

Malachi: Undisputed Love

Malachi 1:1-5

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on January 7, 2024.

Bill and Will

Back in the late 90's, I had a youth worker named Bill. Bill was older but he was a wonderful leader. He had two adult children, a younger daughter who was naturally born to him and his wife and an older son who was adopted. His son's name was Will. Bill loved Will. It was that fierce, faithful love of a father.

But Will struggled. He had addiction issues. He had a rebellious streak. He struggled to deal with authority. And because of the issues he had accepting the rejection of his birth parents, he struggled to feel the love from his parents, Bill and his wife.

Will was constantly in trouble. We would be preparing something for ministry with Bill, and he would get a call and you could see the life leave his eyes and he would quietly tell me that he was sorry, but he needed to leave. We understood that it probably concerned his son.

One weekend, we were coming off of a lock-in and sitting down to a breakfast of an egg sandwich and thirty-seven gallons of coffee when Bill sort of unloaded about all the trouble surrounding his son. He told me that he wished he could change how Will thought and responded and processed life. But he couldn't. And Bill told me that he was determined to prove his faithful, fatherly love for his son. Regardless of what Will did, regardless of how stupid or disrespectful it all was, Bill would love that young man.

Bill's love for his son was not just some series of actions. It was a constant, ongoing state of being. This provides a great introduction to Malachi. The prophet opens his preaching to a rebellious child called Israel and reiterates to Israel God's unfailing covenantal love for them. I invite you to open to Malachi 1:1-5.

An Oracle

Malachi begins by declaring an oracle, a pronouncement in our English translation of the Bible, the CSB. The Hebrew word is translated as oracle and its root word means "raise, lift," with a related noun meaning "burden, load."

The oracle that the prophet Malachi shares is the burden of the word of the Lord. It will touch on the laws and prophecies, and we will be immersed in that context in these next few verses.

There is divine authenticity directed toward Israel. This divine truth is to be the “burden” of all who hear it. In this context, Malachi and then those who hear his words, become the “burden bearers.” It becomes the responsibility of those who hear this message to carry the burden or the weight of the divine truth of God’s word to others.

The Hebrew word for burden bearer is “Sabbal.” The Old Testament talks about the importance of the burden bearers. Malachi is identified as such. God has set him apart to carry this burden of sharing the divine truth. We also have a responsibility, a burden to carry. We are supposed to pronounce, share, the divine truth of God’s word with others.

To be fair, this can seem like an overwhelming responsibility. And if you try to carry this burden alone, if you try to bear this burden in your own strength and through your own wisdom, the results could be extremely discouraging. In Nehemiah 4, we read about the strength of the burden bearer failing. In that account, which could have been the same period from which Malachi lived, the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem was a massive pile of worthless rubble. It was a wreck. And the work was too much for the laborers, the burden bearers (same word in Hebrew). Their strength failed.

Too often as Christians, we are trying to live a life we are convinced believers are supposed to lead, yet do it all on our own, in our own power. We never pray, asking for the power of the Spirit to help. We don’t lean into the truth of the word or spend time reading and meditating on it. And what we realize is that the burden we carry of trying to live a transformed life in our own power is too much weight to carry. There is too much debris around our lives for us to do that all on our own.

The rubble of pride, unbelief, anger, lust, despondency, or arrogance is just too much to remove on our own. The burden of living according to the divine truth of the Scripture in our own power won’t work. So, we must allow the Spirit to fill us and live in Christ’s resurrection power. We must belong fully and completely to the Lord. We must start with his divine authority.

God's Divine Authority

That is where Malachi begins. Malachi means “my messenger” or “angel.” He is God’s divine messenger. He can carry this burden of the divine truth of God’s word because, just the message he carries, he belongs to God. It is God’s message, carried by God’s messenger.

And what is God’s burden, God’s message, for a united Israel? God tells his people through his prophet, “I love you.”

It doesn’t seem like a heavy burden or message. And yet, it becomes disputed immediately. Despite Israel’s status as God’s rebellious child, despite all of their covenantal infidelity, despite all of their idolatry with pagan gods and deities, their improper actions stemming from all of that polytheistic nonsense for centuries upon centuries, God still loves Israel. Just like my friend loves his son.

God tells his wild child Israel that he loves Israel. And what is Israel’s response? “But how have you loved us?” They argue from the jump. They dispute the message. They are petulant and argumentative.

Israel was convinced that returning from exile would mean walking up to Jerusalem from Babylon and realizing the supernatural promises of God. They sang their psalms of ascent as they made their journey.

They sang things like, “When the Lord brought back the captive ones of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with joyful shouting. They said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’” (Psalm 126:1-2). They were hoping to return to their promised land and experience God’s blessing on their homeland. They arrive and everything is a shambles. What they expected to find and what they actually found were two entirely different things.

So, the first statement that is disputed isn’t about any specific issue or circumstance. They aren’t arguing about exile or even the destruction of Jerusalem. They argue about the basic character of God.

Israel had a flawed perspective of God’s love. Consider how humans respond to and what we expect in love. How do you measure earthly love?

By what standards do you consider someone actually loves? For many people, love means feeling comforted, being made to feel happy. Well, Israel is not happy because of all that has transpired. They just ignore all they did to break God's covenant. They aren't concerned with what they've done wrong. They are too busy arguing and disputing the character of God.

We do that too. Someone does something we don't like. Instead of getting a better perspective on why they did what they did, we immediately attack their character. Israel has done that with God here in Malachi 1.

But God affirms his love for them. Love is one of the key themes of this short prophetic book of Malachi. God loves Israel. The Hebrew word used for love, the verb and the tense it is used in, indicates that God's love is a state of being, not a past action. This verb is used to express an ongoing emotional response.

God's love for Israel is continuing for Israel. God's love is not a past action that has ended. It continues on. That is the same for us today. God's love for us is not some action in the past. God's love for you, revealed and proven in Christ giving his life for us, continues on. Because it is a state of His being.

Despite the cantankerous nature of the people that God is speaking to through Malachi, He tells them of his continuing commitment to the covenant relationship.

God made a covenant with Abraham, and it was extended through to Abraham's son Isaac and then on to Jacob. It was refined and re-established at Mt. Sinai by Moses, affirming God's commitment to Israel. Sadly, Israel rejected God's Kingship and repeatedly broke their covenant with God. They would ultimately suffer the punishment of exile as a result. And then even after returning from exile, as God affirms for Israel again his covenantal love for them, Israel is acting like a spoiled child. But like a parent cares for a rebellious child, God still loves Israel.

But how? The people dispute God's love based on their sad situation they now find themselves in post-exile. They have returned to this ruined and unrestored land. How could God love them? They are asking God to prove to them how he has loved them.

Esau and Jacob

God uses Jacob and Esau as proof of his love for Israel. This is sort of a tricky spot. For many of you, you have started some sort of read the Bible plan. If you stick with it, eventually as you read the Old Testament, you will see in a few places what God says here in Malachi 1. God loved Jacob and hated Esau. Sadly, our English grammatic style and vocabulary do us a disservice here.

English assigns a strong emotional aversion to the word “hate” that is not present in the Hebrew. We have to understand this from a covenantal context. Jacob was loved as a covenant ally and Esau was placed outside the covenant relationship with God. Love and hate deal with election not with emotion here. God chose Israel/Jacob. Because God chose Jacob, Esau will now become periphery to Jacob’s story.

Here in Malachi, Esau is to be understood not as an individual, more as a geographic region. Esau’s descendants became the people of Edom, and Edom was in a mountainous area of the Transjordan region. They settled in the mountains because they felt it would be an unbeatable fortress and would be free from trouble and danger. No enemy would ever conquer them in their mountain strongholds. Jeremiah tells us that this once unbeatable stronghold has become a wasteland by the time of the exile. Jackals occupy the deserted ruins of Edom.

This concept of God hating Esau meant that there was no covenant relationship with Edom. Edom’s response? They said, “We don’t need God! We can do all of this by ourselves!” They would become their own burden bearers. And what did the people in Malachi’s day discover about trying to carry your own burdens?

No covenant relationship results in no life. God allows Edom to take matters into their own hands. He never denies them that control, that authority. It is the same with people now. God will allow anyone to take matters into their own hands. God will allow people to try to carry their own burdens.

But what was true for Edom is true for us. Life outside the covenant relationship with God is no life at all. God never denies people now or denied Edom then their control. He does deny its effectiveness.

If you are convinced that you can do all of this on your own, that you can carry your own burdens and you can manage the weight of this world all by yourself, God has a message for you tucked away here in his message to Esau. If you are convinced that you don't need Jesus and you will be good enough on your own, listen carefully.

You may try to build your own life without Jesus. But one day, God will tear all of that apart. It will be demolished. This curse of sin is serious business and you cannot deal with it alone. And if you try, if you reject the true and perfect burden bearer, Jesus Christ, you will find yourself on the outside of God's covenant relationship.

This is not a temporary punishment. For all of those people who are convinced that God is ultimately just going to give in, there is a seriousness that our English doesn't really pick up. God says he will "demolish it and they will be cursed forever." Life outside of God's loving covenant relationship is a forever curse of devastation, a desolate spiritual wasteland.

With Your Own Eyes

God ends this section with a promise. "You will see with your own eyes." They will see God's love for them, proven by his covenant relationship with them, with their own eyes. God will show Israel that he loves them. They won't have to take anyone's word for it.

Have you ever watched a cooking show and they make some questionable looking dish and then they take a bite and they oooh and ahh over how great it tastes? And you wonder if it really tastes that good or if it's all a bluff because Gordon Ramsey is not going to call his own food nasty, right? No, you have to take their word for it.

Or have you ever had to have a parent vouch for the other one's love for you when they punished you? "Dad loves you; he is just very upset that you used his tablet as a frisbee."

Well, God tells Israel, you won't have to settle for someone else telling you that I love you. Israel will see God's love for them proven to be true. God's love for them will be seen in how he deals with Israel, and God's love for Israel will also be seen in how God dealt with Edom.

Even the structure of verb – object – object – verb in *love – Jacob – Esau – hated* tells Israel that God's love is more significant here because of its prominence being emphasized over the last word.

In God's covenantal relationship, love is emphasized as dominant. God is a faithful, loving Father. And his love was proven for us too in the New Covenant.

The curse of our sin was too much of a burden for us to carry. So, even while we were rebellious children under the weight and curse of sin, even though we tried to solve our own problems and carry our own sinful weight, God still loved us. And God proved his love for us in Christ, his perfect Son, dying for us.

But don't take my word for it. See for yourself. See and experience God's love in Christ – God's perfect Fatherly love for you. Accept Jesus today.