

Loved by God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a group called the, it's an old group of musicians, the Righteous Brothers, released a hit song, don't laugh, they released a hit song that was made famous by a Tom Cruise movie called Top Gun.

They released it in the 1980s, was anyone born in the 1980s? No, there's a few of us around, yeah, good. So what I thought I'd do, I'd play this song and see if you recognise it, so Steve, if we can have this lectern mic on as well, see how we go.

There's no tenderness like grief in your finger tears. Quite good. You're trying hard not to show it.

But baby, baby, I know it. You've lost that love in me.

Okay, and all those people who sang, and all those people who didn't. Yeah, yeah. It is, to some generations, it's a pretty famous song.

[1 : 1 1] But it's a rather sad song, actually. It's about someone who feels like their spouse has stopped caring for them, has lost that loving feeling towards them.

And I start with that tonight because as we begin this book of Malachi, this is how Israel is feeling about God. They felt God had lost that loving feeling towards them.

As we're at point one in your outline and verse one in your Bibles, have a look there. Verse one, a prophecy, the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. I have loved you, says the Lord, but you ask, how have you loved us?

You see, God says he has loved Israel, but they deny it and ask, well, how? We can't see it. You see, Israel feels like God has lost that loving feeling towards them, that he no longer loves them.

Why? Well, because God hasn't kept, or hasn't seemed to have kept the promises they expected him to keep, or certainly not in a way they expected him to keep. Now, to fully understand this, we're going to have to do a bit of background work tonight.

[2 : 2 0] So if you've got your handouts there, have a look on the back and there's an outline. And look towards the bottom of the outline where it says Judah is exiled to Babylon. If it's too small for you, I've got on the next slide, I think it is a nothing.

So it's unhelpful. You're going to have to squint. Okay, so down the bottom there, it obviously didn't load up. Down the bottom, it says Israel, sorry, Judah is exiled to Babylon, 586 BC.

And that happened because despite a hundred years or hundreds of years worth of warnings, I think roughly 330 years worth of warnings, God finally sent Babylon to judge Judah, destroy the temple and take them into exile because they kept worshipping other gods.

But then going down the timeline, God promised to return them back. And so the next bit down there is 538 BC. God moves in the heart of a king who releases Israel from exile.

And so Judah returns under a governor called Zerubbabel, 538 BC rather. But the people faced hardships and it was easier to build their own places rather than God's place, the temple.

- [3 : 40] And so the next bit of the timeline, we meet the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. God sends them to warn and encourage Israel not to neglect God.
- And we see this in the book of Haggai. So we're going to read a book that I doubt many of you here have read. So just turn back from Malachi, past Zechariah to the book of Haggai. You're going to have to do a bit of work tonight. So page 946. And have a look at chapter 1, verse 2.
- Haggai chapter 1, verse 2 and 3. This is what the Lord Almighty says. These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.
- Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin? And on it goes.
- [4 : 39] In other words, the people are saying, oh, look, it's a bit hard to build God's temple. We'll look after ourselves and build our own houses. And Haggai is saying, well, if it's good enough to build your own house, then the time is good enough to build the Lord's house.
- And so Haggai and Zechariah warned and encouraged them not to neglect God by not building the temple. And one of Haggai's encouragements is on the next page, chapter 2, verse 6. So have a look at there, chapter 2, verse 6.
- This is what the Lord Almighty says. In a little while, I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations and what is desired by all nations will come.
- And I will fill this house, the temple, with glory, says the Lord Almighty. The silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the Lord Almighty. The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house, the other temple that Solomon built, says the Lord Almighty.
- And in this place, I will grant peace, declares the Lord Almighty. You see, Haggai said, get going with the temple. And then God promised that he would fill this new temple, this next temple, with greater glory than the first temple.
- [5 : 54] What's more, Zechariah, who was around the same time as Haggai, also promised a new king. So come forward to the book of Zechariah, Zechariah chapter 9. Just flick a few pages forward.
- Zechariah chapter 9, page 953. And come down right down to the bottom. And you might recognize this passage from the Gospels.
- So down the bottom, chapter 9, verse 9. Rejoice greatly, daughter Zion. Shout, daughter Jerusalem. See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
- I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. Instead of battle, he will proclaim peace to the nations. And this king will rule.
- His rule extend from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. And so, next on your timeline, the temple is finally rebuilt in 516 BC.
- [6 : 59] 70 years since it was destroyed. But the thing is, it was not filled with God's greater glory that he promised in Haggai. Now, what's more, the king from Zechariah, who would rule from sea to sea, has not yet come.
- And so, after about 50 years, the people think God has lost that loving feeling towards them. They expect that his promises to be fulfilled in their lifetime, but they don't seem to be.
- Now, of course, God did fulfill those promises in Jesus, who is filled with God's glory because he is God's son. And he is the Messiah who rules as the risen Lord from sea to sea.

But because God didn't fulfill his promises the way Israel expected, then they feel that God no longer loves them. And so, in response, they no longer love God in return.

Now, they didn't go off and worship other gods like before. The exile has cured them of that. But they denied God loved them and just went through the motions of worship.

[8 : 10] In fact, they even let their worship of God become corrupt. So, it's at this point that God sends Malachi to remind the people of his love, to call them to return to him, chapter 3, verse 7, and to encourage them to recommit themselves to God.

And so, what follows in the book of Malachi are six tough conversations, like six marriage counseling sessions, where each session addresses a different issue in the covenant relationship.

And they are tough conversations because back in Malachi, it opens with the words, a prophecy, verse 1, which is literally a burden.

Malachi's ministry was not going to be easy, but it was necessary so that people might recommit themselves to God and enjoy his blessings rather than judgment again.

Now, I think this word of God, as verse 1 calls it, in Malachi is very much relevant for us today. After all, it's very easy to feel like God no longer loves us.

[9 : 19] And when life is hard and when God doesn't meet our expectations or answer our prayers the way we'd like him to, then we can feel like, you know, he's lost that loving feeling towards us.

And so, how does God respond to them? What does he say and how might that answer encourage us? Well, he answers by displaying his love.

Point 2 in your outline and verse 2 again in your Bibles. God replies, This week is my 20th wedding anniversary.

Michelle, my 20th wedding anniversary. And so, to display my love for her, I'm taking some annual leave this week and taking her away to the Yarra Valley for a couple of nights. Pretty good, huh? Yeah.

Actually, the parents are paying for it, so I think it's not that great a display of my love. But I will pay for dinner, I promise. But the point is, we know when someone is displaying love for us or for others by what they do, don't we?

[10 : 35] But it's not all that clear when we read these verses how God displays his love for Israel. And so, to fully understand what God means, we need to remember who Jacob and Esau were and what God said to their mother.

So, hopefully, this is on the next slide from Genesis chapter 25. Otherwise, we'll have to do more Bible flicking. The Lord said to Rebecca, that's the mum, Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated.

One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger. When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.

The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment. So, they named him Esau. Esau means hairy. After this, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel.

And so, he was named Jacob, which means grasp the heel. Now, notice how God promises that a nation will come from each boy. And so, from Esau came the nation of Edomites, and from Jacob came the nation of Israel.

[11 : 45] In fact, Jacob even has his name changed later to Israel. But also, notice that God promises here that the younger Jacob will be served by the older Esau.

You see, in the culture of the day, this is a huge shock, because it was the eldest son who received the inheritance, the blessings, everything. The eldest was served by the youngest.

I mean, that's the joy of being eldest sibling in the family, isn't it? Now, having underlings below you to serve you, at least that's what my oldest daughter thinks about her younger sister. But God says it's going to be the other way around.

That is, God chose Jacob and the nation of Israel from him to receive the inheritance, the blessings, everything the firstborn son would normally receive.

In fact, I think on the next slide, Andrew, I don't know if I'm a bit unsure now after that. Is there a verse from Exodus? Yeah. God even calls Israel now his firstborn son, even though Israel, Jacob, had no right to it, because Esau was the older brother.

[12 : 57] It was his right. And that's what God means when he says in Malachi, was not Esau Jacob's brother? In other words, was not Esau the firstborn who had the right to receive the blessings?

But, says God, I have chosen Jacob to receive them instead. That's how I've loved you, Israel. I've chosen you rather than Esau.

And on the other hand, he did not choose Esau, did he? That's what the language of hate means here, not choosing. After all, the Bible says that God does love all people because he made all people in his image.

Indeed, he gave his son to die for all people. But here he especially loves Israel by choosing them to be his people, his firstborn son.

While he hates Esau in the sense that he did not choose him to be his people. And now we have to acknowledge at this point that we don't like this language of God choosing some and not others.

[14 : 04] It kind of rubs us the wrong way. Even though God is God and he has every right to do so. And that ought to be reason enough. But we also need to remember that this is also what Esau chose for himself.

Esau also chose to reject the blessings as the firstborn. Here at Five O'Clock Church, we've been going through the book of Genesis for several years now, I think. But you remember that time where Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of what?

Lentil stew, red lentil stew. That's where the name Eden comes from because it means red. And as nice as you might find red lentils, giving up your birthright for them actually shows you don't care much about it.

I mean, can you imagine Bill Gates' son, Rory, giving up his inheritance for a bowl of red laksa? It's unthinkable, isn't it? And it shows you don't really care.

In fact, Genesis 25 says that Esau despised his birthright. And so while God chose not to make Esau his people and receive his blessings, Esau also chose not to be God's people and receive his blessings.

[15 : 17] Both things are true. Which means, by the way, when it comes to our non-Christian friends and family, we cannot blame God for not choosing them.

They also chose not to believe. Of course, Jacob was no better than Esau. From birth, he grasped his brother's heel, remember?

And his name, Jacob, to grasp the heel is also a Hebrew expression for someone who deceives. That's what Jacob was, a schemer, a deceiver. So he didn't deserve the blessings either.

But you see, that ought to make Israel realize just how great God's grace has been towards them. How much he loves them. That he would choose Jacob and Esau, sorry, Jacob and Israel to be his firstborn son.

Firstly, despite having no right to it. Esau had the right. And then secondly, despite not even deserving it themselves. The fact that he adopted them as his people is entirely an act of God's grace.

[16 : 25] And that's how he has loved them. And in case that's not enough, God not only chose them, he also kept them. Despite the fact that they kept turning away from him.

Have a look at the rest of verse 3 to 5. He says, Have I not turned Esau's hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals? Edom may say, Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.

But this is what the Lord Almighty says. They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the wicked land.

A people always under the wrath of the Lord. You'll see it with your own eyes and say, Great is the Lord, even beyond the borders of Israel.

God is saying, He don't just look back and see how I have loved you by choosing you. But look around and see how I've loved you by keeping you.

[17 : 25] Even bringing you back to your land. While the land of the Edomites remains in ruins. See, sometime while Israel was in exile, Edom was conquered.

Perhaps by the Arabs or the Nabateans. And God says they will never rebuild, no matter how much they try. And to this day, there's no land of Edom as such. Instead, the nation will always be under God's wrath.

Unless we think that's a bit harsh. Let me tell you, they deserved it. Because when the Babylonians attacked Israel, the Edomites were standing there clapping at their cousins' demise.

In fact, they were doing more than that. They actually hunted down their cousins, the Israelites. Killed them or handed them over to the Babylonians. That's what the book of Obadiah is all about.

And that's why they're always under God's wrath. But you, Israel, says God, you are still here. Despite nations trying to wipe you out.

[18 : 28] You are back in your land to rebuild while Edom is not. And if I made you into a great nation through one man, Abraham, do you not think I can do it again?

No, I have loved you. Look back at how I chose you and look around at how I've kept you. That's how I have loved you.

One of my daughters got grumpy with my wife and I because we weren't having what she wanted for dinner. And after insisting that we were going to have veggies tonight, she exclaimed, you don't love me anymore.

And then stomped off to her room. Now, apart from the fact that giving children what's good for them is actually loving, she'd also forgotten all the other things we'd done for her, even when she didn't deserve it.

She'd already forgotten what we'd already done and instead complained about what we didn't do. That's similar for Israel. Now, to be fair, life was hard for them.

[19 : 34] It was really hard for them. Now, this fallen world made it hard. But you see, they weren't looking in the right places to see God's love. They had forgotten what God had already done for them in choosing them.

And they forgot to look around at how God had kept them, even though they didn't deserve it. And so they complained God didn't love them. But what about us?

Point three. Because as I mentioned before, when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want him to, or keep his promises the way we expect him to, it is easy to feel like he no longer loves us.

But when that happens, we're to do the same thing Israel was to do. We're to look back at how God chose us, and we're to look around at how God has kept us.

Then we'll know, in fact, even more than Israel did, that God truly loves us. Let me show you from the second reading. So turn with me to Ephesians chapter 1, page 1173, I think.

[20 : 39] Notice what, chapter 1, verse 3. He says, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In love, he predestined or chose us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ.

See, Paul says, We who trust in Christ have been given every spiritual blessing because God loved us and adopted us as his son. Now, do realize that Paul is not being sexist here, calling us all sons, even though some of us here tonight are female.

Remember, it was the firstborn son who received all the blessings. And so by saying that he adopted us as sons, it's a way of saying that we can now receive all the firstborn blessings.

In other words, we as adopted sons can now share in everything that belongs to the son, Christ. And that's extraordinary when you stop to think about it.

[21 : 54] Everything that is his, we can share in. But it's even more extraordinary when you realize what it costs God to adopt us. And notice it says that we've been adopted through Jesus Christ.

That is, through his blood, as verse 7 makes clear. To put it differently, Christ's blood paid for our adoption as God's sons. Some friends of ours have just come back from being missionaries in Fiji, which sounds like a really nice place to be a missionary.

And they did love it, but it was much harder than it sounded. Now, they have three children of their own. But while they're over there, they decided to adopt a little Fijian boy called Timothy. I think he's on the next slide.

Here he is with his dad, Tony, and there he is in the pool with them. Now, it costs them thousands of dollars to adopt Timothy. And part of the reason now they've had to come back from their mission work is that he needs ongoing medical treatment, which has not only cost them, will cost them more money, but has cost them their mission field.

It costs to adopt is the point. And yet it costs God a whole lot more to adopt us. It costs him the blood of his only son. That's how much God loves us.

[23 : 12] And so God not only adopted us as his sons and paid for us with the blood of his only son, two things which already show us how much he loves us, but he also did it even though we did not deserve it.

For we, like Jacob, had no right to receive this adoption to sonship. We were completely undeserving. There's a lady, a 59-year-old lady, Mary Johnson, who was a mother until her only son was shot dead by a passing gang member in the US called Oshia Israel, actually.

Israel was released from prison after serving just a little over half of his sentence, which was hard for Mary to accept. But when Israel got out in 2011, Mary met him and then in an extraordinary act of love, invited him to live next door.

On the next slide, there they are. There's Mary and there's Israel. And what's more, Mary now treats him like a son. On the next slide, willing to hug him and care for him.

She has effectively adopted her son's killer. It's extraordinary, isn't it? It's a great act of love. But Mary has done it because she is a committed Christian and she wants to love like God.

[24 : 39] See, this is how we see God's love for us. He not only adopted us at the great cost of his own son's blood, but he did it while we were like this man, Israel, like the nation of Israel.

That is why we were completely undeserving. And when we feel like God has lost that loving feeling, then we had to look back at how God chose us, adopted us at the cost of his own son's blood, even when we didn't deserve it.

And if that's not enough, then not only look back, but look around like Israel were to do. In our passage in Ephesians, hopefully you've still got to open there, towards the end, in verse 13 and 14, Paul writes, Now that doesn't mean life was always going to be easy.

It wasn't easy for Israel back then. It's not going to be easy for us here today. But it does mean God will be with us and keep us. And so we can look around at others who are under God's judgment because they, like Esau, chose not to believe.

And we can look around at others who started off interested in Christianity, but then chose not to continue in Christ. And we can look around at others not to boast over them, but to mourn for them and humbly thank God that he's kept us from being like them.

[26 : 16] A month ago, a friend of mine in Sydney told me how his pastor had an affair with a youth group leader and is unrepentant. He has since left the church, been stood down, but he's also left his family and Christ too, I think.

Now, if he persists, it means he was never really a Christian in the first place, but the point is, this could happen to anyone. And so while I lamented with my friend over such a situation, do you know what I did when I got off the phone?

I thank God that he has kept me from anything like that situation. Well, last night, my wife and I were on Facebook. Well, she was on Facebook. I was looking over her shoulder.

And she was looking at a friend from hers from school who actually started coming to church with us when we still lived in Sydney. But the allure of the world, making money and career and having a good time was too great for her.

And so she's no longer calls herself a Christian. And we saw the photos of her on Facebook, Facebook partying and enjoying herself. And our hearts were saddened by her choices.

[27 : 28] And who knows whether God will bring her back or not. But as we looked, we also thank God that he has kept us from being dragged away by the world too. You see, we are to look back at how God chose us in Christ, but then also look around at how he has kept us in Christ.

That's how we can know that God loves us. So if you're here tonight and don't know this grace and love of God, then do trust in Jesus. Believe that Jesus died for you so that you could be adopted by God and kept by God for heaven.

And if you are here tonight and do believe, then do we know how loved by God we are? And we say it so many times, it's easy to take it for granted, isn't it? Do we reflect on it?

Do we humbly thank God for it? John understood it. He writes on our last slide, how great is the love the Father has lavished, love that word, lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God.

And that is what we are. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this reminder tonight that although it can feel like you no longer love us, that you do incredibly love us.

[28 : 57] And so when we face difficult times in life and we are tempted to doubt your love for us, help us to look back at how you chose us and adopted us at great cost, despite us not deserving it.

And help us also to look around and see how you have kept us, that we may never doubt just how much you truly love us. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.