

“Purified”
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This is the holy gospel from Luke, the second chapter:

Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the Law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. The law of the Lord says, “If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the Lord.” So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord – “either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Sovereign Lord, now that Your servant die peace,
as You have promised.
I have seen Your salvation,
which You have prepared for all people.
He is the light to reveal God to the nations,
and He is the glory of your people Israel!”

Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary, the baby's mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your very soul.”

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

Then Jesus' parents had fulfilled all the requirements the law required. They returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give You thanks for Your word this day and we ask that You would open our hearts and minds to hear from You, to listen, and to respond as You would ask us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We have in our Old Testament reading for today the words of Malachi, the last book of our Bible and one of the prophets of the Old Testament. The role of the prophet is not fortunetelling or even future telling. The role of the prophet is to be a spokesperson for God. And so as we read the prophets in the Old Testament, almost always we hear one of two messages. Either they're calling the people of God to be faithful to Him or they're calling the people of God to treat others with justice, especially widows and orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land. These people, while less powerful, are not to be taken advantage of by God's people. They are to be treated well. Those are the two primary voices of the prophets of the Old Testament.

So in Malachi, we get a taste of what God is speaking to His people. We get to see through the words of the prophet the very heart of God for His people. "Look," Malachi says, "I am sending My messenger and he will prepare the way before Me." There is a preparation that needs to happen before God shows up. God will provide the messenger to speak for that. We hear in verse 3, chapter 1, "Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to His temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the Lord of Heaven's armies."

Now I want to pause there for a moment to reveal to you a kind of a shock that happened to me as I first read the New Living Translation. The New Living Translation always translates what most of us are familiar with "the Lord of hosts" using the words "the Lord of Heaven's armies." For most of my life, I didn't realize that the hosts were an army and so it becomes shocking when we think that God leads heaven's army. Why does God need an army? Well because there's a battle at work. There's a battle between good and evil. There's a battle between that which is faithful to God and that which is faithful to anything else. So we hear in this word that it's the Lord of heaven's army, that God is coming to set things right, to set the enemies aside, to remove those barriers which would stop us from being faithful and in the fellowship of God Himself.

So there's this word in verse 2 that suddenly takes us from being excited at the presence of God to realizing that, maybe, we need to think of something else. Listen again to Malachi in verse 2 of chapter 3, "But who will be able to endure it when He comes? Who will be able to stand and face Him when He appears?" It may not be all good news that God is showing up, for God will stand against those who stand against Him. God will stand against sin and evil even when it's in our own lives. The word from Malachi, as we move forward, says in chapter 3 that 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. The Refiner's fire, purification.

Now when I imagine that I'm the gold or silver that needs to be refined and that I'm the one that's going to be fired, that's a pretty scary word. There is a challenge that's coming and it's not going to be pleasant. It's not going to feel good. Perhaps you've experienced it in the call to repentance, when something you've done that's wrong is called out. Maybe by a parent or someone else in authority. Or maybe it's just that light in your mirror when you realize you've been going too fast on the freeway and you have these negative thoughts of having been caught. Rarely a pleasant feeling. Yet I want to challenge you to remember maybe just the purpose of that highway patrolman which is to remind you and to remind everyone to drive more safely. Do not take chances and risk injury to themselves or others.

There's a purpose for this refining that God will do. It's so that we can be righteous before Him. It's so that we can be brought back into fellowship and relationship. The goal is to remove anything that stands as an obstacle between us and God. So often in our lives, that obstacle is our own guilt or shame that God needs to remove. Quite frankly, often we don't like it, but it is what we need. It is what needs to happen in our lives. We need to be purified. We need to be made right. What I'm saying is not that we need to make ourselves right because we cannot, but we need to be made right because God can. He can prepare us to live in fellowship with Him, to enjoy His lovingkindness and mercy and to be brought out of the target of His wrath and His anger for wickedness or toward wickedness and that which would hurt us or others whom God loves. You see, God does not want us even to hurt ourselves, much less hurt others because that's the nature of His love. This purification that is brought to us is brought in love to make us right and good.

So as you heard the gospel proclaimed just a moment ago, you heard over and over again about the requirements of the law. Joseph and Mary were bringing Jesus to present Him to the Lord as the law required. They were bringing an offering as the Lord required. As they were ready to leave, they finished what the law required. Almost sounds very repetitious which is an indication to us that we ought not to overlook it. When Joseph and Mary brought the Messiah

to observe the law, the Messiah was being prepared to rescue the people whom God loves. Then it was time for their purification offering. It's interesting because I think most of the time we would have thought of that as the purification of the baby or the purification of the mother, but here I think maybe we can hear more broadly. Maybe we can hear that what's being brought is purification for the world, because Jesus is the Messiah and He's coming to rescue God's people.

Simeon, who is righteous and devout, was waiting for this, for God's people. He had been promised that it would happen before he died. So he rejoices and he announces the very purpose of the Messiah. He is the light to reveal God to the nations, to all the people. He is the glory of your people Israel. This is good news when you're on the right side of purification, but we hear in Simeon's words that there is a problem. Again in verse 34 of chapter 2 of Luke, it says this, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall and many others to rise. He's been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose Him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your very soul." he says to Mary.

You see it's not that God is coming to oppose people. It's just that in their guilt and shame and wickedness some people will oppose what God seeks to do in making them right. If they will not allow God to forgive and be merciful to them, if they will not turn to God and acknowledge their need for Him, then they stand opposed. God would tear down that opposition and that fire, purifying fire ought not to be resisted because God's desire is to raise us up, to make us clean, to forgive us that we might live in renewed fellowship and so, our hearts need to be opened. The true thoughts of our hearts need to be revealed, so that they can be dealt with by God's grace and mercy, through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's why He came, to sort out our wickedness, to sort out our selfishness, to reveal it so that we can be made right.

I'm wondering if this is sounding like good news. I'm wondering if this is sounding like law or gospel. I'm wondering how you're feeling at this point whether you're thinking this is something that is going to bless you or something that is going to curse you. So I want us to understand the intentions of God who sent His Son to be our savior and more. Purification is not easy. There is pain in the gain. There is sorrow in recognizing our shortcomings and our wickedness. There is sorrow and recognition that our actions have caused pain and injury to others. There are sorrow and pain in recognizing that we have not done even ourselves a service because of our selfishness. We've gotten in our own way. We've gone down the wrong path and we need to be told we are wrong and that God is right. And that hurts, but it also helps. It is also the very path to victory and joy and celebration, in the presence of our God. It is the way in which we discover the grace and goodness of God for us and for the world. Sometimes it's hard for us to

believe, but it is the good news of the gospel for you. It is a stark light that may startle us in the beginning, but then reveals the goodness and the love of God.

I remember when I was doing a Bible study with some men on a Tuesday morning. We had been journeying through the scripture, when it suddenly began to dawn on so many of us that very often those things that we experience and that they saw in the scripture for the people of God in the scripture as testing or as trials, that those ended up being blessings and the blessings, the gifts of prosperity and provision, were often the test. Every test is a blessing and every blessing is a test.

James, chapter 1, verse 2 reminds us to “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” The struggle is often that which leads to the growth in our lives. Most of us would never choose it, although very often athletes choose it all the time. It's a part of how we use training to get stronger and to get better. We have to push ourselves and then gradually, we get stronger or gain endurance. There's a similar reality in this spiritual journey. As we humble ourselves before God, as we admit our need, that that is the very thing that God uses to prepare the way of the Lord and the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. As we humble ourselves, He lifts us up.

From Hebrews 12:2, we hear these words, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus, too, endured pain and hardship and suffering, only to have God turn that to be the very source of our salvation and hope. So when you hear words of scripture that are challenging, understand that that challenge is a gift, so that we can grow. When the circumstances of our lives hit us hard and we struggle, understand that that test, that trial is an opportunity for us to grow and to realize that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

We hear in the psalm this morning that the joy, that is, the destination of this journey of purification. We hear in Psalm 84 “how lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of heaven's armies. I long, yes. I faint with longing to enter the courts of the Lord.” That's the place we desire to be, in the presence of almighty God. That is the reason we were created. It is our destiny. It is our shape and our purpose. “What joy for those whose strength comes from the Lord. who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs. The autumn rains will clothe it with blessings.” There's an allusion here. When it talks about a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it's talking about moving toward the presence of God. There's an allusion here in the Valley of Weeping, in the place of struggle and hardship where we are forced to acknowledge our shortcomings and our sin and the fact

that we can't do this on our own. But God is our strength and the joy of the Lord is our hope. So in the midst of the struggle, or as it says in the Valley of Weeping, we experience refreshing springs. Just as rains and storms are sometimes unwanted and cloudy skies are sometimes considered less pleasant than sunny ones, we need the rain. I've heard so many people in the last few months that I've been here in San Jose saying we need the rain.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need the rain in our lives. We need to be nurtured and blessed by the trials and the struggles that come. So in those places of hardship and struggle, we simply seek the Lord and ask for His strength, for His renewal. We ask Him to cause all things to work together for good, as we love him and are called according to His purpose. Listen as Psalm 84 goes on, "for the Lord God is our sun and our shield. He gives us grace and glory. The Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right. O Lord of heaven's army what joy for those who trust in You." Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is trustworthy. God is faithful. He sent His Son to make us right, to bring us forgiveness and grace. We can experience that mercy in our lives and it can change us. It can transform us into a people of grace and goodness. "I have seen your salvation," Luke says, "which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations and He is the glory of Your people Israel." Simeon, this faithful devout man, understands who the Messiah is. That He is the glory of God's people and He is hope for the nations. Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is faithful. He will come. He will restore. He will purify and cleanse. He will transform us so that the joy of the Lord is our strength. Thanks be to God. Amen.