

Call to Obedience #307  
PO Box 299 Kokomo, IN 46903 USA  
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## **The Furnace of Affliction**

By Reimar Schultze

“Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction.”—Isaiah 48:9-10

There is a furnace of affliction for everyone; I mean everyone. No one will be exempt from it: neither the rich nor the poor, neither the wise nor the unwise, neither the learned nor the unlearned. Job, who knew about afflictions, said, “Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward” (5:7). But affliction must be divided into four categories: there are afflictions we bring upon ourselves; there are furnaces designed to draw sinners to God; there are those for backsliders; and there are some ordained to refine the saints.

The first category of affliction is that which we create ourselves, through our choices of the flesh, through neglect of others, by not obeying God or seeking His counsel. If you consume unhealthy food and drink, you are likely to get cancer, heart disease, diabetes, etc. If we add a lack of exercise, our afflictions may be increased. If we spend more money than we take in, we have trouble. If we don't check the oil on our automobile or if we don't pay our taxes we create our own furnace of affliction. If we are prayer-less and don't put on the armor of God daily, we invite a multitude of trials. These consequences will have a ripple effect and will not end until we leave this world. People who do not live wisely have a hard life: they are discouraged, depressed and stressed and may only be able to keep going with the help of the pharmacy. Paul said that what we sow, we shall also reap (Gal. 6:7). Oh, how many people go through life suffering physically, mentally, socially, financially and spiritually because they have created for themselves all kinds of furnaces of affliction?

Secondly, God uses furnaces of affliction to bring sinners to Himself. The first call all sinners receive is through the Father's outstretched arm of mercy, as shown in His creation. In Romans, Paul systematically deals with the major issues concerning God's grand plan of salvation. In the very first issue that Paul addresses, he answers the question; Can the lost come to knowledge of God without knowing Jesus? And Paul's answer is that the invisible things of God -- his essence, his nature, character and personality -- can be clearly seen from His creation, so that man is without excuse (1:20). In other words, the visible things of His creation reveal something of the nature of the invisible God: His goodness, extravagance, power, and interest in our lives. God expects the unbeliever whether in a large modern city or in some remote jungle, by looking upon nature, to marvel and to glorify Him. If the sinner does not respond, God may choose (especially if the sinner has been prayed for) to put him into a furnace of affliction, getting him into a place where he has no choice but to cry out for God's mercy.

Thirdly, there is a furnace of affliction for the backslider. Again, what is God's desire for the backslider? It is the same as for the sinner: that he not perish. “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Pet. 3:9). Jesus paid the ultimate price for everyone to be saved. He invested in the salvation of every one and now he wants a return on the investment that he made on the cross.

And who is the backslider? The backslider is everyone who does not return Jesus' investment, who does not have Jesus as his first love. “Nevertheless, I have somewhat against

thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Rev. 2:4-5). Everyone who has left Jesus' first love is lukewarm, and therefore is lost (Rev. 3:16). A backslider is one whose heart is hardened and often the only way such a person's heart can be broken is for God to put him into a furnace of affliction.

That is the history of Israel, isn't it? God called his people, "stiff-necked:" "And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people" (Ex. 32:9, also Ex. 33:5 and Deut. 9:13). There are times God was so angry with them that he wanted to destroy them, but mercy triumphed over judgement. But what would that mercy do? It would not let the backslider, the stiff-necked, go on in his wickedness. No, his mercy was to delay judgement and to put them into the fiery furnace, to see if perhaps the transgressors would repent. God had several nations attack Israel in judgment, in order to break their stubbornness. If this did not work, through these nations he destroyed the Jewish cities and razed their temple and made them slaves. Then, out of that furnace of affliction, God received a remnant who would carry on the faith. This is best described by God's words in Zechariah: "And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God" (Zech. 13:9). God takes no pleasure in putting anyone into a furnace of affliction. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Eze. 33:11). Every wicked man who dies is a loss to God, and God will go to the most extreme end to save us all, but he will not save us against our will.

Unfortunately, often when God puts backsliders into the fire of affliction, well-meaning, sympathizing Christians pull them back out. Others pour water on the fire to ease or quench it. When the true saints of God pray hardened hearts into the fire to save them, you need to leave them alone. Any time you prevent someone from getting the full effect of the refining fire, you contribute to his damnation. Hardened sinners must come to the end of their rope, with all the crutches and support systems removed. They must come face to face with a holy God. The story of the prodigal son shows us that the father let his son experience the full effect of the fiery furnace. Had he intervened, his son's salvation would have either been delayed or prevented altogether. Get out of the way when men are in God's ordained furnaces until God's work is done. Giving backsliders sympathy in their afflictions often does nothing but help foster rebellion and procrastination. It also can make the "deliverer" proud, claiming to be the only Christian who really cares about the needy. This does not mean that we should close our bowels of compassion; rather it means that our compassion for the needy shouldn't work against but always in harmony with God's purposes.

Fourthly, there is a furnace of affliction for the righteous. The ultimate purpose of the affliction of the righteous is to promote the glory of God. When Lazarus died, "... his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby" (John 11:3-4; see also John 9:1-3 and 21:18-19). You may shine brightly for Jesus, but if you do not progress in that brightness, God may well put you into a furnace to remove unknown dross and impurities that you may shine even brighter. Or you may have stopped growing spiritually altogether. There is a physical law that if a plant stops growing, it dies. So it is in the kingdom: when a soul stops growing in grace, it starts to die. Sometimes God may prepare a furnace of affliction for us to exhibit the power and faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ to others. "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (II

Cor. 4:8-10). How do we know his power and faithfulness except through trials, afflictions, tribulations, persecutions or sickness? It is only through these that God's power and faithfulness are manifested to the brotherhood and the world. God has to put us into a battle, into a fight of faith to make us more than conquerors. So many Christians want a victorious Christian life, but they want it without a battle, without getting into the fight. James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2). Luther puts it this way, "watch eagerly for joy when you get into all kinds of battles." Why? Because that is the entrance into the victorious Christian life: battles, afflictions, trials, furnaces of affliction, those are doors to more of Jesus and less of us. For the world to behold both the suffering and victorious "Christ in us, the hope of glory."

There are times when God may put us into the fire to deliver us from pride. The Apostle Paul was kept continually in a furnace: "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (II Cor. 12:7-9). Again, here, the purpose is all of him and none of us. It was this "thorn" that kept Paul in the lowlands of humility, without which the church would not have been blessed throughout the ages. When a log gets hot enough in the fire, it begins to sing. Oh, we all sing, but I speak of the song that is born and sustained in the fire. There is no greater song than that.

Finally, getting back to our text, "Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction (Vs. 10). Notice these pivotal phrases: "I have refined thee"; "I have chosen thee." Saint of God, when God puts you into His furnace, He will control the temperature and He will control the duration of the fire. He will not leave you: "... be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5). God will keep His eye on that furnace all the time, just as He did for Job and his afflictions.

I can think of no better ending for this little letter to you than this: "And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness" (Mal. 3:3). The furnace of affliction is for the glory of God, that we may become offerings of righteousness unto Him.

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