

Malachi: Apathy and Awe

Not too long ago, my children were watching an animated film, And as I walked by, I heard a song that was being sung by some of the characters, that caught my attention. The title of the song and the repeating chorus was “Everything is awesome!” So to make sure I wasn't taking the song out of context, I checked what the lyrics are, and some of them say exactly what the title suggests:

Trees, frogs, clogs, they're awesome
Rocks, clocks, and socks, they're awesome
Figs, and jigs, and twigs, that's awesome
Everything you see or think or say is awesome!

I don't know what effect the songwriters wanted to have on us, but I think it had the opposite effect on me. Because instead of feeling awesome about everything, I thought to myself, if *everything* is awesome then *nothing* is awesome. If everything I see or think or say is awesome, then awesome doesn't distinguish anything from anything else. Awesome may as well be another word for normal, or for average. The whole point of the word *awesome* is to single out some of those few things, or experiences or people or places that evoke awe in us when we experience them. Awe: that experience of overwhelming admiration, wonder, breathless reverence before something truly grand, powerful, even a kind of dread before something so vast and powerful that we sense of vulnerability. A mixture of surprise, wonder, fear, admiration all combines into something we feel rarely.

All of us have felt awe in different degrees when confronted with something of astounding beauty, or power, or skill, or magnitude. But the very qualities that make us admire them and call them awesome would lead us to say, “No, not everything is awesome.”

A song like that does not show that our culture is waking up to awe. It shows that it is drowning in boredom. Nothing is really awe-inspiring any more. All of existence has become mundane, empty of meaning, so we start to use words with great emotional weight to try and stir up our bored and tired souls. Maybe if we keep using the word *awesome* about everything, we'll feel less bored with the world. But it is clear that our world is a tired, yawning, jaded, cynical, bored world, so saturated with images and sounds from the media that it has become de-sensitised, calloused, and unable to feel much at all.

I don't know if you have sensed it in the work-ethic, but it seems there is so much apathy. People seem to care little about anything: the way they work, the quality of their work, their surroundings. We are suffocating in an atmosphere of boredom and apathy. T.S. Eliot said in one of his poems,
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

The church has not escaped it. The same listlessness, boredom and apathy that afflicts people in general affects many professing Christians. People drag themselves to church, but forget about twice on a Sunday, or more than once a week. There's a tolerance for an interesting sermon, as long as the man knows how to get everyone home on time for lunch. The worship ranges from plodding all the way over to raving, but few are the churches today where someone would walk out and know what Tozer meant when he said that worship is “A humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder.”

The giving displays apathy. The church's chronic need of people to serve, and the almost continual

chronic shortage shows apathy. Many Christians judge a ministry not by its faithfulness to God's Word, but by its convenience. A lack of convenience means effort, and apathy has no place for effort. The easy-come, easy-go attitude towards commitment displays apathy, because apathetic people don't commit, it's too much trouble.

And just like that song tries to get us to feel awe again by saying 'Everything is awesome', there are a lot of churches and ministries that do something very similar. They also sense the problem of spiritual apathy and boredom, so they try to rev God's people up with worship services that feel like concerts, or with programs in church filled with fun activities, or by trying to make their youth and Sunday School program seem 'awesome', or by swapping worship for entertainment, or by swapping ministry for therapy, but when all of that is over, the problem hasn't gone away: people are bored with God. And all the hyped-up activity just reminds one of those cheerleaders who tried to get you to scream for your team when it wasn't doing well.

We can be encouraged though, that our good God is not surprised by this. In fact, this is not a new problem, but a very old problem. Spiritual complacency, spiritual apathy, spiritual lethargy is a problem that God's people have wrestled with for ages. It just so happens that ours is an era in which apathy is all around us. But God in fact sent a prophet by the name of Malachi to deal with exactly this problem in Israel.

The year was probably around 430 B.C. This was not the Israel that lived under the glory of David and Solomon. It wasn't even the Judah that lived under good and bad kings. No, this was after Israel had been defeated and deported to Babylon, lived there for seventy years, and then some returned to rebuild the Temple. During that time, Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the nation. About seventy years later, Jerusalem was still pretty much in ruins, and Nehemiah returned to oversee the rebuilding of the walls and the rest of the city. And it was during this time that Malachi prophesied.

The Judah of this time had finally been purged of external idolatry. Never again, after the exile, do the Jews have a problem with worshipping Baal or Molech or any other god. They are definitely monotheists. But what creeps into Israel at this time is a spiritual apathy. For whatever reason, Israel loses a sense of awe in their God. They keep going through the motions with their religion, but they become indifferent, insensitive, apathetic.

That's highly relevant for believers of all ages, and maybe especially ours. If we have professed Jesus Christ as God's Son, as our mediator and salvation, and righteousness, it may not be that we are in danger of turning to another god. But it may be that along the way we find the same indifference, lethargy taking hold of our souls.

A kind of spiritual entropy affects all of us, and when the cultural air we breathe contributes to that, we need to know how to respond. Because if any people on earth should know the meaning of awesome, it is God's people. If any people on earth should have reason not to be apathetic, it is God's people.

To do an overview of this book, we can see two major themes: the apathy the people displayed, and the awe God deserved.

Look first at

I. The Apathy the People Displayed

The prophet Malachi brings at least five charges against God's people which reveals their spiritual apathy. Each of those charges is disputed by God's people. They argue, and say, "In what way?" "How is that true?" "When did we do that?" Malachi follows it up with evidence.

They were hardened to God's love

2 "I have loved you," says the LORD. "Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?' Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" Says the LORD. "Yet Jacob I have loved; (Mal 1:2)

The first sign of their apathy was that they no longer even felt that they were a chosen, special people. God had graciously, mercifully selected Israel, and had not favoured, nor for that matter, chastened, other nations like He did Israel. But instead of sensing the great privilege, and being in awe of God's selecting love, they no longer even noticed it.

Apathy takes the amazing out of grace. Apathy takes the wondrous out of love. The selfish focus begins to forget the riches of our inheritance, the treasure chest of grace that is our, the wonder of being His people.

They were careless about God's worship

6 "A son honors his father, And a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts To you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' what way have we despised Your name?" 7 "You offer defiled food on My altar. But say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible.' 8 And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, Is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, Is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" Says the LORD of hosts. (Mal 1:6-8)

Here was a group of people who began to treat worship as a chore. Their view of God had descended to where they gave God leftovers. They gave God second-hand, throwaway sacrifices, that they would not even dare give as a gift to one of their Persian governors. They had more genuine awe for their human fathers, and human rulers than they did for God, because they would never try to get away with giving that kind of thing in the human realm.

The priests, the leaders of Israel's worship were corrupt, self-serving, hypocrites who caused people to stumble. When the fear of the Lord departs from the hearts of the leaders, the only things left are the shabby substitutes of control, money, publicity, celebrity, and even sensuality.

When spiritual apathy sets in, God's people treat His service, His day, His worship, with a casualness, and a sloppiness that would get them fired on their first day of work if they tried that in the workplace. When spiritual apathy sets in, God gets spare change for the offering, leftover time for worship, and second-hand attention.

They were indifferent to God's family

13 And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, With weeping and crying; So He does not regard the offering anymore, Nor receive it with goodwill from your hands.

14 Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant.

(Mal 2:13-14) 15 But did He not make them one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.

16 "For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously."

(Mal 2:15-16)

Nehemiah had to deal with this problem as well. Israel had slipped into such a low view of God, that they no longer honoured the uniqueness of being God's people, and so only marrying God's people, so as to raise up more of God's people. When God had told Israel to marry only other Israelites, He always told them that intermarriage with pagans would turn their hearts away from Him. On top of that, the children of such marriages would be confused, and probably half-hearted towards the God of Israel. Divorce would only add to this problem: splitting up families, harming the children, destroying the picture of God's covenant love.

Spiritual apathy shows up in our dating and marriage practices. When we are zealous for God, we see it as impossible to pledge ourselves in marriage to someone who does not love what God loves. But when we become apathetic, the things of God grow strangely dim, and the possibility of companionship, albeit with a Christ-denier, becomes more attractive to us. When spiritual apathy sets in, the values of the world, which say, personal freedom and personal happiness are more important than modelling faithfulness and loyal love. We care less about having godly families and raising believing children, and we begin to believe the mottos of the world 'be true to yourself', 'your number one priority is to love yourself and be kind to yourself.'

They were sceptical of God's service

17 You have wearied the LORD with your words; Yet you say, "In what way have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, And He delights in them," Or, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal 2:17)

13 "Your words have been harsh against Me," Says the LORD, "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?' 14 You have said, 'It is useless to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, And that we have walked as mourners Before the LORD of hosts?' (Mal 3:13-14)

The Jews in Malachi's day had come to ask themselves, what difference does it really make if we live godly lives and serve Him? We're not doing much better financially. We're still under the rule of wicked governors. There are still all kinds of social problems. We have personal struggles, financial struggles, emotional struggles. And on top of this, we're trying to live this life of self-denying obedient devotion to God.

And once spiritual apathy has set in, the Christian life feels like a long funeral. We feel convicted over sin, and we say no to all this fun, and we don't get to do what the world does, and all for what? What's the payoff in doing so?

They were stingy with God's money

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation. (Mal 3:8-9)

Israel had been given laws regarding giving. Every year, they were to give a tenth of their income to the Levites, and a second tenth for the support of religious festivals. There were a few other smaller offering too. This was essentially ancient Israel's income tax. Giving over and above that was wholly voluntary.

But what had happened to them? As this spiritual coldness developed in them, they began giving less and keeping more. They began reasoning, what difference does it make to God if I give or

don't? And instead of giving, they simply spent that portion that was reserved for God on themselves. Not only did the freewill offering dry up, the required and mandated offering dried up.

Spiritual apathy affects our pockets. The Bible has so much to say about money because where your treasure is, there your heart is also. The way we spend our money is a very physical and tangible display of what we value, what we love, what we believe in. And our God does not place us under a heavy burden of financial giving. He simply says, show that you trust that I am the source of your money, that your money is actually My money by giving Me a regular, planned out, thoughtful and sacrificial portion.

But spiritual apathy affects this too. "Why give away my money? God doesn't need it. It's men who need it." I've never been in a place of spiritual decline which didn't negatively affect my giving.

So these are the indictments that God brings upon Israel through Malachi. Israel was spiritually complacent. They were hardened to God's love. They were careless about God's worship. They were indifferent to God's family. They were sceptical of God's service. They were stingy with God's money.

Now spiritual apathy might look similar or different in you or me. But what we really want to know is how to deal with it. How do we change it?

And the answer might surprise you. God does not simply tell Israel to straighten up, and try harder, and do more, and be more disciplined. He does not tell them to feel guilty and mourn and punish themselves and do better next time. God's remedy for spiritual apathy is not more works from Israel. God's remedy for spiritual apathy is awe.

II. The Awe God Deserved

God's remedy for spiritual apathy is to restore the fear of the Lord, the awe of the Lord in the eyes of the Jews. God's remedy for spiritual apathy is God Himself. Not works, but grace – the person and the works and the promises of God Himself. If Israel remembered who their God was, what He was like, and thought on it, what would return would be awe, which would be what would change all those other things in their worship, their giving, their service, their families.

Look at the end of the book where you see this.

*16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, And the LORD listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him For those who fear the LORD And who meditate on His name.
17 "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "On the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them As a man spares his own son who serves him." (Mal 3:16-17)*

2 But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves. (Mal 4:2)

The people who had replaced apathy with awe were like God's jewels, and would experience His reward. This is the answer. Don't miss that little phrase in verse 16: **those who meditate on His name**.

Throughout the book, God keeps revealing things about Himself, that if you meditate on those things, apathy is replaced with awe.

Look at five of them.

God is a God of Love

Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" Says the LORD. "Yet Jacob I have loved; 3 But Esau I have hated, And laid waste his mountains and his heritage For the jackals of the wilderness." (Mal 1:2-3)

God tells them: look around and see how I have favoured you as opposed to how I have treated Edom. To Israel's hardness, God says, meditate on how I have chosen you and treated you.

God is a God of Majesty

11 For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations," Says the LORD of hosts. (Mal 1:11)

14 "But cursed be the deceiver Who has in his flock a male, And takes a vow, But sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished-- For I am a great King," Says the LORD of hosts, "And My name is to be feared among the nations. (Mal 1:14)

To Israel's carelessness, God says, meditate on my nature as a great King, King over all the nations of the Earth.

God is a God of Faithfulness

10 Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another By profaning the covenant of the fathers? (Mal 2:10)

To Israel's indifference to God's family and covenant, He says, meditate on the truth that I am a faithful, covenant-keeping God.

God is a God of Justice

"Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts. 2 "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 launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness. (Mal 3:1-3)

When Israel is sceptical of serving, God says, meditate on the truth that I am sending the Messiah who will bring ultimate justice to the whole earth.

God is a God of Gracious Generosity

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this," Says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it. (Mal 3:10)

When Israel is stingy, God says, meditate on how generous and lavish I am in My provision and giving.

Those who meditated on God's love, God's majesty, God's faithfulness, God's justice, God's grace, would have awe growing in their heart.

Your awe of God will be directly proportional to your meditation on God. Little thought on or about God, little awe. On the other hand, Solomon tells us that if we search for wisdom, seek it out understanding, “ 4 If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; 5 Then you will

understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. (Pro 2:4-5)

I have sometimes counselled people who find themselves in a cycle: they are depressed. And then they are depressed about being depressed, which adds to the depression.

That same cycle can happen here. We can find ourselves spiritually apathetic. And then because we are apathetic, we are apathetic about doing anything about our apathy. And so it goes. So like we saw last week, the remedy is grace: seeing and meditating on our God. You break the cycle not with works, but with faith: the faith that will meditate, diligently on who your God is. That's what the book of Malachi calls us to do.