

To God Alone Be The Glory

If you wanted to start a fire outside, how would you go about it? I'd start with a good, safe fire pit. Then I'd arrange dry paper, dry kindling, and dry logs into a little tepee. Strike a dry match, light the paper, and stand back. Soon there would be a nice fire for roasting weenies and marshmallows. Show of hands: how many of you would start a fire by pouring water over everything first? No one? Is none of you named Elijah? There was a time when the prophet Elijah met the 450 prophets of Baal at the top of Mt. Carmel in order to demonstrate once and for all that "*the LORD—He is God.*" Elijah challenged all those false prophets to call on Baal to send fire from the sky to light the fire under their offering. They prayed and sang and danced and slashed themselves from morning till mid-afternoon. When it was obvious that Baal was not going to answer them that day—how could he? He was a figment of their imagination! Elijah then doused his whole offering with water three times—he didn't want anyone to claim he was about to light the fire by trickery when in fact the one true God was about to answer Elijah's short prayer with fire from the sky. Usually water suppresses fire. That's point I'm trying to make.

But when Jesus wanted the world to know that he is the Savior we all need—one who would give us a holy record before God, one who would take the responsibility of our sins on himself—he talked about his

saving work in terms of THE BAPTISM THAT KINDLED A FIRE. Wait! How could applying water by sprinkling, pouring, or dunking cause a conflagration? Normally it wouldn't, yet in our text Jesus says, ⁵⁰*I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!*

The Baptism (50). Do you get it? Jesus is using the term "baptism" in a figurative sense. We can tell because putting water on someone does not cause them to burst into flame. Also, Jesus had already been baptized by John t in the Jordan River. Also, Jesus never received a second baptism of water. Also, baptism is not normally something that people are distressed about. Baptism usually causes joy, because baptism is one of the ways that God dispenses his forgiveness to sinners. But Jesus is distressed about his impending baptism. By "baptism" he must mean his upcoming death, which will involve suffering the whole fiery judgment of hell for the sins of the world.

Fiery judgment. This leads us back to **The Fire** Jesus mentioned (49,51-53). Jesus said, ⁴⁹*I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!* There he goes again, speaking in picture language. What could Jesus be talking about this time? The first thing that comes to my mind is the fire of Judgment Day—destructive fire. That's when Jesus will send down fire and brimstone to burn up everything on earth. But Jesus says he wishes the fire were already kindled. If the fires of judgment

were kindled already by then, many people would die in unbelief before Jesus paid for their sins. That would make Jesus a maniacal God. Jesus wants all people to be saved. So this fire that Jesus wishes were already kindled has something to do with wanting everyone come to a knowledge of the truth—not destructive fire, but saving fire.

Who do you know in the Bible that causes a saving fire? What about the fire of the Holy Spirit? The tongues of fire he sent on Pentecost—that was saving fire.

Which reminds me of how John the Baptist had predicted the Messiah would baptize Jesus' followers with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16)? The Holy Spirit is the one who causes saving faith to burn like fire in the hearts of believers (see 2 Tim 1:6, Luke 24:32, 1 Thess 5:19). Believers feel a burning desire to share the good news with others so they catch the fire of the Holy Spirit. Think about it. After Pentecost when the Holy Spirit set the disciples on fire, they boldly testified about Jesus, even when they were beaten, imprisoned, and ordered not to speak about Jesus ever again. So it is our loving, gracious Savior who says, *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!* First Jesus has to save the world. Then the Holy Spirit can fire up the church to spread the good news.

Ah, but fire also has a tendency to burn things up. And Jesus wants his followers

to understand that when the gospel spreads to you and sets you on fire, it may just burn up your closest bonds of association and kinship. That's why he says, ⁵¹*Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.* This is one of Jesus' "hit-you-between-the-eyes" statements that people have trouble figuring out. This one is especially hard for people who think of Jesus as only warm and fuzzy. Oh, Jesus is warm and fuzzy, but according to the Bible, he is also holy and just.

In one sense Jesus did come to bring "peace." Isaiah had called the coming Savior the "*Prince of Peace*" (9:6). When Jesus was born, the angels sang, "*peace to those on whom his favor rests*" (Luke 2:14). The night before Jesus' baptism of suffering, he told his disciples, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you*" (John 14:27). On Easter evening Jesus greeted his disciples by twice saying, "*Peace be with you*" (John 20:19,21). In the epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul rejoiced, "*Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (5:1). Jesus did come to bring this kind of peace on earth—peace with God.

But as Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem to make peace between sinners and God, it is becoming clearer to him that many people are not accepting his message. Reminds me of what aged Simeon had told Joseph and Mary about baby Jesus (Luke 2:34)—"*this child is destined to cause the*

falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” Jesus sees this happening. It is distressing to Jesus. He wishes his part of the mission were finished so his followers could share it and spread it.

Wherever Christians have taken the gospel of forgiveness in Christ, conflict [“a sword”] has usually resulted. But why should the gospel of peace cause a division? Think about it. Christ offers to sinners complete pardon because of his atoning work. By God’s grace some receive this offer with joy. But many resent and reject the gospel for one of two reasons. 1) Some folks are very proud of their accomplishments in life, and frankly they don’t like the implication the gospel makes. What implication? Remember, the gospel offers complete pardon of sin, which implies people are sinners. They need pardon. They need a Savior. Oh, now that’s just a little too much for their pride to take. “I’m not perfect, but I’m not that bad. I’m a good person.” That’s how the sinful flesh likes to think. Consider every joke you’ve heard about the pearly gates of heaven. Nearly every single one implies that good people get into heaven, and you know how many times those pearly gates jokes get repeated. 2) The other reason the gospel results in division is because it calls on us to leave our lives of sin, and frankly, people like certain sins. They want to keep on living in a way that they claim

makes them happy (even though sin always leads to misery). So they push away Christ and his gospel and all his believers.

“Oh, all this friction is terrible! Come on, Pastor: ‘Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me...’ Maybe you should stop speaking the truth about Jesus if it’s so divisive.” Why? So everyone can ‘row, row, row, the boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, all the way to...’ hell? No, Jesus came to save people from hell. He brought a solution for sin that actually works. It is not the fault of Jesus or the gospel that some people don’t like God’s solution or fight against it. The world is definitely better off with the division Jesus brought than without it because at least some people believe the gospel and have peace with God and with other believers.

This is why I keep asking you to spend time in God’s Word every day. I want you exposed to God’s teachings on sin, grace, holiness. I want your heart so full of God’s joy and peace that it comes bubbling up and out in your conversations in a pleasant way, never toxic. You never get to be a jerk about Jesus. But even when you are gentle and kind, clashes are inevitable. Jesus wants his followers to know that hostile divisions will cut through all of society, even families. Jesus is alluding to Micah 7:6 when he says, ⁵²*From now on there will*

be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.

Families do not believe as a group. Each person believes for himself/herself. It's wonderful when your relatives are happy believers in Jesus too. But if you choose Jesus and his Word over your own family... If you speak up about any sin that your family happens to be weak towards, you will feel division! Family just can't understand how you could love Jesus more than them, so the sparks fly. Your faith will be tested again and again. You will sometimes have to choose between submitting to false beliefs and practices of members of your own relatives or lining up with the truth as taught by Christ.

This division is one reason you will hear so many Christians urge young people to marry only a believer, never an unbeliever. Young people often ask me, "How can I tell if someone I want to date is a believer?" That easy. Ask them to come to church with you. What a great date! Jesus said, "*Those who belong to me listen to what God says*" (John 8:47). Those who feeds their faith through regular Bible reading are likely believers. Young people, always remember, the one you marry will have great influence over not just you, but your children as well. Ask yourself, "Will this person influence my children to know Jesus better, or will there be a division every time I bring up

how important Jesus is to me?" *If you marry an unbeliever, or someone with such weak faith that they often act like an unbeliever, there will be extra strife and sadness in your home. One unbeliever in a home can make things very hard for the believers. But don't stop saying prayers before meals. Don't stop bringing up Jesus while you're on the road. Don't 'keep the peace' when relatives come to visit by keeping quiet about Jesus in your own home. Jesus did not come to bring that kind of peace. We have too much to lose. So do our relatives.

Jesus underwent a baptism of God's wrath so that we could "*have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 5:1-2). Then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to kindle the fire of faith in people through the gospel. Whenever the gospel is shared anew, some will believe and others not. Expect division.

The truth is not divisive. People who don't want the truth are divisive. But the truth about Jesus is the one thing that can bring them peace with God. Those who enjoy the peace of forgiveness will also enjoy peace with you.