

Devotion 42:

Our Father Refines and Purifies

Malachi 1--4

I recall in my childhood years that Saturday nights were painful times. Oh, there were good television shows that we got to watch and I recall eating homemade ice cream. But before those treats were enjoyed, something had to be endured—the Saturday night bath. And it wasn't pleasant.

My mother instituted a ritual of washing our hair in the kitchen sink. Between the shampoo oozing into and stinging our eyes and my mother's sharp nails digging into my scalp, there was the tug of war going on between my mother's hand and the nape of my neck trying to fight back. Mix in some groans and frequent "Ouch!" and you pretty much have the picture. It seemed like days before I could feel the warm towel wipe away soap from my eyes and ears. My head still looked and felt red from the steel-wool-like treatment the next morning when we arrived at church.

And looking back, I guess that is why we, and our poor mother, endured the ordeal. We were getting ready to go to God's house. That is the message of Malachi. Our Father is coming to refine and to purify us:

"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver." 3:2-3a

This cleaning will be rough. Have you seen photos or old movies or visited museums where the old washboards are shown? They are hard, bumpy wood. Prior to that rocks were used. And the bars of soap resembled rectangular chunks of sandpaper. The directions for cleaning were easy: apply rock to garments and scrub vigorously! After that process, then roll the clothes through the ringer! Of course, purifying silver and gold wasn't any better: just turn up the heat and burn off the dross!

Now those who desire the Lord's coming must know that clean hands and a pure heart are required. *"Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol."* (Ps. 24:3-4) To say that Israel was dirty was an understatement. Sabbaths were ignored, mixed marriages were entered, and defective sacrifices were being offered. To say that we are dirty by nature is an understatement too.

Unfortunately, some people today think that if they just give themselves a good, Saturday night bath, they will be good to go. Clean up our act and God will accept us. We'll be safe and home free. There is only one problem: we can't clean ourselves sufficiently.

Isn't it interesting, though, that those who come into the Church today enter via the bath of baptism? And the refining and purifying soap is God's Word:

"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."
John 15:3

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."
Hebrews 10:19-22

"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior." Titus 3:5-6

And sometimes it is difficult to believe we are really clean in our Father's sight. *"But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."* (Col. 1:22) Despite our feelings, we can be assured that we are indeed clean. Our Father doesn't refine or purify anyone halfway.

In fact, our entire lives of sanctification might be likened to one, long, gradual polishing. This is why we shouldn't be surprised if we encounter the furnace of affliction (Is. 48:10) from time to time. My mother was always pleased with the outcome after those Saturday night scrubbing. I suspect our Father is too.