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THE PROCESS OF PURIFICATION, PART TWO

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Today is the second part of a sermon about the process of purification. Remember, salvation is in three tenses: in the past, we are saved from the *penalty* of sin. That is what Jesus accomplished for us. That is the “new birth” which we receive through faith in Christ. The second tense is the present tense: in the present, we are being saved from the *power* of sin. That is what we’re talking about here. This part of our salvation is an ongoing process that begins with the new birth and ends at death. The third tense, of course, is the future: in the future, we will be saved from the very *presence* of sin. There is no taint of sin in Heaven. There will be no sin, no suffering, no sorrow, no death, no disease in Heaven. Maybe we could sum all this up by saying, “He died for me; I’ll live for Him, and then I’ll live *with* Him.”

Let’s look again at Genesis 15:9-10. While you’re turning there, let’s remember that Abram has asked God for information: “God, I’m here in the land, but I don’t own it yet. What is the process of ownership? How will I know that I possess the land?”

And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.

And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.

God’s answer is going to be visual. He wants Abram to prepare specific animals of a specific age in a specific way. Remember, the things that happened to Abram physically are things that teach us spiritually! Listen to this:

In the heifer or ox, patience and strength are symbolized. . . . The she-goat is the symbol of nourishment and refreshment for the soul. The ram is the picture of power, of might in warfare. The birds are a picture of gentleness and grace, the Spirit of God at work. It is significant that all the animals were to be three years old. This is a reference to the public ministry of our Lord which lasted for three years. All these qualities of his character were publicly made manifest during that time. Here, then, is a symbolic portrait of Jesus Christ in the beauty and full vigor of his manhood. All that he was was clearly told out and made evident by his life.

Now in the death of Christ, all that he was is made available to us. He laid down his life that we might have it! He poured out his soul unto death that all the fullness of his person might indwell my life and yours, that we might have all that he is. The slaying of these animals and birds and Abram’s long contemplation of them is the beautiful picture of this for us.¹

Isn’t that beautiful? The process of purification—the process of claiming God’s promises in our lives—begins with a sacrifice—Jesus!

1 Ray Stedman, “The Furnace and the Lamp.” 1968. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/the-furnace-and-the-lamp>.

You'll notice that Abram divided the animals (excepting the birds) in half. The reason for this is well-known: in ancient times, when two parties made a covenant, they would take an animal and cut it in half. They would take their vows and walk together between the halves of the dead animal as a way of saying, "If I don't keep my promise, may what happened to this animal happen to me!" I guess you'd say that they took their promises seriously! We no longer cut the carcasses like that, but I would hope that God's people will still take their promises seriously, even when keeping those promises costs them something.

So here's Abram: he's prepared the animals just as he was told, and he's sitting there waiting for whatever God has in store. He is contemplating the meaning of the sacrifice. Look with me at verse 11 if you would, please:

And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

These fowls are vultures, which seem to me to be the foulest fowl of all! These vultures descend upon the feast while Abram awaits the promise, contemplating the sacrifice. Folks, I want you to understand that whenever you begin to contemplate the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ, you will begin to realize your own foulness. You will no longer be able to rationalize or justify those little sins which you allow in your own life (but probably criticize in others!). You will realize that you don't measure up to and certainly do not deserve the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. You will say with Paul, "*O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*" (Romans 7:24).

The story continues in verse 12.

And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.

The words "deep sleep" show the same kind of "deep sleep" that God used on Adam when He was creating Eve, indicating a supernatural kind of sleep. In fact, Abram experience a tremendous sense of awe and dread in this supernatural state because he's in the presence of God. This is our response to God's holiness. Whenever a human comes into contact with the divine, that person will become instantly and awesomely aware of both God's holiness and his own impurity. Generally, we like to believe that we're pretty good people, but that's only because we aren't measuring ourselves against the one true standard of goodness, God Himself. Abram in God's presence experiences an immense dread.

And then God begins to speak to Abram. Would you look at verses 13-16 with me?

And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years;

And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.

And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.

But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

In this dream-state, God tells Abram about the future. He tells Abram of the subjection of his children

in Egypt for four hundred years. He tells Abram that they will be afflicted and treated unjustly. He assures Abram that He will sovereignly intervene for them after four hundred years.² God also assures Abram that He has a definite plan for his own life in that he will live a long and peaceable life, followed by an afterlife of reunion with his godly ancestors. He will not die by the hand of King Chedorlaomer or any other troublemaker. Finally, God remarks that part of the reason Abram's descendants will be subjugated in Egypt for four hundred years is that God is delaying judgment on the current inhabitants of the Promised Land.

This is significant! Many atheists and skeptics criticize God regarding the way He treats people in the Old Testament. They think He's some kind of cosmic bully, picking on people He doesn't like. That's not the way God is at all. What He's doing here is *delaying judgment* on the wicked. They deserved to be wiped out at that very moment because of their murderous disregard for human life; but God gives them a stay of execution for four hundred years. In the intervening years, they have opportunity to repent of their wickedness, and they're being exposed to the truth through Abram and Melchizedek and probably others. At the end of the four hundred years, they're going to hear about God's dealings with Egypt on behalf of the Israelites. We find out in the book of Joshua that, yes, the people of Jericho and other Canaanitish people knew that God was moving on behalf of the Israelites. They had time, opportunity, and knowledge to repent of their murders, of their child sacrifices, of their fertility rites; and some of them, like Rahab, did just that!

Now we come to some very profound symbolism. Let's continue in verse 17:

And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.

What a glorious passage! Do you remember that the two parties making a covenant were to walk together through the divided carcass of the animal, or in this case, animals? Notice here that Abram did not go through the carcasses. God went through in the fashion of a furnace and a lamp. In other words, this covenant would be kept by God unconditionally. There was nothing Abram could do to break the covenant. This covenant does not rely on Abram's ability to keep a promise to God, but is instead an assurance that God will keep His promise to Abram.

The furnace and the lamp themselves are significant symbols. The furnace always speaks of judgment in Scripture. It speaks of a fire which cleanses and purifies the life of the believer. When we come into God's presence, we can feel that fire of examination, burning away the impurities that we try to hide and protect and seal away. We have to come to the place where we acknowledge our sinfulness, our pride, our lust, our gossip, our unfaithfulness, our selfishness, our dishonesty to ourselves, others, and God. Often this happens in a time of crisis, or through the Holy Spirit's howling admonition. It may be that we have a moment like David did, when Nathan pointed his finger and declared, "Thou art the man!"

The moment we recognize this sinfulness and ask God to purge it away, He becomes a lamp. Oh, blessed, blessed lamp! We are illuminated. We know what we must do. We know what we must say. The confusion and the darkness give way to light and life. That is the God we serve!

Let me close with the wonderful words of Pastor Ray Stedman:

² A round number; the actual tally was 430 years (Ex. 12:40).

[Y]ou become aware that God is speaking to you and there is no way to escape his voice. He is putting his finger on the thing which is wrong in your life. He is going through your life like a furnace of fire, searing, scorching, cleansing and you cannot escape. You must face yourself. You have to acknowledge, judge, and reject yourself. The instant you do, God is no longer a furnace but a lamp! You see everything clearly in a wonderful, illuminating light. What was confusing before is as clear as daylight now. You know what you have to do and you know how to go about doing it. Your true enemy is clearly defined. There before your eyes you see the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, and the Canaanites—all those filthy tribes that inhabit the human heart. You see that you have been defending and protecting them, though they have been defiling and polluting you. Bitterness, sensitiveness, impatience, envy, self-righteousness, laziness, lust—these are the enemies you see.³

Thank You, Jesus, my Furnace, my Lamp.

3 Stedman.