The Searchlight of the Lord

Purification, Pruning, and the Enemy Within

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The Weight of the Human Condition

We have been turning over the life we live as human beings: the ups and the downs, the losses, the things that come our way that cause us to have to hold onto something. We can have faith in many things. We can place our confidence in any number of things, and rightfully so. But there is one Person who sees all and judges every injustice and every righteousness. He knows how we are tried and the things that affect us. He knows who raised us. He knows what we have experienced through our lives: the education, the brokenness, all of it. In John 15 Jesus says:

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

He wants us to abide in him, but we abide in him because we have first been made clean through his Word.

There is a brokenness shared across all eight billion of us. Some of it we have done, through sin, through distortion, through the twisting of our own stories. Some of it has been done to us: cancer with no clear cause, the toxins in the air and water, things we cannot account for. This is a world in a bit of a spin, and it has been since the very beginning.

He Became Sin for Us

There is a verse I love in Romans 8, we'll go through it in more detail another time, where Paul says God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, "on account of sin" or "for sin."

"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3).

The Greek word Paul uses there is the same word the Septuagint uses in Leviticus for a purification offering. The Septuagint is the work of a group of trilingual scholars who got together and translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The same word that meant "sin offering" or "purification offering" in Leviticus is the word Paul reaches for: he became a purification offering for us.

And what was that offering? The priest would take the blood, sprinkle it on the altar, then turn toward the tabernacle and sprinkle it there. Picture the tabernacle sitting in the center of the twelve tribes. As the people moved about their days, dust would rise up and settle back on the tents. Imagine that dust as a metaphor for the people's sin, rising up and falling back on the place of God's presence. God could not dwell in their midst with that sin layered upon his sanctuary. So this purification, the turning and sprinkling of the place, was what allowed God to remain among them.

That is what Christ has done for us. "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." He spoke something out of the life he lived in faithfulness to God. He did not twist the narrative of his life. He did not twist the storyline in his own spirit. He lived faithfully to God, and God therefore vindicated him and brought him out of the grave.

"O Lord, If I Have Done This"

That makes me think of Psalm 7. David writes:

"O Lord my God, in You I put my trust; save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me, lest they tear me like a lion, rending me in pieces, while there is none to deliver" (Psalm 7:1–2).

David is being verbally assaulted by Cush, a Benjamite. And this is the kind of moment we all know. Sometimes it is, "Why me, Lord?" for things that are not our fault. Sometimes it is, "Why all this conflict in my life? Why now?" These seasons should at least cause us to ask whether God might be wanting to prune something in us.

Notice where David's head goes. Cush is the one tearing at him like a lion, but David turns the searchlight on himself first:

> O Lord my God, if I have done this: if there is iniquity in my hands, if I have repaid evil to him who was at peace with me, or have plundered my enemy without cause, let the enemy pursue me and overtake me; yes, let him trample my life to the earth, and lay my honor in the dust. (Psalm 7:3–5)

Do you see what he does? Before he assumes his integrity, he interrogates it. He brings the conflict to the throne and says, "Lord, look at me first."

Rehearsing the Hurt

This hit me this week. I had some serious Cush-the-Benjamite moments around my workplace. And here is what I do in those moments: I come home and rehearse the hurt. I rehearse the wrongdoing. I rehearse the pain: what was said, what was done, the tone of voice, the look on the face. You can do that to the point that you become ineffective in your life. There are things God wants to prune out of me.

When we have conflict (with our spouse, our children, our parents, our coworkers) the temptation is to wear the chip of the victim on our shoulder, walk into the next room, and dare anyone to knock it off. And someone always does. This is a generation of victims. I am a victim. I go in wearing the victim chip on my shoulder, and it gets knocked off almost every day.

But what David is saying is, "Lord, start your interrogation with me." Look at verse 6:

"Arise, O Lord, in Your anger; lift Yourself up because of the rage of my enemies; rise up for me to the judgment You have commanded!" (Psalm 7:6).

"Arise." That means: wake up. Wake up, Lord. Let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end. But before he goes and pounds on the Judge's door to wake him from his slumber, he asks for some self-reflection first. Lord, what's going on in here? Bringing yourself to the Judge of all and saying, "Before you go after my enemies, before you look at anything else, look at me. If there is any wickedness in me, that is the beauty of what God has called us into. We are not out scouring the earth for our enemies. We look for the enemy within first. Then we can go out with a heart that is clean. We have been sprinkled by the blood. The tabernacle where God wants to dwell has been sprinkled clean. God is dwelling in us, and we become agents to change this world.

Soot and Survival

Many years ago I read a story about natural selection that has stayed with me. My father was a cattle breeder, so the concept was familiar to me. He bred for two things at once: birthing ease (mama cows that gave birth to small calves and survived calving) and milk production (cows that, when they grew up, could produce a hundred pounds of milk a day). When you combine those two traits, the farmer doesn't lose his expensive cattle in childbirth, and the next generation produces. Natural selection was something he practiced, deliberately, for thirty years.

But the story I read was about moths in industrial Germany. In the soot of the industrial age, the white-barked trees those moths used to rest on turned dark with pollution. The light-colored moths that had blended in with the bark were now exposed; birds picked them off. Within a few generations (moths reproduce quickly, so you can watch evolutionary pressure work in real time) only the dark moths were surviving. The light ones were gone.

Through the soot of corruption thrown off in this world, we can begin to feel that the only way to survive is to generate the same kind of darkness that has come against us. To match the soot. To turn dark with the trees. Psalm 7 has a word for that, a few verses down:

> Behold, the wicked travails with iniquity, conceives trouble, and brings forth falsehood. He made a pit and dug it out, and has fallen into the ditch which he made. His trouble shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down on his own crown. (Psalm 7:14–16)

If we adapt to the corruptible things of this world, yes, we may survive. But at what cost?

The Searching Gaze

There are days when I walk out with victory and my words are seasoned with grace. There are other days when I am saying, “Lord, rain down fire on my enemies.” But the word that comes to us out of Psalm 139 is:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24).

We invite the Lord to look at us. As we move through the turbulence of life (and we all do, at different times and in different ways) if we ask for the searchlight of God, here is the beauty: when we open ourselves up to the One who sees the hundred billion ways we have failed, that very opening is where the purification happens. The sprinkling of his Word on us.

The pruning of our lives. And it begins to produce a fruit that the people of this world can partake of.

We become the salvation of the world. We become the tree of life in the midst of the Garden of God. That is what stood in the holy place of the tabernacle: the seven-branched golden lampstand, representing the tree of life in the midst of the garden. In the new covenant, that lampstand is replaced by people. And when people find themselves rooted in him, others begin to eat the fruit of our suffering. They begin to eat the fruit of what we have walked through with him.

And Peter

It is only when we have spent time with God that the world takes notice, as Acts says, that they took note that Peter and John had been with Jesus. Think about Peter's trajectory. He starts with that overconfident vow: "Though all may forsake you, I will never forsake you. The rest of these may, but I will not." That overconfident ego; he had something.

Then Luke tells us what happened the night Peter denied Jesus for the third time:

"Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord . . . So Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:60–62).

That look from Jesus was not a gaze of "I told you so." It was a searching gaze of knowing. And Peter left that courtyard a different man. When we will open ourselves up to the hundred billion ways we have failed, when we let the fiery gaze of our great High Priest look into our lives and call us into loving relationship with him and with one another, we will no longer look at the failures of our children, our spouse, our parents, or our coworkers the same way. We will look at them as fellow conspirators against God in the same sin we ourselves have

committed. And we will walk up with empty, open hands and say, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Peter went out and wept bitterly. But when Jesus rose from the dead (when all things were made right that day, when the one truly Righteous One who had stood before God came out of the grave vindicated) the angel at the tomb said:

“But go, tell His disciples, and Peter, that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you” (Mark 16:7).

And Peter. That is the message I want us all to carry: that despite the hundred billion failures spread across eight billion people, the blood of Jesus Christ has been sprinkled for all of them, that they might become a dwelling place of God.

Clean Hands and a Pure Heart

It is our responsibility not to fester. That is why I find such beauty in David’s prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart . . . cleanse my hands.” Psalm 15 asks:

“Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?” (Psalm 15:1).

And Psalm 24 answers:

“He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully” (Psalm 24:4).

Clean hands, the works you do are right. A pure heart, those works are done out of a motivation of purity. These are the things God has called us to. And it is in our suffering, in these challenging times, that the purifying word of God can come into our lives and turn our brokenness into wholeness, our barrenness into fruitfulness.

What a great God we serve. What an amazing God we serve. Love is what brings salvation's plan down to man. Let us continue to pray for one another.

Peter himself learned this lesson, and he wrote it down for the rest of us:

> For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. (1 Peter 2:19–23)

This is our example.