

Loved by God

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Date: 01 November 2015

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[0 : 00] But today we're beginning a new series in the book of Malachi, which is the last book of the Old Testament, or the book of Malachi, as some of my kids like to call it. And we're going to look at this as we head towards Christmas.

Why don't I pray again for us, though, before we start. Let's pray. Father, again, we do thank you for your word. Lord, we thank you that as Neville prayed before, that it is a lamp to our feet.

And even though this was written to your people, the Israelites, thousands of years ago, there is a message that is still very much relevant for us here in Melbourne today.

And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to understand your word and to live our lives in light of it. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in 1964, the Righteous Brothers released a hit song.

I'm going to try and play some of it for you, if the technology allows me. See if you recognize it. Thanks, Gwyneth. Or not. It worked this morning. You've hit next, yeah?

[1 : 11] Okay, this is the lines. I'm not going to sing it because I won't be that cruel to you. But it goes like this. There is no tenderness like before in your fingertips.

You're trying hard not to show it. Baby. But baby, you know it. You've lost that loving feeling.

Yeah, yeah. Much better than Righteous Brothers. And that's actually rather a sad song, isn't it? It's about someone who feels their spouse has stopped loving them, has lost that loving feeling towards them.

Well, as we begin the book of Malachi this morning, this is how Israel was feeling about God. They felt that God had lost that loving feeling towards them.

For Malachi begins with God's love declared and then denied or doubted. If you've got your Bibles there, have a look at verse 1 and 2.

[2 : 11] The word of the Lord to the Israel through Malachi. I have loved you, says the Lord. But you ask, how have you loved us?

Do you see what's happening? Israel has doubted or denied that God loves them. That God has lost that loving feeling towards them. Now, why would God's people think that?

Well, to answer that question, we need to know the historical background, which is always worth doing when you're beginning an Old Testament book. So the next slide is a broad sweep of their history.

It's a bit hard to see, so we're going to zoom in on the next slide. Of course, it starts with creation and Adam and Eve. And then, of course, the fall where Adam sinned and humanity fell, as did creation.

So now we live in a fallen world where there is sickness and disaster. But then on the next slide, again, hit next again. Should fix itself up. There we are. God called Abraham. And through Abraham, God was going to create a great nation.

[3 :17] He was going to bless all people on earth through Abraham and reverse the effects of sin. So God began to do that. Abraham had Isaac. Isaac then had Jacob and Esau.

Though Esau is missing from that timeline, you might notice. We'll find out why today from Malachi. And then came Joseph, who ended up in Egypt. And in Egypt, the people ended up as slaves.

But next slide. God called Moses to save his people from Egypt. This was the exodus or the exit from Egypt. Then, having saved them, God brought them to Mount Sinai and promised to continue as their God.

And they, the people, promised to be his people. And so God gave the law to show them how to live as his people. And then he gave them the land to live in.

And for a while, they did live as God's people in God's land under God's rule. In fact, under King David and Solomon, we reached the high point of Israel's history.

[4 :21] The temple was built where God could once again dwell amongst his people, almost like he did back in the garden. And other peoples of the earth were coming to Israel and sharing in the blessings, just as God had promised to bless the nations through Abraham, through Israel.

Now, the effects of sin, you see, were starting to be reversed. But then it all went wrong. On the next slide, Solomon led the people astray.

So the kingdom was torn in two. And so you can see the two pathways there in the timeline. The northern part became known as Israel. The southern part became known as Judah. And for 200 years after this split, God warned the people to turn back to him.

200 years, that's pretty patient. More patient than I am with my children. But they did not listen. The people, that is. Sometimes my kids, too. And so the northern kingdom was wiped out in 722 BC by the superpower at the time, the Assyrians.

And they never came back. As for the southern kingdom, well, they had a couple of good kings. And so they lasted a bit longer for another 130 years. But they persisted in turning away from God as well.

[5 :31] And so this time, they were exiled by the Babylonians, who were the next superpower. So on the next slide, we'll get a close-up of that. Exiled to Babylon and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in 586 BC.

But of course, God promised to be their God. And he promised to bring them back. And he did. And the Persians became the next superpower. And God moved the heart of the Persian king, Cyrus, to allow the people to return.

And so, on the next slide, they returned to the land under a governor called Zerubbabel, who happened to be a descendant of King David. But the people faced hardships.

And it was easier to look after themselves rather than to trust and serve God. So God also sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah on the right side there. The font's a bit light there. Sorry about that. But Haggai and Zechariah came to warn and encourage them.

And then finally, the temple was rebuilt in 516 BC. But here's the thing. Haggai had promised that the glory of the Lord would fill the temple.

[6 :38] In fact, that this rebuilt temple would be even better than Solomon's first temple. But it wasn't. And Zechariah had promised that the Messiah would return and rule from sea to sea.

But he hadn't. So after about 50 years had passed, the people were still waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. Yet instead of trusting God, who had delivered in the past, instead of living wholeheartedly for God as they promised at Mount Sinai, they again withdrew from God.

Now, they did not worship other gods like they did before. The exile had well and truly cured them of that disease. But they felt unloved by God.

They felt that God had lost that loving feeling. And so they stopped loving God with their whole heart in return. They just went through the motions. And so again, they're in danger of judgment.

For they were wandering from God. And it's at this point on the next slide that Malachi steps in. God sends Malachi to remind the people that he does love them.

[7 : 48] And he sends Malachi to call the people to return to him. Chapter 4 verse 7. To recommit themselves to him. That God might not have to judge, but bless them.

And so what follows in Malachi are six conversations. Kind of like six marriage counseling sessions, if you like. And each session addresses a different issue in the relationship. And it's addressed so that the people might recommit themselves to their relationship with God again.

But in this first session, this first discussion, God begins by declaring his love for them. Chapter 1 verse 2.

Yet they look around and they doubt it. They deny it. In fact, how have you loved us, God? The promises are not yet fulfilled. Life is hard.

And we can feel the same way, can we not? We are still waiting for some of God's promises to be fulfilled. We can sometimes feel that life is hard.

[8 : 52] And it is hard. And so we can sometimes feel that God has lost that loving feeling towards us as well. So how does God respond? Well, he responds by defending his love for them.

Point to the rest of verse 2. He says, Now when you first read that, it's not all that clear how this proves God's love for them.

Earlier this year in July, on the next slide, this young Irish kid, Patrick Ward, wanted to show his love for a girl at school, Rose O'Donoghue. And so he, instead of just passing a note in class, he made this video where he declared his love.

And then he danced and sang to a romantic song and then sent the video to her. I think on the next slide, he's got some dance moves happening in the next one. It's all very cute. I think to show my love for Michelle, I took her to McDonald's, which on reflection, I could have done better.

But it's clear that Patrick is showing and proving his love for Rose. But when we read these verses, we could be forgiven for thinking, how does that show your love, God?

[10 : 10] How does that prove that you loved Israel? And to understand this, we need to remember who Jacob and Esau were and what God said to their mother, Rebekah.

And so on the next slide is a passage from Genesis 25, where we read about this. It says, Now 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, which means hairy. After this, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel.

So he was named Jacob, because Jacob means he grasped the heel. Now notice here on this slide that God promises a nation will come from each child.

And so from Esau came the nation of the Edomites. And from Jacob came the nation of Israel. There's the first connection. But also notice that God chose the younger to be served by the older.

[11 : 21] And this is the second connection, how God has loved Israel. You see, in the culture of that day, as I'm sure you realize, the eldest boy was the one who received the inheritance, the blessings, everything.

The eldest was served by the youngest, not the other way around. I mean, that's the joy of being the eldest child, is it not? Having underlings to serve you. At least that's what our eldest daughter thinks her younger sister is for.

But remarkably, God says it will 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.

He chose Israel to be his people, his treasured possession. Even though they had no right to be. This is how God has shown love for Israel.

By choosing them, you see. And this is also what it means to love and hate. You see, in Malachi chapter 1, when we read the words, Jacob I loved and Esau I hated, it's that word hate that kind of doesn't sit comfortably with us, does it?

[12:33] But the language of love and hate is really the language of choose and not choose. After all, God does love all people. Because he made all people in his image, did he not?

Indeed, he would give his only son to die for all people. But here, he especially loves Israel by choosing them to be his people, his firstborn sons, his children.

And he hated Esau, not in the way we hate, but in the sense of not choosing Esau and the Edomites who came from him to be God's people. Of course, we need to also remember that while God did not choose Esau to inherit the blessing, it is also true that Esau himself did not choose to inherit the blessing.

Do you remember? Because later on in Genesis 25, we are told that Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of what? Do you remember? Soup. Red lentil soup.

Edomites. Which is why his descendants are called the Edomites, because Edom means red. Now, as nice as you might find red lentils, giving up your birthright for them actually shows contempt for your birthright, doesn't it?

[13:52] And either way, he's given it up. He's lost it. You see, while God chose not to make Esau his people and receive his blessings, Esau also freely chose not to be God's people and receive his blessings.

Of course, Jacob was no better than Esau, really, was he? He grew up to be a schemer. From birth, he was grasping his brother's heel, do you remember? That's what his name, Jacob, means, to grasp the heel.

But that phrase, to grasp the heel, is a Hebrew idiom or phrase that means a deceiver. That's what Jacob was. Do you remember? He deceived his father, tricked his father into getting the blessings.

So he didn't deserve the blessings either. And that only makes God's choice and love for Israel all the more amazing, given he didn't deserve it. So why did then God choose Jacob and Israel over Esau and the Edomites?

Well, I think it's to show that being his people does not depend on how good you are. It does not depend on whether you are the eldest in the family. In fact, it does not depend on anything the world might think.

[15:05] Rather, it depends entirely on God's gracious choice. So, on the next slide, Paul puts it like this in Romans chapter 9. He says, Rebecca's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac, yet before the twins Jacob and Esau were born, all had done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose in election might stand, notice this, not by works or good deeds and so on, but by him who calls, who chooses.

Rebecca was told, the older will serve the younger. Just as it is written in Malachi, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. You see, by choosing Jacob and the nation of Israel to inherit the blessings, God shows that what they have is entirely undeserved, entirely from God's gracious hand, not by works, but by God who calls, even from birth, even from before birth.

And so, while God loves all people, he has especially shown his love to Israel by choosing them to be his people, even when they had no right, even when they didn't deserve it.

This is how special they are. This is how loved they are. It's as though God is saying to the Israelites, look back and remember that you had no right to be chosen. Was not Esau Jacob's brother?

Did not Esau and his descendants have a legitimate claim to the blessings? Yet I chose you, who had no right, and did not deserve it, to be my people and receive my blessings.

[16:40] That's how I've loved you. What's more, because God chose them, he has also kept them, despite the fact that they keep turning away from him. Do you see the rest of verse 3?

Malachi chapter 1 verse 3. He says, he's not only loved Jacob and hated Esau, he's also turned Esau's hill country into a wasteland, which was his inheritance, and left the inheritance to the desert jackals.

And 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 will see it with your own eyes, and say, great is the Lord, even beyond the borders of Israel. You see, the Israelites, were not only to look back, and see how God loved them, by choosing their forefather Jacob, over Esau, but they're also to look around them, and see that the land of the Edomites, has been destroyed, while Israel is back in their land.

You see, it seems that sometime, while the Israelites were in exile, Eden had been overtaken, by other people groups, perhaps by Arabs, some scholars think, or the Nabataeans.

[17:59] And God says, if they try and rebuild, they won't, no matter how hard they try. Why? Well, because they were not God's chosen people.

And so they would have to pay, for their own sins. What sins? Well, when the Babylonians attacked Israel, the Edomites were standing there, clapping, cheering on the Babylonians, enjoying seeing their cousins slaughtered.

In fact, the Edomites even hunted after, Israelite survivors, and killed them, or handed them over, to the Babylonians. That's why, in verse 4, we're told that Edomites are always, under God's wrath.

Because of what? They did. But the point is, to this day, there's no land of Eden. Yet, says God, you Israelites, my people are still here.

You see, I chose you, and so I've also kept you. Despite you turning away from me, time and time again in history, despite other nations, trying to wipe you out, you are still here, unlike your Edomite cousins, who are not.

[19:10] And you've begun to rebuild your land, unlike your Edomite cousins, who will not. And if I made you into a great nation, through just one man, do you not think I could do it again?

Now, now I have loved you, Israel. Look back at how I chose you, and look around at how I've kept you. There's the evidence, for how I've loved you.

On the next slide, is a picture of our youngest, who is not in a happy mood. And the issue was, this is it, very important, we weren't having, what she wanted for dinner.

And so she pulled her face, and when she insisted, and we said no, she exclaimed this, you don't love me anymore, and ran off to her room.

Of course, she'd forgotten that, we'd given her lots of things, even though she didn't deserve it, we'd shown her love, in lots of ways. The problem was, she just wasn't looking, in the right place.

[20:10] Well, Israel had forgotten, how God had loved them. I'm sure life was hard for them. It was a fallen, and still is a fallen world. But they weren't looking, in the right place, for God's love.

They had forgotten the fact, that they had been chosen by God, and kept by God. Even though they did not deserve it. Even though they kept, turning away from him, time and time again. That's how God has loved them.

And the message, for us today, is the same. See, as we look forward, from the Old Testament, to Jesus, and then to us, which is what you always need to do, when reading the Old Testament, we see that, God has also chosen us, in Christ.

Adopted us, to be his children. And that's how God, has loved us. You see, we too can go through hardship, and feel like God has, lost that loving feeling, towards us. But we must remember, to look in the right place, for God's love.

We are not to look at, how healthy, or wealthy our lives are, because God never promised us, those things. Instead, we are to look, at who God has made us to be.

[21:14] We are to remember, that he chose to adopt us, as his precious children. His first born sons, as it were, who receive, all the blessings, that go with that. And then he gave, his only son, Jesus, to make it all happen.

We saw this, in our second reading, from Ephesians. So on the screen, is reading, the relevant part, from Ephesians. Paul writes, Praise be, to the God and Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why? Well he has blessed us, in the heavenly realms, with every, spiritual blessing, in Christ. for he chose us, in him, before the creation, of the world, to be holy, and blameless in his sight.

In love, he predestined, or chose us, to be adopted, as his sons, through Jesus Christ.

You see, while God loves all people, he has especially, loved us. For God chose us, to be adopted, as his firstborn sons, the ones who, inherit the blessings. And here, we inherit, every, spiritual blessing.

[22:24] And if you have, every, spiritual blessing, how many do you lack? None. And the spiritual blessings, are the ones, worth having, because unlike, the physical ones, which last a lifetime, the spiritual ones, last an eternity.

This is what we have, as God's firstborn sons. And do we, deserve to be adopted, as his children? No. Like Jacob, we've done nothing, to deserve it. In fact, the verse says, that we've been chosen, before the creation, of the world.

Before, like Jacob, we could do anything, good or bad. But like Jacob, we too, grew up to be sinners. In fact, we were sinners, from birth. And so, did God choose us, because he knew, we would one day believe?

Well, he knew that, but he didn't choose us, because of that. Rather, he chose us, and then enabled us, to believe as well. You see, like with Jacob, our sonship, and blessings, are entirely, entirely, from God's gracious hand.

This is how special we are. That while God loves all people, he has especially loved us, by choosing us, to be his treasured, children. And notice, on the slide, I'll go back just a sec, Gwyneth, that all this, is through, Jesus Christ.

[23:46] In other words, this is what it costs God, to make us, his firstborn sons. The blood of his, only son. I have some friends, who work as missionaries, in Fiji, which is actually, harder than it sounds.

And they have, three children of their own, but they've just adopted, a young Fijian child. And on the next slide, is a photo of them, on their first holiday together. That's all the other kids, holding the adopted son, in the pool, on the right there.

Now they have love, for all the children, there, our missionary friends. But they especially love, this child, called Timothy. Because Timothy, was chosen for them, to be adopted, as their own son.

But to do this, it actually costs them greatly. They don't have lots of money, as missionaries, in the first place, but it still costs them, thousands of dollars. Yet, they did it, because they said, God has adopted us.

And it costs God, so much more. The blood of his, only son. This is how, God loves us. He has adopted us, as his sons, at the cost of his, only son.

[24 : 56] And he will keep us, and continue to forgive us, and bring us, home to heaven. That's how God, continues to love us. If you're here this morning, and you don't know, this love of God, then trust in Jesus.

Believe that Jesus, died for you, so that you could be, adopted by God. And if you are here this morning, you do believe, then do you know, how loved by God you are?

Do you reflect on it? Do you rejoice in it? Well, let me finish, with a verse, that has often struck me. It's from, 1 John chapter 3, and it's on the screen.

John writes, how great, is the love, the father has lavished on us, that we, undeserving people, should be called, the precious, children of God.

And that, is what we are. I don't know, how you're feeling this morning, but whenever it feels like, God has lost that loving feeling, then look, at who, he's made you to be.

[26 : 02] And remember, that we are, amazingly, loved by God. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you, for your love, for us, that you have chosen us, to be adopted, as your, firstborn sons, as it were.

those who inherit, every spiritual blessing now, with the hope, of physical blessings, to come in glory. Father, we thank you, that you, even then, gave up, your only son, Jesus, to make all this happen.

Father, we pray, that whenever we feel, as though, you have stopped caring for us, or lost that loving feeling, help us to remember, whom you have chosen us to be. Your dear, and precious children.

May we always remember this, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. you