



# GRACE CHURCH

## Am I Truly Loved?

Malachi 1:1-14

Grace Church | 11.27.22

There is a question that drives the heart of both the toddler, and the retiree, the student and the CEO, the privileged and the poor. It is a question that serves as the single most powerful primary indicator of our own perceived value of self, and drives men and women both to utter despair or to utter ecstasy, depending on how they answer. It's a question that we even may feel more prominently now. When all the lights of our consumer Christmas fades, and the glow of the new material acquisitions cease, and nostalgia tuckers out into the self-evaluation of a new year, here is the question again, and we all have asked it: "Am I Truly Loved"?

No doubt we all *feel* love. We perhaps *believe* that someone loves us: our parents, some friends, our spouse if we have one, our children perhaps. But when the rubber hits the road, and the circumstances surrounding our life and our relationships are difficult, when our sense of self-worth dips, when we perceive we are at most unlovable... who is there then? I spoke with a man this week in his early 60s who told me that his Father only told him he loved him right before his death. All those years, he *felt* his Father loved him, but he never heard it. The evidence was not there, the surety. When his Father finally confessed his love, to his face, he said his life changed.

But what if his Father never told him? Is there enough surety of love in the world to fuel the fight against our own unloveliness? I want to go as far to say today that all the love in the world will never satisfy that deep question in your heart until you truly receive the love that surpasses all love: the love of God.

Advent is a season of longing for the love of God to be revealed. Christmas is the revealing of it. And if in this season we can truly awaken ourselves to the love of God, I think our lives can change. We can be reinvigorated to love God in return, to follow him into the dark places when the shine of cultural cheer wears off.

So that brings us to the book of Malachi. This short book is, as **verse 1** tells us, an *oracle*, which literally means "a weight". It's heavy, because it is the unfiltered word of God. Forty-seven out of the fifty-five verses in Malachi are first-person accounts of God speaking to his people through his prophet. It is weighty with questions, with rebuke, with truth, and with hope. Like Advent, it's a book full of a kind of darkness. But it's preparing the way for light to come in. Malachi was written to the people of God in a time where they had every reason to believe that God *didn't* love them. Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed, all their enemies triumphing over them, their nation and



culture small and insignificant, in danger of ceasing to exist. The people of Israel doubted God because of their circumstances, and it showed in their actions. They did not treat God as if he was king of the universe, and they certainly did not treat him as if he was *their* king of the universe. As we will see, to doubt God's glory is to doubt the glory of his love.

Malachi is a wake-up call to the love and glory of God. It's structured through a series of six "disputations", which is a debate or argument, two of which we will see today, where God rebukes his people and their leaders and calls them to repentance. It's not easy to swallow at times. But I want you to see the goal as we begin: the goal is that you would arrive at Christmastime with a magnified vision of the love and glory of God in Jesus Christ, that the light of the world would be extra bright to your eyes this year. And it starts today with entering into the Israelite experience as we see in chapter 1 a diagnosis of their problem, one main symptom of their problem, a treatment to their problem, and one result of the treatment.

### **The Diagnosis:** Blindness to the Love and Glory of God

We jump immediately into action in **verse 2** where we see a question and answer common to the style of Malachi. On behalf of the Lord he says: "I have loved you". This is both a past and a present verb—God has always loved Israel, and still loves Israel. It is somewhat strange then, that their answer is "How have you loved us"? This is probably better translated as "in what way have you loved us?", since it's important to note that Israel is not doubting that God loves them at all, but their true doubt is that his love is really meaningful.

Not only are the people of Israel, and as we see starting in verse 6, their priests, denying the love of God, they dishonor God by not giving him the respect (fear) he deserves. He sees Israel as his son, as his beloved children. Can they not honor their heavenly Father by trusting in him and his love even when circumstances are poor? If not honoring him as Father, at least they could respect and fear him as a servant would a master. God is far more than a master, but he is not less.

Remember this kind of attitude was driven both by their own insecurities and sinful mistrust of God, but also their circumstances. Malachi lived among the people of Jerusalem as they returned from exile to a broken city, still under the rule of foreign nations. Sure, Yahweh may love us, they say, but look around! I would like for him to prove it! The love of God to the people of Israel, and by extension the love of God for us, is not simply a feeling. If it was, it would be right for the Israelites to doubt its veracity from time to time. No, the word for "love" here is political in nature—it's a commitment to be a stalwart ally. God is saying to Israel: I have chosen you, and I am on your side. The problem then for Israel is that they had begun to doubt that having God on their side was any good at all.

We all understand what this is like: to be told we are loved, and yet fail to see the realities of it. Perhaps we aren't so bold to say it to one another (i.e. if next time I tell my son "I love you" and he says "prove it!", I'm not sure it would go over so well), but we treat God in similar ways. The gospel



of Jesus, the message which screams to us “God loves you”, becomes rote. We take little encouragement from the truth that God is for us in Christ if our perceived feeling at the moment is that belonging to God is simply ok. Perhaps the Israelites had begun to compare: was their God Yaweh really greater than the other Gods? It certainly seemed like he was losing the battle of deity supremacy at the moment, given his people were so insignificant and broken. In the same way, we make comparisons between the potency of the love of God and the love offered by our own idols. Perhaps, like the psalmist in Psalm 73, we see the prosperity of wicked people and we say: “Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain, I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” Is any of this worth it?

The Israelites' problem is that they have forgotten the truth of **verse 11**. Here is a surety—God’s name *will* be great, and *all* people will bow the knee to him. Likewise in **verse 14** he reminds us that he is the “great king”. The word “great” is not just “as kings go, pretty great”, but rather a king of kings, the high king, the king to which other kings bow.<sup>1</sup> The Israelites are blind to the love of God because they underestimate the glory of God. What Malachi 1 is teaching is that our hesitancy to accept the love of God comes from a heart untuned to the glory of God. We forget the majesty of the gospel of God’s love in Christ because our God has become in our minds too small. In not so many words, this is the greatest human problem: our God is too small. By desiring to be God, we make Gods in our own image, rather than worshiping in awe the God who cannot be domesticated. When God becomes small, his love is no big deal. And to ignore the love of God is to reject the gospel itself. Let’s now move to consider the symptoms of this problem.

### **The Symptoms:** Second-Best Offerings

The dishonor shown to God by the people is more serious than asking him to explain the nuances of his love for them. It's not just that they doubt God, but that they don't value him. It seeps deep into the heart, and is ultimately a problem of worship. Because they had forgotten the glory of God, their worship had become warped and wicked, a religious show with no true sacrifice. So much so that in **verse 10** the Lord confesses that it would be far better for them to shut the doors of the temple completely and abandon the priesthood than continue in their practice.

What was so bad about the worship of Israel? That is the question they ask in **verse 6**, “how have we despised your name”? God’s answer in **verse 7** is that the food on the altar had been *polluted* and *despised*. The Mosaic law was very clear: only the best animals were to be offered at the table of the Lord. While God did not require females for normal sacrifices (except guilt ones), since that would hurt the reproduction capabilities of the herd, he did require only unblemished males. In **verse 8** we read that the Israelites priests are accepting sacrifices of animals that are blind, lame, or sick.

There are many factors at play here, but one important thing we must remember is that it was the priests who ate the normal sacrifices of the temple. After an appropriate animal was killed and its blood spilt on the altar, they would then use its meat for their own food. A blind animal tastes just

---

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Stuart, “Malachi” in *The Minor Prophets, Vol 3.*, ed. Thomas McComiskey.



as good as a normal one—and it helps the farmers get a blemished animal out of their gene pool. But what about the sick or lame ones? Those were actually forbidden by Mosaic law to eat, period. Perhaps some lame animals were accepted by the priests, since they could be eaten in violation of God’s law but without negative health benefits. But there are other sacrifices too, like burnt offerings where the entire animal is killed and then burnt, that sick animals may do the trick. As a whole, we have a situation that moves far beyond ignorance. The rhetorical questions might cause you to lean that way, but that is not the case. The priests were well trained in the Law of God. What is going on here is a willful trickery, or as **verse 14** says, a “cheating” of God. It’s possible there was even bribery, that priests were accepting sub-par sacrifices that helped the worshipers monetarily in exchange for more meat or a little coin off the top. In some ways, it is analogous to what made Jesus so righteously angry at the temple when he flipped over tables. Worship had become a means of satisfying the deity with minimal personal cost.

But sacrifice is meant by God’s law to be costly. You can imagine the comparison the Israelites are making to the surrounding nations as they try to rebuild their society and their economy too. No other gods have such stringent sacrificial demands. How could the Israelites expect to rise again to prominence, much less survive after exile, if their best animals were given over to be slaughtered without payment! To offer to God the best, and to be zealous about giving God the best, was seen by Israel, as **verse 13** says, to be a “weariness”, something to “snort” at. So while it is the priests to which this is addressed, since they are the ones meant to teach the people the law and uphold the purity of the temple sacrifices, the people are also not off the hook, as **verse 14** shows. Both offering and accepting sacrifices that are second-best is an affront to God’s holiness and an act of faithless religious pandering.

Here again it is not hard to see how this kind of culture can seep into the church. As one commentator says, “we joyfully offer our hearts, our time, and our possessions to our idols, while resenting and resisting the Lord’s gracious demands on our lives”.<sup>2</sup> We treat our time as if it is our own, our resources and finances as if they are guaranteed to us, and our possessions as if we can take them with us into eternity. The problem with a church culture that does not give sacrificially is not that they dishonor the pastors or leaders or budget committee—the problem is that they dishonor God. Failing to give our best, whether that be time, resources, or attention to God it’s fundamentally a problem of false worship.

Church, I am constantly blessed by your generosity. In fact, my family depends on your generosity. As do all the ministries of the church. But let us take care, in a season of giving and spending, that our hearts are attuned to the glory of God and to what he deserves from us. Take stock of the image in **verse 8**. When the government calls, you pay—if you skimp them, they will take note. And in the time of the original audience, offering second-best to the governor of the province (remember Israel is ruled by Babylon) would be a sign of disrespect, even of revolt. It would be costly. How much greater is God than an earthly ruler? The governor may have an army with the power of Babylon,, but God is, as he is called 27 times in Malachi and in **verse 4**, the “lord of hosts”;

---

<sup>2</sup> Ian Duguid, *Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi: Reformed Expository Commentary*



that is “lord of the heavenly armies”. We could imagine here a husband who forgets his wedding anniversary, or buys his wife cheap gifts when she deserves attention and care. What kind of husband would treat his wife that way, a wife who is deserving of honor? And yet, how is it that we treat God, from whom all our blessings flow and who deserves the sacrifice of our very lives, with cheap gifts and half hearted worship? God is not greedy—he is holy. And when he says “I love you”, it is only fitting that we respond to the magnitude of his glory and love with our best.

So how do we overcome this propensity to allow our love of God to grow cold, to forget just how mind-bending it is that he would be *our* God? Here is the treatment given in our text.

### **The Treatment:** The Beauty of Sovereign Grace

Let’s go back to God’s response to Israel in **verse 3**, because we find that God responds rather curiously to the question: “how have you loved us”? What God does is paint a historical picture for the Israelites, trying to show them just how deep his love for them goes. He does this by comparing his relationship with them to that of Jacob and Esau. If you remember your Bible stories, you would know these two are twin brothers with a history of rivalry. Esau was older by a few minutes—and he was the strong, ruddy one. Jacob was the conniving and clever one, who ends up convincing his older brother to give up his birthright, the privileges of the first-born son, over to Jacob for a bowl of soup. He also tricks his Father Issac into blessing him as if he were blessing Esau. Although there is eventually a redemptive moment for the brothers, history teaches us that the nations that come from them, Israel from Jacob and Edom from Esau, are bitter enemies. Such a strong past connection should lead them to be allies, but instead they are rivals, fighting for land and power, with Edom following idols and Israel following Yawheh.

And the hardest part for the Israelites is that Edom is prosperous, even in their rejection of God. They settle flourishing land and make do for themselves in the mountains where they are kept safe from intruders. When the empires of Assyria and Babylon come, they ally with them against Israel instead of having to suffer the humiliation of exile like Israel does. And so Israel is no doubt envious—was it not Jacob and his descendents that were supposed to be the prosperous ones? But God makes it clear here the dichotomy: “Jacob I have loved, and Esau I have hated”.

This is not a personal vendetta God has against Esau. This is about God sovereignly choosing a people group in order to reveal himself and make himself known. Neither is Jacob chosen by God because he is better than Esau. If anything, he is the wicked one! Jacob is chosen by God simply out of sovereign grace to be his *special chosen* son. Romans 9:11 tells us that Jacob was elected by God “though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad”. You may say: “this doesn’t sound fair to Esau and his descendents!” Which in your understanding of fairness, you would be right. Fairness would mean God would condemn both undeserving men and nations.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ian Duguid, *Malachi*



But God is in the business of grace, not human fairness. He does not settle his disputes in your court, but on his own terms. This understanding of God is what the Israelites missed. Through their cheap sacrifices, they revealed that they cheapened the sovereignty of God's grace. Instead of marveling that the God of the universe would choose *them*, they felt entitled to more from him. Instead of grasping the beauty of his choice, they presumed upon it.

What God is doing through Malachi in **verses 4-5** is assuring the people that if they can only trust him, he is working things out for their good, and he is on their side. It may seem like Edom is the loved one of God, but their mountain fortresses will not protect them forever. His hill country will be deserted to wild animals, and unlike Israel, who will be blessed by God to rebuild their broken city, God promises Edom will never get the chance. In Jerusalem worship of the true God will resume, and it will be called, even to this day, "the Holy Land". But Edom? Their culture is gone, a cliff note in history. Their great cities are destroyed, and it is called "the wicked country". God is not the God of Edom, but of Israel.

Oftentimes the doctrine of God's sovereign election of his people can be difficult for us to find solace in. Perhaps it has been used as a weapon against us, or been explained in such a way that leaves no room for comfort but only for pride. But the real doctrine should do exactly the opposite. How silly the pride of Israel seems when they consider that the only thing separating them from Edom is the sovereign choice of God! If you are in Christ, your pride should fall to the wayside when you consider that the only thing separating you from those far from God is the fact that God chose to lavish his love on you freely. When you feel an outsider to the love of God, here is a soft place to land. God's sovereign election of his people is not fuel for comparison or pride, but comfort when we doubt the love of God.

The final proof of God's sovereign grace is found in the fact that although we constantly fail to honor him as we should, and we are always tempted to give less than best, God was in no way stingy with us. When the time came for God to offer up *his* sacrifice that would once and for all deal with our sin, he didn't hold back. God did not choose a blind, lame, or sick lamb from his household to show us his love. He chose his perfect son. And Jesus, that perfect Son, honored his Father until the end.

"Oh, what love! Christ would not intrust our redemption to angels, to millions of angels; but he would come himself, and in person suffer; he would not give a low and a base price for us clay. He would buy us with a great ransom, so as he might over-buy us, and none could over-bid him in his market for souls. If there had been millions of more believers, and many heavens, without any new bargain his blood should have bought them all... Oh, we under-bid, and undervalue that Prince of love, who did overvalue us; we will not sell all we have to buy him; he sold all he had, and himself too, to buy us."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *The Trial And Triumph of Faith*



How can we undervalue God, who so overvalued us? When we truly reflect on God's sovereign grace—that it was free, underserved, and cost everything—its beauty will blow us away. Advent is that season where we should expect and prepare to be wowed by the beauty of God's grace. Don't undersell how significant it is that God would love you enough to send Jesus.

### **The Result:** The International Praise of God

As we close, let's return to Edom for a moment. I want to prove to you that the point of the election of Israel is God's free choice, and it has nothing to do with a personal vendetta against Edom. In the same way the fact that you are loved by God has nothing to do with your background, your spirituality, morality, ethnicity, or otherwise. We know this to be the case because when the people of God fully realize the love of God, and start treating God with the honor he deserves, *all* people are blessed, even the Edomites.

This is the original intention of the covenant of God with Israel, a covenant that finds its fulfillment in Jesus. God told Abraham that the blessing given to him and his children would be for the nations. And so in **verse 5** that is the result of God's love for Israel: that he would be seen as great "beyond their border". Similarly this is the point of his rebuke in **verse 14**, that when Israel turns to right worship again, when through Jesus God's people worship in Spirit and in Truth, he will be feared "among the nations".

This means that whether you are of the tribe of Israel or of the tribe of Edom, whether you are full of confidence or doubt, whether you possess a past full of virtue or one riddled with vice, whether you have given God your best or kept it for yourself—today the God of glory is calling out to you. He says, and he proves in Christ: "I have loved you." Will this be the year you believe him by faith?

