

Malachi 3:1-4 ^{NIV} "See, 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.

Philippians 1:3-11 ^{NIV} ³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God.

“Refining”

One of the most powerfully freeing verses in all the Bible is Philippians 1:6, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (NRSV).” Quite simply, Paul is there stating that God makes us who he wants us to be. The Triune God of grace has sent his Spirit to dwell in us to work inwardly in us and in our relationships to transform us so that over time we come to resemble better the image of Jesus and more deeply share in Jesus’ own relationship with the Father. God himself makes us righteous, which means makes us able to have faith and to be faithful.

I say this verse is freeing because it is so utterly filled with grace and so utterly in opposition to the Christian faith that I grew up. I grew up believing that the burden was on me to make myself what I thought God wanted me to be. It was get yourself right with the Lord, which meant start going to church and living right, and God would make things go right for you and you’ll go to Heaven instead of Hell when you die. I failed miserably at that and still do whenever I find myself slipping into that mode of believing. It is motivated by guilt and shame and indeed, the grace of God has no place in it. (Grace is being in the presence of God with his favor extended to you and having him act on your behalf.) Paul wrote in Romans 8:1-2, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” ^(NRSV) There is now no condemnation. We are free from the guilt and shame that comes from our failing Christ as well as free from the self-righteousness that comes when we think we have succeeded before Christ. This does not mean that we are free to sin boldly so that grace may abound. It simply means that when we’ve blown it, it’s God’s love that we must face not his wrath.

Just a brief example, William is a “Terrible Two” these days. So often it seems that the only word he knows is no. He bawls at the drop of a hat. We fight him to get him dressed. A good deal of the time everything is a point of contention for him and there’s no reasoning with him, none at all. There are times when I just what to spank him or at least threaten him with “I’m going to give you something to cry about.” But I can’t and so many times I just walk away because I see in his face that the tone of my voice is just scaring and confusing him and making things worse. In my eyes William is the best little boy in the world and I tell him that regularly, about every ten minutes actually, and even though he doesn’t understand what it means I also frequently tell him I love him. Too many children grow up without ever hearing that from their fathers, grandfathers, and uncles. Nevertheless, when he pulls these little stunts which take me to the last string of my patience, what am I to do with my best little boy in the world? Do I unleash my wrath on him? Give him something to cry about?

Love is tough at times, most times, and unfortunately, the way we discipline our children too often becomes the way they deal with other people. For example, where did William learn how to take toys away from Alice? He learned it from Mommy and Daddy taking things from him that we didn’t want him to have. So, carrying through with that, if I were to unleash my wrath on him for being a typical, unreasonable two year old, I would only be teaching a typical, unreasonable two year old that unleashing your wrath on someone is an appropriate and acceptable way to get what you want from someone else. The better lesson I think is to demonstrate anger management to him.

I have another reason that I think is better; I don’t unleash my wrath on him because that is not the way our Father in heaven has dealt and still deals with me when I carry on like you’re your typical, unreasonable, 43 year old sinner. God works in us through a process that resembles refining, by his grace according to his great love for us God purifies us that we might bear his image.

Now, I’m not one to go and swipe cheesy devotional stuff off the Net but I found this story describing the work of a silversmith that was just too good to pass up: There was this woman who had studied this passage from Malachi with her women’s group at church and she volunteered to visit a silversmith to study how he does his work. So she went to a jeweler and asked him to show her what is involved in refining and purifying silver. As she watched, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest so as to burn away all the impurities. The woman then began to think about God

holding us in such a hot spot. Then she thought again about the verse, that he *sits* as a refiner and purifier of silver. She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. Then she asked the silver smith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy--when I see my image in it."

I could say more on this but I think this story speaks loudly enough of the Lord's faithfulness and love for us and his work in our lives to create his image in us both as individuals and as a fellowship of believers. The Lord is at work in every one of us to create faith and faithfulness in us that reflects his image back to him. He works with us each in accordance with who we are. For some of us, the flames have been hotter than for others. For me, the most difficult time of my life was the year and a half leading up to divorce and the two years after. In the refining fire of that emotional turmoil I could have very easily just wallowed in my failures, but God wouldn't let me. Instead, he healed me of my believing several lies about myself that I had believed since I was four years old. Indeed, the LORD burns away our impurities so that we don't suffer them anymore.

Back to the terrible two year old, the covenant there is that I am his father and he is my son and that reality will never change. Therefore, Dana and I have to raise him. So, as a Christian, I must live the love of the Father before William and as best as I can demonstrate it to him. When William is in the midst of one of his episodes as far as I am concerned he, the little two year old is in the midst of the refiner's fire; and when he is in the thralls of it, reason and yelling are not what he responds to. Those approaches only make it worse for him. What he responds to is love. By love I don't mean giving in to him. Rather, love usually looks like sitting in time out with him or leaving him to learn to sort himself out.

So, without further ado, I would like to sing the you one of my favorite hymns,

Come, thou Fount of Every blessing

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.

Sorrowing I shall be in spirit,
Till released from flesh and sin,
Yet from what I do inherit,
Here Thy praises I'll begin;
Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood;
How His kindness yet pursues me
Mortal tongue can never tell,
Clothed in flesh, till death shall loose me
I cannot proclaim it well.

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

O that day when freed from sinning,
I shall see Thy lovely face;
Clothed then in blood washed linen
How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace;
Come, my Lord, no longer tarry,
Take my ransomed soul away;
Send thine angels now to carry
Me to realms of endless day.