

GOD THE REFINER

By Russell Barnett

Throughout the Bible God uses many analogies to help us better understand His thoughts and desires. Today I would like to examine in a little more detail one of the analogies God uses in the Old Testament. If you would, please turn with me to Malachi chapter 3 verse 3. Malachi here is talking in particular about the end time, however it still applies to what God is doing with us today. We see here that God describes Himself as a refiner and purifier of silver and gold, this is obvious proof that Metallurgy is a Godly profession (just joking).

Mal 3:3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness.

These words refine, purify and purge all express the same concept of cleansing and removing of imperfections by a process, a process that we as Christians must undergo if we are to become perfect like Christ. The concept of being perfect or pure is a vast topic and I won't assume to even broach it today, however I would like to look at the actual process by which silver and gold are refined and try to show some spiritual parallels that may be of assistance in our struggle to live God's way.

To give a bit of a background silver, up until 500BC was regarded as the most valuable metal on earth, indeed it was during Solomon's reign that gold replaced silver as the most precious metal. Gold and silver share some important properties that explain why they were viewed so highly by the ancients and even by people today.

Silver is the second most ductile and malleable metal next to gold making them both very easy to fashion and mould. Both have a brilliant metallic lustre or shine that does not tarnish or corrode making them beautiful to look at and ideal for jewellery. The reason gold and silver do not tarnish or corrode is because they do not react with the atmosphere, even at high temperatures gold and silver still remain inert. In a minute you will see why this is so important.

Let me now briefly explain the actual process by which silver and gold was refined in Old Testament times. The refining of gold and silver follow the same process which is in fact quite simple. The impure or natural occurring gold or silver is placed along with pieces of lead, into a crucible type vessel. It is then placed into a furnace where the metal melts and mixes with the lead forming a molten liquid mass of metal. Air, under force is then blown onto the surface of the molten metal while still in the furnace.

As I mentioned previously gold and silver do not react with the air whereas the lead and any impurities like tin, copper and iron do react. The lead, once it comes in contact with the blowing air reacts then circulates throughout the molten metal. This circulating reacted lead then absorbs all the other metal impurities to form a mixture called dross, which vaporises or floats to the surface. The floating dross is then subsequently blown over the edge of the crucible by the blasting air and is consumed by the furnace. The gold or silver is then left behind in the crucible free of all impurities.

Now that I have explained how silver is refined let us look at what it says in Jeremiah 6:27-30. Here God sends Jeremiah to test and refine the Israelites but they refuse to be purified and God subsequently rejects them, but notice what God likens the Israelites to.

Jer 6:27-30 "I have set you as an assayer and a fortress among My people, That you may know and test their way. {28} They are all stubborn rebels, walking as slanderers. They are bronze and iron, They are all corrupters; {29} The bellows blow fiercely, The lead is consumed by the fire; The smelter refines in vain, For the wicked are not drawn off. {30} People will call them rejected silver, Because the LORD has rejected them."

So here the bronze and iron, which we know are impurities in silver are likened to the impure Israelites. However in this particular refining process even though the air blows fiercely and the lead is consumed, the dross is still not drawn off and the wicked still remain. Again in Ezekiel 22:18 we see that God likens the Israelites to the dross that is to be consumed instead of the pure precious silver that God desires them to be.

Ezek 22:18 "Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to Me; they are all bronze, tin, iron, and lead, in the midst of a furnace; they have become dross from silver.

We know that in the silver refining process the dross is separated and burnt up, so also God does to the wicked. This is confirmed in many scriptures, there's no need to turn there but let me quickly read you a couple in Psalms.

Psa 119:119 You put away all the wicked of the earth like dross; Therefore I love Your testimonies.

Psa 37:20 But the wicked shall perish; And the enemies of the LORD, Like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away.

These scriptures and others show the importance of making sure that we are not counted amongst the wicked.

So then it remains for us to be like pure silver or gold and not like the dross, full of impurities. If we are to be pure then we must put away sin and live a way of life defined by God's word, which is its self pure. To be pure we must repent and be baptised accepting Christ's awesome sacrifice. But let us now turn to 2 Tim 2:22 where we see that part of being pure is having a personal commitment to God's way of life and His church.

2 Tim 2:22 Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

So what then am I saying, that through our own efforts we can become pure?

If we look once again at the analogy of refining silver we see that this is definitely not the case, the silver does not refine itself nor separate itself from the dross. It is the heat of the furnace and the blowing air that removes the dross. Christ's sacrifice is what purifying is really all about as it shows in Heb 9:13-14

Heb 9:13-14 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, {14} how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

We have heard many times and rightly so that it is through our baptism that we partake in Christ's sacrifice. The idea of being washed or purified is an integral part of baptism. It uses the symbol of water to express the aspect of cleansing our life from sin, but this is not the only concept attached to baptism as we see in Matt 3:11. John the Baptist is telling the Pharisees about the difference between his baptism and the one that will come with Christ.

Mat 3:11 "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So what is this baptism of fire that John the Baptist is talking about when referring to the baptism of Christ?

This idea of baptism by fire can very easily be related to the furnace that is involved with the refining of gold and silver. It is interesting to note that the ultimate test that gold and silver undergo to check their purity is to be assayed by fire. If you remember we read in Jeremiah that he was sent to assay and test the Israelites.

Now to assay something is chiefly used in the reference to metals, meaning to test the metals purity. The gold or silver is tested by taking a sample, weighing it then refining it, and then reweighing the now known pure gold. If there is no change in weight then all the gold is pure, if a loss of weight then the gold is impure.

Therefore this idea of a test that also purifies is a very important concept that matches, as you will see, very closely to the idea of being baptised with fire. In 1 Cor 3:13 we see that this very same idea is used to explain what will happen in the end time.

1 Cor 3:13-15 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. {14} If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. {15} If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Here we have a concept of fire used to test and at the same time used to save. Again in Zec 13:9 this idea is confirmed.

Zec 13:9 I will bring the one-third through the fire, Will refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; And each one will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"

So then when we are baptised by fire we are tested to show our impurities but at the same time as we are tested we also are refined. Doesn't this idea ring true with the many trials or temptations that we suffer as we strive to follow God's way of life. The trials reveal our weaknesses but as we persevere through the trials we grow and overcome and therefore become more pure. Indeed only with the hot temperature of the furnace can silver be refined, don't we also need to experience some heat for us to change. In Isa 48:10 God testifies to the fact that He has tested us with this very necessary heat.

Isa 48:10 Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

When we think of examples of affliction or trials we tend to think of major examples like Christ dying for us, or of Job and his great personnel and emotional loss and suffering. Indeed we can read in the Bible of many people who have been afflicted in many traumatic ways. It is, however, I believe important to note when we think of trials and tribulations that God looks at all trials, great and small as a means to refine and test us.

Some years ago during my first three years of high school I was verbally and physically abused by a group of peers, sometimes because of my beliefs other times just because of whom I was. It was not a life-threatening situation, however to me it was still a tough period and therefore still regarded as a trial in God's eyes. Some of you maybe experiencing this kind of thing at the moment at school or work, however we can take comfort in knowing that God is watching closely. James tells us that we should be glad when we experience these types of trials because it means we are being perfected.

That may all be well and good but what about when we experience trials that we think we can't handle, that are simply too tough to bear. I believe we can draw more encouragement if we once again look at the analogy of the refining of silver and gold.

During the refining process the heat of the furnace is critical, if too severe then the silver or gold will be vaporized and lost, if too cold then some of the lead will remain and the metal will not be pure. The smith watches very closely the temperature making sure that it stays exactly right. In other words the severity of our trials is extremely important to God for He wants us to be pure but never to be lost. In 1 Cor 10:13 no need to go there, our God, who can not lie promises that He will not tempt or test us beyond what we are able to cope with.

As we draw to a close please turn with me to 1 Pet 5:10 we see that we can draw comfort from the fact that our suffering is only for a short time.

1 Pet 5:10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

We know that it is God's plan for us and that we be made perfect spirit beings dwelling with Him for the rest of eternity.

In conclusion let me briefly summarize the main points I have tried to show today successfully or otherwise by using the analogy of the refining of silver and gold

- If we continue in the way of the wicked then God will remove us from His plan of salvation like dross is separated from the silver and consumed.
- God requires us to be like precious pure silver, to have a pure heart free of all dross and impurities
- When silver or gold are assayed they are tested by fire and therefore are refined, so to when God test's us He is also refining us
- Silver and gold to be purified must experience the heat of the furnace, we also must be baptised with fire and experience trials and tribulations in the furnace of affliction. However we are never consumed or tested beyond our capabilities, just like the smith who closely watches the furnace temperature so God watches and cares for us.

Let's now turn to a final scripture Psa 66:10 that really encapsulates all these thoughts:

Psa 66:10-12 For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. {11} You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. {12} You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment.

As the silver or gold nears the final stage of refining it experiences an action known as “brightening”, at the time that the last of the impurities are consumed the now pure molten metal suddenly emits a bright flash of light and immediately solidifies. I eagerly look forward to the time when God sees this happen to His people.