

# The Cure for Boredom

By David H. Roper

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I would like you to turn again to the book of Malachi. Recall with me, just briefly, something of the situation that occasioned this particular prophetic writing. The Lord is concerned about his people because they had lost that sense of God's love for them. They found it very difficult to believe what Malachi said, that the Lord really cared about them and was interested in them in a personal way. The Lord raised up this prophet in order to show the Jews that he did have this sort of concern, and he calls their attention to the fact that God had judged their enemies, specifically the Edomites, as a token of his love. Israel, however, said that the judgment of the Edomites was not a demonstration of God's love because the situation in Israel was no better than the situation in Edom. In both cases, the nations were depressed. But Malachi says there is one significant difference. Though Edom may say, "We will rise again," they never will. They have no hope. They may try to rebuild, but God says, "I will tear down." In contrast, the nation of Israel has a future and a hope. God is going to fulfill in them everything that he has promised to do for the nation. Israel's destiny, not its circumstances, is the sign of the love of God. God is at work in the midst of his people to conform them to himself, and he is going to fulfill every promise that he has extended to the nation of Israel. It is the living presence of God in their life that is the proof of God's love. If they look at their circumstances, they might question the love of God; but they were to look not at the situation, but at the purpose that God had for them.

I learned just a few weeks ago that in Greek theater there were two classifications of plays. They were classified either as tragedies or as comedies. A comedy was a story that ended well, with the hero and heroine receiving everything they should receive. But in contrast, a tragedy ended tragically. No matter what happened throughout the story, the play was classified as either a tragedy or as a comedy, depending on the ending--not on the circumstances throughout the story. It struck me, as I read that description, that for us believers, life is a comedy. That does not mean that we are going to laugh our way through life, because there are many circumstances in life that are anything but funny. Yet our destiny is fixed and certain, and God is at work in our lives to use even those tragic circumstances to conform us to the character of God. Therefore, for us life is a comedy. But for those outside of Christ, life is a tragedy. It does not matter how good their circumstances may be. This is what God is saying through Malachi to his people. God has a purpose for them, and he is at work to fulfill that purpose. Israel can cling to the knowledge that nothing is going to turn God away from that destiny. It is by that destiny, and the active work of God in their lives that the Israelites can see that God really loves them and cares for them.

Whenever people lose the sense of God's love, as did the Israelites at the time this book was written, certain things begin to happen. The first thing is that they fail to respond with love and warmth to the Lord. If they feel that the Lord does not love them, then it is very difficult for them to worship God acceptably. They do not feel love, and so they cannot respond in a loving way to the Lord. That was what was occurring in Israel. Their worship was cold, for they had lost the sense of God's love for them. The second thing that occurs whenever people lose that sense of God's love is that their family life grows cold. Beginning with verse 10 of chapter 2, Malachi speaks of the conditions in the Israelites' families. Husbands and wives were unable to respond in love toward one another, and so families were breaking up. That section continues through verse 16. In chapter 2, verse 17 through chapter 3, verse 6, he describes what was happening in society in general. This failure to recognize that God loves us eventually pervades all of society; not our families only, but every aspect of life. He says in verse 5 of chapter 3.

**"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien,**

**and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts.**

So all manner of antisocial behavior began to pervade the life of this people because they had lost that sense of God's love. It affects their lives in the temple, at home, and in society. We are going to look at each of these areas in successive weeks.

First, let's look at what was happening to the Jews' worship, beginning with chapter I, verse 6.

**"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, How have we despised Thy name?' You are presenting defiled food upon My altar."**

Now this was a word that was addressed to the priests, although the same words could have been addressed to all the people. It is addressed to the priests because the priests were representative of the nation, and stood in the place of the nation. Also, the priests were condoning what the people were doing. It is obvious what was occurring here. People were bringing blighted sacrifices into the temple. Instead of bringing the best, they were bringing the lame and blind and sick animals to be sacrificed. The priests did not own flocks. They were not allowed to possess fields or to own flocks of sheep, so it is not the priests' sheep, but the sheep the people brought, that the priests were sacrificing. Therefore the priests themselves were condemned because they were condoning what the people were doing. Malachi is saying that the priests represented all the people. And what was true of these priests was true of the nation of Israel in general. All were guilty of a perverted form of worship. He says that the priests were habitual despisers of the Lord.

I am sure the priests' response would be to reject the idea that they were despising the Lord. After all, their business was to represent the Lord to the people. They were paid to be religious; that was their function. They were going about their business in a way that they felt was proper. They punched in at the temple at nine o'clock every morning and stayed until five. They did what they were told to do. Yet they are described as despising the Lord. Their response, predictably, was, "In what way have we despised the Lord?" The sacrifices they were bringing were less than the best. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy the nation was told the sort of sacrifice that was acceptable to God. They were to bring the firstlings of the flock, the very best. They were told not to bring an animal that was blind or lame or sick, the very terms that are used here to describe the offerings that the Jews brought. Malachi says, "In that you condone these sacrifices and allow these people to bring something less than the very best you are actually despising my name. You are taking lightly the table of the Lord." Verse 7,

**"But you say, 'How have we defied Thee?' In that you say, 'The table of the Lord is to be despised.'**

What God wanted was the very best, the firstlings of the flock. But they were using the best of the flock for themselves and were offering only half-heartedly what God required.

The counterpart of their experience today is not the offering of sheep and oxen, because we are not called upon to offer that sort of sacrifice. The sacrifice that we offer today is ourselves. Paul says in Romans 12, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. The worship that the Lord looks for today is not the worship through sheep and goats, pigeons and doves. The only acceptable worship is ourselves, the offering up of our own lives to God. That is the only logical, reasonable sacrifice, Paul says, the only one that makes any sense at all, in response to what God has done. The only sacrifice that is acceptable is the sacrifice of the total self--body, soul, and spirit--to God. But so often we respond as the Jews responded, giving God less than the best. And we do so because often we are not aware of the love God has for us, and what he has done for us in the cross. That was what was happening in Israel. God said, "You're taking me for granted. You're taking the sacrifice too lightly, offering only a part when I want all."

He says an interesting thing in verse 8, which I think could just as well be directed toward us.

**"But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? [You see, it is sin to offer less than we are.] And when you present the lame and sick is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the Lord of hosts.**

The governor here was the Persian appointee, the political leader of Judah. God says, "Would you offer this sort of sacrifice to your leader? How would he receive you? Would he appreciate it?" As I read this passage I thought, What sort of offering do we make to our employers? That seems to be the counterpart today. Would we make the same sort of halfhearted response to the person who employs us that we make to the Lord? God is not thinking of the amount of time that is required in order to fulfill our responsibilities, but of our spirit. Many of us take very seriously our responsibilities toward the people who employ us. We spend a lot of time and effort and thought and dedication in that area of our life, and we are motivated by a desire to please. None of us would think of doing a job half way. We know more than that is expected of us. Malachi says "Does God expect any less? Does the Lord of the universe expect any less?" He expects the whole man, not just a part of our heart, but the whole man.

In verse 10, he says,

**"Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you."**

Do you see what he is saying? It would be far better to close the gates, to shut down the temple, to stop offering, than to offer this sort of worship. No worship at all is better than a halfhearted sacrifice. That is an amazing statement when seen in the context of Jewish worship. For the Jew, worship only happened in Jerusalem. It had to happen there. God said, "That is the city upon which I have written my name." Three times a year Jews had to present themselves before the temple. Though throughout their history they worshiped in high places away from the temple, that was never acceptable. If they were going to act strictly according to the law, they had to present themselves at the temple. That was the only place worship could take place. And God said it would be far better that you not worship at all, than that you do so in this halfhearted way. Just shut the temple down.

But God explains why it would be better to shut the temple down in verse 11.

**"For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts.**

This verse has troubled many people, because it appears to say that it does not really matter which God you worship, as long as you are sincere. Acceptable worship can occur any place, any time, to any god, as long as it is an acceptable worship. People have used this passage to support that idea, but that is not what God is saying at all. In the Authorized Version or in the New American Standard, the verbs are translated in the future tense. In the New American Standard, the expression "will be", which occurs twice, is in italics, which indicates it is not found in the original text, but is the translators--understanding that this passage refers to some future event. It is clear that they see this as a prediction of the time when the gospel would go out to the Gentiles and the Gentiles would worship the Lord away from the temple. And that is a possibility. The Revised Standard translates this passage in the present tense, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts. The present tense indicates these things were going on at the time Malachi was written. Actually, the passage is ambiguous. It is difficult to know exactly what Malachi meant, because there are no verbs in the passage except in one place, and there is no time in that particular verb. So it refers not only to the time Malachi was speaking, but to some future time as well.

I believe Malachi is saying, "This is a truism, something that is true in any time in history. Wherever you go, when you find people who are worshiping God in an acceptable way, their worship is pure." That would be

astounding to a Jew of that day. Oh, they knew that Isaiah and other prophets predicted that eventually Gentiles would be included in the nation, but it would be something absolutely new to think that at that very time, in the fifth century before Christ, people outside of Israel were worshiping acceptably. But that is what God is saying. He says that there will be universal worship of the Lord, from the east to the west, "from the rising of the sun, even to its setting." Not only that, he says, but these Gentiles would be involved in a priestly ministry, because they offer up incense. The only one who was allowed to offer up incense in Israel was the high priest. Not only that, but their grain offering will be pure. The word used is not the word that is normally used for offerings that were ceremonially pure. He uses an entirely different word that has the idea of being acceptable, that God will accept your gift.

I believe God is saying that at any time in history there are people who have a measure of truth. Perhaps these people have heard through the message of the prophets or in some other way. But they had some degree of the knowledge of God and they were worshiping him on the basis of that truth. They were not doing it precisely the "right" way; they were not doing it in Jerusalem, or following the prescribed pattern. But their worship was accepted because their hearts were right, their attitude was right. God is saying, "You folks in Jerusalem believe that you have the only way. You've got the temple and the priesthood, and you feel that is the only acceptable place and way to worship. But I would rather have someone else somewhere else worshiping me in an entirely different way, but worshiping me in spirit and in truth, than to have you worship correctly but halfheartedly." In other words, the Lord is saying, "I like the way they are doing it wrong better than the way you are not doing it at all."

I believe the New Testament parallel to this passage is John 4. This is the well-known account of the Samaritan woman at the well. Samaritans despised the Jews, as you know. They believed that Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac at Mount Gerizim, not Mount Zion. They worshiped God at Gerizim, not at Zion. And when the Lord began to get to this woman, she (as we often do) engaged him in a theological debate. If you want to stiff-arm God, one of the best ways to do it is to discuss theology, as this woman did in John 4:19-21. "The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain (i.e., Gerizim); and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall men worship the Father.' " Here he is speaking of the cross, his own death, burial and resurrection. On the basis of that action, Gentiles would be able to worship in any place.

Jesus continues in verses 22-24, "You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews [Now listen to this!] But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be his worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Looking forward to the cross, he says, "The hour is coming," but then he says, "and now is," when God desires men to worship in spirit and truth. He is looking forward to the cross, because it is on the basis of that cross that men at any time in history can worship God in spirit and truth. This was the basis by which Abraham worshiped God. He did not know the name of Jesus, but the cross is a fact, not merely of history, but of something that transcends history and includes all of time. It gathers up all ages of mankind into one. And when anyone responds to the truth that he has, and begins to worship God truly in spirit, then that worship is acceptable on the basis of the cross. And God takes the initiative to get more truth to that individual until he comes to a full knowledge of God. It has to be on the basis of the cross. That is why Jesus said, "The hour is coming (That is true.) but now is." In any time in history, when men and women sincerely seek God, that worship is acceptable. It becomes God's responsibility then to get more truth to them. God says, "I would rather have someone who worships me in the inner man, in reality, than to have people saying and doing the right things, but in their hearts offering up only partial worship." I believe that is what Malachi is saying. In the words of the hymn, "What shall I give Thee, Master? Shall I give part (or halt) of my heart, or shall I give all to Thee?" That is what God wants, the totality of our being. He wants us to say, in the inner man, "Lord, I'll do what you want me to do, be what you want me to be; I'll follow you wherever you want me to go." That is worship, true worship. John says, "The Father seeks such to worship him."

But that was not happening in Israel. They were offering a partial sacrifice, and they were bored to death with it. That is why, in verse 13, it says,

**"You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!'"**

How boring! What a drag! There is nothing more boring than trying to worship God when your heart isn't in it. It is far better to shut the gates. It is far better to go play golf on Sunday than to worship God when your heart is not in it. It is better to do almost anything than to worship God with half a heart. It makes for a tedious, boring round of activities. We have all been through this. We have been doing things, teaching Bible studies, going to Bible studies, reading Christian books, teaching Sunday school, bored to death. What a drag! That was what was happening with the priests. They just could not get into the sacrifices. The daily round of offering these animal sacrifices was getting to them. My, how tiresome it was. What a bore (verses 13-14).

**"You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the Lord of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery, and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the Lord. "But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock, and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the Lord of hosts, "and My name is feared among the nations."**

Here is the same argument. If you go throughout the nations, you will find men who are worshiping God acceptably; and I like what they are doing, God says, even though they are not getting the details right and may not be saying it the right way and do not have the right liturgy. But their hearts are right. They fear me, and that I respond to. Chapter 2, verse 1 continues,

**"And now this commandment is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says the Lord of hosts, "then I will send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart."**

Then God gives this very graphic description of what was happening to the priests. There was a large table on which the priests sacrificed the animals, and as they sacrificed the animals, the blood and entrails, the refuse of the animals, would be spattered on their garments. God says that when the priests go out to take the remains of the animals to the garbage dump, they will be left with the refuse. The people will treat you like garbage. Verse 9 adds,

**"So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways, but are showing partiality in the instruction."**

When we do not take seriously our relationship to God, then no one takes us seriously. We lose our impact upon our friends and upon society. That is what Jesus meant when he said, "When salt no longer is salty, it is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." And that is what happens to you and me when we stop taking our relationship to God seriously. We lose our impact on society. People are disdainful of us; they ignore us. And my, how boring life becomes! We doubt that we have any significance at all.

There seems to be a pattern that develops, as Malachi spells it out for us. The priests did not respond to the Lord, and so they did not respond wholeheartedly to his Word. They took it lightly. And after awhile people began to take the Word lightly. That is what it means in verse 8, "you have caused many to stumble by the instruction (or in the law)." They actually began to despise the Word, and eventually they began to despise the messenger of the Word. They did not listen, they laughed at him and treated him like garbage. It all began because the priests did not take their relationship to the Lord seriously.

What a contrast to God's purpose for the priests, as he describes it in verses 5 through 7.

**"My covenant with him [with Levi, the father of the tribe of Levi] was one of life and peace..."**

There was a sense of vitality to life. Life was peaceful and quiet. The Hebrew term for peace has the idea of

well-being. He felt secure, vital, useful.

**"...and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered Me and stood in awe of My name. True instruction was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many back from iniquity."**

Who of us does not long for that? To be the kind of person who goes into difficult situations and is redemptive and instructive, and turns people back. How often we go into those situations and have no impact whatsoever. One of my favorite stories is about a man who was visiting his friend in the hospital. The friend was in an oxygen tent, recovering from a mild heart attack, and doing quite well. As the man was talking to him, he noticed his friend was beginning to show signs of stress. Asking for a pad of paper and a pencil, the friend scribbled a note and passed it to him. The man read the note, which said, "Please, Charley, you've got your foot on the hose!" So often that is what happens to us. We want to be helpful, we long to have a redemptive effect on peoples' lives, but we are really causing them great distress.

How boring life becomes when there is no significance in our lives! We do all sorts of things to fill up the emptiness of our lives. We take karate classes. There's nothing wrong with that, but it won't make your life more exciting. It won't help to read Discovery Papers, or to go to Bible studies, or become involved in some Christian ministry. That is what we start thinking: "I've got to get busy! I'll start a home Bible class. I've got to do this, or that, or the other; and then my life will be vital. I need more training." But it doesn't work. Our lives do not become more vital, we do not have more impact; we just become more and more bored with the truth that we receive. There is only one answer, and he has given it in chapter 2, verse 2,

**"Take it to heart, and give honor to my name."**

It is just that simple. Start by saying, "Lord, I'm yours." Do it while you are washing dishes tomorrow morning, or diapering the baby, or on your way to work. "Lord, I'm yours, all of me, for whatever purpose you wish to put me to today." And then you will discover that God will begin to show you some very specific ways where you have to act out that submission. We like to keep it in the theoretical, but God gets very specific. "All right, here is where I want you to give me all of yourself." Maybe it is just to be peaceful while you dust the house, or work at a job that is terribly boring. Just accept that circumstance and let God be God, let Him be Lord in your life in that circumstance. Let him have all of you. That is the acceptable worship that he looks for.

It is not merely here at church that we worship; we worship everywhere. It may literally be at a sink full of dirty dishes, when the last thing you want to do is to wash those dishes! But you say, "Thank you, Lord, that this is the task that is before me, and you can have all of me to accomplish this task." That is worship, when we begin to take God's Word very seriously in specific areas of our life. And that is the life that begins to get exciting. God will bring into your life all sorts of circumstances and people and events that, as a friend of mine says, begin to put the fizz in the Pepsi! Life gets downright exciting. But we start at the other end. We say, "Lord, you've got to do something to make my life worthwhile," and so we start doing things to add meaning to our life, and nothing works. God says, "Look, start at the very heart. Give me the sort of honor that is due me, and then I'll make life exciting for you." I was speaking at a fraternity house a number of years ago, and a young Christian student came up to me and said, "I want God to have my life. I don't know what it's going to mean, but I want him to have my life. I want to be used." I have seen that young man grow in his relationship to God for seven years now. God has taken him into some of the most exciting things you can imagine and used him in a tremendous way to change the lives of others. It began with a desire to let God be God in his life. That is where we have to begin.

In the Old Testament there is an interesting account of the call of Gideon, whom God called to deliver his people. He was anything but a leader. He was hiding in a rock when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and addressed him as a mighty warrior. "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior!" The first thing the angel required of Gideon was an act of worship. He had to make a sacrifice. He brought what he had. The people were terribly poor and poverty-stricken. They had been under siege for seven years and had very little to eat. But Gideon brought all that he had to the angel, who touched it with his staff, and the sacrifice was consumed. This was a symbol, I believe, of the same issue. Gideon brought his whole life, and the angel accepted it, because that was acceptable worship.

The very next night God called him to tear down the Baal sanctuary in his father's house. His father was custodian of the Baal, and so Gideon had to act in his own home. That was the specific request that God made as a result of Gideon's statement of his intention to serve God with his whole life. Some months later, when the Midianites invaded again, God told Gideon to call the people together. Although Gideon said he was the least of his clan, and his clan was the least of his tribe, and his tribe was the least of the tribes in Israel, when he blew the whistle to collect the tribes, the whole nation followed him. Why? Because he had demonstrated in his own heart and in his own home that he was a wholehearted man. Isaiah 50:4 says, "The Lord has given me the tongue of the learned, that I might know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary." That is what we all long for, that sort of tongue. The very next verse says, "The Lord God has given me the ear of the hearer." It starts with listening to God as he reveals himself, then responding to that revelation. That is wholehearted worship. "God, here I am." And then God will give you the tongue of the learned, so that you will be a source of blessing and vitality and encouragement to others.

Lord, most of us are sick and tired of dedicating ourselves again and again. This is the sort of thing that we have done repeatedly, and we realize that that is not what you want. What you want is a submissive spirit, the willingness to say, "Lord, here I am, in my weakness--and in my inability. I know that in my flesh I cannot follow through, but here's my life, to do with as you see fit. Strengthen me to be your man, your woman." Lord, we thank you for the change that takes place in our life and in others--as that becomes true. May it be true in our life, Father. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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