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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

'I have loved you,' says the LORD. 'But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' the LORD says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.' Edom may say, 'Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.' But this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called The Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD – even beyond the borders of Israel!' (Malachi 1:2-5).



The Book of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament, was probably written at around 450 BC. The theme of the book is *You are Loved* and its opening words are: *'An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD' (1:1)*. How does it make you feel to know that someone loves you? Many people are just a little uneasy when someone comes up to them and says, 'I love you.' Sometimes I say it to people I know really well. Just as I go off the telephone I say, 'Love you,' and they don't know how to respond. 'Right, oh well, um, um,' is often all I get in return. Once in a while, if they are used to me telling them I love them, they say, 'Oh well, same to you.' But it is a good feeling to know that you are loved. I want to hear it from my wife every day, and I guess she wants to hear it from me every day too. Victor Hugo, the nineteenth-century French writer, said, 'The supreme happiness in life is the





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conviction that we are loved.' Michael Eaton, a missionary in Nairobi, once told me that he saw a sticker in a car window that said, 'Someone in Kenya loves me'!

We all have a need to be loved. When people are difficult to understand, when I wonder what makes them tick, I find that what they most need, and what they most want, is to be loved. There is nothing that breaks the hardest heart like the feeling of being loved. All of us can face terrible opposition and suffering if we feel approved of, accepted and loved by someone whose opinion matters to us. There may be people out there who care about your approval and perhaps you have never told them that you love them. Some readers ought to get on the phone today to their parents, while they are still alive, and say, 'I love you.' I remember how angry I used to be with my dad when a letter arrived from him saying, 'Dear Son, I wrote you on the eighteenth, you would have got our letter on the twenty-second, but I notice you didn't write until the twenty-fifth.' Then the letters stopped coming. Dad had Alzheimers. I could tell him now that I love him, but it would mean nothing at all. My dear Dad is now in heaven.

Let me tell you about Uncle Buddy Robinson. He was illiterate, having quit school at the age of nine. And he was tongue-tied. If ever there was somebody who had no future it was Buddy Robinson. A preacher who got to know him told the man, 'Bud, I love you.' Robinson looked up and said, 'What?' 'I love you,' the preacher repeated. 'Nobody has ever said that to me before,' gasped Buddy. The preacher smiled. 'Will you come to church with me tonight?' he asked. 'Don't know what it is or where it is,' Buddy replied, 'but I'll go.' He sat through the sermon, at the end of which there was an altar call. 'Bud, will you go to the altar?' the preacher asked. 'Don't know what it is or where it is, but I'll go,' Bud said, 'for you told me you loved me.' He was converted soon afterwards, and he became an evangelist in the Church of the Nazarene in which I was brought

up. It is estimated that Bud led over a quarter of a million people to Christ, and it all began because he was told that he was loved.

There is an even greater feeling than knowing another person loves you, and that is knowing that God loves you. There is no greater feeling than that; there is nothing like it. When I feel that God loves me and approves of me I can face a thousand foes. And the message of Malachi is just that, *You are loved*. *"I have loved you," says the Lord* (1:2). We all have skeletons in our cupboards, and God knows every one of them, yet he still says, 'I love you.'

Martin Luther called John 3:16 the Bible in a nutshell, and that's what it is. *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*

But knowing that you are loved isn't the end of the story. Malachi goes on to say: *'But you ask, "How have you loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals"'* (1:2-3).

That use of 'love' and 'hate' is a common Hebraic idiom in which they are not to be taken absolutely but by comparison. When they are together, as they are in this verse, love means preferred and hate means loved less. Which brings us to the subject of this chapter, the sovereignty of God. I like the phrase *'I have loved Jacob'*, I am not so happy with *'Esau I have hated'*. I wish that were not there. Whether we like it or not, the verse shows that God chooses some but not all. Charles Spurgeon used to offend his fellow Calvinists when he prayed publicly, 'Lord, send in all thine elect, then elect some more.' Spurgeon believed in the absolute sovereignty of God, his right to do what he pleases at any time with anyone. When he was preaching to some ministers on the importance of soul-winning, Spurgeon

said they should try to convert everybody as though they were all God's elect. Afterwards someone asked him, 'But, Mr Spurgeon, what if we convert one of the non-elect?' Spurgeon patted the man on the back and said, 'Well, God will forgive you for that.'

Although we read here, *'I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated,'* we read in Hebrews 12:15: *'See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no-one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.'*

Jacob could take no credit because God loved him. Esau could not blame God because he chose to live in the here and now, voluntarily giving up his birthright. What he did, he did by deliberate choice. Salvation is all of God's choice. No Christian can boast of his faith and say, 'Look what I have done!' In the sovereignty of God salvation is his to give or to withhold. Some people don't like it that God has that right, but he is God and he does whatever he wants.

Sometimes we do not want God to be God, we want God to be like us. We want God to jump if we just look up to him; we want God to salute us and do our bidding. But instead, he said to Moses, *'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'* (Ex. 33:19). That is God's right.

God sometimes chooses to withhold his mercy. He says, *"Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. ... the wrath of the LORD ... You will see it with your own eyes"* (1:4-5). That is enough to bring us to our knees.

The only way to be saved is to ask God for mercy. Mercy, to be mercy, can be given or withheld and justice be done in either case. Jesus described two people in prayer. *‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men ... or even like this tax collector” ... But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’* (Luke 18:10-14).

If you want to compare yourself with others, God says you are lost. You should climb down from your pride and say, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner. I’d be so grateful.’ Because God decides to whom to show mercy, it makes all the difference in the world how we approach him. He is sovereign. When you know that he has said, *‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’* (Ex. 33:19), you come to your knees and say, ‘Will you be gracious to me?’

This word at the beginning of the Book of Malachi was an oracle to the people of Israel. You say, ‘Well that is fine, God loved Israel, but I am a Gentile.’ But in Romans 9:6, Paul says, *‘It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.’* God has widened the family. His family was not to be continued along racial lines, but through those who would hear the gospel and respond to it. There is one requirement for being loved. We find it at the end of the book of Revelation. *‘The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come.” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life’* (22:17).

The requirement for being loved is to know we are in need of his love, and the requirement for being satisfied is that we are thirsty.