

# Despising God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's pray. God, speak to us from your word tonight, we pray.

Not only that we may understand it, but believe it and obey it. Thus to be trained in righteousness, and proficient for every good work in Jesus Christ.

Amen. They are the three words that arouse the greatest passion.

The words that would probably evoke the strongest response on the whole if you said them or heard them. I love you.

Either that will elicit a passionate feeling and response and words of response when somebody tells you and you believe them, they love you.

[ 1 : 15 ] What thrilling words to hear when you love the person in response as well, when love is reciprocated. Or it may be that the passionate response to the words, I love you, is, Oh, yuck!

If your mother tells you that in public, or something to that effect. Or maybe the response, just as passionate, is full of scorn or rejection.

I love you. No, you don't. Those words are empty. I don't believe. Those words on your lips. They may be when those words are doubted.

When they're not backed up by some action. Or maybe it's when past love seems so distant as though the embers have gotten cold.

And somebody says, I love you. And you think 30 years ago perhaps. But not now. I love you. They're not words that fall usually on deaf ears.

[ 2 : 28 ] It's astonishing that the starting note of this very stern book of prophecy from the prophet Malachi is actually a tender note indeed.

A book that seems so scathing of God's people and its leaders in particular begins with such warmth and affection.

I have loved you. Not simply past tense. As though I have loved you hundreds of years ago back in the time of Moses or David or someone.

No, that's not the sense of the verb. The sense is I've loved you and I still do. It's hard for us to encapsulate that in just three or four words in English.

We've got to say both things. But actually the sense of the verb is that. I love you in effect. Past and present.

[ 3 : 31 ] I love you is what God is speaking. They're the words of a lover to his people Israel through the prophet Malachi. But Israel's response is not to feel warm and gooey on the inside.

Not to feel overwhelmed by God's love and his statement in verse 2 but rather to be filled with dismissal and scorn. I have loved you.

I have loved you says the Lord. But you say how have you loved us? It's a statement of rejection. A statement of denial.

A statement of refusal on the lips of Israel. It is skeptical scorn. How have you loved us? It is unbelieving.

Unseeing. It's full of despair and indeed disillusionment. Malachi was a prophet in the 5th century BC most likely.

[ 4 : 33 ] Perhaps in the middle of that century. So say about 450 BC give or take. At that time Israel was merely a province of Persia. It had had its heyday hundreds of years before.

The glorious days of Solomon perhaps 500 years before. The great days of Josiah nearly 200 years earlier. But since then they'd been devastated by firstly Assyria as it had come in a couple of hundred years before and come to the borders the edge of Jerusalem before it retreated.

But then devastatingly and in a sense almost finally the destruction of the land about a hundred and bit 130 years or so earlier than Malachi.

Jerusalem fell the nation was no more the king was taken off into exile to Babylon. The leaders the wealthy people some of the priests all carted off to Babylon and what was left was a devastated outpost really.

A province beyond the river from the perspective of Babylon people who were impoverished struggling to get a living the infrastructure of their country torn apart their temple gone their priestly system of sacrifice no more.

[ 5 : 55 ] But then from their despair in exile after 70 odd years or so a return back to the promised land issued by the now super ruler Cyrus the Persian emperor but it wasn't a return to the glory days.

They came back to that province with opposition from their neighbours the Samaritans to the north in particular. They needed to be provoked by other prophets to rebuild their temple and that wasn't as good as the first temple Solomon's temple destroyed by the Babylonians.

They had no king it was still a province of Persia this time rather than Babylon. And all those promises of earlier prophets that beyond the exile there would come this great glory of the nation streaming into Jerusalem as Isaiah saw it where's that?

Or the promise of the Messiah the branch that would come and liberate God's people in Jeremiah where's that? The promises of Zechariah and the glory anticipated that world peace would come in the early chapters of Isaiah the suffering servant would bring righteousness to the people of God where's all of that?

Indeed those promises seem to have come to naught and so God's statement I have loved you and still do seemed hollow indeed.

[ 7 : 23 ] How have you loved us? Look at us your people we're not a nation yes we have a temple but we're not rich we're not prosperous we don't actually inhabit the whole of the land that was promised to Abraham we're no longer a multitude as the sand on the sea or the stars in the sky as was promised we don't have a king there's a governor but we're really a little provincial outpost we're nothing and all those promises God nothing how can you say you love us?

Empty words hollow words but God's response is twofold exhibit A he says comes from earlier in his word he goes on to say is not Esau Jacob's brother?

an odd question to ask in response to have I loved you yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau Jacob and Esau were twin brothers born of Isaac son of Abraham back in the book of Genesis chapter 25 the older twin was Esau and yet it was the younger Jacob through whom the promised line would follow from Esau came the nation of Edom and by the time of Malachi Edom had been for centuries a hostile nation to the people of Israel and Judah though they came from twin brothers it was always through Jacob that the promises of God were made and held in one sense a completely arbitrary decision of God I chose Jacob not Esau the younger not the older I am sovereign and free I will choose whom I will choose I am God and whilst we might somehow feel a little bit repugnant when we read that Esau

I hated the Hebrew idiom of putting the opposites together love and hate is not so much that hatred that is a personal emotional response to someone that we dislike intensely but rather Jacob I chose and loved and I did not choose and did not love Esau is in effect it's not a personal vindictiveness or hatred at Esau but I didn't choose him and I therefore didn't love him is in effect the contrast that is being painted God is sovereign and he chooses to love whomever he chooses to love and exhibit B in the verses that follow I have made Edom that is the descendants of Esau his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals 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 until they are called the wicked country the people with whom the Lord is angry forever

Jerusalem of course had been made desolate but God's people had rebuilt and were now dwelling there admittedly not in the luxury and glory of its heyday but they had rebuilt successfully not so Edom if they rebuild I will tear it down again is what God says by the time of Malachi Edom was a nation on the way out it had lived south of Israel for centuries in the Negev desert south of the Dead Sea and so on but in the 5th century BC having been an ally of Babylon when Jerusalem fell and under the curse of earlier prophets like Obadiah and others Edom had been forced out of its own land heading north and made for a time Hebron its capital that's just a short bus ride really south of Jerusalem but even then it was hardly a nation it was really almost a refugee nation and sometime in this 5th century BC it seems that the

[ 11 : 37 ] Edomites finally lost their identity overtaken by people later the Nabateans and who later a couple of hundred years later set up a city as their capital in Petra in modern Jordan Edom no more you see God's saying look around you and see yes you still exist your capital exists your temple exists it may not yet be the glory prophesied by the prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Zechariah and others but Edom they're going and you will see it I think probably there's a sense of you've already seen something their hill country is a desolation they've moved north but they're on the way out I have loved you and I still do and the truth is your own eyes shall see this and you shall say great is the

Lord beyond the borders of Israel but now the tone turns from tender love to severe indictment of sin from assurance to the sternest of rebukes mainly it's the priests the leaders of the people who are in the firing line in the verses that follow tonight but not exclusively so as we'll see a son honours his father and servants their master if I then am a father where is the honour due me and if I am a master where is the respect due me says the Lord of hosts to you O priests who despise my name where is my honour where is my respect and instead what do I get you despise my name and again

Israel rejects this statement of God so they say at the end of verse 6 how have we despised your name and basically the answer is you've despised God's name by cheapening your religious practices you see you've offered polluted food on my altar instead of offering pure and spotless lambs and goats and birds and whatever the sacrificial rules required for the different sacrifices instead of those animals being pure spotless you've offered polluted food that is animals that are sick or lame or blind as it goes on to say how have we polluted it verse 7 goes on to say by thinking that the Lord's table may be despised when you offer blind animals in sacrifice is that not wrong and when you offer those that are lame or sick is that not wrong yes it is clearly wrong the laws of the Old Testament in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and other early chapters of the

Pentateuch make it very clear the perfection that is required in the animals that are offered for sacrifice and Israel's not doing that they're offering lame animals sick animals blind animals less than best and thus they are despising God's name in fact the sacrificial animals that they offer to God they're not even fit for the governor the Persian governor probably although it may just be the Jewish governor set up over the province that's referred to in verse 8 try presenting that to your governor will he be pleased with you or show you favor the question demands the answer no he won't be how much less would God be with such offerings and sacrifices rather than this cheapened religion verse 9 exhorts them to implore the favor of God that he may be gracious to us the fault is yours will he shall show favor to any of you says the

Lord of hosts it is basically calling the priests the leaders of Israel and the people behind them to repentance implore the Lord for his favor because the implicit suggestion is your practices now do not bring the Lord's favor they do not please him implore his favor one of the difficult jobs sometimes we have to face in the Anglican church of which I'm involved on councils and as an archdeacon is deciding when to close a church down and some of those decisions are ones that I've had to deal with and still currently am dealing with in Melbourne invariably the decision to close a church down is tied to its financial situation and its attendance levels that is they can't afford a full-time minister indeed often they can't afford even a half-time minister there are so few people going that really in the end the decision on the grounds of economy is to close a place down it would be inconceivable in the Anglican church at least at present to consider closing down a church where there are significant people in pews that is in number I mean on a Sunday where the bills are paid the church is maintained and so on but God's words here show a different criterion for considering to close down one of his religious institutions if I can put it like that it's not quite a church I suppose as we would think you see the consideration here is not that nobody ever turns up to offer a sacrifice so let's close down the Jerusalem temple and sell it off to promote ministry in another place probably it's quite populated there are lots of sacrifices going on no doubt these were religious people there are a number of priests who've got quite a lot of work to do and are being sustained perhaps by the religious practices but in the end it is

[ 18 : 05 ] God's wish they'd be better off he'd be better off if it all closed down see what verse 10 says quite shocking really oh that someone among you would shut the temple doors that is probably the outer doors into which people would the normal men at least would go with their sacrificial animals to meet the priest to offer them shut those outer doors so that the whole temple becomes defunct so that you would not kindle the fire on my altar in vain you see it's not just that

this is second rate and God's therefore a little bit dissatisfied it's not like going to a restaurant and thinking oh that meal was a bit average I mean it sort of filled me up but it's not that great God's saying this whole paraphernalia is absolutely in vain it's worthless it achieves nothing you can offer all the lame blind sick animals you can find in the world and you're no better off it is a complete waste of time it is worthless pointless valueless and profitless it is not even a little bit useful it's absolutely in vain a total waste of time you see it's not built on the economy of how many people offer sacrifices how popular the priests are how many people flock to hear them or whatever the criteria is not full churches it's whether or not

God is being despised and again note the refrain like in verse 5 similarly in verse 11 for from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations not just in Israel universally great and in every place incense is offered to my name at a pure offering for my name is great among the nations says the Lord of hosts it's a slightly puzzling verse because it's to us in present tense in every place is offered to my name a pure offering I'm sure the verse is anticipatory of the end age where universally like we read in the New Testament every knee will bow before Jesus not something we yet see but one day we will see that in every place a pure offering is offered to God universally this refrain of

God's name being great in the nations is juxtaposed and jars with the despising nature of the priests it's meant to show up their sin in an even sharper light it heightens their culpability when we read of what the priests are doing and their disdain and casualness and despising God by cheap sacrifices and when then we read God's name is great in all the universe we realise how serious their sin is it is a black and white picture between those verses a strong contrast and note how that contrast is then brought out in verse 12 at the beginning but you my name is great among the nations but you makes the contrast very sharp and very clear you see far from treating God's name as great even in their own nation they despise it and insult it verse 12 in essence rephrases verse 7 and verse 13 in essence rephrases verse 8 so so sharply and badly is

God being treated by these priests that in effect the indictment is repeated when you say that the Lord's table is polluted and the food for it may be despised you are profane God's name what a weariness is this you say and you sniff at me bit hard to imagine the sort of sniff but it's sort of turning up your nose in effect at God says the Lord of hosts 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 verse 14 in effect says no I'm not even a bit pleased totally it is in vain but notice that the priests alone are not to blame cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished you see the people are following the low standards of the priests the priests ought to be inspecting the animals that was part of their job and if an animal was blind or lame or sick they should reject it and say you've got to but these priests despised God and so did the people who came with the animals and again the refrain to juxtapose the seriousness of their sin shows in a clear light for I am a great king says the Lord of hosts and my name is revered among the nations from this indictment in chapter one comes the hints of punishment in the opening verses of chapter two what's God going to do in response he's already said that what they do is bad and in vain how will he then punish these people in effect the opening part of chapter two turns the tables from the beginning of chapter two chapter one in chapter one verse two the people said how have you loved us they doubt that love now God in a sense throws an accusation back to the people and now oh priest this command is for you if you will not listen if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name says the

[ 24 : 25 ] Lord of hosts then then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings indeed I've already cursed them because you do not lay it to heart I will rebuke your offspring and spread dung on your faces the dung of your offerings and I will put you out of my presence this is almost four letter word type punishment that is I will smear dung on you is not a particularly pleasant thing to imagine and the rules of the sacrifices back in exodus were that all the offal the intestines and the dung was to be taken well outside the temple area and burned so here it's saying that the priests are to be actually in a sense taken out of the temple and just burned covered in dung not literally burned but showing how worthless they are what a waste of time it all is and so on this is a strong language indeed the word for offspring is the word for seed and it may be rebuking your crops or it may be rebuking your offspring or indeed it may be both and the sense of rebuking is to bring a curse upon it no longer will the blessing be that you'll have numerous descendants and lots of crops and wealth and prosperity it's the opposite of that

God will judge you and judge those after you is in effect what he's saying in these verses and there's real anger indeed in this this is not a light word from God at all spoken in the utmost seriousness when he says in the middle of verse two I will send the curse on you the sense is I will unleash it on you I'll hurl it on you it's strong language indeed because it shows the personal anger of God at the way he's being treated by his people and their leaders and the cause of the problem you will not listen is how verse two starts you see it's not that their treatment of God is an accident it's not that they're fumbled around and come up with a system and it's not quite right but they hadn't realised it it's not just that they're acting out of ignorance you are not listening to me is in effect what God is saying how would they listen to him well the words of the scriptures of course that's where their sins arise from they're not heeding and obeying and listening to the word of God that they'd already been given for hundreds of years in particular in this case the laws of sacrifices in Exodus through to Deuteronomy in the early part of the Old Testament the priest's failure is stubborn disobedience it is a refusal to listen to God's word which so often lies at the heart of sin Adam fell for the same thing in the garden of Eden refusing to listen to God's word and choosing to listen instead to the serpents but then notice that the purpose of this punishment by God severe as it is is not the destruction and the annihilation of his people or their leaders see verse four know then that I have sent this command to you that my covenant with Levi may hold says the Lord of hosts

Levi was the name of one of the sons of Jacob and from Levi came the tribe of the Levites who were the priests and in effect the covenant with Levi arose out of the sin of the people as a whole at the golden calf incident in Exodus 32 and they became set apart to be the mediatorial tribe between God and the rest of his people the priests through whom sacrifices would be offered and by whom the word of God would be taught to the people of God that setting apart of Levi as the tribe of priests God says I want that to hold the priests of this day are despising God and will be punished but the purpose of punishment is mercy a severe mercy indeed because it's a mercy that comes out of severe judgment and punishment for sin but its purpose is not just

God's vindictiveness or hatred of his people get out of me forever but it's a punishment to purify purification is always painful a severe mercy so that my covenant with Levi may hold he goes on then to say about this original covenant and what it should be like my covenant with him was a covenant of life and well being which I gave him this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name in contrast implicitly with the priests of this day of Malachi true instruction was in his mouth and no wrong was found on his lips he walked with me in integrity and uprightness and he turned many from iniquity for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge and people should seek instruction from his mouth for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts that's how the priests ought to have behaved so that the people would not fall into iniquity but what has happened is the opposite so in verse eight we read but you have turned aside instead of walking in integrity in a straight line they've turned aside from

[ 30 : 11 ] God's path and turning aside is a deliberate action the sense of the verb is deliberate not accidental it's not acting out of ignorance and instead of causing many to come away from iniquity to come into the path of righteousness as verse six said verse eight says you've caused many to stumble that is to stumble morally and religiously and in their faith and fall away from God is the implication of that the opposite effect of what you should have done instead of bringing them from iniquity they've stumbled into it by your leadership and you've corrupted the covenant of Levi not not wrecked it it's not broken forever but it's corrupted and God's act of punishment severe though it is is that the covenant may become pure again and hold the result then is that those who despise God are in themselves despised by him

I make you despised and abased before all the people in as much as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction they've sought human favour that is not God's which is why earlier he implored them to seek God's favour not other people's well this is a very damning indictment of the leadership of God's people and the people as a whole as well it is a critique of their worship and religion that has become perfunctory routine what someone called a dozy duty it's a religion of convenience really let's get rid of our lame and sick and blind animals which will do us no good it is a religion that despises God's greatness indeed it's full of cheap grace actually they're offering worthless offerings that are in effect leftovers that cost them nothing and bring them no benefit if they keep them you see it's like discarding old clothes into a charity bin makes you feel good that you might be helping someone else but actually it's cost you nothing because the clothes

are either worn out no longer in style or don't fit you anyway it's like tossing a few loose coins or notes in a collection plate you won't miss it it costs you nothing but it might make you feel good that you've actually done it you see what's being indicted here is a religion that is just convenient a religion that costs nothing and in our day and age the similar sort of indictment would go to those preachers who can't be bothered actually quite preparing their sermons properly what's the point no one will listen so I'll just sort of have a nice

Saturday instead of slaving at a sermon it's an indictment against those who are carefree or casual or unreliable in fulfilling their duties or responsibilities for the people of God it's an indictment for those who have a role but turn up late or not at all to do it those who don't practice to do it those who couldn't care if oh well if I'm not there somebody else might do it after all that's the sort of indictment of a religion of convenience people who just do things routinely slackly that cost them nothing and in effect despise God people who offer the remnants of time the skerricks of interest and the dross of their money regards God as blind unseeing and unknowing but he says I love you I love you

I have loved you and I still love you he says it emphatically at the beginning of the book to this people who despise him that makes it all the more astonishing the opening words of the book he's not saying I love you to people who are faithfully generously and sacrificially serving him and honouring him and glorifying his name he's saying it to a people who despise him I love you I still love you is what he's saying all the more remarkable because of their disdain of him I love you he says and I still do despite your disinterest despite you despising me despite your disobedience why does a prophet of judgment like Malachi begin his book with such an emphatic statement of love it almost jars when you go from chapter 1 verse 2 to the end of chapter 1 how can

God say I love you and I still love you and then recite all the things that they do that are so far from right and so far from honouring him how do these two ideas sit together in the same place isn't there a disjunction of thought here when grace is so cheapened by God's people that they despise him like ancient Israel what they need to hear is grace when they regard grace as so cheap they need to be told that grace is actually costly for it's grace that trains God's people to be self controlled upright and godly it is grace that teaches hearts to fear it is the grace of the mercy of God that provokes one to offer themselves as a living sacrifice it is the grace of the love of God to the loveless that they may lovely be it is the grace of love so amazing and so divine that it demands my soul my life my all it is the message of amazing grace of endless mercy of love vast beyond all measure that Israel needed to hear they thought that grace was cheap and it's not it's costly and God is telling us and Malachi is telling us that when we fall into religions of convenience that cost us nothing we not only despise

[ 37 : 37 ] God but we so cheapen his grace that the answer we need to hear is not just words of punishment but words of punishment framed by words of grace ancient Israel in Malachi's day thought that God owed them a lot a king the full borders of the land prosperity and wealth and crops and animals the honor of the nations and so because that was not their reality they were despondent and skeptical about God's love at all God is never our debtor he owes us nothing he never does and he never will and ancient Israel their mean spirited and casual and carefree offerings belie their murmuring pride when we fall into the trap of thinking that God is our debtor then we've lost our heart if we become deceived into a mere grudging religious duty a religion of convenience a cheap grace then we despise

God for we cheapen the most costly gift of all his mercy and love to us in Christ free grace but far from cheap don't despise the deep love of God don't despise the ceaseless mercy of God don't despise the amazing grace of God for it is that grace that keeps on being poured out to transform us and renew our minds that we offer our whole lives as living sacrifices to God God begins by saying to complacent convenient people

I love you I have done and I still do do you know that God can say to you tonight despite your sins despite who you are I love you do you know that in your heart Andrew Stephen Suze Luke Lisa Matt God loves you David Jan Jillian Faith God loves you a love so amazing so divine it demands our souls our lives our all

God is Godino God God him