

West Valley Church  
5/22/2011

**Elemental Faith:  
Fire, Part One  
Consuming Fire**

The sound was thunderous, like an audible earthquake coupled with the sound of a freight train. It could be heard long before it was ever seen or felt. It was one of the greatest dangers to the early settlers.

The pioneers who settled the American West often had to travel for days at a time across miles and miles of grassy plains. And while pioneers considered mountain ranges difficult and treacherous to cross, they dreaded these vast plains even more. It wasn't hostile Indians, prairie wolves, rattlesnakes, or summer heat that caused their fear. It was lightning; or at least what happened because of it.

The high grass on the plains was often so dry that lightning could ignite a small fire that could then be whipped up by the winds and spread quickly across the land, engulfing everything and everyone in its path. Many died on their journeys across the plains simply because they were unable to outrun a raging prairie fire.

After many tragic journeys, the pioneers developed a method of finding refuge from these fires that is still used today. I'll explain what that is and how it applies a little bit later.

Today we are beginning the last part of our series called "Elemental Faith." We started this series back 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 can satisfy our deepest thirsts. 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 begin our three part series on "Fire," learning about the holiness of God. If you are a follower of Christ—meaning you have put your faith in Him and what he did for you by dying 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 this fire of God. It will not only help you in knowing how to relate to the Holy Spirit, but also in knowing what he wants to do in your life. If you know that, you can then yield yourself to him and let the Holy Spirit work in you.

The emphasis of this part of the series is 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) “A consuming fire....”

That is an interesting verse, and it says something very intriguing about God and how we approach him in worship and in life. He is the architect, builder, and creator of this world, as well as the new Kingdom that will belong to all those who trust in Him. So while he is a God who is our father, he is *not* our buddy or pal. He is God; he is holy, and it is dangerous to approach him without recognizing that. The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2, niv)

God is much like fire that can be unpredictable and deadly if we don’t approach it with caution and understanding and respect. Fire has always held very strong imagery in the Bible, and almost always it

### **1. Represents the *Presence* of God.**

When God first appeared to Moses, do you remember how he did it? God spoke to Moses through a bush. Now, you’d think it would be enough, if you heard shrubbery talking to you, you’re walking in your yard and your hedge starts speaking, you’d think that *maybe* there was something unusual or supernatural about it. But that wasn’t enough. The bush was *on fire*, and yet it didn’t burn up. God chose to represent his presence to Moses by speaking to him through *the fire*. God chose that imagery on purpose. The fire made the difference in representing his presence: “There the angel of the LORD appeared to him as a flame coming from the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire but that it was not burning up. ‘This is strange,’ he thought. ‘Why isn’t the bush burning up? I will go closer and see.’ When the LORD saw that Moses was coming closer, he called to him from the middle of the bush and said, “Moses! Moses!” He answered, ‘Yes, here I am.’ God said, ‘Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground.’” (Exodus 3:2-5, gnb)

Then, when Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, they didn’t know what direction to take in order to go to the Promised Land. So God personally led them by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud of smoke by day: “During the day the LORD went ahead of his people in a thick cloud, and during the night he went ahead of them in a flaming fire. That way the LORD could lead them at all times, whether day or night.” (Exodus 13:21-22, cev)

So God, the consuming fire that He is, displays His blessing and protection over His people in the form of a cloud as a shade protecting from the burning sun and

*fire* to light the way through the darkness of night.

Then, when the Israelites settled enough to create a place to worship God, they built the tabernacle—first a tent, then when they finally arrived in Jerusalem, they built the Temple. And a key part of that place of worship was the Holy Place—the place where God’s presence would dwell. Representative of that Presence was the altar of fire.

On this altar, the priest would place the meat offerings to God. The altar had a fire on it, and the offering was called the burnt offering. God *started the fire* on the altar with the very first burnt offering that was laid on it: “Suddenly the LORD sent a fire, and it consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. When the people saw it, they all shouted and bowed down with their faces to the ground.” (Leviticus 9:24, gnb) Once that fire was lit, it was the job of the priests to make sure that it never went out: “The fire on the altar must be kept burning. It must not go out. Every morning the priest must add more wood to the fire. He must place the burnt offering on the fire. He must burn the fat of the friendship offerings on it. The fire must be kept burning on the altar all the time. It must not go out.” (Leviticus 6:12-13, nirv)

That fire represented the continual presence of God and his work among people. But it was more than just a presence; the fire

## **2. Represents the Holy Presence of God**

There are many examples in the Old Testament of God’s fire. Fire does more than just give light—it is something that is hot and that we have to be careful to approach. The same is true of the presence of God. He is so hot—so holy hot—that there is no doubt that it is God’s presence, and we’ve got to be very careful about how we approach him. Part of God’s holiness means that he refuses to be confused with, or compared to, any other “pretend” gods. When the writer to the Hebrews wrote about God being a consuming fire, he is reminding his readers that God is holy by quoting Deuteronomy 4—“Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” (Deuteronomy 4:23-24, niv)

Maybe you are familiar with the story of the prophet Elijah and his contest with the 800 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. It seems that the people of Israel could not decide which God to follow: Jehovah Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or the false god Baal. To settle the dispute, each side was to build an altar and place a sacrifice on the altar for their god to consume. The prophets of Baal went first- dancing and praying, even cutting themselves and crying aloud all morning for their god Baal to receive the bull sacrifice, but there was no answer.

Elijah taunted them, saying that maybe they should shout louder, that Baal couldn't hear them because he was on the toilet. Prophetic trash-talking!

Then Elijah built his altar and placed the bull sacrifice on it and just for good measure, he dug a trench around the altar and filled it with water and saturated all the wood for the fire and the meat itself with water. Then Elijah prayed to the Lord and asked Him to receive this sacrifice so the people might see that He the Lord was the only true God. No sooner did he pray that, then verse 38 reads this way: "then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." (1 Kings 18:39)

And the people of Israel got a first-hand look at what the Hebrew writer reports: "our God is a consuming fire."

The fire of God represents his holy presence, which cannot tolerate and will not share space with false gods or with sin. He will not compete with other things in your life; you must offer to him everything, because he is a consuming fire.

So fire represents God's holy presence, and like fire, that holy presence will burn what can be burned. You see, fire also

### **3. Represents the Purifying Holy Presence of God**

God's presence, his fire, is called a refiner's fire:

"But who can endure the day of his coming (*meaning generally to be in his presence*)? 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. . . ." (Malachi 3:2-3, niv)

God cannot tolerate sin or any competing thing, and he will burn it up in our lives. Either he will burn it up because we ask him to, or ultimately, at the end, he will burn *us* up along with the sin if we ignore him. Most of us are familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities whose people lived such sinful lives that an angel was sent to warn Lot to get out of the city with his family before it was destroyed. Verse 24 of Gen.19: "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overthrew those cities and all the valley and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground." (Genesis 19:24, esv) No doubt the writer of Hebrews was aware of that story when he wrote: "our God is a consuming fire."

God cannot, does not, tolerate sin in any form. That is because he is holy. We, on the other hand, are not. In fact, the Bible says that we all have sinned and gone

astray—each to our own way (Romans 3:23, niv) instead of following the Lord. So when we who are sinful are in the presence of a Holy God, we don't stand a chance. God says, "I will not let you see my face, because no one can see me and stay alive." (Exodus 33:20, gnb)

In our sin, and in ourselves, we can't even look at God and survive—that's how holy he is. That's also why, in the Old Testament, God wouldn't allow anything or anyone considered to be unclean to remain in the community of God's people: "If anyone touches something unclean—whether human uncleanness or an unclean animal or any unclean, detestable thing . . . that person must be cut off from his people." (Leviticus 7:21, niv)

So the fire of God will burn away any and all sin: "As men gather silver, copper, iron, lead and tin into a furnace to melt it with a fiery blast, so will I gather you in my anger and my wrath and put you inside the city and melt you." (Ezekiel 22:20, niv)

So if God is like a white-hot holy fire that burns away sin, and we are sinful, then how do we keep from getting burned up too?

The answer to that is because the fire of God

#### **4. Represents the Purifying Holy Presence of God in our lives.**

The amazing thing is that, while God is a consuming fire, his love consumes the burning intensity of his holy fire.

Remember the story of the burning bush that Moses encountered? Look again at what the Bible says: "There the angel of the LORD appeared to him as a flame coming from the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire but that *it was not burning up*." (Exodus 3:2, gnb, italics added)

This time the result of the consuming fire is not death and destruction but instead it's insight and revelation—so that Moses can deliver God's people (*repeat*). The same thing happens with Isaiah when he had his vision in the temple that's recorded in Isaiah 6.

In his vision, Isaiah sees the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up and angels appear, declaring over and over again God's holiness, the temple shakes and is filled with smoke and Isaiah is struck down with fear and awe, and an angel takes a white-hot burning coal from the burnt offering on the altar, holds it in tongs and touches the mouth of Isaiah saying: "...your guilt is taken away and your sin forgiven" (Isaiah 6:7) By doing so, God purified Isaiah's life so he could pursue God's purpose for him, which was to speak—to tell others about God.

The prophet Malachi spoke about God's consuming fire, calling it a refiner's fire.

The fire wasn't just to burn sin, but to purify the precious metal: "But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when he (*the Lord*) appears? For He is like a refiner's fire...He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord." (Malachi 3:2-3) You and I are precious metal to God! He doesn't want us to be destroyed—the Bible says that "he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins." (2 Peter 3:9, gnb) So the fire of God can actually become a blessing instead of a burning to those who trust in him. It will work in your life to purify you!

One final example of this blessing that comes through the fire of God is seen at Pentecost. The disciples were gathered in a Jerusalem home waiting for the Holy Spirit as Christ had instructed them. Hear again that Pentecost experience as it is told to us in Acts 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)

An unusual, even bizarre experience, as we try to picture in our mind "tongues of fire" splitting up and resting on each of the disciples. But here again, like the burning bush for Moses, and the pillar of fire that went before the Israelites, and the coal to Isaiah's lips, here again is the fire of God (this time in the form of tongues of fire) not just destroying or purifying but being a source of blessing and divine presence that brings with it the gift of languages as each disciple began to speak in a language they had never learned but could be understood by the crowds gathered there—people of all different languages. It meant that all of the people gathered could hear the Good News in their own language!

And that's the amazing thing—the fire of God is the purifying, holy presence of God within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Not just purifying us and cleansing us, but also empowering us for the purpose of telling others about God's great love. Isaiah's lips were touched by that fiery hot coal to cleanse his lips so that he could tell others about God. The disciples were touched with God's fire so they could share the good news in ways that others would understand.

God wants to touch your life with fire to cleanse and purify your life, but also to empower you to tell others about how great God's love is. Your response to the Holy Spirit will determine whether that fire destroys you or empowers you.

Remember the prairie fires? Pioneers could hear the fire coming. They could see

the smoke. They could not outrun it—prairie fires travel so fast they would be caught up in its intensity and be destroyed. Unless they acted quickly.

Whenever they saw smoke from a lightning fire in the distance and heard the fire coming, they would go downwind from their wagons and actually set the plains on fire themselves. The wind would then push that fire and burn the grass downwind from them. Once the grass was burned, they would then move their horses and wagons onto the scorched land. When the prairie fire from the lightning did reach them, they were safe because there was no longer any grass to be burned. As long as they stood on the ground that had already been burned, the fire would go around them and press on downwind, burning away all that dry fuel of grass, but would leave them untouched and safe.

Jesus Christ allowed the fire of God to burn his life. When you and I trust in Christ, we can stand within the burned ground of his life and then allow the purifying holy presence of God in our lives, and the all-consuming fire of God burns everything else around us, but leaves us purified, cleansed, and empowered to live a new, abundant life in him and to have the power to tell others about him.

Friends, the fire of God will consume everything—everything—you included—unless you are standing in Christ and submit to the Spirit because our God is a consuming fire. You will either be consumed by him or purified and empowered in him. Which will it be?

*Pray: for those to put their faith in him. For those who have but are sinning to repent and ask forgiveness of it's like carrying gasoline—not safe, not smart! Drop it!*