**Sunday 15th January 2017 Message**

**Strong Links In Uncertain Times**

**Slide - *Scripture:*** [***Malachi 1:1–5***](http://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/malachi/1/messages) ***An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." 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!'" (NIV)***

***Luke 18:8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" NIV***

**Introduction**

Last week we looked at the necessity of uncertainty, and accept that we are living at a time in this world with growing levels of uncertainty. I mentioned I believed God was leading me to preach through the book of Malachi at the beginning of this year. Today we embark on a journey with the last prophet of the OT bringing Gods last word for 400 years to a people totally disheartened by the uncertainties around them.

As we consider this book let me put a picture in your mind for you to consider the importance of this message which has to keep the people of Israel going for 400 years until God speaks through a prophet again.

The people of Israel were Gods chosen nation, His children, and He had pulled them out from a Gentile, ungodly man called Abram. The nation grew and was established through the line of Jacob who God chose and loved. They had failed and abandoned God numerous times, yet God still considered them His own, and through them Jesus was going to be born, so even more ungodly, unfaithful people could be called His children called the church.

Gods message through Malachi, at this time, was His wooing of a people He loved and wanted to be faithful strong links in a chain of faith until the Messiah comes in 400 years. This chain was to remain strong from the door closing in the OT to the door opening in the NT. A complete failure of faith could have left the nation with no people believing, hoping or expecting the coming of a Messiah. Thankfully there were some still around, some shepherds, a virgin, a barren one, a Simeon and a Hannah to name just a few who readily received their Saviour. Those 400 years were ones of great trials and uncertainty, the strength of the nation had dwindled, and many other small nations had been swallowed up by the growing Babylonian and Persian empires.

Today God speaks this message to us with a desire to ensure His children (you and I) are prepared for the return of Jesus Christ. He is looking for believers who will continue to faithfully serve and worship Him in times of uncertainty. He is looking for those who faithfully live, according to His word.

He is looking for those who will be the strong links of active faith from the closing of the door on the last year, and the door opened before us in this year of increased momentum. He is looking for strong links of faith to exist from the door of time closing at the death and resurrection of Jesus till the new door open upon His return.

When the Saviour returns will He find faith in the earth? ***Luke 8:18.*** Will He find strong or stronger faith at the end of this year. Will He find people stronger in their faith after Brexit than they were before? Jesus knew the potential impact of uncertainties until His return and He asks a question that should stir us to determination.

I did not realize how relevant this message is to what the Lord had revealed to me last week. The message has always been relevant to the church, even more so in the latter days in which we live.

**God's Message to Israel After the Exile**

Malachi prophesied around 420 BC in Israel. He was one of the last inspired prophets before the 400-year lull in divine revelation between the Old Testament and Jesus Christ. The Israelites had returned from the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem had been rebuilt, and the temple restored. Surprisingly he is still dealing with the same issues as Nehemiah some 50-100 years later.

But the people had not learned their lesson from the exile. They had grown skeptical of God's love (1:2), careless in worship (1:7), indifferent to the truth (2:6–7), disobedient to the covenant (2:10), faithless in their marriages (2:15; 3:5), and stingy in their offerings (3:8).

To this carnal and rebellious people God sent his messenger (Malachi means "my messenger"), and the first message he put on his lips was, "I have loved you, says the Lord!"

**The Word of God**

An oracle of God – are the opening words, which literally translated means the burden, the things that weigh heavy on Gods heart, are to be revealed through this prophet to Gods chosen people.

The word of the Lord – all of the Bible is God’s word, Jesus is the word of God, God has revealed Himself and His heart in many ways. Yet here we have audible revelation through a guy called Malachi (whose name coincidentally means “my messenger”).

God’s love for His people is that of a Father who wants to speak them, this whole Bible is a love letter, and this book of Malachi is a love letter, yet it is a heavy burden on Gods heart. Not many of us like rebuke from our Father’s because we fear a lack of love being shown to us.

Malachi has heard Gods heart, and he skillfully choses to bring the message through a series of disputations in the form of a revelation of truth of God and a revelation of the response that goes on in the hearts, minds and actions of His children.

Some prophets feel as if they only have to give the truth, the whole truth, and no grace or understanding which is also in Gods heart, but not Malachi. I need, we all need, to be like Malachi, know Gods word and why He is saying it.

**The Love of God**

***Verse 2: "'I have loved you,' says the Lord."***

***If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts. (1:6***)

***I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name is feared among the nations. (1:14b)***

My covenant with him [Levi] was a covenant of life and peace [in other words: just as in 1:2, "I have loved him!"], and I gave them to him that he might fear: and he feared and stood in awe of my name. ***(2:5)***

***I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. (3:5)***

In other words, Malachi's burden in this book is to show us a God who makes us tremble with reverent fear. Therefore when he begins his prophecy to Israel in chapter 1 with the good news, "I have loved you, says the Lord," he unfolds the love of God for us in a way that makes us tremble before the majesty of God.

**Israel's Question**

When God said in verse 2, "I have loved you, says the Lord," the Israelites respond skeptically, ***"How hast thou loved us?"***

Now test yourselves here. How would you answer that question in your own life? How would you describe God's love to you? Are there so many uncertainties that you could almost despair over your circumstances? Is your life and family in such a shamble’s that you feel as skeptical about it as the Israelites did? Do you want to say, "How hast thou loved me?"

I don't doubt that there is a little of that in all of us. And so it will do us all good to listen to God's answer which is almost never heard today. How hast thou loved us? Answer: "Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau."

**God's Answer**

Now what sort of answer is this? The descendants of Jacob have asked, "How hast thou loved us?" How is it an answer to say, "Jacob I loved, Esau I hated"? Isn't that just a repetition of what he already said in the first part of verse 2, "I have loved you, says the Lord"?

No it's not, because of the little question, "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" What does that mean? Why did God ask that? He asked it because he knew that the answer to that question contained the key to the essence of his love.

What is the answer? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? The answer is yes. In fact, as every Israelite knew, Esau was not only Jacob's brother, he was his twin brother, conceived in the womb of Rebecca by their father Isaac. Jacob and Esau were not like the sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael. They had different mothers and one of them wasn't even an Israelites. But Jacob and Esau were twins. And not only were they twins, Esau was the elder, which means that by all customary rights and privileges he would be the main heir of the father's blessings.

Now what is the point of saying, "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" The point is this: Based on what you and Esau were in yourselves I could just as easily have chosen Esau as you. Isn't he your brother? Weren't you twins? Isn't he in fact your elder? But I chose you, and passed him by.

What then is God's answer to the question, "How hast thou loved us?" His answer is, I have loved you with free, sovereign, unconditional, electing love; that is how I have loved you.

My love for you is electing love because I chose you for myself above your brother Esau.

My love for you is unconditional love because I chose you before you had done anything good or evil—before you had met any conditions—while you were still in your mother's womb ([***Genesis 25:24***](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gen%2025.24)***).***

The text says God hated Esau. The word here as used as the opposite to loved. In fact the more palatable meaning is God had rejected Esau but chosen Jacob. Just as God hates sin, hates divorce, He has rejected these as they are not the best for His children. Esau had been rejected even though he was the older brother, and Jacob had been chosen.

My love for Jacob/Israel is sovereign love because I was under no constraint to love you; I was not forced or coerced; I was totally in charge when I set my love upon you.

And my love for you is free because it's the overflow of my infinite grace that can never be bought.

Just as God says He had chosen Jacob, He had chosen Abraham, He has chosen you, not because any of them or us are great. He chose them and us because He is Great and knows what we can do when we remain in submission to Him. Contrary to some teaching let us be clear we did not chose God He chose us. We are the ones He foreknew would seek to be conformed to the likeness of His Son ***Rom 8:29***, just as He foreknew the patriarchs ***11:2***

Now I ask you, if you are a Christian here today, and if you say to God, "How have you loved me?" can you answer the way God answered the Israelites? Do you look at your sister or brother living in sin and tremble that you have been chosen? And that your election is not because of anything in you? And that your faith and hope are owing wholly to God? Do you look at that childhood friend or college roommate who took a turn away from God when you stayed on the path, and tremble at the awesome thought that God chose you?

**Four Aspects of God's Hatred of Esau**

But what about Esau? Probably the most striking thing about this text is that in it God chooses to highlight his love for the descendants of Jacob by contrasting it with his hatred for the descendants of Esau, the nation of Edom.

If we ask, what does God mean by saying (in verse 3), "Esau I hated," the answer is spelled out for us in some detail in verses 3 and 4:

I have hated Esau; I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert. If Edom says, We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins, the Lord of hosts says, They may build, but I will tear down, till they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.

Notice four aspects to God's hate of Esau.

**1. God Opposes Them**

First, it means that God opposes their prosperity and brings their land under judgment. "I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

**2. God Will Continue to Oppose Them**

Second, it means that God will continue to oppose them when they resist his judgment. His judgment will not suffer resistance. Verse 4: "If Edom says, We, are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins, the Lord of hosts says, They may build, but I will tear down."

**3. They Will Be Given Up to Wickedness**

Third, God's hate for Esau means that they will by and large as a nation be given up to wickedness. Verse 4b: " . . . till they are called the wicked country." This is the most devastating of the judgments and the one that makes all the others just. God does not bring judgments on an innocent people. He is just in all his dealings. When he passed over Esau and chose Jacob, there was no decree that an innocent Esau would be judged. Rather what God decreed was to pass Esau by, to withhold his electing love and to give him up to wickedness.

Now there is great mystery here, and I do not claim to solve all the problems that our little minds can think up. There is much we are not yet ready to know. We see through a glass darkly. But this much we are surely to believe: God did not choose the descendants of Esau; rather he passed over them and withheld his electing love; as a result Esau gave rein to wickedness and deserved the indignation of God. Which leads to the fourth aspect of God's hate.

**4. God Will Be Angry with Them Forever**

Fourth, at the end of verse 4 it means that the Lord is angry, or indignant with them forever.

Why Does God Inspire Malachi to Open This Way? Why does God inspire Malachi to begin his message to these worldly Israelites, and to us, with such a revelation as this? "I have loved you, says the Lord. How have you loved us? Is not Esau Jacob's brother? Yet I have loved you and hated Esau. How have I loved you? I have loved you with free, sovereign, unconditional, electing love."

So, God could reveal how He had cared for His chosen people, and that they still exist despite all the they had passed through, whilst Gods rejected people had suffered and seen much demise.

Likewise, the church can see how God has loved her despite all the persecution, opposition that she has face. Yes, she has suffered but Jesus is still building His church. Whereas those faiths that have rejected Him and thereby been rejected by Him cannot boast the same protection.

**That We May Know He Reigns Over the Whole World**

But that is not all. God has another purpose in revealing the greatness of his electing love for Jacob and his judgment upon Esau. He tells us in verse 5:

Your own eyes shall see this [you shall see the terrible judgments on Edom] and you shall say, 'Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel!'

In other words, part of what it means to be loved by God is to know that God reigns—that he is great and mighty—even beyond the people called by his name. He reigns in Edom. His purposes are not ultimately frustrated by the wickedness of any people. "Great is the Lord, beyond the border of Israel!" Yes, even in Edom—in Albania.

**Application**

So let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. Let us give him the glory—all the glory—for our salvation. And let us never grow weary in savouring and strengthening and spreading the vision of our God, for "Great is the Lord beyond the walls of this church!"

**Slide -** The whole essence of this introductory passage to Malachi, is like God sitting His children on His lap, and they are turning around and slapping Him in the face.

Everything in our life is provision from the Father. We slap Him in the face and say “You said you love me?” He says “look around everything you have is mine. I adopted you. You are sitting on my lap and you say “How have I loved you””

We need to understand the Fathers heart, and behave like the Father. The Father in this book is looking for children to behave like the Father. Loving like the Father, absorbing rejection, rejecting the things that weaken faith by the way we worship, act in Marriage, giving etc

**Ten things**

1. **Slide -** God our Father absorbs a lot of hurt caused by us.

Sin is not just breaking Gods laws it is breaking Gods heart. It is saying and doing things which show we do not love as He loves us. Rebellious children do so much to their parents, and say horrible things, we have to absorb a lot of hurt like the Father and not respond like siblings. Slap them back when they slap you. You have to absorb to maintain relationship.

There are so many supposed Christians hurting the Father and He is not responding liking a sibling and fighting back. He demonstrates good parents. He maintains His Fatherly disposition.

As parent’s you have the opportunity to rise above responding in like manner.

1. **Slide -** When you do not see yourself as very bad, you cannot see God as very good.

What ways have you hurt the Father? What ways are you grieving Him? God looked on the nations in Genesis and was grieved.

If you see yourself as good you expect the Father to give you everything as a matter of entitlement. If you see yourself as bad you say “I deserve hell everything else is a gift. Thanks dad that’s a lot of gifts”

Weebly wobbly “If I am good God is bad” “If I am bad God is good”

1. **Slide - Discipline is one way that God loves us**. ***Proverbs 3:11 and Hebrews 12:5***

Many of you are hurting and suffering and you are asking is God punishing you. NO. For God to cause you to suffer would mean that all the punishment He laid on Jesus on the cross was pointless.

He will sometimes let you reap what you sow. This is part of His discipline.

God saves us from ourselves. No discipline seems pleasant at the moment, but it reaps a harvest of righteousness later.

1. **Slide - Sin is a two lane highway.**

There are two ways to sin. ***Rebellious sin.*** Those that say they are believers and rebel against God. Eg dating someone you should not marry

Most of us ***our sin is in the form of religion*** – they do not give generously they are greedy, they do not worship wholeheartedly they are lazy, they do not think of others they are thinking about themselves, they do little of all things required to satisfy their own conscience not Gods requirements. Trying to work out the minimal standard is and even unmotivated to aspire to that, trying to work out what they cannot get away with. Is this you are you going through the motions luke warmly. Do you listen to Gods word agree in head and not do and hope that is sufficient?

God deals with our rebellion.

1. **Slide -** God has not failed you and He does not owe you.

They were thinking and responding out of their expectations of God. God has failed us so He owes us. We deserve more money so we are not giving to Him. We deserve an easier life so we are not going to put up with this anymore. God you better take care of us and then we’ll take better care of what You care about.

1. **Slide -** When we are ungrateful for what God has done we are unwilling to do what God commands us to do.

His love for us should compel us. We need to remember ALL that He has done. Count your blessings not your problems. If we do not appreciate all that God has done for us we will not be motivated to do what God asks us to do. We do not focus on what we have to do we must focus on what He has done for us. They were thinking they were being treated like Esau, but they had been treated like Gods chosen one Jacob.

1. **Slide -** God expects us to change our attitude even if He does not change our circumstances

The people of Israel were not atheists but they were angry. God said in Malachi – your attitude is horrible, I can tell by the way you serve, the way you give, the people you are marrying. Their response – if you would fix our circumstances we could fix our attitude.

Parents – hear from their kids is you want my attitude to change fix my life, be a different parent.

He may or may not change our circumstances but He always expects a better attitude.

If He changes your circumstances before you change your attitude you would get the impression that you can control God, that you are in charge.

What is the thing He has not given you that you feel entitled too? Bigger house, better health, a spouse – then I could praise you because you are not enough for me.

1. **Slide -** When you are ungrateful for the life you have you should consider the life you should have.

Without Jesus who would you be and would your life be better?

1. **Slide -**We are not there yet.

God has so many promise no sin, no death, no sickness – we are not there yet and we are impatient.

Its like taking the kids on holiday in there excitement and impatience they are asking in the back “Are we there yet?” No we are still on the drive, we have not even left the house.

God has a lot of people to pick up on the way to the end, we are effectively saying leave all the other people behind lets just get to the end.

For the Christian on the journey this is as close to hell as you will ever be, and for the non Christian this as close to heaven as you will ever be.

1. **Slide -** Our Father is greater than we feel and we are worse than we fear

The question “How have you loved us?” just the fact that we have a Father that lets us yell at Him, means we are loved.

**Meditation**

Close your eyes. In response to the question you ask “How have you loved us” – His response the Fathers Love Letter.

Say in response “Father You have loved us”, “Father You have loved us”, “Father You have loved us”, “Father You have loved me”

**Concluding Comments**

As we enter this year lets remember how much the Father has loved us as a church, and commit to serve Him wholeheartedly, to give as He gives, to share His love with others, and to become like Him.

**Slide -**

Is the chain cropper of doubt about the Fathers love nibbling away at a link in your faith? Are you going to let circumstances and uncertainty determine whether you love God or not.

Altar Call

Offering