

If someone asked you to describe the character of God what would you say? You may have quite a long list, but somewhere near the top I'm sure you'd have described Him as loving. God is love! Not a revolutionary idea, is it?

But, do we ever doubt that God loves us by how we think and feel? I doubt we'd ever be so bold as to say it out loud, but do we sometimes doubt God's love. Perhaps we think this because we're an irrelevance in our society? If we're noticed at all, it's with a slightly patronising smile of someone thinking 'how quaint'. Has God forgotten us? After all, we're supposed to be his people so how come his church is so pathetic? Does he really love us? And if he does, then why doesn't he make it a bit more obvious?

Or we might think this way when we feel life isn't going as it should. Things are hard, loved ones are ill or have died. Does God really love us at times like that?

Sometimes we all feel a bit like that, and because of that Malachi is the book for us. It was written about 2,500 years ago. It's a message from God delivered to his people, the Israelites, by a bloke called Malachi. Look at verse 1. "A prophecy: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi." A prophecy is a message from God, it means a message of substance and importance, which is hardly surprising considering it is from the Lord. When the word LORD appears in the Bible in capital letters it is the English translation of the word Yahweh. That is God's name, it means Almighty God who is the sovereign creator God who is all powerful and in control of everything. And this message is spoken to His people Israel through a bloke called Malachi. If God is speaking to His people I suggest it's worth paying attention to what he says!

At this stage in their history the Israelites were a poxy little nation, with a temple built out of rubble. They had just returned from exile in Babylon, not because they'd defeated the Babylonians. But because the Babylonians had let some of the Israelites return to the small insignificant dusty outpost of their vast empire. This is Almighty Creator God's people and they looked pathetic.

So because they felt ignored by God, the Israelites were ignoring Him. They went through the motions of being good Jews, they went to the temple. But it was half-hearted; they didn't really care about God because they felt he didn't care about them.

In response to this God spoke to them. The simple message to the Israelites of the book of Malachi is that God still loves them and is faithful to his promises. And because He is faithful, they shouldn't doubt God but trust Him. Malachi 3:7 is the theme verse of the book. "Ever since the

time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty”

That was for them then, but what does an Old Testament prophesy, spoken 2,500 years ago, have to do with us today? Well, we've already said that we all, at times, doubt God's love. Maybe you're thinking like that now. And, because we've all felt that, we need to listen to what God has to say through this book.

It might be that you wouldn't call yourself part of God's people. It may be that you're sceptical about God's involvement in this world. Well I think Malachi has a lot to say to you. Please listen to see how God is active and sovereign and in control. More than that, it also answers a fundamental question for all of us, whether we're a Christian or not; how can we be sure God loves us? That's something we all want to know, isn't it?

So, let's spend the rest of our time have a look at specifically how God shows he's loved us.

1. God loves us – he's chosen us (1-3)

Malachi 1:2 "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' The LORD says he's loved them. The people in some incredulity say "How have you loved us? We're a poxy little nation, living in a poxy little city, with a poxy little temple. How can you say you love us? Look at us!"

I know we're not there yet with our twins but this does make me think of a stroppy teenager who argues with their parents about everything. You say something and straight back comes a counter statement or question or argument. This teenage rebellion is a bit like what is going on here in Malachi. God says something and straight away the Israelites say, "Why, how, rubbish, you don't know what you're talking about." The book of Malachi is divided up by 6 of these teenage strops; known more technically as disputations or arguments. And that's how we're structuring our sermon series over the coming 6 weeks. We're going to look at one argument a week.

Back to the 1st disputation, look at verse 2. The stroppy teenage Israelites ask, "How have you loved us?" And we expect God to answer them with a list of all the wonderful things he's done for them. But not a bit of it. See the end of verse 2. "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob,³ but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." Seems a bit of a weird answer to a

question to justify his love for his people. To focus on such a negative emotion as hate; to talk about wiping out an inheritance.

Remember God's justifying his statement that he loved them. And this account about Jacob and Esau demonstrates exactly that. Now the history for this is recorded in Genesis. Esau and Jacob were twins, Esau was the oldest. But God chose Jacob and his descendents to be his people. Even though Esau was the older brother he was to serve Jacob. God, in his infinite wisdom chose Jacob, not Esau. God is saying that the Israelites, Jacob's descendents are loved by God because he chose them.

But what does it make you think about God who says, in verse 3, "Esau I have hated."? That is strong language. Do we think of God as someone who hates? Yes, he hates sin, injustice those kind of things. But here is God saying he hates an individual, Esau.

God chooses to love one and chooses to hate and judge the other. And if you know anything about Jacob you'll know that he certainly wasn't chosen because he was a good man. He was a dodgy wheeler dealer. Esau wasn't a good bloke either. He rejected God. He wasn't innocent. Neither were good men, but, in God's sovereignty, he chose Jacob..

We've got a clear difference here. Love versus hate. Chosen versus not chosen. This is not about equality; these twin brothers are not treated in the same way by God. And this is not about justice; if both were treated with justice neither would have been chosen, they both would have been condemned as sinners who reject God's rule. This isn't about equality or justice, this is about grace and mercy. Jacob was chosen through God's loving gift of grace.

And that's exactly the point that God is making. He shows he's loved the Israelites because he chose them. They are descendents of Jacob; they are descendents of his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They are chosen by God and this proves that he loves them. God first made promises to Abraham 1,500 years before Malachi was written and God is showing that he has remained faithful to his promises made then. How has God loved them? Because he's chosen them!

My twins have these matching toys. They're the same, now I can choose which one to play with. There is nothing in them that makes one better than the other. I just chose whichever I want. In the same way, there is nothing special about us that means God would want to choose us over someone else. It's entirely God's choice.

How do we know God loves us? Well if we call on Jesus as Lord, if we're a Christian, that's because God has chosen us. Of course, we're not chosen because we're special, or have done anything to deserve it. The only reason we're chosen is because God decided we were going to be part of his people. We can't earn our way into God's people. We can't be born into God's people. We do nothing to be part of God's people. He does everything. And being chosen by God is the most incredible, wonderful, amazing privilege. To be chosen by God is to be loved by God. The point Malachi is making is don't doubt God's love. Don't doubt that God is in control. Don't think that God isn't involved in our lives.

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The truth is that God loves us because he's chosen us. What an amazing reassurance. If Jesus is your Lord and Saviour then you are chosen by God. You are part of his people. God has chosen you and that is the most wonderful example of the fact that God loves us.

Don't doubt God's love. God loves us – he's chosen us.

2. God loves us – he's defeated our enemies (4-5)

Malachi 1:4 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.⁵ You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD-- even beyond the borders of Israel!'"

Edom was crushed. The descendants of Esau were defeated. They'd been God's, and His people's, enemies for centuries. A 1,000 year before, in Moses day, during the Exodus, they'd opposed them. In the 100 years before Malachi was written they'd helped the Babylonians attack them. They'd done everything possible to oppose them. And God had defeated them. Indeed, this prophecy about their final judgement, was about to be fulfilled. If you wanted to go on holiday and visit the Edomites you can't, they no longer exist.

The contrast between the nations is massive. Edom may say they will rebuild their ruins. But God will not allow that. Well that's exactly the opposite of what was happening right then for the Israelites. They'd just returned from exile to a ruined, crushed land. And now they were rebuilding their city and their temple. They were still a nation, they were still in Jerusalem, they still had a

temple. God was still their God. God was still present with them. God still loved them. God proved he loved them by defeating their enemies.

Remember Israel had repeatedly rejected God. They deserved what happened to Edom to happen to them. But God chose them; he treated them with grace and mercy.

Now, of course, this doesn't directly apply to us today. As God's New Testament people, we're not a physical, geographically bound, racial entity. We're God's people and come from all kinds of people groups; from all kinds of backgrounds. We don't have physical enemies in the same way the Israelites did. But God has proved he loves us by defeating our enemies.

So, how has God proved he loved us by defeating our enemies? Well of course the answer is the cross on which Jesus died for us. The cross is the event in history where God most clearly demonstrated his love for us, his chosen people. And he displayed his love by defeating our enemies. But who are our enemies? The Bible tells us our enemies are sin, the world and the devil.

Our sin was dealt with by Jesus taking our place. Jesus took our punishment by dying in our place. Our sin is defeated by the cross. So, that's one enemy destroyed. What about the world? The power of the world to tempt us away from God is defeated by the cross. Because of Jesus' death on the cross we are free from the power of this world and we now live as citizens of his kingdom. So, that's 2 of our enemies defeated, what about the devil? Well the devil thought the cross was the moment of his greatest triumph, but he found that it was the moment of his utter defeat. He was crushed by Jesus death on the cross. His power over us was done away with.

I love documentaries and books about the World Wars. I'm reading this one at the moment. I'm fascinated by the sacrifice of so many so we can be free. Rightly, we look back to the defeat of our enemies in the world wars and delight in the freedom that was secured for us. On a much bigger scale we can look back to the cross to see the freedom that God won for us in defeating our enemies.

1 John 4:9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

Colossians 2:15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Do you feel that we are small and insignificant church struggling to do anything against a prevailing culture that ridicules faith in Christ? Do you feel that God doesn't really love us anymore, if he ever did? Do you feel that God's no longer really that concerned for his people?

Don't. Please don't. The cross is true. The greatest demonstration that God loves us is as valid today as it was 2,000 years ago, when Jesus died. God told the Israelites to look back 1,500 years to the promises he made to Abraham. He told them even though 1 ½ millennia have passed, they are still valid. And he'd tell us the same thing. Look back 2,000 years. Look back to Jesus. Look back to the cross. That's still true. That's still the place God most spectacularly demonstrated his love for us. The cross is where God defeated our enemies.

But, don't just look back. Like God told the Israelites to look forward, he's also told us to do the same. Look at the promises God has given us about our future. Don't doubt God's love, remember what He's promised us. Revelation 21:3-4 "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

When we doubt that God loves us look at the cross. Look at what Jesus achieved for us by dying in our place. Celebrate the fact that you are chosen by God and that he has defeated our enemies. And, more than that, rejoice that your future is secure.

Don't be half-hearted and doubt God's love for you. He passionately loves you. So, respond in kind. Passionately, whole heartedly, follow him.

Let's pray!