

I still remember one time when my dad made the decision to not immediately rush to my rescue.

I was in high school, had just gotten my driver's license, I had gone to visit a friend about an hour away. I was on my way home, stopped at a Walmart to get some snacks for the road, and locked my keys in my car.

Thankfully I had a cell phone and called my dad, "Dad, I locked my keys in my car," fully expecting that he would hop in his car, drive an hour and bail me out. But he didn't. He gave me a few ideas of what I could do and said, "Figure it out."

I remember being frustrated by that, even a little bit hurt at the time. I wanted him to rescue me, not give me a pep talk and tell me to figure it out.

But I learned a good lesson that day. It was the days before smart phones, so I had to go back into Walmart, found the payphone with the yellowpages chained to it, looked up a local towing company and paid the \$30-\$40 (or whatever it was) for them to come out and get me back into my car.

I still remember that day when my dad made the decision to not immediately rush to my rescue.

That's one of the parts of parenting that I find challenging: knowing when to step in and help/rescue your child and when to step back and let them try and figure it out themselves. I haven't even entered the teen years of parenting, but I can already see that it is a hard balance to find.

We know inexperienced kids can get into problems way over their heads and we want to protect them from that. So, we have this strong instinct to rush to our kids rescue. But at the same time, a big part of parenting is preparing our kids for life without us. It can be good in the long run to let them make mistakes so they can learn from those mistakes.

It's a hard part of parenting - knowing when to come to the rescue and when to step back so they can grow and learn. It starts when they are little and get stuck at the top of a playset. They panic, they start to cry, they yell for help and parents face a decision: rush up there and save them, or stay back, offer some coaching and support and let them figure it out - they got up there, they can get back down.

And as the kids grow, the situations they get themselves in get bigger with them and parents wrestle with the instinct to protect and the importance of teaching.

It's one of the most difficult but also very important parts of parenting: loving your kids enough to let them learn and grow by not always, immediately running to their rescue.

I think that helps us understand a little better what is going on in Malachi chapter 3. More than that, I think that everyday parenting conundrum helps us understand some of how God the Father treats us, his children, still today.

In the time of Malachi (a little more than 400 years before Jesus) God's people, the Israelites were wrestling with some real-world problems - there was political unrest, economic uncertainties that left some people out in the cold, and even those who had weren't all that comfortable with what they had because they felt how uncertain it was - real-world problems like we all experience today, and they wanted to know, in their own words, "**Where is the God of Justice (2:17)?**"

God says he loves us. He calls himself our Father. He calls us his special people. We are hurting. Things are uncertain. We've got real problems. Why isn't he rushing to our aid?

Like that 4 year old stuck at the top of a playset, or that 16 year old locked out of his car an hour away from home, they were calling out to God to come and rescue them, but he's wasn't coming - not as quickly as they wanted, not in the ways they wanted.

Sure, he sent a prophet named Malachi. But Malachi just came and told them that some of their problems were a direct result of their general spiritual apathy and general indifference to doing the hard work of living the way God wanted them to, but that's not the kind of help they wanted - it was the equivalent of a dad reminding that kid at the top of the playset that he got himself up there. They wanted a God who would swoop in to rescue them - like he did in Egypt with the plagues and the Red Sea.

But that's not the God they got. In his wisdom, God decided to resist the urge to swoop in and give his people a pain-free, problem-free life. Instead he chose to teach them a lesson - albeit a lesson taught in the classroom of pain and suffering.

God promised through Malachi that he was going to come, but not like a genie in a bottle, not as a God who came to make their wildest dreams of a problem-free life come true, not even as a helicopter parent who would quick set their lives in order again.

Look at verses 2 and 3 again: **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.**

God was going to come, but not in the way they were hoping and expecting. He was going to come as a refiner's fire, or a launderer's soap.

Let's unpack that comparison.

Unrefined, raw precious metal, fresh from the ground, is shoved in a furnace to burn away any impurities. If metal had feelings, we might say metal is hurt by the refiner to make it better.

Dirty clothes are scrubbed with soap to make them clean. If clothes had feelings, we might say they are roughed up by the launderer to make them better.

And this is where that parenting conundrum comes into play: When it came to his Old Testament people crying out to him for help, God is not climbing up the playset, God is not hoping in the car with the second set of keys, not because God doesn't love them, but because he loves them enough to teach them - to refine them, to launder them, to let them hurt, to make them better.

He says that after he's done this work, then some of that spiritual apathy will go away and he'll have, "**Men who bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.**"

God was not rushing in to save his people so they could learn, so they could be refined and cleaned, so they could be made better.

Which begs the question: Learn what? What exactly does God hope to teach by standing back while his people suffer? Some of what the Israelites were going through seemed much worse than falling off a playset, or paying someone \$40 to get you back into your car. Their problems seemed very real, very hard, very insurmountable. What was God trying to teach by not stepping in and immediately saving?

The Bible's answer: God teaches some of the most important lessons of life when he does this refining, laundering work of not immediately rushing in to take away our suffering.

The list of all the things God can and does teach through suffering is long.

He teaches us that we are not nearly as in control of our lives, as independent of God as we sometimes think we are. He teaches us how foolish we are sometimes – swallowing the lies of the devil. He teaches us how often and how easily we slip into apathy and indifference when it comes to our faith, our relationship with him. There is a lot that God can and does teach by allowing us to suffer.

But by far, the most important lesson when he steps back is creating in us a desire – a desire for something more – something more than what we can find or buy or secure in this world; a desire that cannot be satisfied by anyone or anything but him.

Because when we desire him and his love and his salvation, he is a God who loves to give himself to us.

That was the lesson God wanted to teach the folks of Malachi's day – to create in them a desire that only he could satisfy. It's a lesson he still loves to teach today...

I imagine for some of you it is not hard at all to see yourself in those believers in Malachi's day. You know what it is like to be stuck at the top of the playset, yelling for God's help, crying, screaming at him, but he just stands down there saying, "It's going to be ok."

Some of you know what it is like to be locked out of your car praying to God, hoping, expecting that he's going to rush to your rescue, but he doesn't, not the rescue you wanted, at least.

And it is at moments like that, when we cry out with God's people from over 2400 years ago, that we need to hear and remember God's word through Malachi.

Remember that your God loves to teach through the refiner's fire and the launderer's soap. He loves to create in people like us who are so quick to forget, so apt to stray; he loves to create in us a desire that only he can satisfy.

Also remember his very clear promise – a promise made to people who were crying out for his help and frustrated because he wasn't coming when or how they wanted him to: **"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord *who you are seeking* will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, *whom you desire*, will come," says the LORD Almighty.**

When God's refining and laundering work creates in us a desire that only he can satisfy, he loves to remind us of this promise.

2400 years ago when God's people craved his rescue, when they wrestled with frustration because he seemed slow to answer, God promised to send two messengers – one who would prepare the way for the second messenger; the second would be the messenger of a covenant that God's people were desperately desiring. God promised his people a covenant (a beautiful loving contract), a covenant that some of his other prophets spelled out in detail:

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel at that time," declared the LORD through Jeremiah, **"I will be their God, and they will be my people... for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."**

2400 years ago when God's people, refined by fire, cleaned by soap, desired him, he promised that they would have him. Through the work of these two promised messengers, they would have forgiveness and love and a relationship with God that would never end.

It is a promise made 2400 years ago. A promise God kept. That's what today, and Advent, and Christmas are all about – the God who kept this promise made through Malachi.

God promised to send one messenger who would prepare the way for a second messenger – a very clear reference to John the Baptist who prepared the way for that second, desperately desired messenger of this new covenant of forgiveness. And that second messenger? Jesus.

2400 years ago when God's people craved his rescue, when they wrestled with frustration because he seemed slow to answer, he reminded them that he was working through that pain to refine them, to teach, to create in them a desire, a desire that he promised to satisfy in the work of Jesus.

That is a promise that God still loves his people to be reminded of.

Today, when you, God's people crave his rescue, when you wrestle with frustration because he seems slow to answer, when you feel the refiner's fire and the launderer's soap, remember this promise, made and kept.

You have forgiveness, you have a God who loves you, you have a relationship with God that will never end because of Jesus. And that Jesus who came once promises that he's not going to leave you alone on top of the playset or locked out of your car forever.

He promises you the comfort of his coming in two very real ways still today. He promises to come to you through his Word in the Bible, in services like this, when you read it at home, he promises to come through his word to remind you that he is still here with you and for you. He will coach you through his word as you maneuver the tricky playsets of life.

And then he promises you a day in the future when the God you desire will come again and take you where the fire and soap are no longer needed – with him in heaven.

Friends, Malachi helps us see today a little glimpse into the crazy important and loving work of our Father in heaven. Expect him to refine you. Expect him to launder you. Expect him to come and love and forgive and save you.