

The Refiner's Fire

A Study of Malachi 3:1-3

1 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.

2 But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:

3 And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.

~ Malachi 3:1-3

The prophet Malachi speaks in the first three verses of Malachi 3 of a great and terrible day that is coming. He gives an obvious reference to the “day of the Lord” by using the term “day of His coming.” As is the case in many of the Old Testament oracles, the first and second comings of Christ lay side by side in the same text so that there can be no doubt that the one Person who is coming shall fulfill all of the prophecy. Here in this text is an obvious allusion to John the Baptist preparing the way for the first coming of Christ, but also there is a mention of a “sudden” coming that brings great fear and trembling. The language used to describe the second coming is similar to that of Joel: *“The day of the Lord is great and very terrible, and who can abide it”* (Joel 2:11b).

Both of these comings are linked to one man, Christ Jesus, who sits as a refiner before a purifying fire. It is our intent to focus on the refining fire that Christ speaks of in connection with His First Coming, and discover what bearing that has on us in our present age. When Christ was in His earthly ministry, He made reference to this fire when He said, *“I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled?”* (Luke 12:49). Christ goes on to tell how the fire that He sends will cause divisions. It will separate the believer from the unbeliever in the same way that the metal is separated from the dross. John the Baptist speaks also about how Christ will baptize the believer with the Holy Ghost and with *fire*. Jesus asks His Disciples whether they are willing to be baptized with the baptism that He will be baptized with, speaking of His sufferings that were coming. This specifically is the fire which we intend to focus our thoughts on, the fire that Christ Himself applies to each one of His sons and daughters.

1. Christ is the Refiner

Malachi says that Christ will sit as a refiner and purify the sons of Levi. There are two points made in this phrase that need to be noticed: **Christ is the one Who applies the fire**, and **the sons are the ones that are purified**.

We know that the Devil delights in raising opposition against the work of God. Yet for the children of God, all that God permits the Devil to do is intended for their purification. The sons of God are often in great affliction and tribulation when they are in earnest about serving the Lord. Christ allows the fire of afflictions to separate His sons from those who are mere imposters. Not only does God allow Satan his

latitude as with Job, but Christ also directly applies the heat in our lives. John the Baptist said that He would baptize us with fire. And in this passage Malachi says that He shall sit as a refiner.

Jesus referred to His own struggle in the Garden with drinking the cup from the Lord as “a baptism.” He asked His Disciples, “*Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*” (Matthew 20:22,23). Christ answers His own questions by saying that they will indeed drink of the same cup and have the same baptism. It is the fire of affliction and tribulation that Christ asks His disciples to partake of in the same manner as their Master. The Scripture says of Christ that He learned obedience by the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). It is this same baptism of fire that Christ will take every true son of His through. Every son must know that it is Christ Who sits by this fire and applies precisely the right amount of heat for His intended purpose.

Christ does not simply apply the fire without reason, but rather this fire is specifically intended for one purpose: that is purification. It is the work of the refiner to carefully apply the heat based upon the quality of the metal—for the purer the ore, the greater the heat that can be applied. The greater the heat the more the dross will be separated from the precious metal. As the dross begins to leave, the refiner looks into the molten ore for the reflection of his own image. When his image is clearly reflected he knows that the right amount of heat has been applied. Here then is Christ applying the heat and looking on until He sees His own image appearing in the metal (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The source of heat may come from other believers, unbelievers, natural causes, or the Devil; yet it is Christ that is in control of all these circumstances and acts as the refiner. It is a source of comfort to every son to know that the Refiner controls each fire.

Everyone in the world experiences some tribulation, but the son of God is given tribulation specifically for the purpose of sanctification. Whom the Lord loves He chastises (Hebrews 12:6). Our difficulties in life are given as evidence of the love of the Lord for us, and He will not allow us to be tempted above that we are able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13), so that we are purified and not destroyed.

2. The Sons of Levi are Purified

The Levites were members of the tribe that was dedicated solely to the service of the Lord, and yet it is this tribe that received the purification. From this tribe were taken all the priests and ministers of the temple. The reference here is that those who are sanctified and set apart for the work of the Lord will surely feel the heat from the fires of purification. God will not set anyone apart for ministry without first purifying him. There will be no impure metal put into service, and that which is not heated is not purified.

The text also states that the Lord will come to His temple to perform His work. By this we understand that the fires of purification will be in the midst of God’s people. Peter states that “*the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God*” (1 Peter 4:17). It is evident then that the Church will undergo tribulation. Peter speaks again of the members of the Church as “*a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people*” (1 Peter 2:9), so that there is no doubt that we are the spiritual sons of Levi by adoption. It is evident that Christ selects those who are priests for the heat of the refiner’s fire. The Apostle Paul speaks of this work of Christ: “*Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority*” (Titus 2:14,15).

As spiritual priests in the temple of the Lord we should expect that the Lord will purify us in the furnace of affliction to separate the dross from us so that we might more accurately mirror His image. This is not a quick process, for Malachi states that He shall “sit” by this fire. He will stay by this fire until the work is completed. He labors over it with patience and love. He carefully works the bellows to keep the right temperature on us for proper purification. The more demanding the service the more pure the metal must be.

The Apostles asserted that they were able to receive the baptism of fire that Christ took upon Himself; little did they know at that time that they all, except John, would give their lives in death for the ministry of the Gospel. By the time Peter wrote his epistles, he understood the baptism of fire. He in turn exhorts other Christians to expect the same: *“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the **fiery trial** which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy”* (1 Peter 4:12,13).

The purpose of these trials is to teach us the fellowship of Christ’s suffering (Philippians 3:10) so that we may have great joy at His glorious appearing. When we suffer with another, we can draw closer than what is possible in any other way. When Job, a man who seemed perfect in every way (humanly speaking), was tested by the fiery trial he cried out, *“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:5,6). His relationship with the Lord, though close, now took on a new dimension through suffering affliction.

When we understand that Christ is the Refiner, we can know that we will not be given more heat than we can bear. If we feel the heat we may know that the Lord is seeking to draw near to us in a way that we have not previously experienced.

There is the danger of our shrinking back from this refinement and never being purified. With some of these tests there is an option for what seems to be an easier way. Job’s wife said, *“Curse God, and die”* (Job 2:9), indicating that Job should simply end his life in order to avoid the suffering. The person who refuses the fire also stops the refinement process. The Lord may actually increase the heat in an attempt to separate the dross, but the person can refuse the refinement and become bitter against God. The Scripture speaks of such metal that cannot be refined by fire, as we will see.

3. Reprobate Silver is Rejected

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of Judah having become reprobate so that God could not refine her. *“The bellows are burned, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain: for the wicked are not plucked away. Reprobate silver shall men call them, because the Lord hath rejected them”* (Jeremiah 6:29,30).

God had applied so much heat to Judah in hopes of refinement that the bellows that fan the flame were burned, the lead used in the refining process was all consumed, and yet the dross was not separated from the ore. Since the impurities could not be separated from the metal the whole combination had to be rejected. Such is the inevitable end of all who refuse to profit from the Refiner’s fire. Unless the sons of Levi accept the refining fire they will be destroyed in the consuming fire for all eternity. But if we allow ourselves to be examined in this refining fire we will not be condemned with the world.

The metal that cannot pass the test of refinement has no value for service, but rather it is discarded. If we wish to serve the Lord we must expect to be purified so that we reflect the image of the Refiner. Christ will not use impure vessels. If we circumvent the heat our service will begin on a corrupt foundation, and the Lord will not be in work that does not reflect His image. Not only will the Lord refuse to use an unrefined vessel, but He will also reject it.

Though the Lord will reject the reprobates, yet we know from Scripture that they do many seemingly wonderful works in the name of the Lord. They preach the message of salvation without a cross of suffering and self-denial, forgiveness without repentance, grace without a law, gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit, a Savior without a Lord, a Refiner without a fire, and purity without separation. The doctrine of the reprobates is clearly defined in 2 Peter 2 and in Jude. Such persons have been ordained to condemnation because they have become reprobate silver whom the Lord has rejected. They have no worth to the Refiner and will be thrown into the consuming fire that will burn up the dross. These individuals will not abide His coming and will not be able to stand in the day when their works will be put to the test. Malachi speaks of the coming day of the Lord in chapter four where the wicked will be consumed in an oven of fire that will leave neither root or branch behind.

4. An Offering in Righteousness is Desired

The objective of the Refiner is clearly stated by Malachi; He desires a righteous offering. It is only after we have been sanctified that we can offer our bodies to the Lord as a righteous offering. There is no offering until it is laid on the altar. There is no sacrifice without a fire, and no fire without heat. Paul earnestly entreats us to present our bodies a living sacrifice to the Lord as a reasonable service (Romans 12:1). It is the purifying process that produces the superior metal and makes it of greater value. Our value is solely determined by the image we bear. If we have been purified we may render ourselves to the Lord, for we will bear His image and superscription when the dross has been separated.

The Lord also desires to baptize us in fire that we may know with Him the fellowship of His sufferings. We are to be baptized with the baptism He was baptized with, and drink of His cup. He submitted His will to the Father when in great agony in the Garden so that He could offer Himself as a perfect and willing sacrifice for our sin. The disciple is not above his Master and must follow in His footsteps that they may be one.

Peter echoes the same sentiments: *“Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, **arm yourselves likewise with the same mind**: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin”* (1 Peter 4:1). In order to be refined by suffering, our minds must be “prepared” to suffer. Otherwise, we will rebel against it when it comes.

There is a beautiful illustration of this theme in the account of the Hebrew lads who were thrown into the fire by Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3. They were innocent of any real crimes against Babylon, yet they were accused as criminals of the state. Their charges were based upon their faithfulness to God above the king. The king mocked them and asked where their God was Who would deliver them from the execution of his sentence. By human reasoning they should have been candidates for God to have delivered them from the fiery furnace since they had not sinned. It did not appear to be God’s fire, but that of a pagan king’s . . . or was it? They knew that God was able to ultimately deliver them from the king, but they did not know if He would deliver them from the furnace. Though God was with them while they stood on trial, the heathen could not see His providential hand upon them. It was only when

they were thrown into the fire that the king was able to see their God. Both their bonds and the men who bound them were destroyed by the heat — a symbol of the dross being separated. In the fire was revealed the form of the fourth man as the Son of God. The fire revealed the image which the king could not otherwise see.

Before Christ the Refiner came, He sent His messenger ahead to prepare the way before Him. John warned that the One coming would thoroughly purge His floor and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. The disciple of Christ must “expect” to suffer if he wishes to be accepted as an offering of righteousness.

Each one of us must examine ourselves to see how we have prepared our minds to suffer the heat of the refining fire, so that we may be purified when it comes and be equipped for service. If we view it with the mind of Christ, we may enter into the fellowship of His sufferings and be made conformable to His death. It is when the disciple walks the path of his Master that he draws the closest to Him. If we have partaken of His death and sufferings in the furnace of affliction, we may draw close in communion with Him when we remember the death of the Lord in the emblems of the bread and the cup. These emblems are the tokens of the communion that we have with our Lord. We are unworthy to partake of them unless we are willing to allow Him to refine our lives. If we are unwilling to be sanctified, we are unworthy to commune with our Lord. It is He that sits over this fire. To reject the fire is to reject Him. But if we realize that it is He that applies the heat, then we may know that we will not suffer above what we are able to bear, and not one degree more than is needed to make us pure.

The consequences of the Refiner’s fire are purity (sanctification), the privilege of being useful in the Master’s service, and close communion with God. The same chapter of Malachi that speaks of the Refiner’s fire also speaks of the wonderful promise that the Lord will remember those who are His (Malachi 3:16-18).

We are refined, not only for our own purification, but also that we might project the image of Christ to the world who watches. They often cannot see the reality of the presence and image of Christ in us until the fire reveals it. When we feel the furnace heating up, perhaps God is preparing to reveal the image of the fourth Man that we may walk forth from the fire pure, unbound, and to the glory of God.

-Paul Shirk

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of