

God Loves You

David H. Roper

They tell me that when Dwight L. Moody began a series of addresses on the Cambridge University campus he began by saying, "Men, don't think that God don't love you, 'cause He do." Moody, as you know, did not receive much more than an eighth-grade education, and yet God used that man mightily among university students. It was that statement at Cambridge, coupled with his message of the love of God, that began a great revival that swept through the university world in England. The love of God is the message that we want to talk about during the next few weeks. We want you to know that God loves you. He cares about you in a very personal and real way. We are going to learn about God's love from the book of Malachi, in the Old Testament. Strange, is it not, that the love of God should be presented just as clearly in the Old Testament in books like Hosea and Malachi as it is in the New Testament?

The book of Malachi can be found in the clean portion of your Bible. It is the last book in the Old Testament. If you can find Matthew, turn left. It is appropriately placed because it probably was written last of all the books in the Old Testament. It was written sometime around 450 B.C., a very interesting and significant time in the Mediterranean world. This was the golden age of Greece, the age of Pericles. This was when men like Aristotle and Socrates and Plato lived, and historians, poets, and writers like Thucydides. This was a time when the Greeks celebrated some of their great victories over the Persian armies, when Leonidas and his 300 Spartans held off the entire army of Xerxes for a period of time. These were golden days in the history of Greece.

Yet if you had lived at this time and had been looking at the nation of Israel from the Jew's point of view, this was anything but a golden era. They were terribly discouraged, bordering on despair. They had returned from exile some sixty to seventy years before. They had been in exile first under the Babylonian empire, and then under the Persian empire for seventy years. Now they had returned and had begun to rebuild, but their efforts were not too rewarding. In fact, they were downright discouraging. They were able to rebuild the wall, but they did not have enough men of military age to protect them against any sort of siege. There were probably less than 100,000 Jews in all of Palestine. They were living in huts, ill-protected from the rains. Their farms were not producing well, they had undergone several periods of drought, they were in economic trouble. They had rebuilt the temple, but it was certainly nothing like Solomon's temple. The Chaldeans had burned Solomon's temple, and all that was left was a burned-out shell. The Jews had been able to replace some of the interior, but they could not put back the gold and silver. Someone has estimated that between ten and twenty million dollars' worth of gold was used in building Solomon's temple. Of course the Jews did not have that sort of money; they were poverty-stricken. And they did not have a king, but an appointee from the Persian government who was their governor. They had very little freedom, and certainly no national pride. They were terribly depressed and discouraged, and if you had talked to them of the love of God, I am sure they would have said that God had forgotten them. God may love the Greeks. All they had to do was look at the morning newspapers--they were all quoting the Greek leaders. But nobody was quoting the prophets and poets of Israel. We are forgotten. God does not care. He has cast us aside in a kind of historical backwater, and history has gone off without us.

Jews had lost the sense of God's love for them as a people and, correspondingly, they had lost their love for one another. This always happens. Whenever we lose that sense of the love of God, life grows cold, we do not love each other, we do not love ourselves, we do not love anything. As John says in his little epistle, "We love because he first loved us." Every ounce of love we have comes as a result of his love for us. And when we do not sense that love, our own love atrophies.

This atrophy was spreading all over the land of Israel. The Jews were feeling it in their religious system, as their attitude toward worship became more and more desultory. They did not care, did not want to give wholeheartedly;

the Jews did not love God because God did not love them. Their homes were feeling it. Husbands and wives could not express their love for each other and did not feel love for each other. Men were leaving the wives of their youth and, as Malachi will tell us later, were marrying their Canaanite secretaries, abandoning their homes. Open hostility was breaking out between sons and fathers. This alienation of the family carried over into every realm of society. A strange sort of relativism broke out, which Malachi described as calling good evil, and evil good. There was injustice in the courts, and oppression of minority groups, and the nation was cold and destitute of love because the Jews felt that God no longer loved them. So God raised up this prophet to tell them again of the love of God.

We want to look this morning at the first five verses, the introductory message that Malachi was to deliver

The oracle [or burden] of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.

"I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How hast Thou loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation, and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness." Though Edom says, "We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins"; thus says the Lord of hosts, "They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever." And your eyes will see this and you will say, "The Lord be magnified [will be great] beyond [or above] the border [territory of Israel]."

He is contrasting the territory of Israel with the territory of Edom. The Edomites' territory will be a wicked land. I think the symbol is the same that we use in the expression "badlands," a desolation. But the Lord will be magnified, literally, above the territory of Israel. It struck me as I read through the passage this week, that we still call the land of Canaan "the holy land". Malachi says that Edom will be called the badlands, desolate and forgotten. We do not know who Malachi is. It would be nice to know, but his credentials are not given. In most of the prophets, a genealogy is given, and we know something of the prophet's family and where he came from. But that is not true of Malachi. Many people think that this is not a name at all, but a title, for the name in Hebrew means "my messenger," and that term occurs a number of times in the book of Malachi. It refers ultimately to Jesus, the Messiah, who was referred to as "My Messenger." It is also a prediction of John the Baptist, who was called "my messenger". So the prophet here is called "my messenger." I believe we are not to know who wrote this book. God raised up a messenger, someone through whom he could deliver this message. God often does this. He sometimes raises up a nobody and, through him, expresses a burden, a concern on his heart that he wants to transmit. The NAS version translates this word "burden" as an oracle. The oracle is the word of the Lord, but the term actually is a burden, a heavy load. It is a burden on God's heart, the sort of thing that weighs on his heart, and he wants us to know. That burden, as Malachi expresses it, is that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life. I bet you thought Bill Bright originated that idea! But twenty-three hundred years ago God expressed through the book of Malachi and others the first spiritual law: God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life. That is the message of this book, the love of God.

In this opening chapter, God contrasts the love that he has for Jacob and the hatred he has for Esau. Now that is strange, coming from a God whom we always identify with love. God is love; how can he hate someone? We need to understand again how the Jews looked at love and hatred. In Western thought there are gradations of love. We love someone a whole bunch, we love someone else a little less, we like someone, we tolerate someone, and we are indifferent to someone, right on down to the category of hatred. But the Jews did not look at life that way. None of the Semites did. If you did not love someone with all your heart, then basically you hated him. There is an interesting illustration of that concept in the book of Genesis. Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel. Rachel was the favored wife, and Jacob loved her with all of his heart. He loved Leah too, and there were indications that he was very tender, considerate, and thoughtful toward her. But he loved Rachel more. It was said that Leah was hated, but Rachel was loved, because she was loved with the whole heart. This, of course, is the point that Malachi is making. God doesn't hate anybody in the way that we hate people today; neither does Jesus admonish us to hate our parents, and actually have animosity toward them. But his point in making that comparison is that we are to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, and then our parents or whoever comes next. This is

Malachi's point. God loves Jacob with all his heart, and his love is seen in something that God has done with Jacob, but his "hatred" is seen in something he has not done with Esau.

Now you have to know something of what is behind this paragraph before you understand it, and many of you, I am sure, already know what particular event Malachi is referring to. There are two names mentioned here, Jacob and Esau, two men who became two nations. Esau was the father of the Edomites, who lived southeast of Israel, just south of the Dead Sea. Jacob was the father of Israel. So when he talks about Jacob and Esau, he is really talking about the two nations that sprang from their loins. He goes back to an actual event that took place in the lives of these young boys, Jacob and Esau. They were twin brothers, sons of Isaac, and God made a choice between those two brothers. He chose Jacob, rather than Esau. Esau was the older by a few minutes, so in the culture of that time, no matter how close the time of his birth was to his brother, Jacob was the second son, and the inheritance would go to the firstborn son. So Esau should have had the inheritance. The inheritance, according to Genesis, was all that had been given to Abraham: all the land, and the promise that through his seed the whole world would be blessed (through the Messiah). These promises normally would have gone to Esau as his legacy; but it went instead to Jacob. For some reason that we do not understand, God chose Jacob rather than Esau, though he was the second-born. He is not talking about the relationship that either of these boys had with him. It is not that sort of choice, because both of these young men had the opportunity to respond to the grace of God and to know him in a personal way. He is talking, rather, about the inheritance they would receive. God had to choose one or the other, and in this case it was Jacob. Jacob, as you know, was the schemer. His name means "the deceitful one," the one who trips people up. He spent his whole life trying to con his older brother out of the inheritance, even though it was legally and rightfully his. Eventually he did so, and spent twenty years in Haran as a result, trying to hide from his brother. Yet, despite the trickiness of Jacob, there is the indication throughout Genesis that he was a man who sought God with all his heart. He sought in the wrong way, used all the wrong methods, but he really had a heart for God. In contrast, Esau never had a heart for God; he despised his birthright. Hebrews says he sold out for a pot of beans. He came in from the field hungry and wanted something to eat, so he sold out for a little pot of lentils. His heart was never hungry for God.

The subsequent history of these nations demonstrated the direction these two men were going in their early years. Jacob's heart hungered after God, and Israel's twelve sons, his descendants, became heads of the twelve tribes. The nation Israel, by and large, sought after God. But that is not true of Edom. Esau's descendants were the Edomites, and throughout history, the Edomites were the Israelites' enemies. First they engaged in border skirmishes, then actually became much more openly hostile toward them. Obadiah tells us that when the Chaldeans overthrew Jerusalem and destroyed the city, the Edomites lined up along the road and harassed the refugees. They even captured some of them and sold them into slavery to Greece and Phoenicia, and afterwards looted the city, siding with the Chaldeans. That is why, Malachi says, God hates Esau and loves Jacob, because of what they did to his people. If you want the full story, read the book of Obadiah, a prediction of the downfall of Edom, because of the way it treated its brother Israel. We know that, just prior to the writing of Malachi, some unknown group of Arabs from the Sinai Peninsula invaded Edom and absolutely destroyed it. So when Malachi was written, Edom had ceased to exist as a nation. Its capital city, Petra, is a tourist curiosity today. Here is this impregnable fortress, and yet it fell. Eventually the Edomites were assimilated into some of the Arab tribes south of Canaan and actually into Israel itself. Later, during the Maccabean period, the Edomites were forcibly circumcised and were taken right into Israel. They ceased to exist as a nation.

Through Malachi, God says to Jacob, "You want to know that I love you? Look at Edom. They are gone." But do you know how Israel would respond? The same way I would respond in that situation, and the way they responded in Malachi's day, by saying, "That's very unimpressive. Look at us. Do you mean to tell us that you hate Esau and love us, and prove it by saying Edom is desolate? Have you looked around Jerusalem lately? We're just as desolate." The point that Malachi is making is not that Edom has been destroyed and Jerusalem hasn't. The point is not that Jerusalem's circumstances are better, that the Israelites are healthy, wealthy, and wise, and therefore God loves them, while Edom is downtrodden and hated of God. No, Malachi's point is that Israel has a hope; Edom does not. It is that fact that demonstrates the love of God and has nothing to do with circumstance. The circumstances were dreadful, but Israel had a hope. Malachi says the Jews will see the Lord magnified over their territory. But right next door is a group of people whose territory is a bad-land. Notice what Malachi says? In

verse 4 he puts these words in Edom's mouth, "We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins;" thus says the Lord of hosts, "They may build, but I will tear down Edom had no hope. Malachi says the proof of God's love for us is that we have hope. It has nothing to do with our circumstance. It is the presence of God within his people strengthening them, operating through them to accomplish his purpose. God has a plan for Israel, and he is pursuing that plan.

Regardless of your circumstances, and the stress, and the difficult times you are going through, God is going to see you through to the end. He has a purpose for you. Is it not interesting that history confirms this fact? Where is Edom today? How many people have ever heard of the Edomites? They have no representation in the UN. They are nobody; they are forgotten. But Israel, for four thousand years, has endured. As a matter of fact, the prophets say that the continuance of Israel is linked with the continuance of the cosmic order of the whole universe. As long as there is the sun, moon, and stars, there will be an Israel. God will never forget his people, and he has not forgotten them for four thousand years. There are only two or three other nations on the face of the earth that have existed that long, and none of them has had as long a period of glory and impact upon the world as the Jews have had. God says, "I haven't abandoned you. I'm going to fulfill the work that I've begun. I'm going to accomplish every promise that I gave to Abraham. You have a future, as Jeremiah says, and a hope."

Now the Jews do not realize that God hasn't abandoned them, but God's love is what makes them so spunky. This is why they are so indomitable. I am reading Max I. Dimant's book on "Jews, God, and History", and, throughout the book, he tries desperately to determine the source of Israel's energy, and he misses on all points. God is at work in that people. Historians always allude to a monument that a Pharaoh left behind. His name was Merneptah, a thirteenth-century Pharaoh in Egypt. He carried out campaigns in Syria and Palestine, and when he returned, as oriental leaders are wont to do, he chronicled a list of all his victories. Near the bottom of this monument, there is a line which reads, "Israel is desolated; his seed is no more." I always think of Mark Twain's response when a newspaper put out a notice that he had died. He wrote the editor, "The reports of my death have been slightly exaggerated." Here is one Pharaoh who missed the point;

Israel is very much alive. Its seed was not desolate. The Jews just keep turning up. Every time you turn around they are doing something else. They are indomitable people!

I saw a funny cartoon in *Time Magazine* a year or so ago. It showed a Jew standing on the banks of the Suez Canal shaking a Sten gun over head. The canal was filled with Arabs who were swimming to the other side. The caption read, "And if you come back tomorrow, I'll send my husband!" How do you explain that spirit in Israel? Well, you see, God has a future and a hope for those people, and he is at work in their life. Circumstances don't matter. The desperate conditions the Jews have been in throughout all of their history has not fazed them. They have a future and a hope, a hope that God has implanted within them. He is at work, even though they do not know it. It is that hope that is the sign of the love of God, and not their circumstances. The mark of God's love in your life is not your circumstances, but the hope that God has placed in your heart. That is what Paul says in Romans 5. Your circumstances may be very grim, very difficult. You may be questioning whether God loves you at all. And if you look at your circumstances you are bound to question the love of God. But the love of God is not seen in your circumstances, it is seen in your hope, the certainty that God is at work in your life to accomplish his plan, to make you more and more like Jesus Christ. That is the mark of his love. We are a people who formerly were without hope, Paul writes, but now we have hope. Paul says that he who has begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ.

John Landrith and I spent some time running around Greece a year or so ago, and we were struck by one particular sign that kept showing up all over the country. It took us awhile to determine what it was, but then we saw it said, "telos", finished, complete. Finally we discovered that these were various zones, such as speed zones. When you came to the end of the zone there would be a sign, "telos", fulfilled, complete. That is the term that Paul uses. "He that has begun a good work in you will bring it to a finish." You are completed. It does not matter what you have to go through, God will use every circumstance to complete his program in your life. And his love is seen, not in the pressures and stresses and the circumstances of your life, but in his indwelling presence, and his strengthening you in the midst of those circumstances. I had a friend who asked someone how he was doing, and

the man replied, "I'm doing all right, under the circumstances." My friend said, "What are you doing under there?" That is the problem. So much of the time we are under the circumstances, bound by them and frustrated by them. They make us resentful and bitter, and we think God has forgotten us and shoved us off to the side, no longer interested in us. Everything is going wrong in our life. You do not see the love of God in the circumstances, you see it in the hope.

What a great illustration of this principle the life of the Lord is! When he began his ministry, the Father said, "This my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." He never did one thing that displeased the Father, not one thing. He always did those things that pleased the Father. And yet his life was one series of traumas after another. He was misunderstood, he was rejected, ostracized, positively hated, eventually crucified. And we look at that life and say, "Now there's a man who pleased God, and look at all the terrible things that happened to him. God loved his Son?" Yes. The love of God is seen in his working through the Son all that he had purposed. And at the end of his earthly life, Jesus could say, "It is finished." He did not say, "I am finished"; he said, "It is finished." The work that God had set out to do in his life was finished. Paul picks up this same thread in Romans 8, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come (nothing in this world)...can separate us from the love of God..."

A number of years ago, my wife Carolyn and I were sitting together on a sofa and we were distressed about something. I do not recall now what it was. Our boy, who was five at the time, crawled up in our laps. We were sitting so close together that he could sit on both laps. He had been listening to this discussion that had been going on for some time, and he put his arms around our necks, pulled our heads together and said, "Dad, let's sing 'Jesus Loves Me'". We have thought about that so frequently. You know, "A little child shall lead them." That is how we need to look at life. We do not see the love of God in our circumstances. They can be terribly discouraging. But we see the love of God in the hope that he has given to us that, through the circumstances, he is going to provide all that we need. And he is going to accomplish in us what he has promised. So don't think that God don't love you, 'cause he do! And the proof of it is that he will be magnified over your life.

Father, how grateful we are that you love us. And again, it is not because we are lovely or lovable in the slightest. We want to thank you for your sustaining power, and for the hope that you give us. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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