

## **"God's Refinery"**

Rev. Chip Blackshear

First Presbyterian Church of Corpus Christi, Texas

Isaiah 48:1-11

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Have you ever had one of those days when it seems that nothing is going your way? From the time you get up in the morning it's as if the whole world is against you. There's no soap in the shower, you burn your toast at breakfast, on the way to work whatever lane you get in slows down, the computer is giving you trouble, and everybody is in a bad mood.

Maybe it's more than just a bad day. Maybe you're facing real challenges - the loss of your job, financial difficulties, a prolonged illness, a divorce, or the sudden death of a loved one. These are all painful experiences, whether it's physical pain or emotional pain. When we face these kinds of difficulties we want to cry out, "why me, Lord? What have I done to deserve this?" We call this kind of suffering "affliction." We feel like it is something that is being done to us.

When we're going through these difficulties in life we can often be tempted to view them in one of two ways. First, we often feel like we don't deserve to be suffering. We want to know why God doesn't "fix it." This question has haunted many people through the years and many people lose their faith because they can't understand why a good God would allow so much suffering.

On the other hand, sometimes when we are facing difficulties we begin to think that God is punishing us for something. We convince ourselves that we *do* deserve to suffer because of things we've done in our past. We aren't sure that God is able or willing to forgive us. One day Jesus passed a man who had been

born blind. His disciples wanted to know who had sinned for the man to be born blind, whether it was him or his parents. They assumed that God was punishing the man for something. But Jesus sets them straight. He says, "he wasn't born blind because someone sinned. He is blind so that God can do something great in him."

In the same way our Scripture readings this morning help us understand what the Bible tells us about our suffering and affliction. Verse 10 says, "I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction." The prophet Malachi says the same thing. He says that the LORD is like a refiner's fire. "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver."

What we find is that our afflictions, our difficulties in life, are part of our process of being purified to be like Christ. The analogy that the Bible uses in several places is that of refining metal so I did a little research on it. Up until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, only seven metals were known to humans: gold, silver, copper, lead, tin, iron and mercury. Silver is the oldest known metal, having been discovered some time around 6000 BC. The ancient people discovered that it was shiny and nice to look at but also that it was soft and malleable, making it primarily useful for decoration. It would be another 3000 years before gold was discovered and it was also used primarily for jewelry and ornamentation.

Lead was probably the first metal that ancient people

discovered could be purified with fire but it wasn't long before they discovered that with enough heat they could melt the other metals also, including gold and silver. You see, gold and silver rarely occur in a pure form in nature. They contain other metals or various impurities that need to be removed to get to a purer form that is more valuable. The gold or silver is not nearly as valuable with the impurities, which is called "dross."

Historically, especially in ancient times, the way to remove the dross was to crush the raw ore and then heat it to the melting point of the metal. This requires a really hot fire. Silver melts at around 1800 degrees Fahrenheit and gold at almost 2000 degrees. At those temperatures the impurities, the dross, either burns up or floats to the surface to be removed. One of the techniques for separating silver from lead was to use a series of pots all heated up to high temperature. The lead that floated to the surface was skimmed off and moved to the next pot on the left while the silver was moved to the pot on the right so that the silver in the far pot was quite pure. This is probably the technique Psalm 12 is referring to when it says in verse 6, "The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times."

Here's the thing. Refining silver requires the complete attention of the silversmith. He must watch the silver to know whether the fire is hot enough or too hot and to know when the dross is burned up and the silver is ready to be poured into the mold. God tells us that He is like a silversmith. But then he says that you are more valuable to Him than silver or gold. He is in the process of refining you and me.

Romans 8:28 says, "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." God uses times of trial and difficulty to purify us. Several years ago there was a study done that asked people to name the time in their life when they grew the most spiritually. Can you guess what the number one answer was? It was during a crisis. People said that their faith grew the most during times of great personal difficulty. Isn't that great news? Instead of having adult Sunday School I've asked our discipleship committee to just start creating personal crises for people.

I'm only kidding of course. But we don't want to miss this important concept. God uses these difficult times in our lives to draw us closer to Him. Listen to verse 10 of our passage again: "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction."

In the furnace of affliction God is burning up those things that are not Christ-like in us. So what are some of the things that God is getting rid of in our lives? Maybe you're holding on to some grudge, some anger about something that was done to you, hoping to get revenge. Maybe you've gotten so focused on what the world calls success that you've forgotten what God calls success. We find some of the things that God is purifying from us right here in Isaiah 48. In verse 4 God says one of our biggest problems is that we're stubborn. He says our neck muscles are iron and our forehead is brass. We're stiff-necked and hard-headed. Please don't elbow your spouse. He's talking to you here also.

In verse 8 He says, "from before birth you were called a rebel." We are born with an

amazing ability to sin. Turning our back on God comes so easily for us. In Reformed theology we call this Total Depravity. Not that you and I are as bad as we could be but that there is no part of us that is free from sin.

Most convicting, though, is in verses 1 and 2. God is speaking to those of us who claim to be His followers, who, as verse 1 says, "swear by the name of the LORD and confess the God of Israel." But then He says, "but not in truth or right." In other words, what needs to be removed from us, burned up in the "furnace of affliction," is our lack of trust in God that indeed all things do work together for our good.

For the ancient Hebrew people the temptation was to worship carved idols representing the gods of the people around them, usually fertility gods or goddesses. We find over and over again in the Old Testament that God's chosen people started worshiping these false gods as a way of sort of hedging their bet. They were sort of saying, "I worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, but I'll keep these other little gods over here just in case."

While we don't typically worship carved statues, many of us are quite skilled at creating our own substitutes for trusting Jesus and following Him completely. The biggest of these is to trust in our own strength and abilities. I want to say, "I did this myself." Or maybe worse, I want others to notice what a good job I've done. But God is at work burning up those things that are getting in the way of my relationship with Him.

So why does He do it? Why does God go to the effort to purify us and walk with us through our affliction? He tells us in verse 11. "For my own sake, I do it. My glory I will not give to

another." Our reading from 1 Peter says basically the same thing. "you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Friends, that's the message here. The only thing that really matters in our lives is what brings praise and glory and honor to Christ. Anything that doesn't bring glory to God has to

go. But you don't really have a choice in the matter. God is doing it. He will refine you whether you like it or not. Your only choice is whether to recognize what God is doing in your life or not.

There's one last aspect to this analogy. I said that refining silver requires the complete attention of the silversmith. He must stand close to the heat watching the molten silver constantly. That's because the way he knows when the silver is ready is that it begins to shine and he can see his reflection in it. In the same way, as we are going through various trials, we can take comfort knowing that God is right there, watching us very closely. And He knows when we have become more Christ-like because He can see His own reflection in us. I hope you begin to see it, too.

*Amen*