

Fire

Included with this talk is a list of Bible references used on Sunday (All from the ESV)

My aim, this morning, is to delve into the concept of fire in the Bible with the help of some reflections and music. In this short talk and service, I can only possibly hope to scratch the surface, of what is a vast subject. Clearly the Bible writers used the concept of fire in so many different ways and it is only when you come to study these that you realise how many. Fire is one of the most incredible metaphors in the Bible. All I can do is to offer you some food for thought, some pointers for you to do your own thinking, your own research.

I wonder what pictures your minds conjure up when I mention the word FIRE. In one sense I see a nice warm cosy fire, maybe in the hearth in a home, or a campfire which provides warmth, a feeling of fellowship and friendship, a never ending source of wonder and delight. I could sit and lose myself watching flames in a campfire or hearth fire for ages. In another sense I am petrified of fire. I am petrified of the destructive power and intense heat of fire.

Often natural fires are caused by lightning strikes. They burn forests and sometimes towns and villages. One of the largest fires in recent history was in 1825 when a fire tore through Maine and New Brunswick, Canada, burning 3 million acres of forest. However, most of the forest or wild fires are caused by humans. And humans accidentally cause fires in the home with chip pans, electric fires and candles for example. Some humans are responsible for arson, a destructive and often tragic crime.

The concept of fire is referred to time and time again in the Bible. There are hundreds and hundreds of references. We heard a very small selection of them earlier. Fire is used in many contexts and it is not surprising that it plays a very important role in the Bible. The Creator himself is described as a 'consuming fire'. Isn't that strange? How often is fire associated with creative rather than destructive forces? Yet if we think about it, no advance in civilisation has ever taken place without fire! Would anything be made? And our lives depend on that biggest ball of fire imaginable - the sun. There is no doubt that, the more we understand about fire the more useful it becomes.

In the Book of Acts we read of the fire that Jesus yearned for. Tongues of fire settled on those present and they rushed out into the streets. They rushed out into the streets to proclaim the glory and works of God. And the result was that 3000+ were baptised and became Christians there and then. Is it a coincidence that when Moses' Law was given under a fiery mountain, 3000 Israelites were killed? When Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to that Jerusalem Upper Room there was different kind of fire and 3000 people became Christians. One brought fear and anger and death, the other brought freedom, forgiveness and life. This was the all-consuming fire that stirred up the passion of so many on that day and has done for millions since that day

Of course there is another side to fire. Man has used and still does use fire as an instrument of destruction, cruelty or as in the case of Nazi Germany, to extinguish unwanted people. And as a result we have an unhealthy fear of fire. Fire accidents create havoc, produce horrible disasters and cause so many deaths. Images of the fireball, as a result of the Shoreham air crash, or the tragic events of September 11th and many others are imprinted on my mind. This also instils a fear of fire. The more we can use fire for positive reasons the more we will lose our fear. And more often than not, out of destruction, of homes and of forests, for example, comes new life and new hope.

And this is the context of Jesus' desire to 'kindle the fire' Fire, needs to be kindled. Jesus came to kindle fire. Jesus came to 'kindle new life'. The fires of our heart need to be kindled. Our own fire needs to be nurtured. Jesus wanted his followers to do good works, God's works and kindle their own fires and the fires of others. Jesus wants us to kindle or rekindle the fire of love in our hearts for our friends, neighbours and enemies. He wants us to pray for them.

Fire communicates the presence of God. Think about the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. Here fire is symbolic of God himself, for Moses turned away from the sight of the burning bush because he was afraid to look at God. God was in the fire. God was in the fire on Mount Sinai when the Law was given to the Israelites. In the New Testament Paul describes the second coming of Christ in "blazing fire" In Revelation John imagines Jesus with eyes 'like blazing fire' and all of these situations imply some form of judgement. Fire is seen as a symbol of God's anger and judgement - the eternal fire of damnation where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the Old Testament it is often a sign of God's wrath. But this is a purifying fire, a refining fire. And a special use of fire imagery in the New Testament is that connected with baptism with fire. John the Baptist seemed to preach with fire in his nostrils and he claimed that Jesus would baptise with "the Holy Spirit and with fire", a promise fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.

Peter Smith
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Hebrews 12:29 For our God is a consuming fire.

Luke 3:16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

2 Chronicles 7:1 As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

Psalm 104:4 He makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Matthew 18:8 And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

Exodus 13:21 And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.

2 Thessalonians 1:8 God is just; he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

Matthew 13:50 The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Exodus 14:24 And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic.

Malachi 3:2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.

1 Chronicles 21:26 And David built there an altar to the Lord and presented burnt offerings and peace offerings and called on the Lord, and the Lord answered him with fire from heaven upon the altar of burnt offering.

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Leviticus 6: 12-13 The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out.

Isaiah 43:2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and

through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Luke 12:49 I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

Exodus 3:2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

Acts 2:1-15 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed like 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.