

West Valley Church
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Elemental Faith: Consuming Fire, Part Two

When I was in third grade, my parents took my brother and I on vacation to southern California from Salem, OR. That's a long drive in an Oldsmobile Delta 88. I had my little bag of coloring books and road bingo boards and some toys to keep me busy. Can you believe it? Eight hours a day driving, three days straight in a car, (and that's just one way!), with no video games, no in-car DVD players. I don't think we even had an eight-track tape player! I don't know how we survived. Actually, I don't know how my parents survived. The dividing line between my brother's space and my space ran right down the middle of the hump on the back seat floor. It might have helped my parents if they'd actually drawn a line (or better yet built a fence!), because my brother and I fought over that territory. The hump on the floor was like a military no-man's land—you get in it and you're going to get hit.

Anyway, it was a fun trip because we stayed in a hotel with a pool. Man, that was living—a real in the ground pool! Then we went to Disneyland—I think we even got the “A” tickets and rode the monorail around the park (those of you who are older will remember the “A” tickets). The Matterhorn was the fastest ride, and then we went through the Haunted House. At least I'm pretty sure we did; I closed my eyes all the way through it.

The next day we went to Universal Studios and took the tour on the tram. This was in 1969 or 70 and I had never seen anything like the movie magic we saw on that tour (anybody take that old tour?)—the fake flood coming down the dirt road and then the tram drove through the parting of the pond water. Then the tour took us through what looked like a nice neighborhood—single story ranch homes and split levels. We came around one corner and one of the houses was on fire! I thought the studio had an emergency on their hands and they were going to have to stop our tour. But to the surprise of my unsophisticated third-grade mind, we came around the other side of the house to see that it was only a façade—just the front of a house. The house was made of non-burning material and there were gas-powered flames mounted in the windows. The fire was fake! I learned then that not everything in life is as it appears.

That was the lesson that God's people learned in the Old Testament, and they learned it the hard way. It cost a couple of priests their lives because they handled fake fire in the Temple.

I'll explain what that is in just a moment, but let's review first. Today we are in the second part of our series on "fire," part of an over-arching series called "Elemental Faith." We started this series in March by first getting a biblical view of ourselves using the element of "earth." Then we learned about Jesus by using the biblical metaphor of "water," concluding on Easter that only Jesus satisfies our deepest thirst. In the next series on "wind" we learned about the Holy Spirit—that He is a distinct part and person of the Trinity, and how He wants to and can work in our lives when we ask him to and let him. Today, we continue our series on "Fire," learning about the holiness of God, and what the Holy Spirit will do in us if we submit to him. If you are a follower of Christ—meaning you have put your faith in Him and what he did for you when he died on the cross in your place and now you live for Him—if you are His follower, then it is important for you to understand about the Fire of God. It will not only help you in knowing how to relate to the Holy Spirit, but also in letting him do what he wants to do in your life. If you know that, then you can yield your life to him.

We are basing the emphasis of this part of the series on a verse out of Hebrews 12: Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:28-29, niv)

God is very particular about what and who we base our lives on and what we live our faith by. God has given us his very fire—in the person of His Holy Spirit. We've been learning about Him, now we need to experience him. God made that point clear back when His people were still wandering around in the desert, having escaped from Egypt and still heading to their homeland.

Since they didn't have a Temple to worship in, God instructed them to build the Tabernacle—literally a portable Temple and worship center where they could worship God and carry out their sacrifices. Aaron, Moses' brother-in-law was the man whom God appointed to be a family of priests to perform the duties of worship. When they dedicated the Tabernacle (the tent that served as the Temple) they offered the very first burnt offering of meat on the altar. It was placed on the altar of burnt offering, and God sent fire from heaven that consumed the offering and lit the fire on the altar. "Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown." (Leviticus 9:24, niv) That fire, started by God, was to remain lit at all times. And that was one of the responsibilities of the priests—to keep that fire lit at all times. They were to make sure that it never went out. So every morning one of their tasks was to stoke the fire and fan it into flame. Then, for every burnt offering, they were to light it with that same fire. God was explicit about this: "The fire on the altar must be kept

burning; it must not go out. Every morning the priest is to add firewood and arrange the burnt offering on the fire and burn the fat of the fellowship offerings on it. The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out.” (Leviticus 6:12-13, niv)

So Aaron, the priest, had four sons who were all working in the tabernacle. Two of Aaron’s sons were named Nadab (*nawdawb*) and Abihu (*awbeehoo*). One day, as the burnt offering was being given, they didn’t exactly follow the prescribed method. This is how the Bible describes the scene in Leviticus chapter 10:

“Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu put coals of fire in their incense burners and sprinkled incense over them. In this way, they disobeyed the Lord by burning before him the wrong kind of fire, different than he had commanded. So fire blazed forth from the Lord’s presence and burned them up, and they died there before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord meant when he said, “I will display my holiness through those who come near me. I will display my glory before all the people.”’ And Aaron was silent.” (Leviticus 10:1-3, nlt)

I don’t know if you caught what was going on there, but the priests had strict instructions on using the fire for the burnt offering—it could only come from the altar that God had started. But instead these guys offered unauthorized, or literally the word is “strange” fire, and God consumed them with fire for doing so. The same story is recorded in Numbers:

“The names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained (or authorized) to serve as priests. Nadab and Abihu, however, fell dead before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorized (or “strange”) fire before him in the Desert of Sinai. They had no sons; so only Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron.” (Numbers 3:2-4, niv)

The use of that word “strange” is sort of obscure, and it’s used on purpose, because it indicates that the very thought of using this fire was weird and distasteful. They were using fire that God had not commanded them to use, and God wanted to make the point that he is holy and must be taken seriously. God wanted them to know that he was not made for them; they were made for God. And boy did he make that point! No doubt, the writer in Hebrews had this story in mind when he wrote, “Our God is a consuming fire.” So what could this possibly mean to you and me? If you are a Christian, or even if you are not, first just know that God is not someone to be trifled with. Yes, he loves you as if you are the only one in all the world to love. Absolutely! But that doesn’t mean that he will ignore sin or that you and I can live this Christian life casually. There is great power, great abundance of life in Christ, but it cannot be lived on your terms. So let’s learn

what the problem was with offering unauthorized fire: When Nadab and Abihu (Nawdawb and AwBeehu) offered this strange fire, they were offering it with

1. Unauthorized *Might*.

God had specifically told them that the offerings to God had to be made in the strength of *his* fire—that's why they were to use the fire that God had started, and to never let it go out. But they thought that they could serve God in their own strength.

When I was in high school I was working out, lifting weights to be strong for football. I worked out a gym that belonged to a man by the name of Doyle Kennedy. Doyle Kennedy was a world champion power lifter. He looked like a huge hillbilly with an enormous belly—long beard going down his chest, and if you didn't know better you'd think he was very fat and out of shape. He was the first person ever to dead-lift over 900 pounds and at one time held the world records in squats and dead lifts. Until he was disqualified because he was using steroids. He was accomplishing things by using unauthorized might.

Unfortunately, Doyle passed away in 1999—way too young and who knows how much the steroids contributed to his early death.

Living this Christian life is not easy—we are faced with challenging temptations, we are asked to do incredible things—things too great for us to accomplish on our own. We can only live this kind of abundant life as believers in Jesus if we rely completely on God's might—and we do that by yielding completely to the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul understood this: he said, “So we preach Christ to everyone. With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ.” That's what we do as Christians—we share the good news with everyone so that those who are lost will be found and those who are found will grow. That's what that means. But that's not easy to do. That's why he went on to say: “To get this done I toil and struggle, using the mighty strength which Christ supplies and which is at work in me.” (Colossians 1:28-29, gnb) Christ's mighty strength, not his own.

Aren't you tired of living the Christian life in your own strength? Aren't you tired of struggling? Aren't you tired of the fight? Aren't you tired of the challenges, the struggles, the temptations, the trials? *You don't have to deal with them in your own might.* You can rely on God's might, God's strength. It will be so much easier if you do, and God takes it very, very seriously when you don't. These guys lost their lives over working in their own might, instead of the strength of God's fire, the Holy Spirit.

The second problem was that they used

2. Unauthorized *Power*.

When we say “might,” it means we are relying on our own strength. When we talk about “power,” it’s about under whose *authority* we are carrying out the Christian life. The priests were authorized by God, and were to function under no other authority. That’s what God established: “Then anoint Aaron and his sons, and ordain them as priests in my service. Say to the people of Israel, ‘This holy anointing oil is to be used in my service for all time to come. It must not be poured on ordinary men, and you must not use the same formula to make any mixture like it. It is holy, and you must treat it as holy. Whoever makes any like it or uses any of it on anyone who is not a priest will no longer be considered one of my people.’ ” (Exodus 30:30-33, gnb)

This was serious business; handling the fire had to be done according to God’s very specific instructions and authority: “he shall take a fire pan full of burning coals from the altar and two handfuls of fine incense and bring them into the Most Holy Place. There in the LORD’s presence he shall put the incense on the fire, and the smoke of the incense will hide the lid of the Covenant Box so that he will not see it and die.” (Leviticus 16:12-13, gnb)

They did not have the authority in themselves to use whatever fire they wanted. Because they were priests, they figured that they could do whatever they wanted, but they forgot that any authority they had come from God, not from themselves or from their position or rank. It’s the same thing that was happening in the book of Samuel, when Eli was the priest. His sons were taking the meat offerings and eating it for themselves. The Bible says, “This sin of the sons of Eli was extremely serious in the LORD’s sight, because they treated the offerings to the LORD with such disrespect.” (1 Samuel 2:17, gnb)

God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament about how bad the people had become, and here’s how he described it: “‘Should I not punish them for this?’ declares the LORD. ‘Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this? A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the *priests rule by their own authority*, and my people love it this way.’” (Jeremiah 5:29-31, niv)

The Bible says that you and I are a kingdom of priests. That’s how the Bible describes you if you are a Christian. But don’t think that because you are a Christian, you can live this life for God on your own terms or by your own authority to do live it however you want. You have no authority except by God! None of us do. Jesus made that abundantly clear on the day of his crucifixion. He was being questioned by Pilate—a leader who felt that he held the power of life

and death over Jesus. Jesus wouldn't answer his questions, so Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Remember, I have the authority to set you free and also to have you crucified." Jesus answered, "You have authority over me only because it was given to you by God. . ." (John 19:10-11, gnb)

Let me describe it this way: Most of you know I lived in Mountain Home, ID for over 11 years before we moved here, and there is a large Air Force Base there. I got to know my way around the base pretty good, so let's say I decided I wanted to go out on the base and drive around—see my friends who lived there, shop at the BX, maybe sit in on some meetings. And at the same time, so did Pastor Keith, when he was an active duty Colonel (most of you know Pastor Keith, our executive pastor, is a retired Air Force Colonel). What's going to happen for Keith when he tries to go on the base? He will get through the front gate, right? What will happen to me? I won't get through the gate. Do you know why? Because I haven't been authorized, and he has. But let me ask you this: does Keith have the authority because Keith says so, or because the US Government says so? Right!

You and I are not entitled to this Christian life—it is the free gift of God by his grace. We do not get to live this life because we deserve it or because we've earned it or because we are entitled to it or we say so, or because we have the authority to in ourselves. It is only by God's power that we have the opportunity to live this life. We don't deserve it at all; in fact, what we deserve is death. But thank God that in his authority he has given us the gift of this Christian life! We can live an abundant life because he says so!

You see God says in the Bible: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty." (Zec 4:6, niv) That's important enough that we should read it together (reread).

If it's not by might, and it's not by power, than how is it that we are going to live this life with abundance and meaning and power and might? By his: Spirit! We can live the Christian life by an

3. *Authorized Spirit.*

John the Baptist is the one who came before Jesus to prepare the way for him. So he would baptize people with water to show that they had repented of their sins, or turned their back on a life of sin and were ready to follow God. "Then," John said, Jesus would do his own baptizing. John the Baptist said, "I baptize you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who will come after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matthew 3:11, gnb) The Holy Spirit and with fire! Be filled with the authorized Spirit.

Some scholars suggest that Nadab and Abihu were serving under an unauthorized

spirit because they were drunk. They were given explicit instructions about that: “The LORD said to Aaron, ‘You and your sons are not to enter the Tent of my presence after drinking wine or beer; if you do, you will die. This is a law to be kept by all your descendants. You must distinguish between what belongs to God and what is for general use, between what is ritually clean and what is unclean. You must teach the people of Israel all the laws which I have given to you through Moses.’” (Leviticus 10:8-11, gnb)

We don’t really know for sure if this was the case, however God *is* pretty specific with us about not being drunkenly influenced by alcohol instead of the Holy Spirit: “Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18, gnb) Say what you want about using alcohol, but God is clear that he expects us to be filled with authorized Fire, not fire-water!

The only way we can successfully live this Christian life is by God’s Spirit. Remember, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” By *his* fire, not ours! It is by God’s Spirit *in you* that the holiness, the power, the fire of God will burn in you! Remember we said last week that the fire of God will either burn *in* you are burn *up* you. Aaron’s sons had the power, the fire there with them in the fire of God’s presence. But then they chose their own fire, and as a result, instead of being filled with the fire of God they were consumed by the fire of God.

If you are trying to pursue a great life without Christ, let me just tell you that you will never, never reach greatness. Not without him. But in him—as a Christian—you can achieve greatness, you can have an abundant life right now and every day by the might and power of the Spirit!

If you are a Christian, and you are trying to live this Christian life in your own power, give up! You will never make it. There are so many Christians who are struggling along in their own might and power. But nothing will be accomplished that way. Not in your life, not in our church, not in our community. We will never have the kind of impact as a church in West Valley that God intends if we do it in any way other than by God’s Spirit. That’s the only way we will grow as a church. That’s why the Bible says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” (Psalm 127:1, esv) Whether it’s our lives, our homes, or our church, it will only be by His Spirit.

That’s why the Apostle Paul said, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord.” (2 Timothy 1:6-8, niv)

Just like the priests in those days had to fan the flame every day, you and I need to fan into flame the gift of God—His Spirit, so you can have power of love, self-

discipline, and telling others about Jesus. That's the Christian life! Don't ever let the fire go out. Ever!

Let's pray (get serious about this!)

Own might? Own power? You are not authorized! It's only by His Spirit.