

God's Masterpieces!

Malachi 3:1-4; 4:1-3

We often wish that the Christian life was easier, don't we? We ask questions such as, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Why do believers often suffer so much?" or "Why do the ungodly so often seem to live such carefree, trouble-free, even prosperous lives?"

Let's begin by acknowledging what ought to be rather obvious to thinking people. Some suffering us simply self-induced, brought on by our own foolish choices and errant decisions. We do something carelessly, thoughtlessly, or in open disobedience to the Lord, and then we suffer the consequences of our own folly. It happens all the time. Then, we often rationalize our misfortune by blaming others, fate, bad luck, or circumstances. The reality, however, is that the real trouble is **us**.

But what about those times when, to the best of our knowledge, we have acted responsibly, with prudence, seeking God's wisdom and guidance, trying our best to be obedient to His commands – and we still find ourselves in the furnace of affliction? It is in those times that we need to be reminded that our God allows trials and afflictions to come our way as a means of refining us and developing us into the masterpieces that only He knows we are capable of becoming. Let's be honest, this can be a very painful process. The refining of a human being can be just as exacting and as demanding as the refining of a precious metal.

When we go to buy a piece of fine jewelry, we expect to walk into an attractive store with aesthetic lighting, attractively laid out display cases, and well-dressed personnel waiting to show us the various wares inside the glass cases. Everything about the surroundings is designed to show off the jewelry in its best light.

But if we were to track those jewels back to their origin, the opposite would be true. A silver mine, for instance, is a dark, dirty, and dangerous place. Men dreaming of fortunes have lost their lives in the mines!

When the ore is brought to the surface the work is far from over. The crushing, amalgamating, and smelting is yet to be done. Silver does not melt until it reaches a temperature of 960.5° Celsius. Only then does it begin to yield up its impurities. No doubt both King Solomon and the prophet Isaiah had something like this in mind when they wrote about God's purging process, the purifying of our hearts and lives. So Solomon writes:

“Remove the dross from the silver, and out comes material for the silversmith; remove the wicked from the king's presence, and his throne will be established through righteousness” (Prov. 25:4-5).

And through the prophet Isaiah, God says:

“I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities” (Isa. 1:25).

Clearly, God is more interested in our character than our comfort. He wants us to realize our full character potential, not just relax in our comfortable pews.

We all want our fine jewelry to be of the highest quality, and we expect it to have to go through a refining process, but we do not often think about the need for a similar process in our hearts. It seems that many of our churches have become conditioned by the world. In many church circles “feel good” and “keep it positive” have become the operative slogans. We tend to bristle at the idea of God wanting to make major changes in our lives. But because God loves us, he will never let us remain the way we are today. That is the reason for his refining process in our lives.

When the Lord looks at us it is as if he sees silver or gold. That is how precious we are to him. In fact we are worth much more than silver or gold! He also sees that, like silver or gold, we need to be refined and to be purified. We need to have all of the dross removed from our lives; that is, those attitudes and habits and those spiritual contaminants that pollute our souls and hold us back from realizing our full potential. If silver is contaminated with dross, it does no good to simply add more ore to the pile. The silversmith will not be able to make something beautiful out of it, no matter how large is the pile of unrefined ore. The dross has to be removed! As long as the impurities remain, the silver will never be shiny or smooth.

We readily accept this reality in many areas of life, but when it comes to spiritual matters we often resist it. Can you imagine a patient with a cancerous growth instructing the doctor to simply supply something to dull the pain? That is a prescription for death! The growth must be removed! Similarly, in the spiritual realm the cancer of sin must be removed. The impurities must be removed before we can fully appreciate the blessings our Father wants to bestow on us.

When Jesus began his public ministry, one of his first stops was the Temple. Did our Lord begin with a new coat of paint and add expensive new furniture to improve the décor? No, first he got rid of the things that didn't belong in the Temple, the extortion and racketeering. He showed himself to be a refining fire that day because he deeply loved his Father's house. The money-changers had turned what was supposed to be a house of prayer into a den of thieves.

The Word says, “Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?” If we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, then will not our Lord be just as interested in cleansing us and purifying us from all that contaminates the human spirit? Of course! He loves us more than he loves a building. The Temple of Jerusalem was impressive, but it was nevertheless only a building made out of bricks and mortar. We are made in the image of God!

The Bible says that, “The Lord corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights” (Prov. 3:12). God's purpose for us is a lot deeper than merely our comfort. He lovingly permits trials and furnaces of affliction so that our sinful attitudes and wrong reactions can come right to the surface. He wants us to be made aware of our lack of genuine faith and love. Sometimes the Lord places us in situations in which we are beyond our ability to cope. Why? He is teaching us to rely on Him, to believe His promises, to trust His good intentions, and to have confidence in Him as a loving heavenly Father. He is drawing us away from our self-reliance to reliance on Him. And He knows exactly how much heat to allow in our lives. He will never scorch us, but if we jump out of one cauldron because it seems too hot, He has others waiting. The dross must be removed!

Do you know how the ancient refiner knew when he was finished and the heat could finally be turned down? It was when he looked into the cauldron and saw his own reflection in the shining silver. As long as his reflection was muddy and rippled with flecks of slag, he knew he had to keep working. But when his face finally showed clearly, the silver had been purified. This is exactly how it is with us. God's eternal plan is for us “to be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). Jesus is still the

Refiner and Purifier of his people! As he so carefully works on our lives, he keeps looking into us in order to see his own blessed reflection.

Shouldn't we trust our Lord and surrender to this process rather than fighting it? It is a process of love designed to bring beauty and maturity into our lives. If only we could realize that the holier the life, the more true and lasting joy we experience.

Some flowers, such as the rose, must be crushed if their full fragrance is to be released. Some fruits, such as the sycamore, must be bruised if they are to attain ripeness and sweetness. And yes, some metals, such as silver and gold, must be heated in the furnace if they are to become pure.

The attainment of godliness – the process of becoming a mature Christian – requires similar special handling. It is often through pain, suffering, trouble, adversity, trials, and even temptation that we develop spiritual discipline and become refined and enriched.

When a wood sculptor wants to create a work of art, he starts with a log and begins to fashion it with a sharp chisel. He meticulously cuts and shapes that log until finally he has his finished product. The log might simply have been burned in a fireplace and reduced to ashes, but instead it has become a beautiful masterpiece worthy of being displayed on the mantle over the fireplace. Similarly, if we are willing to yield to the Master's chisel strokes, then we will have the privilege of one day being lifted up above the furnace of affliction and being displayed as one of God's masterpieces.

It may seem that God is always chiseling away at us and that His work is too painful. Yet His ultimate purpose for us is to produce a masterpiece. Does the music of your life seem inharmonious and discordant? Never forget what any concert pianist will tell you; the richest chords require some black keys! Is God working on you right now? Then take it as a sign that He loves you and that He is molding you into His masterpiece!