

Our God is a Consuming Fire

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Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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Hebrews 12:29

For our God is a consuming fire.

We live in a time that has the mind-set that if it is old it is not worthwhile. We prefer the modern to the historical. Society craves the new. New ideas are almost always better than old ideas. At least that is the thinking today. People think that whatever the man of antiquity thought 300 years ago has been improved upon. We see ourselves as more sophisticated and much more intelligent. We are the generation that has sent men to the moon and split the atom. Therefore, it is concluded that modern man is advanced. For example, the progressive culture of today believes that its ideas of morality are much improved upon the morality, of let's say, the Puritans. Modern thinking disdains the morals of the Puritans and often makes puritanical thought the object of ridicule and mockery. Such high standards of ethics and conduct are considered unsophisticated and unsound. Today the moral ethic that has evolved from our enlightenment is amoral. If it feels good to you, then it is moral. Some improvement!

Modern, or better yet, post-modern, man also has contempt for any classical or historical view of God. The view of God that conservative evangelical Christians have is considered old-fashioned and archaic. Adherence to Scripture is laughable to the present age of modern wisdom. To maintain the view of God that was held by the fathers is to be out of step with progress in religion. According to the intellectual, man knows so much more now than he did a hundred years ago, and with his growth in knowledge has come a supposedly more enlightened view of God. Man today refuses to be saddled with an old view of God that cramps his style.

But post-modern man has made one major mistake in his rationale about God and about truth. He has chosen to ignore the simple fact that truth cannot change. Truths, meaning statements of fact, can change, but not truth itself. For example, it is a fact that the pews' upholstery is teal in color. But we could change that if we so desired, and it would no longer be teal. But truth cannot be changed because truth is the reality of an unchanging God. God is the beginning point for all truth since He is the creator of all things. Jesus said He was, "the truth." God does not evolve; He cannot do so. If He was truth a thousand years ago, He must be truth today and a thousand years from today.

If truth originated with man, then truth could change for man has the ability to change. But man cannot establish reality since man is not the creator. Reality can only come from the very one who created all that is real, and that someone is God.

Therefore, whatever was true about God is always true about God. The writer of Hebrews has provided a clear presentation and argument of God's immutability. Whatever is said of God in the Old Testament concerning His person and character has not changed.

To say that the New Testament gave only one view or perspective of God would be wrong. But it is also wrong for us to emphasize one particular view of God to an overemphasis, or ignore some of the Bible's presentations of God because we do not like them or understand them. One of the views of God that the writer wanted to remind his readers is, "our God is a consuming fire." And in this present ever-vacillating world we need to see this presentation of God. In a world that thinks it has improved upon its understanding of God, this view must be pressed in on it again.

THE NATURE OF FIRE

Deuteronomy chapter four and the twenty-fourth verse states, "For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God." It is from this text of Scripture that the writer of Hebrews reminds the Jewish Christians of who God is. He has spent a large portion of this letter proving to them the difference in how God has dealt with His people. In the Old Testament He dealt with Israel through the Old Covenant. In the New Testament He has established with the Church a New Covenant. Although, the covenants may have changed, the writer seems intent on proving God has not changed. If there is any continuity between the Old and New Covenants it is this—God has not changed.

In the Old Testament God is stated as being a consuming fire. The same words describe the God of the New Testament. I know the boasted wisdom of the age tells us that we have made a great advance upon Old Testament revelation. It is not so. The revelation that Moses saw of God the first time was a consuming fire, and the writer of Hebrews reminds us that God is still a consuming fire. Let us discuss for a moment the nature of fire and thereby learn something of the nature of God.

Fire is hazardous. How useful fire is to man, but oh, how dangerous it is. Respect fire and it will bless you, transgress its laws and it will destroy you. This is the nature of fire and it is the nature of God. Our God is called a consuming fire. It describes Him perfectly. Not only do you serve a God that is tender and kind but also a God as dangerous as fire. He can either bless you or harm you. You must respect Him or else you will be burned. This is the reason for the exhortation of verse twenty-eight which we studied last week, "let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." Why must we serve God in this very defined manner? The answer is verse twenty-nine, "For our God is a consuming fire."

You cannot approach fire in a haphazard way. You must pay attention to its power. Its power can be used to produce, build and advance. But its power can destroy, demolish, and take life. We cannot approach God in a haphazard way. The nature of God is holy, and holiness to an unholy creature is deadly. God testified to Moses that no man could look upon His holy face and live. It is no surprise or wonder that when God has appeared to men in much glory they fell to the ground as ones who had died. Our God is a consuming fire, and He cannot be approached without the asbestos suit of Christ's righteousness. Approach Him in your own goodness and righteousness and you will go up in a puff of smoke. The holiness of God will see your righteousness for what it really is—filthy rags. You need the righteousness of Christ, and only then are you safe from the raging inferno of God's purity.

We would also say the nature of fire is that it is hot. Another way of saying it is that fire is intense; it is intense heat. There is no such thing as a cold fire. Even the coolest of fires will burn you. The Lord is also very intense in His nature and attributes. There is no apathy with God, nor is there any lukewarmness in what He does. You could say God is very passionate in whatever He believes and whatever He does. Our Lord does not halfway do something. Thank God! He did not halfway redeem us. We do not need to somehow figure out a way to get the rest of the job done. Oh no, we are redeemed and God did it. Nor is our salvation something that will not remain. What kind of salvation is it that God rescues the sinner only to lose the sinner later? If a man was drowning and a lifeguard saved him only to lose him to the tides before reaching shore we would not say the lifeguard saved him. No, of course not. The paper would not come and get his story how he rescued the drowning man. They would not take his picture and print the caption saying this was the lifeguard that saved a man. There was no rescue. There is no salvation unless complete deliverance occurs. If God is the God of salvation then our rescue from sin must be complete. "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). God is intent in saving His elect.

Neither can it be said that the Lord somewhat loves His children. He loves us thoroughly and with such intensity that we cannot but feel His love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given us. He has set His love upon us and burned it within our hearts so that no matter how bitterly cold the world may be, the warmth of His love remains. God is intensely love! His passion for us is red-hot and He pursues us as a lover would his love.

But as His love is intense and not lukewarm, so is His justice. God is intensely righteous. He can no more look the other way and ignore sin than fire can be tepid. Anyone or anything that is against His Son God is against and will come against in all His fury. He will not deal with it mildly nor will His rebuke be gentle. God's wrath will be hotter than the furnace. It will be more violent than the tornado's wind. Its destruction will be more devastating than a nuclear weapon. The Lord God cannot be halfhearted in anything He does for all of His attributes are infinite. God is intense. That is the nature of fire and that is the nature of God Almighty. Let us now proceed to the characteristics of fire.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FIRE

Fire represents many things in Scripture. It can illustrate purity. Fire purifies gold and silver. And trials that purify the believer are often considered like fire. Fire is also a representation of power. Its power is known to destroy as well as empower. We must look and understand the characteristics of fire. What are its properties and functions? What can fire do? If our God is compared to fire, then we must know fire's characteristics and thereby know God. First, beginning with the negative and ending with the positive, I wish for us to see God's person as a consuming fire that destroys.

Fire destroys. The Lord displayed His judgment against Israel using fire. In Numbers 11:1 "And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the LORD burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp." The prophet Nahum compares the anger of God to fire when he said, "Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him" (Nahum 1:6).

If you refuse the Christ, you will know the fury of His fire and you will be consumed by its flames, for God is a consuming fire. The fire of God destroys all and His raging flames cannot be controlled or put out. There is no retardation of its flame. In the book of Daniel, the three Hebrew men, Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego refused to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's idol. This so infuriated the king that he ordered his furnace to be heated up seven times hotter than normal. It was so hot those who threw the Hebrew dissidents into the furnace died just from the heat of the furnace. Continue in your willful and sinful ways and God's anger will be heated many times over against you and it will consume you. Its flames shall lick you up like dried grass or paper. The flames of God are fueled by sin. It feeds upon the wickedness of man. That is why sin makes no sense. It only heats up the anger of God against you. Lusts of the flesh are food for its fury. Sins of the mind equally feed its flames. Anger and evil words are particular favorites of the righteous judgment of God. Pride and the love of money will be both consumed in God's indignant fire. No sin can hide from this fire that gorges itself on all wickedness.

There should be fear in your heart towards God. What man would think of running into a house that is totally engulfed with fire without the proper equipment? Only a fool would do so. But fearlessly unconverted men run into the fire of God's justice and they are destroyed. Continue to live your life in disregard to His commandments and refuse His Son's sacrifice for your disobedience and you will perish. The flames of hell are an eternal memorial that God is a consuming fire. The burning fire of hell is nothing else but the manifestation of God's judgment against you and all that have rebelled against Him.

Disregard the nature of fire and you will suffer. Disregard the laws of fire and you will incur grave consequences. Hear the author of Hebrews' warning; do not play with God for He is a consuming fire!

God as a consuming fire not only destroys the wicked but also purifies the righteous. Fire purifies. The furnace purifies the most precious of metals. Its flames refine and cleanse. God is

ever perfecting His saints and burning the dross of impurities that remains within them. Do you labor under the fear you may not be the child of God? Let me give you a test that will for settle for sure where you stand with this consuming fire called God. Does sin seem to hound you and weary you? I mean does it seem no matter what you do you still find sins hanging around you neck like an albatross and you long to be free? You loathe what seems to you an inability to overcome. If this is you, then, my friend, you are experiencing the purifying fire of God. His holy flames are licking at your heart and the burning holiness of His righteousness is searing the impurities. The fire of God brings light to the darkness of our sins. It exposes what we did not know existed. That is the business of fire or light—to expose the things hidden in darkness. This is the privilege of the child of God, and this is the experience of all those who are on the King's highway.

Oh, I would that all of you know this fire of purity! Some I fear know nothing of this work of God. You do not know by personal experience God's work of chastening. "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Hebrews 12:6). Your back is free of the scourger's whip. Sin does not disturb you. You are quite at home with your pet sins, and you have no intention of giving them up. The fire of sanctification does not consume your lusts. You do not yearn nor crave to grow in holiness. In your mind, being saved is enough for you. But hear me, my friend, you are not saved. Only those whom God has saved are the ones who experience this sin-purging fire. It burns within the breast of all those who have been redeemed, burning and destroying the works of the flesh and remaining corruption.

Dear child of God, do not doubt your Father's love because you feel this fire raging within your soul. Whom God loves He chastens. The fire of purification is one of the sincerest evidences of His love. The one who should doubt God's love is the person who never experiences anguishing over his sin. If you do not feel the heat of conscience and the blazing fire of the Holy Spirit's conviction then you are not loved by God, for only those whom He loves, He chastens and scourges every child whom He receives.

This lack of concern about sanctification that I see today troubles me. It troubles me greatly. We have mistakenly, and at a terrible price, separated justification and sanctification. Today we hear things like, "Jesus Christ can be your savior but not your Lord. If you have accepted Jesus as your savior, now accept Him as your Lord." Or, "Discipleship is for those who are saved and want to go deeper in Christ. You can be a Christian and not a disciple." These statements are typical and are a symptom of a theology that separates justification and sanctification.

These two aspects of salvation cannot be separated. God has not done this, and we must not teach such an incomplete salvation. Salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins, but it also includes victory over sin and the eventual removal of sin's power and presence in us. "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Can one be saved and ignore the will of God continuously? Of course not! "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification

and honour” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4). The apostle Paul writes that salvation is not complete without sanctification. He says in Second Thessalonians chapter two and verse thirteen, “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation **through sanctification** of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” How many would dare say that you could be saved without believing the truth? We would not begin to open our mouths to utter such a blasphemy, and yet we say that sanctification is optional—that is blasphemy! The Scripture says, “salvation through sanctification.” There is no salvation without sanctification.

Men have wanted the blessing of knowing that they are forgiven and justified. Justification has been rightly emphasized, but sanctification has been ignored. Yet the great evidence of justification is sanctification. Salvation begins with justification, but it continues with the purifying work of God in the new believer’s life, thoughts and attitudes. In other words, if you do not know the refiner’s fire burning in your soul you have not been converted. If the holy flames of grace are not destroying the remaining corruption of your heart then you do not have right standing with God. Oh, what a tragedy that pastors and theologians have invented strange fire to appease and excuse the wickedness in the pews and even in their own lives. Designing and fabricating doctrines that promote a lackadaisical attitude toward sin and holiness has been the work of devils. Apathy about growing in grace is deadly. It’s worse than a diabetic being apathetic about taking his or her insulin.

Our God is a consuming fire and He will burn sin wherever it is to be found, but especially within the believer’s heart. Within the heart the flames of God will purify and work its cleansing, for it is within the child of God’s heart that the holy flames of grace have been deposited and its flames cannot be extinguished.

And finally, fire is energy. It is productive. God as fire consumes to empower His servants. It was the Baptist who said that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And on that long awaited day of Joel’s prophecy, the fire of God descended on 120 hungry souls. The consuming fire of God ignited twelve apostles and 108 followers of Christ. They received an empowerment that changed the world, and today its effects are still being felt. We are a result of the fire of Pentecost.

The book of Acts is a testimony to the fact that God empowers His church and that the only power sufficient for the church is the fire of God. The blessed Christ, before leaving His small flock, commands them to wait for the fire to fall. He says to them,

For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence . . . But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:5, 8).

The Bible tells us that they obeyed and waited for the promised fire of power. Perhaps they obeyed for no other reason than that our Lord commanded them to do so. But I think also they felt the enormity of the task of taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth. They knew that without God granting them supernatural power they were woefully inadequate. These men were just fisherman and for the most part common laborers. It was later said of them that they were ignorant, meaning not educated in the seminaries and universities of their day. The apostles, along with others, knew all too well the certainty of failure if they did not wait as the Lord had commanded. And so they waited, and so the fire fell.

Oh, that we felt the impossibility of the task so that we would be motivated to wait for the endowment of power! And oh, that we felt the weight of the command to take the Gospel to the whole world. I am convinced that we do not believe this command to be ours personally, and therefore we are not motivated to wait upon God for the heavenly fire. You are not so impressed by God that He has called you to preach, teach, and make disciples. “That is the clergy’s task and not mine,” is your reasoning. Please note, that when the fire fell on the Day of Pentecost, that it was not only the clergy upon whom the Holy Spirit fell. He empowered the laity that had gathered with them to wait for the Promise of the Father. May God make you to know the seriousness of His call to “Go.”

I am convinced that this is God’s procedure that He works through a people whom the fire of the Spirit is energizing. He has not asked us to apply our strength and knowledge to bless Him. Far from it, for “they that are in the flesh cannot please God.” He has always meant to grant a fire of power to the weak and infirm and thereby glorify Himself. Why won’t we lay down the carnal weapons of our warfare, and wait upon the Lord for heavenly power? The Christian and the church have no other power source.

The church has had men of great intellect. But all their intellectual powers are useless without the Holy Spirit’s fire. Surely Paul would be considered one of the church’s keenest minds. Yet Paul refused to rely upon knowledge to persuade the Corinthians of the claims of Christ. Nor did he rely upon oratory and eloquence. Paul said to the Corinthians,

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God . . . And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

What then did Paul rely upon? He answers in the last portion of verse four, “but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” There is no doubt Paul was able to have intellectually persuaded many of his case and cause men to mentally assent to the truth of Christ as we do today. This is our method, so we now have training classes and seminars teaching people the skill of how to persuasively reason with men concerning salvation. But Paul knew what we seem to have forgotten—that salvation is supernatural and not just mental. What is needed for a man to be converted is a new birth; a new birth of the spirit, and only the Holy Spirit can do this. “Except a man be born of water and of [or by] the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John

3:5). And so Paul refused the powers of flesh that he might be endued with the power of the Spirit so that he could say to the Corinthians, “That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:5).

Oh, that is it, “the power of God.” That is our need today. Fresh fire. We need live coals of the altar of God to touch us. Would God do it today! But we have done the opposite of Paul. We have forsaken this fire of heaven’s power and we have depended upon our natural talents and practiced skills to do the work of the Lord. And we go on weak and live as miserable paupers. We are as powerless as a homeless man having nothing. We are nothing without this fire from heaven and we will keep on doing nothing without it.

How can I hope you will be any different as a result of hearing this message? What will keep us from leaving here as we often do—as powerless as we came? We leave unchanged and unaffected. It is only that God would be so kind to us and give us what we do not deserve but desperately need—the fire from above.

It is no wonder that the world pays the church little attention. As far as it is concerned it is has already conducted our funeral and has left us in the grave, and it did not mourn our passing. We are irrelevant to the world. We do not even make the world angry with us anymore. We have so little of God filling us that we are not so much as an interruption to the world and its agenda. We shall continue to be irrelevant as long as we refuse to stop everything, get before the Father of Promise, and wait for this mighty outpouring of His Spirit.

What we need is what Elijah experienced on Mount Carmel. The world of Elijah’s day was much like ours in that true faith of God had become irrelevant to culture in general. Out of the entire nation of Israel there were only seven thousand true believers. The remainder of Israel claimed to be believers, as do the majority of Americans today, but they really were not as most Americans are not. But one man was ignited by God and burned within himself with a passion for God’s glory. This one man, Elijah, is said by James to be a man of “like passions as we are.” He is no different than we today as far as his human constitution. But he had one major difference about him and that was God consumed him. That is the difference we need; we must have it. Elijah had it.

On Mount Carmel Elijah challenged eight hundred and fifty false religious leaders. When God’s fire ignites your soul you will reject this pseudo-peace and perverted unity that religion has today. You will speak out against the false spirituality that exists. There are not many ways to God and we are all not on our way to God on separate paths. There is only one way, and it is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Elijah’s challenge was that two altars were to be erected. The false prophets would build theirs and Elijah would restore the broken altar of God. Each would take a bull, sacrifice it, and lay them on the respective altars. But here’s the catch—neither Elijah or the false preachers could light the wood and burn the sacrifice. Elijah said to them, “And call ye on the name of your gods,

and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God” (I Kings 18:24).

The false religious leaders began to pray to their false gods from before noon to about four o'clock in the afternoon. They prayed, cried, sang, preached, danced, and even cut themselves to get the attention of a god that did not exist. And when they were exhausted from their religious activities, Elijah did something most unusual. He dug a trench around the altar and requested that twelve barrels of water be poured over the sacrifice and wood. The water was poured over his altar until sacrifice, wood, and trench were water logged. Then Elijah prayed a very simple prayer,

LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again (I Kings 18:36-37).

The Bible records this answer to Elijah's prayer, "Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench" (I Kings 18:38).

I fear that we are more like the false prophets than we are Elijah in that if we cannot use our own fire we do not know what to do. We, like them, make a lot of noise, but no fire. We too are exhausted from all our religious activities, and we have no fire. We need this fire. God has promised us this fire. It is this fire that burns our lives as a living sacrifice and God is glorified. We must have this fire. Oh how we must have it!

May God consume our lives with His holy fire! As on the Day of Pentecost may the fire of God rest upon each of us. Oh, to God, that all His people were prophets! Are you on the altar as a living sacrifice? Have you given Him the full load of your life and have you drenched your life with the water of His Word? Are you waiting in faith for the answer to your prayer for fire to consume you and cause your life to brightly burn for His glory? There is a fire and we desperately need it. The light from our lives seems to have dimmed. We are no longer a flame but a flicker, barely a spark of light left. But oh, when God descends He will bring with Him the fire of heaven and consecrate the altar, our altars, and our sacrifices with power. Only then and not until then will we be any service to the Kingdom of God.

But the same fire that empowers and purifies the believer will destroy the unbeliever. The sinner has no protection against the consuming fire of God's glory. He or she, unlike the Christian, does not have the asbestos suit of Christ's righteousness. They will be melted down by the fervent anger of God's holy justice. They will know nothing of His mercy, only His wrath. What will be your refuge, dear sinner, at His appearing? Where will you be able to flee and hide from Him who comes with a flaming sword? There is no escaping His all-seeing eye. That will be the day of final accounting. It will be the day when the justice of God will no longer be delayed but

will come forth as the sun. You will not be given today's opportunity of mercy. There will be no services, no sermons pleading for your surrender, no invitations to accept Christ. Only judgment, the red-hot fire of His holy presence, and the blistering hot censure of His displeasure will you know. And finally you will be given over to the tormentors and to the ever-burning flames of God's righteous justice. May God have mercy upon you today. Amen.