

Loved by Grace

1:1 The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

2 "I have loved you," says the LORD. "Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?'

Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" Says the LORD. "Yet Jacob I have loved; 3 But Esau I have hated, And laid waste his mountains and his heritage For the jackals of the wilderness." 4 Even though Edom has said, "We have been impoverished, But we will return and build the desolate places," Thus says the LORD of hosts: "They may build, but I will throw down; They shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, And the people against whom the LORD will have indignation forever.

5 Your eyes shall see, And you shall say, 'The LORD is magnified beyond the border of Israel.'

Have you ever come across a child who said to his or her parents in a fit of rage, "You don't love me!" And as every parent knows, the problem at that moment is not that the parents have failed to love properly, but that the child has failed to perceive or think properly. In those moments, something else has filled the child's mind, and some kind of self-centredness has taken over, to where she blurts out, "You don't love me!"

What if people say that to God? In fact, people say that all the time. They say that when they complain about the pain in their lives, or the evil in the world, or the apparent lack of justice. If God loves you, how would you know? What would count as evidence that God loves you?

That's important, because just as that self-centred child claims the problem is his parents' lack of love, when it is actually his lack of love, his lack of humility, so people today can have a similar problem. For many people, *God loves me* means "God finds me lovable and so He makes much of me." For many people, *God loves me* means, "I am so valuable to God that He lets me be who I am without judging me in any way. For many people *God loves me* means, "God loves the way I am directing my own life and would never bind me in any way." If you think this is what it means for God to love you, you will feel much like that child, for God does not love us in these ways.

Just like a self-centred child will change his mind about his parents' love when they displease him, so a self-centred humanity does the same thing about God's love.

God's people should know better. But very often, they allow worldliness and spiritual indifference to take over their hearts to where they can no longer see the wonder of God's love. And when you keep going down that road of thinking God does not love you, the result will be spiritual apathy and indifference. That had happened to the Jews in Malachi's day.

About 430 years before Christ, they were back in the land after an exile in Babylon. The Temple and the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt, but the Jews had become spiritually indifferent and apathetic. Malachi is the prophet who receives the burden of God's Word against them, and it begins with a dispute about God's love.

2400 years later, this discussion is for us. We who struggle with spiritual apathy need not to have our egos stroked by a self-centred version of God's love, but to be awed and humbled by a God-centred version of His love. Since God is dealing with an apathetic people, He doesn't stroke or feed their self-centredness. Instead, He is going to focus on the aspect of His love that humbles us, that leaves us in awe – that God loves us graciously, freely, sovereignly.

So we need to hear from God what that looks like, what to expect, how to think of it. As happens in this book, we see a kind of debate that keeps happening in three phases. God makes a charge, Israel disputes it, and God backs up His original charge or assertion.

I. God Declares His Love

2 "I have loved you," says the LORD.

What a glorious way to open a book! No other book of the Bible opens with such a declaration. God says in clear terms, "I love you." In fact, the words are in the perfect tense, meaning I have loved you, and continue to do so to this day.

For a people who are feeling cold and icy towards God, this is a blowtorch to their indifference. If God says to you, "I love you" you simply cannot remain unmoved. You have to say something. But for the Israelites, their response is like that of a spouse long since embittered against her mate. She doesn't want the card and the roses. She's embarrassed by God's open statement of love.

But God has never been shy to declare His love for His people. His love is lavish, extravagant, and public.

II. Israel Denies His Love

"Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?'

Israel asks in reply, "How have you loved us?" Which is as much as saying, "No, You do not. If You do love us, where is the evidence? We cannot tell that you love us."

What a harsh and painful thing for Israel to say to Yahweh. After a marriage of over 1000 years, to say, "You don't love me." God married Israel in a ceremony at Mount Sinai when Israel accepted the Mosaic covenant, and God pledged Himself to them, and that was in around 1450 B.C. Here they are in around 430 B.C., and for 1000 years, God has been a loyal spouse. He took them out of Egypt, led them through the wilderness, spared them even through their 40 year discipline, took them into the land, subdued their enemies, gave them the land. When they were unfaithful, He chastised them, but sent them deliverers – the judges, and then the kings. After hundreds of years of unfaithfulness, He chastises them by sending them to Babylon. But He brings them back into the land, gives them a new Temple, restores the city, restores the worship. But they still say, how have you loved me?

Can there be anything more wounding to a faithful spouse than to hear your spouse say, "Do you really love me?" Can anything hurt a parent more than to hear a child say, "You don't love me"? The same is true for friends, for pastors, for spiritual mentors. When you invest time and your own goods, and your very soul into someone, and he turns around and says, "You never really loved me!" - it is a deep wound.

But Israel said that to the Lord. Forgetting all He had been to them, all He done for them, they looked around at their situation and concluded what the selfish teenager, or the self-centred spouse concludes, "You don't love Me!" Perhaps it was as they looked at their Persian rulers, and thought, "Where is the promise of being a kingdom?" Maybe it was as they looked at their diminished financial situation, their smaller nation, less grand second Temple, generally struggling circumstances. Perhaps it was even when they turned their theology upside down, and instead of seeing their own sin as the reason for their captivity in Babylon, they began blaming God, and sulking that He had taken them through that, and had not prevented it. However it was, Israel had reached a place of feeling completely indifferent and even sceptical of God's love.

New Testament believers can be guilty of this. Believers can get to this point, far removed from the fresh morning of their first love, and now they begin to wonder, “Does God actually love me? Where do I even see that?”

At what points are we most likely to doubt or deny God's love? I can think of four times.

First, in times of spiritual backsliding and growing worldliness. John tells us “Love not the world, neither the things in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in Him.” Loving what God hates begins to cause a kind of city-glow that blinds us to God's love. In a city like ours, the amount of light emitted by the city actually blocks our sight of the stars. The light of those stars is still reaching us, but the city glow drowns that light out. So as worldliness and selfish loves begin to saturate our soul, the glare begins to blind us to what is still there: God's love for us.

Second, in times of ongoing suffering and trial. When some pain, or loss, or problem, or difficulty, or unanswered prayer seems to persist, we wonder if this God who is in control still loves us. Why does He not remove the thorn, we say? Why does He not come quickly and answer our longing? It is not always the *intensity* of the trial that begins to erode our hope in God's love, but the *duration* of the trial. Job said the right things about the Lord at the beginning, but as the trial dragged on, he began to say that God was targeting him, and hounding him, and wounding him without cause.

*Though He causes grief, Yet He will show compassion According to the multitude of His mercies.
33 For He does not afflict willingly, Nor grieve the children of men. (Lam 3:32-33)*

For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. (Hos 6:1)

Third, when we see the prosperity and ease of the wicked. As we look over the fence, as we look across to the car next to us, as we see the people who deny Christ, and scorn faith, and mock God prospering, succeeding, blossoming, we wonder if we have been deceived. We ask the questions that Asaph asked in Psalm 73, why do the wicked prosper? What kind of love gives me such hard struggle, and gives them such ease?

Spurgeon tells of a woman “who was wonderfully kind to her very unkind and wicked husband. She was so obedient, gentle, affectionate and patient that he even boasted about what a good wife he had. And in company, one night, long past the hour of midnight, he said that if he took his drunken companions home with him, late as it was, she would receive them like a lady and prepare a supper for them—and never show by word or sign that it was hard upon her, or that they were not welcome. And it came true! When he took them home, she got together such things as she had and made a decent feast for them. And one of them addressed her, afterwards, and said that they had come there as the result of a wager—and they could not understand how she could have patience with such a man as her husband was, for they themselves felt ashamed of the way he had acted towards her. When they pressed her for her answer, she said, with tears “I am afraid that my husband's only happiness will be in this life. I have prayed for him and sought in vain to bring him to a better mind, but my fear is that when this life is over, there will be no more happiness for him, so I mean to make him as happy as he can be in his present condition.”

It would be good for us to remember this, and then say no more about it. For many of the wicked, God can say both in justice and in mercy, “Verily they have their reward.”

Fourth, in times of deep doubt and struggles with assurance. Everyone, at some point, battles doubt. Everyone battles, at some point, assurance of salvation. People who trusted Christ early in life, struggle. People who wrestle with a besetting sin struggle. People experiencing dryness in devotions struggle. People encountering fresh assaults on the Bible, on Christianity, on the genuineness of

their Christian experience, struggle. And as these doubts fly, we cast a shadow on God's love. Does He really love me?

And if we allow the same hardness that came upon Israel to enter our souls, it goes from doubt to denial. How does He love us? Where does it even show up in my life?

To that charge, God responds with evidence.

III. God Demonstrates His Love

Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" Says the LORD. "Yet Jacob I have loved; 3 But Esau I have hated,

God proves His love in a strange way. He uses twins to compare, and make a point. He draws a comparison. And the comparison is meant to overwhelm Israel with a thought that strikes both terror and deep comfort into the believing heart.

God brings up as evidence two boys, Esau and Jacob. Esau and Jacob were twin brothers. Esau was born first, and Jacob second. Going by what makes sense to the human mind, God should either have loved them equally, since they were twin brothers. Or, going by cultural tradition, God should have shown more favour to Esau because he was the firstborn. Jacob should have gotten less blessings. But instead, God chose to favour Jacob. Before they were born, before either had developed into a good man or an evil man, before you could begin scoring them, deciding who deserved God's love, Rebekah was told by God in Genesis 25:23 *"Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."*

In fact, God kept doing this. He chooses to use the younger Isaac, and not the older Ishmael. He chooses the younger Jacob, not the older Esau. He chooses the younger Joseph, not the older Reuben. And when Joseph brings his sons to Jacob to bless, He expects Jacob to bless Manasseh the older, but Jacob switches hands, and blesses Ephraim the younger. What is God doing? He is saying, My grace is not earned by birthright. You cannot demand that I bless you because of a human tradition. God says this again to the Jews in John the Baptist's day, "Don't say, we're children of Abraham, so we must be righteous. God can make children of Abraham from stones!"

God, in grace, chose to use and bless Jacob, and make him the father of the twelve tribes. Was it because Jacob was so good? No, read Genesis and you will see that Jacob is a scheming, conniving, manipulative scoundrel. But God set His love upon that scoundrel, blessed him, protected him, and the Jews in Malachi's day were alive because of God's love to Jacob.

Out of all the ways God could have proven His love, He is going to focus on one aspect of His love: the sovereign graciousness of His love, that His love is unearned, unbought, unmerited. Not those aspects which our self-centredness might misinterpret and say, "Yes, He loves me, because I am so good and so He treats me well". No, God is emphasising that aspect which attacks our self-centredness and makes God's love rooted in God.

What did Jacob deserve? What had Jacob earned? Well, you tell me. A man who steals and lies from his own family, tries to bargain and manipulate God Himself, who lives always by his wits, by scheming, by trying to outdo and outplay Laban his uncle, who is willing to split up his family and sacrifice some of them when Esau comes back to meet him, who even in late life play favourites with his sons. What does he deserve?

And what does the nation deserve that murmured all the way from Egypt to Canaan, that rebelled against godly leaders, that turned again and again to foreign gods, that broke their wedding vows to Jehovah, that ignored and persecuted the prophets? What do they deserve?

What have they received instead? They've been preserved, protected, brought back into our land. Israel is meant to say, if God did not love us in this way, we would look just like that. Had God not been gracious to Jacob, he would have gone the way of Esau. Had God not loved Israel, it would have ended up as Edom has. And their own sin was enough to remind them that God had not loved them because of their works.

"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; 8 "but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deu 7:7-8)

Did Jacob have to believe? Yes. Did Israel have to exercise their free choice? Yes. But the emphasis here is: Israel, God has loved you though you did not deserve it. That's one side of the coin.

On the other hand, what about Esau? God uses these chilling words, "Esau I have hated." Now, what does this mean? Did God despise Esau? Did God decide before Esau was born that He was going to curse him?

No. God refused Esau as the one who would carry the promise. God did not choose scoundrel Esau. And mysteriously, while God's choosing is active, God's refusing is passive. God did not make Esau into an evil man.

God allowed Esau's own evil to be his undoing. Remember how Esau came in from hunting and was hungry, and he smelled the delicious food that Jacob was cooking and asked for it. Jacob said, "Give me your birthright in exchange for this food." And Esau, sacrificing his future for the sake of his belly, agrees. Scripture calls him a profane man for doing so. And when the time came for Isaac to die, Isaac and Esau seek to overcome Esau's sinful act, but Rebekah and Jacob sinfully trick Isaac, and get the promised birthright anyway. Esau also chooses to marry idolaters and pagans, despising the covenant God had made with Abraham. This all stinks of sin, lies, deceit. But these human acts, the free choices of these people are bringing to pass God's sovereign statement: the elder will serve the younger. Esau I have rejected.

God chooses Jacob, but God does not curse Esau. God simply leaves Esau to act out his own sin. God lets Esau wreck his own life. God permits Esau to reap his own harvest.

That choice extends to the whole nation. God describes what has happened to the descendants of Esau – the nation of Edom. And laid waste his mountains and his heritage For the jackals of the wilderness." 4 *Even though Edom has said, "We have been impoverished, But we will return and build the desolate places," Thus says the LORD of hosts: "They may build, but I will throw down; They shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, And the people against whom the LORD will have indignation forever. 5 Your eyes shall see, And you shall say, 'The LORD is magnified beyond the border of Israel.'*

God says, just look across the border, and see how Esau's children, the Edomites are, doing. His nation is ruined, and devastated. And even though, they said, "We'll bounce back" God says, I will stop you. I will keep you from ever regaining your position. History tells us that's exactly what happened. The Edomites were increasingly squeezed out of their land by the Nabatean Arabs, until they were absorbed completely.

Now once again, was God being unfair to the Edomites? Did He choose to hate them in eternity past? No, the Edomites acted out their sin. When Israel was marching to the Promised Land, Edom refused to let them pass through their land. Edom joined forces with Babylon in attacking Israel. When Jerusalem was overthrown, Edom rejoiced. They had been murderous and destructive towards Israel for centuries. God had warned them by the mouths of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah, whose whole book is against them. So what do the Edomites deserve? Judgement.

God says to Israel, look over at Esau, your twin brother. He is not being restored to his land, like you have been to yours. He is trying to rebuild, but not succeeding. He is going to be wiped out. He is going to be wiped out for his own wickedness. He is getting nothing less, and nothing more than what he deserves.

And do you know, that no sinner in Hell could ever say to God, I am being treated unfairly. I don't deserve this. Every lost sinner will know that his destruction is at his own hand, the blame is to be laid on himself and not on God. God is the Judge who passes sentence, but the sinner has chosen the path of evil that ends up in Hell.

Did God select Esau for destruction? Did God make sure that Edom would be evil? No. God is not the author of sin. Nor does God create people and ordain that they be destroyed. Spurgeon said, "Do you believe that God...arbitrarily, sovereignly created that man, with no other intention, than that of damning him? Made him, and yet, for no other reason than that of destroying him for ever? Well, if you can believe it, I pity you, that is all I can say: you deserve pity, that you should think so meanly of God, whose mercy endureth for ever."

"I delight to preach this blessed truth—salvation of God, from first to last—the Alpha and the Omega; but when I come to preach damnation, I say, damnation of man, not of God; and if you perish, at your own hands must your blood be required."

But here is the great contrast. Remember these were twins. Twins are perfect subjects for experiments that determine how very similar people end up. Jacob – a scoundrel, Esau – a scoundrel. Israel a rebellious nation, Edom, a rebellious nation.

Israel was supposed to say, we are just like our brothers, but look at what God's unearned, undeserved love has done for us. We have a different past, a different present, and different future because God loves us.

You see, in many ways, the most mysterious, the most humbling, the most awe-inspiring thing about God's love is not all that it does for us, not all that it saves us from, but how undeserved it is. God did not love us because we were lovely. God did not love us because we were loving to Him. God loved us when we were unlovely and unloving.

If the problem is apathy, what drives out apathy is awe. And the truly awesome thing about God's love is that He loves us at all.

Now in this matter of God's grace showing selectivity, we worry about fairness, and that's understandable on the surface. But when you think about it, in some relationships, we not only accept selectivity, we expect it. Imagine a man on a date, whose date asks him why his eyes seem to wander to all other women, who replies that it would be unfair if he chose only one woman. Or

picture a woman who turns down a man proposing, saying, "It would just be so unfair for you to select only me, and in so doing reject all the other single women in the world." No, in relationships of love, relationships of covenant, we expect selection.

We do not like selectivity when we believe someone is being unfairly excluded. But that's just the thing. Were the Edomites feeling unfairly excluded? Did they want Yahweh as their covenant God? No, they didn't, and neither does the unbeliever today. And if you'll recall, neither did you, until God's grace reached you.

Saved by gracious love, lost by man's own rejection. Saved by unearned love, lost by earned guilt. Saved by unmerited kindness, lost by chosen rebellion. Saved by God's kindness, lost by man's hatred.

Spurgeon: "He saves man by grace, and if men perish they perish justly by their own fault. "How," says some one, "do you reconcile these two doctrines?" My dear brethren, I never reconcile two friends, never. These two doctrines are friends with one another; for they are both in God's Word, and I shall not attempt to reconcile them. If you show me that they are enemies, then I will reconcile them. "But," says one, "there is a great deal of difficulty about them." Will you tell me what truth there is that has not difficulty about it? "But," he says, "I do not see it." Well, I do not ask you to see it; I ask you to believe it. There are many things in God's Word that are difficult, and that I cannot see, but they are there, and I believe them."

For the New Testament Christian who is doubting God's love, the same kind of thinking should take place. Look over at your unbelieving colleagues, your unbelieving friends, or more to the point, your unbelieving parents, brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts, cousins. People just like you, very much like you. But look at where their lives have gone. Regardless of how well they have done financially, look at their emotional lives. Look at the state of their families, the state of their relationships. Look at the devastation that sin has brought. Look at the meaninglessness of their paltry joys, the emptiness of their pursuits, the hollowness of what they are living for. Look at the despair in their eyes, the noise they use to drown it out. Look at the defilement and the moral pollution, and some of the irreversible consequences of their sin. Consider their future, beyond this life, in eternity.

And then ask yourself, why is that not you? Where would you be today had God not graciously, lovingly drawn you? Why is that not you? Would you for one moment say that the difference between you and your unsaved relatives is that you have made better spiritual choices, or would you say, "there but for the grace of God go I."

Imagine for a moment your identical twin. Your twin does not believe in Christ. As you look into your twin's eyes, it is as if you are seeing yourself, had God's gracious love not got a hold of your heart. And in your twin's eyes you see the past, present and future, but without grace. Your twin's past is a burden that never goes away. No forgiveness, and no cleansing blood of Christ to wash away defilement. Guilt, regret, pain are in the eyes, and lines the forehead.

The present may have lots of toys and trinkets and fun things, but it is without real joy or meaning, no power over sin, no hope for change in character, no overarching love to live for, no genuine truth, goodness and beauty. It is just a march through a materialist desert, hoping to have enough fun before it all ends.

The future is without hope. No promise of being led, empowered and guided to your end of days, no promise of grace even through death, no hope of being welcomed by God, no hope of the infinite beauties and pleasures of God's Presence, Heaven itself.

You know your twin is that way because he or she has rejected Christ. But then as you look at your own life, and you see the past, present, and future soaked in God's gracious love, you say, "Behold how He loves me! Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on me. Behold how God, being rich in mercy for His great love with which He loved me, gave me life when I was dead. I now love Him because He first loved me.

Only selfish, self-centred children accuse their loving parents of not loving them. And only self-centred believers drift into saying the same of God. What demolishes that self-centredness is when you realise what you deserve, and how God has loved you. It's the awe that rises up when we meditate as Wesley did:

Died He for me, who caused His pain?

For me, who Him, to death pursued?

Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God should'st die for me?