

The Eternal Love of God  
Genesis 25:19-34; Malachi 1:1-5

During our study of Ecclesiastes, we saw how empty life can be for those who have a purely worldly perspective. Yes, for those who live only for the things under the sun, life is inherently frustrating, because nothing in this world lasts forever – not even life itself. Only when God comes into the picture does everything start to make sense.

But that's not to say that the people of God have everything figured out. In fact, the more we know about God, the more questions we often have about Him. For if God really is all-powerful and if He really is in control of everything that happens, then why do we have droughts and pandemics? If God really loves us, why is there so much suffering in the world?

Well, we aren't the only generation of God's people to have such questions, are we? For example, think about the folks who first heard Malachi's prophecy, around 400 years before the coming of Christ. Yes, they had been allowed to return to the Promised Land from their exile in Babylon. But they were no longer an independent nation – instead they had been incorporated into the Persian Empire. So, instead of having a descendant of David to rule over them, they had to obey laws made up by unbelieving foreigners, and of course to pay the taxes those foreigners levied on them. So, it's no wonder that, as we see in verse 2, the people wondered if God really loved them at all.

And maybe when you look at all the problems in your life and in the world around us, you wonder the same thing. Maybe you just don't see how a loving God could allow you or your loved ones to endure sickness and sadness, grief and loss. But God's answer to His people is perhaps even more unsettling than our questions. For God simply says, "I loved Jacob and I hated Esau."

But how does that clear things up? After all, Jacob and Esau, the children of Isaac and the grandchildren of Abraham, were not just brothers, they were twins. And since Esau was the firstborn, even if he was something of a blockhead, didn't the blessings of God, the covenant promises that God had made first to Abraham and then to Isaac, rightfully belong to him? So, why was God so hard on Esau? Why did God say that he hated him?

Well, we might be tempted to let God off the hook by putting the blame back on Esau. After all, by selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew, Esau obviously despised his birthright. So, surely, God chose Jacob because Jacob was somehow more worthy to be blessed.

But the problem is that God chose Jacob before the twins were even born. So even if Esau was not worthy to receive the covenant promises, how could God's choice have depended on anything Esau did or left undone?

Of course, we might appeal to the fact that God can see into the future. Yes, God chose Jacob before Jacob was born, but God might have made this choice because of the actions that He knew Jacob and Esau would take later in their lives. In such a way, we might continue to pin the blame on Esau and give the credit to Jacob, believing that God's choice does not somehow determine the future, but only that it reflects what will eventually happen.

Many theologians have indeed come to this conclusion. And it does seem to make some sense. It gets God off the hook. It makes Him seem less arbitrary, less harsh. But there is only one problem with this theory. It doesn't square with the facts.

For let's take another look at these twins. Esau may have despised his birthright, but was Jacob really any more worthy of God's choice? Remember, Genesis 27 tells the story of how Jacob took advantage of his blind father, pretending to be Esau in order to steal the blessing Isaac intended to give his firstborn. So, how could Jacob somehow be more virtuous, more worthy than Esau was?

And didn't Jacob continue to doubt God's promises, even after God blessed him with children and many possessions? Didn't Jacob go on to play favorites within his own family, engendering the envy and hatred among his sons that led Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery in Egypt?

No, even if we want to solve the mystery of God's choice by saying that God looks into the future and determines what He will do only because of what we end up doing, we run into the stubborn problem of human nature. For the fact is that none of us are worthy of God's choice. None of us can honestly say we love God with all we are and

all we have. None of us can claim that we love our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves. No, all of us have broken God's law of love, and all of us thus deserve to die, to be rejected by the God whom we have rejected by our selfishness and rebellion.

No, Jacob was no better than Esau, and we who trust Jesus are no better than those who continue in unbelief. If God's choice somehow depended on our goodness or on our actions, none of us would be saved. In short, there is absolutely nothing that any of us can do to make ourselves worthy of God's love.

Oh, but we can try, can't we? Look for example at the Edomites, the descendants of Esau who are mentioned in verse 4. Just as the Israelites had been carried off into exile in Babylon, verse 3 says that God allowed the enemies of the Edomites to overrun their territory and lay waste to their land. But how did these descendants of Esau respond to such a disaster? They said, "We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places."

Now, you have to admire their pluck. They weren't going to let anything get them down. They were determined to better their lot, and they were willing to do whatever was necessary to restore their fortunes. But God makes it clear in verse 4: no matter how hard they tried to put the pieces of their lives back together, their efforts would do no good. Just as was the case with the Israelites, there was nothing they themselves could do to earn God's blessings, to earn God's love.

And didn't we discover the same sort of helplessness in the book of Ecclesiastes? Remember, Solomon tried everything he could think of to find happiness and fulfillment in life, but nothing worked. As long as his perspective was limited to the things under the sun, as long as he was focused only on what he could possess or accomplish in his own strength, everything was vain, empty, fleeting. Or as God puts it in verse 4: "They shall build, but I will throw down."

So, where does that leave us? If there's nothing that any of us can do to earn God's love, and if there's nothing we can do to escape the inevitable consequences of sin, we might be tempted to fall into the same sort of despair we read about in Ecclesiastes. In the face of all our problems, we might even be tempted to ask the same sort of cynical question that God's people asked in verse 2: "God you say that you love me, but how can that be true? Given all that we are going through, in what way have you loved us?"

But that really isn't the right question, is it? No, given the pervasiveness of our sin, and given our inability to rid ourselves of it, the proper response when God says, "I have loved you," is not to ask, "How?" but "Why? Why me? Why have you loved someone like me? I'm no better than Esau, and you rejected him. So, why did you decide to love a sinner like Jacob? Why have you chosen to love a sinner like me?"

Well, even if it doesn't make any sense at all, the good news is that God has in fact set His love on rebellious, inconstant sinners just like Jacob, and just like us. And that means that our hope is not based on anything we say or do, or on anything we leave undone. No, our hope is in God's gracious, unconditional love alone. "I have loved you," saith the Lord. And that statement of fact, that sovereign choice of God should be enough for us.

Oh, but how can we be sure that God has chosen us? After all, what if we come to the end of our lives and find that we weren't chosen after all? What if we want to follow God but He has not in fact chosen us to be His people? Such are the questions that are often asked by those who reject the idea that God chooses whom to love.

But such objections forget that God's love is not only a sovereign love that chooses. It is also a merciful love that promises. And we see the proof of that kind of love in verses 1, 2, 4 and 5. For in each of those verses we find the covenant name of God, which we often pronounce, "Yahweh," which is represented in most translations by the word LORD in all caps.

But why is God's name so important? Because God's covenant name goes along with His covenant promises. God's name comes from the Hebrew verb "to be," because He is the God Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come. He is therefore the same God, yesterday, today, and forever. And once such an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable God has made a promise, you can count on Him to keep it.

And to whom has our God promised His eternal love? Well, Jacob received the covenant promise from his father Isaac, even though he didn't deserve it any more than any of us do. And Isaac had received it from his father

Abraham. And God had made a covenant with Abraham, promising that his Seed, that one of Abraham's descendants would inherit the land and would become as numerous as the sand on the seashore and all the stars in the sky.

And the good news is that Jesus is that Seed of Abraham. So as we place our faith in Christ, we not only become one with Him, part of His very body. We also inherit all the promises that God made to all His people throughout all the years.

So, how can we be sure that God loves us? Given all the sin around us and within us, what proof do we have of His love? Look again at His words: "I have loved you." God does not say, "I might love you if you measure up." God does not say, "I might love you if I feel like it." He says "I have loved you." God's covenant love is thus a completed action. There is simply nothing that His people need to add to it.

And how can we doubt this eternal, finished love of God when we look at the cross? For there, at the price of the blood of His own Son, God the Father accomplished all that is necessary for our salvation. There, God loved us with the greatest possible love, a love that lays down its life for its beloved, in spite of our unworthiness.

So, for those who are trusting in Christ, there is nothing we have to do to earn the love of God. There is no magic formula we have to say; there is no ritual we have to perform in order to bribe God or coax God into loving us. No, God takes the initiative in our salvation by loving us first, in spite of our sin, in spite of our rebellion against Him. God draws us, God fills us, God renews us, God saves us – He does it all. And He does it all for love.

"I have loved you." That's the unconditional promise that our covenant-keeping, everlasting God makes to undeserving sinners like us. So, let us trust Him to keep His promise. And let us ask Him for the grace to love Him in return.