is a reference back to the origins of the Israelites as his people.

Their ancestor Abraham had Isaac, who in turn had twin sons, Esau and Jacob.

Neither of them were particularly impressive characters – as we can read back in **Genesis 25-28**

However, God chose to work through Jacob, rather than Esau. The wonder was not that he chose one rather than the other, but that he chose *either* of them!

Jacob went on to have his name changed to Israel, and he then had 12 sons who became the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Esau went on to have sons, too, and his descendants became the nations of Edom and Midian. – are you with me?

A thousand years later, by the time of the prophets, Edom was referred to as Esau quite regularly.

Tragically, instead of a close friendly relationship developing between these nations, the Edomites became increasingly bitter and envious of their distant relatives (you can read about this in the short prophecy of Obadiah), and now, as Malachi preaches, they were still being real thorns in the side of the returned Jews.

In fact, they had become a byword for all Israel's enemies, and for all God's enemies!

What the people are being told, therefore, is that although they might not see it at the moment, their God is at work removing their enemies from them.

The Edomites were particularly stubborn, but their doom was inevitable, because they were fighting against the Sovereign God and his people.

This is a message of reassurance that God is just.

We react at the use of the language of love and hate, but actually in their day, this was not the language of emotions or feelings, but was the language of covenants and agreements – kings could talk of loving or hating each other, even when they got on fine as individuals. They would say that David Cameron loves Nick Clegg, but hates Ed Miliband; Nicholas Sarkozy loves Angela Merkel, but hates David Cameron!)

Basically, God is saying: *'I am bound to you, not to them!'*

These statements from the Lord were declarations that God had bound himself to his people, sinful, weak and failing as they were –

and so, ultimately, he would bring them to absolute victory.

This is that covenant love, that unconditional love – grace.

Not because they deserved it, but because God had promised it! Doesn't that encourage you this morning?

It does me!!

God's love will never be taken away from us, once we are his we are always his!!

His for ever, only his; who the Lord and me shall part?

Ah, with what arrest of bliss Christ can fill the loving heart!

Heaven and earth may fade and flee,

firstborn light in gloom decline;

but while God and I shall be, I am his and he is mine.

(George W Robinson 1860's)

This is taught in the NT too, **John 10:28,29**

It is the great doctrine of assurance;

that our future security depends not on my strength or goodness or ability, but on his promises, his covenant, his love!
You may feel that your enemies keep returning, keep resurrecting themselves – that weakness you thought you had overcome suddenly rears its ugly head again, that sin from your past you thought you had put behind you comes back to haunt you, and Satan will use these things to whisper in your ear ‘*does God really love you???*’
Well, through Malachi he declares for all to hear – ‘*I have loved and still love you, my child; and a time is coming when I will put a stop to all the attacks and slanders and accusations and whispers of the enemy. My victory is certain – I am the Lord Almighty!*’
And so this introduction reaches its climax in the assurance of

4) God's love experienced (Read v5)

He encourages them: ‘*you will see it with your own eyes!*’
Reminds me of the words of Job in the middle of his awful situation: **Job 19:25-27**
The future for the child of God, for any who have put their faith in him, is absolutely certain.
For all our doubts and uncertainties here and now, as those loved by God, the time will come when we shall shout with all of heaven:

*‘Our Lord is great, even beyond the borders of Israel – even Monday to Saturday, he is our God, and he is great!
Even in Stevenage or at school or in the office, or at home...
God is great!!!’*

Where is the Amen again??

What a wonderful way for Malachi to begin this message – it is where we must all start, and what we must hang on to as the challenges of the next weeks stretch us at times to breaking. It is only that assurance which gives us the strength to live as we should.

It is an assurance which is real and certain, but not an encouragement to simply sit back. It is a message to strengthen our resolve and ultimately our own love for the God who loves us so much that he has committed himself totally to us.

Rules and commands are not enough motivation: we will only want to obey when we have grasped just how much we are loved!

This morning the eternal God is saying to us, ‘I have loved you!’

Look at that, as the starting point to seeking to live for me. ***I have loved you!!!***

Maybe, though, we are still tempted to ask the same question: ‘how?’

Well, the answer is to be found in the coming of the one we have been celebrating over the past few weeks:

Romans 5:8

the sacrifice of grace: he sent his One and only Son the victory of grace: **1 Peter 2:24**

Our sins are dealt with, our punishment has been paid, our guilt has been removed, our consciences have been cleansed!

All through this great covenant love of God, who provided himself as the sacrifice so we might become children of God. Have you ever realised this?

God would draw you into his family this morning. He wants you to know his love.

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He intends to lead you in victory over all that holds you and tangles you up.

Turn to him, acknowledge your need, rely on his death.