

Refining the Soul  
Lent 4A  
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[Malachi 3:1-6, 14-17](#)  
[1 Peter 1: 3-7, 13-16](#)

Picture this: You are in ancient Egypt, taking a stroll along the banks of the Nile. Your sandal-covered feet are protected from the hot rocks in the midday sun, but the green grass beyond the riverbanks is cool and refreshing. The river twists and turns as you walk along its edge, and you stop for a moment at the very edge of the river bank. You take off your large-brimmed hat – a requirement for life in the ancient world, and dip it in the river water for a refreshing cool. As you reach down, you notice little sparkling flakes in the sand, glinting as the river water turns suddenly. Excitedly, you gather the sandy mixture in your hat, and start spilling the water out of it, carrying away the fertile soil and sand mixture, and leaving behind the golden flakes. Congratulations – you’ve found natural gold!

Now, you haven’t found much of it, admittedly, but gold is a pretty amazing substance, especially in the ancient world. It is soft – so soft that it can be hammered into exceedingly thin sheets that lose no lustre or color. In nature, it never tarnishes, and it takes extremely potent acids and bases to dissolve it. It is sometimes mixed with other metals in an ore – and often, those other metals are also highly valued – silver, copper and even lead. Because gold can be found naturally, like in the scenario we just imagined, people in the ancient world were very familiar with it – and wanted more of it. After all, in civilizations from the Sumerians to the Aztecs, its purity and eternal shine were emblems of the world of the divine!

By the time of the Kingdom of Israel, gold was pretty well-established as the universal means of transferring money – but it was so valuable that it couldn’t easily be used for small transactions. In fact, one of the words for “pure gold” in Hebrew literally means “locked gold” – as in, if this is being sold, all the other stores must be locked up, because there’s no way to compete. Instead of

using gold for everyday transactions, then, the kingdom of Israel used silver, measured in units of weight known as shekels. A biblical shekel is about a half-ounce (14.1g), and a shekel of silver was usually the equivalent of four Greek Drachma or Roman Denarii, or about four days of work for the average laborer. Every year, every Jewish male adult gave the Temple a half-shekel of silver in dues – and this had to be paid in Jewish coins, no matter who was in control of Judea at the time. It's no surprise that the ancient Hebrew word for silver – *keseḥ* – is the modern Hebrew word for money in general.

The ancients, then, actually had more daily contact with precious metals than we do, not only using them for daily transactions in the marketplaces, but also more familiar with their origin, since land owners would often smelt the metals from their own land. That's one of the reasons why it's one of the common biblical images for forgiveness and atonement, and at the core of what having a change of heart meant.

Earlier, we quoted one of the earliest references to refining in the bible, from Proverbs 17:3 – “The crucible is for silver, the furnace is for gold, but the Lord refines the heart.” Now, if you're looking this up on your own, most translations have “the Lord tests the heart” – but this usage of “test” really does mean “refine” in modern English. You see, silver and gold ore need to be heated to just the right temperature to melt the pure metal away from the dross and slag. Too low, and they won't melt – too high, and the dross will melt, too. So, to make sure that the temperature of the furnace was correct, the ancients needed to test it. They obviously didn't have access to an infrared thermometer, but they did recognize that certain clays and metals melted at certain temperatures, and would test the temp by sacrificing a little of these materials. By making a crucible out of known clay, they could also use its color to test the temperature. For this reason, “testing” silver meant melting the metal out of its ore, and then blowing off the white lead-oxide dross as it cooled.

What does all of this tell us about God's action in refining our soul? As you can tell, it's a lot more involved than it seems at first glance. In his letter to the churches of Asia Minor, Peter offers an initial word of encouragement: “There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little

while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold.” Here, we again see this “test and purify” construction. Remember, this means “refine”. Given that, it seems that Peter is saying that if we face difficulty and danger in this world, our faith can stand it. Not only can our faith stand the test, but as the dross – the sin, the hatred, the dehumanization, the disconnection from each other and God – will be left behind, or perhaps even blown away by the breath of God.

We see this metaphor of metallurgic refinement all through the Hebrew Bible, too. The books of Proverbs, Isaiah, Zechariah and of course, Malachi, have explicit references to refinement of the heart by God. Let’s take a closer look at the Malachi passage. Early Christian writers saw Malachi as the last of the Hebrew prophets, though there are writings from after his time in the Bible. By Malachi’s day, it wasn’t enough to stand in the streets – or even in the temple – and state to the people, “Thus sayeth the Lord.” Many had copied this style, and many were ignored, or dismissed. Malachi’s style is different – he uses almost a Q&A format that grabbed people’s attention:

*“You said, ‘Serving God is useless. What do we gain by keeping his obligation, or by walking around as mourners before the Lord of heavenly forces? So now we consider the arrogant fortunate. Moreover, those doing evil are built up; they test God and escape.”*

In this way, Malachi serves as a mirror to the people, presenting their own arguments, and refuting them one by one. It’s a sophisticated technique, allowing people to provide answers and leading them to draw their own conclusion – “Then those revering the Lord, each and every one, spoke among themselves. The Lord paid attention and listened to them.” You see? In his way, Malachi was revealing to the people the refining that God was already doing among them – and would continue to do:

*“The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming, says the Lord of heavenly forces. Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can withstand his appearance? He is like the refiner’s fire or the fuller’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. He will purify the Levites, and refine them like gold and silver. They will belong to the Lord, presenting a*

*righteous offering.”*

Here, the refining is offered in the future, as a thing to come. But to prepare, Malachi is encouraging people to turn back to God, to cease doing the things that cause harm in the world, everything from adultery to telling falsehoods, to cheating people out of their hard-earned silver, and “brushing aside the foreigner.” As we continue in Lent, as we continue to examine ourselves for the tarnish of sin, this warning carries a real weight with it.

I’d like to give you a practical demonstration of this idea – but since I couldn’t bring a foundry into the sanctuary, I’m going to demonstrate by a less dangerous method. Remember that Malachi refers both to a refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap. Well, let’s use the reference to soap to give a great visual. Here, we have a clear container that represents the human condition – red sin mixed with blue grace leads to a purple life. It’s also purple to remind us of Lent! If we turn away from God, and embrace sin, the liquid turns red. But God’s grace – green, for grace, purifies us to be pure blue. You see, no matter how often we pour the purples together – sharing ideas, trying to escape our sin, we can’t eliminate it. But Jesus, filled with grace, refines our soul – brings out the love and grace that God had intended. And the more that grace is active in us, the more we can share with each other in community!

After all, as Peter reminds us, it is good to continue rejoicing together! Wrapped up in the metaphor of refining the soul is the idea that our faith is, at our core, pure. No matter how much the toxic lead of sin has wrapped around it. After all, we were originally created in the image of God! And even if we have fallen from this perfect state, Peter reminds us that our inheritance in God is kept in heaven, “pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.” This inheritance is ours, not because of what we have done, but because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And so, this golden faith is still within us, preserved no matter what occurs, becoming even more visible as the heat is turned up around us. Peter is not telling us to seek out the testing, the furnace – no, instead, he is reminding us that if we find ourselves in the furnace, we will glow with the heat, and find ourselves showing the faith of God all the more clearly. Even if we tarnish again – and again – and again – God’s grace is enough to purify us again,

and again, and again.

May you always recognize the difference between filth and faith, knowing that God wants you to be whole and at peace. May you be filled with joy even through times of intense heat, knowing that Christ is leading you through. May your soul be refined so that the Spirit of God will blow away your dross, and fill you with pure, golden faith. Amen.