

The Refiner's Fire

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11

Sunday, December 8, 2024, at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Malachi 3:3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness.

✚ Introduction: The order of the Hebrew Bible was rearranged somewhere around the fourth or fifth century, with Malachi replacing Chronicles at the end.

One of the funny things I learned about the Bible within the past couple of years is that there is a difference between the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible. For years I thought that the two were the same, but I was startled by an article by a Jewish scholar who maintained that there is a difference between the two, despite the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible being the same set of documents. The order had been changed somewhere around the 4th century and who did it and why is a mystery. In the Hebrew Bible, 1st and 2nd Samuel is combined with 1st and 2nd Kings and 1st and 2nd Chronicles is placed last. Chronicles covers much of the same history as Kings but with an emphasis on the grace of God, so the Hebrew Bible ends on a positive note. But the Old Testament ends with Malachi, which ends with a curse. I can see why that might have been done because Matthew's Gospel speaks of Jesus putting an end to the curse of the Law, but that is just a guess. Like I said, we really don't know who rearranged the order of the Books of the Old Testament and why, but for today let's look at a telling characteristic of the presence of Jesus, that He is like a goldsmith refining precious metal, and ponder what that means.

✚ Set the Stage

Malachi-the refiner's fire

In Malachi, the coming of the Messiah, preceded by his messenger, John the Baptist, will be like a gold or silversmith refining some of the precious metal. It is melted and subjected to heat, watched over by the goldsmith until all the impurities have been removed. When he can see his reflection clearly in the molten metal, he knows the process is finished. Malachi maintains that the presence of the Great Messiah is like that. He begins with judgment upon the corrupt priestly cast, that they may return to their proper work, then He turns His attention to the rest of the corrupt society of that day.

Philippians 1-begin a good work in you...

Our passage in Philippians indicates that the Holy Spirit does something like what Jesus does with those priests in Malachi. Philippians, the epistle of joy, includes these words in 1:6, "being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;..." We find it a promise in Scripture that the Holy Spirit works in the heart and mind of a practicing Christian and will pursue it unto completion on the day of Jesus Christ. He is committed to making us the people we were always meant to be, and Philippians tells us the end goal a few verses later. Philippians 1:10-11 says, "...that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." I don't know about you, but I conclude that I am far removed from this standard that that I have a long way to go before I reach this description, but this is the goal of the promise that the Holy Spirit works within us and that He will not stop until that goal is reached. Sometimes, that means what the Holy Spirit does will be like a goldsmith refining a precious metal.

✚ Main Point: The Lord is a refiner, so also the Holy Spirit

The Lord's presence is like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap, and the work of the Holy Spirit is also like a refiner's fire. What does that mean? I think it means this, that while we are not of the Sons of Levi, we are set apart in Christ to be a priesthood, the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5) and that, just like the refiner seeking to see his own reflection in the purified precious metal, we are meant to reflect the character of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). That can mean that the Holy Spirit, usually thought of as an encourager, may, like Christ as the refiner of those priests, confront us when our character falls short of Christ. The Holy Spirit will remind us that all of humanity is guilty before a just and holy God, that the Holy Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves and will not hesitate to show us where we fall short. Growing in Christ involves being confronted by the Holy Spirit and to face what we are really like.

✚ Application: Sometimes guilt is not a bad thing.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit will make us feel guilty, especially when we need to feel guilty. I remember a spiritual practice that was attributed to a famous pastor of the 19th century that I've practiced from time to time. I find a quiet place, perhaps in the pastor's study or someplace like it. I take out pen and paper and then I pray and ask God to reveal to me anything, any attribute, character, habit, action or speech that is in me or has been committed by me that needs correction, then I wait quietly. It usually takes a few minutes but without fail something comes to mind, a lazy habit, a selfish mindset, words spoken carelessly without concern for others. I write them down and soon my page is full. Then I go through them one by one and repent and ask for wisdom and strength to do better, to be better. It's not always fun, and I feel guilty when I do it, but I think there is a sort of refining of my spirit as I go through the process, and I am the better person for it.

✚ Conclusion

Advent is the season of hope, of expectation and of ancient promises coming to pass. It reminds us that the eternal Son of God not only came to earth but came to earth as a baby. He joined the human race; the Creator joined creation. I want the Holy Spirit to come to us and to our lives in a new way this season. I want to leave this season with a new experience of the Holy Spirit, to leave this season with a deeper wisdom, a greater humility, a gentler soul, and a heart that is refined and purified, at least more so than when the season began. That is my hope for all of you as well.