

You Have Broken the Covenant; Repent!

“Come, Let Us Return to the LORD”

The Preaching of the Minor Prophets for Today

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The LORD has an indictment against his people. (Mic 6:2)

When we turn our Bibles to the “prophets” of the Old Testament, what do we expect to find? Many, perhaps most, anticipate cracking the lid on a deep treasure chest of predictions about the future. Yes, the LORD did use the prophets as fore-tellers.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days. (Mic 5:2)

Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21),
and a portion of their work was unveiling what was to come.

“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

“And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and
fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and
the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD

comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” (Joel 2:28-32)

But the Old Testament prophets were not exclusively or even primarily predictors of the future. The largest portion of their work revolved around pointing to the past, retelling the story of Israel, diagnosing the failure of Abraham’s descendants to keep covenant, and applying what God had said long ago as an explanation for the distresses of their days. Idolatry, injustice, and empty ritualism were pervasive in Israel and Judah. Spiritual rot had reached the top and was flowing downstream from Samaria and Jerusalem. The LORD had an indictment against his people. The prophets were his messengers.

The Minor Prophets

Stretching from approximately 760 B.C. to 460 B.C., the twelve Minor Prophets are “minor” only in relation to the size of their written work when compared with the larger works of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. What they had to say was of major importance because of the source of their message.

The word of the LORD that came to Hosea... (1:1)

The word of the LORD that came to Joel... (1:1)

“I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.” (Amos 7:14-16)

But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of the LORD,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
and to Israel his sin. (Mic 3:8)

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. (1:1)

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah... (1:1)

...the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet...
(1:1)

...the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah... (1:1)

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. (1:1)

Who is this LORD? He is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind,
and declares to man what is his thought,
who makes the morning darkness,
and treads on the heights of the earth—
the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name! (Amos 4:13)

This fundamental fact is what led Malachi to ask three vital questions in 2:10: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?”

Who is this LORD? He is I AM, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob who appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Exo 3:4-6). He delivered Israel from the hand of the Egyptians (Exo 4-12). He brought them to himself at Mount Sinai (Exo 13-19). “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1). In the light of these truths, throughout the prophets, the heart of the LORD is on full display.

“O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,

and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.” (Mic 6:3-4)

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of kindness,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11:3-4)

But I am the LORD your God
from the land of Egypt;
you know no God but me,
and besides me there is no savior.
It was I who knew you in the wilderness,
in the land of drought... (Hos 13:4-5)

“I Will Be Your God, And You Shall Be My People”

The LORD of hosts remembered and referenced “the covenant that I made with [Israel] when you came out of Egypt” (Hag 2:4-5). Abraham’s descendants should have remembered and respected that covenant. It was a binding agreement, founded upon promises, regulated by expectations, and weighted by mutual accountability. When Israel first encamped before Mount Sinai, the LORD called Moses to tell the people:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exo 19:4-6)

All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do,” entering into an agreement with I AM based on promises. Theirs was to be an exclusive relationship rooted in expectations and accountability.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

(20:1-6)

When Moses came and told the people “all the words of the LORD and all the rules,” they repeated their commitment. “All the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do’” (24:3).

Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD, took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and for a third time they vowed, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (24:7). Israel had entered into a covenant with the LORD—a binding agreement founded upon promises, regulated by expectations, weighted by mutual accountability, and ratified by the shedding of blood—“the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (24:8).

The LORD’s intentions were clear. Passages like Leviticus 26:11-13 reveal his heart’s desire for his people:

“I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.”

His covenant with Levi is described in Malachi 2 as “one of life and peace.”

“It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.” (2:5-7)

Israel had entered into a binding agreement with the LORD, weighted by mutual accountability, and some of Moses’ last words were spent reminding the people of the serious expectations.

“If you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” (Deut 28:1-6)

The LORD would cause their enemies to be defeated before them. He would bless their land and their barns. He would establish them as a people “holy to himself, as he has sworn” if they kept the commandments of the LORD their God and walked in his ways (28:9). The LORD would make them abound in

prosperity, in the fruit of their womb, the fruit of their livestock, and the fruit of their ground. The heavens would give rain and all the work of their hands would be blessed. All would flow and flourish from their faithful connection to the Source of life.

“The LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.”
(28:13-14)

But if they would not obey the voice of the LORD, if they were careless with his commandments and negligent with his statutes, curses would come upon them and overtake them. Cursed in the city. Cursed in the field. Cursed baskets and kneading bowls. Cursed would be the fruit of their wombs, the fruit of their ground, their herds, and their flocks. Cursed would they be when they came in and went out. All would shrivel and rot apart from the Sustainer of life.

“The LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.”
(28:20)

“Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain,

wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish.” (28:47-51)

Deuteronomy 28 rehearsed the promises, the expectations, and the warnings, reinforcing the mutual accountability. Deuteronomy 29:1 summarizes it all: “These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb.”

Centuries later, the prophets of the LORD were sent with an indictment against the descendants of Abraham.

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
whoever is discerning, let him know them;
for the ways of the LORD are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them. (Hos 14:9)

The LORD who had revealed himself to Moses as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exo 34:6) now had a controversy with the children of Israel. “There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land” (Hos 4:1). Moses may have commanded them to talk of God’s words when they sat in their houses, when they walked by the way, when they went to bed, and when they rose, teaching them diligently to their children (Deut 6:6-7), but by the days of the prophets, the God of Moses was moved to lament, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6). Israel and Judah had been stumbling and staggering for a very long time. Their hearts had grown cold to an exclusive relationship with I AM. They had fallen into the trap they had been warned about so many times before.

...when they had grazed, they became full,
they were filled, and their heart was lifted up;
therefore they forgot me. (Hos 13:6)

The Prophets as Prosecutors

It had always been “sound wisdom” to fear the name of the Holy One in their midst (Mic 6:9; Hos 11:9). The LORD desired to walk among them and be their God, but the people had developed a very different desire. “My people are bent on turning away from me” is the lament of Hosea 11:7. “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him” is the diagnosis of Habakkuk 2:4. Woe is pronounced on Jerusalem in Zephaniah 3:1-2.

She listens to no voice;
 she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD;
 she does not draw near to her God.

“The land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD” is the startling introduction to Hosea’s prophecy. The LORD instructed Hosea to call his second son “Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hos 1:8-9). Why? Why would the LORD speak in this way? Israel had “played the whore” and “acted shamefully,” saying, “I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink” (Hos 2:5). In response, the LORD would not be silent, idle, or mocked.

And she did not know
 that it was I who gave her
 the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and who lavished on her silver and gold... (2:8)

They shall eat, but not be satisfied;
 they shall play the whore, but not multiply,
because they have forsaken the LORD
 to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine,
 which take away the understanding. (4:10)

But they do not consider
that I remember all their evil.
Now their deeds surround them;
they are before my face. (7:2)

Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands,
they would be regarded as a strange thing. (8:12)

For Israel has forgotten his Maker... (8:14)

The more they were called,
the more they went away... (11:2)

The LORD took Amos from among the shepherds of Tekoa to clearly connect the covenant curses of Deuteronomy to the days of Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam king of Israel.

“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.

“I also withheld the rain from you
when there were yet three months to the harvest;
I would send rain on one city,
and send no rain on another city;
one field would have rain,
and the field on which it did not rain would wither;
so two or three cities would wander to another city
to drink water, and would not be satisfied;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.

“I struck you with blight and mildew;
your many gardens and your vineyards,
your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.

“I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt;
I killed your young men with the sword,
and carried away your horses,
and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.

“I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,
and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD. (Amos 4:6-11)

Promised discipline had been administered. Righteous judgment was coming. Deserved destruction was on the horizon. The final warnings would be delivered by the prophets.

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.
Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light. (Hos 6:4-5)

The LORD had an indictment against his people (Hos 12:2). Their relationship had been ratified at Sinai. The terms and expectations, promises and warnings had been made clear in Deuteronomy. The people had vowed, “All that the

LORD has spoken we will do.” And yet, just cause for indictment was abundant throughout centuries of Israel’s history. The LORD would use the prophets as his prosecutors (Hos 12:10).

“For the Lord GOD does nothing
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.
The lion has roared;
who will not fear?” (Amos 3:7-8)

Indictment #1: Idolatry

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exo 20:3), but in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, the word of the LORD came to Hosea with a roar.

“I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals
when she burned offerings to them
and adorned herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers
and forgot me, declares the LORD.” (Hos 2:13)

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image” (Exo 20:4), but the people of Hosea’s generation were inquiring of pieces of wood and looking to their walking staffs as oracles (Hos 4:12).

They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains
and burn offerings on the hills,
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,
because their shade is good.
Therefore your daughters play the whore,
and your brides commit adultery...
...for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes

and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,
and a people without understanding shall come to ruin. (Hos 4:13-14)

It is the LORD “who makes the storm clouds” and provides “showers of rain” (Zech 10:1). It was the LORD who had given Israel the grain, the wine, and the oil, who had lavished on her silver and gold, but Israel had used it all for Baal (2:8).

O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress;
from me comes your fruit. (Hos 14:8)

And yet, “a spirit of whoredom” had led God’s people astray and they were “joined to idols” (4:17). “They have left their God to play the whore” (Hos 4:12).

“You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exo 20:5). In the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, Micah of Moresheth gave voice to the word of this jealous LORD.

Hear, you peoples, all of you;
pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it,
and let the Lord GOD be a witness against you,
the Lord from his holy temple.
For behold, the LORD is coming out of his place,
and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth.
And the mountains will melt under him,
and the valleys will split open,
like wax before the fire,
like waters poured down a steep place.
All this is for the transgression of Jacob
and for the sins of the house of Israel.
What is the transgression of Jacob?
Is it not Samaria?

And what is the high place of Judah?
Is it not Jerusalem?
Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country,
a place for planting vineyards,
and I will pour down her stones into the valley
and uncover her foundations.
All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces,
all her wages shall be burned with fire,
and all her idols I will lay waste,
for from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them,
and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return. (Mic 1:2-7)

“For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me” (Exo 20:5), and when the living, jealous Lord of heaven and earth rises up, what profit will be found in an idol shaped by a mere mortal, “a metal image, a teacher of lies?”

For its maker trusts in his own creation
when he makes speechless idols!
Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake;
to a silent stone, Arise!
Can this teach?
Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
and there is no breath at all in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Hab 2:18-20)

By the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem could largely be described as “bowing down on the roofs to the host of the heavens.”

...those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,

those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.” (Zeph 1:4-6)

How far they had fallen from the days when Moses had called, “Hear, O Israel”!

“The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

“And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you —with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God —lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth.” (Deut 6:4-15)

Abraham’s descendants had put their undeserved inheritance into a bag with holes (Hag 1:6). They had given themselves over to household gods that uttered nonsense, trusting diviners who saw lies. Their hopes had come to rest on false dreams full of empty consolation. “Therefore the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted for lack of a shepherd” (Zech 10:2).

Indictment #2: Injustice

A willing and able shepherd—the best shepherd—had been willing to lead and ready to deliver all along. “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2).

“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another.” (19:11)

“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him.” (19:13)

“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. (19:15)

“...you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (19:18)

Having turned their backs on their Creator and Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, it should not be surprising that relationships with their fellow image-bearers would suffer.

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. (Hos 4:1-2)

Four transgressions are pronounced by Amos who had been brought by the LORD from among the shepherds of Tekoa to indict Israel with a roar from Zion.

...they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;

a man and his father go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge,
and in the house of their God they drink
the wine of those who have been fined. (2:6-8)

“I know,” their Creator wanted them to hear. “I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate” (5:12). Having forsaken the fountain of living waters, they turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood (6:12). The needy were trampled and the poor of the land brought to an end as false balances helped merchants deal deceitfully (8:4-6).

Woe to those who devise wickedness
and work evil on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in the power of their hand.
They covet fields and seize them,
and houses, and take them away;
they oppress a man and his house,
a man and his inheritance. (Mic 2:1-2)

Having given themselves to sin, they were now devising ways to sin. How far they had fallen from the days when Moses taught them, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself”!

Hear, you heads of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel!
Is it not for you to know justice?—
you who hate the good and love the evil,
who tear the skin from off my people
and their flesh from off their bones,

who eat the flesh of my people,
and flay their skin from off them,
and break their bones in pieces
and chop them up like meat in a pot,
like flesh in a cauldron. (3:1-3)

The heads and rulers of the houses of Jacob and Israel “detested” justice. They were making crooked all that was straight. They were building Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity (3:9-10). The LORD asked in Micah 6:11, “Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales and with a bag of deceitful weights?” Not as long as hearts were full of violence and mouths spewing deceit. The people who had been commanded to bind God’s will as a sign on their hands (Deut 6:8) had placed their hands “on what is evil, to do it well” (Mic 7:3).

So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted. (Hab 1:4)

Who should have stood in the breach? The officials, judges, prophets, and priests. But in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, Zephaniah delivered this indictment against Jerusalem:

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!
She listens to no voice;
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD;
she does not draw near to her God.
Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her judges are evening wolves
that leave nothing till the morning.
Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men;

her priests profane what is holy;
they do violence to the law.
The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no injustice;
every morning he shows forth his justice;
each dawn he does not fail;
but the unjust knows no shame. (Zeph 3:1-5)

The righteous LORD saw. He heard. He knew. He was witness when faithless men dealt treacherously with the wives of their youth (Mal 2:13-15).

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

But no amount of calling evil good and good evil would alter the expectations of the God of justice. No amount of misrepresenting him would change the nature of the LORD who is righteous. Doubting his existence, his attention, or his devotion to his will would not make him disappear. The unjust might not have known shame, but they were on the brink of knowing God’s terrible wrath.

Indictment #3: Empty Ritualism

As long as this heartless injustice was tolerated and propagated among his people, the LORD would not be interested in their hypocritical religious expressions.

“I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;

to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

Embedded in the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28 were the expectations that Abraham’s descendants would not only “obey the voice of the LORD [their] God” but that they would serve him “with joyfulness and gladness of heart” (28:45-47). By the days of Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, joyfulness and gladness of heart in the LORD had been subverted by, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale?” (Amos 8:5).

Malachi gave voice to the word of the LORD in perhaps the sharpest indictment of Israel’s empty ritualism.

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the LORD’s table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is

polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. (1:6-14)

The covenant of the fathers had been profaned (2:10). Judah had been faithless. Abomination had been committed in Israel. The sanctuary of the LORD, which he loved, had been desecrated (2:11), all while some were brazenly saying, "It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts?" (3:14). "Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD" (3:13). Those hard words and stubborn hearts would not be ignored or glossed over.

The pride of Israel testifies to his face;
Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt;
Judah also shall stumble with them. (Hos 5:5)

The Prophets as Pleaders

Idolatry and injustice mixed with empty ritualism had wounded God's people with an "incurable" wound (Mic 1:9)—a wound that no human king or ally could cure or heal (Hos 5:13). In the process, they had wounded the heart of the LORD—the one faithful covenant partner who was moved to lament for a time, "you are not my people, and I am not your God" (Hos 1:8-9).

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD,
"when I will send a famine on the land—
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.
They shall wander from sea to sea,

and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD,
but they shall not find it.” (Amos 8:11-12)

If his unfaithful people continued to scorn his patience and despise his messengers, the time would come when they would long for words from the LORD and be unable to find them.

“Yet...” It’s one of the great, wondrous, undeserved words breathed out by God through his prophets—men carried along by the Holy Spirit to serve as spokesmen, foretellers, re-tellers, prosecutors, and even pleaders. Though his people had strayed from him, rebelled against him, and spoken lies about him, “I would redeem them,” says the LORD (Hos 7:11-13). If they would repent, God would forgive, even at the eleventh hour. And so, the prophets pled.

“Come, let us return to the LORD;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD;
his going out is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth.” (Hos 6:1-3)

What does it mean to repent? Hosea 5:15 is an ancient aid for understanding. Repentance is acknowledgement of guilt, a turning to seek the face of a holy God, and—with an awareness of my absolute unworthiness—a determination to earnestly seek him as the God who desires “steadfast love” (Hos 6:6), whatever his prescription, whatever the cost.

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2:12-13)

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
who do his just commands;
seek righteousness; seek humility;
perhaps you may be hidden
on the day of the anger of the LORD. (Zeph 2:3)

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:6-8)

“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are
not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside
from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will
return to you, says the LORD of hosts.” (Mal 3:6-7)

For far too long, Israel had stumbled because of their iniquity. “Return, O Israel,
to the LORD your God,” was the plea of the prophets. “Take with you words and

return to the LORD; say to him, 'Take away all iniquity' ... and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands" (Hos 14:1-3).

Sow for yourselves righteousness;
reap steadfast love;
break up your fallow ground,
for it is time to seek the LORD,
that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. (Hos 10:12)

If his people would acknowledge their guilt? If they would turn to face the holy God they had forsaken and, with humble awareness of their absolute unworthiness, earnestly seek him? What would they find? After centuries of unfaithfulness, what would they experience?

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.
And there I will give her her vineyards
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

"And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.

“And in that day I will answer, declares the LORD,
I will answer the heavens,
and they shall answer the earth,
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and they shall answer Jezreel,
and I will sow her for myself in the land.
And I will have mercy on No Mercy,
and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people’;
and he shall say, ‘You are my God.’” (Hos 2:14-23)

“I am yours and you are mine.” That’s what the faithful and Holy One yearned for all along. The prophets had provided a portrait of Yahweh as spurned spouse, anguishing over Israel’s unfaithfulness. They had portrayed him as patient Father, grieving the consequences of a rebellious child’s foolish choices. But if that wife would turn... if that prodigal child would come home... “I am yours and you are mine.” That’s what the LORD of loyal love continued to desire. “Walk with me and I will walk with you. I AM. I do not change. You did, and it cost you dearly. Yet even now, if you will return to me with all your heart, I—the LORD your God, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love —will return to you.”

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.
He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,

as you have sworn to our fathers
from the days of old. (Mic 7:18-20)

“Remember.” So much of the prophets’ work points to the past, calling the descendants of Abraham to remember. “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (Mal 4:4). Remember who you are. Remember whose you are. Days of the LORD would come, “burning like a furnace” (Mal 4:1, NASB), when all the arrogant and all evildoers would be consumed like chaff. But incurable wounds of the past didn’t have to define the present or destroy the future. “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (Mal 4:2).