

It Starts with Love

1. Intro

- I wonder if you've ever been disappointed by love?
- Have you ever had expectations of someone who you thought loved you and it just didn't pan out as you had hoped
- I remember when I was in year 8 I started 'going out' with this girl
 - Clearly I was a disappointment to her ... because within about a week ... she started ignoring me, distancing herself from me and the whole thing went cold very quickly
- Of course its an all too common reality of relationships failing to live up to expectations and going cold
 - When couples are dating and the expectation isn't matching the reality ... then the passion, the zeal, the excitement and the connection soon fades and the relationship becomes dull, half-hearted and lifeless
- Those great theologians Jake and Elwood Blues (aka The Blues Brothers) once said 'everybody needs somebody to love'
 - To love and be loved is one of the core aspects of being human
 - We love love
 - We crave love
- So for instance, research shows that when babies are neglected and deprived of love (such as nurturing, holding etc) it affects how they develop and respond to others
 - Dr David Wolfe, a psychologist at the University of Toronto says that when babies are neglected some of the affects include poor impulse control, social withdrawal, problems with coping and regulating emotions, low self-esteem, pathological behaviors such as tics ... and others
- We crave love, we love love ... its part of being human
- But the reality is ... while we may experience love in part ... often we're disappointed by those who love us
 - We crave love ... but so often it doesn't live up to our expectations
 - We get let down
 - We get hurt
 - We get abandoned
 - We get forsaken
 - Even relationships which are healthy and strong often experience disappointment, heartache and sadness ... let alone a bad relationship
- What if you could be loved by someone who
 - will never leave you disappointed

- is always faithful
- will never hurt you
- never forsake you
- always stand by you?
- Sounds impossible doesn't it!

- As we start this new series in Malachi this morning we'll see that experiencing that type of love is not only possible ... but it can be experienced by everyone
 - You just need to know and meet the one who can do it

- This morning as we look at Malachi 1:1-5
 - Apprehension of God's love
 - Affirmation of God's love
 - Application of God's love

2. Context and Background

- Malachi is the last of the OT prophets and was writing to the people in Jerusalem in the 4th BC
- In the centuries beforehand God's people had been conquered by the Babylonians as part of God's judgment on them for their idolatry and sinfulness
 - The city of Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed
 - The majority of the people were carted off into exile in Babylon
- But eventually God's people were allowed to return to Jerusalem and where they rebuilt the temple and the city walls
- Despite the exhortations of Israel's leaders to restore the temple worship and obey the law of Moses ... within 100 years of returning from exile they had lost their way and sin abounded once more
 - Tithes were being ignored,
 - the Sabbath was being broken,
 - the people were intermarrying with foreigners; and
 - the priests had become corrupt
- It's into this situation that God raises up the prophet Malachi

3. Apprehensive of God's Love

- And the first word God speaks to the people in v2 is – "I have loved you"
 - But God's people doubt God's love
 - They're apprehensive that God still loves them

- Reason they're so doubtful and apprehensive is because ... when the Jews had been allowed to return from exile and rebuild the temple and they did so with high expectations

- Earlier prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Haggai and Zechariah has all spoken of a glorious time in the future where:
 - Temple would be restored, and God would return to dwell once more with his people in the temple
 - That Israel would be reunited and restored to its glory days as it had been under King David; and
 - God's promised rescuing king - The Messiah / the Christ ... would come rule over this unified kingdom of God and establish peace and justice for all
- But the reality of what followed was a far cry from those expectations
 - Their land remained by a small province in the backwaters of the Persian Empire
 - The glorious future announced by the prophets had not yet been realized, and
 - The temple was way smaller and much less opulent than the original built under Solomon
 - There had been no visible sign of God coming back to dwelling in the temple and amongst his people
- And so because things aren't going according to plan and their expectations haven't been met ...
 - the Israelites think God has abandoned them and no longer loves them
 - they think God has forsaken his covenant promises to them
- However, the irony is that its Israel who have forsaken God and their covenant with him, not the other way around
- This is because Israel's apprehension, doubt and skepticism has turned into to a spiritual malaise
 - They doubt God's covenant love
 - They no longer trust in him and his promises
- And as a result
 - They've drifted from God and become apathetic, callous, corrupt, cynical, dishonest and wicked
 - Their temple worship has become half-hearted and routine
 - They were no longer taking obedience to the Law seriously
- It turns out they are just as hard-hearted and unfaithful as their ancestors before they were judged and taken into exile in Babylon

Application

- Have there ever been
 - Times when you've been disappointed with God?

- Times when you've doubted his love, provision, promises?
- Maybe you were going through a particularly hard time in life ... prayed earnestly to God for
 - Healing
 - Take away your pain
 - Provide for you in your hardship
 - And God seemingly didn't answer your prayer
- Or maybe it was
 - Time you have been sinned against or let down by someone in church
 - Their hypocrisy, their behaviour, their lack of humility, their insensitivity ... has really hurt you
- Or it could have been
 - You had great expectations of God doing something significant in your life ... and it never happened
 - Maybe your church had a great vision with Four E's ... and they never came to fruition
- It's very easy in those times of disappointment to become disaffected and start to give up on God
- To start to think God doesn't really love me or love us ... because if he did things would be different
- From there to allow your doubts to take over to the point where you lose your zeal, your passion for the Lord
- And when expectations of what God can and ought to do are not fulfilled and you become lukewarm in your faith, and ...
 - You stop praying because you think it doesn't matter
 - You stop being generous with your money ... because why would I give if there doesn't seem to be any fruit flowing from this
 - Your daily worship of God becomes half-hearted
 - Apathetic about reading the Bible because you're not even sure it will make a difference
- It's very easy to give up on God when you doubt God's love and goodness because things don't turn out the way we expect him to do it

4. Affirmation of God's Love

- Well in Malachi's day ... God knows all about Israel's doubts and disappointments
 - And so he preemptively says what he knows they are thinking in their hearts

- *"But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"*
- And then God goes on to affirm his love for them by pointing them right back to the beginning of the Bible in Genesis
- Vv 2-3 he says
 - *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."*
- To understand what God is saying here we need to remind ourselves of who Jacob and Esau are and how this relates to God's love for the people Malachi is speaking to
- You can read this for yourself in Gen 25-36
 - Jacob and Esau were twin sons of Isaac & Rebecca, grandsons of Abraham [refer slide]
 - Jacob would later have his name changed by God to Israel
 - In Genesis 25:22-23 we read about these twins
 - *²² The babies jostled each other within her, and Rebecca said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³ The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."*
- So even before they were born, Jacob and Esau were fighting in the womb
 - And they would grow up to have large families that would eventually give rise to two nations
 - Jacob > Israel > Israelites
 - Esau > Edom > Edomites
- Critically ... God chose Jacob (the younger of two) and his ancestors, to become the carrier of God's covenant promises instead of Esau his brother
 - This was a huge shock because normally the older son receives all the blessings and inheritance
- And God did this ...
 - not because Jacob was more worthy ...
 - no Jacob was just as sinful and flawed as his older brother
- God did it to show
 - He is the one who chooses those he will bless
 - It's only by his grace and sovereign election ... not by our human merits
 - God's love and choosing doesn't depend on
 - Birth order

- Success
 - Moral standing
 - Father's preference
 - Religious obedience
-
- In his great love for his people ... God made a covenant with them
 - It started with Abraham many years before ... and God reaffirmed that covenant to Jacob ... promising him;
 - A land to live in
 - Many descendants
 - Bless him and all people of the earth through him¹

 - And throughout the rest of the Bible it was God's covenant love that meant God ...
 - blesses Jacob with 12 sons who become the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel
 - Judges Pharaoh and rescues them out of slavery in Egypt
 - Provides for them in the desert
 - Gives them the Law to follow
 - Gives them the Promised Land to live in
 - Gives them kings to rule over them
 - Gives them peace and prosperity under Kings David and Solomon
 - Gives them prophets to warn them and call them back from sin to God
 - Holds off invasion from Assyria and Babylon
 - Brings them back from exile to Jerusalem

 - And this ... despite their failings, flaws, grumblings, sin and idolatry

 - It's in that sense that God **has loved** Jacob
 - He loved Jacob enough to choose him
 - And he continued to love the descendants of Jacob in the centuries that followed as God remained faithful to his promises throughout

 - God's covenant love for Israel and not for Edom made a difference
 - But Malachi doesn't say all that ... he just says ... look at your brother
 - For the contrast between Jacob and Esau ... between Israel and Edom couldn't have been more stark
 - *"I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated"*
 - They are strong words ... but just as
 - God's love for Jacob reflects his election of Israel as his chosen people;
 - God's animosity towards Esau reflects his rejection of Esau and his descendants

¹ Gen 28:13-14

- 'Esau I have hated' describes the hostility between God and Esau that started when Esau despised his birthright and the blessing of God's covenant promises and gave it up so nonchalantly for a simple bowl of soup
- And that hostility towards God remained throughout the years to come as Esau and his descendants continued to be hostile to God and his people
 - That hostility reached a climax when the Edomites joined with the Babylonians invading, sacking and pillaging Judah and Jerusalem²
 - And for her outright hostility towards God and his people ... God promised to judge Edom
 - **Obadiah 1:8** *"In that day," declares the LORD, "will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau?"*
 - **Obadiah 1:10** ¹⁰ *Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever*
- And history shows Edom was conquered by the Nabatean Arabs between c550-400BC who gradually forced the Edomites from their land ... and Edom effectively ceased to exist as a nation
- In addition to God's covenant love and **all** that he has done for Israel throughout the centuries ...
- Here God is saying ... just look across the border and see the contrast between you and your brother Edom
- He says in v3 & 4
 - *I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals*
 - *"They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD.*
- But Israel has not be left to the jackals in the desert
 - They have come back, and they have rebuilt
 - And there is once more a temple on Mount Zion
 - And Jerusalem is no longer a city forsaken
- In effect, God is saying through Malachi ...
 - "You doubt I love you?"
 - "Look at how I chose you"
 - "You didn't deserve it"
 - "Look at what has become of you – the descendants of Jacob ... versus what has become of the descendants of his twin brother Esau"

² Refer Obadiah

- “There is the proof that I love you
 - “My choosing of you ... and blessing of you ... and my continued faithfulness to my covenant promises ...
 - “Despite the fact that you have failed to love me or remain faithful to me.”

5. Application of God’s Love

Reassurance

- If you’re a Christian ... it can be very easy to doubt God’s love for you because of
 - unanswered prayers
 - hurt by other Christians
 - lack of fruit from your ministry
 - particularly if you’re someone who’s poured lots of time and energy and money into a church, youth group, kids church or other ministry and it just seems to have gone nowhere or even backwards
- And it’s very easy therefore to become jaded, apathetic, ambivalent and half-hearted in your faith
- But the way to be assured of God’s love in those times is not to look for
 - Some great experience or emotional high
 - For miraculous healings
 - Answered prayers
 - Perfect church
 - Ministry successes
 - If you do you’ll only continue to be disappointed
- Like Israel ... we need to look back and see God’s demonstration of his covenant love
 - Just as the Israelites could look back and know for certain they were loved because they were chosen in Jacob
 - The Christian can look back and know for certain that they are loved because they are chosen in the great descendent of Jacob ... Jesus Christ
- Colossians 3:12 says that in Christ ... as God’s chosen people you are holy and dearly loved
 - Holy = lit. set apart
 - In Christ ... God has set you apart
 - God has taken you ... and designated you to be one of his
 - To confer on you amazing privileges and blessings and prove to you that in Christ you are more dearly loved than you can ever imagine

- In his great love for you ... God has set you apart to:
 - Be his
 - Be saved
 - Be indwelt by the Holy Spirit
 - Be restored
 - Be reconciled
 - Be forgiven
 - Be blessed
 - Be his children and call him Father
- That's his covenant love to you in Christ
- That's what Christians call the gospel ... the good news!
- The way you and I can truly be assured of God's love for us is in the gospel
- And how did God show that those in Christ are dearly loved
 - At the cross
 - *1 John 4:9-10 – 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.*

- And that he would choose you and in his great love for you send his son to die for you and you sin
 - Is only by his grace and sovereign election ... not by our human merits
- God's love and choosing doesn't depend on
 - Success
 - Moral standing
 - Parents preference
 - Religious obedience
- Its only by God's grace

- And so friends ... the way to overcome
 - your doubts about God
 - your half-heartedness
 - The way to guard against becoming jaded, apathetic, and ambivalent in your faith ...
 - Is to continually to marvel at how God has demonstrated his covenantal love in choosing you in Christ and showering you will all the blessings that flow through to you because of the cross

- And so friends here's the love that we crave that we can have and experience that won't leave us
 - disappointed
 - let down
 - hurt

- feeling abandoned or forsaken
- Because Jesus has demonstrated that love for you and I at the cross even when we failed to love him
- And he went to the cross for you
 - even though he had every right to be disappointed
 - even though you let him down when you failed to love him
 - even though he was hurt when they drove those nails through his hands and feet
 - even though he was the one who was forsaken when he cried out on the cross ... "my God, my God why have you forsaken me?"
- Friends ... when you come to Christ, and put your trust in him ... you get to experience the greatest love you can ever know
- Which means ...
 - you can stop looking to your spouse or other significant relationships to give you that love you crave
 - you will no longer crush others around you under the unrealistic weight of expectation of giving you that great love that they can never meet
 - you are less likely to be left feeling disappointed, let down, hurt or abandoned ... because
 - your expectations of them will be realistic
 - you'll be experiencing that great love you crave in Christ

Response

- But there is another application of God's covenant love that flows of out this assurance
- As we read through the rest of Malachi ... God's going to rebuke Israel over their
 - Half-hearted worship
 - Their material selfishness
 - Their unfaithfulness in marriage
 - Their neglect of the poor
 - Their lack of generosity
- Because while God's covenant love means he's remained faithful to Israel ... Israel failed to remain faithful to him
- And the rest of Malachi is God calling Israel back to love God in response to the love God has shown them

- The same is true for you and I
- We cannot just bask in the assurance of God's love for us in Christ and the cross and not let it change us

- It's impossible to know ... that in Christ you holy and dearly loved, and not be transformed by that
- Friends ... the good news of Jesus changes everything
 - It ought to impact your whole life
 - There's no room for apathy as a Christian
 - You can't just shrug your shoulders at God's love
- As Tom said in his Malachi podcast
 - The challenge is to be fully committed to the God who is fully committed to us
- And that commitment includes your:
 - Life goals
 - Priorities
 - Use of time
 - Sexuality
 - Worship
 - Use of your money
 - Relationships
- But it all starts with love ...
 - God's covenant love to you ... a covenant Jesus sealed for you with his blood on the cross
 - And to the extent you come to know and experience that love for you in being chosen, holy and dearly loved through the one who was willing to commit everything for you
 - Then you will be able to love him and commit every to him

PRAY