

Worship from the Furnace Psalm 66:10-12

Remember, Psalm 66 is a song about worship, a fact that could be lost on us in a few moments. In the first nine verses, the psalmist invites "all the earth" to praise God. He reflects on God's "awesome . . . deeds;" wonders so mighty that even His enemies "cringe." The specific deeds by which God rescued His covenant people Israel, most notably, the parting of the Red Sea, are featured. The songwriter calls his fellow Hebrews to praise or "bless" God, which is a grateful response to blessings from God. This is a psalm of praise, but any notion that praise is always a natural thing to do now takes a serious jolt:

¹⁰For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.

¹¹You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.

¹²You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.

Everything the psalmist has spoken of in the first nine verses is praiseworthy, but if these are untested, superficial beliefs, these three verses may slap the appetite for worship right out of your mouth. God had recently allowed His covenant people to endure some great oppression, and yet, the psalmist's attitude about praise remains intense. What is praiseworthy about God allowing us to suffer? Do you believe in the final and ultimate goodness of God so thoroughly that you can actually praise Him for your sufferings? Do you realize that this is essentially what the Bible calls us to do?

Not every religious belief is held so tenaciously that a person will go to the mat for it. A famous guru had many disciples who hung on his every word. When news circulated that he lay dying, his closest disciples gathered around his deathbed. A second group gathered in adjacent rooms throughout the house and on his porch to hear the words repeated to them. The masses crowded around his house and down a long road. They too were waiting to hear the guru's dying words passed through the crowd.

The guru whispered, "Life is like a river." The closest disciples nodded and repeated the message to the next group of disciples who in turn passed the message to the others. "Life is like a river" was repeated until one man at the end of the road frowned and said, "I don't get it." So, this question passed back through the chain of disciples until it came back to the dying guru. "Life is like a river? Teacher, we don't understand." The guru struggled to lift his head and replied, "OK. So maybe life isn't like a river."

Now, there's a conviction! But, how tenaciously do you cling to the themes about God that call for worship? Today's text puts our capacity for praise to the test. "Praise God for this! Praise God for that!" we can mindlessly babble. But sometimes, when we find ourselves in the furnace of real-life trials, "this and that" cease to seem very praiseworthy, if even memorable. Our song screeches to a halt.

Today, our consideration of worship cannot be about the proper length for a sermon or about tradition *versus* innovation. Our study of worship today has to be about whether or not we really believe that God knows what He's doing. These verses are not about worship in a setting where technicians control sound, lighting, temperature and ambience. They are about gut-level worship from a furnace of testing. When trials are hardest, the determination to praise God is most critical even though we don't seem to be wired that way. Worship from the furnace is one of the most important lessons we will ever learn.

I. The Reality of a Refining Process (10)

¹⁰For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver . . .

A. The Refiner's Fire

The image is not complicated. As an ancient silversmith threw raw ore into a smelting furnace to separate the impurities from the silver, so the psalmist recognizes that God casts His people into a smelting-pot of suffering and discipline so that they might emerge purified and proven in their faith. The Bible never hides this fact. In fact, the Bible often speaks as if it is God Himself Who subjects us to certain hardships. That's not an aspect of the Gospel that sells very well in our current culture of comfort and self-indulgence, but God gives His children a way of making sense of it all:

⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. – Hebrews 12:7-9

Humorist Jonathan Katz speaks of the difficulties he has with discipline:

“My daughter has me totally wrapped around her little finger. I don't even try to win anymore. I just try and save face. I say things to her like, ‘Go to your room at your earliest convenience, L.K. Daddy's going to count to fifteen hundred.’”

Imperfect though we are as human parents, our efforts to discipline with love and wisdom are essential, for discipline shapes character. God is a perfect parent. His discipline is always perfect. The childish believer rants and raves in his trials. He questions God's fairness and even His goodness. But, as he matures, he accepts God's discipline. Eventually, he may even learn to embrace it.

B. Through Our Trials, God Teaches Us Obedience

This word “refined” is rendered “tested” in Psalm 119:140 where it is applied to God's promises: “Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.” Psalm 12:6 adds: “And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.” The purest thing in this world is God's Word. It only follows that if we are to be pure, we must be brought into conformity with that Word. God disciplines us so that we will live according to the only standard for living that will never let us down, and that is His Word.

If you believe God created you, then, you can accept that His laws for your life are best for you. We make short-sighted choices that blow-up in our faces only to learn that obedience would have proved more pleasant. When tempted, Jesus reminded the devil: “Man does not live on bread alone, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). We should learn that response when tempted, because temptation always involves some enticement to distrust God's Word.

C. This Doctrine of Divine Refinement Is Woefully Neglected

"Divine refinement" is seldom preached or sung about. It's a grim topic at first glance. Compounding all this is the fact that we live in a superficial age. Medications mask physical pain - even valuable pain that can alert us to more serious problems. Countless amusements compete with the fulfillment of basic responsibilities. Charming distractions divert our minds away from resolving serious spiritual struggles. We are accustomed to instant gratification. This notion of a tedious and lengthy period of refinement for our faith doesn't play well in an age of shallow spirituality.

In spite of what some evangelists suggest, no one is exempt from real life problems. Avoiding reality cannot last. Eventually, toughs issue must be faced. Even Forrest Gump understood: "No matter how hard you try to run from your troubles, you will eventually hit an ocean and have to turn around." Rather than denial, isn't it better to know that Someone is working for your good through all of this?

As hard as it may be to accept, if God is our Father, He must discipline us. That discipline may be necessary in order to break our pride or to temper our wills. Discipline teaches us patience. It teaches us to minister with compassion and empathy to others who hurt. Not all discipline from God is punishment, but some of it absolutely is. Breaking God's laws has consequences - sometimes painful ones. When we think and pray about it, we will consider the pain that is linked to rebellion against God and, in view of where He's taking us, we will even trace that pain back to His perfect love for us.

II. The Reason for a Refining Process (11, 12a)

¹¹You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.

¹²You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water,

A. Israel Had Endured a History of Suffering

Every aspect of the oppression described reflects what the Hebrews endured in Egypt in the days of Moses. But, they also reflect countless other episodes of oppression through the years at the hands of other foreign powers. When Israel was led by judges, Midianites, Ammonites, Moabites, Amalekites and Philistines all oppressed the Israelites. We cannot say precisely what historical hardship lies behind this psalm. Whoever the tormenters were, the great Refiner was shaping His people through all of it.

"You brought us into prison" is translated "Thou didst bring us into the net" in the *New American Standard* version. The Hebrew words for "net" and "mountain fortress" are similar. The intended idea is not affected. Whether the Hebrews were figuratively swept into a net like fish or birds or literally imprisoned in a mountain fortress, their freedom was lost. They existed at the whim of their oppressors. God "laid burdens" on His people. Every nation that oppressed Israel tried to impress them into labor.

"You let men ride over our heads" can be interpreted with three pictures. It could figuratively portray an enemy riding God's people like beasts of burden. It could metaphorically refer to Israel as totally beaten-down. It could be a literal description. Certain Assyrian artwork depicted conquerors riding chariots over masses of slaughtered humanity. "... we went through fire and water" probably just refers to the variety of indignities that were suffered. Many times, Israel was almost utterly destroyed, at least as an observer of world events could tell. On the other hand, Israel was never close to being destroyed, because a faithful God was always at hand, fashioning His people toward righteousness.

B. An Untested Faith Is Arguably Not Faith at All

The rescue of the earlier Hebrews from Egypt did not spell the end to their travails. They brought more upon themselves. They fussed about needing water. God sent water. They fussed about needing food. God sent manna from heaven. Then, they even complained about that miraculous provision:

... ⁵We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost - also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.

⁶But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" - Numbers 11:5, 6

"Slavery ain't so bad so long as the food's tasty." The Hebrews still had an appetite for some of life in Egypt. In the same way, just because Jesus rescues a person from sin's shackles doesn't mean his appetite for sin immediately vanishes. Claims and boasts about faith do not prove faith. Obedience proves faith. Disobedience only disproves faith. It can take time to develop an appetite for obedience.

Hebrews 11 demonstrates that real faith obeys. By faith, Abraham followed God to a new land. He didn't say, "God, I have neither the courage nor the inclination to move, but I assure you that I have faith." By faith, Noah built a massive ark at the Lord's command. He didn't say, "This flood thing seems a little extreme, Lord. I'm going to pass, but don't take that to mean I don't believe in You." Faith does what it is told. But, take heart believer. Even Abraham and Noah had their bouts with rebellion and distrust and they also spent time in the Refiner's furnace being molded for obedience.

I wonder what some people even mean when they speak of faith. They live in open rebellion because some detail of God's law is bothersome. Then, they insist that they have faith. It takes no faith to refashion God into some indulgent deity who winks at our sins. That's not faith. That's idolatry. Faith obeys. We understand this and we desire to obey, but often, we don't know our own hearts well enough to distinguish our actual faith from that hypothetical faith we imagine we would show whenever strict obedience is costly and terrifying. That is why it is essential that an all-knowing Refiner takes a role in perfecting our faith.

C. Why Is God Praiseworthy in this Role of Refiner?

God fulfills many roles in our lives that naturally invite our praise and adoration. He is Creator, Father, Savior, Provider, Protector - our Mighty Fortress. No one has to twist my arm to sing about those things - but, Refiner? We are supposed to thank God when He sends us through "water and fire"? We are to praise Him when He refuses to shelter us from hardship? If you don't mind my saying so, that's a little hard to swallow. How can He expect us to gratefully praise Him in His role as Refiner? May I suggest that the refining of our faith is some of the most remarkable and skillful work that He does?

When I talk about some ancient throwing raw ore into a smelting pot, I'm not talking about some do-it-yourselfer with a *Home Depot* furnace whose full-time job was accounting. The silversmith was a skilled craftsman. He knew what he was doing. If he stoked the fire too hot, a significant amount of silver would flow away with the impurities and the dross. If he stoked the fire too little, he might not really complete the refining process at all, and the finished product would be less than brilliant.

Only someone with a mastery of the process could be trusted to do the job right. Only an expert could produce the most and the best product from the raw material. This is why we praise God even in His role as a Refiner. He alone has the mastery of the process to make the most and the best of us.

If we do not learn to worship God in His role of Refiner, we will tend to worship in times of plenty and forget to do so in times of testing. We may even question God's goodness. It is a bit of a paradox, but the most mature believer in God is the one who most embraces the persona of an innocent child:

David, a second-grader, was bumped while getting on the school bus and suffered a two-inch cut on his cheek. At recess he collided with another boy and lost two teeth. At noon, while sliding on ice, he fell and broke his wrist. Later at the hospital, his father noticed David was clutching a quarter in his good hand. David said, "I found it on the ground when I fell. This is the first quarter I ever found. This sure is my lucky day." - Charles Kreig

Sound far-fetched? A mature faith brings us to a point where we would never entertain the notion that any trial should ever rob God of one ounce of praise. A man named Habakkuk prophesied in the days before Jerusalem fell to Babylon. He knew the horrors that were coming, but no matter how desolate the enemy would leave his beloved homeland, Habakkuk would insist on the truth that God would remain God, merciful to the faithful, and worthy of praise. In an expression of trust both inspiring and convicting, the prophet sings:

¹⁷Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
 though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
 though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
 I will be joyful in God my Savior. – Habakkuk 3:17, 18

III. The Result of a Refining Process (12b)

... but you brought us to a place of abundance.

In identifying himself with the ancient Hebrews and their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the psalmist is clearly speaking of Canaan. After four centuries of slavery and forty more years of discipline in the wilderness brought on by their own sin, the Hebrews entered the Promised Land - a land flowing with milk and honey. For the psalmist in his immediate circumstance, this "place of abundance" was the restoration of the nation to covenant fellowship with *JEHOVAH*.

For Christians, this "place of abundance" is at one sense already possessed, while in another sense, we occupy it progressively and on different levels. In one sense, we already possess our "Promised Land" based on the assurance that God's promise brings. Heaven is ours because God has spoken. We are already "seated in heavenly realms." For the full fruition of that promise, we wait. Sometimes, we live in a realm of conspicuous blessing. Sometimes, we venture through seasons of trial. In both scenarios, we are always making progress toward a heavenly city, and the Great Master Refiner is always faithfully at work, taking us there.

We are not what we will be or what we must be in order to live in God's fullest presence, but God will complete that work in us. In the meantime, welcome your trials just as you welcome the good times, for the likeness of Christ in us gets closer with every event in which God works for our good.

*The refiner's fire has now become my sole desire.
Purged and cleansed and purified that the Lord be glorified.
He is consuming my soul, refining me, making me whole.
No matter what I may lose, I choose the refiner's fire.*

- John Mohr & Randall Dennis