

Malachi: Refining Fire

Malachi 2:17-3:6

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on February 18, 2024.

Blue Flame?

Not too long ago, my daughter asked me to purchase for her a bag of snacks. It is hard to truly clarify what type of snack it is. It is a crunchy snack, but not the traditional American potato chip. It is called Takis. From my limited understanding, Takis are a spicy crunchy sort of rolled crisp. This particular bag was called *Blue Heat*. What in the world is blue heat? Well, my daughter explained, it is like the blue flames from a fire. Blue fire comes from the phenomenon of burning sulfur.

In Oklahoma there is a town called Sulphur. It is the stinkiest town in the state. The sulfur deposits there are overwhelming. So apparently, people love to eat these stinky, hot blue crispy things. My daughter dared me to eat one. So I tried one and my face exploded. Apparently, the blue flame is not a fire to be trifled with. As if any of them are.

Since we were children, we've been intrigued by fire. Matches, candles, fireplaces, fire pits – fire is extremely interesting. Fire is also a recurring biblical theme. We see God as a fire in Exodus in the form of a burning bush as well as a pillar of fire that leads the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and home to the Promised Land. The New Testament continues this idea of equating God with fire. Malachi also tells us that God is a fire. But what kind? I invite you to Malachi 2:17-3:6 to find out. (read text)

He is A Fire

In the second verse of the third chapter of Malachi, the text does not identify God as being like a forest fire. A forest fire destroys by burning indiscriminately. The fire spreads to any and every tree. It does not skip over particular trees. The forest fire does not spare cherry blossoms because of their pleasing color. The forest fire does not pass over quaking aspens because of the pleasant and relaxing sound the leaves make when the wind blows through.

It does not say that God is like an incinerator's fire. That is a fire that consumes completely, leaving behind only a pile of ashes.

We know that God is not like an incinerator fire because later in v. 6 we read, “Because I, the Lord, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed.” God is not an incinerating fire.

Malachi tells us that God is like a refiner's fire. “For he will be like a refiner's fire...” There is both warning and hope in this passage. God is described as being a refiner's fire, and that makes all the difference. You see, a refiner's fire does not destroy indiscriminately like a forest fire. A refiner's fire does not consume completely like the incinerator fire does. The refiner's fire refines. It purifies.

When you take silver or gold to the refiner's fire, it separates out all of the impurities that ruin the value. The refiner's fire burns up the impurities, leaving only silver or gold. This is what God says that He is life. God is like a refiner's fire.

We are careful to remember that the text does identify God as being fire. Which means that purity and holiness are difficult processes to put oneself through. So, there should always be an appropriate humility before the Lord, a proper sense of “fear and trembling.”

We learn it from the time we are little: do not play with fire! Not too many years ago on the 4th of July, I had purchased some fireworks at the local fireworks stand. I asked the high school student whose family ran the stand for a recommendation. I wanted something that looked like what you see in those big city-wide displays. The big bang-bang pop-pops. The kind with the big shower of sparks and the loud report. But I didn't want to spend an arm and a leg. He directed me to the Purple Haze. It was the real deal for only \$15. I bought four! We had friends over and I set the first one off and it was amazing. It was professional. It was impressive. I looked like a firework champion. It didn't get all that high, barely eclipsing the height of the big tree in the front yard, but that just made it all the more impressive.

I lit the second one on the gravel parking lot shared between our parsonage and the church. I lit the fuse, meaning I had about two seconds to get away but as I backed off, the firework fell over onto its side, dramatically altering the trajectory of the fireballs. The first few balls shot right at my family and the friends we invited over. Our friend Jared grabbed up my son and his and retreated into the garage. All of the women ran screaming inside the house, fireballs bouncing off of the door and exploding on the porch.

The firework then shifted and shot a few balls off at the church and under the church van. Then another shift and I launched an artillery barrage onto the two highways that intersected about forty yards away, stopping traffic in several directions. It was incredible. Terrifying, but awesome. I remembered then one of the earliest life lessons we all have. Never play with fire.

And it's a good lesson. Holiness is not a game. God takes it very seriously. We are to be holy as He is holy. This means that Christianity is never something we play at. Our attitude toward purity is not to be flippant. Purity is not to be taken lightly. God is like fire and fire is serious. You don't play around with it.

But it does say God is like a REFINER'S fire. And therefore this is not just a word of warning, but a word of tremendous hope. For Christians, when the furnace of trouble and affliction is lit up, it is always for refinement.

It is never for destruction. Remember what the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:28: "Everything works together for the good for everybody who loves God and are called according to His purpose."

Four Questions

As we consider this text, let's answer four questions.

1. Who is like a refiner's fire?
2. Why must he be like a refiner's fire?
3. How can we experience his fire as refining and not consuming?
4. What is life like in the refiner's fire?

1. Who is Life a Refiner's Fire?

Chapter 3 answers the question. As I read it, look for three individuals. "See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in – see, he is coming," says the Lord of Armies.

The first individual mentioned is "I"—"See, I am going to send . . ." This "I" is identified at the end of the verse: "Says the Lord of Armies." The speaker is Jehovah, God the Father.

The second individual mentioned is Jehovah's messenger who prepares the way. "See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me." Who is this messenger coming to prepare the way? The New Testament quotes this very verse to identify John the Baptist, the one who came to prepare the way for Christ (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).

The messenger that God will send to prepare his way is a kind of Elijah or one like Elijah. That is why Luke 1:17 says that John the Baptist went before Jesus in the Spirit and power of Elijah.

The third individual mentioned in verse 1 is "the Lord will suddenly come into his temple." "Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple." This is another messenger, different from the first. Who is this person? Three things here point to the divine Son of God and Messiah.

1. He is called "Lord"—a term that Malachi would not apply to Elijah or John the Baptist. This person is someone greater.
2. The temple is said to belong to him: He will suddenly come to "HIS temple." Of whom could you say that he is the owner of the temple of God?
3. This person seems to be almost identical with Jehovah, not only because Jehovah's temple is his temple, but also because he seems to take the place of the word "me" in the first half of the verse. It says, "See, I am going to send my messenger, [Elijah=John the Baptist] and he will clear the way before me." But then he switches without any difficulty and instead of saying, "And I will suddenly come to my temple," he says, "Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple." It looks as though "me"—Jehovah—is virtually interchangeable with this other person called the Lord, who owns the temple of God.

So the messenger of the covenant, the Lord, the owner of the temple of God, is none other than the Son of God, who is with God and is God, and who came into the world and made himself known to us personally in Jesus Christ.

So when verse 2 goes on to say, "But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears?"

For he will be like a refiner's fire." We can conclude the text is talking about the Son of God who came to us in Jesus Christ.

2. Why Must He Be Like a Refiner's Fire?

The answer is implied in the word itself. He must be like a refiner's fire because we need to be refined. We were created in the image of God. We were created with the potential to revere God and trust God and obey God and glorify God. But we were also born in sin. It was both our nature and our inheritance as humans. We are born with impurity of rebellion and unbelief, and we fall short of God's glory over and over, again and again.

Don't believe me? You can prove this to yourself in so many ways. For example, have you ever considered how readily your heart is inclined toward things that show your strengths to other people? In other words, have you ever noticed an inclination to brag on yourself? To talk about yourself? When others are talking, are you just thinking of some better thing that you can say about yourself? Or, have you ever noticed how resistant your heart is to being alone with God?

You and I are impure by nature and by practice. We have an alloy of sin amongst our hearts and that is a problem. Because God will not have any alloys in heaven. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." But the good news for us is that redeemed people will fill up the banquet halls of heaven. This means that He must be a refiner's fire. If he were only a forest fire, heaven would be empty. If he were only an incinerating fire, heaven would be empty. And if he were no fire at all, heaven would be empty.

How do we know that God will not simply abandon impure people like us and that heaven will not be empty? We don't deserve salvation. Why are we not simply consumed? Why does Christ come as a refiner's fire and not a forest fire?

Verse 6 tells us why. "Because I, the Lord, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob are not destroyed." By itself that statement doesn't make sense. What if God were unchanging in being a forest fire? What if he were changeless in unrelenting wrath? What sort of changelessness is it that guarantees that we are not destroyed because of our sin?

It is His unchanging, unfailing, never-ending covenant-keeping. According to verse 1 the Lord comes as "the messenger of the covenant." The reason Jesus is a refiner's fire and not a forest fire is because God made a covenant. And Jesus is the Messenger and emissary of that covenant. He confirms it and seals it with his blood. That is why Hebrews 13:20 calls his blood "the blood of the everlasting covenant."

The book of Malachi began with a statement of how the covenant began. "'I have loved you,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How have you loved us?' 'Wasn't Esau Jacob's brother? This is the Lord's declaration. 'Even so, I loved Jacob.'" (1:2). This is what never changes—the free and sovereign choice of God to save sinners. "'I have loved you,' says the Lord . . . 'And I the Lord do not change. Therefore you are not consumed.'" Jesus is a refiner's fire and not a forest fire.

3. How Can We Experience His Fire as Refining and Not Consuming?

Verse 5 makes it clear that when God comes, not everyone will be refined. Some will be consumed.

"I will come to you in judgment, and I will be ready to witness against sorcerers and adulterers; against those who swear falsely; against those who oppress the hired worker, the widow, and the fatherless; and against those who deny justice to the resident alien. They do not fear me," says the Lord of Armies.

This is not the work of refinement, but the final judgment of condemnation. It is ever clearer in 4:1: "For look, the day is coming burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them," says the Lord of Armies, "not leaving them root or branches."

So when the Lord comes, some are refined, and some are consumed. How can we be sure to experience the refining fire of God rather than the consuming fire of judgment?

The text is very clear what the answer is NOT. The answer is not to get rid of your own sin yourself. If you could get rid of our own sin, you would not need any refining. If gold could purify itself, it would not need the refiner's fire. Refining is for sinners!

But how, then, does a sinner qualify to have his sin burned up? How can a sinner have sin refined and burned away? It requires the merciful fire of God to destroy the rebellion of sin. Okay, so what does a person have to do to receive that mercy?

And the answer of the entire Bible is to trust in the purifying mercy God! Or as Malachi repeatedly teaches us: fear God—which means that we should be afraid to dishonor God with our unbelief in Him. We should be afraid of the irreverent act of not trusting Him. We should be afraid of our impulsive nature to avoid the difficult refining fire of mercy. We should further avoid our tendency to run into the forest fire of judgment because it looks more fun, cooler, easier, popular. Trust the goodness of God.

*And all my life, You have been faithful
All my life, you have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God.*

Believe that his ways are the ways to infinite joy. Don't doubt his expertise as The Refiner.

The way to experience the fire of Christ as refining and not consuming is to trust his promise to bring us through the fire to endless joy. Salvation is by grace through faith in the purifying mercy of God.

4. What is Life Like in the Refiner's Fire?

The most important thing to say is that it is a life of confidence in God. What is the foundation of our confidence? This promise: the furnace of affliction and trouble for the family of God is always for refinement, never for destruction. "Because I, the Lord, have not changed, you are not destroyed." Life in the refiner's fire is a life of trust in the unchanging, never ending, never failing, everlastingly purifying love of God.

And perhaps the next most important thing to say is that there is no painless path to heaven. Why? Because Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And it is impossible to become pure without pain. Just like you cannot be burned painlessly. Purity comes through the refining fire. And the refiner's fire has two forms: one is the fire of affliction, and the other is the fire of intentional self-denial.

We see the fire of affliction and trouble in:

- 1 Peter 1:6-7 "You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith – more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire – may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."
- James 1:2-4 "Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing."
- Hebrews 12:5-10, 14 "And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord . . . for the Lord disciplines those he loves, and chastises every son he receives . . . If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children . . . he disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness . . . Pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord.'"

And the other form of purifying, refining fire is the fire of intentional self-denial. We see it for example in:

- Matthew 5:29-30 "If your right eye causes you to sin gouge it out . . . and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."
- 1 Corinthians 9:27 "I discipline my body and bring it under strict control..."
- Romans 8:13 "But if you live by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

What is life like in the refiner's fire? More than anything else it is the unshakable trust that all the paths the Lord leads us down, he leads us with never-ending, never-failing love and faithfulness.

Trust the Lord to save you and then to refine you. It isn't easy or painless. But His holiness and purity are the end of the process.