

Reading: Malachi 1:1-14

Theme: Doubting God's love!

This evening we are starting a series which will take us through the book of Malachi. As we do so I realise it is not going to be an easy series to prepare, to preach or to sit under! Yet I pray it will be profitable for the preacher and congregation alike and it would draw us closer to our precious Saviour, keep us from wandering off or be used to restore us to Him if we are away from Him as a believer, even to cause you to seek and find Him as your Saviour if you are not a believer. I want to look at 4 things this evening from v1-5:

1. The Burden Bearer.

Imagine for a moment that we are in Jerusalem is around 430 BC. The temple had been rebuilt by Zerubbabel and Joshua some 80 years previously; the walls had been rebuilt by Nehemiah some 20 years ago. Life is not easy, but we are not facing great hardships. The sacrifices at the temple are established, people live in good houses and accommodation, there is security - with no threat of war or attack as the Persian Empire has a long reigning emperor and the Persian governor in the area keeps things on an even keel. All in all, life is fine for us and we are comfortable.

Then one day we go out and about and there he is! We have seen him, known him to be a man who is marked out by his love for God, for being serious, even too serious we think, about serving God. Yet he looks like he's got the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he looks weighed down with care, with concern. We ask "*What's wrong?*" Then as he speaks, we wish we hadn't asked! Because what we hear is not comfortable, it is pointed, painful, vivid and we ourselves go away feeling as if **we** have the weight of the whole world and heaven on our shoulders - now we too have cares and concerns...

That would probably have been the situation as this messenger delivered his message. We know nothing of Malachi, we are not even sure if that was his real name. Some think this name is a “nom de plume” for someone else and scholars suggests it was Ezra the scribe. What we do know is that the name Malachi means “*My Messenger*” or “*The Messenger*”. Malachi would bring God’s message to the people. In this little book of 55 verses, we are to note that in 47 of the verses, God addresses the people in the first person i.e. I, me, myself. It is a book where God’s voice and words are to be heard and seen most clearly. As we read it, we are to take note of such direct speaking by the Lord, for it **demand**s our attention.

This book will remind us that no matter who we are, the important thing is for God’s voice to be heard by us first of all, then heard and seen through us. Preachers, teachers are to use their gifts and abilities not to earn praise or draw attention to themselves, but for the Saviour to be held up and presented to all and glorified. We see this in Scripture - the greatest prophet, John the Baptist, was just a voice crying in the wilderness; he pointed to the One to come, he said that Jesus had to increase and he decrease. Paul was glad for the word of God to go out freely, even if not by him; Elijah did great things in God’s service at Mount Carmel and then he curls up in a little ball in prayer - out of sight, away from the limelight and the adulation of the crowds.

As much as we can rightly admire any preacher, teacher, a Christian author or person, we are to remember they are but mortals and their desire should be to present Christ and God’s word. They will not be perfect and our hope is to be in and upon the God and Saviour they proclaim.

Malachi was a man with a burden. The NIV and other versions start off with “*An Oracle*”, but the main force of the word is “*a burden*” or “*to bear a burden*”. This was the weight on his shoulders, upon

his heart and it was affecting him - the burden of the word of the Lord to Israel i.e. the message he had to bring to them.

Things may have seemed ok on the surface - the temple, sacrifices, the walls built, economic stability, peace etc. but the Lord saw things as they really were and the Lord, through Malachi, addressed very bluntly and forcefully situations as they really were. The Lord pulls no punches in His speaking to His people at this time. We can learn more of the situation Malachi spoke into by reading Ezra and Nehemiah. We can read of the failures and sins which angered the Lord and prompted this message of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. Along with these sins, failures and practices, there was a dead formalism - the people of God went through the motions of temple services, sacrifices, and felt all was okay because they were doing religious things.

Malachi is used as an alarm clock, to wake up God's people at this time, to alert them, to cause them to recognise where they were. Sadly, we too can easily lapse into the same situation. We can lose our zeal, our first love, we can settle down into our comfort zones and have only an appearance of being spiritual and yet we are not real with God, not as close as we could be to our God and our Saviour. John Benton's book in the Welwyn series (EP) on Malachi is termed "*Losing Touch with the Living God*".

That is my fear not only for myself, but for us as a church family. We can become so busy, even in God's work or in the service of God, yet we lose touch with the living God and our Christian life is measured in terms of activity rather than love for Him or our personal relationship and love with Him. We could end up with cold, hard, fossilised hearts and be in a distant sham of a relationship and our walk with God becomes formal and cold.

I told you at the start, this series was not going to be easy to prepare, preach or to receive, for the message Malachi brought was a searching one and it can have the same impact on us. If you feel that such is “about time” - whether for me or the church, can I ask you to humbly seek God with us and not stand aloof through pride or arrogance. My longing is that the Lord will deal with myself and all of us, that the whole church would be affected and so we all would be real with our God and with each other.

2. The Loving Lord.

At the start of v2 we have a startling message from the Lord to His formal, cool, indifferent people - “*I have loved you*”. This is a bit of a shock as it is not a telling off using stern words, but tenderly the Lord rebukes them by reminding them He loves them. We are to realise that this statement, this glorious reality and truth would further compound and expose their sin, failure, indifference, carelessness and formalism for what it really was. They had allowed this cold formalism to develop, to go on in the light of the fact that the Lord God Almighty loved them. This is what made their failures, sin, coldness so inexcusable, for it was not against a tyrant, a cruel ogre, a hard, callous God, but against the One who loved them with an everlasting love.

Here is the tenderest of approaches to an indifferent people. They had been so privileged, so honoured and the Lord’s love had indeed been lavished on the people of Israel. They were privileged above all nations on earth to have been loved and have this love of the Lord God Almighty lavished on them.

3. The Puzzled People.

The Lord already knew the response of the people as they felt it was not the case and would ask “*How have you loved us?*” All they saw was the lack of blessing, no prosperity, still ruled over by the Persians and yet they were doing their part - going to the temple,

making sacrifices etc. but were they knowing “*Health, wealth and prosperity*”? Not at all, so how had the Lord loved them?

Amazingly, the Lord tenderly and lovingly condescends to argue the case, to reason with them. Here were a puzzled people, questioning how God loved them, yet He gently, lovingly shows them how He had loved them with a totally undeserved love. The Lord could have laid before them the panorama, the drama of His love - from Abraham’s calling, through to deliverance from Egypt, to establishing them in the land, the setting up of the monarchy under David, establishing a place of worship, or even the relatively recent Babylonian captivity and deliverance as well as their immediate history - restoration to the land, the temple rebuilt, Jerusalem rebuilt and established. Didn’t these all declare God’s love to them?

Yet the Lord didn’t do that, but took them back to a specific time, when one just as good, if not better was passed by for their ancestor Jacob (v2-3). Esau and Jacob were twin brothers; Esau was the older and it was usual to favour the firstborn, the older brother, but God didn’t deal on merit, worth, or priority, but in grace and mercy; for it pleased God to choose Jacob and this was done before their birth. Genesis 25:23 tells us of Jacob being chosen to be blessed even before their birth and so it was not of merit, but of God’s choosing.

Some object and say they cannot see how God could love Jacob and hate Esau and so they soften it and say that God favoured Jacob, but favoured Esau less! The Hebrew language is very black-and-white and the words really mean love and hate. My problem is not that God could hate Esau, but how could He ever love Jacob!? Esau was not chosen by God, was not treated in grace and mercy. Yes, he knew great blessings and prosperity physically, but spiritually he knew nothing of God’s redemption, salvation, love and mercy. Jacob was set aside to know God’s love, grace and mercy. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 9:10-13 as he shows that God is gloriously sovereign in

His plans and purposes and is always so. He calls and saves people on purpose, not by chance or accident and He doesn't need them to allow Him to do so!

God can save the most unlikely and He loves those who do not deserve it. The question is do you know the Lord has loved you? As Christians realise that we are privileged and have been loved by the Lord with an everlasting love, even before the foundation of the world. This is not the same as being saved from eternity past, for we have to come to faith and then, and only then, are we saved. Yet we can look back and see how the Lord's love was shown to us in our lives - keeping, leading, directing until that time when we came to trust Him in our life history. We may have been through adversity, or through gross sin, or it may be we were prayed for before our conception, when we were in our mother's womb, all our days long. The important thing is that we have come personally to know the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ as we trust Him as our Saviour.

His caring and keeping, His salvation blessings all cry out "*I love you*". The fact we love Him at all, even if weakly, should cause us to say "*We love Him because He first loved us*". Never forget that if we are a Christian, we are loved by the Lord. In the light of such love, we are to live our lives for Him and are to delight in Him. We may not have great wealth, possessions etc. but we eternally have the love of God in Christ Jesus as ours. We are to think on and delight much in that glorious truth and loving relationship.

Some here may have had the privilege of a Christian home, parents, grandparents, friends and family, even had the church pray for you and you have shared, been a partaker of the blessings of God upon them. Yet you may still be sinning against the love of God in neglecting, rejecting the privilege and honours you have had, for you are not trusting the Lord Jesus as your own Saviour. "*God so loved the world*" can include you! You've seen and known of that love in

the lives of your loved ones and if you will not believe in Him, you will perish in the light of such overwhelming evidence. What then will your excuse be? For Malachi's message also spoke of:

4. The Divergent Destinies.

The Israelites had known God's loving care in restoration of the temple in Jerusalem being rebuilt. Esau's descendants - who is also called Edom (Genesis 25:30), were still devastated, were only dreaming of the relative prosperity that Jerusalem knew. Yet no matter what they planned, or what they did, all would be lost and destroyed. They would *"be called the Wicked Land, people always under the wrath of the Lord"* (v4). They may have built, fulfilled their plans, may have seemingly had it all and yet all would be lost.

As believers we may see people, even ungodly, openly wicked and immoral people, seemingly prosper, they seem to have it all. Perhaps someone here would like all the world can offer and they don't want God to spoil or hinder their lives and pleasures. Such ones are to be warned and note what Jesus says in Matthew 16:26 *"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"* A person can have everything, but if they, even you, lose your own soul, you are going to be an eternal loser and you will be in the Wicked Land and always under the wrath of God.

Malachi says, in v5, that incredibly the Israelites would see this on the Edomites and they, and all those around would glorify the Lord. Incredible and as harsh as it seems, one day Christians will see people punished in hell by God and glorify Him! T V Moore in his commentary on Malachi says *"God will be glorified in the punishment of sin as well as in the reward of obedience. Hell is full of God's glory, as well as heaven and the sinner shall show it forth in his perdition not less truly than the saint in his salvation."*

This is a solemn consideration for all who are not yet Christians, but we who are Christians are not to lose or be diverted from the thrust of this section - which is about doubting God's love from a cold, formal, lifeless, distant life, love and walk from God that is a mockery to God, His love and of His work for and in us.

I said that this book wasn't going to be easy to preach through or to sit under. It will search us whether we are believers and unbelievers. Yet we are to remember it is the great God of heaven, who in His love is going to be doing this searching work. We are to ask God to be merciful to us an individual and show us our lives before Him and to grant us the grace and mercy to go to Him for restoration, for renewal, or even salvation. Pray that God's love would shine through to us in all that we see and consider in this book, so that both preacher and congregation together would know God's love and tenderness toward us as He graciously and lovingly shines the spotlight of His word into our lives as individuals and as a church, and revives the embers of our love for Him.