

Debate with God: A question of love

Malachi 1:1-5

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 18 September 2005

Introduction

I was reading this week about a man who one day pulled his car off the road to help a woman change a flat tire. While he was lying under her car, another vehicle accidentally swerved to the shoulder, and in the collision the car was shoved onto his chest, breaking his ribs and piercing his left lung, which began to fill with fluid. His wife, who was barely five feet tall, placed her hands on the bumper of the car and prayed, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," and lifted the car off his chest so he could be dragged out. By the time he was taken to hospital he was in a state of shock. Doctors prepared for emergency surgery, but his chances of survival were iffy. Suddenly, spontaneously, the man's skin changed from ashen to pink. He experienced a miraculous healing. He invited a surprised surgical team to join him in singing, "Fairest Lord Jesus." They did not even bother to hook him up to oxygen. He did not find out until later that this was the precise moment his father-in-law's church started to pray for him. Sometimes these kind of stories come from not very credible sources. But in this case the man was James Loder, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. His life was not only saved that day, it was radically transformed. Until then, although he taught at a Bible college, God had been mostly an abstract concept to him. Now Jesus became a living Presence. His love a life-changing reality. And James Loder's heart grew so tender that he became known as "the weeping professor."

You can't be loved without being changed. When people experience love they begin to grow lovely. This is true at a physical level. Psychologists tell us that the excitement of being in love increases your heart rate: your face glows, your lips look more red, and under-eye circles actually become less noticeable. Heightened emotions cause your pupils to dilate, so that your eyes look brighter and clearer. We have been so constructed that even our bodies become lovelier when they are loved. But it's especially true on a spiritual level. 1 John 4:19 says: "We love because God first loved us." It's our experience of God's love for us that enables us to love others. And the truth is we are loved. Frederick Buechner said, "We are above all things loved – that is the good news of the gospel ... To come together as people who believe that just maybe this gospel is actually true should be to come together like people who have just won the Irish sweepstakes." Yet often we don't. We forget or doubt or never truly believe that God loves us. Maybe that's why the people we know out there aren't flooding into churches on Sunday mornings. Our lives aren't flooded – and transformed – by the love of God.

A question of love (v1)

Turn with me to Malachi. It's the last book in the Old Testament, so go to Matthew then hang a left. Today we're starting a series in Malachi. This short book is written as a series of six debates or arguments between God and his people. We're going to look at the first one today. Let's read Malachi 1:1-5.

This book can be dated to around the middle of the fifth century BC. The people of Israel have returned from exile and captivity in Babylon. They've restored the walls of Jerusalem. They've rebuilt the temple (1:10). They've recommenced their system of worship (1:8). And you'd think their worship would be marked by rich gratitude for all that God has done. But it isn't. It's marred instead by apathy and indifference. While they've got their land back, they don't have their freedom. They are ruled by a Persian "governor" (1:8). Israel is still under foreign occupation. While they have a new temple, it's a sad imitation of Solomon's glorious temple. And while they live in reasonable comfort and safety, pests and plagues are ravaging their economy (3:11). The picture painted by prophets like Haggai and Zechariah had led them to expect that when they rebuilt the temple the glory of the Lord would come with unprecedented blessing and the nations would as a result stream to Jerusalem. They've waited some fifty-odd years. And it hasn't happened. It starting to feel like it's never going to happen. Like God has forgotten them. They've lost hope. They're doubting his love: "You say you love us? *How* have you loved us?!" God responds to their cynicism by presenting concrete evidence for his love. He points to the indisputable facts of history and says in effect, "Here are three reasons why you need never doubt my love for you."

God's love is unconditional (vv2-3)

The first reason is this: God's love is unconditional. According to the Old Testament, Esau (the ancestor of the Edomites) and Jacob (ancestor of the Israelites) were twin brothers. You'll notice in v2 that Esau is named first because he was the firstborn (Gen 25:25,26), and so by custom, he was to be the principal heir and recipient of his father's blessing. He was the one who deserved preferential treatment. And yet God "loved" Jacob and "hated" Esau in the sense that before they were even born (Rom 9:11) God chose Jacob to be the one with whom he would make a covenant, the one through whom he would achieve his redemptive purposes in this world. Interesting. Why? Certainly, it had nothing to do with Jacob. Jacob was known as grasping and deceptive (Gen 27:1-40). The point is that God's love for us flows from within him, not from what he finds in us.

Studies show that adults spend more time smiling at, cooing over, holding and kissing pretty babies than they do with plain ones. Fathers are more likely to be involved with attractive babies than those judged unattractive by independent observers. From an early age we are taught that love must be earned. Children's stories reinforce this. Why was the prince enraptured with Cinderella or Snow White or Sleeping Beauty? They were beautiful. There was something attractive about them. But listen to this. Ephesians 1:4-5 says: "God chose us in Jesus before the creation of the world." (As Eugene Peterson puts it, "Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made holy and whole by his love.") God loves you simply because he has chosen to. He loves you when you don't feel lovely. He loves you when those closest to you don't find you lovely. So what more do you need to achieve or accomplish? Who else do you need to impress. You don't have to earn his love. You can't. Just embrace it. His love is unconditional.

God's love is unceasing (vv3-4)

The second reason why we need never doubt God's love for us is this: It's unceasing. In verses 3-4 God points to the fact that he has "turned [Esau's] mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." He's probably referring to the invasion of Edom around that time by Nabatean Arabs. "Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish." He did. This prophecy concerning the permanent ruin of Edom was fulfilled when the Nabateans finally drove the Edomites from their territory.

Some commentators have asked, "How does the destruction of Edom prove God's love for Israel?" It makes sense when you understand that Israel and Edom were mortal enemies. From the time Jacob and Esau struggled together in the womb of their mother, the two nations never got on. The Edomites refused to allow Moses and the Israelites passage on their way to the Promised Land. Once Israel was established in the Promised Land, Edom was among the nations that plotted her downfall (Ps 83:6). And if you read Psalm 137:7 you'll see it records that the Edomites actually assisted the Babylonians in destroying Jerusalem in 586BC. So by pointing to his judgment of the Edomites God was saying to Israel, "Look at how I've been protecting you. In spite of the fact that you've been grossly unfaithful towards me, I am keeping my end of the covenant between us. I will never stop caring for you. My love for you is unceasing."

I love that story about the married couple who were having a bit of a row. And they thought, "Maybe we should just write up lists of all the things we dislike about each other. Get it out of the system." As the wife sat down with her paper and pen, she softens and thinks, "Maybe this isn't such a good idea." But then she looks over at her husband and he's scribbling furiously, smoke coming off the page. So she thinks, "Alright. I'll give him both barrels!" She scrawls out a whole litany of complaints against her husband: "One hundred things I hate about you." They exchange lists. Guess what he's written? "I love you. I love you. I love you..." The whole page. For every grievance that he has against her, he's written, "I love you." That's how God loves us. He's committed himself to us. You may feel that you have let God down. Even if you have, you remain the focus of his unceasing care. So what are you worrying about today? He is working all things together for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.

God's love is unbounded (v5)

One more reason why we need never doubt God's love. It's unconditional. Unceasing. And unbounded. Verse 5: "You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD - even beyond the borders of Israel!'" This closing verse hints at the universal scope of God's love. It's even more explicit in v 11: "My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun."

If you voted in the election yesterday you had a choice. Between Labour and National. Between Helen Clarke and Don Brash. If you chose one, you were rejecting the other. In our world that's how it usually works. To be chosen by someone usually means being chosen at the expense of someone else. But God doesn't choose that way. God chose Israel, not at the expense of the rest of the world, but for the sake of the rest of the world. To carry his love to all the nations, including Edom. God chose you – has gifted you with time, talents, treasures, knowledge, faith, love – not to keep for yourself, but to invest in the spreading of his kingdom. Like the people of Israel, do you ever feel that God isn't working in you or through you to touch anyone? God's promise is that he will, he wants to. "You'll see it with your own eyes." The challenge for us is to live in God's love. To remember that he loves us with an unconditional, unceasing, unbounded love. You can't give what you haven't received. Let me finish with a couple of suggestions on how to do that.

- Every morning, when you wake up, let your first words be "I am loved by God."
- Every night when you go to sleep, let your last words echo, "I am loved by God."
- Pick a verse like Isaiah 43:1-4. And write these words down and carry them in your wallet. When you're feeling unloved, or unsafe, anxious or alone, pull it out and take a look. Remember and feast on God's love.

Questions

1. David Watson wrote: "Unless renewal precedes evangelism, the credibility gap between what the church preaches and what the church is will be too wide to be bridged. It is only when the world see the living body of Christ on earth that it will be in anyway convinced of the reality and relevance of Christ himself." What do you think? How can this renewal occur?
2. The book of Malachi is framed as a debate between God and his people. Six times God outlines an issue the people need to address if they are to become the kind of people who draw others to God. Can you identify those six issues?
3. Are you, like James Loder, living in the love of God? Or are you more like the people of Israel? How? Do you have a passionate relationship with God or a plodding ritual?
4. Walter Wright says: "God's covenant love or covenant faithfulness represents the commitment that God has made in his relationship with his covenant people – a commitment to be our God, to be there in our future, to be for us... Even when we fail, God still commits himself to us and honours his end of the relationship by carrying our end also..." Discuss.
5. Read Deuteronomy 7:6-8 and Ephesians 1:4-5. What do these passages say about the nature of God's love for us? How are you ever guilty of trying to earn love?
6. Read Lamentations 3:22-23. What does this say about God's love? How have you experienced God's protective care in your life?
7. What gifts has God given you to use in spreading his kingdom? Are you using them?
8. Read 1 John 4:9-10. How could you in practical ways this week make your life an experiment of living in the love of God?