

The Refiner's Fire
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Last week, Pastor Deb preached an awesome message on the Anointing. She discussed five ingredients of anointing. She brought out the point that if we want the Holy Spirit to anoint us we must die to ourselves. Dying to ourselves is an ongoing purifying, sanctifying, refining process. The Bible calls this process the baptism of fire.

I'm preaching a message called The Refiner's Fire. John the Baptist said this about Jesus in Matthew 3:11-12

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

To winnow grain means to separate the chaff from the grain. The chaff is the worthless part of the grain. So, the grain was put on a threshing floor and beaten with a sharp threshing instrument. Then the winnowing fork was used to throw the wheat and chaff up into the air. The heavy wheat would fall to the ground and the wind would carry the lighter chaff away. It would be gathered up and burned.

Likewise, God crushes out everything in our lives that is worthless. He separates the worthless from the good.

God has all of us in the process of being made holy. The word holy means to be separate.

That's why 2 Corinthians 6:17 says:

"Come out from among them and be separate," says the Lord.

To make us holy, God must separate some junk out of our lives. How does He do that? Malachi 3:2-3 says:

He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

Precious metals are refined in the fire. Heat causes impurities to rise to the top where they can be skimmed off. God allows the heat to get turned up in our lives to reveal impurities. All believers are in this life-long process of being made holy.

In Revelation 3:17-19 Jesus said this to the church at Laodicea:

You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.

We get obsessed with money, material things, how much we have, acquiring more. But Jesus is saying that we are needy and don't even know it. We need the refiner's fire, the righteousness of Christ and spiritual vision.

There are several reasons for the refiner's fire:

The refiner's fire reveals what is really in our hearts. Jeremiah 17:9-10 says:

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives.

We have an amazing ability to deceive ourselves about ourselves! But God has ways of showing us what's really in our hearts! Have you ever noticed when things get heated in a discussion or argument, things rise up in you that you didn't even know were there? You might say something you shouldn't say and wonder, "Where did that come from?" That's the fire of God showing us some areas that need the soap of the Lord to be cleaned up.

The refiner's fire also produces the fruit of the Spirit in us. But the main reason for the refiner's fire is to purify us and make us like Christ! That is God's ultimate purpose for all of us! Romans 8:28-29 says:

We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Our destiny is to be conformed to the image of Christ. This is God's purpose for your life! To be like Christ.

Everything that God allows to happen in your life is permitted for one great, eternal purpose: to conform your character to the image of Christ. This is what discipleship is about – becoming like Christ. Luke 6:40 says:

A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

God has us in a training program to become like Christ. One of the characteristics of the Christ-like life is obedience.

John 5:19 says:

Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."

Basically, Jesus is saying that obedience boils down to hearing and doing the will of God. Here's a mind-boggling Scripture. Hebrews 5:8-9 says:

Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered. And since God intends to make you like Jesus, He is going to take you through the same experiences Jesus went through - including loneliness, temptation, stress, criticism, rejection, and other problems. Why would God exempt us from what He allowed His own Son to experience?

To be a disciple of Jesus means that I enter into training to become like my King. He will discipline me and train me through many trials and difficulties. All of this is done out of love, not to harm me, but to make me stronger - to make me ready for the Kingdom.

It's like being in the military.

When you go to basic training, your drill sergeant will not coddle you or baby you. They will push you to run farther and do more pushups.

They will train you to obey orders without question.

They are not doing that to be mean. They are doing that for your good.

They know that in battle, you need to be in shape.

They know that in war-time, you need instant obedience because there is not time to for everyone to think things through.

Following orders is vitally important. As disciples of Christ, our Master wants to train us to be overcomers. He wants to discipline us because we are training for reigning.

God's goodness and grace doesn't mean you'll never be hurt, sad, or unhappy. God is more interested in your character than your comfort - your holiness than your happiness. He wants to perfect you, not pamper you. You cannot become like Christ without some pain.

We are like jewels, shaped with the hammer and chisel of adversity. If a jeweler's hammer isn't strong enough to chip off our rough edges, God uses a sledgehammer. If we're really stubborn, He uses a jackhammer. He will use whatever it takes.

That's what the refiner's fire is all about. Sometimes it's not "seeing the light" but "feeling the heat" that captures our attention.

The Bible often compares trials to a metal refiner's fire, which burns away the impurities. 1 Peter 1:7 says,

These troubles come to prove that your faith is pure. This purity of faith is worth more than gold.

A goldsmith was asked, "How do you know when the gold is pure?" He replied, "When I see my reflection in it." And when your faith is pure, people can see Jesus' reflection in you.

Someone has compared people to teabags; you don't know what's inside them until they're put in hot water. Under pressure, your heart is forced into the open and shows its true colors.

You don't develop character in a classroom but in the circumstances of life. Every situation is a character-building opportunity. Paul said in Romans 5:2-4

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

The word suffering is translated in other Bible versions as hardship, trouble and pressure. You see, the circumstances that happen around you are not nearly as important as what happens inside you. The circumstances are temporary, but the character you develop will last forever.

There are many ways God wants to teach us. The primary way is His Word, but He also uses people and circumstances. He uses circumstances to mold us into Christ-likeness because we experience circumstances 24 hours a day.

God even uses problems to teach us. God has a purpose behind every problem. 2 Cor. 4:17 says:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Jesus warned us that we'd have problems in the world. No one is immune to pain or insulated from suffering, and no one gets to skate through life problem-free. In fact, life is a series of problems.

1 Peter 4:12 says:

Don't be bewildered or surprised when you go through the fiery trials ahead, for this is no strange, unusual thing that is going to happen to you.

There are four basic kinds of problems in life:

- Trials or tests are designed by God to draw us closer to Him and build our character.
Psalm 66:10 says: *For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.*
- Temptations are designed by the Devil to draw us away from God and destroy our character.
- Trespasses are hurts caused by the sins of others.
- Troubles are usually, but not always, the consequences our own sinful choices.

Anytime we ignore God's principles, we eventually suffer the consequences. We always reap what we sow. God has given us the freedom to make choices, but we are not free to choose the consequences of those choices.

People often confuse these four types of problems, blaming God for the natural consequences of their poor choices or blaming the Devil for circumstances that were actually planned by God.

When you face a problem, try to determine the source first.

- Jonah encountered a storm because he disobeyed God.
- Paul encountered a storm because others disobeyed God.
- But the disciples got into a storm because they obeyed God!

The storms in your life can be a trial, a temptation, a trespass, or trouble, and each one requires a different response.

If the trouble is your own fault, you should repent of it.

If it is a temptation from Satan, you should resist it.

If it is a trespass against you by others you need to release it through forgiveness.

But if the problem is a trial from God, you need to rejoice in it.

Regardless of the source, none of your problems could happen without God's permission and He intends to use it for good, even when Satan and others mean it for bad.

The source of your problem is no problem for God; He will use it all for your good and your growth if you trust him. Because God is in control, everything that happens to you has spiritual significance. Everything! Romans 8:28-29 explains why:

We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son..."

This is one of the most misquoted and misunderstood passages in the Bible. It doesn't say, "God causes everything to work out the way I want it to." Obviously, that's not true.

It also doesn't say, "everything in life is good." Much of what happens in our world is evil and bad. It is easy to bring good out of good, but God specializes in bringing good out of bad.

He has a master plan for your life that involves all that happens to you - including your mistakes, your sins, and your hurts. Everything fits into God's plan. God can bring good out of even the worst evil. He did at Calvary.

God's purpose is greater than your problems, your pain, your failures, your sorrow and even your sin. He can use it all for good if you'll give it to Him.

What is God's good purpose in problems? What does God want to accomplish through working all things together? It is that we may "become like His Son..."

By the way: problems don't automatically mature you. Many people become bitter, rather than better, and never grow up. Blessings only occur when you choose the right response to your problems.

There are some truths to remember and some actions to take if you want to grow from your problems.

Here's what to remember in the refiner's fire.

1- Remember God's intentions are always good.

He knows what's best for you and has your good interest at heart. His plans *for you are plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* (Jeremiah 29:11)

Joseph understood this when he told his brothers (who sold him into slavery), *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.* (Genesis 50:20)

2- Remember that pain is temporary, but the reward will be eternal.

Hebrews 11:26 says that Moses was able to endure 40 years of the constant pressure and problems of leadership "because he was looking ahead to his reward." Romans 8:18 says:

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

3- Remember to stay focused on God's plan, not your problem.

This is how Jesus was able to endure the pain and shame of the cross. He was able to put up with anything because he never lost sight of God's plan. Hebrews 12:2 says:

Keep your eyes on Jesus, our leader and instructor. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy He knew would be His afterwards.

4- Remember to endure the fire with patience and persistence.

Character building is a long, slow process. When we spend our energy trying to avoid or escape from the difficulties in life, we short-circuit this process and delay our growth.

Think about this: Jesus never used His supernatural powers to solve a personal problem or relieve his pain.

When you grasp the eternal consequences of your character development, you'll pray fewer "Comfort me" prayers (Please help me feel good) and more "Conform me" prayers (Please use this to make me more like you).

If you are facing trouble right now, don't ask, "Why me?"
 Instead ask, "What do you want me to learn?"
 Then trust God and keep on doing what's right.
 Don't give up - grow up!
 Don't quit - submit!

5- Remember to rejoice and give thanks to God.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us:

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

How is this possible? Notice that God tells us to give thanks "in all circumstances" not "for all circumstances." God doesn't expect you to be thankful for evil, for sin, for suffering, or for its painful consequences in the world. Instead, God wants you to thank Him that He will bring good out of evil.

Philippians 4:4 says, *Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice.*
 It doesn't say, "Be happy about your pain." It says rejoice "in the Lord!"

During difficulties, you can rejoice in the truth that God loves you, that He knows what's best for you, that He is in control of the situation, that He has the power to help you through, and that He will reward you.

The ultimate test of spiritual maturity is when you can rejoice in the Lord while experiencing things that don't make sense at the moment. 1 Peter 1:6-7 says:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

So – rejoice in the fire because it’s revealing your heart!
Rejoice in the fire because it’s building your faith!
Rejoice in the fire because it’s purifying your motives.
Rejoice in the fire because it’s producing character in you.
Greatly rejoice in the fire because you’re coming out like gold!!
Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice!