

Into The Refiner's Fire

Hello Dear Listeners;

This month on this program we are having a closer look at the problem of human suffering. We saw last time that suffering and death came into the world because of man's fall into sin. Yet we also saw, (I hope) that God in his infinite goodness and sovereignty pointed to the solution to the suffering that now seems to flood the world. That solution, is found in Jesus Christ and in *his* suffering to pay the penalty for our sin as a ransom on Calvary's cross.

There is a vast unbridgeable difference on how suffering, misery and death is seen and 'digested' by Christians and non-Christians. No doubt there are large numbers of people in the world who deny that tragedy, pain and suffering can have any positive, salutary effect .

Yet there are many, including the churches that sponsor this program who maintain that "*Indeed, all things must work together for my salvation*".¹ Is this some vain or foolish hope? No, it is the revelation of the Holy Spirit who used his servant Paul, the apostle, to write this down in Romans 8:28. Speaking of the great comfort believers have knowing that the Holy Spirit Himself intercedes for them Paul says,

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.

Much has been said and written about this verse. What I would like us to think about today is the fact that God often takes his faithful people and tries them, even sorely at times in order *to purify them*, and make them strong, spiritually and emotionally. For believers have been placed on his side and they are engaged in a spiritual warfare of no small proportions. They are called to fight the "*good fight of the faith*" as the bible calls it. (1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7)

It's a hard battle that pits Christ's true followers against all the forces of evil, including Satan, that arch-enemy of the Lord himself. It's a battle in which even those veterans who have raised the banner of the Lord for many years have to be purified. That they might constantly look to Jesus Christ, their Commander in Chief. Surely this also means that they have to lay aside and overcome all kinds

¹ a phrase from the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1 , Answer 1.

of personal temptations to quit the battle field and deny the faith. Satan would like nothing better.

But the Lord God puts them to the test. He tries them by fire, as it were. That very wise man Solomon in the Book of Proverbs says, “ *The crucible (is) for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.*” (ch. 17:3) (*A crucible was a fireproof melting pot into which crushed or broken pieces of ore were placed. Then the refiner placed the crucible into the furnace at the precise temperature necessary for removing other metals that would mar the quality of the gold or silver. Just as the furnace is used to purify silver in the crucible, our Refiner uses heat to purify our hearts and cleanse our character. Proverbs 17:3 says, “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.”*)

The singer who wrote Psalm 66 speaks of great joy in the Lord because of his surpassing great works. He gives thanks for the fact God preserved his life and that of the people. Then he says,

For you O God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.

We hear the psalmist realize that the severe trials that God put them through had a purpose. This one, that he and God’s people might be brought to a “*place of abundance.*” Surely that “place” was the promised land where God lived in the midst of His people.

The bible speaks in numerous places of the trials that can and do await God’s people. And yes, it is so that when believers are in the midst of those trials, persecutions, with misery and pain threatening to beat them down, they can be sorely, terribly dismayed. Yet so often, though you hear God’s people crying ,even “ *out of the depths*”, of sadness, loneliness, they cry to the Lord, (as they do in Psalm 130). Knowing, that they must wait for the Lord, to reveal His goodness, to save them, redeem them in his “unfailing love.” (v. 7)

Edith Schaeffer the wife of Dr. Francis Schaeffer a philosopher and pastor who with his wife were instrumental in establishing the L’Abri (“the shelter”) in Switzerland and who herself was a prolific author wrote Affliction “ A

compassionate Christian look at understanding the reality of pain and suffering in our lives.”²

She likens the Christian’s moulding and purifying to the making of a fine musical instrument. She notes the fact that, “ *Fine musical instruments are not made overnight.*” “ Much time needs to be taken as the wood must be tempered for years and time for mellowing and refining is necessary.”

Christians have confidence that the Lord is preparing them for something grand, something immeasurably greater than what He has yet given them to experience. It is the fulness of joy and peace in His presence. Together with all God’s children, set apart for Him in his amazing undeserved favour.

Yes it is so, the journey may be very difficult at times. The apostle Peter, writing to what are called “ *God’s elect, (and) strangers in the world*” at the beginning of his first letter, speaks about the tenacity of the devil who “ *prowls around, like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” (1 Peter 5: 8) Peter tells his readers to “ Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” (v. 9a) Then he gives them this promise:

The God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen

It is a sure promise. So powerful and gracious is the Lord God that He can and does often have his children singing in the midst of trials. I think of the numerous martyrs who, while facing the mouths of hungry lions and the swords of murderers, put their trust in Jesus Christ. Looking to him , knowing that He would take them to himself should they breathe their last here below.

Surely is the reality of knowing that the refiner’s fire produces pure gold in the hand of as God who does not abandon His own that caused the apostle Paul to say this, (in chapter five of his letter to the Romans) -

And 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. And hope

² The statement on the front of the book Jacket of Affliction by Edith Schaeffer, Fleming H. Revell Co. 1978

does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us. Romans 5: 3-5

The Lord God lays claim to His “gold.” Believers, who come through the fire, by grace, through faith, *are* that gold. Put to the test in trials and afflictions they persevere, no, not in their own strength but in the strength of God the Holy Spirit. That perseverance produces character that quality of being approved as a result of these trials. “Character” it’s a victory shout of those who are more than conquerors by Faith in Jesus Christ. They have hope, hope for today and tomorrow, knowing God will not abandon them. For this hope is their sincere desire coupled with their confident expectation.

All this because their faith and hope is anchored in the love for them by Jesus Christ. All victorious because He who suffered the most extreme agony of the cross lays claim to them, through thick and thin. All because He lives today to intercede for them, even in the midst of the fire. That purified, made strong, they might enter His gates with unending joy. To him be the power and the glory and thanksgiving, forever. Amen, and thank you so much for tuning in.