

Waldorf and Stadler

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] What do you think? When I hear their names, I think back to the 1970s kids show, The Muppets. Waldorf and Statler were two old Muppets who would sit on the theatre balcony and shout all kinds of abuse at Kermit and the other Muppets.

Unfortunately, life is full of Waldorf and Statlers, people who like to make you look bad. And there's more Waldorf's in our offices than we would like to admit, and sometimes we even have them in our homes.

We most definitely have them in church courts. We may even have to endure them in our marriages. I don't, but we may have to.

Never mind Waldorf and Statler on the balcony on a kids' TV show from the 1970s. All too often, they live in our heads. And they infect the way in which we think, especially about God.

The voice of cynicism rails at us, especially when it comes to our faith, and all they say to us is, it's all rubbish. Their voices paralyze us until we can no longer tell the truth from fiction.

[1 : 14] Our relationship with God begins to falter, because the Waldorf and Statlers in our minds keep telling us that if there is a God at all, He doesn't care about us.

Well, you know, nearly two and a half thousand years ago, the people of Israel felt rather like this. They'd been listening to the Waldorf and Statlers of their day, and despite all their religious practices, they were giving up on God.

Seriousness had given way to cynicism. Devotion had given way to doubt. The message of the prophet Malachi is to realize that the Waldorf and Statlers of their day are lie-telling, joy-stealing, life-killers, and that our faith isn't rubbish, folly, and lies, but wisdom, life, and riches.

We too need to listen to the voice of God through Malachi the prophet, rather than the voices in our heads of doubt and cynicism. Well, in these verses, as we begin a short series into the message of this prophet, we hear the first two cynical doubts in the minds of the people.

God doesn't speak, and God doesn't care. And we listen carefully to how God answers these objections. I do speak, and I do care.

[2 : 45] You know, the older I get, the more I realize there's nothing new under the sun. Perhaps the same Waldorf and Statlers who spoke into the Israelites' heads are speaking into our heads this evening.

God doesn't speak. God doesn't really care. If we are hearing these voices, and I don't mean in some kind of schizophrenic way, we need to listen to the Waldorf, we need to listen to Malachi, as he tells us that God doesn't play dice with us, and that these are muppets and not men.

So first of all, in verse 1, God does not speak. A prophecy. The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. Now, Malachi is written in the mid-5th century BC.

The Israelites had been in captivity in Babylon, but were slowly returning to their homeland. Many of the subjects Malachi deals with are also found in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra.

The Persian Empire is in power, and the emperor had placed governors over every single district. The temple in Jerusalem had largely been rebuilt, but the walls and the gates of the city remain broken down and await Nehemiah to return.

[4 : 13] Many of the Jews had been back in Israel for some years following their captivity. They thought that their return to Israel from captivity would have been the start of a new age of Jewish supremacy, where God would restore the nation.

But it hadn't happened. They thought their return from captivity would herald a new Jewish empire of prosperity. But it never happened.

Their own national Waldorf and Statlers began to sow doubt. The priests and the people were skeptical that God would ever fulfill the promises he had made to them. God's silence was

deafening.

And you could almost hear these muppets in the background of Israel. You see, what did we tell you? The God of Israel doesn't speak.

You can't trust a God who doesn't talk. You may as well worship the gods of the nations. At least they have prophets who will tell you there and then what their gods think of your problems.

[5 : 27] They'll offer you immediate and quick solutions at a very good price. So you see, the Jewish nation was caught in a destructive and terrifying cyclone of international politics and military threats and religious pluralism.

If ever they needed immediate answers and quick solutions, it was now. Sometimes it feels that way for us, does it not?

We're confused. We want to know what to do. Perhaps something's gone wrong in our lives and we're wondering what God has to say about it. But God's silence is deafening.

We do not know what other Christians are talking about. We're frankly a little jealous of them when they say to us, God said to me, or the Lord led me, or I heard this word from the Lord.

Because no matter how much we pray, we never hear any special voices or have any special impressions on our hearts. We don't audibly hear the voice of God telling us to go this way and not that way.

[6 : 42] And so we have our own Waldorf and Statlers in our minds saying to us, see, it's all rubbish, foolishness and lies. Just get on with life. Forget all about God.

And then straight into the skepticism of the Jewish nation, God speaks, he says, a prophecy. The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.

We know next to nothing about this man. His name literally means my messenger. Into the doubt of the Jewish nation concerning the silence of God.

God sends his messenger. It's his responsibility to deliver the message God has given him. All questions regarding the silence of God are immediately quashed as soon as the prophet opens his mouth and says, thus saith the Lord.

All that the nation of Israel had been hearing up to this point were the Waldorf and Statlers of their day sowing seeds of cynicism and doubt.

[7 : 54] But their skeptical voices pale into insignificance beside the only voice that really matters any. The voice of God as he sends his messenger Malachi to proclaim his word.

It's almost like Malachi is saying to the people of Israel, you just hold your tongue because the king is about to speak. It's going to be a difficult message.

The king needs his people to listen to the truth and not the lies they're telling themselves. The word the NIV translates as prophecy here or oracle literally means a burden and is only ever used in situations where God has something hard to say to his people.

something which will bring them to repentance. Something which will help them to realize that it's not he who is at fault for the situations they find themselves in but them.

Their accusations against God will not go unanswered. They were so sure that having been released from captivity in Babylon God would make them into the richest and most powerful nation on earth.

[9 : 11] The walls of Jerusalem and its gates lie in ruins. Their land is still unproductive and there's no harvest. And they open their mouths and they accuse God of breaking his covenant promises to them.

God will not let their accusations go unanswered and so through the prophetic proclamation of Malachi he's going to show them that he never promised prosperity and that in fact it's not he who has forsaken his commitment to them but they who have forsaken their commitment to him.

That their religion has become about ceremonies of the hand not about the devotion of the heart.

It's going to be a difficult message because God needs to expose and excise the lies of the Waldorf and Statler and he needs to tell his beloved people the truth.

You just hold your tongue the king is about to speak says Malachi to Israel. He's come to tell you the truth. Sometimes we feel as if we're hearing a deafening silence from God.

Perhaps we're confused about the way to turn in life what to make of the difficult situations we find ourselves in. No one's taking away from the pain that causes us. I remember one Christian very clearly when I first came to Glasgow City 16 years ago who hadn't been in church for some months and I went to visit her and she explained in her own words I'll never forget the words she used as

she sat on her chair she said to me God let me go God has let me go her complaint was that when she prayed she felt nothing what worried me was not just what she said but how she said she wasn't upset she was very apathetic didn't really care God has let me go she said it became clear as I listened to her and asked her questions that she had stopped reading her Bible months before this and stopped coming to church even before that in other words while she accused God of being silent she had closed down all those channels through which

[11 : 33] God has promised to speak to his people she wasn't listening to God and then blamed God for not speaking you know if we're wearing a pair of earplugs and choose to live in a soundproof room we can't blame the outside world for never communicating with us if we have willingly let go of God to the extent that we won't allow him to speak to us anymore through his word if we've stuck our spiritual fingers in our spiritual ears we cannot blame God for being silent poor lady God did not let go of her the truth is she let go of him probably because she never had a grip of him in the first place rather than accusing God of breaking his promise she should have held her tongue and let the king speak through his word to her so what then is the practical application of this truth of verse one that

God speaks well surely not just the silencing of the cynicism of the the Waldorf and the statlers of our minds but that we ourselves as God's people should make every should take every opportunity to hear God's word to hear his voice he speaks to us through his word the bible the holy spirit inscribing the words on the pages of our hearts and sanctifying us by the truth truth Jesus said very often he said he who has ears let him hear let us therefore make every effort to hear the voice of God as he speaks to us through his word the bible investing therefore in the daily personal reading and study of his word investing in placing ourselves under the preaching of his word when we hear the voices of the Waldorf and statlers in our heads saying to us

God does not speak speak when we are confused open up your bible and pray for God's holy spirit to do his sovereign work of illumination no you're quite wrong Waldorf you're quite mistaken statler God does speak right here in his word God doesn't speak that's the first cynical accusation the second is in verses 2 through 5 God doesn't care God doesn't care the chief accusation the people of Israel want to make against God is that at best he's given them no solid tokens of his love and at worst he does not love them at all that he really is not committed to them in any way I have loved you says the

Lord but you asked how have you loved us the Waldorf and statlers of their day cynically whispered into their ears I thought you said God loved you look at the walls of Jerusalem they're in ruins look on the gates they're burned and broken down is this the kind of love you're talking about and you know I guess the Waldorf and statlers of our day aren't much different they're still trying to infect us with the same cynical doubts we may have been Christians for many many years and we've had it pretty smooth in life there have been no major hiccups on the way then suddenly there's a problem maybe it's mental illness maybe it's bereavement maybe it's a loss of employment but all of a sudden life is no longer a bed of roses oh it was easy to believe that

God loved us when we had it easy and smooth but now it's more challenging now's the very time that the Waldorf and statlers speak into our minds and say I thought you said God loved you really look what's happening to you you have depression your loved one has died you've lost your job is that the kind of love you're talking about but just as God would not allow his people to perpetuate the lies they were telling themselves about to silence so he will answer them concerning his love such an accusation is far too serious for God to keep his own counsel because after all as Phil said the whole Bible from beginning to end records the drama of God's love for his people the first response he provides them with is the truth of his word

[17 : 02] I have loved you says the Lord but when he says he loves them he is to be believed because he is God and not man that he should lie or change his mind when in verse 2 he says I have loved you the particular form of the Hebrew verb literally means I've always loved you and I love you still I've always loved you and I love you still who is it that's saying God doesn't love us that person is a liar when all the time the God who is the truth and only ever tells the truth says to his people whatever their circumstances no matter how you may feel about me right now it doesn't change and it never will change the way I feel about you I have always loved you and I always will love you who then shall we listen to the voices of the Muppets in our heads with their cynical lies or the voice of the

God who never once has lied to us we shall listen to the voice of God as he says to us I have loved you and I love you still we shall listen to the voice of our Lord as he says to us nothing shall separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus I love the film A Beautiful Mind I think it's one of the best films Hollywood has ever produced and I love it for even just this one reason it contains for me one of the best lines in cinema the tormented hero of the film Professor Nash says like a diet of the mind I choose not to indulge certain appetites you all know the line right like a diet of the mind I choose not to indulge certain appetites when it comes to the love of God choose not to indulge the appetite of cynicism and doubt rather listen and tell yourself the truth

God has always loved me and he loves me still today the second response God gives is that he proves that love is the history of his actions love is the history of his actions that when he says them he is to be believed because he's proved it in time and space you know the way in which Waldorf and Statler win is to blind our hearts and minds to all that God has done in history by making us forget that God has worked in our world in real time and in real space to demonstrate his love for us in the context of Malachi God points to his love for Jacob and not Esau it wasn't as if Jacob was worthy of

God's love and Esau wasn't in many ways as you read the account of their strained relationship Esau comes out better than Jacob and yet God in his sovereign grace set his love upon Jacob the father of Judah and not Esau the father of Edom as a result look at what happened to Edom the descendants of Esau the Babylonian invasion devastated Judah and it left Jerusalem devastated and in ruins now the temple has been rebuilt but the walls are still ruined but what happened to Judah and Jerusalem is as nothing compared to what happened to Edom the descendants of Esau even though Edom had sided with Babylon in its invasion of Judah and its destruction of Jerusalem Edom itself had been utterly destroyed all its cities all its towns had been mercilessly raised to the ground by Babylon's armies in verse 2 God says of Edom I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to desert jackals and whereas God has helped and will help the people of Judah to rebuild he will always be against Edom and he will always frustrate Edom's plans compared to Judah God calls Edom the wicked land a people always under the wrath of the Lord and Malachi is calling upon those cynics in his own nation to see what the Lord has done to Edom and how compared to Edom Judah because it is the people of

[22 : 34] God's love will be rebuilt and will become great again the whole world can look in and see the difference between the two nations Judah rebuilding Edom continually being devastated in other words because God loves Judah he is working to rebuild it but because God hates Edom he is continually destroying it even even the Waldorf and statlers of Malachi's day with their cynical doubts filling the minds of God's people can't deny that Edom is under God's curse they might try to close their eyes to the truth of what they see around them but they can't change that truth of history that God has acted in covenant blessing upon the descendants of Jacob whom he loves but in covenant curse upon the descendants of

Esau whom he hated the voice of cynicism and doubt cannot repaint the history of God's actions because if if they took them at face value cynicism would have to be replaced by faith and doubt by assurance now the historical action that we look back at the historical demonstration of God's infinite love for his people isn't the curse of Eden it is the cross of Jesus it was there God proved his love for his people by giving his one and only son as the sacrifice for their sins we read in Romans 5 verse 8 in this wonderful verse which we should all have firmly seared into our hearts and minds God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were yet sinners Christ died for us there is Jesus hanging on the cross dying in agony to make us the new people of God's promise love if we were to paraphrase Malachi 1 verses 2 to 5 in New Testament speak we'd read I have loved you says the Lord but you asked how have you loved us God replies have you seen my son on the cross have you heard his voice crying out for your forgiveness that's the historic demonstration of my love that while you were yet sinners my son died for you ah they're very clever Waldorf and Statler they'll play in our natural doubts and our cynicism they'll say to us see things ain't really so good in your life right now are they God doesn't love you God doesn't care about you it's all words really in the light of all

Christ suffered on the cross for us are they telling us the truth or are they lying to us in the hardest times of life listen carefully to me in the hardest times of life we are forced back to that simplest and most rudimentary and yet most profound of Bible texts for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever should believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life

when times are tough for you listen to the words of Christ on the cross as he cries out father forgive them for they know not what they do don't listen to the words of your cynical doubts God has always loved you and God loves you still and how do we know that because he demonstrated his love for us in this while we were yet sinners

Christ died for us go to the cross see the blood of Jesus flowing from his hands and his feet see it listen to his voice crying out my God my God why have you forsaken me smell the sickening odour of death feel the wooden splints of the cross in your fingers taste death in the air look at the history of God's gospel intervention in the atoning death of Christ and his victorious resurrection on the third day and then ask yourself well I don't feel great right now and life ain't a bed of roses for me but if there's one thing I know from being at that cross and all that

[27 : 48] I saw and I heard and I tasted and I touched and I felt it is that God has always loved me and he loves me still God's people having cynical doubts about whether God speaks or cares is nothing new really God's people have been having these doubts for thousands of years Waldorf and Statler weren't 1970s creations by Jim Henson they were alive and well in 5th century BC Israel and they're alive and well today in Glasgow City Free Church but the truth of Malachi 1 verses 1 to 5 is that these two rogues are muppets and not men and if we want the truth we need to look not upon them but upon the cross on which God by giving his one and only son to give us new life in his gospel and take all our sins away so let me ask you then as we close to whom are you listening the voice of the cynic or the voice of the savior the voice of the muppets on the balcony or the voice of the man on the cross

Malachi tells us that if we should listen to the truth of God then our eyes shall be opened to the wonder and the greatness and the glory of the majesty of God and then our hearts will be filled with the worship that comes from the gospel of Christ and our mouths will be opened in praise and we will sing along with the people of Israel great is the Lord even beyond the borders of our land let us pray Lord we thank you that every phrase sentence statement of scripture whether written before Christ came or after he came is relevant hyper contemporary and goes straight into our hearts and deals with the issues we face today like our complaining because we don't think you're talking to us like our complaining because we don't think you love us when all the time you talk to us continually through your word and all the time through the death and resurrection of your son

Jesus Christ you say to us I have always loved you and I love you still Lord we pray for any who are here this evening and don't know Christ's love for themselves who think they're wandering through life with no one who cares Lord we ask and pray that you would show them just a smidgen a snippet of what it meant for Christ to die on the cross for them and how much you love them we ask these things in that is the heart hope you know you