

“IN THE FIRES OF GOD’S FURNACE”
Psalm 51:1-12, Hebrews 12:11-17, John 17:6-19
February 4, 2024

“A group of women were studying the book of Malachi. In Malachi 3 they came across this: ‘*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver*’ (v. 3). The women wondered how this showed God’s character, so one of them volunteered to learn more about the process of refining silver. She promised to report her findings the following week.

“She called a local silversmith to make an appointment to study how he worked. She explained that she was curious about the process of refining silver but never mentioned the Bible study. On the appointed day, she watched the silversmith hold a piece of silver over the fire to heat it. ‘To refine silver,’ he said, ‘one must place it in the middle of the fire where it is hottest and allow the heat to burn away all the impurities.’

“The woman suddenly understood this was how God holds his followers in ‘hot’ spots, exactly like the Malachi verse that talks about how God sits as a refiner and purifier of silver. She asked the silversmith if it was true he had to stay with this piece of silver, in front of the fire, the whole time it was in the flames. The silversmith answered emphatically, ‘Yes!’ He told her there was more to his job than just sitting and waiting, though. He said he had to monitor the silver the entire time it was in the fire, never taking his eyes off of it. ‘If the silver is left in the flame even a second too long, it would be impaired,’ he said. ‘If it was not in the flame long enough, impurities would remain in it.’

“She listened and then sat silently for a moment before asking, ‘How do you know the exact moment when the silver is completely refined?’

“He smiled at her and said, ‘That is a good question and has an easy answer. The silver is fully refined when I see my image in it.’ (Author Unknown)

“The silversmith knows just how long to keep the silver over the fire. He does not keep it over the fire too long or too short, but he knows when it is just right to purify it.”

What a perfect example of God’s sanctifying grace! Sanctification is the process of working with us to remove all of the impurities within us so that the end result is a pure and holy person. God’s

desire is to get us to the point when all our sins are burned away and all that is left is holiness - uncontaminated, unpolluted, untainted, and unadulterated. God's sanctifying grace works in us until He sees His image in us.

But that means that we have to go through a refining process. Without heat, the silver is never purified. So, too, without heat in our own lives, we never have the sins in our lives exposed so that they can be removed from us.

Take for example our lesson of Psalm 51. King David had some very nasty stuff in his life, and he had been content to keep them hidden. He had not led his army out to war, and so was bored out of his mind staying home in the palace. He ended up committing adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David's Mighty Men, and a good friend. And when Bathsheba notified David that she was pregnant, David went through a whole variety of things to try to get Uriah home with his wife so that the child could be considered Uriah's. But when everything failed in this scheme, David decided that he had to hide the whole thing, and thereby had Uriah killed in battle. Then, to look like he was doing the right thing, David took Bathsheba as his wife, so that the child would seem legitimate.

However, during this whole endeavor, David was wasting away because of that sin. So God used one of His prophets, Nathan, to confront David with his sin. God put David over the hottest part of the fire so that his impurities and sinfulness could be made visible, not because God delights in making us miserable, but in order to purge David of the sin in his life. God's furnace heated everything up so that David recognized that what he did was wrong. It gave him the opportunity to repent of all of his sinfulness so that he could once more be a man after God's own heart.

So Psalm 51 is David's confession of his sinfulness. And he cries out to God, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleans me from my sin*" (51:1-2). The whole chapter is the sanctifying process of David repenting of his sins and seeking the forgiveness of the Lord God Almighty.

And that's God's desire for each one of us. We all have junk in our lives that we hide, trying to look upright and honest before others, but that stuff burdens us and causes us to waste away, no longer being connected with the Lord Jesus. The goal of the refining process of God's furnace is to put heat to us, so that we begin to recognize the junk in our lives and to begin to call us to repent of it, and allow God to remove it from us so that we might grow closer to Him again.

But this is difficult for us to do because none of us wants to be disciplined. The writer of Hebrews states that well in the 12th chapter when he says, "*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*" (12:11). This is God's desire for us, so that we get rid of the garbage in our lives and allow Him to clean our hearts and minds from the unhealthy stuff we carry around. The discipline that God puts us through is not meant to destroy us, but rather to purify us so that we can "*produce a harvest of righteousness and peace.*" Without God's refining furnace burning away the dross and sin in our lives, we continue to carry around great burdens of guilt and shame and we waste away, thereby no longer able to do the work that God has called us to accomplish.

However, when you are over the heat, just remember that God has His eyes on you. He knows when you've had enough and you've been refined and purified. His timing will always be just right. When you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God has his eye on you and He will "sit as a refiner and purifier" keeping watch until He sees His image in you. God is intimately aware of your needs and limits. He also knows just when you've had enough. At the right time He will remove you from the fire. The results will be complete at the right time.

Therefore, God puts us all to the heat in His refining furnace. The author of Hebrews gives us the end results that God is looking for. He says, "*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as*

you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done” (Heb. 12:14-17).

God’s fiery furnace intends to make us holy so that we might live as His witnesses to the transformation that takes place through Jesus Christ. But it takes most of us getting so low that all we can do is look up, and THAT is when we come to recognize the Lord’s work in us. Then we have the opportunity to repent of our sinfulness, and to once more trust in the ways of God. God provides us His sanctifying grace so that we are not destroyed because of our sin, but redeemed through the discipline of going through God’s refining furnace.

The music group, Consuming Fire, has put together a song entitled “Keep the First Things First.” The lyrics go like this

“All the things that I have held dear, the vanities that whispered in my ear: What would I do if they all disappeared? Riches and fame and all that they could buy, I've come to find they never satisfy. What would I gain if my soul's the price?

“I don't wanna love what the world loves. I don't wanna chase what the world does, I only want You (Lord), I only want You. First thing's first, I seek Your will, not my own - surrender all my wants to You. Keep the first thing first.

“To live Your truth, walk Your ways, set my eyes Lord I fix my face on You, all my desires reversed. To keep the first thing first I give it all my life an offering. My heart is yours so have Your way in me. Your kingdom's all I wanna seek.

“I don't wanna love what the world loves; I don't wanna chase what the world does. I only want You, I only want You. First thing's first, I seek Your will, not my own, surrender all my wants to You. Keep the first thing first, to live Your truth, walk Your ways. Set my eyes Lord; I fix my face on You. All my desires reversed, to keep the first thing first.”

That’s God’s sanctifying grace at work, helping us to realize that there is nothing in all this world that can satisfy our hearts, and encouraging us to give it all away so that we might be like the Lord Jesus.

You see, God is not interested in our physical lives so much as in our spiritual lives. Sure, we are physical creatures and we have lots of needs that God has created us to have. Yet it’s not the

physical things of this life that are important to God. He wants all of our heart, soul, mind and strength to be focused upon Him, and only then can we have all of our physical needs met, as He provides for us in abundant ways.

So the things in our lives that we chase after, what would it be like if they all disappeared? Could we actually begin giving everything away so that there would be nothing else between us and the Lord? Could we possibly rid ourselves of all earthly things so that God could be our One and Only God? What treasures do we have that keep us from following God's work in and through us? If we are people after God's own heart, what is it that has to be burned away in God's refining furnace in order that we become pure and holy?

The main struggle we have in our life is a lack of faith that the Lord will supply us with our daily bread. We spend our lives building up financial portfolios that can give us wealth in retirement years. We collect property and items in our lives that mean so much to us, but the danger is that many times they become idols to us that take us away from a relationship with the Lord Jesus.

And what about our positions at work? We've spent years climbing the ladder of success, getting the positions that have authority and power attached to them. Yet many times we give the job greater importance in our lives than a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. The work we do becomes the idol that keeps us away from the Lord.

There's so much in our lives that become idols that we spend more time worshipping than we do the Lord God Almighty. Sporting events, hobbies, favorite activities, technology, media, and other personal pleasures become the very dross in us that God wants to burn away in the refiner's furnace. But we rationalize that it would all be too hard to give up, so we just go on indulging ourselves rather than letting God do His work of purifying us through His sanctification. We put more hope in the things of this world than we do in the things of the Lord, and we therefore find ourselves corrupted and spoiled rather than pure and holy.

The desire for the Lord God is to rid us of all our passions and desires so that our whole life

focuses on Him being the #1 in our lives. God will not tolerate being second place, for that means that we have put something or someone else as first in our life. So we fail to keep the very first commandment, “*You shall have no other gods before Me*” (Exodus 20:3). God is absolutely demanding us to have Him as first in our lives. But oh, how we disappoint Him.

So is it any wonder then, that God puts the heat on us? He wants us to be so diligent at living for Him through our faith in Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit directs and guides us throughout our lives. Nothing else is more important to Him for us. And that is the reason that God sent Jesus Christ to us here in our world. Listen to Jesus’ prayer for all of His disciples (that includes us). This is John 17:6-19. (READ John 17:6-19)

Jesus is praying to God the Father to protect us by the power of His Name (17:11) so that we might be one with Him, even as Jesus was one with Him. As we put our faith in Jesus, as we turn our lives over to God in His Name, we become children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, and God promises to take care of us AND to use us so, that the rest of the world might come to know that they, too, can become His children as they trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. But when we get so enamored with all the things of this world, we lose our love for Jesus, and then lose God’s protection and guidance.

But God doesn’t want us to fall away from Him! Jesus gave us the Word of God so that we might live for Him. And because we live for Jesus, the world will neither understand us nor will they love us. Rather they will hate us because we are no longer dependent upon the things of this world to make us happy. The world will despise us because we don’t need the things of this world to be at peace. God supplies us with all we need and gives us a peace that the world cannot understand.

So rather than take us out of the world, Jesus prays that God would draw us closer to Him each day, so that as living witnesses of the love of God for us, others might also follow our example and give their lives to Jesus Christ. Jesus asks God the Father to protect us from the evil of this world so that we are not of this world, filled with all kinds of impurities and unrighteousness.

And Jesus’ greatest request of the Father is, “*Sanctify them by the truth: Your Word is truth. As*

You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You”
(John 17:17-21).

The sanctification that Jesus is asking God to do in us, is calling us to be one with Him. Jesus is calling us to be in the world, but not of the world, to live as His people distinctly different than all others so that all people can see the value of having Christ Jesus as Lord of their lives. And we cannot be sanctified if we have all the stuff of the world corrupting us and demeaning us. God means for us to be holy, so for those who give their lives to Him, He purifies through His refining furnace.

So let me conclude today with these important words. “It was the enraptured Rutherford who said in the midst of very painful trials and heartaches: ‘Praise God for the hammer, the file, and the furnace!’

“Let’s think about that. The hammer is a useful and handy instrument. It is an essential and helpful tool, if nails are ever to be driven into place. Each blow forces them to bite deeper as the hammer’s head pounds and pounds.

“But if the nail had feelings and intelligence, it would give us another side of the story. To the nail, the hammer is a brutal, relentless master - an enemy who loves to beat it into submission. That is the nail’s view of the hammer. It is correct - Except for one thing. The nail tends to forget that both it and the hammer are held by the same workman. The workman decides whose ‘head’ will be pounded out of sight...and which hammer will be used to do the job.

“This decision is the sovereign right of the carpenter. Let the nail but remember that it and the hammer are held by the same workman...and its resentment will fade as it yields to the carpenter without complaint.

“The same analogy holds true for the metal that endures the rasp of the file and the blast of the furnace. If the metal forgets that it and the tools are objects of the same craftsman’s care, it will build up

hatred and resentment. The metal must keep in mind that the craftsman knows what he's doing...and is doing what is best.

“Heartaches and disappointments are like the hammer, the file, and the furnace. They come in all shapes and sizes: an unfulfilled romance, a lingering illness and untimely death, an unachieved goal in life, a broken home or marriage, a severed friendship, a wayward and rebellious child, a personal medical report that advises ‘immediate surgery,’ a failing grade at school, a depression that simply won’t go away, a habit you can’t seem to break. Sometimes heart-aches come suddenly...other times they appear over the passing of many months, slowly as the erosion of earth.

“Do I write to a ‘nail’ that has begun to resent the blows of the hammer? Are you at the brink of despair, thinking that you cannot bear another day of heartache? Is that what’s gotten you down?

“As difficult as it may be for you to believe this today, the Master knows what He’s doing. Your Savior knows your breaking point. The bruising and crushing and melting process is designed to reshape you, not ruin you. Your value is increasing the longer He lingers over you.”¹

So let the Lord Jesus have His way with you to make you pure and holy, even as He is pure and holy, for the glory of the Lord our God. Let’s pray.

Father, thank You for making us according to Your image. Thank You for calling us to be Your people. Thank You for giving us Your Son, Jesus, to save us and sanctify us. So, today, we ask that You would continue Your work of refining us in Your furnace as we live in this world. There is yet much that we need to have burned off from our hearts and minds so that we might be holy in Your sight once more. Keep watching over us as You put us into the hottest part of the fire so that all that is impure and imperfect in us is burned away. Help us to trust You in the whole refining process, knowing that You love us and desire our very best. Keep working on us so that our lives might become wholly focused on serving You, right where we are. Give us the courage to let You do Your work in and through us so we might be Your disciples, in the great and powerful Name of Jesus Christ. AMEN

¹ (Charles Swindoll, in *Stories For The Heart*, (compiled by Alice Gray), [Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996] p. 186-187)