

When Traitors Demand Justice

Malachi 2:10–3:5

© Mike Riccardi

Introduction

Betrayal. Treachery. Duplicity. Double-crossing. Treason. Each of these words conjures in our souls a kind of aversion, a kind of antipathy, a kind of disgust that makes us uncomfortable, unsettled, and even angry. We look upon traitors with a special kind of revulsion. Benedict Arnold betrays the United States to the British. Demas deserts Paul. Judas betrays the Lord Jesus. Our souls recoil from the thought of such men.

And that's because betrayal is marked by a special kind—an aggravated kind—of evil. It's one thing to sin against someone openly by some sort of outright act of unrighteousness. But it's another thing to cover that act of enmity under the cloak of friendship. Betrayal is so repugnant to the virtuous mind precisely because it is a breaking of trust. It is evil masquerading in the name of goodness—again: hostility and enmity in the name of friendship. It's laced with the most vicious kind of deception: the kind that lulls an unsuspecting person into letting their guard down, and then striking them when they're at their most vulnerable.

It's why the pain of being betrayed cuts so deep. When Joseph realized he had been sold into slavery not by marauders and kidnappers but by his own brothers—it must have broken his heart. “It's one thing to be treated this way by enemies! But by my own family?” When David realized that he was being betrayed by Ahithophel, his trusted counselor, and by Absalom, his own son, he gives voice to the pain of betrayal in Psalm 55:12–14. He says, “For it is not an enemy who reproaches me, Then I could bear it; Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me, Then I could hide myself from him. But it is you, a man my equal, My companion and my familiar friend; We who had sweet fellowship together Walked in the house of God in the throng.” We hear a similar sentiment from David in Psalm 41:9, though this time speaking not only for himself, but also in a prophetic sense articulating the thoughts of the Lord Jesus as He experiences Judas's betrayal of Him. He says, “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me.”

And we know exactly what he's saying, because, though certainly not to the same degree as Jesus and Judas, and maybe not even to the same degree as David, Absalom, and Ahithophel, we have felt the pain of betrayal in our own lives. Maybe it was a professional betrayal, where there was some sort of breach of contract, or someone took advantage of your good faith in a business transaction. Maybe it was a feigned friendship, where you discovered that someone who represented himself to you as a loyal friend was really maligning and undermining you to others

behind your back. Maybe you have experienced among the worst of person-to-person betrayals: the breaking of the marriage covenant by a spouse's adultery. To one degree or another, we all know this pain. And we all understand what David says in those passages. "I could handle this kind of offense from my enemies! I could sustain this kind of mistreatment from the world! But from you, my dear friend, whom I trusted? We who have had (what I thought was) such sweet fellowship together? That my soul cannot bear!"

God had bound Himself to Israel by covenant. "I have loved you," He says to them, at the very outset of this book. "I have set My covenant love upon you and bound Myself to do you good by My own promise." And Israel had entered into covenant with God. Exodus 24:7: Moses reads the book of the covenant and the people respond, "All that Yahweh has spoken we will do!" And Moses sprinkles them with the blood of the covenant. And Yahweh is faithful to His covenant! He is characterized by perfect covenant faithfulness! That untranslatable Hebrew term *chesed*—which is predicated of God perhaps more than any other designation—is that lovingkindness, that steadfast, loyal love, that covenant faithfulness to His people. Deuteronomy 7:9: "Know therefore that Yahweh your God, He is God, the faithful God, *who keeps His covenant* and His *chesed* to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments." 1 Kings 8:23: "O Yahweh, the God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth beneath, *keeping covenant* and showing *chesed* to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart." It was unmistakable. It was axiomatic. Yahweh keeps His covenant! Yahweh is faithful!

But Israel was faithless. Israel was treacherous. Israel broke the covenant that they had made with God at Sinai. They had betrayed the covenant that they had sworn to uphold by their faithful obedience to Yahweh's commandments. And not just Israel historically, but this community of Judah of Malachi's day, who had been rescued out of exile and restored to their land. Even they had been found traitors to Yahweh's covenant. We've spoken about it already in our first two sermons on Malachi—how the people, 80 years downstream from God's promises of Messianic renovation, had seen no such glorious revolution, and had become doubtful of the trustworthiness of God's character. And how in their faithlessness, they had become disillusioned and apathetic. They believed God let them down.

And so we saw last time, in chapter 1 verses 6 to 14, how the priests allowed their hearts to drop out of their worship practices. They went through the motions of the temple service, but familiarity had bred contempt, and the temple worship became little more than empty formalism. And, not surprisingly, as the religious leaders lapsed into disobedience, the people they were leading followed suit. As go the priests of Israel, so goes the nation of Israel. While God has been a God of covenant faithfulness, Israel has been a nation of covenant treachery. Of betrayal.

And in fact, as we come to our text this evening, we find this theme of treachery and betrayal littered throughout our passage. Look at the middle of verse 10 of chapter 2: “Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?” Verse 11: “Judah has dealt treacherously.” Verse 14: “...the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously.” Verse 15: “Let no one deal treacherously.” And verse 16: “Take heed that you do not deal treacherously.” What has happened? The God who is faithful to His covenant has summoned to court this nation of traitorous covenant breakers.

And He has **four charges** against them—**four evidences of their treachery**, of their betrayal, of their covenant unfaithfulness. But this is not just a history lesson. This is not just a diatribe on Israel’s betrayal. The reality is: you and I are no less covenant-bound to Yahweh than Israel was. As we’ve said in past weeks, if anything we are more covenant-bound to Yahweh, because we live in the age of New Covenant fulfillment—united to the very Messiah whose coming Israel longed for. And yet, like Israel, those of us in the visible church are often guilty of the very same **charges of treachery**. We have betrayed our confession of covenant faithfulness, and have become unfaithful. And so my prayer for tonight is that Yahweh’s rebuke of His ancient people would be an instrument of sanctification for His people today, in this place—that we would repent of our own treachery and renew our commitment to live faithfully before God in response to His unfailing, covenant-keeping grace.

I. Defilement (2:10–12)

Well, that **first charge of treachery** is, number one, the charge of **defilement**. And we find this in verses 10 to 11. Malachi asks, “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers? Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of Yahweh which He loves *and has married the daughter of a foreign god.*” Yahweh rebukes His people for the **defilement** that is brought upon them by intermarrying with the pagan nations.

This was a significant problem in the post-exilic community. Ezra mentions it in Ezra 9:2. He says, “They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.” Nehemiah mentions it in chapter 13, verses 23 to 27: “In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people.” And then listen to Nehemiah’s reaction: “So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, ‘You shall not give your daughters

to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.” How’s that for pastoral care?

What made Nehemiah react so strongly? Why does Malachi call this “dealing treacherously” and “profaning the covenant of our fathers”? Well, let me say it clearly: it was not because the Bible prohibits interracial, or perhaps better said, interethnic marriage. You’ll remember that Numbers 12 tells us that Moses married a Cushite woman. Boaz marries Ruth the Moabitess. Matthew 1 includes Rahab—the Canaanite from Jericho—in Jesus’ genealogy. And Malachi himself, just a few verses later in chapter 3 verse 5, rebukes Israel for failing to show compassion to the “alien,” or the “foreigner” (CSB). So, Scripture is not saying that intermarriage is a **defilement** because it’s somehow immoral for people of different ethnicities to marry one another. Not at all.

No, what makes intermarriage a **defilement** for Israel is that it was *interfaith* marriage. And that’s why Malachi phrases this as he does: “Judah...has married the daughter of a foreign *god*.” At the outset of the Mosaic Covenant, Moses explained this to Israel. Deuteronomy 7:3: “You shall not intermarry with them,” verse 4: “*For* they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of Yahweh will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you.” And so the prohibition of intermarriage with the nations was for the specific motive of not engaging in syncretism—of not being wooed away to serve the gods of the nation the other spouse belonged to.

It strikes at the pure worship of Yahweh. And it’s not hard to see how that would work itself out. Perhaps some of the men in the post-exilic community were looking to establish ties with the other peoples within the Persian Empire—maybe aiming to broker business deals or land agreements as a result of marriage ties. But then you live with a woman. And not only do you grow to care for her to the point that the things most important to her become endeared to you as well, but: the worship of false gods isn’t nearly as demanding and contrary to the flesh as the worship of the true God. And so as time passes, and as the promises of Messianic renovation still don’t materialize, how easy it would be to become lax in devotion to Yahweh. Back in Nehemiah 13, Nehemiah reminds the people that this very thing was Solomon’s downfall. Nehemiah 13:26: “Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things?” Yes He did. God warned him, in 1 Kings 11:2, “...they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.”

And so this is why this is such a treacherous betrayal of covenant loyalty. Yahweh is the *one Father* of Israel, verse 10. Yahweh is the *one God* who created this nation by calling out Abram, a moon worshiper from Ur of the Chaldeans, and entering into covenant with him. Malachi is saying: intermarrying with the pagans is a profaning of that very covenant. By yoking themselves so intimately with those who are not the people of God, they are striking at the truths of the oneness of the Father who adopted them and the God who created them. One commentator puts it this way: “The oneness of God determines the oneness of Israel. ... God is Israel’s Father

and Creator, [and thus] they have one origin and therefore are intimately related to one another, [and therefore] it is inconceivable that the members of this people should break the faith among themselves. ... Why do we not honor the exceptional spiritual unity which binds us together as members of God's covenant people?" (Verhoef, 266).

It's an abomination, verse 11 says. This is the term used in the Law of the especially wicked and idolatrous practices of the pagan nations. And yet Malachi says, This abomination "has been committed in *Israel*, and in *Jerusalem*"! These are the people of *God* who are **defiling** themselves in such abominable ways! This is Jerusalem—the place where God has said, "My name shall be there" (1 Kings 8:29). This is the city that is called by Yahweh's name (Dan 9:18–19). And because God dwells in and among His people, Malachi calls Israel "Yahweh's sanctuary"—His dwelling place. They themselves are the temple of God, but they are profaning that temple, Malachi says—the sanctuary which Yahweh loves. It's just unthinkable!

And it ought to be just as unthinkable for us as the New Covenant people of God. The people of God no longer have any ethnic or national boundaries, but the New Testament does call us a chosen race. We are the new humanity, re-created in Christ Jesus, the Second Adam—the head of the new spiritual race. We are Second Adamites, and in that sense we are only to join ourselves in the covenant of marriage to those within the family of God. The Apostle Paul gives that very instruction in 1 Corinthians 7: a Christian is "free to be married to whom she wishes, *only in the Lord.*" Only to those who are united to one another spiritually, because of their spiritual union to Christ, can come together in the covenantal union of marriage. To do otherwise would be to **defile** the temple of God with idols, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6. "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness? ... Or what agreement has the temple of God with Idols? For we are the temple of the living God."

How can it be that those who are the covenant people of God, the people who have witnessed the fulfillment of everything post-exilic Judah was hoping for, we upon whom the ends of the ages of have come, we who are the temple of God—how can it be that we could ever find any pleasure in romantic companionship with an enemy of the very Gospel by which we are saved? Believer, how can your soul delight in someone who stands opposed and rebellious to the very Savior whom *you* claim is the fountain of all delights? Whatever is lovely in a person is only lovely because of what it reflects of the loveliness of Jesus!

And so to those seeking a spouse, it simply cannot be that those who are fundamentally opposed to the honor and glory and worship of Christ our great Bridegroom find a place of dearness and closeness and intimacy in our hearts. It's nothing other than spiritual adultery, a profaning of the covenant of salvation, a **defilement** of the temple of God with idols. Now, that doesn't mean those of you who are already married to unbelievers should separate from them. Paul also says that in 1 Corinthians 7: if the unbeliever consents to live with you, the marriage covenant is not

to be broken simply because there is an unequal yoke. You honor the Gospel by honoring the covenant you made—and we'll see more about that in a minute. But to those of you not yet married: heed this exhortation from the prophet of God not to deal treacherously by marrying an unbeliever.

II. Divorce (2:14–16)

And that brings us to a **second charge** that Yahweh leveled against Israel. Not only were they acting treacherously by defiling themselves via intermarriage. They were also **divorcing** their present wives to enter into those relationships. Number one: defilement; and number two: **divorce**. Malachi says in verse 13 that God refuses to except their offerings; we'll get back to that in a moment. But they arrogantly ask, in verse 14, “For what reason?” “Why doesn't Yahweh receive our worship?” Answer: “Because Yahweh has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” And then in verse 16 He defines that betrayal explicitly: “‘For I hate divorce,’ says Yahweh, the Lord of Israel.”

So, Israel wasn't only betraying the covenant that God had made with them via Abraham. They weren't only betraying the covenant Law that God had given to Moses. They were also betraying the covenant of their marriages, to which Yahweh Himself acts as witness. You see, marriage is much more than a civil or contractual agreement. It's much more than a nice ceremony and a fun party designed to testify to the glory of the bride and groom. Contrary to what Hollywood tells you, marriage is not just another relationship to be entered into and broken off from every couple of years based upon fluctuating emotions. Marriage is a covenant made in the presence of God and man in which one man and *one* woman pledge their faithfulness one to another for life. Verse 14: Your husband is your husband by covenant. And your wife is your wife by covenant.

In Proverbs chapter 2, verses 16 and 17, Solomon is counseling his son to pursue wisdom, which, he says, will “deliver you from the strange woman, from the adulteress who flatters with her words; that leaves the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.” You see, marriage is not even just a covenant between husband and wife. It is “the covenant of our God.” In every marriage—whether between believers or unbelievers—in every marriage God stands as a witness in the covenant ceremony, whereby He Himself joins the two into one! This is why Jesus says, “What therefore *God* has joined together, let no man separate.” And so one commentator writes, “The job of the witness was actually that of an enforcer or guarantor. Thus, a covenant witness is not the same as a court witness, who simply gives testimony in a trial. A covenant witness was the third party who could and did make sure that the direct parties to the covenant kept its terms” (McComiskey, 1337). When God sees His people dealing treacherously with their covenant wives, He steps in to testify against them.

Why? Because God hates divorce, verse 16. Now, just what a striking, jarring comment that is! What could move this God of love, this God of unfailing patience, this longsuffering God who delights to give good gifts to His creatures—what could make this God hate? And the answer, of course, that the God who is good must hate evil. The God who is righteous must hate unrighteousness. David says of God in Psalm 5:5, “You hate all who do iniquity.” He says in Psalm 11:5: “The one who loves violence His soul hates.” Well, in the same way, the God who is unfailingly faithful must hate treachery and betrayal, and so He hates divorce. Even if He permits it in those exceptional cases of adultery and abandonment, nevertheless His disposition toward it is one of hatred and hostility.

But it’s even more specific than that. Turn with me to Ephesians chapter 5. This final paragraph of Ephesians 5 teaches us that God has designed marriage to be more than just a plan for human flourishing or as the bedrock of family and society. He’s designed marriage to make much of His own glory by magnifying the relationship of covenant-keeping grace that exists between Christ and His Bride, the Church. All throughout verses 22 to 33, Paul grounds every one of his instructions on marriage—the husband’s loving headship, the wife’s respectful submission—everything is grounded in Christ’s headship over the church and the church’s submission to Christ. And then, in verse 31, he quotes from the first wedding sermon in Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” And the very next thing he says is: “This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” This whole time he’s been talking about marriage, but this whole time he’s been speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

What this means is: marriage is a parable of the Gospel. Marriage exists to illustrate the way that Christ keeps the covenant commitment that He made to His Bride. And what is that commitment? “I will never leave you, nor forsake you.” The Good News is that Jesus has saved His people from sin, from God’s wrath, from just punishment, from fruitlessness, and from a wasted life. He has taken our sin out of the way so that we can enjoy fellowship with our Creator and Redeemer forever. And marriage is purposely designed to display the glory of that Good News. Marriage exists to tell the truth about the Gospel. And the Gospel is, in part, that Christ never leaves His bride. The covenant of your salvation is sure. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Well then: what does **divorce** do? It lies about the Gospel. When a husband divorces his wife, he is communicating that Christ might actually leave you and forsake you if at some point He finds your sin too intolerable. When a wife divorces her husband, she is communicating that the church might actually forsake Christ as her Savior, because she finds Him impossible to live with. But neither of those things is true. Christ will never leave His people, no matter how sinful they are, because He has paid for their sins by the sacrifice of Himself on the cross. And the true church will never abandon Christ, no matter how deceived they may be about His love and care

for them, because their eyes have been opened to behold His glory, and He has captivated their heart. **Divorce** lies about the Gospel! And so God hates it!

And He hates it in 5th-century BC Israel, and He hates it in 21st-century American evangelicalism. And so you need to heed this warning. Some of you are tempted to deal treacherously with the wife of your youth. Some of you are tempted to deal treacherously with the one who is your spouse by covenant. And so you need to fight that temptation. You need to fight for fidelity in your own marriage because, one, you know God hates the covenant betrayal of divorce, and because you love Him you want to please Him in everything you do. But even deeper than that: you need to fight for faithfulness to your marriage covenant in the strength of the unfailing covenant-keeping grace that you have been shown by Christ every day of your Christian life. And you need bend that covenant-keeping grace that you receive out toward your husband and your wife, and keep covenant—because it would repulse you to lie about the precious Gospel by which you have been saved, because you delight to tell the truth about that glorious Gospel.

III. Blasphemy (2:13)

There's a **third charge of treachery** that Yahweh brings against Israel in this passage. And that is, number three: **blasphemy**. Defilement, divorce, and **blasphemy**. And we see this most clearly in the verse we skipped: verse 13. Malachi says, “This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of Yahweh with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.”

As a result of their betrayal of both the covenant between them and God and the covenant of marriage between one another, God had stopped receiving the sacrifices they brought for temple worship. And it seems the people became aware of this because God was not answering their prayers for a fruitful harvest. In Chapter 3 verse 11, God says that “the devourer” was destroying the fruits of the ground. There were economic consequences to their disobedience. Well, naturally, then, the people prayed that God would provide crops, but they eventually realized that He was not answering those prayers with favor. Sin had cut off communion with God—even as Isaiah 59:2 says, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.”

Well, in response to that broken fellowship, the text says the people wept. But this was not a godly sorrow over sin for the offense it was to God that led to their repentance—to a change of direction, to a forsaking of sin and a return to God in faithfulness. No. It was the worldly sorrow that grieves over the consequences of sin! that mourns over the fact that, “I got caught, and it's costing me something.” It was a similar phenomenon that God rebuked Israel for several centuries earlier in Hosea 7:14. There He says, “And they do not cry to Me *from their heart*

when they wail on their beds; for the sake of *grain* and new wine they assemble themselves, they turn away from Me.” You see? “They turn away from Me. They don’t turn toward Me, in repentance. They come to worship because they want My gifts, not because they want Me. And even their displays of emotion—it’s not from their heart. They think their histrionics and displays of fleshly emotion will manipulate Me into giving them what they want. ‘They worship Me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from Me.’”

And when Malachi says that they “cover the altar of Yahweh with tears, with weeping and with groaning,” I can’t help but hear overtones of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. In an attempt to rouse Baal to action, these pagan prophets called out to their false god “from morning until noon,” the text says. And when it didn’t work, Elijah mocked them and said, “Maybe he’s in the bathroom! Or maybe he’s asleep!” And “so,” verse 28, “they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice.”

Weeping and wailing and raving and even self-harm—all of this was the way the pagans worshiped their gods—hoping to move their god to compassion by their excessive displays of emotionalism and willpower sacrifice. We see that in multiple places: the idolaters in the temple in Ezekiel 8 are “weeping for Tammuz,” a god of the Phoenicians. Isaiah 15 speaks about how the people had gone to the high places in Moab to weep. “Everyone is wailing, dissolved in tears.” Malachi is telling Israel: “Your heartless worship is no better than paganism! You’re trying to manipulate God with your ostentatious displays of grief and sadness, thinking that He’ll have to answer you if you whip yourself up into enough of a fervor! But none of that is for Him! It’s only for what He can give you!” And that is **blasphemy**—in the truest sense of the term. That is, literally, taking God’s name in vain: calling out to God under the pretense of worship, all while your heart is empty and your hands are unclean.

God says, “I’m a witness between you and your wife by covenant, which covenant you are now breaking in order to join yourself to the daughter of a foreign god. You want to deal treacherously with the wife of your youth, your first love, who has been by your side all these years, to whom your heart ought to be knit together, whom you ought to love more tenderly than anyone else, whom you have pledged to love and support for the rest of your days! You want to betray the vows of that covenant, and then you want to come into the temple and offer sacrifice to Me? and then have the nerve to ask Me why I don’t accept them?”

You get God wrong, friends, if we think you can divorce your life Monday through Saturday from your life on Sunday. if you think that your life outside of church is somehow your “private life,” that it escapes the notice of God, and that He accepts you so long as you go through the motions of Sunday worship. That’s not how this works. God is a witness against your covenant

unfaithfulness. And unless you come to Him in sincere repentance and godly sorrow over your sin, forsaking the way of wickedness and returning to Him in faith, there will be breakdown in communion. He will not receive your worship, except as a provocation to judgment.

And you get God wrong if you think that you can persist in patterns of sinning, and then come to church or come before Him in prayer, and just feel bad enough about your sin—even to the point that the tears flow and you cry out for forgiveness—all the while knowing that in the back of your mind you’re making provision to go back to those broken cisterns again. “Do not be deceived. God is not mocked.” You can’t fool God into forgiving you. You can’t bribe Him with closed eyes and raised hands and loud singing, while refusing to repent of and mortify sin. That would be nothing but **blasphemy**—nothing but taking God’s name in vain.

IV. Insolence (2:17)

Well, we’ve seen God rebuke Israel for their defilement, for their divorce, and just now their blasphemy. The **fourth** and final **charge of treachery** that God levels against Israel in this passage is, number four: **insolence**. And I struggled to know what to call this, especially because **insolence** doesn’t seem strong enough of a word to describe the brazen, arrogant impudence of reproaching the character of God. But that was the best I could think of. Look at verse 17 and see their **insolence**: “You have wearied Yahweh with your words. Yet you say, ‘How have we wearied Him?’ In that you say, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of Yahweh, and He delights in them,’ or, ‘Where is the God of justice?’”

And I almost don’t even know where to begin after that. It troubles me even to read those sentences out loud. This is blasphemous cynicism. “You know, God, we rebuilt the city, like You told us! We rebuilt the temple, like You told us! We keep offering the sacrifices! And yet we don’t see any such Messianic restoration! We don’t see the nations being shaken and the latter glory of this house greater than the first! We don’t even see any crops in the land! All we see is the Persians getting stronger, the pagans enjoying life while we languish, and even the wickedness taking place in Israel is going unpunished! I thought You cared about *justice*, God! But it seems like all the evildoers have it easy, and we’re here weeping on Your altar and You don’t even give us a decent harvest! Do you delight in evildoers? Is that it, God? You must, because we don’t see ‘the God of Justice’ anywhere around here!” Just blasphemous **insolence!**

It reminds me of Psalm 73, where Asaph confesses that when he saw the prosperity of the wicked, it almost caused him to stumble. He says, “The wicked have it easy.” And so, Psalm 73:13, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. For I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.” “I’ve served God for nothing, because the wicked who mock Him have all their needs met, and I suffer!” But look at the difference between Asaph and the Jews of Malachi’s day. Psalm 73:15: “If I had said, ‘I will speak

thus,”—if I kept thinking like this—“Behold, I would have *betrayed* the generation of Your children.” This is treacherous talk! This is the way those who are faithless covenant breakers speak! Arrogant **insolence** that reproaches the character of God is the language of traitors.

Listen to Calvin make application to us. He writes, “Such insolence is now seen in all [hypocrites], who vauntingly profess religion when they are treated according to their own wishes”—hypocrites love to praise God when He gives them what they want—“but when God deals more sharply with them, they not only [complain], but vomit forth...impious slanders against him, as though he did not render to them the reward due to their just dealings.” You hear what he’s saying? You don’t deserve any better! In fact, you deserve worse! You deserve hell! And so every moment you’re not in the flames you’re getting better than you deserve. And so even in seasons of adversity, when God sees fit to put us through trials and difficulties, or to chasten and discipline us, let us not be quick to hurl accusations against God and question His goodness and justice. But let us humble ourselves under His discipline, to receive His instruction as sons, and be led to repentance.

But aside from the brazen **insolence** of the accusations themselves, what’s especially striking is who’s making them. Think for a moment who these characters are who are accusing God of delighting in wickedness. They’re traitors! They’re the ones who betray the stipulations of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants by intermarrying with pagans! They’re the ones who betray their own marriage covenant by seeking unlawful divorce! They’re the ones who blaspheme God by treating Him as if He can be manipulated like the false gods of the nations! And these treacherous rebels are demanding justice?

But that’s not all that uncommon, is it? for those most guilty to demand justice? because it’s not really justice they’re demanding. They may call it that, but what they’re really clamoring for is for justice to be meted out on the other guy. Right? It’s never, “God, come and shine the searching light of your holiness into the darkness of my heart, and give me what I deserve.” No. It’s, “Come and punish my enemies!”

Conclusion (3:1–5)

What’s God’s response? Chapter 3 verse 1: “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord [the God of Justice], whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you ‘delight,’ behold, He is coming,” says Yahweh of hosts. Verse 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 fullers’ soap.” “What do we want? *Justice!* When do we want it? *Now!*” “Oh, justice is coming. I’m going to send you a final prophet—a kind of second ‘Elijah,’ chapter 4 verse 5—whom we learn from texts like Matthew 11:10 and Luke 1:15–17 is John the Baptist. And the Lord—the God of justice you’re longing to

see, oh, He's coming in the person of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. But when He comes to execute justice, you won't be able to endure it."

Malachi is saying the same thing to them that Amos said to Israel in Amos 5:18–20: "Alas, you who are longing for the day of Yahweh, For what purpose will the day of Yahweh be to you? It will be darkness and not light; As when a man flees from a lion And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall And a snake bites him. Will not the day of Yahweh be darkness instead of light, Even gloom with no brightness in it?" You see, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4:17, judgment begins with the household of God. And those who profess to be God's people while engaging in the unrepentant faithlessness of defilement, divorce, blasphemy, and insolence, will find that their cries for justice against the wicked will testify against them on the day of judgment.

John the Baptist—the Elijah who was to come—cleared the way for Yahweh, the Lord Jesus Christ, who accomplished righteousness and forgiveness at His first coming. But what the Old Testament saw as a single coming of Messiah, the New Testament reveals to be spread across two comings. To put it in the language of Isaiah 61:2, half of which Jesus quotes in Luke 4:19: Messiah's first coming was "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord"; His second coming will be "the day of vengeance of our God," when He'll come as a refining fire, purging away the impurities of Israel, and consuming in His judgment whatever impurities remain. Zechariah 13:8 says that in that eschatological judgment—the time of tribulation that is outlined in the book of Revelation—two-thirds of Israel "will be cut off and perish." Malachi 3:5: "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against" the evildoers who do not belong to Him in truth.

And friend, if God's justice finds you like them on that day, in the filthy rags of your own righteousness, clinging to your sin and persisting in your treachery, the God who is a *refining* fire for His people will be to you a *consuming* fire unto your everlasting damnation. You who demanded, "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" will cry out from the torments of hell: "What have we got? Justice. When do we have it? For eternity." Friend, if you're here tonight still clinging to some sin in your life that you refuse to let go of, if you remain a stranger to the grace of Jesus Christ, if you still have not bowed the knee and put all your trust for a righteous verdict on the day of judgment in His righteousness alone—be reasonable. Isaiah 33:14 says, "Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?" No one can stand before the bar of God's justice. Our only hope is to turn away from ourselves and trust entirely in Incarnate Justice—the very Messenger of the Covenant prophesied in this passage. Forsake your sin. Come to Christ. Trust in Him alone for righteousness, and be saved.

After prophesying the destruction of two-thirds of Israel, Zechariah 13:9 goes on to speak of that one-third remnant. God says, “I will bring [them] through the fire, Refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ And they will say, ‘Yahweh is my God.’” Malachi 3:3–4 says the same thing: Messiah “will purify the sons of Levi...so that they may present to Yahweh offerings in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to Yahweh as in the days of old.” The Lord Jesus Christ is going to restore this nation of traitors, and purge them of all their iniquities through His perfect sacrifice on the cross! And then they will worship God *in Christ* in spirit and truth! And He came and He accomplished all that He promised, in the first century AD. And yet Israel rejected Him. “Like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.” But that very same chapter of Isaiah 53 prophesies the repentance of *this* nation of Israel. And we look forward to that great day of the future conversion and restoration of Israel, when at the end of the age, the deliverer will come from Zion, and work righteousness and reign from Jerusalem for 1,000 years.

And the Good News for us, we who have, by grace alone, turned from our treachery and have put all our trust in that very Messiah already: the fires of the Day-of-the-Lord judgments will never come upon us, because they broke upon Christ in their fullness, as His heart extinguished the flaming sword of God’s wrath on the cross of Calvary! The great hymn says, “Thy blood the flaming blade must slake, thine heart its sheath must be!” He had to be pierced with the sword of God’s wrath so that I may go free. And friends, that is what happened. That is the Gospel!

And so I call you to repent of your treachery. I call you to walk in faithfulness to this God. But I remind you that your repentance and your faithfulness is not what joins you to Yahweh. Christ is what joins you to Yahweh. “Nothing can for sin atone! Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” And so for the ones whose sins have been atoned for, how can we walk in treachery to that Gospel covenant? How can we walk inconsistently with the grace that we have been shown? How can we break covenant, when Christ kept covenant unto His own undoing? unto that wretched cry, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” I’ll tell you why: So that He does not have to forsake us in His justice, but now must in accordance with justice reward us according to the righteousness of our Substitute—according to the obedience of the Man who never sinned in thought, word, or deed, who was never unfaithful, not even in His thinking!

What a glorious Gospel has rescued us! Let us not be faithless. Let us come to God in faithfulness, in the strength of the grace by which we have been saved.