

# How have I loved thee?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Father, we ask today that your spirit will be at work, melting hardened hearts and comforting tender ones, so that in all things your love and glory may be magnified.

Speak through your word in Malachi today. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Now, what a magnifying glass is for? The best use of it, of course, is simply to hold one and pretend that you're Sherlock Holmes or Detective Conan.

But apart from that, we probably think of magnifying glasses being used in two ways. Firstly, we use them to see things that we couldn't see before.

So scientists and medical researchers use them in microscopes all the time, so that they can see all kinds of organisms and funny cell-like things that are invisible to the naked eye.

I imagine that the people who are working on the vaccine for the Wuhan virus are probably using them in some way right now. Secondly, we use them so that we can see clearer.

[ 1 : 07 ] I'm sure some of you have reading glasses and that you appreciate them. And you're in good company. Two thousand years ago, the Roman writer and politician Seneca praised his version of reading glasses, saying that he could read any letter, no matter how tiny the handwriting.

And so, you can still enjoy your daily newspaper reading and appreciate nature all around you. The book of Malachi is a magnifying glass.

For first of all, this book magnifies God. The prophet helps us to see God clearer. Who he is. He's the Lord Almighty, or more literally, the Lord of hosts.

That's what it's called again and again and again. Just glance down a bit further in chapter 1 verse 6, or 1 verse 8, or 1 verse 10, or 1 verse 11, and for at least another 20 times, you can see that's what he's called.

He commands armies. He's the divine warrior. He's the one committed to establishing his kingdom on earth. He's the king.

[ 2 : 28 ] He's the sovereign. He's the purifying fire. And yet, that is not all there is to God. For Malachi also magnifies the fact that he too is father.

A father who deserves honor. A father who is filled with fatherly compassion. We'll see this in the coming weeks. He's a covenant keeper.

An advocate against the exploiter. But most of all, a passionate lover. For today especially, we'll see God's white, hot, burning love in 3D.

A love that cannot be compared to human love. But the book also magnifies ourselves. In the sense that it helps us see things about ourselves that we couldn't see before.

The prophet puts God's people under scrutiny. And what he finds isn't pretty. For those who call themselves God's people are actually pretty downbeat about God himself.

[ 3 : 39 ] They worship him without any heart. They routinely give him their second best. They don't even give a second thought to him the moment they leave the worship service.

But when they do, they love to argue with him. As we'll soon see. They view God as their God.

That much is certainly true. But it's more like how a group of unmotivated, disgruntled employees who are about to go on strike might view their boss.

Technically true. But not really the case in practice. And so this book doesn't just put a magnifying glass to God and to ourselves.

But more specifically, it puts a magnifying glass on the relationship between God and his people. Between God and us.

[ 4 : 42 ] We can see that. Because this entire book is actually built around six conversations. Or as the scholars put it, six disputations.

And that word disputations already tells you that the relationship is not in a healthy state. For throughout this book, just like how a married couple might have the same quarrel again and again. And so God and his people will engage in the same kind of disputation again and again. Now let's use chapter 2 verse 17 to 3 verse 5 as one example of this kind of conversation.

So can I just ask you to just flip your page, maybe just one or two pages over or swipe once or twice on your app. And please turn with me there to chapter 2 verse 17 onwards.

And this is how the conversation tends to go. First of all, the issue is introduced. And so in verse 17, God says, You have worried the Lord with your words.

[ 5 : 48 ] That's the issue. And then comes the pushback. In this case, verse 18. How have we worried you, God?

Catch the tone. It's not said with a desire to put things right. But rather, it's a gearing up for a fight. And then third of all, we get God's answer in the rest of verse 18 all the way down to 3 verse 5, which we'll look at in a few weeks' time.

And so introduction of issue, pushback, and then God's answer. That's how each of the conversation or disputation will play out, including today.

And there's six of them in all. And you'll see this pattern in every subsequent sermon in this series. But what has brought them to this point?

After all, the book of Malachi is the final book of the Old Testament. And things have been looking up. Let me just give you the timeline of what's happened in Israel's history so far.

[ 7 : 04 ] And if you sign up for those Bible overview classes that our elder, Hompat, just advertised, you'll soon be experts on this in no time. But what's happened roughly is this. In about 930 BC, the kingdom splits into two.

And so Israel splits into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. From a human perspective, that's because of politics and civil war. But from God's perspective, it's because King Solomon, the king of that time, chased after other gods.

And so there's judgment. And then in 722 BC, Assyria comes, takes the Northern Kingdom. And then roughly about 587 BC, Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern Kingdom, falls to the Babylonians.

The Jewish temple is destroyed and the people are taken into captivity and exile. And so things aren't great. But yet another empire arises.

The Persians, who defeat the Babylonians, and they tell the Israelites, you can go home. It's exactly as God promised.

[ 8 : 21 ] And so they go home. They rebuild the city. They restore the temple. They revive the economy. And so by the time of Malachi, it looks like everything is fine.

Things are looking up. But there is a problem. Basically, God's people are not happy. They're thinking, hey, look, I'm part of God's people.

But why doesn't it look or feel that way? Why doesn't it feel as if God is present? And so God has fallen short of their expectations.

They expected glory. They expected glory. But their rebuilt temple felt more like a renovated community hall than a majestic Notre Dame.

They expected a relaxed life. But they were struggling along as they endured drought and crop failure. Not prosperity.

[ 9 : 22 ] They expected stability. But all they felt was insecurity. Because the nations around them looked so much stronger than they were.

And so the question everyone is asking, whether out loud or not, is this. In what way have you loved us, God?

I don't see it. I don't feel it. I can't picture it. And God, I don't like it. And that's a question we could so easily have today, can't we?

For some of you today, you're privately disappointed because your vision of the Christian life hasn't been met. Perhaps you've expected glory.

Not that you wanted to be the big boss or get tons of money. But you did think that God would come true for you in terms of getting that workplace bonus. Or that hopeful contract.

[ 10 : 29 ] Or that position on the committee. Or perhaps success in that particular project. Perhaps you expected a simple and stable life.

One which is not marked by worries about your parents' health. Or your own health. Or having to carry the burdens of your family and friends.

And you question. In what way have you loved us, God? And what's happened to the people in Malachi's day could be happening to you right now.

For the people in response began to cool off the relationship. They began distancing themselves from God. You see, that's the difference between them and the psalmist.

In the Bible, the psalmist also often questions God in all honesty. Where are you, God? Do you love me?

[ 11 : 38 ] Are you for me? The problem isn't the honest questions. Not when the psalms are full of them. Just go home and read any psalm. You're bound to run into honest questions sooner or later.

But the problem is where the questioning leads you to in your relationship with God. The psalmist doesn't distance himself from God.

Even though he is pained because he wonders why God seems silent, he still trusts that God is somehow there. His constant questioning actually comes from a place of trust.

But the people of Malachi's day are different. Their questioning comes from a place of doubt, which leads then to distrust, and then leads on to a deliberate distance.

Now, it's not that they wanted to completely break off the relationship. They still wanted to call themselves God's people. But they decided, God, we won't be giving 100% to you.

[ 12 : 57 ] We won't exactly disobey you, certainly not blatantly, but we'll kind of be passive-aggressive about it. We'll go to the temple. We'll give you polite smiles, but we'll also give you the cold shoulder and criticize you behind your back.

We're not ready to abandon you, but we're not ready to abandon ourselves to you either. And perhaps today, that's you.

You want to have it both ways. Your circumstances and your situation has led you to distance yourself from God. But you don't quite want to say, I'm not a Christian, because Christianity still forms part of your cultural identity.

You can't imagine calling yourself a Buddhist or a Muslim or a free thinker. But it doesn't work that way. Just imagine a marriage relationship where you didn't want to talk with your spouse, you criticize him or her to others, you daydream about moving away, but you still want to call him or her your husband or wife.

It's technically a marriage, but that's not much of a relationship, is it? And eventually, breaking point will come.

[ 14 : 25 ] It's the same with God. You can't distance yourself from God, but still want to hold on to your label as a Christian.

It doesn't work that way. But here's the good news. When God's people ask, even if somewhat childish, how have you loved me?

Well, God does respond. He's been put on trial, but he doesn't hand in a note from the hospital to avoid going on the stand. Rather, he says, I'm going to make my witness statement.

I'm going to show you I have loved you. For here's the paradox. God says, it's when you doubt my love that you need to know my love most intensely.

For only my love can melt. Your heart cause you to give yourselves to me wholeheartedly and enable you to love others.

[ 15 : 33 ] So let me answer, how have I loved he? Let me count the ways. And firstly, God says, I have reached out to you.

I have reached out to you. Now, if you've closed your Bibles at this point, make sure they are open again to the book of Malachi and you will see that's what the opening line is really all about.

Verse 1. A prophecy. The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. This is not just a formal introduction to the book.

This is more like a parent who upon seeing how upset his child is, sulking in the corner because she's been denied her favourite toy, decides to stoop down to her level and talk to her quietly. rather than ignoring her, rather than disregarding her, he chooses to engage with her even though she initially resists engagement.

[ 16 : 44 ] She says, oh, no, daddy, I don't want to talk to you. You see, God could have remained silent or turned away in annoyance but instead the word of the Lord comes to Israel.

He engages He speaks. He says, I've heard your burdens and now let me make known the burdens of my heart for you.

But why? Why does God even speak? Why does He even reach out to you and me? Now, that might seem like a funny question but think about it.

Does the young di-Pertuan Agong have any obligation to speak to you? Or perhaps your hero, I don't know who that could be, perhaps a Nicole David or Yobin or ZRV, does she have any obligation to speak to you?

The answer is no because I presume none of us here have a relationship with them. They're all kind of up there in their respective fields and we're all more or less down here and there is no necessity on their part to establish a relationship with us.

[18:09] Neither does God but God did. You see, notice here how God has revealed Himself in verse 1.

He is the Lord, capital letters. That's the way our English Bible translations try to capture that this is the personal name of God, Yahweh, which means something like I am who I am.

And when we hear the personal name of God, we're meant to remember we know this name only because God has chosen to enter into relationship with us.

And in the Bible, He does this through something called a covenant. You see, to understand Malachi, we need to grasp this idea of covenant.

It's going to come through quite strongly in the next few weeks. And the word itself is going to be mentioned six times in this book. But the concept is there in the background throughout.

[19:19] What is a covenant? It refers to a means by which we structure a relationship. So some will say it's a bit like a contract today, since that's how we often structure business and commercial relationships, we sign a contract.

And indeed, like a contract, a covenant involves two parties and requires obligations. But it's not quite the same because most of our contracts have nothing to do with loving relationships.

And so perhaps the best modern example of a covenant today is when you get married. You see, when you get married, you're making a statement about the form and the structure of your relationship.

You're husband and wife, you are exclusive to each other, and you do have obligations to one another. And so in one sense, it's like a contract.

You promise each other things. But you do so out of love. The obligations are not so much the point, the loving relationship between you and your spouse is.

[20:36] That's covenant. And that's what God did. He loves his people, and so he speaks to them. He reaches out to them and makes a covenant with them.

If we read the Old Testament prior to Malachi, we know that God made promises to them. He tells them, I'm going to be your God, just like how somebody might say I'm going to be your husband. I'm going to redeem you. I'm going to make you into a nation, give you a land, and bless you. And I'm going to outline my plans, my purposes for you in my law.

That's God's covenant with his people. And he keeps his promises. Now don't miss the fact that in verse 1, God is speaking to Israel.

That's remarkable because Israel shouldn't exist. They disobeyed God time and time again.

[21:48] That's why in a history lesson earlier, the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria, and the southern kingdom was in captivity to Babylon. Death, broken, their obligations.

And the stipulation was that they should be gone. All done for. But God said, I haven't abandoned my plans for you, though you're unfaithful, you're disrespectful, you're deceitful.

That's what we are. We'll discover that as we read through Malachi. But though you're like an adulterer, God says, I won't cut off all contact, I want to stay on speaking terms with you.

I'll keep my side of the covenant. And so already in the first verse, get this, God is showing how he has loved his people.

His word comes to them. And get this, God's word has come to you. God was up there, we're down here, but the word became flesh and engaged with us.

[23:06] The word came to Israel through Malachi, God's messenger. But the word came to us through God's son himself, Jesus.

And in Christ, God wanted to make a new covenant with us. But we will only find this remarkable if we understand that we've been unfaithful too.

We've been disrespectful, we've been deceitful, we're covenant breakers, we've broken our promises to God time and time again.

We didn't honour him, we didn't seek his will, we didn't adopt his priorities, we didn't love him. Just examine your week gone by.

How many times can you honestly say that you love God with all your heart and your soul and your mind? And sometimes, maybe even often, we say sorry, only to go and do it again.

[ 24 : 14 ] Just like Israel. Old habits die hard. And sometimes we decide anyway, you know what, who cares?

Sometimes we're tempted to take that attitude, aren't we? But still, God himself comes seeking us. Do you see, how many of us can love like this?

How many of us can love someone who breaks their promises regularly to us? Who keeps saying, I don't care to us?

And yet, God says, I do. I love you. Even though you're feeling disappointed, your expectations haven't been met, you're not in a place you thought you would be.

It's true, God says, I love you. Because I've spoken to you in the Lord Jesus Christ. And God still wants to remain on speaking terms with us.

[ 25 : 26 ] We know this how? Because of what's in front of you. The Bible is God's way of saying to you, I want to continually engage with you.

I want you to know me more and more and more. I want you to know that I have loved you. And so listen, these are my words.

And yes, contained amongst them are some hard commands and instructions and rebukes. But they come wrapped in love.

Because the Bible is not ultimately just about instructions commands and rebukes. The Bible is about Jesus.

And so it's a real tragedy if the Bible remains unopened. For I have loved you, says the Lord. But you wouldn't know it if you didn't open your Bible because you wouldn't meet Jesus.

[ 26 : 37 ] But for Israel, God's mere words aren't enough. Verse 2, I have loved you, says the Lord. But you ask, how have you loved us?

So there's introduction of issue and then pushback. Now, I don't know about you, but if a husband says to his wife or a wife says to her husband, I love you, probably the right thing to say back is, I love you too.

That's marriage counselling 101. But if the other partner replies, well, how have you loved me?

Prove it. I suspect that's not a very good sign. It looks like I need to schedule at least another five marriage counselling sessions. You see, it exposes their heart.

After all, this is the end of the Old Testament and God has nothing left to prove. He's rescued them from Egypt. He's rescued them from the wilderness.

[ 27 : 44 ] He's rescued them from Babylon. I love you too should have been the right response. But it isn't.

Their hearts are not soft. God has nothing to prove to us either. He's already sent his only son, Jesus.

And if we respond the way Israel does here, it shows the state of our hearts as well. It needs softening. But God remains patient.

And in the rest of today's verses, he'll say, alright, you ask, in what ways have you loved me? In the remaining verses of today's passage, let me count to you the other main way.

Here is God's answer. Secondly, God says, I've chosen you. I've chosen you. Since Israel isn't getting the views, God says, well, let's look all the way back to your past.

[ 28 : 57 ] Look at where you've come from, and you will see that I chose to love you, and I have never ever changed my mind.

Look at verse 2 again. Was not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord, yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.

Now, to understand this, we've got to go all the way back near to the beginning of the Old Testament in Genesis 25. Rebecca, the daughter-in-law of Abraham, that's Israel's founding father, if you like, is pregnant with twins, Esau and Jacob.

Now, Esau's the older brother. He's born first. And as such, he's meant to be the more privileged guy, according to ancient Near Eastern culture. You see, he gets all the inheritance.

He's the guy who gets to inherit his father's blessing. But if we were to read on in Genesis 25, we discover that Esau ends up selling his birthright for some bread and steel, and Jacob ends up with the blessing instead.

[ 30 : 14 ] But what is so striking is that before even either of them were born, this has already been predicted. Jacob was always going to be the blessed one.

Just look at Genesis chapter 25, verse 23. The Lord said to her, that's Rebecca, two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated.

One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger. And what you need to know to understand why Malachi mentions Esau and Jacob is that the descendants of Esau go on to become the Edomites, whereas the descendants of Jacob go on to become the Israelites.

And so the Edom mentioned in verse 4 is actually the nation that comes from the line of Esau. And Israel is the nation that comes from the line of Jacob.

And historically, Edom has been the enemy of Israel. And God says, Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated.

[ 31 : 36 ] Both of you come from the same mother, but it's you, Israel, that I have chosen over Edom. Now the language here is pretty strong.

God hates? How can that be? Isn't he love? But what you need to understand is how the Hebrew mind works here.

It's not so much about emotions, but decisions. Love and hate is about a binary. It's one or the other. Let me explain.

Think of Jesus' words in Luke 14 26 where he says, If anyone comes to me but does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, such a person cannot be my disciple.

Now is Jesus saying that we are to hate our family? No, of course not. But he is saying that there are decisions to be made.

[ 32 : 44 ] When it comes to who is number one, it's one or the other. It's Jesus or family, not both. And so the language being employed here is kind of the same.

It's Esau or Jacob. It's one or the other. And if it's Jacob, it can't be Esau. And that's expressed in the language of love and hate.

And so we need to understand how the language is being used and not import our modern linguistics or our modern ideas of what love and hate is back into the text. And so here is God's answer to the question.

God, in what way have you loved us? Answer, I've chosen you. Now we might be tempted to think that's because one was better than the other.

After all, think of school when the captains are trying to choose their teams during PE. We always choose the better players first, don't we? And yet when we compare Esau with Jacob, we discover Esau is the stronger guy.

[ 34 : 07 ] He's the life of the party. He's the firstborn, which means he has all the status. And Jacob, well, let's just say that Jacob isn't Esau, not in any way.

And the descendants of Jacob are the same. They've never been the kind of empire that Assyria or Babylon or Persia was. But God chooses the weaker brother.

He chooses Israel. But perhaps we could say, ah, maybe Jacob, although he was weaker, maybe he's the guy with more integrity.

Maybe God chose the brother with the better moral character. Um, no. If you were to read Genesis 25 onwards, we'll find that both brothers are equally bad.

They're equally guilty. Esau despises his birthright, which basically means he despises God. And yet Jacob basically is also a con man.

[ 35 : 17 ] He's a master manipulator, trying to manipulate things to his own advantage. They're equally guilty. And so what separates the two isn't their family background, it isn't their status or ability, it isn't their inherent goodness.

The only reason why God chose Jacob over Esau wasn't anything to do with either brother, but with God himself.

That's why it's interesting, isn't it, that in Genesis 25, this choosing did not take place after birth, it happened before birth.

It wasn't as if God was waiting to see how they would turn out before choosing. He did it even before they were born. Why? To show that God choosing one over the other was purely 100%

grace.

Totally undeserved. Nothing to do with us or any goodness inside of us.

[ 36 : 38 ] Does that sound scandalous to you? Well, God's grace is a real scandal, isn't it? God has never chosen us based on anything inside of us that was remotely good.

He has never chosen us based on any potential that we showed. He cannot be enticed by our brides.

God, let me do this good thing and then you let me into your kingdom, okay? He cannot be attracted by our charm. God, let me dress up in my Sunday best and let you hear my beautiful singing voice.

God is entirely free of our influence and that is why he can be gracious.

You see, grace cannot be grace if God must give it, if he's compelled to give it based on something good inside of us.

[ 37 : 46 ] grace is only grace when freely given. Now, how can that be fair, you ask?

And that's an understandable question. But it's also a question we would only ask when we don't understand what it is we really deserve.

You see, the principle of fairness is the principle that we should get our deal. We should get what we deserve.

And what do we really deserve? Verse 3 tells you, But Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.

Judgment alone is what everyone deserves. When we look at the descendants of Esau in the Old Testament, we discover they're not a particularly nice bunch of people.

[ 38 : 58 ] Amos 1 verse 11 tells us about the violence they perpetrated against women, for example. They're not innocent. But then again, neither are Israel.

Amos 2 tells us that Israel and Judah have exploited the poor and they've broken the law. Everyone deserves judgment.

That's fair. And so the real question is, not so much why didn't God choose the other, but why did God choose anybody at all?

God not deal with us according to our sin, but according to his mercy? If God was fair in the way we conceive of it, we'll all be in hell right now, without the hope.

And so God asks, are you beginning to see the magnitude of my love for you? It isn't because somehow we deserve better treatment.

[ 40 : 09 ] It's because God has freely set his gracious love upon us. If today you have saving faith in Christ, you trust in Christ's death on the cross for you, you know God personally, well all of that is a gift.

And that should make us fall on our knees and humble us that God would choose to grant his love to us in this way. You know if we get puffed up thinking, wow, God chose me, well that means we've still failed to understand God's sovereign grace.

For this grace shown to us in the past is what now secures our future for us. And that's a related way that God shows his love for us.

And thirdly, God says, I've secured your future. Look at verses 4 and 5. Edom 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. You will see it with your own eyes and say, great is the Lord even beyond the borders of Israel.

[ 41 : 36 ] understand this, Israel, God says, Edom's eternal destiny is destruction. They cannot escape the judgment of God.

But look, Israel, God says, I've brought you back. That should give you hope that your eternal destiny is different.

That should show I love you. And look, Christian, I've sent Jesus to bring you home. And that should give you hope that your eternal destiny is secure.

How great God is that we are spared his wrath even though we're not Israelites, even though we are beyond the borders of Israel, all because of Jesus, great is the Lord.

And all of this simply means this. If this is indeed the way that God loves us, it means that no matter our circumstances, no matter our situation, no matter our emotions at this present moment, we know for sure that God loves us.

[ 42 : 59 ] It's a love that cannot be compared to human love. I hope you see that. We have to understand God does not owe us anything.

God does not have to choose us. If we think that he does, then we cannot comprehend his love. Our God is too small.

love. But if we know that we are people who deserve nothing, absolutely nothing, and yet God has chosen to be committed to his people, that he chose to send his chosen one, Jesus, to live a perfect life, to die on the cross for our sin, to rise again as king, then we would be in awe of his love. It's a fierce kind of love, and it's the kind of love that God wants to put on display to melt away our indifference, to show how stupid it is to distance ourselves from him, to call us back to repentance. We wouldn't ask, in a sneering way, how have you loved us, God? But we would be utterly humbled and resolve anew to walk in his ways.

[ 44 : 24 ] For my friends, if you're asking, in what way have you loved us, God? Well, God has definitively answered that question.

We have no pushback to offer. But now, he gently but firmly asked us to consider this question. God, how have I loved thee? It's a question that the rest of the book of Malachi wants us to reflect on, and it's a question already to ask yourselves today.

so the Lord of the Lord has come to you. Let's respond appropriately. Let's pray.

Father, as we come to you this morning, will you please continue to awe us and humble us by the depth and strength of your love.

[ 45 : 42 ] Father, help us to digest that all we've heard this morning. Help us to see that your love is far beyond human love, far beyond what we can imagine.

And indeed, even the aspects of your love that we find hard to understand, the hard edge of your love, help us to take that on board.

God, will you help us to change that? Will you melt away our indifference? Will you help us to say sorry to you? But indeed, help us to say I love you too.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen. Amen.