

Texts: Proverbs 17.3; Daniel 3.19–28; Malachi 3.1–4; 1 Peter 1.1–7

So, a refiner would take silver or gold and heat it to a very high temperature where the metal would melt to a liquid, and when it was in that liquid state, any impurities would rise up to the surface where they would be carefully scraped off. They call the impurities dross. And once the dross was removed the metal would then be cooled back into a solid state and it would be all that much more precious because it was just that much more pure.

That’s what a refiner does. And this idea of a refiner’s fire that tests our faith and removes our impurities has long been a thread within our beliefs. It’s an idea that’s often pulled out to comfort people when they’re suffering. It’s most often presented as: “these sufferings are God’s way of testing your faith to see what you’re made of—these sufferings are God’s way of raising the heat so the impurities in your faith will rise to the surface and God can skim them off and leave your faith more pure for the future.” And I get where people might find some comfort in that: a lot of times it seems like if we can find some noble cause that underlies the problems in our life—if we can find some Divine purpose and positive outcome that drives our sufferings—then it must be alright... if I can just endure for a little while longer.

The problem in my mind is that this can so easily—so subtly—drift into a theology of God the Divine Refiner who tortures us for our own good. And how can we suppose a loving God would send us diseases and plagues, tsunamis and earthquakes, fires and bombs just to refine our faith? How can we believe a gracious and merciful God would send terrible

persecution, and unthinkable crimes, and the loss of innocent lives for the sake of “testing our faith”?

For my part, I don't think that's what God does. I don't think our God aligns with a “the ends-justify-the-means” mentality. I don't think of God sending us specific events and situations as though it was a holy “waterboarding experience” for our own good.

Instead, I think God set up a world in which the awesome laws and forces of nature that typically work for the good, every now and then also churn up storms, earthquakes and droughts and dangerous circumstances. Overall, it's a fantastic system that brings us food and water and clean air and security—and has done so for countless generations—but sometimes the incredible forces God has harnessed to serve these purposes also bring danger and harm. I don't think that was God's purpose, but I do think God knew that good could arise even from that.

I think God created bodies for us that would serve us well, bodies that could adapt to our environment, heal many of our own hurts and illnesses; bodies that could reproduce and give us the blessing of families, and last us maybe 80, 90—even 100 years if we're so fortunate. But these amazing bodies aren't bulletproof. They can't endure every pressure, every impact, every disease, every abuse they're subjected to. Sometimes we get diseases—let's face it: sometimes these diseases are the consequences of our own choices and actions... or lack of actions.

And sometimes we suffer due to the actions and choices of others. Many years ago I was in a traffic accident. It was 5:30 on a crowded four lane stretch when a car coming in the

opposite direction swerved into my lane. I couldn't merge to the right, there was no way I was going to swerve into the oncoming traffic on my left so I just hit the brakes and watched that car slam into me head on. I remember watching the flakes of paint from the hood of my car fly up—and they glittered in the air as the hood crumpled toward me. As I look back, I don't believe God sent that driver into my lane as a way of testing my faith. I don't think that was a choice God made for me. That was a choice that driver made when he decided to drive even though his license had been suspended. I think it was due to the choice he made to stop off at that bar for a few quick ones on his way home even though he already had several DUI's.

I think that's our truth. Things happen. Sometimes very difficult things happen for any number of reasons... don't blame it on God. But at the same time Paul tells us that "all things work together for the good..." And I think that's where the refiner's fire comes into play. These events, this suffering; we can either allow it to sour our faith—to turn us against a God that we think should have rolled us up in heavenly bubble wrap and protected us from every evil—or we can trust God to be with us through these events, and we can look for the silver lining.

We can—and often we do—find that it's exactly in our toughest times that we're drawn closest to God. Often it's during the toughest times of our lives that we open the door to faith, we open our eyes to the possibility that God might help us, comfort us, and give us strength to endure. And often, when we've gone through the fire we find that we have indeed been refined. Maybe we find that our own habits and actions had gotten us into

a dangerous and hurtful pattern, but through the mercy and power of God we can confront those habits in the future. Or maybe we find that the faith we'd abandoned or ignored for years was exactly the essential thing that we should seek and nurture for the future.

You might be wondering why we paired the story of the fiery furnace with this theme of the refiner's fire... Well the thing that rises up to me here is that we can't really blame God for having Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego tossed in the furnace. As far as blaming someone, we'd have to point to Nebuchadnezzar and his henchmen. But when they were thrown into that blazing furnace a fourth person appeared...and we're told that this one had the appearance of a god. This one had the appearance of a god, because this one was God—or as the story says, an angel of God. The idea of this story is that God walks through the fire with us, and in that fire God is our comforter and our ultimate protector.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survived that blazing fire and when they came out the other side even the king who sent them in praised them for their faithfulness—and God for God's goodness in caring for them during their ordeal. And this—I think—is the paradigm of our God and the refiner's fire. Yes, there are fires in our lives—some of which seem as unbearable as that fiery furnace so long ago—even Christ Jesus faced his own fiery furnace, although his was in the shape of a cross. But the deal is: even there our God is with us; even there our God walks beside us... and if the eyes of our faith are open, even there we find that our faith can be strengthened.

Really, our lives are this great gift we're given. We're blessed with the incredible beauty and joy of living in this wondrous world that God has created. But so often we take

this beauty, this goodness, this gift for granted. Often it's only when the fires blaze up in our lives that we turn to God and acknowledge God. It's when the sufferings come that we sift through the facts of our lives and question our actions, our faith, our values and priorities. It's during the times of suffering that many of us recognize that maybe we haven't been as faithful as we might have been. It's during the times of sufferings that we bargain with God, plead with God, pray to God.

And the truth is that maybe we don't always get exactly what we'd been praying for—that miraculous passage through the flames. But maybe we find that we've reopened our side of the communications with God, our side of our relationship with God, and maybe our introspection has revealed some of the dross that has hardened our hearts to God in the past... and we've cried out to God to sift that off the surface of our hearts... and we've recognized God standing with us in the fire.

God doesn't *will* these fires on us; instead, God transforms the chaos and destruction of the fires that come to us—naturally in the course of life—into Refiner's fires that strengthen and purify our faith. And God walks with us through them, to comfort and support us even amid the flames. And perhaps—sometimes—God calls us to enter the furnace with those we love; to walk with them as God's messengers of love... May we embrace those opportunities with a reverent and humble joy, only in his strength and always to his glory. Amen.