

MAL 1.1-5: HOW DO I KNOW HE REALLY LOVES ME?

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HOW DO I KNOW HE REALLY LOVES ME?

This is the question the American pop-singer Whitney Houston poses in one of her best-selling songs:-

*There is a boy I know, he's the one I dream of
Looks into my eyes, takes me to the clouds above
Ooh! I lose control, can't seem to get enough
When I wake from dreaming, tell me is it really love*

Chorus:

*How will I know (Don't trust your feelings)
How will I know
How will I know (Love can be deceiving)
How will I know if he really loves me?
I say a prayer with every heart beat
I fall in love whenever we meet.
I'm asking you what you know about these things.
How will I know if he's thinking of me.
I try to phone, but I'm too shy (can't speak)
Falling in love is all bitter sweet.
This love is strong, why do I feel sweet.*

*Oh wake me, I'm shaking, wish I had you near me now.
Said there's no mistaking, what I feel is really love*

Oh tell me....

The same question was also posed by the Jews in the time of the prophet Malachi. In the second verse of Malachi chapter one we read: **‘The Lord says to his people, ‘I have always loved you?’. But they reply, ‘How have you shown your love for us?’**” (Mal 1.2). How do we know you really love us?

This evening we are beginning a new series on the Book of Malachi – the last book in the Old Testament. We know absolutely nothing about this prophet.

- We are not even sure of his name. For the word ‘Malachi’ simply means ‘messenger’ – it could have been an assumed name, not his real name.
- We don't know when he was born, or when he died.
- We do know that he lived after the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon in 537 BC. Most scholars date the book of Malachi around the mid-5th century BC, perhaps some 100 years after the return of the Jews from exile.

It was a time of disillusion and indifference.

When the Jews had first returned home to Jerusalem, there was a sense of great excitement. People thought that God was going to restore the fortunes of the nation – that their country would experience the glory it had known under King Solomon.

But the reverse became true: instead of experiencing freedom, power and glory, Israel found itself having to pay taxes to Persia and having to provide provisions for the Persian army.

To make matters worse, the country experienced droughts and crop failures.

Money was tight – people were struggling to make ends meet.

Perhaps not surprisingly people began to question whether the God whom they worshipped really loved them.

Indeed, some were beginning to say that if God didn't care for them, then why should they care about God.

People began to feel angry and bitter toward God.

People began to feel indifferent toward God – indeed, even the religious professionals, the priests, could scarcely care about the God they worshipped.

As a result people began to live for themselves rather than for God – honesty in business and faithfulness in marriage went out the window – people began to worship the fertility gods of the nations around them.

It was a time of moral and spiritual decline.

This is the context in which Malachi operated as a prophet.

But unlike his predecessors, he didn't go around saying '*Thus saith the Lord*'

He adopted a different form of religious communication.

Malachi's preferred form of rhetoric, for that is what it is, is to make a statement, follow it up with a question, and then give a reply. If you look carefully, you will discover that eight times in this book he adopts this particular technique. So here in Mal 1.2-3:

- **"I have always loved you"** is the opening statement.
- **"How have you shown your love to us?"** is the question.
- God's reply: **"Esau and Jacob were brothers, but I have loved Jacob and his descendants, and have hated Esau and his descendants. I have devastated Esau's hill country and abandoned the land to jackals"**

LOOK AROUND YOU

Yes, Malachi's contemporaries in effect asked '*How do we know God really loves us?*'.

And God replies: '*Look around you* – things are not as bad for you as you think they are – just look at what happened to the other branch of the family'.

The reality was that the Edomites, who were Esau's descendants, had had a much worse time than the Israelites, who traced their ancestry back to Jacob.

“I have devastated Esau’s hill country and abandoned the land to jackals” (1.3)

Malachi seems to be referring to some recent calamity experienced by the Edomites. Commentators tell us that they had been invaded by the Nabataeans, who had ransacked their land, and forced most of the Edomites to take refuge in the Negev, to the south of Judah.

Malachi goes on: whereas God had allowed the Jews to rebuild on their return from exile, there would be no future for the Edomites: **“Let them rebuild – I will tear them down again. People will call them ‘The evil country’ and ‘The nation with whom the Lord is angry for ever’”** (1.4)

Why should God do this? Because, says Malachi, *‘God loves Jacob, and hates Esau’*. Actually Malachi is engaging in hyperbole – God hates nobody: God may hate sin, but he does not hate the sinner. No, what God is saying is that Israel has a special place in his affections – he loves his people.

Yes, says Malachi: God does love you. Look around you. Look at your history. Wake up and respond to his love.

That then is the context in which Malachi declares: God loves you
If the truth be told, the context is so remote from the context in which we live today, that Malachi’s message does nothing to us. We couldn’t care a toss about Jacob and Esau, and the fortunes of their descendants. It is all academic and irrelevant.

And yet there is a context in which Malachi’s message is amazingly relevant – a context in which our minds and hearts are suddenly engaged – and that context is the cross of Jesus.

LOOK TO THE CROSS

Listen to the Apostle Paul writing to the church at Rome: **“God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us”** (Rom 5.6)

How do we know God really loves us? Look to the Cross
If we want proof of God’s love, then look to the Cross and see there that God loved you so much that he gave his only Son for you, that you might not perish, but have eternal life.

In this context listen again to the opening statement and question of Malachi.
“The Lord says to his people, ‘I have always loved you’. But they reply, ‘How have you shown your love for us?’”

In a way of which Malachi could never have dreamt is, the reply is **“God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us”**

What an amazing statement.

- ***It affronts the intellect:*** it is inconceivable that God should love each one of us in such a way. There are too many of us for God to love. Just think: how many people do you love? What's more, we love less people than we know. And how many people do we know on a first name basis? Most people know somewhere between 40-60 people. But God knows every one of the millions of people who inhabit this planet – and what's more he loves them. What an amazing feat
- ***It affronts the conscience,*** in the sense that it doesn't seem right that God should love us all. For if we think about it, we feel that there are many people who don't deserve God's love – people who neglect their children, or people who abuse children; people who cheat, whether through claiming benefits they are not entitled to or evading taxes through underhand tax-avoidance schemes; and so the list goes on of people we feel don't deserve God's love. Actually, the Bible tells us that none of us deserves God's love – for in one way or another all of us have failed to reach the mark, all of us have sinned. In that sense God's love is truly scandalous
- There are times when ***it affronts the 'emotions'***. We feel like saying, if it is true that God loves us, then why does he allow me to lose my job, why does he allow my child to be bullied at school, why does he allow my loved one to suffer? Why does he allow this to happen and that to happen? And frankly there is no answer to those questions this side of the grave – but one thing I do know: God does love you – look to the Cross and see his love for you

To return to Whitney Houston's song: God's love is not a dream – it really is love.

God's love does not deceive – God's love is for real.

“I have always loved you” “How have you shown your love?” ”God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us”