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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham on Sunday
morning 26.7.70

Hymns: 607, 531, 329

Reading: Exodus 2 (from v.23) and 3

Text: Isaiah 48.10

"Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen
thee in the furnace of affliction".

This remarkable prophecy is evidently primarily directed to the Jews as they stood in a covenant relationship with God. He made a covenant with them when they were in the furnace of trial in the land of Egypt, and when the Lord remembered His covenant to them and had respect unto them and delivered them from their long and bitter bondage. This prophecy has been a great blessing through the ages to the living family of God and has been made wonderfully profitable. It has many solemn reproofs because of the people's propensity to depart from the God of their fathers, to idolatrous ways and practices that were offensive in the sight of their God Who had done so much for them. Hence there were solemn judgments, famines and other sad things to chasten them for their iniquities. Nevertheless, He remembered His covenant with them. It has also many confirming words to the Lord's living family; many, O many, have found a sweet morsel for themselves in this prophecy.

Isaiah was directed to proclaim words of comfort, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins". Blessed words of comfort are here, reassuring words that the Lord will never, never, never forsake His people; for it is recorded here, "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me". There are also blessed predictions of the coming Messiah, Who was in promise in those days, and of the work that He should accomplish as we have in Isaiah 53; also of the Gentile church so blessedly recorded in chapter 54. And here also is the word of the Lord to His people saying

"Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver". He refers in the context to their obstinacy and that He knew they would deal very treacherously "thou wast called a transgressor from the womb. For my name's sake will I defer mine anger". In another place we have, "For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth", as though they would sink never to rise again, but the Lord knows just how to stay His rough wind in the day of His east wind. He says, "For my name's sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off". If we rightly realise what we really deserve; if we have that discovered to us of our fallen ruined, wretched condition and all the bitterness and enmity of our poor depraved hearts; if we have this discovered to us, we should greatly wonder that the Lord had not cut us off long before this. O what forbearance, what compassion, what grace, what mercy the Lord has manifested toward His poor dear people, notwithstanding all their transgression! He says very tenderly "I will not cut thee off", "Behold I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction". This reference here to silver, "I have refined thee, but not with silver", I would take possibly to refer to the fact that the Lord's dear people are "not redeemed with corruptible things as silver and gold from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ". So says the Lord, "I have refined thee, but not with silver", not with any material substance, no corruptible substance, no perishable substance; no, I have refined thee because of My love to thee.

"As many as I love I rebuke and chasten". This refining is referred to in the Scripture and evidently has relation to the Lord's dealings with His people, with divine discipline that is designed and intended for their good; for if all things are designed to be for their good in the Lord's purpose then this refining must be designed for their good. So one hymnwriter says

"the flames shall not hurt thee; I only design

Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."

There is a refining process designed, therefore, in the dealings of the Lord with His dear people. This is in New Testament teaching as

well as Old Testament teaching. In Hebrews 12 we find the Apostle saying, "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." A very important indication is this. All things work for good to those who are rightly exercised under this refining process whereby much dross may have to be burnt up. Who are we, that we can say that we have none, or never accumulated any, do not know anything about this dross? If we do not know anything about the dross that is within us we do not know anything about what has been done for us. When the Lord has purposes of mercy, grace and love to His poor dear people then He purges their dross. When the Apostle refers here to chastenings, according to earlier chapters he evidently indicates particularly the sufferings they were passing through; not because of any wicked ways in them, in that sense, but because of the cross that was laid upon them which was as heavy chastening in the sense that it was a severe test to the reality of their faith and confidence of which they had made profession. We may be assured of this, dear friends, that what the Lord is pleased to give us He will refine in the furnace of trial and affliction, not that in itself it needs refining. but in our poor hearts it will be used as a refining process to purge our dross and to refine our gold. "I will refine thee, but not with silver". It is rendered by some, "not for silver", as though the Lord desires no material gain in His dealings with His people, but He designs their gain, not their material gain but their spiritual gain, their spiritual profit. "Our Fathers chastened us after their own pleasure", - at least my father did - but "he for our profit" that is for our spiritual profit so that we may take root downward and bear fruit upward. This is the blessed effect of divine chastening which we are exhorted to prize.

"His chastening, therefore, prize
The privilege of a saint;
Their hearts are hard who that despise,
And theirs too weak who faint."

There must be this chastening, there will be in various different ways; it is a discipline; it is so needful dear friends; but all is softened

in the case of His dear people, all is softened in the blood of Christ.

"The lash is steep'd he on thee lays,
And soften'd in his blood".

There will be a refining and there will be a need for it. I know we may continue in an outward uprightness and integrity and our life and conduct may be admired by others, but there is a root deeper than all this - the Lord searches the heart. It says "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.", (Malachi 3.3) and they need it more than anyone else - "and purge them as gold and silver that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness". There will be a refining in different ways, not necessarily bodily affliction, but there will be a refining which can be in a sharp spiritual conflict; but it is a necessary process dear friends, because everything outwardly may look all right, but the Lord looks inwardly, He sees what no one else sees, He will penetrate the gloom. His eye sees every recess of the human heart, nothing is hidden from His view. If the Lord has enlightened our understanding and brought us to a knowledge of our sinful condition, we shall see many things and wonder that the Lord has not cut us off altogether; but He says "I will refine thee". This is His blessed teaching, it is a mercy that He will not leave us to ourselves. If He does, what shall we do? We shall keep accumulating more and more dross, I am sure we shall if we are left to ourselves. We may become very easy. People may look at us and think all is well, but all the time we are drifting away from the Lord in our affections. We can become luke-warm and worldly, turn our eyes away and behold vanity. We need refining, and if we are the purchase of Christ's most precious blood we shall be brought back again. He will not leave us nor forsake us. There will be a discipline.

It is a very blessed teaching. I feel sure some of the Lord's people have had their sweetest times in their soul's experience when they have been under this refining process.

"The furnace shall not singe thy hair,
Till Jesus give them leave"

He will refine them to bring them to His blessed feet, to some conformity

with a suffering Christ. He will not leave them to run their own way, which will be the worst thing for them. "I will refine thee". He does not take away anything good that is worth keeping; but if the Lord has taught you and me something of our guilty condition, and has convinced us of our guilty state before Him, we shall realise that we need this refining. How good He is in this.

What is the effect of this refining? It is to bring forth fruit. This is the effect of this refining? It is to bring forth fruit. This is opened up in the parable of the vine, He says, "I am the true vine and ye are the branches". Here are the living branches, they are not dead stock, they are not lying on the ground withered up; but the Lord does not say, they need no attention. They are the very branches that do need attention, "every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit". This is a refining process. How tender He is in this, is He not? He gives sweet support under this refining process, but there is some dross to purge away. He does not say "every branch that bears no fruit He purges it to make it fruitful"; if it bears no fruit it is to no purpose, cut it away. It is the fruitful branches that He disposes shall pass through this refining process. He purgeth them, He cleanses them, He knows just how to treat them. This is the Father referred to here. "My Father", says the Lord Jesus, "is the husbandman". There has never been a better husbandman, He knows exactly how to prune or cleanse or treat these fruitful branches. I do not know how to treat them, I do not know what to do with some of the branches in my own garden, but here is a husbandman Who knows just how to tend these branches, just how much to cut away and just how much to leave. Why all this business? To make it bring forth more fruit.

"Behold I have refined thee, but not with silver". This is nothing to do with the things of this world, material substance, things of the earth. This is the dealing of a Father in heaven, of the husbandman. What is this fruit then, dear friends? As far as I have known anything of this I believe I can tell you what this is. One of the fruits that result from the discipline, this refining, is confession of our sins before Him. Is not that true? How hard we can be if we are left to ourselves, as hard as the nether mill stone; but when the

Lord proceeds with this refining process what a breaking up there is of the rocky heart. He can turn it into a sluice, this is the blessed effect of this refining. You will not strut about telling people how good you are. This is a secret religion, you will be walking up and down in the 51st. Psalm. This is one of the most blessed effects of this refining when the Lord brings His dear people nigh, when He brings them nigh by the blood of Christ, this will be the first thing as the prophet Isaiah says in chapter 6, "Woe is me! for I am undone: because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King", It is a mercy to come here. You know what this is, some of you do, when the Lord gets the pruning knife to work. This, experimentally speaking, would be one of the first things; Lord how vile I am. He may cut away a lot of this rubbish and hold it up before you and then cast it away. It is a mercy to know something of this refining. "I have refined thee, but not with silver".

Another effect of this refining is repentance, for this is so closely mingled. It is that sweet softening of heart in acknowledging our sins before the Lord when we are brought to His dear feet, not trying to recommend ourselves, but just as it is in the Psalm, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight". It is very sweet to come there. I know it is. If the Lord comes into the furnace and blesses your soul you will be sure to make some confession of your unworthiness that He has not cut you off.

Another effect of this refining is faith and love to Him. When He has cleansed you and cut away some of the rubbish and brought you to His blessed feet and blessed you with His sweet love, you will bless Him for all the refining and not only see how necessary it was but bring forth the result of it in confession, faith, hope and love.

"Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction". I have chosen thee. This may have some relation to the dealings of God with the children of Israel when they were in Egypt and when they cried unto the Lord by reason of their bitter bondage. There had been a space of 400 years, not five or six years, but all this long time it seemed as though the Lord had forgotten

them. It seemed like it. You may sometimes feel as though the Lord has forgotten you, but He says He never will. When He comes, it may be with some refining process. The Lord says He remembered His covenant, that does not mean that He had forgotten it in a proper sense; the time had come to bring them forth out of their bondage, and the appointed time will come with you when the Lord will bring you out of your bondage, however long He may dispose to exercise you before this shall be; I am sure that He will come. I heard recently of a friend along the South Coast who has been afflicted for years; just now he is really ill but the Lord has favoured him in his soul as He never had before, and now he says, "He is come, Tell Mr. Delves He has come". He has been greatly favoured. O He will not disappoint you.

"I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction". This does not mean in a Gospel sense that it is in the furnace of affliction that the Lord makes the choice, but in the furnace of affliction the Lord makes the choice manifest. If we look at it in a Gospel sense we know that it was an eternal choice. As relating to the children of Israel, typically speaking, it was not when they were in the bondage of Egypt that the Lord made choice of them; no, but He made the promise to Abraham freely, sovereignly; the promise of the Messiah and the blessing to his seed was made to Abraham and confirmed in Isaac and Jacob, and now He has come to bring them forth out of that long bondage. "I have chosen thee" - and he makes that choice manifest in the furnace of affliction. This is a wonderful blessing if indeed we can feel that we have an interest in the sovereignty of God in His choice of a people. Everything He has done for you, sinner, and for me is done because He has love to us. Has He confirmed it in your heart that He has made a choice of you - that is because of His love to you. He did not begin to love you after you showed some evidence of love to Him. "We love Him because He first loved us". This takes us back to before the world was, before Noah's ark, it takes us back to a covenant God in eternity Who made choice of them. They have been very bad characters, some of them that have been plucked as brands from the burning. Many of them, everyone has. As a vessel of mercy he is plucked from the burning. If he was left to himself he would go on and on until he would be

destroyed.

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"I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction". I would take it like this then, I have chosen thee with a purpose in view. First of all thou shalt pass through a furnace of affliction. Those three that would not bow their knee to the idol that had been set up were cast into a furnace of fire made seven times hotter than it was usually made. The king said that he saw four men walking in the midst of the furnace and the form of the fourth was like unto the Son of God. How profoundly blessed is this; and not one of their hairs was singed when they came out of the furnace, but it was a great trial of their faith. The Lord went with them into it and He has gone into the furnace with you. Some of you if you were to look back over some things, would have to say it was in the furnace of trial that the Lord met with me. What then? You have had to bless Him, not for all the nice, easy things but for the furnace work. "I have chosen thee" in it. The Apostle refers to the fact that if there is no chastening there is no evidence of sonship, "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth" Whom the Lord has made choice of He chasteneth. A father does not trouble about chastening other people's children, he looks after his own. "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth", not He scourges them and casts them off, but he receiveth. "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction". The Lord is pleased often to make that choice manifest in some furnace of trial; many times He has confirmed poor sinners' interest in His love and blood in a furnace of trial though not always so. There is not a dead line to lay down for everyone, but often this has been so. How sweet it is. "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction", to bring thee through it.

I had no thought of preaching from this when we were having breakfast, I had prepared something else but our morning reading came like this, "I will bring the third part through the fire" and then this came rather sweetly to me afterwards, "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction". May the Lord in His dealings with us grant us this blessed spirit of adoption; and to those who are concerned and exercised and troubled and burdened about their own case may that time come when this sweet word shall be felt, "I have chosen thee and not cast thee away." Amen