

Spiritual Dullness

A Study in the Prophet Malachi

David Gooding

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PO Box 2216

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w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

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Malachi

- 1:2 But you say, 'How have you loved us?'
- 1:6 But you say, 'How have we despised your name?'
- 1:7 But you say, 'How have we polluted you?'
- 1:13 But you say, 'What a weariness this is.'
- 2:14 But you say, 'Why does he not?'
- 2:17 But you say, 'How have we wearied him?'
- 3:7 But you say, 'How shall we return?'
- 3:8 But you say, 'How have we robbed you?'
- 3:13 But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?'

It is obvious from this series of questions and one statement that, in the times when Malachi spoke, God's people had become spiritually dull. Their discernment was blunted and they had declined in spiritual health so much that they were not even aware of it. Why was that? We should perhaps try and find any reason for it that we can, for we may be glad when others find some reason for it in us some of these days. Let us be careful in criticising other folks mercilessly.

The people who came back with such enthusiasm to restore the temple and the city and land were looking for the coming Messiah. When he did not come they must have got disappointed, and hope deferred had made their hearts sick (Prov 13:12). They were keen that Messiah should come and put down evil, but he did not come, and in many quarters evil continued and the people lost heart. They had thought their restoration meant that in a few days, months or years the Messiah would come and the Messianic age too with all its honey and milk and delights—and pain would be gone. But the work of restoration was a slow business; they found evil still within and without. Heaven was not just about to be realised, so they grew weary and slackened. What was the good of it all? Some of them came near to saying that there was nothing in it.

How did they ever get to that position?

They had lost their sense of the love of God

The opening verses tell us. "I have loved you," says the Lord. *But you say, "How have you loved us?"* (1:2). They had heard it many times. Now they were turning round and saying that they did not particularly see where God had loved them.

Is it possible for a believer today to do that? It is indeed! That is the very thing in which the first church in the book of the Revelation fell, 'But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first' (2:4). What was their and our first love to Christ? Well, it was possibly when we realised how much Christ loved us. Why do some of us lose our love for Christ? It is because we lose the sense of Christ's love for us.

Israel did so. God had loved them, and loved them spectacularly. But they came to take it for granted and it became ordinary. Presently they could not see anything at all that told them that God loved them, and they lost their sense that he did love them. If only they could have got across the border to Esau, out there in the world, to see that when Esau sinned God came down in judgment (Mal 1:3–5). If only they could have remembered that Israel deserved a similar judgment, yet God had poured judgment on Esau and had had mercy on Israel, though they did not deserve it. God spared them his judgment because he loved them, but they had lost sight of that.

We could all lose sight of God's love, for this or that reason. We so easily take it for granted and we forget it. That is why the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper, so that we would remember it at least once a week. It is easy to take it for granted and forget it. There have also been people so keen in the Lord's work, going out to see the whole area converted, putting their whole energy into it, praying, working — and only a few get converted. They begin to get fed up and then there comes a little bit of quarrelling amongst themselves, and disputes, and then they decide to ditch it all because there was nothing in it. They had got so frustrated because the Lord's work did not proceed in their hands and they decided there was nothing in it. Today they are right back in the world.

How did that come about? They lost the sense of God's love for them. But if heaven does not come for another million years and the work of God in our hands goes to nothing, it will remain true that God loves us. If he did not love us, we would be in hell already. Nothing that ever happens will be bigger than this, 'The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). Once the wonder of that ceases to touch our hearts, our work is on the slippery slope to disaster.

The next four come together, 1:6, 7, 13; 2:14.

They showed contempt for the Lord's name and for the altar

When they lost their sense of the love of God for them, what happened next? "'O priests, who despise my name." *But you say, "How have we despised your name?"*' (1:6).

So God tells them, 'When it comes to bringing your offering — instead of choosing the best bull in your herd, you choose any old thing that is half riddled with consumption, or has one horn missing and is dying with disease, and you say, "That will do for the Lord." You try offering that to your governor as a present, and see what he will say. You wouldn't think of that, then why do you offer it to me?'

'But you say, "How have we polluted you?"' (v. 7). They had fallen into that way of thinking. It did not seem extraordinary to them — any old thing would do for the Lord.

Well, we all are curious people! When we get home to heaven we feel that nothing but crowns will do and they shall all be at the feet of our Lord — but this week we have more important things to think about! We may spend five minutes, hastily, for the Lord, and the

assembly work can be carried on any old way. When we lose our sense of God's love and mercy for us, we will act as though any old slap-dash thing will do for the Lord. They acted as though the table of the Lord was contemptible and to be despised.

But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord. (v. 13)

But there was worse still. The priests, who should have kept knowledge and taught the people (2:7), said that it did not matter, and they shouldn't take these things too seriously. 'Go out and enjoy yourselves and don't think too much about God,' they said.

The details of the text tell us what happened next. With the loss of the sense of God's love for them and his specially privileged position for them as his people, they not only became slip-shod in their offerings and service for God, but their family life broke up and divorce became rampant.

And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand. *But you say, 'Why does he not?' (2:13-14)*

They filled God's altar with tears, the tears of broken marriages and families, and their sacrifices were then not acceptable. It was no good coming into his presence, mouthing praise and singing psalms and hymns, if their families were in ruins as a result of having acted treacherously against their wives in divorce. God wished he had somebody there who would close the doors (1:10) and stop them offering sacrifices, for he did not want to hear them. When we lose the sense of God's mercy and love for us, and become slip-shod in the Lord's ways so that any old thing will do, instead of disciplining ourselves according to God's word we shall become self-indulgent and careless in family life and disasters will overtake us.

They began to doubt God's justice

You have wearied the Lord with your words. *But you say, "How have we wearied him?"* By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17)

Here comes another problem. They had thought that the Messiah would come at any time, but he did not—as Zechariah had warned. So they began to think that the idea that the Messiah would come and put down evil was not true. Evil was running rampant in the world, and if God cared he would put it down. But in the world it is the evil men who prosper, so it does not matter if you are evil or good, God is not interested in it.

We must be patient with them here. It is a very big problem. Our Lord indicated this same problem when he gave us the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). The widow came to the judge and asked to be avenged of her enemies, but the judge would not do it. The Lord said that the elect ought always to pray, for one day God will avenge them.

But he is longsuffering, so he waits and waits and God's people suffer. Do not give up trusting and praying, for one day God will avenge his elect. 'Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (v. 8). One of the great trials of faith while we wait for the Saviour to come is, *Does God really care?*

What would we say to this if we lived in a country where we saw our parents, our spouses, our children, one by one taken to a concentration camp and mental hospital? What would any of us say if we were left in such circumstances a widow, and desolate? Would we ask then if there is anything to the Bible, why does God not intervene, and why is it that such behaviour prospers? Let us not be too hard on Christians in such circumstances. It may come to us one day, and then we will find it hard to believe that there is a God in heaven who cares about right and wrong, as we face the fact that he does not yet intervene to put evil down.

Why does he not come? The passage tells us that one day he will.

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple . . . But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. (3:1-2)

Yes, he will come. But the point is, who shall abide his refining fire? As John the Baptist was to say, he would baptize men and women in the Holy Spirit if they believe, but in the fire of God's judgment if they do not believe (Matt 3:11-12; Luke 3:16-17).

'Why does he not come?' they asked. It would have been a bad job for many folks if he had come! He did eventually come to his temple in the time of John the Baptist, and he brought the message of God's salvation. He would delay using the fan of judgment. He personally indicated that that period would be in the distant future; his coming now was 'the acceptable year of the Lord' (Luke 4:19; Isa 61:2). The day of God's judgment, wrath and vengeance would come eventually, *but not yet* (Matt 13:30, 49-50).

Are any of us getting impatient that God does not deal with our enemies and put them down? It means we have to suffer. Is that why he waits?

The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)

It will be a sad day for some men when he does come; and today we are glad that he did not come in Haggai's day, or Zechariah's day, or Malachi's day. We have got one good, substantial reason for that—we were not born during those years, so we are glad that he has waited until now.

And can we wait like this? It is by remembering that we deserved his wrath but he loved us, that we will be saved from those terrible doubts when they come. May he preserve in our hearts the sense that, whilst we are unworthy, God loves us and he spared us and saved us. If that much is true, we can afford to wait another ten million years for our heaven, for it shall surely come.

They were satisfied with themselves

“Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord of hosts. *But you say, “How shall we return?”* (3:7). Do we see where they have slipped to now? They do not imagine that they could do anything a little better for the Lord than they were doing then. Imagine getting into that state. We have not got there yet, have we? Of course not! We could all write a long list of things that we could be doing better for the Lord. We may not manage to, but we wish that we were doing better.

A person who would ask wherein he could return is showing that he is miles away from the Lord. We should all hope that we never meet such a person. He would be imagining that he is as good as if he were in heaven now; but he would have lost sight of what heaven is about, and would be far away from it. Our goal is nothing short of being like Christ (1 John 3:2), and to serve him one hundred per cent (Rev 22:3–4). We need to return to the Lord every day of the week and confess where we have gone wrong, seeking grace to be better tomorrow (cf. 1 John 1:8–2:2).

They were robbing God

‘Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. *But you say, “How have we robbed you?”* In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you’ (3:8–9). That is what God could accuse them of! Yet they could not see where they were possibly robbing him. They had not noticed it. Did they even care?

They were speaking against God

‘Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord. *But you say, “How have we spoken against you?”*’ (3:13). God finally tells them that their words have been stout, arrogant against him. How was that? They had asked what they were getting out of their service for the Lord. They called the wicked happy, and asked what they themselves were getting out of it. They had put their backs into the work, and their money too, going at times without a new carpet or two, while the man down the street did not even go to the prayer meetings, nor the Bible readings, still less the gospel meetings. He did overtime at work all the time, and look at what he got out of it—a car, a boat, a holiday. What had they got out of it all?

‘You say that I do not pay enough,’ says the Lord. ‘I tell you what I am going to do. To those who have concern about my name, and think about it, I shall keep accounts. I have a book of remembrance; those who fear my name and talk about it, and try to spread its glory, shall be in my book, and when I make up my jewels, they shall be mine’ (see 3:16–17 KJV). They shall be the peculiar treasure of the God of the universe.

Investment Interest

We have not yet seen nor imagined what God will do when he repays our sacrifices. We shall be ashamed of what we said about him, if we are not careful. Not one person will stand before Christ to get his reward and say that he deserves it. We shall all be eternally ashamed (if that will be possible) that we did so little and he gave us so much. Are we aware of what the going

rate is for any sacrifice that we make for Christ? It is certainly not merely the current building society interest. The ordinary flat rate for sacrifice for Christ is ten thousand per cent!

'Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first'" (Mark 10: 29–31; Matt 19: 29–30; Luke 18: 29–30). That, in the terms of present day business, is ten thousand per cent! And on top of that there will be the eternal enjoyment of eternal life.

It will take some faith to believe this. We are not having heaven here; we shall be having it above. Now is the time for service, for sacrifice and suffering for Christ until the Lord comes.

The Old Testament ends with the promise that he will come. They had to wait four hundred years, but he did come. We have had to wait nearly two thousand years for his return, and he will come. 'Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay' (Heb 10:37). 'If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay' (Hab 2:3).

May God grant that in the meanwhile we do not lose heart, and however long the period of restoration may be we shall carry on, lest we shall be ashamed before him when he comes (1 John 2:28).