

An Invitation to Return

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[0 : 00] So as I mentioned earlier, in our evening services here at St. Columbus, recently we've been looking through the book of Malachi. So if you have a Bible with you, you might find it helpful to have it open, Malachi 3, that was on page 802.

Malachi 3 verse 6 says, I the Lord, do not change, therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

Children once said that the only constant in life is change. And it's true that life is full of changes. Change can be exciting, whether that's a new job or a promotion at work coming to a new city to study, maybe getting a new home, a new marriage, family, making new friends and so on.

But change can also be painful. Change is very often something we don't like, whether that's losing the people we love, whether that's friends moving on, work becoming stressful, maybe feeling homesick, all the struggles that are involved in getting older as our bodies begin to change.

Many of the changes we come across in our lives can make us feel lost or untethered or unstable. Sometimes we can be really conscious of how changeable life can be and how changeable we ourselves are as individuals.

[1 : 27] Every human being at one level longs for stability in one form or another. We're all looking for permanence in a world that is constantly full of changes, because we all know at some level deep down we are made for more than a fleeting existence.

Well, this evening in the Book of Malachi, we're pointed to the one person in this world who does not change. I the Lord, do not change, therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

So we're going to think for a few minutes this evening about how this amazing truth about God's character, about who he is as the unchanging God, is good news for us this evening, just as it was good news for the people in Malachi's day.

First of all, I have four points. First of all, it's good news that God doesn't change, because we ourselves are changeable people. Look at verse 7, from the days of your fathers, he says, you have turned aside from my statutes and you have not kept them.

You see, when you read through the story of the Old Testament as it unfolds and as it develops, there are moments clearly where the people love God and they live for him and they serve him and they worship him enthusiastically and things are going really well for the people of Israel.

[2 : 39] But sometimes you can skip forward even a few pages and you find they've turned their backs on God. They're spiritually cold. They're worshiping all kinds of other gods and they've completely forgotten everything God had done for them.

And so Malachi and a lot of the prophets actually expose this as this ongoing problem for God's people. From the days of their fathers, they have turned their backs on the God who loved them. Isaiah, another one of the prophets, put it like this, he said, we all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us have turned to our own way. Jeremiah chapter 2 and verse 5, God says to his people, what fault did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me and went after worthlessness and became worthless?

So the prophets exposed this problem in God's people, the changeability, the inconsistency that's present among them. And at one level, the same is true for ourselves today as human beings. We are all changeable in many ways, our emotions, our desires, our moods, our thoughts, our plans, our hopes, our dreams, they're all subject to change.

[3 : 47] Even our own level of spiritual zeal and enthusiasm and our commitment for living for Jesus can ebb and flow. Sometimes we find ourselves coming to church on a Sunday full of a kind of spiritual vibrance we're encouraged, we're enthusiastic to worship.

But often we aren't like that. Often we come here feeling flat or distant, maybe even apathetic in our spiritual life.

Because with the best will in the world, as human beings we are fundamentally changeable people and the different things that our life will throw at us will impact us in various different ways.

But the Bible tells us that God is not like that. God is a God who does not change. James chapter 1 and verse 17 says, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

First Samuel 15 and verse 29 says that God, he is the glory of Israel, he does not lie or have regret for he is not a man that he should have regret. The NIV puts it that he should change his mind.

[4 : 56] God is fundamentally not like us. The Bible often makes this distinction between human beings on one hand and God on the other, between the Creator and between the creatures.

Because our problem as human beings is we often like to imagine a God who is like us. And so we project our own attributes onto God.

So we end up with a God who is like us but just a little bit better. So the first thing this evening we need to do is have a bigger view of God.

Because we can't really make sense of the Bible, we can't really make sense of the gospel unless we have a big view of God. We can't even understand Jesus properly and what he came to do if we have a small idea of God.

We can't understand the gulf, the chasm between rebellious sinful human beings and a holy and infinite and immense unchanging God. And what Malachi and the other prophets do is they bring that distinction through so clearly.

[5 : 56] So we need to cultivate a bigger view of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith, I'm sure it's your favourite bedtime reading. It's a document from the 17th century. It sums up what we believe as a church, as church leaders we all subscribe to it.

It says that God is infinite in being and perfection. He is a most pure spirit. He is immutable. That's a fancy theological way of saying that he doesn't change. He's immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute.

But even that kind of theologically dense paragraph does not fully capture for us who God is in all his glory. And so the problem is that our view of God is often too small and our view of ourselves is often too big.

Because we are made in God's image. So there are many ways in which we are like God. There are many ways in which we reflect his attributes. But there are also many ways in which we differ from God.

For example, we change over time. If you look back at a photo of yourself from 5, 10, 15, 20 years ago, sometimes you can feel like a completely different person.

[7 : 04] Maybe sometimes you look in the mirror and you begin to see a few gray hairs. There are lots of things in life that remind us that time changes us. There are certain things in life, certain changes we have control over.

There are choices we make, people we choose to surround ourselves with. The job we do, where we live. But there are other changes we actually have no impact on whatsoever.

There are many changes in life we are powerless to control. We cannot turn back time. We are finite beings. There are two changes that are certain for every single human being.

We are born and we die. Both are at one level an inescapable reality no matter what our worldview is, our religious beliefs, our lifestyle choices, our level of wealth, whatever it is, everyone is born and everyone dies.

But God has no beginning and no end. God has always been and always will be. From everlasting to everlasting, He is God. It's a fundamental part of who He is as the unchanging one.

[8 : 09] He is the same today as He was at the beginning of the universe and He will be the same for eternity. God also doesn't become stronger or weaker over time.

He's not like a good single malt that's been maturing for 30 years in a cask. God doesn't get stronger or weaker. A human being, for example, if we don't do anything if we're inactive, that leads to atrophy, our muscles begin to decay and waste away.

We become weaker over time. And sometimes the people of God in the Old Testament felt this way about God. In Malachi's day they were saying, what has happened to our powerful God?

The end of chapter 2, they asked Him, where is the God of justice? What is going on? Why are you not as powerful as you used to be? The time has no effect on God. He is eternally the same. And so Malachi makes this incredible declaration about God's character. I, the Lord, do not change. So maybe we do need to have a bigger view of the God we worship this evening.

[9 : 09] We are changeable human beings, but God does not change. Secondly, it's good news that God doesn't change because we live in a world that is constantly changing.

That was true for the people in Malachi's day. They had to cope with huge amounts of change. When you look back at their history, we were thinking about this a few weeks ago in chapter 1, David and Solomon was kind of like a high point, but it was pretty much downhill from then on. They had to go through loads of tough changes, crushing defeats. They were taken into exile into Babylon. And even when they came back from Babylon, they returned from exile, it wasn't quite what they expected.

It was underwhelming. And so they were faced with all of these uncertainties politically, economically, with regards to their future, all kinds of discouragements.

And in many ways, our world today is full of changes. Politically here in the UK, we've been going through a period of change with Brexit and everything, all the uncertainty that surrounded that.

[10 : 06] Our world is constantly changing in terms of morality. The moral norm is always evolving. There's confusion and uncertainty over ethics and how we should live.

Our world is changing in regards to technology. There's radical change, even in the last decade, in the way that human beings interact with each other and engage with each other.

I'm sure you've shared a similar frustration of sitting down with an elderly relative or friend and trying to explain how WhatsApp works for the 50th time. Our world is constantly changing.

And so to a world full of changes, Malachi points us to the God who does not change. In the chaos of our lives, the busyness of work or uni, stress with our families, whatever it is, there is a God who does not change.

Malachi reminds the people that however fickle and inconsistent and undependable they are, God is not going to change his core commitment to them. And what that means for us this evening is that in a world where at one level it seems like nothing truly lasts, the one thing we can cling to is the unchanging God.

[11 : 15] Because we often look for stability in our circumstances, in our jobs, in our possessions, in the people around us, in our family and friends, and so on and so forth.

And these are all good things. They are good gifts. And we have seasons of joy and contentment with each of these things. But if we look to them as a source of permanent stability, if we depend on these things, they will ultimately fail us.

Tim Keller says this, a pastor in New York City, a written number of helpful books. He says, trusting God means connecting yourself to the one person who will endure forever.

And that means that you will endure as well. In a world where seemingly everything changes and nothing lasts, fix your mind on that promise.

The God we worship this evening is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The message of Jesus, the gospel, is a message of permanence to a world that is fleeting and temporary.

[12 : 14] So that's the second point. The fact that God doesn't change is good news because we live in a world full of changes. Thirdly, God's unchangeable character, his immutability, means that he is absolutely committed to saving you.

God is absolutely committed to saving you. The fact that God doesn't change means that his love is unchanging. His commitment is unchanging.

So no matter how unstable you might be feeling as a Christian, if your faith is in Jesus this evening, he is 100% committed, determined to save you. See, the people in Malachi's day had drifted far away from God.

They had grown cynical and complacent. Their hearts were beginning to harden. And we've seen over the last few weeks the ways that's expressed itself. We saw that they've failed to appreciate the love God had for them.

God starts the book, the first recorded speech in Malachi, I have loved you. And the people say, how have you loved us? We saw the priests were offering half-hearted, defective sacrifices.

[13 : 20] The people themselves were breaking their marriage commitments to each other. And on top of all of that, they were complaining and criticizing the God who loves them. And all of that was

just symptomatic of how far their hearts had strayed.

So here in chapter three, the passage we're in this evening, God graciously invites the people to return to him. He says to them, return to me, and I will return to you.

You see, rather than giving up on them and turning his back on them, he is a God who is committed to his covenant. The people turn their back on God all the time, but God would not give up on his people.

And really the message of all the prophets could be summed up in that one sentence. Return to me. There's a constant invitation to his people to return.

This morning, looking at the ministry of Jesus, we saw that it begins with a message of repentance, a message of turnaround. Come back to me.

[14:20] Malachi reminds the people right at the start of his book of God's unchanging love. You might be here this evening conscious that you have wandered from God, but here's the truth, the unchanging God will not let you go.

No matter how hard your heart, how cynical you've become, we need to remind ourselves of who God is, of his unchanging love he has for us as his children.

Because in a world full of change, God's love is unchanging. The Bible often describes God as a rock, a rock that we can cling to. You see, when life is hard, it can be difficult sometimes to believe that God truly loves us.

Everything in your experience, everything going on in your circumstances this evening might appear to count against that fact. But this is the message of the book of Malachi. Malachi reminds us that in the face of discouragement, in the face of disillusionment and our own cynicism, God has loved us and will continue to love his people and no amount of doubting, objecting, arguing or cynicism on their part will change that fact.

In verse 6, the phrase, children of Jacob itself points the people to God's past love, his past faithfulness, his consistent commitment to them. He has set his love upon this people and nothing will get in the way of that.

[15:45] The Gospel message itself reminds us that if our faith is in Jesus, he has set his love upon us, he has chosen to save us and he will not let us go. God is a God who does not give up on people.

So the fact that God is unchanging means there is a permanence to his love. Psalm 89, verse 34, God says to his people, I will not violate my covenant or alter change the word that went forth from my lips.

Isaiah 46, verse 11, what I have said, that I will bring about. I have spoken, I have purposed, I will do it.

You see, our own plans as human beings are very subject to change. There are so many factors outside of our control when we make plans. I'm a big fan of going up Monroe's, I was mentioning this at the prayer meeting a couple of weeks ago and there are so many factors when it comes to walking in the outdoors in Scotland that are outside of our control.

The weather. Random events can derail our plans. I was planning to run a half marathon last year. I signed up for it, I paid for it, I started to train for it, I was beginning to Google all the right kinds of nutrition and technique.

[16:58] And then not too long before the event, I strained my hamstring and I struggled to walk, let alone run and I had to pull out. There can be all kinds of variables in our best laid plans.

There's lots of things about the future that we just don't know. We don't know as human beings what's coming in the year ahead. We could be faced with a sudden diagnosis, we could lose our job, our relationship could break down, we could crash our car.

But God's plans are perfect. God is not surprised by anything. His unchanging commitment to His people is not subject to change.

So when we look ahead to the year that's coming, one thing we can be sure of, one thing that won't change is God's grace, His goodness, His love, His plan for us in Jesus Christ.

Our lives are so often full of bad news. And sometimes in the midst of bad news, in the difficulty, in the suffering, in the trials, we can be tempted to think that God is cruel and unkind, and God is loving and good when life is going well.

[18:09] But God is always good. We often can't understand some of the things we go through, but we can trust in the truth that God is good at all times.

His love is unfailing. We can look back to His past love and the times He's carried us through. So that's the third thing. The fact that God doesn't change means He is absolutely committed to saving you.

Fourthly, and finally, and very briefly, it means that He is absolutely faithful to His word. In other words, what God has said, God will do.

All of this amazing truth about who God is and His unchangeable character means that He is someone we can trust this evening. It means when you go to your Bible and you read it and you listen to His word, His voice, there should be no doubt in your mind that it's true.

I'm sure you can think of many examples of people in your life who have said one thing and then done another. I'm quite bad for that. I put off getting glasses for about five years.

[19:07] I kept saying to people, I'm going to get my eyes tested in the next couple of weeks. I eventually got round to it. But maybe at another level, we can think of people who've disappointed us by making a promise and then going back on their word.

Maybe you know people who will cancel plans due to busyness. We forget commitments we've made. As human beings, as fallible people, our word is never going to be infallible.

But God's plans and His promises and His truth in His word is 100% reliable. Psalm 33 and verse 11 says, The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of His heart through all generations. God's plan of redemption unfolds and develops throughout the Bible from Old Testament into new, but it doesn't change. He progressively reveals more of Himself and more of His plan.

Because there's lots of questions that pop up when we're thinking about God's character and what it means that He doesn't change. It can be quite a deep concept. Isn't there times in the Bible where it appears that God changes His mind?

[20:12] Doesn't God change when Jesus is born into the world? Doesn't it appear that Moses changes God's mind on the mountaintop? Doesn't it appear that God changes His mind with Jonah and Nineveh?

But what we are saying is that God doesn't change in His essence, in who He is, in His fundamental character. There's sometimes a change in the sense of how He relates to us as His people. He reveals more of Himself and His plan. And sometimes in His word, what theologians call accommodates to us in our language, in our understanding. And there's lots of questions we could go into and explore.

But I think for a Sunday evening, it's probably best not to. I would suggest you can read about God and His character. You should read more about His immutability and what it means that He doesn't change. And for now, I think it's helpful for us to stay in Malachi and think about this context.

Some people think that when we look at a passage like Malachi, and then we compare it with maybe a gospel, for example, that we have two different gods. We have a God of judgment on the one hand and a God of grace.

[21:17] Maybe you've come across that objection yourself. Or maybe it's a thought even as you read your Bible, it lingers at the back of your mind. It's true that the way that God interacts with us develops, but His fundamental plan, His fundamental promises do not change.

And what that means for us this evening is that Jesus Christ and the New Testament is not God's plan B. The cross is not His salvation backup plan because the Old Testament failed.

We have one consistent plan of redemption. And we see in Malachi God's consistency not only in terms of salvation, but also in relation to judgment. At the end of chapter two, the people ask, where is the God of justice?

And so in response to that, we have the beginning of chapter three. Malachi says there is a day coming where God is going to bring judgment. The people have been criticizing God for not acting. And God says, there is a day coming, a day where I will hold people accountable for your actions. And the people of Malachi's day expect that to be about the outsiders, the people around them, the nations around them.

[22:24] But God says it's you that needs to worry. He's going to judge the corrupt insider as well as the outsiders. And so the people are left with this question in verse two. Who can stand on that day?

Who can possibly go in front of a holy and perfect and righteous, unchangeable God when we are so fickle and flawed and changeable and inconsistent?

Psalm 130 says, if God was to mark our sins against us, if He was to count our sins, not one of us could stand. That's the context that leads to this amazing declaration in verse six.

That's what leaves Malachi to say, I the Lord do not change. Therefore, you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. In other words, our hope for that day is centered on the fact that God doesn't change.

We are changeable, but God is not. God has made an unchanging commitment to save His people. He has set His love upon this people. He has chosen to redeem them.

[23 : 25] And nothing is going to get in the way of that, not even their own rebellion. And we see that worked out in the biblical story as His plan of salvation unfolds and Jesus comes along. His unchanging nature, His love, His compassion, His mercy, His justice, His holiness, none of these things are compromised.

Because God wouldn't be an unchanging God if He overlooked sin, if He swept under the rug. But in Jesus, we see that evil does not go unpunished.

Evil is not overlooked. In Jesus' experience on the cross, we see the most powerful expression of God's love and justice, and they meet together.

So God's unchangeability is important in regards to our hope for the future. It means that His character, who He is, is not abstract, dusty, dry, irrelevant theology, but is at the heart of the gospel message.

If you're not a Christian this evening, what is it you look to in life for a sense of permanence? There are lots of good things we enjoy in this life, but ultimately, none of them will truly last.

[24 : 32] What is our hope this evening for the day when we stand before the Creator, the unchanging God and judge of this world? If you're a Christian this evening, you are rooted in Jesus Christ.

You are anchored in the One who does not change. And that means that nothing in this world can separate you from Him. He said this in John chapter 10 and verse 27.

My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all.

No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. And so the question we're left with this evening is do we trust Him? Do we have a big enough view of this God, the unchanging God?

Pray that we would find confidence in the truth that in a world full of change, a world full of chaos and busyness and all the struggles and battles we face in life, that Jesus we follow, the God we worship is the same yesterday, today and forever.

[25 : 36] Let's pray. Lord God, we thank You and worship You and praise You this evening that You are a God who does not change. Father, we acknowledge how busy our lives can be.

We acknowledge, Lord God, the many pressures and battles and struggles and all the various trials and difficulties we come across in life. Father, we pray that as we're burdened by these things, we would bring them to You.

We would anchor ourselves in the unchanging God. Father, we pray You'd remind us of the unfailing love You have for us. Thank You that that love does not ebb and flow.

Thank You that Your love for us does not vary depending on our mood or our ability to be consistent and be faithful. Thank You that Your faithfulness, Lord God, is so great.

Each morning, Lord God, we have so many reasons to be thankful. Father, we pray that as we leave this place and go into our weeks, You would help us, You would equip us, You would encourage us as Your people to live for You and love You.

[26 : 34] Father, help us in all we do to bring glory to Your name. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.