

“The Holy Spirit and Fire”

As Jesus begins His ministry He comes to John the Baptist to be baptized. Just prior to that, John talked about Jesus: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). Note: “with the Holy Spirit *and fire...*”!

Three years later, Jesus’ followers are gathered in Jerusalem. Jesus has risen from the dead and gone back to heaven. Now His followers are waiting for the Holy Spirit to come, as Jesus had promised. On the Jewish festival day called “Pentecost”, God pours out His Spirit on them! This event is described in Acts 2:1-4: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Did you notice it says there were *tongues of fire* distributed and resting on each of those present (Acts 2:3). It's hard to understand what actually happened in that upper room that day, but some sort of *fire* was generated as a physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit being there!

Fire is a powerful symbol, isn't it? There's something primeval about fire. Did you ever catch yourself entranced by flames dancing in a fireplace? Ever rush to the scene of a neighborhood fire?

The Bible at times uses the imagery of fire to symbolize some great truths. For one thing, fire is a symbol of God's presence and activity. God appeared to Moses in *a bush that was on fire*, but not being consumed. When God led the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, a *pillar of fire* went with them at night, symbolizing God's presence with them. Listen to what it says in Exodus 19 about the Lord appearing to Moses on Mount Sinai as the Ten Commandments are given: “Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire” (Exodus 19:18).

Fire symbolized the presence and activity of God! When fire is used in connection with the Holy Spirit, it reminds us that the Holy Spirit is God's actual presence with us!

For example, when we first trust Christ as Savior and are saved, the Holy Spirit comes and begins to live in us – the actual presence of God in us! Hear Jesus' words on this: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you...those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:15-18, 23). Jesus is speaking to His followers. The Spirit would be *Christ Himself making His home in us!*

Does God live in you? *He does* – if we've turned from our sins and trusted Christ as Savior. It

is the Holy Spirit who makes this happen!

But there are other ways the Holy Spirit brings an awareness of God's presence!

Have you ever been in a place - a meeting, a worship service or spiritual rally - where you just sensed the presence of God? Well, that's the work of the Holy Spirit! Sometimes a person will even say, "I felt Holy Spirit moving...". Have you ever had times in your life when you felt dried up spiritually? Far from God? Then something happened to fill you with a fresh joy in the Lord, a new feeling that God was with you? That's the work of the Holy Spirit!

I had such an experience. I was in college, planning to be pastor. I was discouraged, and I hated school. I was thinking of quitting. I felt all dried up spiritually. Three other young adults and I at that time would gather each Friday night at my home church for prayer and sharing. This particular night we were meeting in the church nursery, sitting on those little seats. I remember praying the words of a hymn, "I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasy; no sudden rending of the veil of clay. No angel visitant, no opening skies, just take the dimness of my soul away". Just then I felt this rush inside of me. I became light-headed. It was as though Someone picked me up in that little chair, turned my face and my whole body toward the ceiling. This has never happened to me before and has never happened since. But I felt the presence of God that night. After that encounter with God, my discouragement lifted. I felt a new breathe of life in my spirit. The Bible became alive in a fresh way. And with it I gained a new resolve to remain in school, and continue the course ahead toward pastoral ministry.

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire..." (Matthew 3:11). The Holy Spirit brings God's presence into our life!

Also, fire in the Bible symbolizes purging and cleansing. If we read on in Matthew 3, where John the Baptist speaks of Jesus as the One who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire, it talks about this process of purging. Look at Matthew 3:12: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." The picture here is of Jesus taking His winnowing fork and tossing the grain up in the air, where the wind can sort the wheat from the chaff.

Fire can be used to purge away impurities, like when certain metals are subjected to intense heat and fire, and the impurities are burned away. This suggests that ***the Holy Spirit makes us aware of God's holiness, and purges us from sin.*** Do you remember what happened on the day of Pentecost, after the Spirit came with the wind and the fire in the upper room? Peter preaches a powerful sermon about Jesus, and how the Jesus they put to death is Lord and Messiah. Hearing that message, people were cut to the heart, and said, "What shall we do?" Peter replies, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). When the Spirit came with fire on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit created this atmosphere where people could sense the holy God, and their own need to be purified of sin and evil!

Check out history. Look at some of the great spiritual awakenings, the great revivals documented in history – where large groups of people, sometimes whole communities would turn to Christ. One of the things you see is people being made aware of their perversions and moral failings, and longing to be clean and pure!

Jesus talked about this part of the Spirit's work: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned" (John 16:7-8).

When any *individual* feels genuine sorrow for their sins and a desire to trust Christ in order to be forgiven and saved...when any *group of people* feel a collective grief over their shortcomings and failures and want to be cleansed...that is the work of the Holy Spirit – the fire of God that purges and cleanses!

It is always good to remember that though God is gentle and kind, He is also, as the Bible says, *a consuming fire* who can burn away the scum and contaminants in our life. Sam Shoemaker was an Episcopalian priest who had a wonderful way to apply faith to life. In his book *With the Holy Spirit and With Fire* he says this: "There is, and I think there is meant to be, something a little terrifying in the use of the word 'fire' in connection with the Holy Spirit. To be swept clean by Him, so that nothing of us remained but what was pleasing to Him, would be wonderful; but it would be frightening too."

One of the great works of the Holy Spirit is His ability to purge away sin and evil! If we're followers of Jesus, we ought to be praying regularly for specific individuals without Christ – that the Spirit will convict them of their sins and their need of a Savior. How about praying for a moral and spiritual awakening in our community, in our nation – that people will turn away from the filth and trash that characterize our society and culture – and seek the cleansing power of Christ in our hearts and in our nation! Of course, I pray that God will put in each of us a longing to allow the Spirit to get deep inside us and wash away the dirt and the things that distance us from God!

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire..." (Matthew 3:11). ***But fire also suggests power.*** Get near the heat of a bonfire or campfire, and you'll feel the power of the heat and flames. We drive cars powered by the internal combustion engine, whose controlled flame and spark propel us to our destinations. We even speak of "firepower". Fire, set loose in nature, can be an awesome, scary thing. It was a windy day in July, 1994. Storm Mountain, Colorado. It was more or less a typical forest fire. A group of elite firefighters – "smokejumpers" – had parachuted out of a plane to provide the first line of defense and get the blaze under control. Suddenly a strong wind created an explosion of heat and flame that raced up the side of a canyon. Contrary to most everything else in nature, fire travels *faster* uphill than down. This elite crew of smokejumpers stationed along the ridge of mountain were engulfed in a firestorm

so intense that escape was almost impossible. Fourteen of these brave people died before they could get away from the rapidly spreading flames. The awesome *power* of fire!

So many times in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is associated with power – *especially the power to spread the message of Jesus*. Jesus promised His followers, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” Acts 1:8. How much power does this church have to reach people in the surrounding area who aren’t yet saved? We feel pretty inadequate, at times, don’t we? How much power do you and I have to influence the people at work, at school, in our neighborhood for Christ? Often it takes more courage than we have in order to share our faith as Christians, and to help other people find the Lord! *But God hasn’t told us we have to accomplish this ourselves! He has given us the Holy Spirit and His firepower!*

Someone has reminded us that one of the chief qualities about fire is its ability to set something else on fire – it spreads! We see that happening with the first century Christians. After they received the fullness of the Spirit at Pentecost, these timid followers of Jesus were given new power to spread the message of Jesus – and the Christian movement spread like a prairie fire! That same firepower of the Spirit is available in the church today!

The Holy Spirit and fire.....isn’t that a great image of the Holy Spirit and His work? An Anglican bishop was asked to preach at a Christian conference in England. For many weeks he didn’t respond. The Corresponding Secretary for the conference finally wrote: “We must know if you are coming. We need to make our plans.” The bishop wrote back that he was waiting for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and would let them know of his decision in 4 weeks. Whereupon an exasperated secretary fired back this letter: “Bishop, please don’t bother. Cancel the invitation (to speak). We are not interested in having anyone speak at our conference who lives 4 weeks away from the Holy Spirit.”

How close are we to the firepower of the Holy Spirit? John the Baptist promised that the one coming after him – Jesus – **would** baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. *God wants this for His children!*

How do we access the fire of the Spirit for our life? It starts when we turn from our sins and trust Christ as our Savior (we receive the Spirit then). But the fire of the Spirit grows in us when we: hunger for Him, long for Him, pray, for Him, and surrender to Him our own self will and all that is evil! Day by day...keep at it...don’t give up!

Jean Cocteau is a French writer, artist and film director. Somebody once asked him this: If your house was on fire and you could remove only one thing, what would you remove? Cocteau shot back, “I would take the fire!” In a way, that seems like a smart-aleck reply. If you take the fire, your house would stop burning! But he probably meant something different. No doubt he meant that out of everything in the house, he would want the fire, the passion, that was necessary as a creative artist to succeed. *It’s when we want the fire of the Holy Spirit in our life more than any earthly thing that we are on the right track – and open ourselves up to the fullness of the Spirit!*

