

Continually Refined Until He Arrives

Malachi 3:1-7b (NIV)

¹ "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. ⁵ "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. ⁶ "I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷ Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

Yes, the Lord is coming, and his return will happen suddenly. This freaked the Jews out: "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?" (verse 2) They had good reason to be concerned. "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them." (verse 7a)

Going all the way back to the days immediately following the Israelite's exodus from Egypt, God had made a two-sided covenant with the Israelites, Abraham's descendants, that if they followed his laws that he would bless them and make them prosper in the Promised Land, but if they didn't, then he would send punishment upon them and remove them from that land. It took just days, weeks, after God made that covenant on Mount Sinai before the Israelites turned away from God and broke his decrees.

Yet, God was patient with the Israelites. He continued to call them to repentance, to turn away from sin and turn instead to him, generation after generation. Eventually, God's patience with them ended and the Jews were conquered and exiled to Babylon. 70 years later, God's mercy and promises still shone through as he brought them back to the Promised Land. Having God's unchanging grace showered upon them, they had a renewed zeal in turning to the Lord.

But another generation went by and things had gotten bad again. The Levites, the God ordained priests of his people, had begun offering crippled, sick, diseased sacrifices in their worship. These sacrifices were meant to foreshadow the perfect, blemish-free sacrifice that God would bring in order to remove the sins of the world. These maimed sacrifices weren't even acceptable to put before a governor, let alone God. To make matters worse, these priests had also divorced their Jewish believing wives and married unbelieving foreign women. These were the spiritual leaders of Israel, and this is how they behaved, blatantly breaking God's laws! They had backslid in their faith and should be scared about the Lord coming to judge. They needed to be purified and refined.

Have we backslid in our following of God? In the days gone by has our faith in him been more vibrant and eager than it is today? Are there things good practices of living your faith like reading God's Word every day, praying in the morning and at night and before meals, making purposeful weekly time for worship that have since gotten sidelined? Maybe it was a disruption in your schedule that got you out of these practices. It's like backsliding in a workout routine or a diet. Skip one day and it becomes a whole lot easier to skip another day and then one day you realized that you stopped doing it all together.

Maybe it's not so much godly habits that we have discontinued but our constant wrestle with sin. We know we have a sinful nature. We know that we are constantly tempted. We vow to follow God's Word and do his will, but then we sin. We feel bad about it. We vow to never do it again. And it goes well for a while until we give in to the temptation again. The cycle of guilt repeats. We begin to feel worthless, like we can never be a follower of Christ, and then it's that much easier to embrace the sin rather than fight it. We wonder why we can't kick this, if we were really repentant in the first place. Our consciences accuse us as does Satan as he shouts to God, "You see! I told you that he doesn't actually believe in you! He doesn't want to change! He's not pure! He's not refined! Get rid of him!" He wants to put us on trial and be judged with all the other unbelieving sinners at the Lord's coming, as Malachi recorded. "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. (verse 5) Who can stand before God on that day?

God sees our life of constantly falling into sin and trying to pick ourselves up and do better. He knows that we need to be purified and refined, that our own works and efforts will never fix ourselves. This is why he takes action. "I will send my messenger, who will

prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. (verse 1) The LORD has Malachi prophesy of two messengers. The first one prepares the way before the Lord. As we are in the season of Advent and as we heard in the Gospel reading, we know that the first messenger who prepares the way for the Lord is John the Baptist. He preached a message of repentance. But what is repentance?

Repentance is not a quick, superficial, sweep everything under the rug action to impress company with a clean house for Christmas. It is a turning point, a change of mind and action that follows. To repent means that you were going one way and now you are going a complete opposite way. You feel sorrow over you sin and you want to change, but it's only a feeling. Repentance is also trusting in the second messenger, the messenger of the covenant.

The messenger of the covenant is none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one who actually changes us, who changes who we are and what we do. He doesn't just tell us to do better and gives us instructions of how to do so, but he makes us better. He comes to live the perfect life that we could never live. He says no to every temptation he faced to be that perfect keeper of God's laws for us in our place. He gives up his life so that all our sins are washed clean in his blood. All his work done for us purifies us. We contribute nothing. This is the one-sided covenant that God made with us back in the Garden of Eden where he does all the work, makes the total sacrifice, and we get purified from it.

Because this second messenger purified us, we are changed and so we refine our actions, turning from our backsliding and live instead as he has made us. Yet, we then we sin again. What do we do when it happens, because it will? God be praised that our sin does not negate what Christ has done for us, the message of his one-sided covenant. We are still purified by his perfect life and his death died for us. That accomplishment for us, our purification, doesn't change because our Lord and what he does for us doesn't change. Yes, we're sorry for our sins, but we remember that we are purified. This changes how we live. This moves us to repent, to turn from sin.

This life of repentance - turning from sin, trusting in what Jesus accomplished for us, living a purified life - is not easy. It's a constant struggle, but we are continually refined until he arrives because God's work done for us never changes. "I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." (verse 6) No matter how many times we sin, no matter how many times we fall short, no matter who many times we backslide in our faith, our God calls us away from our sins and instead puts our purification solely on what he has done for us. Every time we look to Christ, we are forgiven and made new, purified and ready to live again that refined life that God has called us to.

Honestly, we all need help to live this purified live of repentance. We get some of that help here by gathering together with fellow Christians around the message of what God has done for us, that he has purifies us. But even then, we tend to keep our sins generic and we keep the specifics of them private. How could it help us if we asked someone to help us live this life of repentance, someone to help us fight temptation, someone to hold us accountable to the new purified life God has given us, someone to remind us personally of what God has done for us and how we are a new and refined person in Christ?

This is a scary thought because, if we are going to enlist the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to tell them what sins we wrestle with. This makes us vulnerable to be judged and looked down upon, to fear receiving the same accusations of Satan coming from the mouth of a fellow believer, or at least thinking that they are thinking judgmental thoughts. Yet, they can help us. It might very well be painful like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap to lay before someone else the sins I wrestle with, but they can call me out when I won't call myself out. They can encourage me when I am weak and want to give in to sin, helping to strengthen me in Christ. They can pray for me and with me. They can help me be pointed to the one who has purified me, to Jesus, the messenger of the one-sided covenant of his forgiveness for us, and so live a continually refined life in Christ.

Our life is an on-going battle of repentance - of being sorry for our sins, looking to Jesus for total and complete forgiveness, and then living that purified life by turning away from sin. We will stumble. We will backslide. But the Lord, the messenger of the one-sided covenant, does not change. His forgiveness which purifies us does not change nor lessen with our backsliding sins. His perfection which covers us does not change or get taken away. And so we are continually refined as we are called to this life of repentance as we prepare for our Lord's advent. Amen.