

Suffering - God's Crucible to Prepare the Bride

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation." 1 Peter 4:12-13

The prophet Malachi foretold that the Messiah would purify His chosen people as a refiner purifies gold and silver. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire... He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness (Malachi 3:2-3)." Zechariah also prophesied the Lord would purify the surviving remnant of His people like gold and silver are refined. "And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested (Zechariah 13:9)." In Proverbs, King Solomon described the Lord as the refiner of His people. "The melting pot is for silver and the crucible is for gold, but it is the Lord who tests the hearts of men (Proverbs 17:3)."

In Biblical times, when the metal smith or refiner wanted to purify gold or silver, he would put the precious metals in a refining pot called a crucible. He would then build a fiery furnace under the crucible. When the gold or silver had melted in the crucible, the refiner would skim off the dross or impurities that rose to the surface. The refiner would then repeat this process until he could see his own image reflected in the molten surface of the crucible. Trials, afflictions and persecutions are the crucible that Christ uses to purify His church until He sees His image reflected in us. "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48:10)." Gold or silver that passed the test of the furnace was called "refined" and had precious value. "Take away the dross from the silver and there comes out a vessel for

the smith (Proverbs 25:4)." Those metals that failed to pass the test were "rejected." In Jeremiah 6:29-30, God calls Israel "rejected silver" because He tried in vain to refine them.

This crucible of suffering is also called the baptism of fire (Luke 3:16). God has designed His crucible of fire and suffering to humble us and reveal the fullness of His Son in us. Affliction, loneliness, heartbreak and persecution are all intended to bring us to the end of ourselves and into Christ's fullness. For as long as we think we have any spiritual life or strength in ourselves, Christ's life cannot be fully manifested in us. Therefore, suffering is intended to bring us to the point where we no longer trust in our own strength (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). God will then reveal the power of His Son's crucifixion in us so that we see that Christ not only died for us (Romans 5:8), but that we died with Christ (Romans 6:8). When we know we have been crucified with Him and our sinful nature has been removed (Romans 6:6), we will no longer rely on our natural ability to serve Christ. When we know this divine truth with certainty, we are able to trust Christ to live in us (Galatians 2:20). Jesus Himself suffered God's humbling of His soul. "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8)."

In the Book of Revelation, we see the new Jerusalem, the holy city, made of pure gold (Revelation 21:18). This heavenly vision reveals the bride of Christ will be like gold purified by fire and clearly reflect the image of Christ in her. This is what Jesus meant when He told the church of Laodicea to buy refined gold (Revelation 3:18). What will it cost the church to buy Christ's pure gold? God has never changed the price: The cost is always our soul-life. Jesus said, "He who has found his soul-life will lose it, and he who has lost his soul-life for My sake will find it (Matthew 10:39)." God will not destroy our soul; He transforms our soul into His Son's image if we allow His crucible of suffering to humble us. The apostle Paul said suffering produces character (Romans 5:3-4). The Greek word used here for

character is *dokime* whose root meaning is "proven and tested," just as gold and silver has been tested in the crucible. In other words, God's suffering produces Christ's character in us that has been proven under fire. We may be surprised and think it is strange when we encounter fiery trials as a Christian. Yet Peter assures us this testing is essential to purify our faith in Christ just as fire is necessary to refine gold (1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-13). Job went through this fiery crucible when he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him... when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold (Job 13:15; 23:10)." We cannot expect to reign with Christ as His bride if we have not suffered with Him (2 Timothy 2:12). When God's crucible of suffering has removed the dross of unbelief from us, we will be dressed in faith as Christ's bride. Christ's life will have been forged in us like gold refined by fire and we will reign with Him as vessels of honor fit for the Master's use. More importantly, we will truly know Him.

The apostles understood God's purpose in suffering was to prepare the church to be Christ's bride and eternal companion. That is why they rejoiced in suffering. Peter said, "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing (1 Peter 4:13)." James said, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds... blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised (James 1:2, 12)." Our joy in suffering is motivated by our longing to know Him despite the humiliation that suffering brings. If we allow suffering to obtain its divine objective, we will become lovesick and, like the bride of Solomon, come up from the wilderness of suffering, leaning on our Beloved (Song of Songs 5:8; 8:5).

"... greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." 1 Peter 1:6-7