

Advent 2, 2012, at Brentwood

The One Who Refines

**Luke 1:68-79 & Malachi 3:1-4
(122, 115, 145, 153)**

December 9, 2012



When I read the passage from Malachi,
the first thing I thought of was Lava Soap.

When I searched for it on the internet,
I discovered it's still being produced,
now manufactured by the WD-40 company.

The Lava Bar is the original heavy-duty hand cleaner.
Here's how the website describes its history and features.
Since 1893, do-it-yourselfers, coal miners, and oil rig workers
have depended on the power of pumice in Lava
to cut through even the toughest grease and grime.

Lava's name was derived from one of its key ingredients-pumice.
A by-product of volcanic activity,
pumice is used in combination with other cleaning and moisturizing agents
to clean and soften even the dirtiest of hands.

Now, I've never done any coal mining or oil rigging.
I've shovelled coal into a furnace.
I've poured oil into a motor.
But none of the really hard, dirty stuff.
My hands got dirty with the normal kid stuff.

And Lava Soap really worked.
It took the layer of dirt, and probably a couple layers of skin, off pretty well.
Strong soap that cleaned you up real good.

Refining is a different process with the same goal,
to clean up valuable metals from the dirt and gunk that gathered around them.
The base stuff was separated from the precious stuff,
leaving the silver or gold pure.
In refining, there is no chemical change in the precious metal.
You are simply removing the impurities,
removing the dirt to the really valuable stuff.

These are the two images used in Malachi's prophecy.
We know nothing about the prophet here.
Malachi, in Hebrew, simply means 'my messenger,'
and the focus in this book is the message.
It's directed to the people of God
and probably written around 500 – 450BC,
after the restoration and the building of the second temple.
The message here is basically the same as in Nehemiah and Ezra.
So Israel is back on their land
and the power of the temple officials is being re-established.
Israel is becoming once again complacent and corrupt.
God, through his messenger, the *malachi*, reminds them of the covenant,
the mutual agreement to follow and flourish –
follow my law of loving God, loving neighbour, and loving self
and I will inspire, guide, and enable you to flourish.
When you don't follow, I will have to refine, says the Lord.
I will send One who refines, one who purifies,
like a strong soap or a refiners of pure metals.

For Christians, that One who refines is Jesus Christ.
God came in the person of Jesus Christ to cleanse and refine,
to restore in us the purity of his original intention for us.
God wants, more than anything else in the world,
to be reconciled with us, to be in close and intimate relationship with us,
to work with and through us to bless the whole creation.
That is what the covenant is all about.
"I am your God and you are invited to be my people,"
is the core message of the whole of the Scriptures.

Through the work of God's Holy Spirit,
we are constantly being presented with purifying opportunities and choices.
We are constantly being presented with opportunities to be blessings,
choices to curse by committing or omitting
or to bless by loving.

That's how the refining works with God –
in the midst of our daily lives,
breath by breath, moment by moment.
God removes and protects us from those elements in our lives
that threaten to encrust us with dirt,
with negative attitudes and harmful behaviours.

God does this by constantly presenting opportunities to be clean and pure,
to live life as God originally intended,
to be in loving relationship with our Creator
as co-creators of a better future.

The crucial judgement,
the final refining for humanity,
took place when God became flesh, dwelt among us,
and went to the cross to remove the curse of the fall.
That is done, finished, over.
There is a new covenant, a new situation, a new approach.
It's been in operation for over 2000 years.

It works like this, says the Lord through his messenger:
“Fear not, you are saved.
In Jesus Christ, I, the Lord, have done this.
This is my way of being a loving judge,
a compassionate Father,
a gracious and merciful God.
I am more interested in blessing the treasure I placed within you
than condemning the earthen vessel in which it currently resides.
So, rejoice and be glad.
You are forgiven and free to flourish.”

The fire of the refining is the passion of God's love.
The pumice of the soap is God's love.
There may be some pain in the removal of encrusted or embedded dirt,
some discomfort in the removal of long-standing habits that hurt us and others,
but the joy of flourishing in the grace of Jesus Christ
makes those memories fade and fall away
as God's compassion works its miracles,
or at least what appear to be miracles to us,
with our limited insight.

So, we wait for and welcome the Refiner,
the One who lovingly washes or refines away
the base elements and dirt that distort and disfigure
the image of God within each of us and all of us.

The Refiners power is that of a delighted baby,
a curious and brilliant child,
a compelling preacher,
a loving healer,
a courageous prophet,
a willing sacrifice,
and a risen Saviour.

That's the Christian way of refining and purifying,
strange as it may seem
and hard as it may be to grasp with our intellects alone.
But it does appeal to our emotions and instincts.
We are refined and purified in Jesus Christ.
The base elements and dirt are being constantly removed
so that the image of God within can shine forth,
clean and shining through the ways we flourish
by blessing all who we encounter in our daily lives.

*May these thoughts and urgings be used by the Holy Spirit
to form us all for witnessing to the mission of Jesus Christ.*

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