

A Cheap Relationship

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we are beginning a short series on the prophecy of Malachi.

We can turn back to the very first verse that we have in the prophecy, the Oracle of the Word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

And we're calling our series Malachi Questions, and that will become a little bit more apparent as we go through both the series, the sermon tonight and the series over the next couple of weeks.

I want to start by asking you all a question. And there it is. What would you say is the majority view of Christianity in Britain today? It's the kind of question that we often ask.

I'm going to give you three options. Here they are. One, that should be one, two, three, by the way, not one, one, one. One, a passionate follower.

[0 : 56] Two, a bitter enemy. Or three, not really that bothered. And I want you to imagine going up to somebody in the street, if you just went up to somebody on the Royal Mile and you said, what do you think of Christianity?

I don't think they would be likely to say, I'm a passionate follower. And I actually don't think they're that likely to say, I'm a bitter enemy. I think what they're most likely to say is, not really that bothered.

And that's what makes Malachi an immensely relevant book for us today, because that's exactly the kind of people that Malachi was prophesying to.

So who was he? Well, we don't know that much about Malachi, but we do know that he was a prophet. That basically means that he was God's spokesman.

And his name actually means my messenger, which is a great name for a prophet, because that's exactly what a prophet was. Many different prophets have appeared throughout the Old Testament prophesying in different circumstances at different times.

[2 : 07] But they all had one thing in common. And when you ever think of the Old Testament prophets, I want you to remember this one thing that they all have in common, all the prophets gave a message of judgment and salvation.

So you pick up any of these books, whether it's Malachi, Zechariah, or any of the other ones, you'll see that pattern. They have strong words of judgment. They give people warnings that their behavior is going to lead them into trouble in terms of their relationship with God.

But it's never just all bad news. There's always a message of salvation accompanying the message of judgment. With the warning comes a word of hope.

Malachi, like all the prophets, came with God's message of judgment and salvation. When did Malachi live? Well, no indication of date is given in the book, but it's almost certain that he lived around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

That means that it's near the very end of the Old Testament period. And the fact that it's the very last book is a bit of a giveaway in terms of that.

[3 : 22] In terms of summing up your Old Testament history, it's good to have a wee kind of framework to think about how Old Testament history looks. I think one of the best ways to remember that is anybody wearing a pair of Nike shoes?

If you've got Nike shoes or a Nike jumper or anything like that. So the Nike Tick is a helpful way of remembering Old Testament history because Old Testament story is basically one of a backwards Nike Tick.

This might sound absolutely crazy, but what I mean is that in terms of the people's kingdom and in terms of their relationship with God, the general trajectory was down throughout the period of the Old Testament.

It's not a kind of story of success, it's a story of failure. Things get progressively worse and worse. So you have the kind of glory days of David and Solomon up near the top and from there everything just goes down.

The kingdom splits. People are idolatrous again and again and every time there's a wee glimmer of hope, it doesn't last long and they return to their former rebellious ways.

[4 : 25] And the low point comes in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel when the kingdom is just wiped out and the people are taken away in exile, which took place around 580 BC.

But about 100 years or so after that, the people returned and there was a kind of glimmer of hope. And that's why we've got a tick because it's down and then there's this like teeny wee glimmer of hope at the end.

The people are not independent, they're under foreign rule, but they're back in their own land and they're starting to rebuild the nation.

Malachi comes in the wee glimmer of hope at the end. The people have returned from exile, but they're still a long way from being where they once were or where they wanted to be.

So who was he? He was a prophet. When did he live? It's kind of at the end of the Old Testament period. What was his message? Well, one of the key things in his message was that he challenged the attitudes of the people of Israel.

[5 : 30] In particular, he challenged them in terms of their relationships, both with their relationship with God and also their relationship with one another, particularly in terms of marriage.

These people were not passionate followers of God, nor were they bitter enemies. Instead, they were just not that bothered and their worship had become very half-hearted.

Malachi is challenging them and we read through that in chapters one, two and three, and then coming into chapter four, we reach the message of hope where Malachi tells us that a Savior is coming and there's something to look forward to.

Right we're looking at chapter one and in many ways this chapter is focusing on their relationship with God and I want us to look at that together. In many ways, Malachi is a big of questions.

That's why we've called our series Malachi Questions. Now normally that would imply a positive thing. Questions are usually a brilliant thing. So for example, if you are wanting to learn more about Jesus, questions are brilliant and please always ask.

[6 : 48] And even if you've been following Jesus for a long time and there's something you're not sure about, always ask. It's brilliant to ask questions. If you're reading the Bible and you come to books like Malachi, which we don't tend to read that often, always ask questions.

If you read something you don't understand, questions are so important. When you're pastoring people, helping somebody through a difficult time, trying to encourage someone in their faith, questions are brilliant to find out where they are and what they need.

And the same is true in evangelism. If you're trying to share our faith, sometimes we can so easily think that when we have opportunities to share our faith, we need to talk.

And that's true, but it's also really good to ask people what they think, what they believe, why they believe it, or what their thoughts are.

Questions are a brilliant thing, but not always. And the questions in Malachi are not good questions.

[7 : 48] They're actually bad questions because they are questions that reveal a hard and cold mindset among God's people.

And we can see that by picking out the questions in chapter one. Let me read verses one to eight again, and you'll see three questions highlighted. The article of the word of God of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

I've loved you, says the Lord, but you say, how have you loved us? Is not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord? Yet I've loved Jacob, but Esau I've hated. I've laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.

If Edom says we're shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins, the Lord of hosts says, they may build, but I will tear down. And they may be called the wicked country and the people with whom the Lord is angry forever. Your own eyes shall see this and you shall say, great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel.

A son on earth his father and a servant his master. If then I'm a father, where's my honor? And if I'm a master, where's my fears? Says the Lord of hosts to you, oh priests who despise my name. But you say, how have we despised your name?

[8 : 55] By offering polluted food on upon my altar. But you say, how have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised when you offer blind animals in the sacrifice.

Is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor. Will he accept you or show you favor? Says the Lord of hosts.

There's our three questions. Have you loved us? How have we despised you? How have you loved us? How have we despised your name? How have we polluted you? They're not questions of sincere inquiry.

They're questions of disagreement and of confrontation. The first question is doubting God's goodness. God has said to them that he loves them.

And yet their response is, how have you loved us? And there's a suspicion of God's love probably arising from the fact that their nation was so far from what they wanted it to be.

[9 : 54] That would have been the mindset then that because their nation has kind of fallen apart and they're picking up the pieces of this mess, the kind of natural conclusion is, well, God doesn't love us because everything's bad in our lives and they're suspicious of God's goodness.

The second and third questions are doubting our badness. So when God points out their sin, their response is denial. How have we done that?

And we see that there's this kind of defensiveness and disagreement lying behind the questions that the people are asking.

And so Malachi 1 is recording for us this kind of conversation and dialogue that God is having with his people. And that dialogue that we have is setting before us some very clear contrasts between God and the people of Israel.

And it's these contrasts that I want to unpack just a little bit this evening. Number one, we see a contrast between what the people meant to God and what God meant to the people.

[11 : 12] The very first statement of this prophecy is that God loves the people of Israel. He says, I've loved you. I've always loved you. And he's revealing what these people mean to him.

And that's what's emphasized by the contrast in verses two to five between Israel and Adam. Now just to explain that a wee bit, you'll remember that Israel as the name for the nation is actually named after one person.

The name Israel is the name that God gave to Jacob. And so the whole nation is named after Jacob. They're the Jacobites, the Israelites. Jacobites?

That's kind of got Scottish. But that's the same name, same word. They were the Israelites named after this one man.

Jacob had a brother, Esau. And from Esau there came a nation which was known as the Edomites. So Israel was the descendants of Jacob.

[12 : 16] Edom was the descendants of Esau. And it's very easy to look at these verses and to think, well, it all sounds very harsh on Edom. It says like God loves one and hates the other.

And you think that seems a bit harsh. But the point being made here is not actually been made about Edom. The key point is that Israel is special to God.

And among all the other nations, Israel is unique. The Israelites thought that the failure of their nation showed that God didn't love them.

If you had stood at the history of Israel and Edom at this point, you would have thought, well, Edom, they're getting on far better than Israel are. But the point being made is that the failure of the nation does not show that God didn't love them.

God is saying that he's always loved them and he always will. And no matter how successful another nation might look, Edom or whoever, that success will not last.

[13 : 19] You can see the Edomites are saying, well, we'll keep on rebuilding. We'll keep on going. We'll be fine. We'll stand on our own forever. God is saying that won't happen. And sure enough, Edom has long gone from the pages of history.

But for Israel, it was so easy to think, oh, these other countries are doing better. God doesn't love us. We need to be like them.

Perhaps a clear example for us would be to imagine the Roman Empire. Do you imagine being an early believer in the early first century, you've got this massive Roman Empire that doesn't really think anything of God at all, basically hates God.

They're dominating the world. They're really successful. And you could easily think, well, their gods must be better. We should join them. And of course, history shows us that ultimately, that Roman

Empire didn't last.

And for us today, it's so easy to think that we need to follow the successful looking crowd that has no interest in Jesus.

[14:23] History shows us that ultimately, that crowd will not last. To God, Israel was unique. And of course, we must never forget that the doors were always open to other nations like Edom to join the Israelites.

It was never a closed shop, but the key point was that they couldn't stay Edomites. They had to come and join Israel. This chapter, like many others in the Old Testament, emphasizes that ultimately, all nations are to come and worship God.

So the contrast isn't between nations and races as such. The key contrast is between those who are in a covenant relationship with God and those who aren't.

Israel were chosen by God to be a light to the world. They were incredibly special to him. But these verses don't just show us what the people meant to God.

They also show what God meant to these people. And the answer is not really that much. And that's revealed to us in their worship.

[15:27] So you remember that way back in the early Old Testament, when all God's requirements were being set out, one of the things that was made very clear was that when you were coming to bring a sacrifice to the temple to worship, you would take the best of your flock.

You take the animal that was without blemish. You would give God the very best. But instead of doing that, in Malachi's day, the people were coming with the animals that were lame or sick or blind.

In other words, the ones that weren't really worth very much. That meant that instead of their offerings being a sacrifice, in other words, something that cost you that you had to give up, their offerings were more like a kind of disposal system where they would just get rid of the stuff that they didn't want.

It was a way of disposing of the leftovers. That meant that their worship was half-hearted. They wanted to maintain an outward appearance of loyalty to God, but in reality, they weren't that bothered about what God thought.

And I have to ask myself, if Malachi was to look at my life, at my use of time, my use of money, my ambitions, my priorities, at how I treat other people, would he say God is getting the very best, or would he say that God is getting the leftovers?

[17:16] For me, it's all too often the leftovers, and I want that to change because God means far more to me than that.

The second contrast we see is between what God wanted and what the people wanted. So what does God want in these verses? Well, the answer is that God wants commitment.

He wants a relationship with these people that is real and genuine, not one that's half-hearted. In fact, verse 10 tells us that God would rather that they just stopped their worship altogether instead of this kind of nominal half-hearted worship that we're doing.

It says there, oh, that there were one among you who would shut the doors, shut the doors of the temple, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain. I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts.

I will not accept an offering from your hand. God's saying, I'd rather you just stop it altogether than this kind of false pretend worship that you're doing.

[18:23] All of this relates back to the fact that throughout the Bible, God's relationship with his people is a covenant relationship. And if that means anything, it means that God wants a relationship that's grounded on utter commitment.

That's why he says at the very start of this prophecy, I have loved you. God is utterly committed to his covenant relationship with his people.

He wants a relationship that has the greatest depth of commitment. The people, however, didn't want commitment.

They wanted convenience. As we said, they offered any old animal and worshipping God became a convenient way of getting rid of the poor stock that they had in their flocks.

But even then, even with this kind of half-heartedness and even offering the kind of the weakest of their animals, their worship of God was just a burden to them.

[19 : 31] Verse 13, but you say, what a weariness this is. And you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts.

For these people, worshiping God was a pain. And there is such a tragic irony here because in terms of Old Testament history, remember the backwards naiketik, in terms of Old Testament history, in terms of the relationship between God and his people, the truth is, they were the pain. They were the ones who had constantly let him down. They were a nightmare, constantly disobeying God, repeatedly refusing to listen to him and again and again wandering off to follow all the crazy ideas of the world around them.

And yet all the time, God remained utterly committed to them. God was constantly faithful, trustworthy and reliable.

He blessed them abundantly and he gave them extraordinary privileges. And yet to these people, God was a hassle.

[20 : 42] They just wanted convenience. And we need to be really careful about convenience ourselves. Now in saying that, I'm not saying that following Jesus should always be inconvenient.

Sometimes we can get that impression that the worse your life is, the better the Christian you are. It's not true. Being a Christian is an incredible joy and brings so many brilliant things.

But at the same time, we must remember that commitment and convenience rarely go together. It's true in so many areas of life.

If you want to be really committed to your job, that will often inconvenience you. Same in marriage and parenting. If you want to be really committed to that, sometimes it will be inconvenient.

Even with your health, if we want good health, that can be a bit of a pest sometimes having to exercise and avoid eating the things that we shouldn't. It's true in many areas of life and it's absolutely true in terms of our faith.

[21 : 50] Convenience will often come at the price of convenience. Likewise, convenience will often come at the price of commitment.

The key question is, ultimately, which of the two do you think is better?

So we see some great contrast here. Contrast between what the people meant to God and what God meant to the people. Contrast between what God wanted and what the people wanted.

Thirdly, we see a contrast between who God really is and how the people actually treated Him.

The verses that we read give us several wonderful reminders about who God really is. We can see four examples in particular in terms of how God is described.

[22 : 48] Verse six describes God as Father. He is the one who cares, who provides, who protects, and who loves His people.

And that rightly means He is worthy of honor. If I'm a Father, where is my honor? In Old Testament culture, as is still true in many ways today, a Father was to be deeply respected, and that is definitely true of God.

Same verse tells us that God is master. He's the one who is in charge, who ultimately has authority. And that means that He is not to be treated flippantly.

Instead, He's to be feared. If I'm a master, where is my fear, says the Lord. Now that word fear is important. It doesn't mean in the sense of being frightened.

It means in the sense of being reverent. Verse 11 tells us that God is the ruler of all nations, the one who is great among all the nations.

[23 : 57] He alone is God. No matter where the sun rises, God is to be worshiped. And then in verse 14, we're told that God is a great King.

Now Israel were all too aware of powerful kings in the world. Their nation had been destroyed by two of them in the previous centuries of Old Testament history.

Back in 722, the king of Assyria, Tiglath Pileser, came and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. 130 years later, in 586, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, another immensely powerful king came and took the remainder of the people in the south away into exile.

Now in the days of Malachi, they're under Persian rule. But Malachi is reminding them that ultimately these kings are nothing.

God alone is the great king. His name will be feared among the nations. But that reality of who God is set before us in Malachi 1 stands in tragic contrast to how the people actually treated him.

[25 : 08] As we said, the people were half-hearted and fed up, and they gave God their leftovers. And a very sharp comparison is given to us in verse 8, where God says, when you offer blind

animals in sacrifice, is that not evil?

And when you offer those who are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor. Will he accept you or show you favor, says the Lord of hosts. In other words, I think God is saying, you wouldn't dare give animals like that to your governor if he was coming to visit you.

The people were far more concerned about impressing their Persian governor than they were concerned about honoring God.

And again, there's this important application there because it reminds us that it can be very easy to do things to God that we wouldn't dare do to people around us.

I think a great example of that is GDPR. Now, GDPR is probably going to send a shiver down everybody's spine.

[26 : 19] For those of you who aren't familiar with GDPR, GDPR is General Data Protection Regulations which came into force over the past couple of years. The UK government introduced all this legislation regarding how you store people's data, their name, their address, their photo, anything to do with themselves.

A massive pile of regulations. When GDPR was introduced, every congregation jumped to attention and rightly so because this was legislation which directly affected us as a church.

And that was a really good thing because we needed to comply. The government of this country brought in new requirements and we complied straight away. And we are so grateful because many people poured hours and hours and hours into making that possible.

It was absolutely the right thing to do. But for 2,000 years, the governor of this church, Jesus Christ, has said, don't gossip, be patient, don't judge, love your neighbour.

And yet have we given these requirements the same attention? And I'm not saying that to make people feel guilty.

[27 : 43] And I'm definitely not saying that things like GDPR should be neglected. I'm just looking at myself and praying, Lord, please help me remember who You really are.

And if we remember that He is Father, that He is Master, that He is ruler of all nations, that He is the great King, then I think that will help me and You remember that what really matters is to prioritise what God wants.

And ultimately what God wants is a committed, genuine, real, covenant relationship with us where He is our God and we are His people.

And all of that brings us back to the questions that are being asked in this chapter. Remember we said that these questions reveal the attitude that the people had towards God.

Remember we said, behind them lies a suspicion of God's goodness and a denial of our badness.

[28 : 50] These are seen in the contrasts that we've looked at where who God is is not recognised and our failures are not acknowledged.

A suspicion of God's goodness, a denial of our badness. These two things have repeatedly ruined the relationship between God and humanity ever since Adam and Eve.

You'll remember that in Genesis 3, what did the devil do? He made Eve question God's goodness. He said, God's not really got your interests at heart when He's telling you to keep away from that tree.

God's not really looking after you, He actually just wants to stop you from being like Him. And then in the aftermath of the fall, we see straight away Adam tried to deny his own badness and shift the blame onto Eve and ultimately onto God.

Ever since these days, humanity has remained suspicious of God's goodness and has been in denial about our badness. We see it so often, we blame God for all the bad things and we talk ourselves up again and again.

[30 : 14] The result of that is that we tend to pull God down and we tend to kind of talk ourselves up as much as we can. I couldn't resist throwing a picture.

We've got a graph here of God and humanity and what we tend to do is talk God down and we tend to talk ourselves up. That's definitely what the people of Malachi chapter one were doing.

They're saying, well, you haven't really loved us God and so they pulled Him down. And we haven't really polluted your sacrifices and we haven't really despised you in our offerings and there's this kind of movement towards convergence.

And the result is that we have a kind of casual attitude towards God because He's not really that far above us. He's not that different to us.

Humanity does this all the time but it's absolutely crucial that we recognize that we can't do that. We absolutely cannot talk ourselves back into this kind of equality with God because one thing that the Bible does not do is bring God down and bring humanity up.

[31 : 32] The Bible does the exact opposite. The Bible puts God and humanity miles apart. God's standards are unchangeably high and humanity made in the image of God fell and is now just nowhere near the standard we are meant to be at.

That's what the Bible does. It doesn't bring God and humanity together. It puts them miles apart. It's interesting that the universe actually does exactly the same thing. You look at the universe and you look at us with absolutely tiny and you look at the universe and you think if God is the creator of everyone and everything then He is massive and we are absolutely tiny.

And that's exactly what the universe is there to do to show how great God is and to show how tiny we are.

That's the theological truth that the Bible sets before us. And it's crucial that we recognize the differences between these two graphs because graph one makes a relationship with God not really that big a deal because we're kind of at his level anyway with or without him.

It's not going to make a huge difference. Graph two makes our relationship with God the most important thing of all because without him we are nothing.

[33 : 00] In graph one, a relationship with God is not really that much. In graph two, a relationship with God is an astounding privilege.

In other words, graph one is a kind of cheap relationship that's no big deal.

Graph two is a costly, priceless relationship that's an extraordinary privilege.

Of course we have to ask which one's better, a cheap relationship or a costly one, a disposable relationship or an indescribably precious one.

Make no mistake, God does not do cheap relationships. And he does not do disposable relationships.

[34 : 06] What God wants is a costly, valuable, precious relationship.

But you look at graph two and you think, well, the gap is so big, how can a relationship be possible? Can we talk our way back up to that kind of level? No, we can't. Can we work our way back up to that level? No, we've got no chance. There's a huge gap that we can't talk ourselves across.

There's a standard that God commands that we can never work our way up to. There's a worthiness that God requires that we can never, ever reach.

In other words, there is a massive cost to bridging this gap.

[34 : 58] But the amazing truth about God is that in order to have a costly, precious, committed relationship with you, He pays.

The gap between us and God is massive, but Jesus steps into it and He covers all the cost.

Graph one needs a tiny Jesus. Graph two needs a massive Jesus.

And that's exactly what we have. And the fact that the Bible puts God and us miles apart shows you just how much Jesus will do for you.

And ultimately, that is what God means in verses like Malachi 1 verse 2 where he says, I love you.

[36 : 03] I love you to the point where I will pay the cost no matter what. God wants a costly relationship with you, but thanks be to God.

He pays for it. And that's why the ultimate message of Malachi isn't that these Israelites were half-hearted, you need to pull your socks up and not be like them.

The ultimate message of Malachi is that God's commitment to you is so great that He is going to send a Savior because God will not give up on you no matter how much it's going to cost Him.

And when we recognize that incredible love serving God stops being a weariness or a pain or a burden, it becomes an utter joy.

God said to these Israelites in Malachi's day, I love you. They responded by saying, how?

[37 : 13] God is saying to you tonight, I love you. And I hope and pray that you are saying in return, I love you too.

Let's pray. Father, we confess that often we can be half-hearted, but we don't want to be because we recognize how much you have done for us in Jesus.

And we thank you that He has come to pay the cost that we could never meet. And we thank you that your love for us is bigger and greater than we could ever grasp.

And we love you too. And in all our weakness and feelings, we just want to go into a new week with a renewed commitment to love you and serve you and live for you.
We thank you for your incredible faithfulness. And we pray that we would walk in your ways all the days of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray.
[38 : 24] Amen.