

Malachi 1

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[0 : 00] And if you can find Malachi again in your Bibles, that would be really helpful. There's a bit of a tendency today, I think, for people like us to prefer lighter things rather than heavier things.

We like light stuff, don't we? We like light, entertaining, funny stuff. We like triviality. But God knows that what we often need is something much more substantial to live.

We need something weightier to take into our minds and hearts. Heavier words that might be harder to hear, but actually in the long run are much better for us to swallow.

They go deeper down into us. And the whole book of Malachi gives us a good dose of deep, heavy spiritual medicine.

If you look at verse 1 of Malachi, chapter 1 in your Bibles, you'll see that the book itself has great weight. Malachi is given an oracle from God to speak to Israel.

[1 : 13] That word oracle, it can translate as burden. Malachi is burdened by a message that God gives him to speak to the people.

The message is heavy. Heavy not in the sense of it being boring or stuffy or too much information, God. But God speaks seriously and deeply.

So can you imagine this morning what might be the heaviest, weightiest, most sobering words that you can imagine hearing in the presence of God?

Angry words? Words of rejection, perhaps? I never knew you. How does God open this heavy message in verse 2?

What kinds of words does he use? Just look there. I have loved you. Those four words are the message that he gives, aren't they?

[2 : 24] And unlike what we might think of those four words, we hear them, don't we, in the movies, they're not light words. These words, rather than turning you all gooey and making Christianity a fluffy thing, they're not an invitation for us to relax spiritually.

They are words that are very troubling. They're spoken to weigh on you heavily this morning. Israel, my people, you church people, hear and feel the weight of these words.

I have loved you, says the Lord. So why does God choose to begin this heavy message of Malachi with these words?

Seems unexpected, doesn't it? Well, first of all, God's love is convicting. God's love is convicting. I don't blame you if it took a little bit longer to thumb through your Bibles and find the book of Malachi. It's just over two pages long, isn't it? It's not easy to find. A Scottish friend of mine used to say that Malachi, it's wee, but it's weighty. One commentator calls it a devastating little book.

[3 : 43] We're going to work through it over a few Sunday mornings. Even though it's small, it's heavy and it's weighty. And you might miss that in the opening few verses that we're going to look at this morning.

You could read the opening verses of Malachi and think that he is the softies prophet. What a great collection of calendar verses they are, aren't they, in verse 1 to 5.

God says, I love you. Sounds lovely, doesn't it? But you might have sensed that as we read on in the chapter earlier on, things are not well between God and his people.

This is not God putting his arm around his people and whispering sweet nothings in her ear. No, the whole book of Malachi is actually more like a row between God and his people.

It's full of accusations, accusations and excuses from the people. And the loving, faithful God confronts his unfaithful people. Because the relationship at this point has gone sour.

[4 : 51] God wants them to come back to him. Just a bit of context, it's about 450 years before Jesus Christ appears on the scene. And Malachi is speaking here to a group of people who are left behind, the remnants of God's people who've returned from captivity in Babylon.

Babylon, they were sent into exile. And then Babylon is invaded by Persia and the Persian emperor Cyrus sends them back to the land of Judah.

It's just after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when they rebuild the walls. It's after the rebuilding project led by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Zechariah.

And the people there back in the little land of Judah, the temple's rebuilt. It's not as it was in the days of Solomon, but there is a temple there. And there's a period of relative peace.

But spiritually, things are dry. Worship, we will see as we go through the book, is there, but it's formulaic and it's hypocritical.

[6 : 02] And so as Malachi speaks those words from God, he isn't relaxed. He isn't preaching about God's love with a smile on his face. These words come not immediately as a comfort, but as a convicting message.

And they lie heavily on his heart. It is not a mushy love. It is a covenant commitment that God has placed on his people like a marriage or between two allied kings.

So just imagine the scenario. In a room, in a house, maybe in the kitchen, there is a husband whose wife was out last night and she didn't come home.

And it turns out she's been unfaithful. And the two of them meet for a kind of face-off. And you can cut the tension with a knife and she stares at the floor and he looks at her and he has every right to lay into her about what happened.

But the conversation begins with him saying, I have loved you. And those words bring a moment of introspection, don't they?

[7 : 22] They gently shame her. Later on in the book, God is going to rebuke his people quite harshly. But his most shaming indictment actually on their cold hearts is his warm love for them.

God's love, we love hearing about it, don't we? It cheers us and it encourages us and it should as we know that his steadfast love endures forever for his people but his love is troubling.

It is very serious. It is a love that cuts into our hearts as we come to terms with our feelings for God. that we have not loved the God who has loved us so. When we turn from him in different ways and we do that, don't we?

If we love something else or if we spend a moment maybe backsliding even and living in a different way than what we should, we pretend to do, we pretend we can do that because we think God does not love us.

[8 : 33] We pretend that he's an abusive, nasty, hateful God and so it's okay to turn from him. But we've hated him in his love. To be baptised, to be a member of this church or any church, Christian church, to be a Christian is to be wonderfully marked by God's love.

But that is a serious and weighty thing. The water that was used to baptise Zayn, that is very heavy water.

It marks Zayn out as being loved by God. It is heavy and serious. To have his covenant love set on you, it is a heavy thing.

And if that has happened to you, you cannot ignore that, you cannot pretend that that's not the case. Who is the man who is offended when a woman sleeps with another man?

Well, all of us should be, shouldn't we? All of us should be offended by that. But of course, it's the husband, isn't it? He is the one who is offended most. The one who has set his love on her is most grieved by any unfaithfulness and any unfaithfulness towards God from his people is never just a casual goodbye.

[9 : 58] His true people cannot simply walk away from him. For God, it instigates a passion and holy jealousy for his people.

A husband would say, wouldn't he, well, that kind of thing happens all the time. It is an awful thing and it's a regrettable thing in society but if my love did that, that's a different thing altogether.

And God's love, you see, convicts us when we or if we turn from him. That is serious because he has loved us and so he cares what we do especially.

He cares how we feel or how we don't feel. Convicted by his love. But there is a problem with that, isn't there?

Because his love can only convict us this morning if we actually believe it's true. His love convicts us but secondly, God's love is doubted.

[11 : 01] I have loved you, God says to his people. But do you believe that? God loves you. We teach our children that, don't we, in Sunday school.

It's kind of bread and butter of our faith that God loves his people. But do we believe it? Do we really? In this row between God and the people, the book of Malachi, it's marked out as we'll see by a series of arguments.

And the first argument that is between God and his people is there in verse 2. If you look there. I have loved you, says the Lord, but you say, how have you loved us?

The thing is, in all of these arguments in the book of Malachi, you'll notice that even though the people speak back to God, it's actually God who says their words, isn't it? And he uses the words, but you say.

That phrase is repeated throughout the book. But you say, but you say. So God makes a statement of truth and he fills in the lines of the people's response.

[12:13] They don't have to say a word actually because it's obvious from the way that they live. He's giving the response that maybe the people won't articulate themselves out loud.

God says, I love you, but I know what you're thinking. You don't have to say it. I will verbalise your thoughts for you. Your inner thoughts. Let's get all of the cards on the table about how things really are in your heart.

Because even though I love you, I know, I know that you often don't believe that. He shows us that behind maybe the language that we sometimes use, especially in church circles, there can be a deeper hidden subtext of what's going on really in our hearts.

We're not going around necessarily lying to each other consciously, are we? But God knows our true intentions and the thoughts of our hearts at any time.

So it's like one of those moments when everyone is biting their tongues. Nobody says what everybody actually might be thinking and then somebody goes and says it. And God does that.

[13:30] He says to us, I want to get real with you and I want you to be real with me. It's time for some candid self-examination because the underlying issue is that you doubt so often what I'm saying here when I say, I love you.

I know what you're thinking because you say in your heart how? How have you loved us, God? What have you ever done for me, God?

you wouldn't dare say it plainly. You wouldn't say it out loud. So let me say what you're so often thinking.

Let me say how you might be feeling. You're thinking how have you loved us, God? And he's right, isn't he, so often. That's why it takes me ages to warm up just to saying a prayer.

Why reading the Bible it seems like a chore. How can it seem like a chore? When other things take my affection away from the Lord, when I don't feel warm towards him, it's because I don't think that God loves me.

[14:44] The fruit of that forbidden tree, it's the age-old problem is that, isn't it, that it just seems so much better than what God is and what he says and that he's a killjoy. For the people of Malachi's day, they had a particular set of issues, they had their own reasons for thinking that.

If you were around about this time last year, we looked through the book of Haggai, you can remember, and in that prophecy, it's just around about the same time in the life of the people of Israel, there was this grand vision, wasn't there, at the end of Haggai, of the rebuilt temple.

The latter glory of that house would outweigh the former glory. God would shake the heavens and the earth and all the nations would bring their treasures in and there will be this cosmic shift and this king Zerubbabel was the king named to lead the revolution for God's people.

But that was about 60 years ago now. Zerubbabel is dead, Judah is now surrounded by enemies, and they're only there under permission by the Persian emperor Cyrus.

The temple is there, but it's just okay. It's been a while since the return from exile. A lot has happened, but there's still obviously a lot more still to come, isn't there?

[16:05] And the assured realities of Haggai's day, of restoration, are not the present realities yet.

And they struggle with the now and the not yet of waiting for God's promises to be fully fulfilled. And the question in their hearts isn't just then, how has God loved us, or what has God ever done for us, but rather, how has God loved us, what has he done for us lately?

How have you loved me right now, God? Because the assured realities that you've promised are not the present realities of my life right now.

the king who was promised, who was going to restore the glory of the temple, was Jesus Christ. And he came, didn't he?

And much was fulfilled, and we see much of it fulfilled in the life of the church today. But not everything is here yet, is it? Not everything is fulfilled.

[17:16] Victory over sin and death, it is complete on the cross, nothing more needs to be done by Jesus. But we still sin, don't we?

And we still die. If God loves us, we might ask, why am I still ill? Why are the Christian funerals? If God loves me, why aren't I immune from pain and from illness and frustration in this world? the cross and the resurrection, they were great then, but we might think, well Lord, what have you done for me lately? Those words at the end of 1 Corinthians, that death will lose its sting, those words are an assured reality, aren't they?

But are they a present reality? We still die. We've been raised with Christ. And when a person becomes a Christian, a new creation, Paul says, our life is hidden with Christ.

Nothing more needs to be done to forgive you or give you new life in Christ. But the outworkings of all that are still not fully known. We are in the now and in the not yet too, aren't we?

[18:36] And so his love convicts, but we so often doubt his love, looking at our circumstances. So God says, let me show you. Let me persuade you that I do, that I have loved you.

And the rest of our short section this morning is that proof from verse 3 to 5. Look at verse 3 with me. How is it true that I've loved you?

And here is the killer blow. Is not Esau Jacob's brother. And we're thinking, how is that supposed to help?

How does that convince us that you love us, God? That God's love is true, it's real. How does that help? Well, his love convicts us and it is real because it is terrifyingly, wonderfully, soberingly exclusive to us.

It is exclusive to us. That is our third thing. Theologians call Malachi a post-exilic minor prophet. That's just a posh way of saying that he's one of the smaller prophets that was written after the return from exile.

[20:00] Now, if you think about it, that should be enough in and of itself, shouldn't it, to convince the people of his love. In case you forgot, God says, I promised that if you left me, this would happen, that you'd be invaded by foreign powers, that you'd be taken off to a foreign land.

I promised that as early as Deuteronomy in the time of Moses, and I warned you again and again that it would happen. And it did happen, and the very fact that you're back in your homeland should say a lot, that I haven't left you, and I'm still committed to you.

He could go down that route, couldn't he? to convince them that he loved them. But what God does is more challenging here. He actually addresses the modern preacher's least favourite subject, it's election.

It's God's choice of a particular people for salvation, and his rejection of everybody else. love. It's the very unpopular teaching that God's love is exclusive to a certain people.

And God uses that as his big argument here. He preaches election to his people. Do you remember, he says, how all of this started?

[21:26] There was this man called Jacob, do you remember? You know the story in Genesis. Jacob was given the name Israel. He became the father of my chosen people.

He was the man that I chose. And you're related to him. You're here because of him. But don't you remember that he also had a brother, Esau.

And not only were they brothers, they were twins. There was nothing to separate them. If you read the stories of Jacob and Esau, you can see that they were both rotten scoundrels.

Jacob was that scheming, conniving con man who posed as the heir, that conniving tow rag. And Esau was just as bad. He gave up his birthright for a bowl of stew.

They were both as bad as each other. But God says, I chose one of them. I chose Jacob. I decided that my love was going to be exclusive to one of them and not to the other.

[22:34] I loved Jacob and I hated Esau. And the story of Esau and Jacob perfectly shows us that it wasn't that one of them was better than the other, that they both had equally little claim on God's love.

his point is that the love I've shown to you, I've shown to you exclusively, my people, and others who were just as good as you, I've passed by.

Others equally deserving as you to be in this church now, I've rejected. love. That is heavy.

That is heavy love. That is serious. It's deep and sobering love, isn't it, when you think about it. When we see that there are people in this world, there are people on your street, there are people that you live next door to, your next door neighbours even, in this town that are just as nice as you are, and as I am, nicer than you.

And God has chosen not to love them in this way, when he's loved you. I realise that talking about this, talking about election, God's choice, might be the first time that you've heard about this, and that might raise lots of questions for you, and I'd really genuinely be delighted in chatting about that with you afterwards.

[24 : 14] I can give some time to that if you want to ask some more questions. I think it's quite interesting how Jesus himself, the master preacher, uses the subject of God's choice in evangelism.

If you read Matthew chapter 11, it's not off the table for preaching, far from it. But for the moment it's important that we say that Esau and those chosen by God are never rejected against their own will. As people live wanting no part of God as Esau did, and nothing to do with him, God merely gives them what they asked for. Esau happily gave up his right to the inheritance for a bowl of stew. And there is no one who is outside of God's love at present who wishes otherwise. The mercy of God comes to people of his choice and it gives them something that they did not ask for or want. God's choice and the stories of Jacob and Esau serve as the first of the dominoes of God's choice throughout history. Bible history shows us that Esau's descendants grew and developed and they took ownership of the land of Eden.

[25 : 37] And so the choice and the gifts and the calling of God are irreversible. Because we see here, don't we, in Malachi, centuries later, Eden remains rejected by God.

Ezekiel foretold their destruction and it's happened. They've suffered under military invasion just like Judah has, just as Israel has, but notice the difference with Edom here.

Verse 4, if Edom says we are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins, the Lord of hosts says they may rebuild but I'll tear down and they'll be called the wicked country and the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.

They think we'll bounce back, the Lord has rejected us but we'll be okay. Notice the contrast there, the Edomites are self-appointed saviours, they think that they can rescue themselves, that they can build themselves up.

Ironically they do what the Israelites were reluctant to do, build up. Both Esau and Israel have endured God's judgement in history but the end goal is totally different.

[26 : 48] For Esau and Jacob in the end. For the loved Jacob judgment will end up in restoration and return.

And for the rejected Edomites it will end in absolute destruction. So do you get it this morning? Do you get what we're saying?

If you're a Christian, if you're baptised, if you're here even this morning and you're not a Christian, you're very privileged, can I put it as bluntly as possible?

God is saying here that receiving my love is not because you are any different in yourself to people who are heading for hell.

The only thing that makes you different is that I've chosen you. Love is exclusive to you. And as you see the final destruction of Edom, you will see how differently I have treated you in comparison.

[27 : 57] I have loved you in a way that I have not loved others. Paul says to the Ephesians, he chose us in him, that's in Christ, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ. Now notice how Paul does not say there, he chose us because we were holy and blameless.

No, he chose us that we should be holy and blameless. We were no different. C.S. Lewis writes in his book *The Four Loves*, depth beneath depth and subtlety within subtlety, there remains some lingering idea of our own, our very own attractiveness.

It is easy to acknowledge, but almost impossible to realize for long. That we are mirrors whose brightness, if we are bright, is wholly derived from the sun that shines upon us.

Another commentator writes, he loves us not because of what we are, but because of what he is.

The light may shine from you this morning, if you are amongst God's people, but it is only a reflection of the light that has shone on you from God.

[29 : 31] Simply the fact of being here and of being a Christian, of being baptised, is a weighty thing. That you, my people, have received my love in Christ, and that I have chosen you, and it is a privilege, it is a serious thing.

Convicts us, doesn't it? I have loved you exclusively. If you have been raised in a Christian home, if you have got any interest in God, it is not because you are nicer, or better, or more moral.

So this love is quite devastating, isn't it? It is weighty. This week, if your love is cold towards God, perhaps if you're beginning to move away from God in your communion with him, please remember these words.

If you're coming to terms with any lack of faith, or any lack of love, or zeal, remember these words. any impatience that you might have with the assured realities not being the present realities in your life, remember these words.

I have loved you. I have loved you. It's only the start of the conversation, isn't it, in the kitchen, in Malachi, but that is how God begins, with those convicting and heavy words.

[31 : 13] I have loved you. Let's pray.