

How have you loved us, God? (Evening Service)

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] So we're starting a new series in a short book of the Bible called Malachi, although some staff members at St. John's have decided to call it Malachi, which is the Italian prophet.

So we have... So this is the last book of the Old Testament. I assume you sort of got that when you opened it up. Last book of the Old Testament, written about 400 years before Christ. So probably helpful to start with some historical background here.

So the people of God were captured by the Babylonians around 600 BC. And they actually did this brutal but very clever thing. All of the Jewish people of any kind of note, of any importance, any sort of community building importance, they got out of there.

They took out of Jerusalem and they brought back to Babylon. And then they destroyed the temple. They tried to basically destroy the culture, destroy the people. Brought them back into Babylon. And so that was obviously pretty tough.

But then the Persians came in a long time later. The Persians swept through. The Persians took over. And God spoke to this king in Persia and said, let the Jews go back to Jerusalem.

[1 : 17] So the Jews went back to Jerusalem. And there in Jerusalem they built a new temple. And so that all sounds quite positive, right? About 80 years later, Malachi wrote this prophetic word.

80 years after they came back from Babylonian exile. And it's not all rosy, we see. So what's life like for God's people back home?

Well, they weren't happy cappers. And why is that? They had been given a lot of promises from God. As God's people. And they interpreted those promises to mean that life would be amazing. Back in Israel. And so they looked at their life and they were thinking, well, what happened? They're looking around and going, well, what happened? I mean, they had a new temple, for sure.

But it was a bit lame. It wasn't anywhere near as cool as the old one. They're looking around and they're going, where's God, like, doing cool stuff? God hadn't done cool stuff for a really long time, they believed.

[2 : 24] It had been hundreds of years to the last, like, miraculous thing. So this is, we're talking about Elijah and Elisha and all the stuff they did. Hundreds of years before anything sort of miraculous had happened.

They believe they're looking at the promises of God and they're thinking, we should be rich by now. And how come all the nations of the world aren't flocking to this new temple that we built?

Because that's one of the promises. And, of course, that's a promise that would only be fulfilled in Christ. But they're looking around and going, what happened to our life? Where did everything go wrong? Basically, they are this really small ethnic group living in a really small, insignificant territory, ruled over by the Persians, surrounded by people who hate them.

They're disillusioned. But the interesting thing was this, is that they didn't stop worshipping. They didn't stop going to the temple or church, whatever you want to call it. We find out later in Malachi, though, that although they didn't stop doing that stuff, practicing their faith, they were very half-hearted about it.

And this is what Malachi is going to address in this book over these sort of six weeks that we're looking at it. So they were orthodox in belief, but there was no fire in their belly. Malachi, in this book, he's going to systematically address how that half-heartedness, how that cynicism presents itself in their faith.

[4 : 03] And how does it? Just a few examples. Malachi tells us later on that these guys were really tight with their money. Really tight. He tells us that their priests were a bit useless.

Weren't really into what they were supposed to be doing. He tells us that in terms of worship practices, they would just go through the motions. So Malachi addresses all these things. Also, they

were marrying foreigners, which is normally something I support, actually. But the problem was, nothing about ethnicity, the problem was this, is God's people were ditching their Israeli wives and marrying what they thought were these gorgeous foreign women. But they were taking on the pagan faith of these gorgeous foreign women they were marrying. So they're really spiritually unhealthy. So that's a bit of background. If you wanted to summarize it, you'd say this.

They lived in this terrible sort of gray area of faith. They kept doing all the religious stuff, but the bare minimum, because basically they didn't have enough courage to deny God outright.

[5 : 17] But they didn't have enough courage to follow him wholeheartedly either. So that's your background. In terms of structure, it's pretty simple. It follows the pattern of a legal dispute or a dialogue, legal dialogue.

Most of the books actually dialogue. Like 90% of it is conversations. And it's structured around these six questions. Whole book, six questions, right?

So for example, God says in chapter 3, You're stealing from me. You're stealing from me. And they respond, How are we stealing from you? And then God responds to that. God later on says, You're not honoring my name.

And they say, How are we not honoring your name? Come on. Come on. And God responds to that. That's how the book works. That's probably good for an overview, I think. Let's get into the text.

It's only five verses, so we won't actually talk for very long here. So verse 1 of the book, of the last book of the Old Testament there, you see it begins by saying, This whole thing that you're about to read and hear about is an oracle from God to you.

[6 : 22] Now the word oracle is a very great, it's a great word, this word oracle, Hebrew. It means a heavy thing. It's a heavy thing that God is going to say. It's what it means.

Oracles means burden. There's going to be a burden. Now given that it's going to be a heavy thing, it's quite surprising that the very first words of Malachi are not rebuke.

The very first words of Malachi is, I love you. People of God, I love you, God. I love you guys. Verse 2, I have loved you. And the grammar of the sentence is this, I have loved you.

I love you. I will keep loving you. So the very first words of Malachi to this really slack group of people is not, here's what you're not doing.

The very first words are, here's what I'm doing. I'm loving you. Now that declaration is immediately met with skepticism.

[7 : 22] That's when we get to our very first question. How have you loved us? How have you loved us, God? That's their first question. So what's behind that question?

Well, before you really talked about it, they're saying, if you loved us, then why does our life look like this? So they're looking around at their experience and they're saying, this doesn't look like love.

This doesn't look like the love of God. Now, some of you may know this feeling. Some of you are carrying a lot of grief because your life is not what you thought it would be following God.

Where's the marriage I prayed for? Where is the incredible job I've prayed for? Where's the body that I wanted? Where's the constant state of joy that I thought I'd get when I followed Jesus?

Where's the showers of blessings in my life? That's a tough place to be, isn't it? Tough place to be and if you stay there, you will become cynical. And what happens is if you stay there, it leads to a passionless faith.

[8 : 40] You go to church, you do the stuff, but it's mostly because you don't know what else to do. It's a life of, if you could say it like this, you could say it's practical atheism.

You don't deny God outright, but you live as if He doesn't exist. Right, back to the text. God says to them, I love you.

And they say, how have you loved us? Now how does God respond to that cynicism? How does He respond to that question? Here's what He says, Is not Esau, Jacob's brother, declares the Lord?

Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. Now that, to our ears, is an unusual response, I think, isn't it? Like it's not very intuitive. Like what does that mean?

Well let me remind you of who these boys were. So these were the twin boys of Isaac and Rebekah. So Esau was the oldest, twins, but Esau was the oldest. He was the hunter, he was his dad's favorite.

[9 : 41] Jacob liked to sort of stick around the tents, make stew, which is just what he liked to do, it would seem. You might remember that Jacob tricked his brother into selling his birthright to him.

You also might remember that Jacob tricked and that fooled his blind, dying father into blessing him and not his older brother Esau, which was the convention.

And that caused a bit of drama. Jacob had to run away. And so these brothers went their separate ways and they founded two nations. Jacob changed his name to Israel and founded, well, his descendants are the Israelites, right?

We're talking about them right now. Esau's descendants became the Edomites. You've probably heard of them, the Edomites, the enemies of God's people. They hated God's people, always looking for a chance to hurt God's people.

In fact, when the Babylonians swept into Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, the Edomites helped them. Back to the text. So the people of God are saying, how have you loved us?

[10 : 49] And God says, is not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord, yet I have loved Jacob and Esau I have hated. It should be noted there that the word hate, it sounds so harsh to us. God hated, it sounds so harsh, right?

But these words together in the Bible, love-hate words when they're together in the Bible, the Bible uses them to describe choosing something and rejecting something else. So it's less of a visceral, emotional response and more of establishing a choice.

So bearing that in mind, how does God's answer, what is he saying, what does God mean when he says that? Well, the is not Esau Jacob's brother line, is meant to remind the listeners that by convention, by cultural convention, Esau should have been the chosen one.

Esau was older, he was the hunter, he was stronger, he was dad's favorite. Jacob was deceptive, Jacob was weaker and yet God chose Jacob.

God chose Jacob to be the father of his nation and that's the big shock the hearers are reminded of. That's the big shock of the story. Paul, the apostle Paul picks this up in Romans 9, he quotes Malachi here, it's quite a complicated quote so stay with me.

[11 : 59] Romans 9 quotes Malachi, here it is, here's Paul speaking. When Rebecca conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, he's talking about Jacob and Esau here, though they were not yet born and had done nothing, either good or bad, in order that God's promise of election might continue, not because of works, but because of him who calls.

She told him, the older will serve the younger, as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. Okay, what does that mean? God chose Jacob before birth. So God didn't choose Jacob because he looked into the future and thought, oh, Jacob will do some really cool stuff.

He didn't look into the future and say, Esau will do some really terrible stuff. God chose Jacob because he chose Jacob because he chose Jacob. Grace. God's grace, he chose Jacob.

God chose you. God loves you. Not because he looked into your future and thought, well, they'll do great. They'll start some non-profit.

They'll be a good preacher. They'll do a home group. They'll give lots of money. They'll do stuff. He chose you because he chose you. God loves you because he loves you because he loves you.

[13 : 22] I don't know if this happens to you much. You meet somebody who's not a believer and they're so much smarter than you and so much more thoughtful than you and so much kinder than you.

It happens to me all the time and yet God chose me. God said, I want you to be part of my family. See, the Edomites were actually a far more impressive group of people.

Much more impressive than the Israelites. God chose the Israelites. God chose you. What does that mean for us? Are we half-hearted?

Have we become cynical? Do we doubt God's love? That's the question, isn't it? That's the question the Israelites are asking. How have you loved me? And God says, don't look at what's just in front of you.

Look back. Now the Israelites, they could look back only to Jacob. We can look back to Jesus. Do we doubt God's love? Do we doubt the immensity of God's love?

[14 : 34] Do we doubt God's commitment to us? Folks, look at the cross. Look at the life of Jesus. Now being assured of God's love for you as you look back at Christ, then look back at your life.

And perhaps it's not what you thought it would be. Look at your life and take the advice of John Piper. John Piper's an American preacher.

He says this. He says, And do that knowing that God has a hold of you.
He picked you. He chose you to be part of his family. You are his. God loves you. Amen. Amen.
Thank you.