

## **FGBC: Advent: Refining Love**

Malachi 3:1-6

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The first time I was in Barkerville I was about 10. To be honest I was a little young to appreciate the history. But the slapstick theater was alright. And in McMahon's Confectionary I bought a baseball sized Jaw Breaker which was good. Having your tongue bleed for a month is living for a 10-year-old. And then there was lunch at the Goldfield Bakery and then, of course, then there was the gold.

Being the thrill-seeking prepubescent I was, I knew I had to try my luck at the pan. So I slapped down \$10 and walked over to the trough with my very commercial looking gold pan already prefilled with dirt.

And then the work began. By adding a little water and skillfully shaking the pan from left to right I was able to dislodge a few of the larger rocks and gravel. But as they fell away so did my dreams of finding a fist sized nugget. Eventually all that was left was a bit of sand in the bottom of the pan. I was devastated. There was nothing there.

And just seconds before I was going to throw down my pan in despair the giftshop owner started congratulating me. Look there it is! This one's got gold!

And sure enough, amidst the alluvial deposits there were three little flecks of yellowish mineral I had assumed were sand. The value of my find was somewhere between 20 cents and a quarter. But I had done it!

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So it turns out gold looks a little different than you might think. On one hand, not all that glistens is gold, and on the other what looks like sand and rocks to one person could be the find of a lifetime. And that's because, before it gets washed and refined, gold looks a lot like a dirty rock. But to the one who knows what to look for 'there could be gold in them there hills.'

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So we are in our second week of Advent today and looking at God's love for us. And God's love is powerful and redemptive. And He reaches out with His love to undeserving sinners and draws us to Himself. But people often think that means God's love is soft and cuddly. But that's not the picture the Bible gives us. In scriptures God's love is a refining love. He is committed to burning out our dross. He will have us being conformed to Christ's image or He won't have us at all.

And it is love that drives God to act this way. God loves us and seeks what He knows is our best. He wants your joy and His glory. So if you aren't living in joy, and you aren't bringing God glory, then His love has more for you this Advent.

And I want to dig this out for you today from Malachi chapter 3. Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament, so just before Matthew. We are going to start today in verse 1.<sup>1</sup>

[Read Malachi 3:1]

Now this is about as much of a Christmas text as you can find in the Bible. The messenger is John the Baptist – he’s Jesus’ cousin – and his message was ‘Here comes God’s promised Messiah.’

And the Jews were stoked. They wanted God’s salvation. But they had no idea how small their vision for this was. They wanted a king to deal with the Roman problem, but God was going to give Himself to deal with their sin and death problem.

And it’s because their ideas were so incongruent with God’s that things turn ominous here in verse 2. Malachi says:

[Read Malachi 3:2-6]

Now here is the point I want to bring out: In whatever mess you find yourself living in, God is at work. God is at work in your mess. He knows your vision for what He is up to is too small, but that’s irrelevant to Him. God is at work in your mess.

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So when Malachi writes this it is around 400BC. And this is a unique time in Israelite history. Israel has just been released from the Babylonian captivity. Jerusalem had been rebuilt. The temple was back. And people were starting to settle into normal life.

But here’s a crazy thing about being one of God’s people – tell me if this rings true for you – when times are good God’s people grow complacent.

Isn’t that your experience? When things go bad don’t you cry for help? Don’t you pray more? Don’t you read your Bible? But when everything is just cooking along isn’t it easy to grow complacent?

If that’s true for you then you are like every other God-follower in the history of humanity. And so most of scripture speaks about this paradox: We keep praying for blessings, and God keeps giving them out, and then He has to turn around and wake us up from the stupor we drift into as a result.

And that’s what God is speaking against through the prophet Malachi. His people have grown lukewarm in comfort.

And God sees this, and He loves His people so He won’t leave them there. Friends, relaxed complacency isn’t the good life, it’s carbon monoxide poisoning. It’s warm and sleepy, and then you’re dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Matt Chandler <https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/the-refining-love-of-god> (Accessed December 6, 2018)

And the God of love doesn't want this for His children, and so He seeks to wake them up. Now how does He do this?

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J.I. Packer, a professor at Regent writes:

"[God] seeks the fellowship of His people and will send them as gifts both joy and sorrow to detach their hands from the things of this world."<sup>2</sup>

Packer's point is that God loves us and so works to draw our sin stumbling selves towards Himself for our joy. And to accomplish this He sends pleasure and pain to loosen the grip the world has on our affections.

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Now let's have a moment of honesty here. Do you need this? Where do your affections lie? What do you love? Like I love some of the stuff in the world. I don't love it all – thank God. But there is lots that catches my eye and tugs at my heart. And the stuff I like, I like a lot. And it tempts me to worship it.

Now here's what I mean by worship: nobody's got a statue of Baal in their house these days. But each of us are tempted to drink from fountains that aren't God. So when you are tired or beat down or restless, or sad or lonely what's your go to? Where do you look to be revived? I just need some "me time." I just need a cold beer and some uninterrupted TV. I need a bowl of ice cream and some peperoni. And then I need to hit the gym.

You see the things we make gods in our lives often aren't bad things. They are just things we go to for life. And when we do this we find ourselves worshipping the created instead of the Creator. He wants us to come to Him, but we go to Dollar store trinkets and cotton candy instead. And because He loves us this ticks Him off.

You see God knows two bowls of ice cream, a bag of chips and 4 hours in front of Netflix isn't going to refresh you. And He wants your joy. He wants what is best for you. And He knows that only He can satisfy.

And so He comes to us like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. Sometimes this means joy and blessings, like Packer says, and other times He walks us straight into the desert. This is God's love for us.

Now the furnace and the desert might not feel like love, but they are. God knows that we need to realize that we aren't in control of our lives – He is. We aren't powerful – He is. We aren't God – He is. And He knows it is only when we are freed from our delusions that we will find joy.

This is why Jesus' little brother James opens his letter to the church in Jerusalem saying:

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from: <https://www.kevinhalloran.net/the-best-j-i-packer-quotes/> (Accessed December 7, 2018)

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. (James 1:2)

Hold on, what!? I get the dear brothers and sisters part, but the rest just derails. Consider it an opportunity for great joy when what happens? Trouble of any kind. Now a lot of different kinds of trouble are included in that category.

So if you lose your job, that's probably an any kind of trouble. And if you get sick, that would probably qualify. And if you find yourself working for someone who hates Christians and gives you a hard time that would work too. Really there's nothing that won't fit. James says if anything bad happens consider it an opportunity for great joy.

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Why? Well James goes on.

For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow (James 1:3-4a)

Now here's the thing about our faith getting tested – and I think this is great – How many of you would agree God has a pretty good idea how strong your faith is? He knows where you stand right? So He's not up there putting some plan into action and then leaning forward and biting His nails while He mutters "Oh boy, this is going to be close. I sure hope he makes it."

No. That's not what happens. God knows where your faith is at, so when He is testing you He isn't doing it for Him, He's doing it for us. He's helping us wake up and deepen our roots so that we can stand up boldly for our joy and His glory.

And this is why we consider it an opportunity for great joy when trials of any kind come. It's because we are aware that God is at work in the mess. We haven't been abandoned. We aren't being punished. The devil isn't coming to get us. God is at work. This is what Jesus following is about.

I mean reality isn't that when you become a Christian the ice cream truck rolls up and you get nothing but lollipops and licorice as you live out the rest of your days in ease. That's not reality. That's not what happens.

But if you sign up for that then when stuff hits the fan that isn't sprinkles you start to doubt "Am I saved? Has God abandoned me? Am I being punished?" The reality is that there is still dross to be burnt off and impurities to be washed away. God is chiseling the rock away to reveal the statue. And this hurts, but it's good.

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Now when we find ourselves in a desert, we can end up thinking about these experiences in one of three ways that aren't healthy.

The first is to over-spiritualize the whole thing. "The Devil's out to get me." Now I believe we have an enemy who prowls around seeking to devour. Jesus talks a lot about the demonic. So I'm not mocking, but it is important to keep this in perspective.

And that's because throughout scripture we see the demonic described like a Pitbull on a leash. Satan's tough, but he's a tool. So when Jesus battles him after 40 days of fasting – when He's at His weakest – it isn't a close call. Jesus owns Satan. So we don't believe in a dualistic universe with equal yin and yang to it. Satan isn't Jesus' arch nemesis. He's His dog and he's been trained.

So think about the interaction Jesus has with Peter. Jesus tells him:

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift... you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to Me again, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22:31-32)

This verse always cracks me up because Peter's response is “Don't worry about me Jesus, I've got this. Nothing's going to take me down.” I think my response would be “Hey, could you call Satan back and just say no?” I mean, thanks for the prayers, but how about saying no instead? But Jesus is going to use him.

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Or then there is Paul. A huge man of faith, and yet he writes:

So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. (2 Corinthians 12:7)

This is the gift God gives Paul – a thorn in the flesh. Aren't you hoping to get one of those for Christmas? But Paul's content with this. This gift keeps him humble and dependant. And Paul wants this more than he wants ease.

Now he asked God three times to take it away. But when God responded “What you really want is My power at work in your life, right? And My power shows up when you are weak.” Paul agreed.

So here's the point, when bad stuff happens, even if the devil is involved, he isn't out to get you. Well he is out to get you, but it doesn't really matter what he's out to do because Jesus has him on a chain. And He's using him for your joy.

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The second mistake we can fall into when we find ourselves in a place of fiery refining, or dusty desert, is that we think God has abandoned us.

So usually when hard moments come, God feels far away. “I'm sick. I'm hurting. I'm dying here. Where are you God?!” Have you ever prayed that prayer?

But scripture makes it clear God is never far from the desert. God actually lives in the desert and meets us there. Hosea gives us the classic example of this. God says:

“But then I will win [Israel] back once again.  
 I will lead her into the desert  
 and speak tenderly to her there....  
 When that day comes,” says the LORD,  
 “you will call Me ‘my husband’  
 instead of ‘my master.’ (Hosea 2:14-16)

God’s going to win Israel back in the desert! That’s why she is out there baking in the sun. She’s not abandoned. That is where she is going to cry out for rescue. And that is what is best for her and for us. There is no abandonment in the desert.

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The third mistake we sometimes make when we encounter the desert is we think we are being punished. We feel like God is punishing us.

But raise your hand if this is true: How many of you are aware of something in your life right now that is worthy of God’s punishment? Like you deserve it. Are there any sinners in the room today?

This is the human condition. Paul says there is no one righteous, not even one. So all our hands should be up. And we know this. And so when bad times come it is easy to start thinking “Well, grace has finally worn out and God is coming to get me.” But that’s not how it works.

The Bible tells us that the Lord disciplines those He loves, but His discipline is there to woo us to Himself, not to beat us down. And that’s the point of the Malachi passage. Look down at verse 6 if you still have that open.

[Read Malachi 3:6]

God’s people have always deserved destruction, but God hasn’t changed His mind about you. This is good news. So if you are saved today you know God saved you when you were broken right? Like you didn’t start cleaning yourself up and then God said “Okay, I can see a bit of gold under all that dirt. I’ll take it from here.” No, the Bible says you were dead in you sin. That’s as far gone as it gets.

And so He resurrected you because He loves you. He showered you with grace you didn’t deserve because He loves you. And God hasn’t changed His mind.

That means what started by grace isn’t going to turn to works now. No, He’s been wiping the mud and dirt off you the whole time. He’s in the refining business. And He’s here because He wants your joy and His glory.

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So it’s a no brainer that kids hate punishment. The other day I was having the “this hurts me more than it hurts you talk” with Jaxon – ever had that talk? And he looked me straight in the eye and said: “When you punish me I feel like you don’t love me.” And I laughed – which probably sounded sinister but really was anything but.

You see he couldn't have been more wrong. Every Jesus loving parent will tell you that boundaries and consequences are set because we want the best for these little sinners.

And this is the same with God with one exception. There is nothing in scripture that says God punishes us now. There is punishment reserved for some in the future, but if you are in Christ then Jesus has taken yours already. There is none left. Now God disciplines those He loves, but this is different. Punishment is payback for wrong action, discipline is training us up to be godly. So look again at verses 3 and 4.

[Read Malachi 3:3-4]

God is in the business of refining His people. And His goal is to end up with people who will bring acceptable offerings in righteousness.

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Now often when Malachi 3 gets preached the goal is to get people to give more money because the budget is tight. But God's budget isn't tight. He's not hurting for cash and doesn't need yours, but He knows that our giving is intimately tied to our identity.

This means someone who gives their money to God is someone who says everything I am belongs to You. I'm your woman, I'm your man. And God knows that people like this are finding the joy He designed them to live in. And He wants this.

But the people Malachi was talking to were struggling. Ironically, they were struggling with good times. Things were comfortable. And so they were growing complacent. They were offering sacrifices to God that were sick and pathetic because while they were trying to worship God they were also trying to worship other stuff. And God knows this is impossible. And He hates watching creatures He loves so much give ourselves to pathetic gods. So He shows up like a fire to burn out that dross.

Friends, our God is a God of love. He loves you so much that He won't leave you where you are. That was true for Israel, and it's true for us. So if you find yourself in the desert this Advent or Christmas consider it great joy because He's working to lead you away from other pathetic gods. He wants to be your God. He wants to be your source of life and joy. And He wants this because He knows that only He is big enough to handle all your problems and lead you into the kind of life He designed you to live.