

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Sermon Title: God Is Like A Refiner's Fire

Pastor John Kim

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**Scripture:** Malachi 3:1-4; Romans 5:3-4

<sup>1</sup> "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup> and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

<sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope.

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### Transcript:

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Well, good morning BelPres, it's so good to worship with you all. Now, I'm not sure if you know this, but our online community is continuing to grow. We have people streaming from all over the country and even overseas, that is just so awesome. Well, my name is John Kim and I'm the global Outreach Associate Director. I get to work in global mission and with many of our global partners around the world. So blessed to be with you all. Father, in this online space we are one Church, the body of Christ. Coming to you with humble hearts, worshiping the God Most High, the God who sees us, the Lord Almighty, and may your name be praised both in heaven and on earth in Jesus' name, amen.

Now, have you ever heard of the term bark on barbecue before? Well, for those of you who know me, I've been on a deep spiritual journey of learning how to make the best Texas-style smoked barbecue. And I've been smoking barbecue for about 15 years. Now, I started off with a small Dome Charcoal Grill, and then I worked my way to electric smokers and now I use a wood pellet smoker. Now bark is the incredibly tasty crust that forms on smoked meats. It looks like the bark of a tree, hence the name. Now many people think that when they see bark on smoked meats, that the meat is actually burnt, but that is so far from the truth. That dark outer layer on the smoked meats is the most flavorful bite. I'm just slobbering, just talking about it. Now to form that perfect bark on your smoked meats it takes skill because anyone who's tried to smoke barbecue, it takes a lot of practice. And as you can see, this body is a result of eating a lot of that practice.

When I smoke barbecue, it takes about 24 hours and I prep the smoker, I prep the meats, I trim the meats, I apply the rubs and once the meats are on the smoker, I spritz the meats with my special Texas-style juice every hour until the meats are smoked to a perfection. Now the key to a perfect bark is the fire and smoke. You have to go low and slow. Low means the fire has to burn at low temperatures. If you have too much fire then the meats do not come out tender and juicy. Now slow means slowing down the cooking process. A 20 pound brisket can take up to 20 hours to cook on a smoker, but in the end it's all worth it. And that leads me to this morning's theme. God is like refiner's fire.

Refiner's fire is the process when gold or silver is placed in a crucible, which is a ceramic or metal cup and heated to high extreme temperatures. Now that process helps remove all the impurities to produce pure gold. And it's the same with smoking meats, that fire and smoke helps create barbecue that is just as valuable to me as gold. Now I know it's been a tough year for all of us. I've listened to many of you share your stories. Many of you lost your career path. Not sure how to pay the bills. See your loved ones pass away. Seeing children struggle in school. And many of you are lonely and longing for relationships. And many of us have struggled with depression and anxiety and feel there's just no hope. And if you're in need of some of that hope today, I can't wait to share some good news.

The past few weeks we've been studying the names of God and how his name alone, we can trust and find courage in Him. And know that He's mightier than any of our problems. And God sees us, and we're not alone and he will be with us always. Now, the Bible also describes God as a refiner's fire that brings healing and restoration, and that makes us better where we are changed and molded and become more and more like Jesus, God refines us like gold and silver, but that's not an easy process. You have to be melted down and have all the impurities cleared away. It's in the fire and through the fire that we are made into who He is creating us to be. Now let's look at the text for today, in Malachi 3:2 it says, "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 launderers soap."

Now let me give you a little background to the story. Malachi, which is the last book in the minor prophets. He was a prophet that served God about 100 years after the Israelites returned from their Babylonian exile. His message was directed to the people who had been

living in Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt sometime earlier, and you can see that in Ezra and Nehemiah, and things were not going well. For the Israelites, they had hoped that after coming back from exile and rebuilding their lives in the temple, that the Messiah would come and set up God's Kingdom with Israel as its center over the nations and bring justice and peace for all. But that's not what happened.

The Israelites did not remain faithful to God. They lived corrupt lives, worshiped other gods and this book is designed as a series of arguments between God and his people. There are six of them in fact, most of the arguments begin with God making an accusation or a claim, and then Israel would disagree or question God. Then God would answer back and give his final statement. God brings up issues like not bringing your best when you worship Him, not being faithful in marriage and forgetting the law of Moses, being selfish with your money and not tithing to God, having idols and adopting other religions, sexual immorality, and injustice.

When we get to Malachi 3, the Israelites accuse God saying, "Where is the God of justice?" They see injustice and corruption everywhere. And God seems to be doing nothing about it. Here God says that He will send a messenger. And we know that messenger is foretold to be John the Baptist, who will prepare the people for God's personal return in that day of the Lord. He will come like fire to purify his people. And we know this to be Jesus, God's own son, the Messiah.

Now what's interesting is that God's presence and being is seen as a refiner's fire. In the Bible, Yahweh manifest himself in various forms of fire. We see God as fire in the making of the covenant with Abraham, with Moses and the burning bush, the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness on Mount Sinai, God descended as fire, in the flames on the altar offered by Manoah and Yahweh answering by fire in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Now, fire is also used figuratively of Yahweh's glory, of his holiness, of his jealousy for his sole worship, of his wrath of the Holy Spirit and Christ in his glory.

Fire is a symbol of divinity. It is a symbol of Yahweh's himself. God manifesting in physical fire can be seen as such as a positive thing, like when He came to consecrate Solomon's temple, or it also can be seen as a negative thing, like when He swallowed up Aaron's son for improper worship, definitely that's a negative. Now I think for the most part, we see through the lens of negativity, which sees divine fire as the wrath of God.

For example, when I attended Church as a teenager, we had this youth group pastor and he would preach on the top of his lungs about sin and the fire of hell in almost every sermon. And my motivation for coming to God wasn't out of love, but out of fear. And I saw God use fire only punish and to destroy. I was more worried about going to the fiery pits of hell, than being in a loving relationship with God. I didn't understand that God's approval and blessing was also seen in his presence as fire, like in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, what looked like tongues of fire came and rested on each of these disciples, are the followers of Jesus. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages. And as a result, over 3000 people came to know Jesus as their Lord and savior.

As Christians, we should allow the fire of God to enter our hearts and minds. Instead of being destroyed by fire, we're actually purified by it. We're corrected, cleansed and healed. God's fire within us, moves us to love supernaturally, where we reflect God's healing and restoration and bring his justice to work communities. I have seen God's refiner's fire at work. When I first came to BelPres, I met a mother who was struggling with a recent divorce and her college-aged daughter who wanted to go on her first short-term mission trip.

And as I met with both, I could tell that the mother was so fearful for her daughter to go out of the country, her daughter's first abroad trip. And her college-aged daughter showed all the signs of not being able to handle across cultural setting in this Asian country. I thought this is never going to happen God, you are going to have to make this possible because I don't see this working out. Long story short, the daughter goes on the short-term mission and she comes back listening to God. And her mother also is listening to God. Now being a single mother, a homemaker for most of her married life, now struggling to understand life without her husband, dealing with her broken family, and both her and her daughter are seeking God through all of these challenges. So what does God do? Well, He puts it on the mother's heart to go and move overseas and teach English and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so the daughter who coincidentally is majoring in the same language of the country that her mother is going to, she decides to drop out of college and join her mother, and they both live to serve God. And they are our BelPres short-term missionaries. They served two years in a closed country where being a Christian can get you put in prison. The challenges of daily life are incredibly difficult. Right before the pandemic hit, God's refiner's fire at work, they come back to Seattle on home assignment and miss the pandemic in Asia. Being stuck here, they felt God's nudging to pursue linguistic studies for Bible translation. And now they're in Dallas till the summer where they hope to return back into the field and join a Bible translation team. I have never seen such a transformation in someone's life like this mother and her daughter. God's refiner's fire has been ablaze in their life, purifying them, molding them, removing all the impurities so that they can walk in an every moment supernatural presence of God.

Now, there are two things about God as refiner's fire that I want you to know. The first thing is that you need to know that you're precious. You see, God knows who you are. He knows your weaknesses, your struggles, your bad sides, your propensity to be judgmental, your love for money, all the blemishes in your soul. God knows all of that and He still loves you unconditionally. The Bible says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

I love watching the Discovery Channel, and one of my favorite shows is Gold Rush. Now the process that miners go through to get the gold is long and crazy hard. They have to dig, excavate and process thousands of yards of material to get to the gold. But here's the thing, in the refining process, they already know they have the gold. It's only by making it pure and removing the impurities in the gold that they're doing. The refiner knows he already has something incredibly valuable. God is a refiner and He sees the infinite value of your soul. And when you follow Jesus Christ with your whole heart, God sees himself as He refines us.

Now I know for some of us, it's hard to accept that God loves us unconditionally. We live in a culture where the love of money and the love of self is above all else. Culture says we pride ourselves in having it all, education, wealth, family, physical appearance. Being perfect is what it means to be influential and to have success in life. But that ladder leads to nowhere. And we have fallen into Satan's lies of what we should have and want to have. And those lies say that only when we have those things, then God can love us and accept us. Can I say that this is where we need to ask for God's refiner's fire to burn through the lies that Satan has told us. That we don't need God, that we can do it on our own and that life is so much better when you have it all.

God bring your Holy fire and burn away those lies that we have been told, that we have taken and built our lives around, and we confess that we need your refiner's fire to blaze in us. We want your fire to reflect Jesus in us and through us. The only way that we can know a truth, and what are the lies, is by reading and praying through the Holy Scriptures, not talking about having just the knowledge of the Bible, but knowing God's heart through his word so well that his fire, his presence burns inside of us. We speak, we act, we love with God's Holy fire, his refiner's fire.

When I was in college, I struggled with sin me like all college students do. And I memorize and I prayed through 1 Corinthians 10:13 every time I struggled with sin. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. God is faithful, He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up from under end." That verse was God's refiner's fire in my heart, helping me through the challenges of temptation. And God always answered, even when I screwed up, He always provided a way out. The outs He provided for me was being in a Bible study, taking on leadership in the campus ministry, leading worship, serving the aging seniors, serving the homeless, going on short-term mission to help alleviate global poverty. Having an accountability partner, God always provides a way out for us.

Now, the second thing I want you to know about God's refiner's fire is that trials and suffering produces supernatural hope. Look at Romans 5:3-4 "Not only so, but we glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character, hope" Sufferings, the root of the word means pressure. And that can come from trials and struggles or the challenges that we face and we take on, and the mess ups that we make all the time. Now, when I was in my first year of seminary, I remember one of our professors saying to us that, "If you're planning to go in the ministry, be ready for trials and difficulties, and times that by a hundred." I was young and prideful at the time when I heard that, and I thought, "No way, I'm going to be okay. I can handle anything that comes my way."

While moving forward in my second pastorate, serving as senior pastor, one of the elders of my Church made it his mission to make my life miserable and disagree with everything I said and did. I don't know if he just didn't like me or was just so bent on having his own way. After doing everything I could to build bridges with him, I was struggling with depression and seeing damaging physical effects. One night after coming home from a long meeting with this leader, I just sat on my sofa for a catatonic four hours, and my left side of my face and my eyes started to twitch uncontrollably. I remember my wife coming to me and she consoled me

and just had worry on her face. And tears came rolling down my face, and I just didn't know what to do. I was scared for my health. And after praying with my wife and seeking counsel for mentors who have supported me and prayed for me, I made the decision to step down as pastor.

Thankfully right away my face and my eye twitching stopped. But the thoughts of being a failure, giving up, not loving my Church enough, all those thoughts came in flooding in my mind. It was one of the most difficult times in my life. And I felt that crushing pressure. Relationships, finances, mental health, when extreme pressure is applied, life can become difficult. We struggle and we buckle at times. Perseverance can also mean endurance. The ability to withstand hardship or adversity, character in the Greek is [foreign language 00:20:33] which means proven character. The kind that only comes from testing.

It's like gold being put through a refiner's fire so that everything impure is burned away, only the best remains. As a refiner's fire removes the impurities to make pure gold, Paul here knows that our trials and our sufferings refines us, purifies us, and allowing us to experience the supernatural presence of God and having confident expectation of something good is going to happen in the future. Dr. Tony Evans says one of the most important features of growing spiritually is the presence of trials. Trials are designed to conform us to the image of Christ.

So BelPres, your homework for this week, every time you pray start with these words, God, you are refiner's fire. After stepping away from that difficult time, my family and I took the summer to road travel, see parts of the country that we've never seen before. Camping out and spending time with my kids and with my wife allowed me to recharge and fill my heart with more of God's love. One night after camping, I remember reading my Bible when everyone was asleep and looking up at the stars, which were the brightest I've ever seen them, and God's presence filled me.

His love wrapped around me. And I knew that all the struggles and trials were helping me to be more like Jesus. That God wasn't done with me yet. And that my heart was filled with hope for what's next, that there was a better place for me and that I just needed to trust Him. James 1:2 says, "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy." God is bigger than any of your trouble, so trust Him, lean on Him and let his hope open your hearts for what's next. God you are refiner's fire, and no matter what circumstances we go through, your love surrounds us unconditionally because of the life and the death of your son Jesus Christ. May your fire melt away our selfishness and make us pure, it's in your refiner's fire that we are made into who you are creating us to be in Jesus name, amen.

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**Discussion Questions:** Read Malachi 3:1-4; Romans 5:3-4

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**Opening Questions:**

- Icebreaker: What talent would you most like to grow and develop?

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions** -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions** – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In what ways has Jesus been "like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap" in your spiritual journey?
- How has God used suffering as a tool for perseverance, character, and hope in your life?

**Closing Question and Application:**

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?