

# THE BURDEN OF GOD'S LOVE

STUDIES IN MALACHI - PART I

*I Have Loved You*

TEXT: MALACHI 1:1-2a (ESV)



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## *Intro to the Series*

Today we begin a new study on the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi. Malachi belongs to a category in the Old Testament known as the “minor prophets.” (including Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah) They don’t get this name because what they have to say is less important than the major prophets like Isaiah or Ezekiel. They are minor only in the sense that their writings are shorter. Malachi’s impact though, I pray, will be anything but minor for this church.

James Boice, who spent ten years preaching through the Minor Prophets, concluded; “Few portions of Scripture have been so challenging to me as the minor prophets. It is not that they are hard to interpret... Rather, it is that they speak so directly and powerfully to present sins. It is just not possible to read them carefully without having one’s life challenged and without determining to go out and live differently.” Rather than ten years, we’ll spend ten weeks on the last one, Malachi. But my hope is our experience will be what Boice describes—that we’ll be confronted with our sin and come to see more of the complexity of it and in turn understand better the greatness of God’s love for His people.

Admittedly, a couple of things work against us here. **First**, the book is unfamiliar even to those who read their Bibles often. So we’ll have to work to get a sense for Malachi, his audience and why God was addressing them. **Second**, the book is mainly a long correction (read: rebuke) from God to His people and this isn’t what most people are drawn to when they study God’s word. So, many could view this as an unfamiliar, undesirable use of time. But they’d be wrong. Malachi, as we’ll see even today, is about the love of God for a people who doubt it. Do you?

## *Malachi 1:1-2a*

<sup>1</sup>The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

<sup>2</sup>“I have loved you,” says the LORD.

## *What I Am Called To Do*

These verses sum up the point of this book—God telling Israel He has loved them. But in the words that follow, Israel asks, “How have you loved us?” Can you relate to hearing God loves you but looking at your life wondering how? In verse 1, we get a clue that what will follow is an answer to their question. The word “oracle” means “a thing lifted up” or “burden.” Malachi isn’t just drafting a letter. He is carrying a burden—answering their question. How is God’s word, the word of His love, a burden?

To get at what this means, before taking up Malachi specifically I want to step back to talk about little bit about the process I go through in writing and preaching sermons. I think it’ll help us understand the burden of God’s word. I’m a messenger. It is my honor to preach here because, as I’ve said, this is a church that **wants** to hear the word of God. And that makes my job a joy.

People ask how I keep from burning out, preaching every week. First, I have the wonderful luxury of relief in Jon—who is so capable and dedicated to the Word. Also, the truth is writing and preaching **is** what fills me up in my job. I can’t recall a single time I’ve come into this pulpit without being excited to get to preach again. I love the Word. I love this church. And I love crafting the sermon and preaching it. Here’s how I do it.

What you get in the bulletin is the same thing I have in the pulpit. It has gone from a first draft to a finished manuscript. I’m not often a three-point sermon guy, and neither am I always linear—so the handout helps the engineer types track with me. I want you to be able to hear the sermon in the moment, but also be able take it with you when the service ends. And I want to make myself accountable to you for what I say.

I **always** begin with a passage of Scripture. Preacher Donald Coggan explains my conviction here: “The Christian preacher, when he enters the pulpit, is not an entirely free man. There is a very real sense in which it may be said of him that the Almighty has set him his bounds that he shall not pass. He is not at liberty to invent or choose his message; it has been committed to him, and it is for him to declare, expound and commend it to his hearers... It is a great thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!”

I study the text, read what others have written about it, form a loose outline and start writing. I’ll write a few lines or a couple of paragraphs, and then go back and read them aloud. As I do, I revise and rearrange. No sentence is safe. If you’ve seen *A River Runs Through It*, I’m like the father looking over his son’s writing assignment, handing it back saying, “Again, half as long.” You’ll notice almost without exception the last line of every paragraph on my handouts takes up almost the whole line of space. That’s because I’m committed to saying three pages worth of stuff in two. I measure every word, clause and sentence to keep it lean.

As I revise, I also interrogate. Am I taking liberties? Am I being heavy handed, redundant? Am I being honest, clear, precise? Is God at the center? Section by section, I delete every unneeded line, even paragraphs I’ve already poured over and sometimes grown to love. Then I proof it, print it and tuck it away until Sunday. I arrive at church around 7:45am and lock myself in the theater where I preach the sermon to an empty room, working out projection, rhythm, transitions, and the lethargy of a tongue still waking up. Everything to this point has been preparation.

Then at around 11:00am, I move from preparation to delivery. This is the moment when the word of God, the messenger and the congregation intersect in God’s presence. There’s nothing more I can do to prepare. All I can do at this point is pray that the Holy Spirit would speak through me and cause everything that is not from God to fall to the ground. It is an incredible thing when the Lord takes a pastor still learning to preach and a congregation still learning to listen and brings His truth to bear on us all through His word, which He does, time and time again. On Monday morning, I start it all over. I love Mondays!

Why do I go through all this? Why do you come to listen? Because everything God tells us is **relational**. Every word has something to do with who He is and who we are in relationship to Him, and that is forever relevant, and weighty. It is **always** meant to change us. So for me to preach the Word in truth, I need to do more than say words. Relying on the Holy Spirit, I must seek to faithfully convey the **weight** of those words—to carry their burden to you. And you must do more than hear the words. You need to take up their burden and, also by the Spirit's help, strive to apply His word to your life.

We need every word He gives. The word of God is about how He loves a people who don't always see the proof, and who demand He produce it. The burden of the word of God is that He does, in fact, have an answer and in His word He does not withhold it. So when the message of Malachi is called a burden, it is because the words that are about to follow **matter**. They are God's answer. What is it about these people that God would send a prophet to give it? Some background is in order.

## *Background on Malachi*

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Who was Malachi? The Hebrew means "my messenger." So while Malachi could've been the author's proper name, it could also have been his title—*messenger of the Lord*. That would make this the only anonymous book in the Old Testament. Based on that, some argue Malachi was the author's actual name. We can't be certain except to say regardless of his proper name, based on his role as a messenger, "Malachi" suits him well.

Malachi was written to the nation of Judah about 100 years after their return from captivity in Babylon. Most scholars approximate the date of the book between 460 and 430BC—based on its relationship to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the governmental structure referred to in the book<sup>(1:8)</sup> and the nature of the offenses Malachi addresses, which mirror the same abuses Nehemiah addresses—who came to Jerusalem around the same time. Malachi was one of, if not the last prophet until the New Testament era 400 years later. So Malachi is followed by 400 years of silence, broken by the concussion of the heralding of the birth of Jesus, our Messiah.

Who was Malachi written to? To understand that, we need to circle back to the Babylonian captivity, or Exile. You cannot overstate how much of a defining blow the exile was to the people of God. These were Abraham's descendants—and from the outset of God's call on Abraham's life, their identity as the people of God was tied to the land God promised to give them.

And it didn't come easy. Abraham wandered as a nomad all his life. His descendants ended up in Egypt when the land God promised was devastated by famine. They came to Egypt for food, and ended up becoming a nation of slaves there for 400 years. When God eventually led them out of slavery, because of their disobedience to Him, they wandered the desert for another 40 years before taking possession of the land God gave.

But once the dust settled, they enjoyed some glory days. David reigned—the greatest king ever. Solomon built Jerusalem into a city so glorious even the queen of Egypt envied her and traveled to see her. And if their identity was tied to land, their land was tied to their worship of God. When they finally came into the Promised Land, they'd exchange the temporary tabernacle of their desert wanderings for the glory of a permanent temple in their capital's center. This was how it was supposed to be.

But the people became careless in their worship. They abused for profit what was set apart as holy. In their hearts they abandoned God. So God raised up armies from Assyria and Babylon to come and carry the people of God away—holding them captive in their foreign, pagan cities. The invaders destroyed Israel, knocking down the walls of Jerusalem and demolishing the temple. Think about this. The people of God, whose identity was so closely tied to land, rejected God and His resulting discipline was to have them removed from it—and as they were being taken away, to watch it smolder in ruin.

When God eventually permits them to return, they begin to rebuild. Over the next hundred years, they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the temple. They had begun again to worship. Life was getting back to normal. This is where we find Malachi's audience—on the other side of a horrible exile that brought Jerusalem to ruin; but the city has been restored. Still, after 400 years in slavery, after 40 years in the wilderness, after Babylonian captivity, they've become critical. Is this how a loving God treats His people? "How have you loved us?" they demand.

The structure of the book is a series of God responding to His people's complaints. And He tells them "Your priests show contempt for my name..."<sup>(1:6)</sup> "You have defiled my altar..."<sup>(1:7)</sup> "You have wearied me with your words..."<sup>(2:17)</sup> "Return to me and I will return to you..."<sup>(3:7)</sup> "You are robbing me..."<sup>(3:8)</sup> and "You have said harsh things against me..."<sup>(3:13)</sup> To each they demand, "How?" Have you ever found yourself in a place where you believe you have a right to demand God give an account of Himself?

Malachi's audience is angry and bitter. They believe God exists, but doubt He's good. They believe they're obligated to worship Him, but don't believe it matters one bit how. They have become indifferent to the point that they think when God declares His love for them, they can snipe back, "Yeah, prove it." They think they are in a position to demand God prove to them He loves them. But to their undoing, this is what He does.

## *The Burden of God's Love*

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And this is the burden of the message of God's love. When we demand to know how He has loved us, **there is an answer**. There are no rhetorical questions with God. And you cannot ask God to prove His love for you according to what He has done for you lately, because the evidence of His love for you is not seen in what He has done for you lately, but in what He has **been doing** since the foundation of the world to secure redemption for a people who time and time again reject Him.

How has He loved you? He has laid your sin upon the back of His Son Jesus and crucified Him for it. In this book comes one example of disdain for God after another and His response. Every word is the answer to their question, "How have you loved us?" It is love when He reveals our worship as half-hearted.<sup>(1:7)</sup> It is love when He exposes us as faithless in our marriages.<sup>(2:15)</sup> It is love when He uncovers our stingy offerings.<sup>(3:8)</sup> It is love when He lays bare our indifference to the truth.<sup>(2:6)</sup>

Don't you see, it is loving for God to show how we've failed to glorify Him for all He is because we were **made** to glorify Him for all He is. We were made to delight in Him. He means to change us where we fall short of all He has called us to be. This is the burden Malachi brings—the burden we're called to take up. He has an answer when we ask how He has loved us. And though His answer is hard, it's built on proof. He has loved you.