

FIRE AND SOAP

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Malachi. The last book of the Old Testament. The last Old Testament prophet. After the book of Malachi was written, after the prophet Malachi prophesied for the last time, a metaphorical curtain came down on the Old Testament. Four hundred and fifty years passed without hearing the voice of a living prophet. Before God fell silent he spoke through the prophet Malachi. "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." The messenger was 450 years in arriving. Christians understand the Lord to be speaking of John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for the Lord's own personal appearance in Jesus. His coming is both a threat and promise. Malachi asks rhetorically, "Will anybody be able to endure the day of his coming? Will anybody be able to stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."

I want to talk about the refiner's fire. I won't have time to talk about the soap – but I want to talk about the fire, the refiner's. Fire, like electricity, is both frightfully dangerous and enormously helpful to us humans. Fire is both friend and enemy. Imagine the great leap in civilization that took place when our ancestors tamed fire, domesticated fire – and used it to warm their cave dwellings. As civilization advanced, people learned to use fire in many other ways. We learned to use fire to cook food, to shape weapons and tools, to change clay into pottery, and to lighten the darkness of a cold winter's night. Eventually, we learned how to refine metal with the use of fire.

Years ago I toured a museum in the steel city of Pittsburgh where I observed an exhibition of the refining process. In the process of refining metals, the raw metal is heated with fire until it melts. The impurities in the metal separate from it and rise to the surface. They're skimmed off, leaving the pure metal. Without this heating and melting, there could be no purifying. The steel would not be strong or useful. The refining process is absolutely necessary for steel to become useful. As the impurities are skimmed off the top of the molten metal, the reflection of the worker appears in the smooth, pure molten surface.

Malachi says that God wants to purify us like a refiner's fire purifies metal. God wants to make us useful for him. The Lord wants to make us strong. The Lord wants us to glow with the fire of God and to reflect God's image. Many of you are familiar with the hymn, "How firm a foundation." The last stanza alludes to the words of Malachi and the refiner's fire.

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

Max Lucado, a writer, pictures God as a Blacksmith. His description of God reminds me of what Malachi says about the refiner's fire. Listen to what he says and hear as a metaphor of how God wants to shape and mold and refine us. He writes: With a strong forearm the apron-clad blacksmith puts his tongs into the fire, grasps the heated metal, and places it on his anvil. His keen eye examines the glowing piece... and envisions what he wants it to be.... With a clear picture in his mind, he begins to pound. His left hand still clutching the hot mass with the tongs, the right hand slams the sledge upon the moldable metal.

On the solid anvil, the smoldering iron is remolded.

The smith knows the type of instrument he wants. He knows the size. He knows the shape. He knows the strength.

Whang! Whang! The hammer slams. The shop rings with noise, the air fills with smoke, and the softened metal responds.

But the response doesn't come easily. It doesn't come without discomfort. To melt down the old and recast it as new is a disrupting process. Yet the metal remains on the anvil, allowing the toolmaker to remove the scars, repair the cracks, refill the voids, and purge the impurities.

And with time, a change occurs: What was dull becomes sharpened, what was crooked becomes straight, what was weak becomes strong, the rough places become smooth and what was useless becomes valuable.

Then the blacksmith stops. He ceases his pounding and sets down his hammer. With a strong left arm, he lifts the tongs until the freshly molded metal is at eye level. In the still silence, he examines the smoking tool. The incandescent implement is rotated and examined for any mars or cracks.

There are none.

Now the smith enters the final stage of his task. He plunges the smoldering instrument into a nearby bucket of water. With a hiss and a rush of steam, the metal immediately begins to harden. The heat surrenders to the onslaught of cool water, and the pliable, soft mineral becomes an unbending, useful tool.”

In the same way God uses our trials, our pain and discomfort, the painful tragedies in our lives to shape and mold us into his image. Through the fires of adversity and testing and temptation the Lord refines and purifies us and makes us useful in his service.

Look back over your life. Think of the most painful times in your life – the death of a loved one, a divorce, a bitter disappointment. Most of us would not wish those experiences on our worst enemy. But somehow we made it through. Would it help to envision God – not causing the pain or tragedy – but using it to make us stronger, more useful in God’s service – so that we might better reflect the image of Christ in us?

Almighty God, you send your Son into a world where the wheat must be winnowed from chaff and wickedness clings even to what is good. Let the fire of your Spirit purge us of greed and deceit, so that, purified, we may find our peace in you and you may delight in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.