



## *Fire*

On a firework night in the USA a bonfire set fire to a local chemical plant. Before long it exploded into flames and an alarm went out to fire services from miles around. After fighting the fire for over an hour, the chemical company president approached the fire chief and said, "All of our secret formulas are in the vault in the centre of the plant. They must be saved! I will give \$50,000 to the firemen that brings them out safely!"

As soon as the fire chief in charge heard this, he ordered the firemen to strengthen their attack on the blaze. But still after two more hours of attacking the fire the fire was still raging. The president of the company offered \$100,000 to the engine company that could bring out the company's secret files. As they will still short of effort the fire chief called up a local volunteer fire company.

From the distance a long siren was heard and another fire truck came into sight. It was indeed the local volunteer fire company composed entirely of men over 65. To everyone's amazement the little fire engine raced through the chemical plant gates and drove straight into the middle of the inferno. In the distance the other firemen watched as the old timers hopped off of their rig and began to fight the fire with an effort that they had never seen before.

After an hour of intense fighting the volunteer company had extinguished the fire and saved the secret formulas. Joyous the chemical company president announced that he would double the reward to \$200,000 and walked over to personally thank each of the volunteers.

After thanking each of the old men individually the president asked the group what they intended to do with the reward money. The fire truck driver looked him right in the eye and said, "The first thing we're going to do is fix the dam brakes on our fire truck!"

I'm sure all of us are aware that today is Guy Fawkes Night, also known as Bonfire Night, Fireworks Night or Plot Night. It celebrates the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, in which a group of Catholic conspirators attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London on the evening of 5 November 1605. Fortunately the religious bigotry aspect of this has been forgotten and now it just an occasion to have a bonfire and let off fireworks.<sup>i</sup>

So I as I thought of fireworks I thought about fire that works, and it led me to consider the fire associated with God. So tonight I thought it would be helpful to look at the image of fire as we find it in the Bible and it's association with God.



There are three aspects of fire in the Bible that we will be looking at, and these are:

- **Presence of God**
- **Purification**
- **Pentecostal power**

➤ **Presence of God**

So firstly in the Bible fire is often associated with God's presence. In fact we see this in one of the earliest instances in the Bible, when Moses encounters the burning bush. We read in Exodus

*Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.*

Exodus 3:1 - 6 (NIV)

We can see clearly from the instructions not to come to close and take off his sandals that the presence of God is clearly associated with the burning bush. It is also interesting that whilst the bush was on fire the bush was not consumed by the fire. We will consider this aspect of the non-destructive aspect of God's fire in the next section. So right here at the beginning God's revelation of himself to mankind through Moses we see that fire is symbolic of the presence of God. It also symbolises God's holiness and power.

We see this association between fire and God's presence again in the pillar of fire that guided the Children of Israel in the wilderness. For we read later in Exodus:

*After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.* Exodus 13:20 - 22 (NIV)

It clearly says the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of fire at night. So the presence of the Lord and the fire are clearly linked.



When God met with Moses on Mount Sinai he did so again in fire. The following are 2 of the accounts of this meeting between God and the people at Sinai.

*Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.*

Exodus 19:18 - 19 (NIV)

*To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

Exodus 24:17 - 18 (NIV)

Again clearly it states that the Lord descended in fire. Notice that the whole mountain trembled violently and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. And in the second that the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire. Though may it have looked like a consuming fire, from the incident of the burning bush, it doesn't necessarily follow that God's fire will consume everything.

We can see from these accounts in the Old Testament that God's presence is often symbolised by or is present in fire.

When we studied 'The Purpose Driven Life'<sup>ii</sup> the first purpose was that 'You're planned for God's pleasure' and Rich Warren used the word worship to describe this aspect of our lives. I think we so often think of what gives us pleasure, and very rarely think what gives God pleasure.

I personally believe at the heart of the Christian faith is a relationship with God rather than rules or doctrine. God wants to be our friend, to use an everyday word rather than say using fellowship. God wants us to know him but he also wants to know us. And an aspect of this relationship is that he wants us to be aware of his presence.

But as we have seen from the use of fire in the Old Testament the presence of God is an awesome thing. So often we treat God as if he is just another friend. It is true as Paul writes in his letter to Romans we can call God Abba or daddy. But never the less God is awesome in power and holiness. When the shepherds heard and saw the angels announcing Jesus birth they became afraid. So just think if we really became aware of God's presence symbolised by fire, our minds would probably be completely blown away. No doubt we might like the priests in the temple fall flat on our faces.

So let's remember that fire in the Bible is used to symbolise the mighty, presence of God in all his glory, majesty and power. Are we seeking that presence of God in our individual lives and are we as a church when we come together crying out to be aware of the awesome presence of God in all his holiness, glory and power.



## ➤ Purification

The second major thing that fire is used for in the Bible is to symbolise purification, particularly of our lives as his children. I suppose one of the clearest place we see this in the reference to the refiners fire in Malachi. We read in chapter 3, at verse 2:

*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. Then the Lord will have men who will 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.*

Malachi 3:2 - 4 (NIV)

Remember that we said one aspect of fire as God's presence was his holiness. When we come into his presence where we know his glory and holiness we will become intensely aware that we are sinners that we are unclean. So God wants to cleanse us and purify our lives.

If you want to purify gold, you heat the gold ore up in a crucible. As the ore becomes hot the gold melts and the impurities float to the surface. The refiner then scoops off the impurities and heats the gold and ore up even more. More impurities will float to the surface, and he will scrape these off. Eventually the gold will be pure. How does the refiner know the gold is pure. When he can see his face in the gold then he knows that it is pure. Notice that this process does not destroy the gold, it destroys the impurities and leaves the pure gold behind.

This is what God wants to do with our lives. Some speak as if we come to know Jesus and are saved and then have eternal life and will go to heaven. But I believe before we reach that point, one of things God wants to do in our lives is to make them more like Jesus.

In the Purpose Driven Life, purpose number 3 was 'you were created to become like Christ'. The technical word that some Christians use for this is sanctification. This is indeed purification. God wants us to be transformed to be like him and to bear his image and character. Fire in the Bible often symbolises purification where the sin or dross is burnt up and leaves the pure faith or character behind.

We see this in Isaiah's encounter with the presence of God in the Temple in Isaiah chapter six. There we read:

*"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Isaiah 6:5 - 8 (NIV)*



So as the live coal touches his lips his sin is taken away. Isaiah is not destroyed by the fire of God in the live coal but rather the sin in his life is burnt up and removed.

We also see this purification aspect where Paul writes about the foundation of our lives being tested by fire. For he writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 3:

*If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

1 Corinthians 3:12 - 15 (NIV)

So if we build foundations in our lives with the pure gold of faith or silver these will remain as God purifies or tests our lives with fire. But if we build with worthless things of straw or wood these will be burnt up, but he ourselves will remain.

So we have seen fire symbolises the purifying work that God wants to do in all our lives. One of the ways he does it, is often through difficult times. Chapter 25 of The Purpose Driven Life is headed Transformed by Trouble. My second sermon at these evening services was taken from Job. In Job we see that whilst God did not cause Job difficulty and trouble, he allowed it. And through these testing experiences Job's faith was purified and proved in that he never cursed God or gave up on him. Indeed his life and more importantly his thinking were transformed through the trials he went through. He was indeed in a sense purified by fire. How much we need to let God take us through this, even though it is painful. We often want to run away from such pain. But in many cases it will be the fire of God's purification in our lives. The Purpose Driven Life at the start of the chapter Transformed by Trouble has the quote:

*It is the fire of suffering that brings forth the gold of godliness.<sup>iii</sup>*

#### ➤ Pentecostal Power

One of the most significant reference is to that on the day of Pentecost. When the power of the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples. We read in Acts chapter 2:

*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

Acts 2:1 - 4 (NIV)



So we see that when the Holy Spirit came upon them to fill them with what for this section I have called Pentecostal power, he came upon them in tongues of fire.

John the Baptist clearly associated the Holy Spirit with fire. Matthew 3 we read:

*"I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

Matthew 3:11 - 12 (NIV)

We can also see that the purifying work of the fire in the Holy Spirit is indicated, for it will burn up the chaff in our lives.

Jesus himself also speaks of fire

*"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*

Luke 12:49 (NIV)

Surely the fire that Jesus has come to bring is the fire of the Holy Spirit.

I am coming to the conclusion that it is the Holy Spirit that transforms lives, heals the sick not Jesus. Before I am accused of heresy, let me affirm that Jesus the son of God came to die so that our sin might be dealt with and we could have a restored relationship with God. In rising bodily on the third day he defeated death so that we too might live now abundant lives and for ever more.

But it is the dynamic third person of the Godhead the Holy Spirit that actually impacts lives on earth. He is the one that opens blind eyes so that unbelievers can start to see the kingdom of God. He melts hard hearts. He is the one that transforms our minds according to Paul. And he is the one that heals the sick and raises the dead. I have just read the book, 'The Spirit who Heals', by Peter H Lawrence. He makes the case that it is the Holy Spirit who heals the sick.

Not long ago Mones a passionate sermon that we should reach out as part of the Gospel to be a church that is healing the sick. If we were experiencing healing more often through prayer then people would no doubt flock to Meadgate. Then even more might come to know Jesus and to know life. If this is to happen then we need the Pentecostal Power of the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Sally when leading the soaking prayer on a Monday night or the intercession before church will often pray, More Lord. She will cry out for more of the Holy Spirit. I must admit recently I have felt some what dry in my spiritual life. I have been crying out to God for a fresh anointing of his Spirit.

So let all of us cry out continually to the Lord. Let us cry out for the fire of God's presence, for his fire to purify our lives and for the fire of the Pentecostal Power of the Spirit.<sup>iv</sup>



Endnotes:

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- <sup>i</sup> Guy Fawkes Night - From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy\\_Fawkes\\_Night](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy_Fawkes_Night)
- <sup>ii</sup> The Purpose Driven Life, by Rick Warren, Zondervan 2002, ISBN 0-310-21074-7
- <sup>iii</sup> Madame Guyon, quoted on page 193 The Purpose Driven Life
- <sup>iv</sup> 3016 words