

THE GOD WHO LOVES

SERIES: MALACHI



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Love is powerful. Everywhere in our culture, everywhere you look people will talk about love. It is one of the most universal concepts. Every culture celebrates love. Every culture tries to understand it, experience it, and find it. This morning we are talking about love.

It's not hard to find a movie about love. There are very few movies that don't have a love story because it is almost impossible to tell a good story that doesn't involve love. This morning I want share a scene from the movie *Moulin Rouge*.

This movie is about a young man named Christian who falls in love with a woman who works at "The Moulin Rouge," a famous cabaret nightclub in the 19th century. Their love is forbidden because he is a "penniless writer"—in the words of the movie—and she is promised to the investor that is allowing the Moulin Rouge to fund a major show. Although forbidden, their love persists. In a scene from the movie, the woman, named Satine, goes off-script and in the opening production of the big show, she declares her love to Christian using a secret song they have written together. This scene is intense because they are declaring to the world their love for one another regardless of how forbidden it might be. Their secret song makes their singing even more intimate and lets the audience see the depth of their relationship and love for one another.

Love is powerful. Two lovers, coming together despite tremendous odds. It's a story we never get tired of. It's the story that is going to kick off a new four-week Advent series in the Book of Malachi. This week we're talking about the God who loves.

Malachi contains the last words that God gave his people before Jesus arrived. So they are fitting words for us to hear as we wait and anticipate the arrival of Jesus at Christmas. But these words are challenging. Most of the book records a sort of conversation between God and his people. It's a series of six questions and answers, but they aren't exactly friendly questions and answers. Most commentators call them "disputations." That's just a fancy word for fights.

What we get to see here is God and his people going at it. We're like kids, watching our parents argue. As we watch, we learn about what is important to each of them. We find

out a lot about God by watching him in an argument with his people. We see a lot about God's people by watching them in an argument with God. And in the process we learn a lot about ourselves and how we relate to God.

These six fights begin with what most intense relationships experience. How committed are you to this relationship. Do you really love me? That's the issue that Malachi opens up with because it's the first, most important issue of any relationship. It's also the first most important issue in our relationship with God as well. Does God really love us?

We're going to start by seeing God affirm his love. But the way he does it often makes us confused or uncomfortable. However, by the time we get to the end of this passage, we'll see how that kind of love is a preliminary love. We'll see how that love matures and develops into what we look forward to at Christmas.

Our goal for the morning is a simple one. Enter into the love of God. Allow yourself to get caught up in the moment.

Introduction

Let's start by looking at the first verse. This gives us an introduction to the book and we can use it to help us understand where this book is coming from.

Malachi 1:1:

¹An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

OK, so before we really get started we need to orient ourselves. When are we talking about? Where are we talking about? Who are we talking about?

First, let's talk about when this takes place. Most people think that Malachi takes place around the middle of the 5th century B.C.. Maybe somewhere around 450-420 B.C.. So that clears everything up, right? Not for most of us. We need to understand what was happening in the middle of the 5th century. God's people had returned to

the promised land around one hundred years earlier and had started to adjust to their new surroundings. But it might help to really start at the beginning. Here's two thousand years of biblical history in two minutes.

In the beginning, God created the world and put people in it. Everything was perfect and there were a few simple rules, but people broke them and sin entered the world. This was tragedy number one of the Old Testament. Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden and forced to fend for themselves.

Some time later, God chose Abraham as the man who would fix this great tragedy. God said that this man would become a father to many nations. God said he would bless this man and his people and that somehow through those people, the world would be blessed.

Eventually, all of this happened. Abraham's people grew into a huge crowd of people. They were slaves in Egypt and God rescued them. They wandered in the desert and then they came into their land. Now they were what God promised them to be. They were a "great nation."

After some disastrous attempts at establishing a government, God eventually gave them a good king in David and it seemed like God's people had arrived. This was the high point of the Old Testament. Abraham's promise came true. They had a bunch of people, they had some land, they had a king. They were finally a "great nation."

But that didn't last long. Things literally started falling apart two generations later when that great nation couldn't agree on how to live together. So they decided to separate into two different nations. This was tragedy number two of the Old Testament. God's great nation divided into two not-so-great nations: one up north called Israel, one down south called Judah.

For three hundred years, they fought with each other, their neighbors, and with God. Then the northern tribes fell to the Assyrians. One hundred and fifty years later, the southern tribes fell to the Babylonians and the great temple of the great nation was destroyed. Here was great tragedy number three of the Old Testament. First, God's great nation split and now they had been conquered.

They had lost everything. But there were these prophecies that God would restore them. That he would come to repair everything that had been broken. Finally after two generations in exile, it seemed like the prophecy might come true. New rulers were in charge and they let

the Jews come back into their land. They rebuilt the temple and they rebuilt walls of the holy city Jerusalem. Things were getting better. It was all looking up.

This was about 440 B.C. and brings us up to the time of Malachi. He gave us these words right around this time. This should help us understand this first verse. Things are getting better. There was some forward progress being made. This is a book of new beginnings.

We love new beginnings. We love to hear about up and comers; stories of people who had lost everything, but were on their way back. This is what Malachi is about. Hoping that things keep getting better.

All in all, Malachi is not a super positive book. After all, even if things are getting better, it's been a rough several centuries for God's people. Like most of the prophets, this is a kind of in-your-face-challenge book. The idea is that things are getting better, but God's people had better look around and get it together if they were going to really expect anything to change. So it's also a book of warning.

If you're wondering who won those six fights that we see between God and his people, it should be no surprise that God does. Each of them start with God saying, "you say this" and then demonstrating how what they say is wrong and needs to be fixed. God is in their face here. It's not happy pie-in-the-sky. It's pull it together and stop acting like idiots.

We need this too. We need someone to get in our face and challenge us. To say that it's time to stop the whining and grow up. We need new beginnings and warnings as well, but mixed in with all these challenges are glimpses of what is to come. Malachi is also a book of promise.

The name of the book Malachi means "my messenger." People argue over whether that is the name of the author or the title of the author. It doesn't really matter, but the name goes deeper as well because all throughout this book there are these comments that speak of someone else to come. At one point, the person is even called "Malachi"—my messenger. God talks of sending someone that will make things right. Someone that will bring Israel back to the way she was supposed to be.

This book is a book of new beginnings as God's people start afresh. It's a book of warning, pointing out the sin in their lives and calling them to change. It's also a book of promise, speaking of the coming one who will finally set things right.

God Loves His People

That brings us to the first big argument of the book. Today we're going to just look at one argument because it sets the tone for all the others.

Malachi 1:2a:

^{2a}“I have loved you,” says the LORD.

You've heard these words before. God loves you. If you have spent much time around church, you may have heard these words so much that they don't mean a whole lot to you anymore. If that's the case, then it is too bad. They are powerful words. Life changing words. Words that change everything in an instant.

For Israel, spoken to them by the prophet Malachi, these were words of the covenant that God had made with his people. They are the first words spoken in this book because it has to start here. It has to start with being confident of God's love for his people. If this relationship between God and his people is going to survive, it has to be built on love.

Think about a baby girl being born. In a normal situation, what is the first thing that baby experiences? Love. That baby is received at least by its mother. The first experience is love. For a baby, when her first experience isn't love there are terrible consequences. Children who grow up without a deep sense of being loved by parents and the people that surround them face all sorts of challenges and obstacles to overcome. It's incredibly difficult to function in this world if you don't feel loved.

So for the Israelites, this book of warning begins with an affirmation of love. It has to. These people need to remember whom they belong to—who chose them. We need the same thing. We need to know that we are loved. We need to hear God say this to us. I have loved you. I have chosen you. You are mine. You are precious to me. We need to know that God loves his people. God loves us.

Rachel and I actually just watched this movie, *Moulin Rouge*, again after not seeing it for a while. We used to watch it frequently when we were first married. It's been fun to see it again because it has some history for us. It brings back memories of special times.

That's what God starts with, “I have loved you,” he says. Think back over that history that we have together. Think back over what has gone on. Look at how I've stuck with you. Look at how many chances I gave you. Look at how

I brought you back into your land. Look at everything I've done for you. I have loved you and I've demonstrated it over and over again over our two thousand years of history together.

This is helpful for us too. Think back over your history with God. What has he done in your life? How has he taken care of you in different situations? How has he been there? How has he provided? A few days ago we celebrated Thanksgiving. Many of you probably gave some thought to what you're thankful for. Our thanks has to go toward someone. That someone is God. God has loved you.

When we talk about God's love, we're not talking about an emotion. We're not talking about a powerful internal experience that God goes through when he sees your picture on his refrigerator.

Think about that baby girl who has just been born. She doesn't really know anything about the internal experience of her mother. All she knows is whether she is going to be held. Whether she will be given food. Whether she will be protected from the cold world. For her, the love of her mother isn't about an internal experience. It's about food, clothes, and nurture.

The same is true of God. God's love means that he is willing to act for us. He has our best interest in mind. Love means that you are willing to act in the interest of another, even when doing so might be against your best interest. Love means that you act for the sake of another.

It's not about how we make God feel. He doesn't need anything from us. He doesn't need us to feel good. God's love is about what he has done and what he will do for us. Listen to 1 John 4:9, “This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” God's love is about action, sacrifice, initiative, and engagement. That's what it means to say that God loves us. He is willing to act for us.

We Question God's Love

The truth is that sometimes we don't see that. Sometimes instead of thanking him, we pick a fight. That's what happens in Malachi. This is the first fight. God says he loves them and his people aren't so sure.

Malachi 1:2b:

^{2b}“But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’

How have you loved us? What have you really done for us? Now, think about the Israelites here. Think about the history they have with God. Salvation from Egypt. The glory days of King David. Staying faithful to them over centuries of petty civil war. Loving them enough to send them into exile to take away the things that they were using to destroy themselves and then bringing them back to their land.

As good as that history was, things weren't perfect for them now. They wanted a lot more than they had. They wanted everything put right immediately. They wanted it all so they had the audacity to say, "How have you loved us?"

Aren't we the same way? Don't we question God's love for us all the time? Most of our anguish in life comes down to the fact that we don't really believe that God loves us. It's the thing that we want most of all, but it's the thing that is hardest for us to accept. How have you loved us? What have you done for me lately? As soon as the words are out of our mouths, we realize what a ridiculous question it is. Yet, we question God's love.

How do you question God's love for you? What is it that you want from God that he hasn't given to you yet? What makes you think that God doesn't love you? Is it because you've done some bad stuff? Is it because you haven't done enough good stuff? Is it because you just think it's a big world and how could God take notice of you? Or is it because of hard stuff that's happened in your life and you wonder how God could let that happen if he really loved you?

How do you find yourself asking this question, "How have you loved me?"

Well, God answers that question. He answers it by going back to their history together.

Malachi 1:2c-4:

^{2c}"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, ³but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

⁴Edom 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.

God answers this question the way a man answers his wife when she questions his love for her. He says, "I chose you. Out of all the women out there, out of all the possible people in the world, I chose you." You are the one I have loved. It's you. I chose you 1500 years ago when I chose your ancestor Abraham. I chose you when I chose Jacob. I chose you when I rescued you. I chose you when I brought you back from exile and I choose you now. It's you. It's always been you. It will always be you.

Wait a second. "Esau I have hated"? I thought God was love. It's great that he chooses me, but what about everyone else? What about God loving the world? How could he hate anyone? Maybe Esau was a nice enough guy? Why would God hate him? This verse leads to lots of questions. How could God hate anyone?

First of all, it's helpful to understand how the Hebrew language works. It's full of parallel statements that either repeat the same idea for emphasis or contrast an idea for emphasis. That's what is going on here. The main idea is that God loved Jacob. The point is not that God felt hatred for Esau; that statement is meant to highlight the love God demonstrated for Israel. "Hate" isn't a great translation here because it steals the emphasis from the first part of the verse, where it belongs.

There is something else going on here as well. God goes on at length about devastating the land of Esau and ruining his inheritance. That's a lot of contrast if that's all it is, but we have to understand that Jacob and Esau are rivals. They are brothers, but their rivalry has turned into a major ethnic divide.

It's amazing to me how easily we learn about rivalries. A few weeks ago, I took one of my sons to our first NFL game together. We saw the San Francisco 49ers beat the New York Giants and it was a great experience. I've become a big 49ers fan in the last few years and this has been the first year in a while that being a 49ers fan is actually a pleasant experience. This was going to be a fairly significant game, so going into it, I was really hoping the 49ers would pull off a win.

It's great to cheer for a team. It's great to be a fan. What amazed me as I walked into that stadium was how I felt toward the Giants fans. Even walking from the car to the stadium, we passed a few guys wearing blue Giants' jerseys. I wasn't really prepared for how strongly I felt toward them. I didn't know these guys at all, but I wanted them to go down. For that day, they were the enemy.

But that's just football. Think about ethnic groups that have been killing each other for centuries. Israelis and Palestinians. Sunnis and Shiites. No matter where you go in the world, a lot of violent conflict is fueled decade after decade by ethnic rivalry. Your great-grandfather killed my great-grandfather, so I will murder your wife. This kind of hatred characterizes a lot of the world.

That's what existed between Israel and Edom. When God chose Jacob, he chose Jacob over his brother Esau. This was 1400 years before Malachi. But Esau became the founder of the people of Edom, one of the nations that lived around Israel. Edom had always been a thorn in the side of Israel. Tradition tells that Edom joined in with the Babylonians when the temple was destroyed in 587 B.C.. Edom and Israel were bitter rivals.

So here in Malachi, God says that Israel is the winner and Edom is the loser. When you're in a rivalry, the other guy has to lose for you to win. Isn't it incredible that we like competition so much? We cheer for our teams; we spend money on them; we do all this stuff even though we know that at the end of the day there's one winner and one loser. There is probably a fifty percent chance we'll be the loser, yet we still play the game because we want to win so badly and wanting to win means we want the other guy to lose.

In the Old Testament, God's love was expressed as a choice. He made a covenant with a particular people: Israel. That covenant was to bless them beyond belief. There was a hint that this blessing was for others as well, but mostly in the Old Testament God seemed interested in Israel. For most of the history of the world, either you won or I won. Nothing else made sense.

I think that part of us likes this. Partly, we want to win and we want the other guy to lose. It appeals to something deep within us. But there's another part that is deeply disturbed by this. Our culture values fairness and equality—we'll talk about why that is in a minute. So this idea of preference is offensive to us. Does God really work this way? Does his love for me mean that he hates others? I know a lot of people who don't want to believe in that kind of a God.

Well, this is how God's love worked in the Old Testament. Before Christ, it was God choosing Jacob over Esau. There was a rivalry and a rivalry only has one winner. One winner and one loser, but the story doesn't end here. As we move into the next verse, we see something different. Something changes.

Jesus Opens Up God's Love To The World

We've seen God assuring the Israelites of his love for them. They question that love as we often do. So God assures them of it in the language of a rivalry. He assures his bride that she is the only one for him. No one else catches his eye. But at the end of this section we see something new.

Malachi 1:5:

⁵You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!'

This is a fascinating verse. God says that Israel will see her vindication. She will witness her enemies being defeated. Completely crushed by the hand of God. What's the result of that? That they will praise God—"Great is the LORD," but the last few words come as a surprise: "even beyond the borders of Israel."

This is remarkable. God will be recognized as great outside of Israel. This phrase "Great is the LORD" is one of praise and even worship. This is not the nations recognizing that God is great because he defeated them. What's being said here is those outside of Israel will praise the LORD, maybe even worship him. It's an incredible idea. God choosing Israel over all other nations. His selection and preference for one over another will somehow open up the possibility for others to praise God.

You get these types of hints throughout the later prophets like Malachi. They talk about how God judged the nations, how God vindicated Israel and then there are little statements that clue you in that that's not the end of the story for the nations. That somehow, God's judgment on those nations and his choice of Israel is meant to open up a path for them as well. All through the Old Testament, you find these hints, that the particular love that God had for Israel will open up. That's what Malachi says here. Love opens up.

What used to be rivalry will somehow be opened up to everyone. God chooses Israel. He destroys Edom. But Malachi talks about a time when somehow this rivalry will end up being for the sake of everyone. Love will open up.

Malachi says that even other nations will proclaim, "Great is the LORD." We might ask the question: When? When is this going to happen? When will the LORD be recognized as great beyond the border of Israel? The prophet Micah uses the same phrase in Hebrew, and he gives us a little more information.

Micah 5:2-4:

²*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*

³*Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.*

⁴*He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.*

Out of Bethlehem will arise one who will stand in the strength of the LORD. And then—at that time—the greatness of the LORD will reach to the ends of the earth. That’s when this will happen. That’s when God’s love will open up to the world. So it’s Jesus that opens up love to the world. Jesus changes everything. Jesus takes a love that was particular to Israel and makes it available to the world.

The gospel of John doesn’t read, “For God so loved Israel that he sent his only Son.” It reads, “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son.” The rivalry has been turned on its head. God chose Israel in the Old Testament so that love could open up to the world through Jesus.

This helps us to understand these verses in our society. Our culture has a problem with a religion that is specific and particular. People use words like “exclusive.” But the shock of Jesus’ gospel was not that it was exclusive. You might even say that one of the main reasons he was crucified was that he was not exclusive. The Jewish leaders wanted a Messiah for Israel, but Jesus came as a Messiah for the world.

The irony is that Jesus’ ideals about including everyone have worked throughout culture. Jesus’ ideas have been working their way through culture and society for two millennia. So much so that being inclusive is one of the primary values of our culture, but that whole idea comes from Jesus. Jesus came into an ancient world of ethnic and national rivalries with local gods and he preached a gospel of inclusion. He took the idea that God chose Israel and opened it up to the whole world.

The great mystery of the gospel is that all people can be included through faith in Christ. This was God’s plan all along. That his choice of one people would lead to an offer for all of mankind. The birth of Christ was the decisive event when God became man, but it was also the beginning of a whole new way of God relating to the world. His love has opened up. That’s why we look forward to Christmas. His love is available to anyone. The gospel is for all peoples.

Conclusion

Malachi is a book of new beginnings. God’s people were at the start of a new season of their history. They wanted God to act in a big way. How do we want God to work in our lives right now?

Malachi is also a book of warning. God begins those warnings by challenging his people to recognize and receive the love that he had demonstrated for them.

Finally, Malachi is a book of hope. This is a book about what God is doing in the world and what he is going to do in the world.

Do you really believe that God loves you? Do you have any idea of the extent to which that love goes? Malachi begins with an insistence of God’s love for his people. That’s us. That’s God’s love for us. And what began in the Old Testament as a choice of one brother over another turns into a family of brothers and sisters united by faith in Christ. God’s intense love for us opens up to the world.

My invitation to you is to get caught up in this love story. Malachi isn’t a sappy love story. There’s challenge and confrontation and rebuke, but it begins with love. God has chosen us. God loves us. God’s love extends to the world. Receive that love. Get caught up in the surprising love of God.