

Congregation, when a minister tells his congregation that God loves them in Jesus Christ, do you ever wonder about the truth of that statement? There are so many things happening that could make us question God's love. For instance, nothing exciting seems to be happening in our lives or in the church. The times of miracles are gone. The canon is closed and hence no more direct verbal revelation from God. In western countries, the numbers attending regular worship services continues to decrease. Some of our covenant children are leaving the church and sadly, some have even left the faith altogether.

On the world scene, Christians continue to be persecuted for their faith in God. Other religions which deny Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah seem to grow faster than our own. The moral decay of humanity shows that we seem to be fighting a losing battle. The movement for same-sex marriages seems to making in-roads everywhere and we also have to vote on a plebiscite concerning it. And last but not least, it's been two thousand years since Christ's first coming. Generations have come and died without seeing him. Where is he?

In fact, does it really matter whether we serve him or not? In some ways the world seems to be going fine without him? And even though we do all the Christian things, reading God's word, praying, going to worship, we are afflicted with the much the same troubles and struggles. We experience unemployment, we have similar diseases, even terminal ones and in the end death still gets us! So where is the evidence that God particularly loves us? Congregation, these questions are not necessarily irrelevant.

The trouble with these 'waiting' periods in history, is that we too can so easily become complacent, and just go through the motions. We sit back and we make all the right noises; do all the churchy things; we even celebrate the sacraments. However, is what we are and do and strive to be, driven out of a deep love for God and for what He has done for us in Christ or is it little more than an insurance policy?

Does God's love compel us, or are we starting to question God's love for us? This was the problem with the people in Malachi's day. They no longer appreciated God's love. They thought that God wasn't involved in life anymore. Oh, yes the temple had been rebuilt, although not without its difficulties, but nothing momentous had occurred to indicate that God's presence had returned to fill it with glory as Ezekiel had said would happen (Eze 43:4).

The days of the miracles had passed. The glory days David and Solomon were long gone. They were still under Persian rule (1:8). The great days when of Elijah and Elisha performed their miracles had disappeared. And although the round of religious duties was still being done, most were done without conviction or enthusiasm. They were still suffering from pests and plagues (2:17; 3:11-12). Generations had been born and died and still no promised Messiah? Where was God? Did it really matter whether one served him or not?

The nation of Israel no longer responded to the fact that they were the privileged people because of God's love. This is the burden that is being addressed by the prophet Malachi in this book. After the introductory verse, The Prophet Malachi reminds Israel of God's great love. Look what God says with a tender and sensitive word to the people, "I have loved you," says the Lord (1:2).

But the people with their calloused hearts and blinded minds couldn't see that anymore. They had become so indifferent and unresponsive to God's love. So much so that in perfect sincerity their reply to the Lord's love was, "How have you loved us? We do not see any evidence of love on your part." The attitude of the people depicted in Malachi is a mirror of our own present secular world. Today, people measure God's love by their own standards today. If things go well and life is good, people are OK to have a God who loves them. However, when things go pear shape they immediately question God's love or even whether there is a God at all?

But this is even more indicting for Malachi is addressing the OT church, the covenant people of God. It's not that these OT people are in open rebellion to God, or are they suggesting that he hasn't got the right to ask offerings of them. These OT people wouldn't for a moment consider themselves as irreligious. In fact, they probably think that God should be approving them. They are doing all the churchy things, but God's love hasn't been evident and hence the question, "How have you loved us?"

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And God answers their question by reminding them that He has loved them from the very beginning. He demonstrates this by first focussing on his choice of Jacob, and secondly, by not choosing Esau. And the answer God gives is based on unquestionable historical events and facts. Let's have a look at these two demonstrations of God's love for his people.

1) First, by choosing Jacob. (1:2). "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" says the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob..." (1:2). The Hebrew word for "loved" has an emphasis on election, although emotion is involved. It is to remind the self-righteous, critical citizens of Jerusalem of the unmerited and therefore electing love of God! They had the audacity to demand God show them that he loved them, utterly disregarding their unique status as His elect people.

By human standards, Esau had more right of entering into the blessing of the covenant made with Abraham than Jacob ever did. Esau was the elder brother, yet God loved and chose Jacob. Jacob wasn't just pulled out of the hat. It wasn't a lucky dip. God's love wasn't blind, rather it was carefully demonstrated. God had given careful thought about his choice of Jacob. God's decision to love Jacob was not based on some warm, fuzzy feeling. Even though there were many other nations more powerful than Israel, God chose Abraham and Isaac and then Jacob to be the father of the Israelite nation.

Scripture says God delighted to love Jacob, along with the other forefathers of Israel (Deut 10:15). Jacob certainly wouldn't have done anything to have deserve it. Matter of fact the choice took place in the womb. When Rebecca inquired of the Lord why the babies jostled in the womb, God replied, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger." (ESV Gen 25:23)

If we had known these two men, we probably would have loved Esau and hated Jacob. Jacob was the schemer, the operator, the manipulator, the untrustworthy rascal. We all know the way he deceived his old blind father Isaac for the blessing. Esau on the other hand, was the outdoor man, hearty, open, frank and strong. Yet, God chose to love Jacob, Israel. They had done nothing to deserve this wonderful privilege. And look how they respond to this wonderful love. What utter contempt! "How have you loved us God?"

And God answers their question in the second place, by highlighting that they were chosen rather than Esau. We should not see this as God saying, "I HATE Esau." Rather, God didn't choose him. Matter of fact Esau and his descendants bring God's judgement upon themselves. Esau's and his descendants are examples of those who despise God's grace. That's what Esau did. He despised his birth-right and was willing to sell it for a bowl of soup.

Scripture records for us that the Edomites did not experience God's blessing. They trembled at the news when they heard how God was leading his people during the Exodus (Exo 15:14). David defeated them and took their silver and gold (2 Sam 8:12ff). Esau's descendants who settled in Edom were elated when Judah fell to the Babylonians (Eze 25:12; Obadiah 10-16; Psa 137:7), but Ezekiel speaks of God laying his hand against Edom.

They are a people under the wrath of God. Every time Edom tries to rebuild, God demolishes. The territory and descendants of Edom emerged as a wicked country. God's continued demolition of Edom's empire demonstrates God's love for Israel and that is what Israel needed to appreciate. Israel's enemies will not overcome them for God loves them! In fact, Edom's downfall resulted in God's glorification (vs 5) because it was a testimony to what happens to those who despise and reject God.

God uses this power over Israel's enemies to display his love to his own covenant people. God has loved Israel no more clearly demonstrated by their own restoration from exile, whereas Edom's restoration only ends in destruction. This was God's answer to Israel's contemptible and arrogant question! And God challenges them. Have a look around says God. You are no longer in exile. You are back in your own land, the land that was promised to them when God chose Abraham.

When the returned exiles would contemplate what God has done for them and how he chose them above the Edomites, it would solicit praise. Great is the LORD. Exalted above the territory of Israel. In so many ways, Israel is our object lesson. If God's choice of Israel and his continual love and protection, brings praise to His name, then his choice of us and our wonderful salvation gives us more reason for praise.

God's choice of us and his immeasurable love for us is not related to our behaviour, because we are not that good! God's choice is simply based on His love! We are a specially chosen people, for God has loved us in Jesus Christ even before the foundations were put in place! It's when we don't recognise that anymore, and think we do deserve it, (which is arrogance) that it results in a lack of worship and questioning of God's love. That's when our sacrifices become second rate, our giving decreases, and human relationships degenerate. It's then we start comparing God's love to our our

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material status in life like the ungodly people around us. It's then we start thinking we have wasted our lives being "devoted" to God. In some ways the church of today has a similar problem to the church in Malachi's day. So many in the church today are questioning whether God is real or whether He loves them. They don't see any miraculous signs and wonders. They don't see any miraculous healings, and the hope of his second coming is all but gone.

And when that thinking is allowed to go on for too long, people start to think that God isn't all that relevant anymore. Sure, people say they love God, but even the devil does and shudders. And yes, they still do the churchy things but God's deep love for them, especially in Jesus Christ doesn't compel them anymore.

It maybe worthwhile to ask ourselves whether it is God's love to us in Jesus Christ that compels us or are we just going through the hops to please others? When it's Bible study nights, or Youth Club or Catechism nights, is our attendance and desire to be under God's word driven by a deep love for him? When we start some outreach program, is that driven by a deep love for God? Indeed, when we come to worship, is that driven by a deep love for God?

God says to us today, "I have loved you." Did I hear you ask, "how did God love us?" Let me remind you just in case you are prone to forget. While we were still his enemies, God sent his Son. While we hated God, He chose us, He loved us. While we rejected him, God sent his Son to be the perfect sacrifice for our sin.

And you ask, how has God loved us? God raised Jesus from the dead, for He was sinless, and because He lives, we believing, are forgiven of our sin and now have his righteousness! And you ask, how has God loved us? He hasn't left us on our own to fend for ourselves. He sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in us. Jesus along with the Holy Spirit intercedes for us before the Judge (Rom 8:26 & 34), and He promises to be with us to the close of the age (Mat 28:20).

And there is still more. His love is still not finished. God wants you and me to share in his glory. You and me - ah what a privilege, what an honour. Yes, Great is the Lord, and Great is his love, even beyond the borders of Geelong. And yes his love should be for all to see. So if someone asks you, how has God loved you, what are you going to say? Can you answer that? I pray you can in word and deed. Amen