

Revivals And Church History :: The Fire of the Lord Part I

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God on Fire

“Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?
Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?”
(Isaiah 33:14)

The Bible contains over 500 references to fire, linking it with God ninety times. God in action is like a blazing fire, we are told. “The people shall be like the burnings of lime; like thorns cut up they shall be burned in the fire” (Is 33:12). Lime burns slowly and thorns quickly. The fire of God has the same effect on all it touches. Fire is His essential characteristic: “The Lord your God is a consuming fire” (Deut 4:24).

Ezekiel, for example, often uses the language of fire to talk about God, e.g. “I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord” (Ezek 22:31, NIV).

Is your God like that? A God of fire is the only one there is. Our God is like a forest fire, not an iceberg. He is never likened to the moon with its cool light, but rather to the sun, radiating warmth. His dwelling is the light of rising suns. What He does He carries out with intense desire and blazing purposes. He cannot abide anything tepid. There is nothing pastel pink in His presence, pale or anemic, neither one thing nor another.

That is God. Can you take it? Isaiah asks, “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?” (Is 33:14). Who indeed?

Elijah presents us with a real challenge: “The God who answers by fire, He is God” (1 Kgs 18:24). Well, if you want to be another Elijah you have to have the God who answers by fire. Can you get along with that sort of religion – incandescent Christianity, hot Gospel, the “fire in your bones” type of faith? Or do you want a casual, easygoing God? The God of Elijah and of Isaiah is never half-hearted, but a God of tireless vigor and total commitment. He is an enthusiast! What He does, He does with fervor: “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this” (2 Kgs 19:31).

Isaiah 33 speaks of God’s consuming anger against wickedness; God being a devouring fire to Israel’s enemies. Then comes the crunch: the fire will have widespread effect. “The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has surprised the hypocrites. “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?” (Is 33:14). Either in or out of Zion He is a devouring fire.

God Does Not Change

God is the same God to everybody, both in the church and in the world. The God who is angry with sinners every day is the God we deal with. He does not change. True partnership with the Lord means being on fire; the God of fire has no fellowship with icicles. He does not get on well with mild, cool, flabby folk who are undisciplined and haphazard and who work in fits and starts, blowing neither hot nor cold. No matter who we are, God does not adapt to please us; we always have to adapt to Him. Is God too much for you? Too zealous, too unrelenting in His activity?

Church leaders and pastors represent God, the God of fire. Our ministry is to bring that God into people’s lives, putting fire into their hearts.

Jesus baptizes with fire (Mt 3:11-12, Lk 3:16-17). John the Baptist said, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Scholars question whether John the Baptist ever said such words, and if he did what he meant. Some say that his words about Jesus baptizing in the Holy Spirit and fire refer to cleansing Israel and judgment. I am sure they are wrong. When John spoke of a baptism of the Spirit and fire, it was a promise, not a threat, although it was also a kind of forewarning of

things to come. Throughout Scripture the fire of God comes both to purge and to bless.

The fire of God is not given to make us cozy, but holy, and to stir us up. When Moses saw the burning bush God first warned him that he was standing on holy ground, and then told him of the great thing He was about to do, to release Israel from the captivity of Pharaoh (Ex 3). When Isaiah was in the temple and it filled with smoke of the burning holiness of God, his awareness of being unclean preceded God's equipping him to be His messenger.

If the God of fire takes over, it will not be a comfortable experience for those who sit at ease in Zion. The idea of being filled with the Spirit is not to give us nice emotions and lovely church meetings, but to set us going for God. In giving power, Jesus makes His purpose clear: "You shall be witnesses to me" (Acts 1:8). It is glorious to be anointed, but it is for service, not for nice services.

Life Without Fire

Can we live without fire? Not on this earth. Primitive people believed fire was a gift of the gods, and we can certainly appreciate that. As part of God's preparation of this world for human habitation, fire is as essential as water or air. Without essential warmth, half the population would freeze to death. Without fire there would be no cooking, no metals, no gold and silver jewelry, no glass, no sunlight, and no manufacturing; we would never have seen a steam train or steam ship. We could not imagine a more terrible world. Nobody would want to live on this planet, and in fact nobody could.

The universe is full of fire. The sun is a great globe of incandescence, every star shines by its own fires, and even the center of our planet is fire—a molten iron core. Every volcano is a dynamic illustration of God's character. He is a Vesuvius of goodness, life and energy.

Some think God is extinct and have published books which claim to demonstrate just that. What happened to God? They may as well ask what happened to the stars. If they are not visible it is because of modern pollution in the atmosphere. That is the price we pay in our great cities—lots of lamps but no stars. These days, the Magi would be hard put to find a star to guide them to Bethlehem. But this is a modern-day parable.

People are not finding their way to Jesus because of pollution. We are too clever by half. Nobody can see God through a polluting cloud of doubt and sin. But He is still there, shining for ever.

On the day of Pentecost there was not only fire but also wind. Wind disperses fog and mist. It clears the atmosphere just as surely as fire warms it. The disciples had doubts galore even after Jesus had risen from the dead and spoken to them. We read that Jesus appeared to the eleven as they sat eating a meal together. Some had believed reports of His appearance but others had doubted; Jesus rebuked them for their hardness of heart. But when the winds of God tore the heavens open and swept into the Upper Room, no doubts were left. The tornado and the tongues of fire on every head were no hallucination. Jesus had reached the power center of the universe, just as He had said. He had kept His promise.

Power Beyond the Grave

Jesus did all these things after He had gone from the earth. What a Jesus! Dead? Forgotten? How can a dead man set 120 living people aflame all at once—and first thing in the morning, too? However, He did not come back, stand among them and say, "Receive the Holy Spirit." You would have thought that for such a historic, vital occasion He might personally have supervised the event. In fact, He did not. The Holy Spirit had come in His place—the Other Comforter. He could be and do all Jesus was, and did. In fact, all Jesus had ever done was by the Spirit.

That is the scale of Pentecost. It is not an insignificant or minor event. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the coming of the Comforter took place in Jerusalem, and the coming of the Holy Spirit occurs in each individual as a personal experience. It is as if Jesus Himself was back again and we are His disciples. To be continued.

Article By: Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke

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