Open in prayer

Read the passage

[1] A pronouncement: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.
[2] "I have loved you," says the Lord.
Yet you ask, "How have you loved us?" "Wasn't Esau Jacob's brother?" This is the Lord's declaration. "Even so, I loved Jacob, [3] but I hated Esau. I turned his mountains into a wasteland, and gave his inheritance to the desert jackals."
[4] Though Edom says, "We have been devastated, but we will rebuild the ruins," the Lord of Armies says this: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called a wicked country and the people the Lord has cursed forever. [5] Your own eyes will see this, and you yourselves will say, 'The Lord is great, even beyond the borders of Israel.'

Introduction

Israel's story began with a promise. God called Abraham and gave him a land, a people, and a blessing for the nations. He rescued Israel's forefathers from Egypt. He made them his own at Sinai. He gave them a king in David, and promised that David's son would reign for ever. And he set his own presence in the temple.

Then everything fell apart. Israel turned to other gods. The prophets warned them, but they would not listen. So God sent Babylon. Jerusalem burned. The temple was destroyed. And the nation was dragged away in chains.

But the prophets did not only warn. They promised too. The Lord would bring his people home, and his glory would once again dwell amongst them. These were promises to the nation of Israel. Land, throne, temple. They were not symbols. They were promises, and God keeps promises as he makes them.

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. In it we discover Israel has returned to Jerusalem. That was a hundred years ago. But the glory has not returned. There is no king. A Persian governor rules over them. The walls are patched. The temple is rebuilt. But it is small.

So the Lord's people look at their circumstances, and ask a question about the Lord. Does he still love us? And they begin to doubt.

Have you been there? You look at your circumstances, and you wonder, does God love me? A retrenchment letter. A scan result. A message from a child who will not come home. And we read God's love like a gauge. Our marriage

is warm, and the needle climbs. Money is tight, and it falls. And we call it faith.

 It is not faith. It is a reading. And the needle follows your life. A love you can only read off a gauge is a love that moves. And a love that moves cannot be trusted.

There is another reading. It does not rise and fall. It is a word.

In verse 1 Malachi comes with a pronouncement. A burden. A weighty word of the Lord to Israel.

 And here is what the Lord says. Do not doubt my love, because it does not rise and fall with the circumstances of your life. His love is fixed. It is free. It is fierce.

So what does the Lord say first to a people who doubt him? Does he open with their failures? Does he open with a demand?

1) **The Lord's Love is Fixed** (Malachi 1:2a)

The Lord declares that his love for Israel is fixed.

What is the weighty word the Lord speaks through his messenger? It is not a rebuke. Not yet. It is an affirmation. As Malachi writes in verse 2, "I have loved you," says the Lord.

 Plain words. And they come first. Before any complaint, the Lord speaks love.

Notice who is speaking. Says the Lord. This is not Malachi's guess about the heart of God. The Lord himself speaks. He puts his own word behind his love.

The word for love is ʻāhaḇ. It is the love of a family. The love of a friend. It is warm, and it is firm.

Now notice the tense. I have loved you. Not, I might love you. Not, I used to love you. I have loved you. This love was already in place before Israel ever doubted it.

Consider who hears it. A returned remnant. Back from exile, but not back to glory. The temple is rebuilt, but it is small. The sacrifices run, but the hearts have cooled. We will see this as we go. Their circumstances have failed them. They have failed the Lord. And still he says, I have loved you.

Their failure did not unsay it. Their hardship did not unsay it. His love is fixed.

On a hard night in a marriage, nobody checks their feelings to find out whether they are married. They look to the vow. The ring. The covenant. Fixed love is not the love that always feels strong. It is the love that is still true when the feeling is gone.

 That is Israel's mistake. They checked the feeling. They should have checked the vow. Israel is asking whether they feel loved. The Lord answers by telling them they are loved.

Not what you see. Not what you feel. I have loved you. The Lord's love is fixed, and what the Lord has said, he does not take back.

So the Lord declares that his love for Israel is fixed. The Lord loves his people, and he says so first.

But what did Israel do to win it? And when they hear it, will they believe it?

2) **The Lord's Love is Free** (Malachi 1:2b-3)

Though they were brothers, the Lord sovereignly chose the younger Jacob and judged the older Esau.

The Lord has said, "I have loved you." But Israel is still reading his love off their circumstances. A small land. A struggling temple. So they answer back in the middle of verse 2. "How have you loved us?"

Listen to the Lord's reply. "Wasn't Esau Jacob's brother?" This is the Lord's declaration. "Even so, I loved Jacob, [3] but I hated Esau."

That jars. It should. So let us not hurry past it.

Two brothers. Same father. Same mother. Same family. But the Lord makes a distinction. Jacob I loved. Esau I hated.

 You may find the language here abrasive. The Lord hated Esau. But the surprise is that he loved Jacob at all. He owed neither brother anything. Neither had a claim on him. Neither could demand his favour. Yet the Lord loves the one, and hates the other.

Now, what does the Lord mean? Love and hate here are not words of passing emotion. They describe his covenant dealings with these two brothers and the nations that came from them. To love Jacob was to set his favour upon him. To hate Esau was to reject him as the chosen heir of the covenant promise. This was no momentary temper. It was God's settled decision.

And Malachi takes us back to Genesis 25. Before the twins were born. Before

either had done anything good or bad. Before either could claim an advantage. The Lord declared that the older would serve the younger. Esau was the older. Jacob was the younger. But the Lord chose Jacob.

Not because Jacob was better. Not because Esau was worse. Not because Jacob had earned it. The Lord chose. The Lord decided. The choice was his.

And that choice stands in history. Look at verse 3. The Lord says of Esau, "I turned his mountains into a wasteland, and gave his inheritance to the desert jackals."

 Mountains laid waste. An inheritance gone. Edom's strength brought low. The Lord's rejection was not an empty word. It had consequences. We will see why Edom faced such judgment in a moment. But do not miss the point. The Lord chose Jacob. The Lord rejected Esau. His choice was free.

Though they were brothers, the Lord sovereignly chose the younger Jacob and judged the older Esau. His love was not earned. It was not deserved. It rested upon his own free choice.

That is Malachi's answer to Israel's question, How have you loved us? The Lord does not point to Israel's worth. He points to his own choice. The Lord's love rests upon his free choice of Israel.

But what does that love do when something threatens the people he has chosen? Will the Lord stand by and watch? Or will he act? What happens when Edom tries to rebuild what God has torn down?

3) **The Lord's Love is Fierce** (Malachi 1:4-5)

The Lord's love is fierce. He will tear down whatever Edom rebuilds, and Israel will see it and confess his greatness.

Verse 3 spoke of Esau, the man. Verse 4 speaks of Edom, the nation. And Edom is destroyed. Cities gone. Walls down. A land left to the jackals.

So how does Edom respond? Not with grief. Not with confession. Not with repentance. Edom makes a plan. Malachi writes of it in verse 4. Though Edom says, "We have been devastated, but we will rebuild the ruins," the Lord of Armies says this: "They may build, but I will demolish."

Notice the title, the Lord of Armies. The one who commands the armies stands against Edom. And notice Edom's words. We will rebuild. Edom trusts itself.

Then comes the verdict. They will be called a wicked country and the people the Lord

has cursed forever. Not a setback. Not a hard season. A verdict. It is the Lord's settled judgment on a nation that set itself against his purpose. And it is not random. Elsewhere, the prophet Obadiah tells us why. Edom stood by while Jacob was plundered.

Does that sit badly with you? Is this the same God who said, I have loved you? It is. This is his answer to Israel's question, How have you loved us? He has loved them by standing against whatever would destroy them. That is fierce love.

 Think of the gentlest man you know. He reads the bedtime stories. He never raises his voice. Then a stranger follows his daughter across the playground. His voice drops. He steps between them. Was that unloving? No. That is what love looks like when something it treasures is threatened.

Here the illustration breaks down. The father reacts in the moment. The Lord does not. This is his settled purpose, made long before. His love is not soft. It is fierce.

 Then comes verse 5. Your own eyes will see this, and you yourselves will say, 'The Lord is great, even beyond the borders of Israel.'

 Why did Israel doubt? They had shrunk God to the size of their circumstances. A small land. A struggling temple. A small God. But the Lord's rule does not stop at Israel's border. Edom's walls will not hold. Edom's pride will not hold. And Israel will see it with their own eyes. Their doubt melts away when they see him act.

So the Lord's love is fierce. He will tear down whatever Edom rebuilds, and Israel will see it and confess his greatness. The Lord's love is active. So Israel's doubt is unfounded.

But where did that fierce love do its hardest work for his people?

Connect to the gospel

Malachi's argument is plain. Don't doubt the Lord's love, because he freely chose you. Israel asked, How have you loved us? The Lord did not point to their record. He pointed to his own sovereign choice.

But here is the difficulty. We are not Israel. These promises belong to them. But we are people who need the same mercy. We build our own ruins and trust our own plans. So how can a holy God love people like us, freely, and remain just? Without the cross, Malachi's word is lovely, but it is not safe.

 Remember how this love was fierce. The Lord stood against whatever would destroy his people. Edom was called a people the Lord has cursed. Now look at what destroys us. Not an army. Not a rival nation. Our sin. So the Lord does the unthinkable. He does not only stand against our enemy. He stands in our place. As Paul writes, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

The curse fell on the Son, so that it would not fall on us. That is fierce love. And it was free. As Paul writes, God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We had earned nothing. We were not worthy. He loved us.

Israel should have checked the vow. We have it. The covenant was sealed in his blood, and the empty tomb stamps it. The Lord does not take it back. Nothing can undo it.

So Malachi's argument stands, and the gospel completes it. Don't doubt his love. Look at the cross. Look at the empty tomb.

What will you do with a love like this? Will you keep reading it off your circumstances? Or will you bow and worship the one who loved you first? And if you are not yet in Christ, will you keep measuring your record? Or will you come?

Application for Christians

Christian, the Lord who stood in your place is the Lord Malachi calls great. And if you are in Christ, his love for you is not measured by your circumstances. It is demonstrated at the cross. His love is fixed. His love is free. His love is fierce.

So what must you do?

Stop measuring God's love by your circumstances. Start measuring your circumstances by God's revealed love in Christ.

Think about how easily you get this wrong. The strained marriage. The uncertain job. The diagnosis. The child who has wandered. You look at your life and wonder whether God still loves you.

 I have been Israel. I have measured the Lord by my circumstances and found him small.

But your circumstances do not measure his love. The cross does.

So worship him. Not later. Not when life settles. Now.

And how do you do that?

First, know the Lord. Read his Word. Learn what he is like. Do not build your view of God from the events of your week. Build it from what he has revealed about himself. This week, read Malachi 1:1-5 each morning. Read it slowly. Do not run from the hard words. Let the Lord teach you who he is.

Second, trust his Word when your feelings disagree. When the bad news comes, do not conclude that God has abandoned you. When the night is long, do not measure his love by how you feel. Tell yourself the truth. His love is fixed. His love is free. His love is fierce.

Third, worship him in the middle of your circumstances. Bring your complaints to him. But do not stop there. Bring your complaints to him, and end with thanks. Sing with his people on Sunday, even when the feeling is gone. Teach your children to trust him. Let your home hear you praise the Lord.

And watch what happens. Your circumstances may not change. But your view of God will. You will stop treating a hard season as evidence of an absent God. You will learn to see that the Lord is greater than you thought.

Christian, do not live as though God's love needs to be proved every morning. He has proved it at the cross.

So worship him. Trust him. And stop measuring him by your circumstances.

Application for non-Christians

Some of you here do not know the Lord. I am speaking to you now. And I am speaking from my heart.

You may be asking, Does God love me? After what I have done? After how I have lived?

Do not look at your feelings for the answer. Do not look at your record. Look at Christ.

At the cross, God showed us what our sin deserves. His Son was crucified. He bore the curse for sinners. And God raised him from the dead. The cross is not a vague offer of kindness. It is God's answer to our greatest problem. We are sinners under his judgment. We need a Saviour.

So what must you do?

Repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

Repent. Stop defending your sin. Stop making excuses. Stop trusting that your good deeds will outweigh your bad ones. Turn from your sin and turn to God.

Believe. Put your trust in Jesus Christ. Not in your religion. Not in your church attendance. Not in your own goodness. Trust the Son of God who died for sinners and rose again.

Perhaps you are thinking, I am not good enough. You are right. That is why you need Christ. He does not call you to make yourself worthy before you come. He calls you to come because you cannot save yourself.

Perhaps you are asking, If the Lord chooses, what if I am not chosen? Do not try to discover what God has kept secret. Listen to what he has made plain. He commands you to repent and believe. He promises that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. No one who comes to Christ will be turned away.

So come.

You do not need to clean up your life first. You do not need to settle every question first. You need to come to Christ. Come honestly. Confess your sin. Ask him to save you. Trust him alone.

And do it today.

You do not know how many Sundays you have left. I do not know either. You may walk out of this building and assume there will be another opportunity. But you have no promise of tomorrow.

 Do not leave this matter for another day. Do not put it off until life is calmer. Do not wait until you feel more worthy.

Christ died for sinners. Christ rose again. And he calls you to come.

Will you keep trusting yourself? Or will you trust him?

I am pleading with you. Repent and believe. Come to Christ today.

Conclusion

How do you answer the question, Does God love me? Do you read your circumstances? Look at your life. A retrenchment letter. A scan result. A message from a child who will not come home. Do you read God's love like a

gauge. The needle climbs, and the needle falls. A love that depends on what's going on.

There is another reading. It does not rise and fall. It is a word. I have loved you.

That is the argument of Malachi, and that is the burden of this passage. Do not doubt the Lord's love, because it does not rise and fall with the circumstances of your life.

The Lord's love is fixed. He said it first, before any complaint, and he does not take it back. The Lord's love is free. Jacob did not earn it. Israel did not earn it. What we did not earn, we cannot lose. The Lord's love is fierce. He stands against whatever would destroy his people. And he stood in our place on the cross.

So what will you do?

Christian, stop measuring his love by your circumstances. Measure your circumstances by the cross.

Non-Christian, stop measuring your record. Repent and believe. His love is open to you, and your record does not stand in the way. Do not wait. Come to Christ today.

 The needle will move again tomorrow. His word will not. The cross is the one thing that never moves.

The day is coming when the needle will stop moving. Israel will see it, the nations will see it, and the church will be with the Lord. Trust him.

Amen.

Close in prayer

Benediction

Romans 8:38-39, For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.