

When Traitors Demand Justice

Malachi 2:17–3:6

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Introduction

One of the most common objections raised against Christianity—indeed, against theism in general—is the so-called problem of evil. If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you’ve heard some form of this objection. “You say the Bible reveals a God who is both all-powerful and perfectly loving. But how can an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God sovereignly govern a world which is so overrun by evil, and injustice, and suffering? If God is omnibenevolent, or perfectly loving, or all-good, He’d *want* to stop evil, right? And if God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, He’d be *able* to stop evil. Well, therefore, the fact that evil exists proves that God is not the all-good, all-powerful God that the Bible declares Him to be!”

Now, it’s not my purpose this morning to give a full-orbed answer to the problem of evil. If you’re interested in my long-form answer to that, you can search for a message I gave during Sundays in July back in 2018; it’s called “God and Evil.” But briefly: It is no contradiction to say (1) that God is all-good, (2) that He is all-powerful, (3) that evil exists, *and*, number four, that *God has a morally sufficient reason for ordaining evil*. If God has a morally sufficient reason for ordaining evil, then that reveals an unproven assertion in the atheist’s argument. The atheist assumes that if God is all-good, He’d want to eliminate all evil immediately. But if God has a *good* reason for ordaining evil—a reason that is itself an expression of His goodness—then God may ordain the existence of evil for the good that He means to cause by it.

You say, “What do you mean? How can God cause good by evil?” Well, He can decree the sin of Joseph’s brothers selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt for the good of “preserv[ing] many people alive” in the midst of the famine by means of Joseph’s God-given wisdom (Gen 45:5–8; 50:20). God can decree the eternal punishment in hell of “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” for the good of putting the glory of His attributes on display—the good of “demonstrat[ing] His wrath and [making] His power known,” and making “known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy,” Romans 9:22 and 23. In fact, God can ordain the greatest evil in human history—the murder of the innocent Son of God—for the good of saving a countless multitude of sinners from their deserved condemnation through the atonement accomplished by that very Son of God on that very cross.

You see, God Himself solved whatever “problem” of evil there has ever been when God the Son took upon Himself all the evil that His people have ever committed, and bore that evil in His

body on the cross, and satisfied the eternal flames of divine justice that burned hot against that evil, and then triumphed over that evil by rising from the dead.

But the unbeliever doesn't ever let the facts get in the way of a good venting of their emotions. "I don't care about your fancy philosophizing! If God is so powerful and so good, why doesn't He come and wipe out all the injustice in the world? Why doesn't He destroy all evil?" When unbelievers ask me that, I respond by asking them: "What? Do you have a death wish?"

You see, there's something you don't realize when you earnestly call for God to come and destroy all evil in the world. If He did that, He would have to destroy *you*. *You're* evil, friend. The wickedness that has plunged this world into corruption and decay has its origin in the heart of man. The world is fallen because of sin. Genesis 3:17, God says to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of *you*." Why? Because of Adam's rebellion and disobedience to the commandment of God—that very same disobedience that we all participate in each and every day. Friend, there *was* a time when God came and wiped out all evil from the face of the earth. It was the flood. It was when He saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And so He rained hell out of heaven, and drowned every human being on the planet, except one family whom He saved by grace. And dear friend, if you're outside of Christ, your heart is no less evil than their hearts were.

What a ludicrous thing for *sinner*s to demand justice! "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" How did that mantra ever make it into the canon law of *our* culture? America: the pornography capital of the world, the land of serial adultery and fornication, of a 50% divorce rate! America: who kills one million defenseless little babies in their mothers' wombs every year, under the protection of law! America: who flies the rainbow flag of sexual perversion from its government buildings at home and embassies around the world! *We* want *justice*?

The people who provoke the Holy God of the universe to His face by giving no thought to ordering their lives according to His Word—who spit in His face by their foul language and sexual immorality and blatant rebellion to Scripture—those same people self-righteously call down justice from heaven, and impugn the character of the God of all holiness because He won't eradicate evil? What manner of self-righteousness could find fault with the very patience and longsuffering that keeps them out of the flames of hell?

But you see, that's just it. It's *self*-righteousness. It reveals the unspoken presumption that, "The execution of justice will destroy those evildoers (and good for them!), but justice will vindicate me! I couldn't possibly be negatively affected by the execution of justice!" And that's when you realize: they're not really asking for justice at all. They're asking for divine strength to mete out human vengeance—the vengeance they wish they could carry out personally upon those to

whom they feel morally superior. 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, and tell me how great you think I am!"

Well, I tell you this morning that self-righteously calling for justice from heaven while at the same time being in absolutely no position to withstand the *execution* of that justice is not a contemporary phenomenon. Surprisingly enough, the 21st-century West does not have a corner on that market. The post-exilic community of Judah was calling for the same thing in Malachi's day.

And I remind you once again of the historical context of this book. It had been about 100 years since the southern kingdom of Judah was delivered out of the Babylonian exile and regathered into the land of Israel. And 20 years after that regathering, Haggai and Zechariah came promising the Messianic renovation of Israel. The temple would be rebuilt, the people would dwell securely in the land, and God's promises would finally be brought to pass. But 80 years had passed since those glorious promises, and the people saw no such revolution. They remained on a small strip of land, under the control of the Persians, and in a time of economic distress.

And the result of that deferred hope was that the people had begun to doubt God's trustworthiness. God had let them down, they thought, and so they began to distrust His promises. They became disillusioned and apathetic with the temple worship. The priests went through the motions, but their hearts had dropped out of it, and they were willing to compromise God's holy demands for sacrificial worship. It was little more than empty formalism.

And as the priests lapsed into disobedience and carelessness, the people followed suit. In our last message on Malachi, we covered chapter 2 verses 10 to 16. And we saw there that God had, as it were, summoned the people of Judah into court, and had accused them of covenant treachery—of betraying their faithfulness to God as His covenant nation. They were treacherous, as they defiled themselves by intermarrying with the pagan nations. They were treacherous, as they divorced the wives of their youth, and broke the covenant of marriage they committed to in the name of Yahweh. And they were treacherous in their blasphemy against God, by ostentatious displays of emotion in worship—feigning sorrow for their sins, hoping they could deceive God into granting them favor by the performance of a religious externalism that had no true heart, bribing Him with pretend penitence while refusing to truly turn from and put away their sin.

But then we come to the next disputation, chapter 2 verse 17 through to chapter 3 verse 6. And it's here that God gives voice to Judah's brazen, arrogant, impudent insolence that certainly mirrors the wickedness of our own day, in which these treasonous rebels reproach the character of God for not caring enough about justice.

Look at verse 17: “You have *wearied* Yahweh with your words.” And I’ve got to stop even there. “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, Yahweh, the Creator of the ends of the earth does *not* become weary or tired” (Isa 40:28)! “He gives strength to the weary” (Isa 40:29). Even those who trust in Yahweh “run and [do] not get tired,” “walk and [do] not become *weary*” (Isa 40:31)! How do you weary the God who does not grow weary? Malachi says, “With your words.” And these are some ridiculous 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.” How interesting that he could have used that word that appears so frequently in Malachi 2:10–16! This talk that we hear about in Malachi 2:17, 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.

We would never talk like that, right? “No, we know better!” We should, but do we really? Listen to John 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.”

Oh, we love God when He gives us what we want, when things are comfortable, when there's no suffering in sight. We love church when church helps us validate ourselves in self-righteousness. We love church when church condemns our enemies. The husband nudges his wife or the wife elbows her husband and says, "See? The preacher's talking about you!" "Were *you* listening to the sermon today, because, boy, he was taking you to the woodshed!" We love our elders and pastors and Bible study shepherds when they pray with us, and preach sermons and teach lessons that stay just enough on the surface that we can fly under the radar, without having to really take an honest look at ourselves and put sin to death.

But when those elders and pastors and Bible study shepherds come alongside you and aim to shepherd you with needed correction? "No, that's heavy-handed. That's 'spiritual abuse.'" When the church starts exposing your sins: "No, I don't think that's a 'healthy' 'spiritual community' for me and my family. I think they struggle quite a bit with legalism." When the Lord in His providence sends you through difficulties and sufferings for His name's sake: "God has forgotten me! I do everything He tells me to do and I never see any blessing!" Calvin says, they "vomit forth...impious slanders against him, as though he did not render to them the reward due to their just dealings."

But dear people, your dealings are *not* perfectly just. And so what is the reward due to you for them? Calvin is saying to those who complain about God's providences, "You think you deserve better than this! Not only do you not deserve better; you deserve worse! You deserve hell!" Friends, every moment that you are not in the flames, you are getting better than you deserve.

And so even in seasons of adversity, when God sees fit to put you through trials and difficulties, or sees fit to chasten and discipline you, do not be quick to hurl accusations against God and question His goodness and justice. Put away all complaining and murmuring and discontentment. Our circumstances are ordered for us by God Himself. To complain about our circumstances is to reproach the God of providence, who by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will sovereignly ordains whatsoever comes to pass. Instead, let us humble ourselves under His discipline, and receive our trials as our Father's instruction to us as sons and daughters. Let us examine ourselves and ask, "How is this difficulty meant to shape my character, and mold me into the image of Christ? What sin can I repent of and put off? What righteous habit can I cultivate and put on, so that this trial might work for God's glory and for my joy?"

But aside from the brazen insolence of the accusations themselves, what's especially striking is who's making them. Remember, again, 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?

What's God's response to their brazen, arrogant insolence? "*Where is the God of justice?!*" Oh, He's coming. 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?" The God of justice is coming, dear people. And when He does, it isn't going to be pretty for insolent rebels who reproach the justice of Almighty God.

And in the rest of this passage—the opening six verses of Malachi chapter 3—the prophet details **three features of the coming of the God of Justice**—three features that instill hope in the hearts of God's people, but that strike fear in the hearts of God's enemies, and urge them to turn from sin, and to trust in Him.

I. The Certainty of His Coming (3:1)

And that **first feature** has already shown itself in verse 1. And that is, number one, the **certainty** of His coming. "The Lord you're seeking *will* suddenly **come** to His temple! The messenger of the covenant you delight in: behold, He *is* coming! You can be **certain** of it!"

Now, we need to get our bearings in this verse, because there are at least three persons that are being spoken of here. First, you have Yahweh speaking in the first person. Verse 1 ends by saying, "says Yahweh of hosts." And it begins by saying, "*I* am going to send." So, first: we have Yahweh. Second, we have Yahweh's messenger: "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me." So, Yahweh's messenger will come prepare the way for the coming of God.

But then, third, Yahweh begins speaking in the third person. He says, "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple." It would have been natural for us to expect that verse to say, "My messenger will clear the way before *Me*, and *I*, the God of Justice, whom you're seeking, will come to *My* temple." But He doesn't. "*I*, Yahweh, am coming! My messenger is going to clear the way before Me." But *the Lord*, who is distinct from the "I" and the "Me" who is speaking, *He* is going to come. He is *the Lord*, the only Master and Sovereign of the Universe. He's going to come *His* temple. And the only one who possesses the temple is God Himself. The One who's coming is God! He is Yahweh! But He's distinct from the "I" and the "Me" speaking earlier in the verse.

Friends, this is nothing other than a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and a reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. The Messiah who is to come—the messenger of the covenant—is (1) to be preceded by the messenger of Yahweh, and (2) is Himself to be identified with Yahweh. Two persons! One “I” and one “He”! But both “the Lord”!

And who is Yahweh’s messenger? Well, in chapter 4 verse 5, God says, “Behold, I am going to send you *Elijah the prophet* before the coming of the great and terrible day of Yahweh.” But in Matthew chapter 11, as Jesus addresses the crowds about John the Baptist, Jesus calls John “a prophet,” Matthew 11:9. And yes, “one who is more than a prophet.” And then in verse 10 Jesus says, “This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before You.’” Jesus quotes our very verse, and says explicitly, Malachi 3:1 was about John the Baptist.

And more than that: Malachi 4:6 says the Elijah who is to come “will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” Well, when we look at the angel’s announcement to Zacharias of John the Baptist’s birth, in Luke 1:17 we find that John is the fulfillment of this prophecy in Malachi 4. The angel says, “It is he [John] who will go as a forerunner before Him [the Lord God] *in the spirit and power of Elijah*”—and then there’s a quotation of Malachi 4:6—“to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children.” And then, interestingly, just a few verses later in Matthew 11, and verse 14, Jesus says to the crowds, “And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is the Elijah who was to come.” John the Baptist was Yahweh’s messenger, sent by God to clear the way for the coming of Yahweh.

But whose coming did John the Baptist clear the way for? Jesus’ coming! In all four Gospels—Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:2–4, Luke 3:4–6, and John 1:19–23—John the Baptist is introduced as the fulfillment of Isaiah 40 verses 3 to 5. *He* is the one crying in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.” Friends, Jesus is Yahweh! “Behold, I, God the Father, am going to send My messenger, John the Baptist, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—the God of Justice you’re calling for—He will suddenly come to His temple. He, the messenger of the covenant—the Suffering Servant of whom the Father said, ‘I will appoint You as a *covenant* to the people’ (Isa 42:6), the mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 9:15; 12:24)—behold, *He* is coming!”

II. The Difficulty of His Coming (3:2a, 5)

“But,” verse 2, “who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?” That brings us, number two, to the **difficulty** of His coming. And this is really counterintuitive, isn’t it? Because we’ve just established that the promised coming in verse 1 looked forward to the coming of Jesus. And His coming was not a day of difficulty. His coming was a day of grace, and mercy, and forgiveness of sins, and of atonement. Why should such a coming be **difficult**?

Well, you've got to remember that this present age in which we live was a mystery to the prophets. Paul calls it in Ephesians 3 "the mystery of Christ ... which for ages ha[d] been hidden, ... now made known through the church." We have the privilege of being able to read backwards—the privilege of living in the age of fulfillment, and recognizing that all the prophets foretold was to take place over the course of two comings of Messiah. But as they were writing, the prophets themselves saw the promises taking place in a single coming. That's why, in Isaiah 61:1–2, for example, the prophet says that God sent him "to proclaim the favorable year of Yahweh and the day of vengeance of our God." That's the same sentence, not even separated by a punctuation mark. Isaiah saw "the favorable year of Yahweh" as the same day as "the day of vengeance of our God." Messiah was going to come and strike down the enemies of Israel and set up the Messianic kingdom!

But when Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1–2 in Luke 4:17–21, and says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus stops in the middle of the sentence. He says He's come to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, but He says nothing about the day of vengeance of our God. Why? Because Yahweh's favor was present in the Messiah calling all to receive salvation through faith in Him. But the day of vengeance was to wait until the Second Coming. And so both favor and vengeance were revealed to Isaiah, and to Malachi, but it was not revealed that more than 2,000 years would separate them.

But that day of vengeance—it *is* coming. And it is going to be terrible. It's the day that we have been hearing about in the main service, as Pastor John has been preaching through the Book of Revelation. It's the time of the Great Tribulation—of Jacob's trouble—when God's judgment will be unleashed upon unbelieving Israel, and the rest of the world. It's the time Jesus talks about in Luke 23:30, as He's being led away to His death, and the women are mourning for Him, and He says, "Oh, don't weep for Me. Weep for yourselves and your children, because days are coming when people will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'"

And that prophecy from Hosea 10:8 finds fulfillment in Revelation 6:16, which Pastor John preached on just a few weeks *ago*, where everyone hides themselves in caves and will say "to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.'" Who ever heard of the wrath of a lamb? A lamb is meek, and mild, and silent before its shearers as its led to the slaughter. Oh, but this Lamb—the Lamb of God—is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, whose eyes are a flame of fire, whose robe is dipped in blood, whose mouth is a sharp sword, and who comes to make war with the unrepentant! the One who treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of Almighty God (Rev 19:11–15; cf. 2:16). Malachi says, "Who can stand when that One appears?"

And the answer is: no one. Not one of us who has ever committed one sin could stand in that day. Dear friend, if you come to that great day in the nakedness of your own righteousness—in the fig leaves and the filthy rags of your own righteousness that can do nothing to cover sin, that are no true righteousness at all!—you will not be able to withstand the wrath of the Lamb. Psalm 130 verse 3, “If you, Yahweh, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” Psalm 1 and verse 5 says, “The wicked will *not* stand in the judgment.”

In that day, Yahweh says in Malachi 3:5, “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness” against you. Just as He was a witness between the men of Judah and the wives of their youth, verse 14, so will be a swift witness against them. Can you imagine the omniscient, Almighty God promising to be a swift witness against you? He says, “I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers”—those who engage in the occult—“and against the adulterers”—those who practice sexual immorality—“and against those who swear falsely”—all liars that will have their part in the lake of fire—“and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan”—those who take advantage of the weak and defenseless, which in our society has no more apt application than abortion—“and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me”—those who despise and are inhospitable to the weak. Idolatry, immorality, lying, taking advantage. Could *you* stand in that awful day?

Malachi is saying the same thing to Judah 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?” 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, you’ll be just like Judah of Malachi’s day: among the people of God, outwardly associated with the people of God and the blessings of divine grace, calling for the God of justice to come and rid the world of evil, only to come to that great day and discover that *you’re* the very evil He’s coming to destroy.

As Peter says in 1 Peter 4:17, judgment begins with the household of God. And if you profess to be God’s people, but you engage in unbroken patterns of the kinds of sins Malachi has spoken of—the treacherousness of divorce, adultery, lying, idolatry, blasphemy, insolence, and oppression of others—you will find that your cries for justice against the wicked will testify against you on the day of judgment. The God who, we’ll see in the next point, is a *refining* fire for His people will be to you the *consuming* fire that Deuteronomy 4:24 says He is. And you will learn that painful lesson that so many in our culture are refusing to heed: that sometimes, those who cry loudest for justice are the ones least equipped to endure it. 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 this morning 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. And that’s what I call you to do this morning.

If you apprehend your great wickedness before the broken Law of Almighty God, if you confess that you have sinned against Him and have earned His righteous wrath in everlasting torment in hell, if you abandon all hope of ever satisfying God’s justice by your own goodness or righteousness or religious performance, and if you cast all your hope for righteousness upon the blood and righteousness of that very Lamb of God, oh dear friend: you will know Him as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world! You will have your sins forgiven. You will be spared in the day of judgment, because all the wrath that would have righteously broken over your head in that day will have broken over the head of the Lamb on the cross! Forsake your sin. Come to Christ. Trust in Him alone for righteousness, and be saved.

III. The Blessing of His Coming (3:2b–4, 6)

The **third feature** of the coming of the God of Justice is, number three, the **blessing** of His coming. And we see it in verses 2, 3, and 4. After asking who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears, Malachi says, “For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, 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 and as in former years.”

“He is like a refiner’s fire,” it says. “He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver.” Silver is a precious metal. But when it’s mined out of the ground it has all kinds of impurities and alloys in it. And so silversmiths would lay the silver into small, portable furnaces, to heat it by fire. And as the ore would melt, the dross—the slag, the impurities—would rise to the top, and the silversmith would scrape off the dross from the top. The smelter would sit, hunched over this portable furnace, constantly watching the silver and removing the dross, until finally all the impurities would be melted away. And he would know he was done when he could see his reflection in the molten silver, so purified that it now looked like a mirror (Boice, 597; Verhoef, 290).

Malachi also says He is “like fullers’ soap.” A fuller was a launderer, someone who would remove stains from clothing. And the soap they would use was *lye* (L-Y-E). A fuller would soak stained clothes in water in which lye had been dissolved, and the chemicals would loosen the dirt from the fabric. Then, the fuller would beat and scrub the clothing until the stain was removed, and the pure fabric was all that remained.

Malachi says: The coming God of Justice will be like a refiner’s fire, and fuller’s soap. The **blessing** of His coming is that the Messiah will *purify* His people. Even though “our God is a *consuming* fire,” as Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29 say, and even though there are people who claim to be the people of God whom He will consume in judgment, even as we’ve seen; nevertheless, He will come to those who truly are His people as a *refiner’s* fire. For the true people of God, the fire that comes will not be a consuming fire. It will be a fire that refines and purifies and cleanses and washes away impurities.

Zechariah 13:8 says that in the eschatological judgment—the time of tribulation that is outlined in the book of Revelation—two-thirds of Israel “will be cut off and perish” in the Day of the Lord judgment. “But,” he goes on, of the one-third remnant of Israel, 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.’” The **blessing** of His coming is that the Lord Jesus Christ is going to restore this nation of insolent traitors, and purge them of all their iniquities. And the result will be pure worship. Messiah “will purify the sons of Levi...so that they may present to Yahweh offerings in righteousness.” Not their leftovers! Not the sick and lame and blind animals that they can’t make any money on so they give them to God for worship! Not the kind of sacrifices that make God come and spread dung all over the priests’ faces! No, “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to Yahweh as in the days of old.”

Ezekiel says the same thing in chapter 20 of His prophecy. God says there, in Ezekiel 20:37, “I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I will purge from you the rebels and those who transgress against Me...” That is the judgment of the tribulation, where the consuming fire consumes the adversaries, but where the refiner’s fire purges the impurities and refines the remnant. And the result is the pure worship of Israel in the millennial kingdom. Ezekiel 20, verse 40: “For on My holy mountain, on the high mountain of Israel,” declares the Lord Yahweh, “*there*”—in the land!—“the whole house of Israel, all of them, will serve Me in the land; there I will accept them and there I will seek your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your holy things.” Verse 41: “As a soothing aroma I will accept you when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered.” Contributions, gifts, holy things, soothing aroma—this is all the language of temple worship. Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi are all prophesying of a restored nation of Israel,

dwelling securely in the land of Israel, offering purified and sanctified worship in the temple in the millennial kingdom of Christ.

God will indeed remember His covenant! And so He will preserve the remnant of His people, who trust in Him! And that's the **good news** in verse 6. Look at it: "For I, Yahweh, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." O, how much significance is packed into every one of those words! I, Yahweh, the self-existent One—I who Am who I Am and who will be who I will be—I do not change! And the immutability of My nature implies the immutability of My promises. I do not turn aside from keeping covenant. And therefore, O sons of Jacob—Jacob whom I *loved*, Malachi 1:2; Jacob, as in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom Yahweh made the Abrahamic Covenant promise to multiply the seed of Israel, to give them a land and a nation, and to bless the world by them—*therefore* (because I don't change and I keep My covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), therefore you, sons of Jacob, are not consumed by the God of Justice who is a consuming fire! Therefore, you are refined by the Savior who is a refining fire! Jesus is going to save Israel. Romans 11:26: "The deliverer will come from Zion; He will remove ungodliness from Jacob." "And so all Israel will be saved."

How glorious is that! The immutable God is faithful to His covenant, even when His people are faithless! And oh, how that sounds like *our* God, GraceLife! Doesn't it? By God's unspeakable grace, we, unclean Gentiles, are the seed of Abraham as well, "heirs according to promise," Galatians 3:29. We are that wild, unnatural olive branch that has been graciously grafted in to become partakers with them of the rich root of the olive tree of covenant blessing, Romans 11:17. We are not the sons of Jacob, but we *are* the seed of Abraham by faith in the ultimate Seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ, who brought the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant to fulfillment by being the Mediator of the New Covenant, through His life, death, and resurrection on our behalf. It was on that cross that our Refiner's Fire "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession," Titus 2:14. It was on that cross that He "made purification for sins," Hebrews 1:3.

And so, that same unchanging God is faithful to His covenant even when the faithfulness of His people is not what it should be. Because it is not our *faithfulness* that unites us to Christ, dear friends. It is the empty hand of *faith alone* that unites us to Christ. It is His faithfulness—not ours—that binds us to covenant blessing. And so the Apostle Paul says to the New Covenant people of God, the church, in 2 Timothy 2:13: "If we are faithless, *He remains faithful*, for He cannot deny Himself." He cannot deny Himself. He cannot change. And His sovereign, electing grace has so united us to Him by covenant promise that to deny us would be to deny Himself! O what unspeakable mercy! Who has ever loved this way! Praise the name of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

Our Refining Fire of a Savior has decisively made purification for us by His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, canceling out the penalty that is due to us; nevertheless, there are still practical impurities in each of us, that Jesus is still mercifully refining out of us, in the purifying fires of progressive sanctification. Each of us still goes through the fire, don't we? Why? Because each of us still has the impurities—the alloys, the dross—of sin within us.

And in light of that, I would offer two final words of application. First, observe that the furnace that Christ most often uses in refining His people are the afflictions and trials of life. Smelting metal is not a dainty process. The flames hurt! The launderer doesn't just dip the clothes in the water-and-lye, and *voilà*: the stains come out! No, he has to beat the clothing, and scrub the clothing until the stains can be separated from the pure fabric. And so, dear people, don't seek to avoid the trials of God's providence. Don't complain about them, and so miss the point of them. Don't flee from the very afflictions that are the means of your refinement, of your purification. No, "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie," remember, "The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design / Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine." God says, "I only design to smelt away your impurities, until you are so refined, that I can see My own image reflected in you—until you are conformed to the image of My Son."

And then, second, be on guard that the sins of Judah in Malachi's day don't crop up in your heart. If you are beleaguered by your trials, if you're tempted to be envious of the wicked, if God Himself seems far off and His promises seem as if they aren't being fulfilled, don't reproach the God of Justice. Don't call God's faithfulness into question. Renew your faith in His promises. Go to Him, and confess with the demon-possessed boy's father in Mark 9, "Lord, I do believe! Help my unbelief!" And whatever you do, in light of your lingering impurities, don't demand justice from God. Don't be one of these arrogant, self-righteous fools who demand the very justice that would incinerate you. Dear people, be much more in search of grace than justice. I'm not saying, "Be unmoved by injustice!" No. But go to God more eagerly in search of grace and mercy, rather than justice, because grace and mercy are what you need from Him. They're what your brothers and sisters need from you.