

In God's image

Part 3

Malachi 3

¹ *"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.*

1 Peter 1:6-9

⁶ *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

In ancient times the process of refining metals was a slow but important one. The blacksmith would take a lump of metal ore which looks like a big rock, smash it up into small pieces then put the ore over a roaring fire. The silver has a lower melting point, so it starts to bubble and drip to bottom. The smith takes out all the larger pieces of rock left on the top. But the process has just started. Over and over again the smith heats the metal, skims off the impurities, each time looking in to see if it's pure enough. Hours go by, the smith repeating this process until he looks in and sees what he has been waiting for, his reflection. When the smith can see his own image he knows his job is done.

This metaphor of a refiner's fire, comes up again and again in the Bible. In the Old Testament and New Testament this process is used to help us understand God's work in us – God's work in shaping us and changing us, and making us into his image.

Malachi is another of those prophets speaking to Israel when they are about to head off into exile. The country has strayed from the ways of God, injustice was common. The mistreatment of the poor and vulnerable was rife – they had broken their covenant with God and Malachi paints this picture for them, of how they are totally unacceptable to God.

But God has plans for them:

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righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

God will make them acceptable again, he will bring them back to the covenant and the process will be like a refiner, refining the metal to make it pure. This is his activity, God is the active agent, he will refine his people through fire. The fire he speaks of is the exile and destruction of Jerusalem – serious hardship.

again the image of refining comes up 1 Peter 1:

⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

But here its linked more directly to grief and trials. That through these trials our faith is purified, hardened and made stronger.

Today even in our nice cushy first world lives, we have trials and hardships. Like when your friends are pushing you to do something not Godly, not helpful to your faith. Be it out partying on the weekend, or what your sex life should be, or what you should think about religion or politics, or how you should treat the opposite sex.

This is being in the fire.

I have often heard, that going to Uni for many Christians really meant they had to know their faith better because they were constantly being challenged, “you don’t believe that Christian stuff do you?” People would confront them with tricky philosophical questions like, how can there be a loving God in a world with so much suffering? And that can be very confronting and scary.

But in this God is finding opportunity refine and sharpen your faith. Of course this is not designed to be a fun thing, it almost always hard, and sometimes very hard. Like if your marriage isn’t what you envisioned, or fails altogether; your children aren’t following the path you hoped they would; you feel abandoned by friends or family; you constantly argue with your family about life and faith; your career is not turning out how you wished, or it’s just not fulfilling you; your plans for life are constantly being blown out of the water; someone you love and held dear is now gone.

These are the trials Peter is talking about, this is the reality of life, even when things are good there is still hard times. But instead of having them rock us, God reveals to us that in hardship he shapes us more like him. In these hard experiences we are being refined so we might reflect God's image.

William Carey was a Bible translator in India, translating into one of the many dialects. He had worked through about half of the New Testament when a fire took all his work, his translations, the dictionaries he had created, his work on the grammar of the native language... all gone. After that huge blow, he picked himself back up, worked harder than ever. Long after that event he looked back at his work was far better than the original. The experience was not fun or easy, but he was made better because of it.

Sometimes the best things the most rewarding things are hard things in life. And sometimes they are the hardest things you might ever face. Yet through the experience we learn and grow because of the difficulty.

Me and Amy when on the Inca trail walk in Peru. We spent four days walking through the Andes mountains, carrying our clothes and packs with us. One morning we started at 3200 m and walked for 3 hours until we passed the mountain range at 4200 m. We walked a vertical kilometre in that morning! The idea is we would arrive on the 4th day at Machu Pitchu. What an experience! The other option is to catch the train in but we didn't get to the temple after 4 days and go 'man I wish I caught the train'. The experience was what made it awesome. It was hard and tiring but taking the short cut would miss the point.

There are times in life when God knows, we need to be refined. When we need to be shaped on the anvil.

This is second part of the refining process. You have you metal then you bend it and pound on it to form it into something new, something better, something stronger. Sometimes after being formed on the anvil we need to come back to be repaired: the blunt sword need to be sharpened, the cracked spade need to be sealed. And even though we have been formed, we have been refined, God has more work to do on us.

In Queensland on the conference, a minister of a huge church shared his anvil experience. He was at a global church leadership conference. Bill Hybel, was one of the speakers talking about growing churches. After the talk the minister, boldly when up to Bill and said "Thanks for the talk, great, I just wanted to know how do I build a culture of evangelism in my church?" Bill turned to him and said, "do it yourself". Clang... Mic drop... ouch.

There was a shot to the ego... God put the minister back on the anvil for one more big shot with the hammer. And Bill was right, how do you encourage others to outreach, do it yourself. Not a fun experience, being shot down by one of your idols. But God uses these moments to straighten what's become bent, to sharpen the dull.

And sometimes we need to be clanged. Because every time we take a hit, we are being shaped closer and closer to the image God has for us. Every hit makes us more in his image. The anvil shapes us and moulds us, and recreates us and perfects us. And of course we are always a work in progress, we will never be perfect. But the closer we get the fewer clangs we will receive.

I hope you're not on the anvil... but if need to be I'm glad you are. Because it's not a time to be avoided but a time to be experienced.

Should God place you on the anvil you can be thankful, because it means God thinks you're still worth working on.