

How do We Know the Lord Loves Us?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 January 2023

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] So with Malachi chapter 1 open in front of you, here's the game that's been in my mind all week as I've been thinking about this passage. One that if you're of a certain generation, you might remember this game from your youth.

It was a game that people used to play to guess if somebody loved them or not. These were simpler times. You would get yourself a daisy.

And one by one, you'd begin to pluck off the petals. And with each falling petal, you would say to yourself the rhyme. They love me. They love me not.

They love me. They love me not. They love me. They love me not. And whatever words were on your lips as that last petal fell, that word was your answer.

Right? You've got the game in your mind. Takes us straight to the question that's the heart of this passage today. Ready for it? Really simple. How do we know that the Lord loves us?

[1 : 08] I cannot think, honestly, as the pastor of this church, I cannot think of a better question that we should spend the next 25, 30 minutes thinking about.

How do we know the Lord loves us? As we step into another new year, how can we be sure of his unfailing commitment to us?

And how can we be sure of the trustworthiness of his promises? I cannot think of a better question for us to be getting our teeth into as a local church as we set out into 2023.

Because here's the reality for many of us here today. Maybe for you, the jury is well and truly out as far as God's love and commitment to you is concerned.

Now, there are all sorts of reasons why we can become disillusioned and doubt God's love for us. You may have returned to a really demanding job this week.

[2 : 16] One that calls for all out commitment for you and you just loved being away from it for a few days over Christmas. And you've returned to it this week and the weight of it has just hit you like a ton of bricks.

Or perhaps it's the weight of worry that's associated with the cost of living crisis. That you managed to escape for a few days and it's returned with a vengeance in January.

I mean, this is a really, really tough month. It's little wonder that a week tomorrow is the day in our culture that we call what? We call it Blue Monday.

And you think, Lord, I thought following you was about living life to the full. Maybe it's the church. Maybe you see secularism on the increase. And yet the church in our nation, generally speaking, seems to be on the decrease.

And you think, Lord, I thought you said that you were building your church. Or maybe it's the loss of a loved one. Each year as you look at the empty chair around the Christmas dinner table, it's like someone's ripped that bandage off of the wound, the wound that you desperately long would heal.

[3 : 29] Do you even care, Lord? You know, my uncle two days before Christmas, he died. He had a stroke at home on the Wednesday.

Recently retired, dearly loved, never came back, died on a Thursday night. For us as a family, Christmas from now on is about his death. And it reminded me of that deep pain that comes when you lose someone that you love.

All sorts of reasons that we can ask this question in our minds. Friends, I have got real raw skin in the game when it comes to this question.

How do we know that the Lord loves us when life doesn't seem to turn out the way that you and I had planned it? How do we know, Lord, that you love us?

And if anything of what I've said there has just clicked with you, you've got to listen to what this passage is telling you and where it finds its ultimate fulfillment.

[4 : 29] Because it is precisely where Malachi's generation of God's people are at. They are asking, how have you loved us, Lord? Have a look at the question that they're asking.

The all-knowing Lord knows they're asking in their hearts at verse 2. Do you see it? Come with me. Look at it. And see just how deep the disillusionment has sunk down into their hearts like some kind of worm as it burrows its way endlessly into the core of an apple.

They say not, do you love us, Lord? They say, how have you loved us, Lord? Do you see the bitterness in their question? The cynicism that's wrapped up in it.

The anger that's wrapped up in it. They do not believe this for a second. If the Lord were to walk into a bar in Israel in this day, the music would stop, everyone would stare, and eventually someone would pipe up to remove the awkward silence and say, you have got some nerve showing your face in here.

Here is a generation who find themselves having returned from exile in Babylon.

[5 : 47] Babylon were defeated by the Persians. King Cyrus said, you can go home. So gradually God's people begin to make their way in waves to their homeland.

So they're back in their land. And what's more, by Malachi's time, they've managed to rebuild the temple. And what does that mean? It means that corporate life for God's people is back up and running again.

As they're doing the sacrificial thing, as they're doing the worship thing, and together they're seeking the Lord. Which on paper you would think, doesn't it? It would sound like they're onto a really good thing.

Except in their minds, they're really not. Maybe think about it like this. This is how I thought about it this week. One of my favorite golfers is called Ian Poulter.

Right? The fact that he's a golfer doesn't really matter for this illustration. But his nickname does. They call him on tour. They call him the postman.

[6 : 52] You want to know why? Because when there's a big moment in golf, when the chips are down, when you need somebody to come through for you, he's the guy who always delivers.

What a nickname to have in life, let alone in golf, is the guy who always delivers. A Malachi's generation look at God, and they say, you are the anti-postman.

Right? You are the God who has promised, and you are the God who has not delivered. Right? Put yourself in their shoes. Okay, we're back in the land, but the tempo that we've got is so unimpressive.

And we're nothing when we look out and we think about the grandeur and splendor of the nations round about us. We're nothing. We're a laughingstock in their face. And you said, God, you said that one day the nations would come flocking to this place and would glorify the God of Israel. That's not what happens. Where's that? We're trying to be faithful. We're trying to do the things that you asked us to do. We're trying to be faithful in obeying you.

[8 : 06] And they are idolatrous, and they are rebellious against you, and yet they seem to be flourishing in their lives. Where is the justice that you said you would bring to us on our enemies?

What's the point in trying to follow you when all it seems to do is get us in a worse place than when we started? What's the point?

You ever asked that? You ever been there? What's the point in trying to be faithful to the Lord? Remember in my young trainee lawyer days, what you do when you graduate, you have this two-year internship.

And honestly, it feels like a two-year episode of The Apprentice, right? It is who is going to get kept on at the end of this. And you soon discover that as well as working hard, what's going to set you apart and get you a slight edge in the game is if you can be seen as one who is partying hard, drinking hard, and joking hard.

And I remember looking after work nights out, people coming in to work the next day with a hangover. And instead of credibility in the eyes of the workplace, it going down, somehow it went up.

[9 : 25] And you think to yourself, what is the point in trying to be faithful? Am I wasting my time here? And I'm so thankful to God for my friend Colin. Colin was a trainee as well in the year below me. When I came to move on, didn't get kept on.

When I came to move on, remember Colin saying, I've tried to play this game for a year and God's just been challenging me that I shouldn't be doing it. And so what he did is every Wednesday night,

he said, I'm going to leave on time and I'm going to get to the church prayer meeting. So he left our offices at Charlotte Square in the center. And what he did is he just walked up to St. Columbus at the top of the Royal Mile and he prayed with his church family. And we were both very aware that that puts Colin at a disadvantage.

Now, however that works out in your own field of life, you get what I'm saying. What is the point sometimes you think to yourself, what is the point of being faithful to the Lord? Is it actually going to count against me?

Is it at the end of the day going to mean anything? And Malachi's generation have concluded that it's not. That it's not. Their hearts have gone callous.

[10:30] Their affections have gone cold. Their religious life makes a mockery of the Lord. Their moral life is an assault on his holiness. And they look at a world round about them and they think, if we can't beat them, join them.

How can you say, God, that you love us? How can you honestly sit there and say that? And maybe that's you here today. And even a small way you're asking yourself, does the Lord love us? And this letter is inescapably corporate. It's not me, it's us. Us. And the Lord's gracious answer, and let's be honest, it is gracious.

Never skip over that when it comes to us. God could have quite rightly left this generation to go their own way. Couldn't he? But God's gracious answer is Malachi.

The one whose name means my messenger. And you see verse one, this guy comes on the scene in Israel with an oracle. You see that word? Hebrew word there, more like our word burden.

[11:42] Burden. For God's heart in this book, as it expresses itself through his voice through Malachi, is that his people would return to him an obedience to his words.

That is where life is going to be found for them. Two reasons why God speaks. First is to expose the short-sightedness and folly of their question.

Okay, God had said that you will be my people and I will be your God. It's the essence of the covenant. The word that was in Deuteronomy. I will be your God.

You will be my people. And their lives are an absolute joke. And they have the audacity to suggest that the Lord is the one who should be in the dock for failing to deliver on his side of the covenant. And my friend Paul said that this is the equivalent of his son, the son who he raised, the son who he taught how to use a knife and fork, was there for when he split up with his first girlfriend, was there for to help him with his homework, was there to ferry him to rugby practice and back, was there to support him through university, turning around on the phone one day and saying, Dad, honestly, how have you loved me?

[12:58] There is something breathtakingly insular about how the people are treating the Lord in this book. When all they would really need to do is take a history lesson and look back through time and see how time and time and time again they had got it wrong as a people and how yet God has been relentlessly faithful, patient, mighty, and just.

But they don't. I think this is maybe a really practical point for us here as a church family. The failure here is this generation, the generations before them, have not passed on who the Lord is to them. Parents, this is our job with our kids. Have you ever thought about this? This is our job with our children, to tell them and pass on to them who the Lord is, how good he is, how faithful he is, and what he has done.

It's one of the reasons why I love old hymns. Because of the wonderful thought that for centuries before we were even here, God's people have been singing these words of praise.

I loved learning this last week when we were at a different church down in Bath. Finding out that Amazing Grace, did you know this? Amazing Grace is 250 years old this year. In fact, I think it was the 1st of January, 250 years ago when they first sung it.

[14:25] Do you know I love that? Love that. 250 years of God's people singing through many dangers, toils and snares. We have already come. Tis grace has brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home.

250 years of that being the anthem of God's people. Saved by grace, not by their works. Saved by grace because of who the Lord is. You know, we've been reading the Pilgrim's Progress with our children at night.

This Children's Illustrated version of it. And I love it. Do you know why I love it? And you can do the QR code thing and check it out if you want. Do you know why I love it? For the simple reason it's

reminded me who I am. Who are we?

We're pilgrims. And I can't say, what's a pilgrim? Every night. Do you know what I say? A pilgrim is someone who is journeying home. This is not our home.

Our generation talk about, have you bought your forever home? You heard that one before?

There's no such thing. It's not here. Because of who the Lord is and what he's called us to do. He's taken us home.

[15 : 31] Reacquainted with the fact that I'm a pilgrim. And because of him, I've got confidence of the future. Here's the thing. As you set out today on our, in your life, our lives together.

Here's the truth of it. Where you and I will be in 10 years time is so uncertain. But where you and I will be in 100 years time, because of Jesus, is no.

And that's something worth basing our lives upon. That that future is untouchable. But this generation before Malachi's generation, I've not been passing on who the Lord is.

But he is faithful. This is Rachel Jones in her wonderful little book, *Is This It?* Subtext, what does it look like to be faithful, following Jesus when life doesn't quite work out the way you thought it would?

And she's writing from her, looking back in her 20s. But every generation, I think, will click with what she's saying. Free on Kindle right now, if that seals the deal. And click this or come to me afterwards and I'll get it for you.

[16 : 36] Here's what she says. He might not take you on quite the route that you would plan. And how many of us know that to be true? But he has intervened to set you on course to the only destination worth heading to.

Oh, the folly of grading the Lord's love purely on how life in front of our eyes we think it is going. Rather than zooming out and observing and remembering the panorama of God's promises and his character of what he said is true.

So that's what this generation are doing. It's the folly in questioning the Lord and who he is. And secondly, secondly, why God speaks is to address the heart of the question.

Because he is the Lord. Right? When you see that in your Bible, capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D, it's a mouthful. That's what that name means. Yahweh, he is the Lord, the covenant God. Makes a promise, keeps his promise. All-knowing, faithfully keeping, steadfastly loving. This is who the Lord is. And this is a one-point sermon today.

[17 : 47] The big proof of that for this generation. God says, I chose you. That's how you know I love you. That's how I've shown it. I've chosen you.

It's not Esau, Jacob's brother. Do you see it in the text? Verse 2. It's a reference to these two twins being born to Isaac and Rebekah that we read about in Genesis 25.

I mean, read the text. And some of you, if you're doing this Bible in a year thing, you'll be up against it really soon. You ask yourself, who would be the brother who's going to carry on this line of promise? The one that eventually Jesus is going to come from down the line.

Who is going to be the brother? And culturally, we'd fully expect it to be the older brother. So it's to be Esau. But God says, no, I have chosen Jacob the younger.

Not because Jacob is better. Get that in your minds. Not because he is better. Or God somehow looked down the line and saw his potential. No, you read the story and this man made some serious mistakes.

[18 : 56] The deceiver. The guy who preferred Joseph. It's not because Jacob was any better. It is simply because the Lord says so.

Jacob I have chosen. Esau I have hated. Hated language there probably comes across stronger in our English translations there. It just means preference.

I chose Jacob over Esau. I chose Jacob. I set him apart for myself. He and his line will be my special possession. To them I will make and keep my promises of forgiveness and grace and love with them.

And by implication, if God has chosen them, he has not chosen Esau. Right? And Esau's descendants, and this is where you hit the text, verse 4.

Are the Edomites. The historic enemies of God's people. When you read through the Old Testament story and this people just make life really, really difficult for God's people.

[20 : 06] They almost represent a world that's in hostility against God and his ways. And God says he will ultimately defeat them and win the victory over them for his people.

You see, Malachi's generation are tempted to think that there is no difference between the two. There is no difference between the Lord's people and the people of the world. But God says that is not true.

And one day, ultimately, you will see that distinction for yourselves. As God says he will finally and fully, rightly judge and condemn his enemies.

And because of his grace, he will graciously save and pardon his people. How have you loved us? How has the Lord ultimately loved us? Friends, where would you look for your answer to that question? Ultimately, the fullest expression of God's love for his people and his unending commitment to us to see his promises home as he loves us comes in the life and the death of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 18] If you're in any doubt this morning, that's where you need to look to him. He is the perfect, visible demonstration of the love of God for and of the commitment of God to his people.

The person that Puritan Thomas Goodwin, as he increasingly tried to wrap his head around the Jesus who he saw in the Gospels, he said of Jesus that he is like love covered over with flesh. Love that. He is love covered over with flesh. And let me just take you to one place in the Gospels. We can go anywhere. One of my favorite places is what Jesus does in John 13.

Oh, and if you haven't met Jesus, here is a wonderful place for you to start trying to grasp who he is. John 13, the night before Jesus goes to the cross and dies.

What does he do? What does he do? And the text makes it clear, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, knowing who was going to betray him, what does he do? And this is Jesus to a T.

[22 : 26] He fills a basin, towel over the shoulder. And he starts washing the disciples' feet. I mean, who would have come up with that?

One of these little things that convinces me that the Gospels are true. Who would have come up with that? No, he washes their feet. Because before life is going to be for the disciples about serving Jesus, first and foremost, it is about Jesus serving them.

And that's a wonderful truth for us to carry into this year. Before life is about serving him, it's about being served by him. Jesus says to them, I need to make you clean.

Symbolically, he's acting out what he was about to do for them as he is crucified on the cross, in their place for their sin, to win their forgiveness on the cross.

Such is his love and commitment to the people the Father has given them. Jesus takes their shame. Jesus takes their sin. Jesus makes them perfect in the eyes of the Father because they're found in him.

[23 : 35] And he says, you are mine. And that's what it is to be a Christian, isn't it, ultimately? We have been served by Jesus. Not because we were better than anyone else. But simply because he loved us, because he loved us, because he loved us.

And not everyone will be clean. And Judas stands there in that scene, presumably having had his feet washed by Jesus.

And yet Jesus knows his heart. It's a heart that, although going along with the religious motions, has long since checked out. But Jesus' disciples, the ones who he will die for, the ones who he will call to himself, what are they?

They're loved, chosen, known, adopted. That's what it is to be his. We did not go looking for him. We did not deserve it.

But this God came looking for us. Friends, if we try and answer that question, does God love us? If we try and answer it in terms of how we're feeling or in terms of how life is going, it's little wonder that you and I get disillusioned.

[24 : 43] But the convincing proof of God's love for us is that he had boundless mercy and endless grace on us in Jesus Christ.

And it's to him that we look to see that God loves us. Now just as we wrap this up and as we close, and maybe try and focus us on the application of this, do you know what our kids loved doing in the summer when we were in America?

Here's what they loved. They loved the water parks. And in particular in the water parks, they loved this thing called the lazy river.

I can't think of a more American thing, can you? Lazy river. Really simple concept. You found yourself a rubber ring. You stepped into the river rapid, the one that would take you all the way

around the circumference of the park.

And you sat in the ring and you kicked back and you just watched life go by. Honestly, amazing. You just let the current take you.

[25 : 52] Oh, that was the American dream. Enjoying the sun, it gets too hot, you're in the water. Too cold in the water, you get to enjoy the sun. Loved it. But here's the thing I realized in the lazy river.

I love drifting. And just how easy it is to coast. Question for you.

When it comes to knowing the love of this God for us in Jesus, is our hearts natural drift towards savoring and living in light of it?

Or is it to drift away, forget and neglect it? Now, if your honest answer is the answer that I give every day, then here are two great things as we close, as we head into this year, that are going to stop us drifting.

Number one, the Lord has given us his word. As we see in the weeks to come, one of the reasons that Malachi's generation are in the place that they're in is they've just stopped listening.

[26 : 59] They've stopped wanting to hear the voice of the Lord. The voice that corrects, the voice that assures, the voice that instructs, and the voice that reminds.

Brothers and sisters, are you listening today? Are we listening today to the voice of our loving Heavenly Father each day as we have his ear in Christ reminding us who he is?

What plans do you have to read his word this year? Maybe you could read it thinking individually. Maybe we could read it with somebody together. This is why we do this on a Sunday, why our meetings are filled with his words.

Because we just forget. We just forget. He's given us his word, and secondly, he's given us each other. Each other. Have you ever thought about the fact that one of the main goals of our meetings, the main ambition here is that we would remember and savour and celebrate the gospel?

Who our God is in what we sing, in what we read, in what we say to one another, both before, during, and after the service. Honestly, there was a time in my Christian life, to my shame, where I honestly thought that as I grow as a follower of Jesus, I will need this less.

[28 : 17] And oh, what a fool I was for thinking that. Because I've come to see, as I continue on, and even if you do this job, to see that I need this not less, I need this more.

I need you in my life. I'm so thankful for you. Some of you have got no idea the ways that you've encouraged me over the years, as you've brought words and seas and God's word into my life. At certain points when I needed it, I thought, thank you for God's people.

Thank you for being you. We should be doing that to one another. And that's why it's so important that we choose a local church. We commit to a local church. For some of you this year, would it not be a wonderful ambition that you put down roots here and say, this is my family.

This is the place where I'm going to grow as a follower and disciple of Jesus. I'm going to grow, not individually. I'm going to grow corporately. Because we need one another. And God, in his wisdom, has given us each other in order to grow.

He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me. He loves me not. Let's close with the words of 1 John 4. This is the Bible's categorical answer to that question.

[29 : 30] 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.

This is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

That is the gospel. So we're going to, it's a wonderful transition into a time of communion. It's essentially what communion is, isn't it? Celebrating what our God has done for us.

So why don't we just pray and then we're going to stand and sing again and then we're going to remember the Lord together. So let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for what we thought about this morning.

Your unending, ceaseless, abounding love for us in Jesus. And Lord, I pray for those of us here today who are doubting. For whatever reason, who are disillusioned, who are questioning.

[30 : 31] Lord, thank you that your word is full of invitations to come to you with our questions. But Father, I pray that by your spirit dwelling amongst us and in us, that you would help us today to remember who you are and to celebrate who you are and to live in light of what you've done.

Thank you, Lord, that we do not wake up tomorrow and think, does your love still apply? Thank you that in Jesus, the one who never changes, the one that we thought the outset is the same yesterday, today and forever, that answer is always yes.
So Father, be with us now, we pray, as we move to this time of communion. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.