

The Consuming Fire

by George MacDonald

God's love is a consuming fire that purifies and transforms us, making us pure and worthy of eternal life.

Topics: "Divine Love", "Purification"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the all-consuming nature of God's love, emphasizing that love is the only inexorable force that yields to prayer. He delves into the concept of divine love purifying and perfecting humanity, striving for absolute loveliness and eternal life. MacDonald explains that God's consuming fire is a symbol of purification, destroying all that is not beautiful or of love's kind, in order to reveal the true essence of individuals. He challenges listeners to embrace the fear of God, not in cringing submission, but in reverent awe and brotherly love, as they journey towards a deeper understanding of God's consuming yet purifying nature.

Transcript

Our God is a consuming fire.--Hebrews xii. 29.

Nothing is inexorable but love. Love which will yield to prayer is imperfect and poor. Nor is it then the love that yields, but its alloy. For if at the voice of entreaty love conquers displeasure, it is love asserting itself, not love yielding its claims. It is not love that grants a boon unwillingly; still less is it love that answers a prayer to the wrong and hurt of him who prays. Love is one, and love is changeless.

For love loves unto purity. Love has ever in view the absolute loveliness of that which it beholds. Where loveliness is incomplete, and love cannot love its fill of loving, it spends itself to make more lovely, that it may love more; it strives for perfection, even that itself may be perfected--not in itself, but in the object. As it was love that first created humanity, so even human love, in proportion to its divinity, will go on creating the beautiful for its own outpouring. There is nothing eternal but that which loves and can be loved, and love is ever climbing towards the consummation when such shall be the universe, imperishable, divine.

Therefore all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed.

And our God is a consuming fire.

If this be hard to understand, it is as the simple, absolute truth is hard to understand. It may be centuries of ages before a man comes to see a truth--ages of strife, of effort, of aspiration. But when once he does see

it, it is so plain that he wonders he could have lived without seeing it. That he did not understand it sooner was simply and only that he did not see it. To see a truth, to know what it is, to understand it, and to love it, are all one. There is many a motion towards it, many a misery for want of it, many a cry of the conscience against the neglect of it, many a dim longing for it as an unknown need before at length the eyes come awake, and the darkness of the dreamful night yields to the light of the sun of truth. But once beheld it is for ever. To see one divine fact is to stand face to face with essential eternal life.

For this vision of truth God has been working for ages of ages. For this simple condition, this apex of life, upon which a man wonders like a child that he cannot make other men see as he sees, the whole labour of God's science, history, poetry--from the time when the earth gathered itself into a lonely drop of fire from the red rim of the driving sun-wheel to the time when Alexander John Scott worshipped him from its face--was evolving truth upon truth in lovely vision, in torturing law, never lying, never repenting; and for this will the patience of God labour while there is yet a human soul whose eyes have not been opened, whose child-heart has not yet been born in him. For this one condition of humanity, this simple beholding, has all the outthinking of God flowed in forms innumerable and changeful from the foundation of the world; and for this, too, has the divine destruction been going forth; that his life might be our life, that in us, too, might dwell that same consuming fire which is essential love.

Let us look at the utterance of the apostle which is crowned with this lovely terror: "Our God is a consuming fire."

"Wherefore, we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire."--We have received a kingdom that cannot be moved--whose nature is immovable: let us have grace to serve the Consuming Fire, our God, with divine fear; not with the fear that cringes and craves, but with the bowing down of all thoughts, all delights, all loves before him who is the life of them all, and will have them all pure. The kingdom he has given us cannot be moved, because it has nothing weak in it: it is of the eternal world, the world of being, of truth. We, therefore, must worship him with a fear pure as the kingdom is unshakeable. He will shake heaven and earth, that only the unshakeable may remain, (verse 27): he is a consuming fire, that only that which cannot be consumed may stand forth eternal. It is the nature of God, so terribly pure that it destroys all that is not pure as fire, which demands like purity in our worship. He will have purity. It is not that the fire will burn us if we do not worship thus; but that the fire will burn us until we worship thus; yea, will go on burning within us after all that is foreign to it has yielded to its force, no longer with pain and consuming, but as the highest consciousness of life, the presence of God. When evil, which alone is consumable, shall have passed away in his fire from the dwellers in the immovable kingdom, the nature of man shall look the nature of God in the face, and his fear shall then be pure; for an eternal, that is a holy fear, must spring from a knowledge of the nature, not from a sense of the power. But that which cannot be consumed must be one within itself, a simple existence; therefore in such a soul the fear towards God will be one with the homeliest love. Yea, the fear of God will cause a man to flee, not from him, but from himself; not from him, but to him, the Father of himself, in terror lest he should do Him wrong or his neighbour wrong. And the first words which follow for the setting forth of that grace whereby we may serve God acceptably are these--"Let brotherly love continue." To love our brother is to worship the Consuming Fire.

The symbol of the consuming fire would seem to have been suggested to the writer by the fire that burned on the mountain of the old law. That fire was part of the revelation of God there made to the Israelites. Nor was it the first instance of such a revelation. The symbol of God's presence, before which Moses had to

put off his shoes, and to which it was not safe for him to draw near, was a fire that did not consume the bush in which it burned. Both revelations were of terror. But the same symbol employed by a writer of the New Testament should mean more, not than it meant before, but than it was before employed to express; for it could not have been employed to express more than it was possible for them to perceive. What else than terror could a nation of slaves, into whose very souls the rust of their chains had eaten, in whose memory lingered the smoke of the flesh-pots of Egypt, who, rather than not eat of the food they liked best, would have gone back to the house of their bondage--what else could such a nation see in that fire than terror and destruction? How should they think of purification by fire? They had yet no such condition of mind as could generate such a thought. And if they had had the thought, the notion of the suffering involved would soon have overwhelmed the notion of purification. Nor would such a nation have listened to any teaching that was not supported by terror. Fear was that for which they were fit. They had no worship for any being of whom they had not to be afraid.

Was then this show upon Mount Sinai a device to move obedience, such as bad nurses employ with children? a hint of vague and false horror? Was it not a true revelation of God?

If it was not a true revelation, it was none at all, and the story is either false, or the whole display was a political trick of Moses. Those who can read the mind of Moses will not easily believe the latter, and those who understand the scope of the pretended revelation, will see no reason for supposing the former. That which would be politic, were it a deception, is not therefore excluded from the possibility of another source. Some people believe so little in a cosmos or ordered world, that the very argument of fitness is a reason for unbelief.

At all events, if God showed them these things, God showed them what was true. It was a revelation of himself. He will not put on a mask. He puts on a face. He will not speak out of flaming fire if that flaming fire is alien to him, if there is nothing in him for that flaming fire to reveal. Be his children ever so brutish, he will not terrify them with a lie.

It was a revelation, but a partial one; a true symbol, not a final vision.

No revelation can be other than partial. If for true revelation a man must be told all the truth, then farewell to revelation; yea, farewell to the sonship. For what revelation, other than a partial, can the highest spiritual condition receive of the infinite God? But it is not therefore untrue because it is partial. Relatively to a lower condition of the receiver, a more partial revelation might be truer than that would be which constituted a fuller revelation to one in a higher condition; for the former might reveal much to him, the latter might reveal nothing. Only, whatever it might reveal, if its nature were such as to preclude development and growth, thus chaining the man to its incompleteness, it would be but a false revelation fighting against all the divine laws of human existence. The true revelation rouses the desire to know more by the truth of its incompleteness.

Here was a nation at its lowest: could it receive anything but a partial revelation, a revelation of fear? How should the Hebrews be other than terrified at that which was opposed to all they knew of themselves, beings judging it good to honour a golden calf? Such as they were, they did well to be afraid. They were in a better condition, acknowledging if only a terror above them, flaming on that unknown mountain height, than stooping to worship the idol below them. Fear is nobler than sensuality. Fear is better than no God, better than a god made with hands. In that fear lay deep hidden the sense of the infinite. The worship of fear is true, although very low; and though not acceptable to God in itself, for only the worship of spirit and

of truth is acceptable to him, yet even in his sight it is precious. For he regards men not as they are merely, but as they shall be; not as they shall be merely, but as they are now growing, or capable of growing, towards that image after which he made them that they might grow to it. Therefore a thousand stages, each in itself all but valueless, are of inestimable worth as the necessary and connected gradations of an infinite progress. A condition which of declension would indicate a devil, may of growth indicate a saint. So far then the revelation, not being final any more than complete, and calling forth the best of which they were now capable, so making future and higher revelation possible, may have been a true one.

But we shall find that this very revelation of fire is itself, in a higher sense, true to the mind of the rejoicing saint as to the mind of the trembling sinner. For the former sees farther into the meaning of the fire, and knows better what it will do to him. It is a symbol which needed not to be superseded, only unfolded. While men take part with their sins, while they feel as if, separated from their sins, they would be no longer themselves, how can they understand that the lightning word is a Saviour--that word which pierces to the dividing between the man and the evil, which will slay the sin and give life to the sinner? Can it be any comfort to them to be told that God loves them so that he will burn them clean. Can the cleansing of the fire appear to them anything beyond what it must always, more or less, be--a process of torture? They do not want to be clean, and they cannot bear to be tortured. Can they then do other, or can we desire that they should do other, than fear God, even with the fear of the wicked, until they learn to love him with the love of the holy. To them Mount Sinai is crowned with the signs of vengeance. And is not God ready to do unto them even as they fear, though with another feeling and a different end from any which they are capable of supposing? He is against sin: in so far as, and while, they and sin are one, he is against them--against their desires, their aims, their fears, and their hopes; and thus he is altogether and always for them. That thunder and lightning and tempest, that blackness torn with the sound of a trumpet, that visible horror billowed with the voice of words, was all but a faint image to the senses of the slaves of what God thinks and feels against vileness and selfishness, of the unrest of unassuageable repulsion with which he regards such conditions; that so the stupid people, fearing somewhat to do as they would, might leave a little room for that grace to grow in them, which would at length make them see that evil, and not fire, is the fearful thing; yea, so transform them that they would gladly rush up into the trumpet-blast of Sinai to escape the flutes around the golden calf. Could they have understood this, they would have needed no Mount Sinai. It was a true, and of necessity a partial revelation--partial in order to be true.

Even Moses, the man of God, was not ready to receive the revelation in store; not ready, although from love to his people he prayed that God would even blot him out of his book of life. If this means that he offered to give himself as a sacrifice instead of them, it would show reason enough why he could not be glorified with the vision of the Redeemer. For so he would think to appease God, not seeing that God was as tender as himself, not seeing that God is the Reconciler, the Redeemer, not seeing that the sacrifice of the heart is the atonement for which alone he cares. He would be blotted out, that their names might be kept in. Certainly when God told him that he that had sinned should suffer for it, Moses could not see that this was the kindest thing that God could do. But I doubt if that was what Moses meant. It seems rather the utterance of a divine despair--he would not survive the children of his people. He did not care for a love that would save him alone, and send to the dust those thousands of calf-worshipping brothers and sisters. But in either case, how much could Moses have understood, if he had seen the face instead of the back of that form that passed the cliff of the rock amidst the thunderous vapours of Sinai? Had that form turned and that face looked upon him, the face of him who was more man than any man; the face through which the divine emotion would, in the ages to come, manifest itself to the eyes of men, bowed, it might well be,

at such a moment, in anticipation of the crown with which the children of the people for whom Moses pleaded with his life, would one day crown him; the face of him who was bearing and was yet to bear their griefs and carry their sorrows, who is now bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows; the face of the Son of God, who, instead of accepting the sacrifice of one of his creatures to satisfy his justice or support his dignity, gave himself utterly unto them, and therein to the Father by doing his lovely will; who suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his, and lead them up to his perfection; if that face, I say, had turned and looked upon Moses, would Moses have lived? Would he not have died, not of splendour, not of sorrow, (terror was not there,) but of the actual sight of the incomprehensible? If infinite mystery had not slain him, would he not have gone about dazed, doing nothing, having no more any business that he could do in the world, seeing God was to him altogether unknown? For thus a full revelation would not only be no revelation, but the destruction of all revelation.

"May it not then hurt to say that God is Love, all love, and nothing other than love? It is not enough to answer that such is the truth, even granted that it is. Upon your own showing, too much revelation may hurt by dazzling and blinding."

There is a great difference between a mystery of God that no man understands, and a mystery of God laid hold of, let it be but by one single man. The latter is already a revelation; and, passing through that man's mind, will be so presented, it may be so feebly presented, that it will not hurt his fellows. Let God conceal as he will: (although I believe he is ever destroying concealment, ever giving all that he can, all that men can receive at his hands, that he does not want to conceal anything, but to reveal everything,) the light which any man has received is not to be put under a bushel; it is for him and his fellows. In sowing the seed he will not withhold his hand because there are thorns and stony places and waysides. He will think that in some cases even a bird of the air may carry the matter, that the good seed may be too much for the thorns, that that which withers away upon the stony place may yet leave there, by its own decay, a deeper soil for the next seed to root itself in. Besides, they only can receive the doctrine who have ears to hear. If the selfish man could believe it, he would misinterpret it; but he cannot believe it. It is not possible that he should. But the loving soul, oppressed by wrong teaching, or partial truth claiming to be the whole, will hear, understand, rejoice.

For, when we say that God is Love, do we teach men that their fear of him is groundless? No. As much as they fear will come upon them, possibly far more. But there is something beyond their fear,--a divine fate which they cannot withstand, because it works along with the human individuality which the divine individuality has created in them. The wrath will consume what they call themselves; so that the selves God made shall appear, coming out with tenfold consciousness of being, and bringing with them all that made the blessedness of the life the men tried to lead without God. They will know that now first are they fully themselves. The avaricious, weary, selfish, suspicious old man shall have passed away. The young, ever young self, will remain. That which they thought themselves shall have vanished: that which they felt themselves, though they misjudged their own feelings, shall remain--remain glorified in repentant hope. For that which cannot be shaken shall remain. That which is immortal in God shall remain in man. The death that is in them shall be consumed.

It is the law of Nature--that is, the law of God--that all that is destructible shall be destroyed. When that which is immortal buries itself in the destructible--when it receives all the messages from without, through the surrounding region of decadence, and none from within, from the eternal doors--it cannot, though immortal still, know its own immortality. The destructible must be burned out of it, or begin to be burned out of it, before it can partake of eternal life. When that is all burnt away and gone, then it has eternal life.

Or rather, when the fire of eternal life has possessed a man, then the destructible is gone utterly, and he is pure. Many a man's work must be burned, that by that very burning he may be saved--"so as by fire." Away in smoke go the lordships, the Rabbi-hoods of the world, and the man who acquiesces in the burning is saved by the fire; for it has destroyed the destructible, which is the vantage point of the deathly, which would destroy both body and soul in hell. If still he cling to that which can be burned, the burning goes on deeper and deeper into his bosom, till it reaches the roots of the falsehood that enslaves him--possibly by looking like the truth.

The man who loves God, and is not yet pure, courts the burning of God. Nor is it always torture. The fire shows itself sometimes only as light--still it will be fire of purifying. The consuming fire is just the original, the active form of Purity,--that which makes pure, that which is indeed Love, the creative energy of God. Without purity there can be as no creation so no persistence. That which is not pure is corruptible, and corruption cannot inherit incorruption.

The man whose deeds are evil, fears the burning. But the burning will not come the less that he fears it or denies it. Escape is hopeless. For Love is inexorable. Our God is a consuming fire. He shall not come out till he has paid the uttermost farthing.

If the man resists the burning of God, the consuming fire of Love, a terrible doom awaits him, and its day will come. He shall be cast into the outer darkness who hates the fire of God. What sick dismay shall then seize upon him! For let a man think and care ever so little about God, he does not therefore exist without God. God is here with him, upholding, warming, delighting, teaching him--making life a good thing to him. God gives him himself, though he knows it not. But when God withdraws from a man as far as that can be without the man's ceasing to be; when the man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end--for the soul has no weapons wherewith to destroy herself--with no inbreathing of joy, with nothing to make life good;--then will he listen in agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door; then, if the moan of suffering humanity ever reaches the ear of the outcast of darkness, he will be ready to rush into the very heart of the Consuming Fire to know life once more, to change this terror of sick negation, of unspeakable death, for that region of painful hope. Imagination cannot mislead us into too much horror of being without God--that one living death. Is not this

to be worse than worst

Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts

Imagine howling?

But with this divine difference: that the outer darkness is but the most dreadful form of the consuming fire--the fire without light--the darkness visible, the black flame. God hath withdrawn himself, but not lost his hold. His face is turned away, but his hand is laid upon him still. His heart has ceased to beat into the man's heart, but he keeps him alive by his fire. And that fire will go searching and burning on in him, as in the highest saint who is not yet pure as he is pure.

But at length, O God, wilt thou not cast Death and Hell into the lake of Fire--even into thine own consuming self? Death shall then die everlastingly,

And Hell itself will pass away,

And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

Then indeed wilt thou be all in all. For then our poor brothers and sisters, every one--O God, we trust in thee, the Consuming Fire--shall have been burnt clean and brought home. For if their moans, myriads of ages away, would turn heaven for us into hell--shall a man be more merciful than God? Shall, of all his glories, his mercy alone not be infinite? Shall a brother love a brother more than The Father loves a son?--more than The Brother Christ loves his brother? Would he not die yet again to save one brother more?

As for us, now will we come to thee, our Consuming Fire. And thou wilt not burn us more than we can bear. But thou wilt burn us. And although thou seem to slay us, yet will we trust in thee even for that which thou hast not spoken, if by any means at length we may attain unto the blessedness of those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/george-macdonald/the-consuming-fire/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net