

Malachi 1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 September 2024

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Malachi chapter 1. We're starting a new series. A friend of mine conducted a wedding recently and he showed me the wedding programme that he'd been given.

! The groom was an actor and the service sheet went like this. Wedding St. Clemens starring Elizabeth and James and James and music by Pachelbel and William. conducted by Mark Jones based on the text of the Book of Common Prayer. World premiere 4th of December 2023.

You opened it up and on the other side of the front page was the cast. Bride, the bride, the groom, the bridesmaids, the best man, the ushers.

It said in small print, understudies not required today. Act 1, some songs and wedding vows. Act 2, Bible readings including some audience participation. Act 3, etc.

[1 : 09] And the conclusion was the curtain call. On the front of the service sheet for this wedding, it said, marriage, the ultimate theatre piece.

James and Elizabeth, the groom and the bride, were aware that weddings are a piece of theatre. There's a ceremony. There's a ceremony. There's rings. There's dresses. There's the churches. But none of those things make a marriage. They only make a wedding. And a wedding is really, isn't it, only half a day in a lifetime of relationship.

Of course, in the context of that relationship, a wedding is a beautiful thing. But it's the relationship is far more important, isn't it?

The relationship is more important than the wedding. The same is true of our relationship with God. Ceremonies, the outward actions, the vows we make with our lips.

[2 : 18] Well, they're important. But they're not the most important thing. What counts most is the inner reality. If you like, the inner reality of our relationship to God.

And that's the issue that is right at the heart of this little book at the end of the Old Testament, Malachi. Malachi contains God's last words to his people in the Old Testament.

It's written about 430 BC. Chapter 1, verse 1, if you look down, says, The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. The message is called an oracle.

It's a word of authority, a word that has come from God. But it's not just any divine word. It's a word from the Lord, capital letters, L-O-R-D.

It's God's special covenant name to his people. That was the name by which God had given himself to his people. And he'd marked himself off from any other so-called God.

[3 : 21] The word Lord, L-O-R-D, in capital letters, speaks of his special relationship with his people. So what we've got here is Yahweh, the Lord God's word to his special people.

The name of Malachi just means messenger. And what follows is a record of the one true God, the God of the universe, speaking through his messenger to his people.

For the last time. Under the Old Covenant. After this prophecy, there's 400 years of silence until John the Baptist turns up. And so look at verse 2.

I have loved you. That seems simple enough. But Israel's response to the question is, you say, how have you loved us?

And that introduces us to one of the major themes of Malachi. How you can understand this book. That it's structured behind a series of statements and then questions. We're going to call them disputes.

[4 : 24] There's six disputes in Malachi. Six disputes where God and his people have this kind of argument. The first dispute is that they dispute God's love.

They call God's love into question. I think it's a pretty foolish thing to do. It must have broken God's heart to hear the question.

Let me tell you why it's foolish. If you know anything about the Bible and you know anything about the people of Israel, you do not have to be Einstein to realise that God has loved them faithfully, patiently, generously, extravagantly.

From the very beginning. And yet Israel questioned God's love. I want you to listen to God's unexpected answer. Look at the end of verse 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've loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. I've laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to the jackals of the desert.

[5 : 30] 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.

You might not be familiar with the Bible, but Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. And Isaac was the son of Abraham, who you probably have heard of.

And right back at the start of the Bible, in Genesis 25, we're introduced to these twins, Jacob and Esau. Before they were even born. And so I want to read you just a couple of verses from Genesis 25, 22.

The story of Jacob and Esau. It says about before they were born, the children struggled within their mother. And she said, if it is thus, why is this happening to me?

Why are they fighting in my womb? So the mum went to inquire before the Lord and the Lord said to her, two nations are in your womb. And two peoples from within you shall be divided.

[6 : 33] The one shall be stronger than the other. And the older shall serve the younger. Jacob was the younger of the two. And he became the founding father of the people of Israel.

Esau was the older of the two and he became the founding father of the nation of Edom. You can see Edom is mentioned in verse 4. The Israelites, do you remember?

In the Old Testament, they became the people of God, his treasured possession. The Edomites didn't. And that's what God is reminding the Israelites here at the start of Malachi.

When questioned about his love for Israel, he points to the fact that they found favour in his eyes. Even though other nations like Edom didn't. The descendants of Esau, they didn't share.

They didn't share the favour of God like Jacob's descendants did. God appeals to their chosenness. That's his answer to their question.

[7 : 36] How have you loved us? It's an unexpected answer, isn't it? When Israel, the people of God, questioned God's love, I think I would have expected God to say, Well, look at my rescue, how I rescued you in Israel, out of the wilderness of Egypt.

I would point to my patients when they grumbled and when they complained and when they went astray. Maybe God would point to his willingness to be their king, to their military triumphs, to a promised land.

The list could go on and on, couldn't it? But God doesn't point to any of those things. He goes way further back and he says, You can know I love you because I chose you.

I chose you out of all the nations of the earth to be my own. And what is even more unexpected is the way that he talks about his choice of Israel.

I want you to imagine for a moment that I take my wife Claire, I haven't got another wife, I take my wife out for a very romantic dinner at a restaurant. And I want you to imagine that she looks longingly at me over the dinner table and she says, How do I know that you love me?

[8 : 52] Imagine for a moment that I responded like this. Claire, you see that woman at the table over there? I let her tyres down and I threw a brick through her window on the way into the restaurant. That's how I love you.

That would be a very odd response, wouldn't it? I don't think that God is saying something as ridiculous as that. But it is surprising what he says.

You see, he spoke about his love for Israel and his choice of Israel by focusing on what life has been like for those he hasn't loved and he hasn't chosen.

Edom. And he uses really stark language in verse 3 and 4 to make his point clear. God's choice of Israel, the people of God, creates a significant distinction.

It's as if the chosen ones are loved and everyone else is hated. And these verses spell out the implications of what those choices have been.

[9 : 53] Their land is wasted. Even if they try to rebuild, God will not allow them to. Because of his wrath against them because of their sin.

And all of that is because of God's choice. And the point that God is making is, I chose you Israel and I chose you alone. Why did God do that?

Well, even from the very beginning of God's relationship with his people, God made the reason for his choice very, very clear. Let me read to you this time from Deuteronomy 7, verse 6.

You don't have to turn to it. But I'll read to you from Deuteronomy 7, verse 6. And God said to Israel, and he addresses them, and he says, For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you. For you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

[11 : 08] Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him to a thousand generations. It's because of God's love and his faithfulness that he chose Israel the way he did.

Which of course makes the logic of Malachi chapter 1 even clearer. God's choice of Israel is evidence of his love for Israel. In fact there's no other reason why he chose them.

There was nothing about the people of Israel that made them inherently attractive to God. It was simply because of his undeserved love for them. And the whole question of God choosing some and not choosing others is very troubling isn't it for many Christians.

Maybe for you. It can be hard to understand and it can be very hard to accept. And sometimes we ask why. Why does God choose some and not others?

And people often say the Bible doesn't tell us why. But that isn't quite right. The Bible does tell us why. God's choice is because of God's love.

[12 : 28] It's the follow-up question that the Bible chooses not to answer explicitly. Why does God love some in this way and not others? And the Bible's response to that is to encourage us to trust God.

Not to grasp at the depths of God's wisdom. To recognize that he is God and we're not. And we don't understand him fully. And we'll never fully comprehend. And that is a question isn't it that requires real humility.

But we must remember that the Bible's answer to the first question, why does God choose, is because he loves.

And that's not just about God's Old Testament relationship with the Jewish people. It's also the way that the New Testament talks about God's relationship with us as Christians now.

Those, if you are a Christian this morning, the Bible says it's because God chose you. And he called you to himself.

[13 : 38] And why did he choose them? Because he loves them. Paul connects the two things in Ephesians chapter one. He says to the Christians in Ephesus, in love, he predestined them.

And it's always been that way with God. And that is why God responded to Israel in Malachi chapter one in the way that he did. How could Israel be sure that God loved them? Well, they only had to look at the Edomites to see what life was like for those whom God did not love and God did not choose.

And God is saying that ought to be enough to assure you once and for all that you are his chosen people. And therefore that they were loved. Now before I move on from this, I want to ask another question.

I want to ask the question, is God's reply foolish? And I want us to consider that because it is unavoidable when you put these two key elements of the opening verses together.

God is giving evidence of his love. Yes. But he's giving evidence to people who've called his love into question. Why is he even answering their challenge at all?

[14 : 47] God is not answerable to you and I. He doesn't need to defend his love to his people. The evidence is all there. They don't need extra evidence.

What's more, this isn't the first time, is it? It isn't the first time that Israel have called God's love into question. In fact, the whole history of the people of God is riddled with them questioning and

rejecting and disobeying.

They've run away from God again and again and again. When is God's patience with his people going to run out? When will he finally refuse to answer that question?

When will he cease to love such an ungrateful people so persistently and so completely? You can see why God's love may seem foolish.

Because it's a love for fools. Fools like you and me. It's a love that continues to take a beating. It's a love that keeps getting thrown back in his face.

[15 : 52] A love that continues to be rejected. If I could say it reverently, is God not a fool to show love to those who show no love in return?

We need to be really careful, don't we, how we answer that question. But the Bible's answer is this. What seems foolish in the world's eyes is often the wisdom of God.

But call it what you will, it is true, it is true that at the very heart of the God of the universe is a God of love.

He is so deeply and profoundly committed to those he loves that he will not give up on them.

Human sin and rebellion can never overwhelm his love.

His love overwhelms the worst that his people can throw at him. And that's the story that Malachi 1 is attempting to tell. It's a familiar story.

[16 : 51] It's the story, if you look through the Bible, of people like Abraham and Moses and David. People who failed God in big ways and in small ways, but who were still his chosen people.

It's the story of Israel from the beginning to the end, despite their constant rebellion and sin. And it's our story too, isn't it? It's the story of the whole Bible.

God's soft-hearted love for a hard-hearted people. God's soft-hearted love for a hard-hearted people.

Let's go to the second dispute. And that starts in verse 6. Because the faithful love of God for his people means that he deserves better than what they were offering him.

chapter 1 verse 6. Look down with me. A son honours his father and a servant his master. If then I'm a father, where's my honour?

[17 : 55] And if I'm a master, where is my fear? Says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name. And here God is suggesting his need to the Israelite priests, to the religious leaders, that they hadn't shown him the honour and the respect that he deserves.

God is saying, I am your heavenly father, I am your master in heaven, yet you've shown me contempt. God has guided Israel, saved Israel, been patient with Israel, loved Israel, yet they've rejected him, they've been ungrateful to him, they've sinned against him, and God is saying, I deserve better.

They've shown contempt for his name. But as we just read in verse 5, as Malachi says again and again, God's name is great and worthy of praise and honour.

So look at verse 11. 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 in a pure offering, for my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.

Then look at the end of verse 14. For I am a great king, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. He's saying, this is who I am, and it's precisely that which the Israelite leaders had failed to reckon with.

[19 : 20] The ones who should have been representing the people before God and nurturing their relationship with God were the very ones who were responsible for not giving God the respect and honour that he's due.

Instead, they showed contempt for his name. So look at the end of verse 6 and see the dispute, the second dispute. They say, how? You say, how have we shown contempt for your name?

Listen to how God puts it, verse 7. He answers them by saying, by offering polluted food on my altar. But you say, how have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised.

When you offer a blind animal in sacrifice, is that not evil? Or when you offer the lame or the sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor, take it to your boss, will he accept it? Will he show you favour? They were offering, weren't they, defective sacrifices.

Animal sacrifices were a central part of Old Testament worship, of their relationship with God. They were the way that God had provided for Israel's sin to be dealt with and for Israel to express devotion.

[20 : 32] Way back when God introduced sacrifices, he made it clear. He says, when you come to me to worship, second class sacrifices won't do.

Let me read you from Leviticus chapter 1 verse 10. It says, if his gift or burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or the goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, the best of the sheep. Offering an animal to God without any defect was to be an expression of our love and worship to God.

That they'd show respect by an honouring him by bringing the best. The best animal from their flock or herd. But a thousand years on from that, when God had given an instruction to these priests, we find that they were disobeying.

They were bringing any old animal will do, anything will do for God. And so Malachi brings God's word of rebuke to them and he says, you're cheating me. Look at the end of the chapter.

It says this, when 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? Cursed be the cheat who is a male in his flock and vows it and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.

[21 : 55] For I'm a great king, says the Lord of hosts and my name is to be feared among the nations. And what is even more, just two verses before in verses 12 and 13, they say the whole thing is just a burden, God.

You profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted and its fruit, that its food may be despised but you say what a weariness is this? And you snort at it.

Even offering bargain basement disabled animals was something that they considered a real drag. Israel were giving second best blemished sacrifices to God and they're even doing it begrudgingly. And they're treating something very sacred, very important in their relationship with God with contempt.

As if doing it the way that God wanted didn't really matter despite what he deserved. And God responds verse 10 with anger.

[22 : 57] Can you see that? He says this, Oh, that there was one among you who would shut the doors that might not kindle fire on my altar in vain. I've no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts and I will not accept an offering from your hand.

The word there is useless fires. The animal sacrifices they were usually burned, but God says the fires that you Israelites are lighting to burn your sacrifices are useless.

These sacrifices, they make no difference at all to your relationship with me. There may be fires but they're leaving God cold. And he's saying I'd rather that someone came along and shut and locked the doors of the temple.

I'd rather you didn't even come into the temple than to have you continue with your half-hearted, ritualistic excuses for worship. Do you see, the Israelite leaders, the priests, they are presiding over a religion that has got no heart and no reality.

It's not a genuine relationship with God. They're going through the motions, through the outward show, but there's nothing of God in their hearts. And they might have thought, our coming to church were keeping God happy but they weren't.

[24 : 19] In fact, they were making him angry because their relationship with God was just a theatre piece. It was all wedding, no marriage. And it wasn't just a one-off problem, was it?

Because 300 years earlier the prophet Isaiah had said about the people then, he says, they come and they draw near to me with their mouth, they honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship actually is made up only of rules taught by men.

And 400 years after Malachi, in the time of Jesus, the Jewish leaders were still at it. And Jesus' conflict is about this very issue, isn't it? In Mark 7, remember all the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, they were upset because Jesus' followers were eating food with unwashed hands.

And Jesus quotes to them, Isaiah 29, 13, he says, you people, you worship me with your lips but your hearts far from me. It's all outward forms, it's all rule keeping, it's all rituals, it's all being seen, but no heart.

No inward reality, it's a theatre piece. And Jesus warns us, doesn't he, really clearly that we need to be careful of being hypocritical like them.

[25 : 39] To not be like the Pharisees in the days of Jesus' day or the priests and the people in Malachi's day because the problem is still with us right now, isn't it? Sometimes we get caught up in the outward displays of religion while inwardly we're really cold towards God.

And we do all the right things but our hearts are far from him. And so you can wear a cross around your neck. You can say on your CV that you are a Christian and you go to church.

You might carry a well-worn Bible with you to church maybe. Maybe you read your Bible on the tube. Are they signs of mere religion or relationship with God?

You might turn up to church and sing heartily. You might take of the Lord's Supper when it comes around but is it just outward observance? Or do those things reflect a genuine love for God?

You may have been baptised in a church, confirmed in a church. You may have been in church all your life but was that because you honoured and respected God or because you're just going through the motions?

[26 : 58] You might read your Bible and pray every day. You might lead Sunday school or youth group. You might even preach a sermon. But is it just because of what you do?

Because it's possible to do all those things with a heart that's far from God, isn't it? Is it just habit? What others expect or do you do them out of a heart that burns a deep longing to please the God that you love? And that's the kind of hard question Malachi asks you and I this morning.

He's asking us about our willingness. The Israelites sniffed at their or snorted at their obligations. They said, what a burden. Are we like that?

Dragging ourselves out of bed or off the sofa begrudgingly on Sundays for church. Or do we leap at the chance to meet with the people of God?

[28 : 03] Do we transfer our money to the church joyfully or are we thinking oh, I could have bought loads of that? Saving others with joy in our heart or just wishing they'd get their act together and sort their lives out?

There are many things. There are good things that we do but things which have no value before God if they're done begrudgingly or if we do them just because we're going through the motions. God wants us to give, doesn't he, to him cheerfully and wholeheartedly. And so Malachi 1 is so challenging isn't it because it says to you unless the things we do flow from our hearts that truly honour God they are what Malachi calls useless fires.

And God says to us this morning rather than carry on with your rituals and your religious duties God would rather that we built a wall at the front of the entrance and put a chain around the gates and boarded up the entrance of the church and carry on and closed down the youth group so that we'd no longer insult him.

It's not an issue of us doing good for bad reasons. It's not as if they kind of cancel each other out. It's not neutral. It is offensive to God.

[29 : 30] It's not what our Father in Heaven or what our Master in Heaven deserves. It's not what our God our Saviour our King deserved. And if that is what you're engaged in this morning God's word to you is I wish you wouldn't bother.

I'd rather receive nothing from you than be insulted like this by your sacrifices. They don't move me they actually show me contempt they're pieces of theatre they're useless fires.

I meet lots of people who are not Christians and maybe you're not a Christian this morning and one of the things they really hate is they hate the hypocrisy of Christians.

And I want to say to you if you're here this morning and that's you you don't hate it half as much as God does. He says to his people don't burn the sacrifices any longer.

And Israel's problem the Pharisees problem is my problem too. And we maybe need to recognise how displeased God is with us how rude we've been to him. He seeks the fruit of a genuine relationship with him not mere religion.

[30 : 38] He looks for a fire in the heart not our useless fires which are really no sacrifice at all. That's the challenge God's word has for us today. But what are the answers?

Do I leave you in despair? Let me give you what I think are God's two answers to this this morning. The first one is the word repentance which means stopping what you're doing and expressing sorrow and turning in another direction.

For Israel it meant didn't it in this passage stop offering the kind of blemish sacrifices. It meant doing things with a heart to God with gladness.

And we live a long time after Malachi because Jesus came and he is the great sacrifice. we don't have to come with animal sacrifices thankfully. But the New Testament calls on us to offer our whole life that's our sacrifice.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says. He says I appeal to you therefore brothers by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.

[31 : 50] All that I have all that I am. and that's going to involve me trusting God isn't it? But as Malachi reminds us we'd be really foolish not to trust God even with our lives.

It's really what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who trusts God with their life. And that is what God wants of us. He wants our all.

He wants everything. He wants our whole life to be an act of worship to him. that we may live the way he wants with hearts of gladness. And actually repenting means expressing right sorrow and turning away from anything less than that.

But the second answer to the question is this. We can't do that can we? I certainly can't. You see God does want me and he wants you this morning to repent but ultimately that won't do.

he wanted Israel to repent but even if they did that wouldn't have made everything right. Because we're still sinful human beings aren't we?

[33 : 03] And we will continue to fail and God knows that of course he knows that and we're so foolish that we hear a challenging word like we hear today from Malachi chapter 1 and we think do you know what I'm going to try a bit harder I'm going to lift my game for a while but I can promise you what will happen is you'll fall back into your old habits you'll be lighting useless fires within days because my sacrifice to God and your sacrifice to God will never be perfect never be without blemish so listen to me for a moment what Peter says to the Christians in 1 Peter 1 and I want you to soak in this today knowing that you were ransomed from futile ways inherited from your forefathers not with perishable things such as silver or gold but you were ransomed with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without spot or without blemish the Lord Jesus rescues us from an empty way of life he rescues us from empty fires kind of way of life and how does he do that he does that by offering himself as an unblemished sacrifice to

God he's the only one that ever needed to be offered in fact it is only because Jesus made that sacrifice that God will allow you to make a sacrifice for him our feeble attempts at sacrifice are only acceptable because of his ultimate sacrifice in that sense even our repentance is a waste of time isn't it without Jesus but because of Jesus it's not Jesus did what Israel could never do perfectly or consistently and Jesus did what you and I can never do consistently or perfectly and Jesus sacrifice today brings forgiveness to those who will trust him the blemishes on all our lives are swept away Jesus can put out our useless fires and he can ignite a fire in our heart that will never go away that will never go out Israel's story is my story and yours love we too call don't we

God's love into question and yet he can say to his people with perfect integrity I have loved you we too have found that God is full of a soft hearted love for a hard hearted people his love is ultimately unquestionable and his love changes our hearts forever in the words of our closing hymn love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all and so the apostle Paul says in view of God's mercy brothers and sisters I urge you to offer your body as a living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God that is your spiritual act of worship let's pray