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Covenant love

Please read Malachi 1:1-5

The place is Jerusalem. The year is around 450 BC. About eighty years before, the Jews had returned from captivity in far-away Babylon. Fifty or so years ago, the new temple of God in Jerusalem had been completed. Its architecture and size were not as splendid as was the previous one, built during Israel's economic boom under King Solomon, but it was functional; it served its purpose. On the surface the life of Israel now seemed fairly good and uneventful. There were no major catastrophes. There were no wars on the horizon. True, no one was very rich, but economically they got by. True, the Jews were still under the foreign domination of the Persians (1:8), but at least they were back in the promised land, the temple had been rebuilt and people were getting on with their daily lives. They were settled.

The burden

But there is one man, Malachi the prophet, who amidst this

apparent calm is heartbroken and deeply disturbed. If you saw him in the street perhaps sometimes he would look anxious, at other times he would look furious and sometimes he would be in tears. He has a weight pressing down on his mind. The word translated 'oracle' in verse 1 comes from a Hebrew root which means 'to bear a burden'. His heart is burdened, loaded down. 'Is it trouble at home, Malachi? Is it trouble at work? Is there another war brewing?' 'No, but it is a message from God.'

God's men are not always happy-go-lucky people. This is not because they have nothing to rejoice over. To be a child of God, to have our sins forgiven, to have God's Holy Spirit in our hearts, to be bound for heaven are glorious things. It is not because they are gloomy and despondent. Christ gives his people peace and joy. It is because sometimes God's men can see the world from God's point of view. The prophet was given a special intuition to see society as God sees it and to feel the situation as God feels it. Looking down on the stubborn, lifeless, bitter religion of Pharisee-ridden Jerusalem, our Lord Jesus Christ *wept* over those sins and those sinners (Matthew 23:37). While the zealous missionary Paul was waiting for friends to meet him in ancient Athens the New Testament tells us that 'He was greatly *distressed* to see that the city was full of idols' (Acts 17:16). Men who are close to God can be sad men. They can be terribly cut up over the sin they see around them. They feel this, not in a sham self-righteous, holier-than-thou way, but because they see that sin is doing the people they love no good. They see sin as a horrible insult to the God they love. Sin is taking many dear people to hell and God is not being loved and glorified as he ought to be. They are distressed.

Malachi is distressed. Malachi is carrying this kind of burden on his heart and it is not the kind of message he enjoys carrying. But he is like an ambassador for God. He must speak this

message, which the people may not like, but which they need to hear. He has no option. God has something to say.

In Israel there is a man with God's message. And this message is not for the Persian governor, neither is it for the Egyptians or any of the other surrounding nations; it is *'the word of the Lord to Israel'* (1:1). It is a word to God's own people. All is quiet and uneventful. What can it be about? It is not trouble in the family; it is not trouble at work; it is trouble at church, in the temple and the people's worship of God. God has something to say about it.

The book of Malachi addresses itself to a certain kind of spiritual problem to which long-established evangelical churches and people who have been Christians for quite a long time are particularly susceptible. There have been those long years and they may have begun with great gusto and fervency, parallel to the Jews' return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple. But now time has gone on since that first commitment to Christ and, almost imperceptibly, there has been a steady erosion of living faith and spiritual urgency. The steady round of everyday life, with its stress and temptations, has somehow cooled the spiritual temperature. The adventurous young 'true disciple' has now become a staid pillar of the church. The fiery Christian Union student has got married, settled down and joined the establishment. That committed young nurse never did quite get out to the mission field, as she thought she would.

There is nothing wrong with being settled in a job and a definite geographical location, but somehow the Christian life has become easy. A nonchalant, almost slap-happy approach has crept into our spiritual lives. We have all our theology sewn up and we have become strangely deft at avoiding the crunch-point of those challenging sermons that we occasionally hear. Spiritual flames are flickering low, and for some that seems to be getting

very close to cynicism and somehow losing touch with the living God.

Just as with the Jews of Malachi's time, there have been uneventful years with no great troubles to keep us clinging close to God, and our minds have turned from spiritual gain and treasure in heaven to personal comfort. 'We will use our new house for the Lord,' we said. Faith has lost its edge and worship has become formal. Our hearts have gone out of it. We have become indifferent. We have heard it all before. We are indifferent about attending the prayer meeting. And, if the truth were known, we have also become indifferent and negligent concerning our own personal devotions, prayer and Bible reading. We still buy the Bible reading notes, but they lay mostly unread on the bedside table.

This indifference can become infectious. As we sense the state of one another's spiritual lives in those various little ways, it somehow spreads throughout a congregation and the church becomes dead and formal and, dare we say it, hypocritical.

What is the gist of the book of Malachi? It addresses this problem of spiritual degeneration, this fossilizing of faith. It is a book where God's people Israel are in the dock and God is charging them and accusing them concerning their spiritual decline.

Throughout the book there is a repeated refrain, a repeated structure in the Lord's words (1:2; 1:6-8; 3:8 etc). The Lord says, 'You have done this ...' Then he goes on to say, 'I know you will claim ignorance and say, "How have we done that?" But listen, you know what I'm talking about and it's got to stop!' In speaking like this Malachi reveals his great awareness of, and sensitivity to, the exact thoughts and feelings of his contemporaries, which is one of the marks of a true prophet. He

expresses the things they feel which perhaps they would never say in public. He exposes that self-deception about our spiritual lives to which we are all so prone. The pious Jew would never sarcastically say, 'How has God loved us?' or 'It is vain to serve God,' in public, while he in fact thinks these things in his heart. Many is the time that, in spiritual weakness, waywardness and blindness, Christians have thought like that, although, of course, they present a different front as they sit in the pew Sunday by Sunday. God sees all this and exposes it all in the book of Malachi. He shows why these attitudes are wrong and have got to stop. Malachi's book is a call to repentance from lax and hollow religion and, even more important, it shows the way back to genuine enduring faith in the Lord who does not change (3:6). It is the antidote to spiritual degeneration.

The love of God for Israel

These opening verses set before us why this matter of Israel's formal, lifeless, careless approach to their relationship with God was such a weighty matter. It was such a terrible thing because it is set against the context of the fact that *God loved them*. "*I have loved you,*" says the Lord' (1:2).

Well over fifteen hundred years before Malachi's time, God had saved a man called Abraham and made a covenant with him. God unconditionally promised to bless Abraham by making him the father of many nations and through him all the nations of the world would eventually be blessed. God was going to make Abraham the ancestor of his Messiah, Jesus, 'the Saviour of the world' (John 4:42). Later, when one section of Abraham's descendants, whom God had chosen, had become a large nation, they were in slavery in Egypt and God used his great power to rescue them, with Moses leading the Exodus from Egypt. Having redeemed the nation from that bondage, God made another covenant, this time with the whole nation of Israel. This