

How have you loved us, God?

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[0 : 00] As we stand, let us pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us. We thank you that you show us your deep love for us in it.

And we ask that by your Holy Spirit, you will stir our hearts up to know you and to love you today, that we might love those that you have brought into our lives through this week that is to come. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. Please be seated. Amen. Well, I want to welcome all of you, as James did, and also welcome those of you who meant to come to the 9 o'clock service but were stopped by a marathon from coming here.

I know there's a few of you. I just barely made it to the 9 o'clock service, and a few minutes before 9, I finally dragged myself in, and I actually got received by people who cheered for me when I came here, which is very unusual.

It's a first. So I'm hoping for more marathons that come up. So it's a nice way to be received into church. So what people almost missed at 9 o'clock was a new series on the book of Malachi.

[1 : 05] And I want you to turn there for a second. It's on page 801. And this is a book that God speaks very powerfully through so that over the next seven weeks, we're going to be going through this very short book.

It's about four chapters long, and in fact, I invite you to read it this week. Somebody told me they read it during the sermon this morning, but I'm not asking you to do that. It's short, but it's a good way to get a feel for what's going to be happening over the next seven weeks.

It's a very relevant book to us because it is written to a city and a time, a culture that had become very self-focused and materialistic.

It was a time when people weren't really believing in God, that He would really judge the world, and they didn't really think that there was much beyond this world. They didn't think that there was much to hope for beyond what this world offers.

They didn't have much room for God in their lives, so there was really little vitality in their relationship to God. And that meant that their marriages and their relationships really suffered.

[2 : 18] There was a lot of brokenness in relationships. It meant that they were trusting in money above everything else, above God even. It also meant that they were morally relativistic, so that they were calling good evil and evil good.

And it's in this situation that God spoke very powerfully through Malachi to all of those things. And if you think that maybe 450 B.C. Jerusalem sounds a lot like Vancouver 2017, you're right.

Very similar in what we think, how we think in our culture here today. So how did it get to that point in Jerusalem? Well, a very short history lesson for you.

You may remember that we did, if you had been here, I know that some of you weren't, we had a series in the book of Ezekiel a little over a year ago. And in that book, we saw that Israel had brought God's judgment onto themselves.

And that took the form of a superpower, Babylon, coming to Jerusalem, defeating all of the armies of Israel, and demolishing the city, destroying the temple, and scattering the people of God so that many of them were taken captive to Babylon, 900 miles away, in present-day Iran.

[3 : 40] And they were there for 70 years. Now, at the end of the 70 years, a new superpower took over, defeated Babylon. They were the Persians. And they, by God's mercy, allowed the people of God to go back to Jerusalem.

Now, the people of God thought, okay, God has fulfilled this prophecy that we'd come back. It's gonna be a golden age. We're gonna rebuild. Things will be new and great again.

But here we are at Malachi's time, 60, 70, 80 years later, and things are not turning out the way that they were hoping. So Jerusalem is not a great city.

There's lots of space we hear in the prophets, but not many people living there. Nehemiah has not come quite yet to rebuild the walls. So there's no walls. The temple was rebuilt, but it's pretty shabby, very unimpressive.

It doesn't look anything like Solomon's temple, and it doesn't seem like it's filled with the glory of God. And the nation of Israel is just this tiny sub-province with a Persian governor over them.

[4 : 46] And then they just had the daily struggles of everyday life in an economy that was very weak. So by worldly standards, they are not successful.

And guess what? They blamed God. They were very disillusioned with Him. And you can imagine what that did to their relationship with God. There was no vitality, no sense of the reality of God in their lives.

And it's like they were just going through the motions. And I wonder if this is something that you are going through now, or you have gone through in your life. You may have been a Christian for a very long time, but right now it may seem that God does not seem close to you.

He's not the center of your life. There's not a vitality. It seems like there's just going through motions. Maybe you feel like you're in a spiritual holding pattern. A number of years ago, quite a few years ago, the first time I flew to London in England, we had a great flight until we got to London. When we got there, lots of fog in London. Surprise, surprise. So we circled what seemed like well over an hour, we circled London. And you could capture little glimpses of it through the fog, but there's no way that we'd be able to land.

[6 : 03] So we ended up landing in Prestwick, Scotland. And then finally making our way. Well, this can be a picture of our spiritual life where we feel like we're just wandering, that there's a real fog between us and God.

We're in a holding pattern and we're not going anywhere. And this is something that Malachi is speaking to, that kind of situation.

You also may not be a follower of Jesus Christ yet. And I know there's probably some in this congregation who have come like that. You have not experienced God's love in your life yet and the joy of serving Him.

Well, Malachi speaks to you as well because God speaks. He reveals Himself in marvelous ways in this book. So you can know a God who cares for you and loves you.

Malachi is a real gift for us because God speaks in order to renew people's relationship with Him. So they can really know the reality of the living God in their lives.

[7 : 13] And that's why the great call of Malachi, maybe if you just flip the page to chapter 3, verse 7, you see the call of Malachi to you and to me and to the people of that time.

And he says there, you know, from the days of your fathers, you've turned aside from my statutes, you've not kept them. And here's the call, return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

Return to me and I will return to you. That's what Malachi wants to have happen in the lives of the people he's speaking to.

This is what God wants through Malachi. He wants to grip us with His grace and help us to return to Him throughout this whole book. So I want you to turn to Malachi 1, 1 through 5, and look at these five little verses that start out this great book.

In this book, God lovingly pursues us in these few, five verses here, and He renews our love for Him in three very practical and real ways that I want to talk about.

[8 : 25] The first is that He speaks to you. And the second is that He loves you through this book. And thirdly, He actually reveals sin in our hearts, which is a way for us to renew, be renewed in our love for God.

So let's look at the first one, that God speaks to you. He does it in human words in Malachi. So verse 1 says, the oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

And that word Malachi, that name, means my messenger. God personally sends a messenger with His words. And that is the unique thing about the God of the Bible.

He speaks personally and directly to people through ordinary people like Malachi. This is an amazing thing because the God who is Lord of all, who created all things and who rules everything, He speaks to you in a written word that you and I can understand, that we have before us.

For the reason to, that He wants us to know Him and to love Him. And because they are God's word through Malachi, they are living words.

[9 : 44] In other words, God the Holy Spirit works through them to change our hearts and to strengthen us in our faith and to lead us.

We experience the true and the living God as we hear His words. And that's what happens throughout the Bible. Right from the beginning, the Bible, the Lord is a God who speaks.

And the words that He speaks are always meant to bring people into relationship with Him. and that's why He speaks the universe into existence in Genesis.

And then He shows who He is to the people that He created. And then He reveals His plan to be in a relationship with them in the law in the Old Testament.

He renews their love and brings wandering people back to Him through the prophets like Malachi.

And then He shows us how to speak back to God, how to pray to God in the Psalms and the poets.

[10 : 44] And then at the center of all things in the Bible, Jesus, the Word of God, becomes flesh.

And He lives with us full of grace and truth.

That good Word, the good news about Jesus brings a spiritual life with God forever as we believe in Him. You see, this living Word actually brings us, draws us into a living relationship with God.

So there's the big reason why God speaks. It is so people can know Him and love Him with all their mind and their heart and their strength forever. That's why He made us.

Now there's a unique thing about the book of Malachi in that even for a prophet, there is a huge number of verses out of the whole book in which God speaks directly to His people.

You know, if you were to count them up, you'd find 47 out of 55 verses for those who count. In all of those verses, God speaks directly to His people.

[11 : 50] And they are personal words. Words that anyone can understand and relate to because He wants people whose hearts have turned cold towards God to love God again.

To warm, living hearts towards God. that's what He's doing through this book of Malachi. And really, that's why we focus on the Bible at St. John's.

It's not because we worship the Bible or because our brand of Christianity means we focus on the Bible. It's not because we want to have all this knowledge about the Bible.

It's simply because we want to hear God's voice. we want to know Jesus. We want to know how we can love Him back, to be in relationship with Him.

And we want to tell, we want to be able to tell people about the living, real Jesus Christ. Not one that somebody might have imagined or that we have thought up. When God's Word was first written, Moses told God's people, meditate on those words of God.

[12 : 57] Meditate on those words that you have been given. Why? So that you might love Him.

Love God with all your heart, your soul, and your strength. So when you're hearing and reading God's Word like Malachi, taking it to heart in your life, God changes you from the inside out.

It's like a fire that's being kindled in us. It kindles a love for Him in you that changes the way you live. And that's why God's Word is such a crucial, incredibly valuable gift for us today.

And I just want to mention that Malachi's message is called an oracle, you notice there. And that word has a sense of carrying something very heavy.

And that's because the word in Malachi is incredibly profound and important and significant for us. It is weighty and profound.

It's critical for our relationship with God. And so we need to welcome Malachi and his words. Listen to God's voice turning our hearts to Him.

[14 : 04] That's the first way he renews our love is by speaking to us. The second thing he does in these little verses to renew our love is he tells us that he loves us very simply.

Look at verse 2. I have loved you. There he's speaking directly to you and to me. And the tense means that I continue to love you, says the Lord.

These are the most beautiful, hopeful words that you can hear in this world, in your life. Because here God speaks personally and directly to you.

He says, I have loved you. I have loved you. And I think it would be a very good thing for each of us this week to take a short, this short line, I have loved you, and think about it and repeat it over and over again.

Meditate on it. Dwell on it this week. There's so many things that are hurtful or bitter that we can dwell on. What about these words? The greatest words we can hear that God says to you, I have loved you.

[15:12] Think about those words in this week. They are words that change everything. There can't be any renewal in your relationship with God, no warming of your heart towards Him without knowing and trusting that glorious truth.

It changes everything in your life. It's the message of the Bible. The message is that God the King has saved you from sin and a life apart from God. He brings you under His gracious rule. He forgives your sins because He loved you. And God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that anyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. We'll hear those words later in the service. But that renews our life and our love with God. Now I know that many of you have heard those words that I just said spoken before. You're very familiar with them. I also know that there's some of you who have not either. But all of us, all of us need to receive that truth over and over again in our lives.

[16:18] because we all suffer from a technical name of a disease called spiritual amnesia. And the common word for that is forgetfulness of God.

The people of Malachi that he was speaking to had that spiritual disease. And you see it in the second part of verse 2. But you say, you who are listening, Malachi, how have you loved us? How have you loved us? Well, God is very, very patient with that question. And he reminds them that he has loved them by choosing them.

So look at the end of verse 2. Is not Esau Jacob's brother, declared the Lord? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. Now this is a searching question because all the people of God were descended from Jacob.

And God is saying, isn't Esau the older brother of Jacob? Isn't Esau the one who was supposed to get the inheritance and the blessing? Isn't he the one through whom the promise that God would make a nation?

[17:29] Isn't he the one through that was supposed to all take place? And the answer they all knew is yes, it rightfully belonged to Esau. Yet God said, I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.

Now that word hate seems awfully harsh here, but the hatred has nothing to do with this sense of malice and bitterness that we think of today because God cannot sin.

It simply means the polar opposite of being chosen to belong to God. So Esau and his descendants are outside the people of God.

In fact, they become the Edomites who we found out in Ezekiel 25 persecuted God's people even in Jerusalem when they were being carried off.

They brought terrible suffering to the Hebrew people. And so the Lord of hosts says in verse 4, they may build, but I will tear down. They will be called the wicked country and the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.

[18:32] You see, they are the opposite of being chosen. Now according to the values of the world, that older, stronger Esau who was favored by his brother, he deserved the blessing far more than his younger twin.

You know that Jacob obtained the blessing, that inheritance by tricking Esau as he was very, very hungry, selling it for food. And then at the end of Isaac, his dad's life, again he deceived his father when he was blind towards the end of his life and received that blessing directly from his dad. Jacob was a conniving scoundrel. He can't get around it. And he took a while to grow out of his devious ways. Now you may know that I have an older twin brother myself.

And I'm a little bit resentful that Jacob gives a bad name to the younger twin. But that's the one through whom God chooses to bring the promise, to bring the blessing, to give the inheritance to. Jacob did nothing to make God favor him and love him. In fact, he did everything to disqualify himself. He wore his sin and his weaknesses, his brokenness on his sleeve.

[19:52] Yet God loved him. And it was simply because he chose to pour out his love and his grace on Jacob and to bless countless people through him to show that he, God, is the God of grace and he saves by his power alone, not because of great things that a person has done or qualified himself for.

That's why at the very end of our passage, it says your own eyes are going to see and you're going to say, great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. Israel. This is God's power, his grace, to love us and to save us.

And it is an amazing love because Israel, just as much as Edom, deserved to experience God's wrath against sin. In fact, the whole world deserves that, including you and me.

Yet, God sends his beloved son to take that wrath on himself and to choose you and me and anyone who will believe in Jesus to be his beloved, the one who receives his grace forever. And by the way, you might not know this, but Edom became the country of Edomia. And the Edomians show up with Jesus in Mark 3.

[21 : 14] They are part of the crowd that comes because they want to hear Jesus teach about grace and to see his miracles. And they have a chance to respond to the gospel. You see, this is not a chosenness away from salvation.

It is a chosenness that means the people of God will bless the world with the knowledge of God's grace. And you know, in the Old Testament, you see people who are absolutely gripped by this grace of being chosen in God's love.

I want you to just turn to Psalm 136. We'll take a little break. Turn to Psalm 136. You're going to see one of these guys. This guy is utterly taken by the undeserved, grace-filled love of God.

He's overcome with thankfulness. And so, Psalm 136 is on page 520.

520. And read this psalm sometime this week. It's amazing because he repeats himself a lot. He's so excited. He's overcome with thankfulness.

[22 : 17] So I'll just read the first three verses. He says, Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. Why? Because his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods for his steadfast love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords for his steadfast love endures forever. And guess what? For all those 26 verses, 26 times, the psalmist is going to say, the steadfast love of God endures forever. And I think these psalms are a marvelous vaccination against spiritual amnesia because God's love moves us to thankfulness.

Thankfulness that God is choosing you today, even in the midst of your distress, even in the midst of lives that can be very, very messy. And we are able to love him and return that love because he has first loved us.

He constantly changes us as we gratefully receive this extraordinary, undeserved love every day. So may we be gripped by that grace and may it move us to worship him in all of our lives.

[23 : 30] Well, I want to close by the third way that God renews our love for him. besides speaking to us and loving us first. He renews our love by revealing the sin that is in our hearts.

And I want to close with this because it really is the way into repentance and lasting change in my life and your life as well. Our hearts always grow cold towards God because of sin that is in our life that we cling to.

But God in his mercy reveals sin. He reveals sin to Israel in Malachi all throughout it always in the context of his love.

It would be very difficult to face your sin without that. But he's always giving it in that context of being chosen by him. Always in the context of personally speaking patiently and gently to his people.

And so if you go back to verse 2 for a second again the question they ask is how have you loved us? What have you done for us lately? And it reveals a real worldliness in their hearts.

[24 : 47] What they're saying with that question is they are not getting what they desired in this world. You know we are disillusioned because we believe this world is all there are.

And they have allowed the world to define for them what it is that they want and need. And clearly God is not giving it to them.

And this so fills their mind that they can't see the incredible privilege that they have in belonging to God. They can't believe in the certain hope that only God can give.

And so they choose not to remember all the very real and practical ways that God has loved them through all their generations. And they've seen it throughout the Old Testament.

God has forgiven their sins and rebellions. He has restored them when they were in trouble. He has rescued them from their enemies. He's provided for their needs.

[25 : 47] He's answered their prayers in marvelous ways. And he's provided priests and sent prophets to help them know this God who chose them. So for them to deny that God had loved them is to deny God who has been there for them, who has been all of these things for them.

The one who saves, who actually sustains them and leads them. Now, it's not wrong for you to ask if God still loves you.

we all go through incredibly difficult things in our lives. We wonder, where is God in all of this? And in fact, often the Psalms ask the question, you have loved us in the past, Lord, but where is your love today?

But what has happened differently here in Malachi's day is that they had decided to distance themselves from God. They have lived as though their needs were far more important than their relationship to God.

And their lives were defined by their belief that God had let them down. It's so very different from that searching after God, crying out to Him, because that is the seeking after God that you are doing.

[27 : 02] But wonderfully, what God does for the people in Malachi's day is in His mercy, He reveals to them the sin of their hearts. and it is a gift to them, because now God can bring the light of His love, that wonderful, simple, clear, unchanging truth, I have loved you, right into their hearts.

And His light fills their darkness. The warmth of His love replaces this cold worldliness that can so easily creep in in our lives as well.

You may be asking God this morning, do you love me? Do you love this imperfect congregation of St. John's? And we might doubt God's love because we try to answer these questions in terms of how we feel or in terms of how well I think God might meet my desires or my needs or in terms of comparing ourselves to others.

but the proof, the real overwhelming and convincing proof of God's love is that He has not dealt with any of us as our sins deserve, but He has had mercy on us in Jesus Christ and in His atoning death.

In Jesus, He has chosen you. He has chosen you to belong to Him, to hear Him speak to you personally. Will you belong to Him this morning?

[28 : 33] Will you love Him with all your heart, your strength? Will you return to Him? Today, God speaks to you personally and says, I have loved you and I continue to love you.

Amen.