

The Refiner's Fire



The Lord is determined to purify and cleanse His people. He allows many of His chosen people to pass through the furnace of affliction. He is determined to bring forth the pure gold of holiness, genuine faith and Christ-like character. But is it possible that we have put out the Spirit's fire as He seeks to move among us? John Benson writes

I was a metallurgist before I heard the Lord's call to ordination. I still bear the scars from laboratory accidents with steel bars at very high temperatures. I soon learnt that respect is needed – even when the fire is contained in a carefully controlled furnace. You cannot play with fire without getting burnt. Fire gives warmth when we are cold. Fire cooks our food. Fire refines metals in the furnace. Fire also destroys.

The words of Daniel Iverson's hymn 'Spirit of the living God' made sense to me as I worked in the lab:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Scrap metal was broken up and placed in a furnace. The furnace was heated until the metal melted and the impurities burned away. The molten metal was then poured

out into a mould and shaped for use. In a similar way, I was going to be refined by fire and shaped into something useful for the Lord.

Before I develop these points, let me quickly add that the refining process continues to this day. The Lord has not finished dealing with me. I am still a work in progress. It is only through the riches of God's mercy and grace that I can stand. Spurgeon expressed it with his characteristic clarity: 'We are not what we hope to be, But we are not what we used to be. There has been progress, but there is still a long way to go.' 'I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.' (*Philippians 3: 12*)

BREAK ME

Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes 'he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement' (*John 16: 7 – 8*). King David had painful experience of such conviction of sin. He committed

adultery with Bathsheba and then conspired with Joab to have her husband Uriah killed in battle. The Lord sent Nathan the prophet to speak to David. 'Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own' (*2 Samuel 12: 9 – 10*). David had no place to hide, no room to negotiate and no words to speak in mitigation. He confessed his sin and Nathan assured him that the LORD had taken away his sin. David's confession is amplified in *Psalms 51* and he recognises that: 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (*Verse 17*)

David is convicted of his sin. Lust, pride and arrogant self-confidence have been exposed. He is broken and contrite before God. He is forgiven. He can make a fresh start with God, but he will face constant trouble in his own household

because of his sin.

Isaiah also experienced a deep conviction of sin when he saw a vision of the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted. He heard the seraphs calling out, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory' (*Isaiah 6: 3*). His immediate reaction was to say, 'Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips.' A seraph flew to him with a live coal from the altar, touched his lips and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.' He had a broken and contrite spirit before a holy God. He was not despised. He was forgiven and then commissioned to go and speak God's words to the people.

Why do we try to by-pass this stage of being broken before the Lord in ministry today? Have we reached a higher level of holiness than those who have gone before us? Has the Lord lowered his expectations of us?

Is it possible that we have grieved the Holy Spirit of God (*Ephesians 4: 30 – 32*) by our bitterness and anger, by our lack of love and forgiveness, by our lust and greed? Do we need to pray 'break me' and allow the Holy Spirit to convict us and change us?

MELT ME

We soon learn that fire is hot and that it is wise to step back and take your hand out of the flames. We instinctively step back from pain and suffering. We also know that some hardship cannot be avoided.

Peter wrote his epistles in the gathering storm of persecution. He knows the present reality of trials, but he also looks to their eternal significance: '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 honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.' (*1 Peter 1: 7*) Peter is in good company when he writes in this way.

Job went through some of the most painful trials recorded in Scripture. He suffered the loss of family, property and health. He struggled with his unhelpful comforters, but he developed the conviction that 'when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.' (*Job 23: 10*)

Isaiah expressed a similar thought: 'See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.' (*Isaiah 48: 10 – 11*)

Malachi continued the theme: 'For he will be like a refiner's fire . . . he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.' (*Malachi 3: 2 – 3*)

The Lord continues to take the saints through the refiner's fire. The Lord is determined to purify and cleanse His people. He allows many of His chosen people to pass through the furnace of affliction. Some face persecution and death. All face temptations and trials. He is determined to bring forth the pure gold of holiness, genuine faith and Christ-like character.

Why do we avoid the refiner's fire? Of course it is painful and we avoid the pain. Why do we put up with sin in our lives? Why do we settle for a life that is not on fire with passion for the Lord? Is it possible that we have put out the Spirit's fire (*1 Thessalonians 5: 19*) as he seeks to move among us? Do we need to pray 'melt me' and allow the Holy Spirit to do radical, holiness-producing, surgery in our hearts and lives?

MOULD ME

A politician of an earlier generation was described as 'a self-made man, very much in love with his creator That is the summit of human pride and ambition. Such ideas cannot survive in the presence of the high and lofty One who says: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit' (*Isaiah 57: 15*)

Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might be taken from Him, but He ended his prayer with 'yet not as I will, but as you will.' (*Matthew 26: 39*) He came to do the will of the Father.

Jesus taught us to pray 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' That includes 'your will be done in my life.' It includes 'mould me and shape me as you want me.'

Is it possible that we have resisted the Holy Spirit (*Acts 7: 51*) as we have asserted our own control over the life of the Church? Have we resisted the Holy Spirit as He seeks to lead us forward in obedience and holiness? Do we need to pray 'mould me' and yield ourselves again to the Father's holy will?

FILL ME

Is it possible that we have grieved the Holy Spirit, put out the Holy Spirit's fire, and resisted the Holy Spirit by our lack of holiness? Have we looked for the power of the Spirit in ministry and overlooked the insistence of the Holy Spirit that holiness is essential if we are to continue to serve? Is it possible that we need to return to a radical holiness of life if we are to experience the streams of living water that Jesus promised to those who believe in Him? Do we need to pray again:

Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

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