

(Knowing God's Way) 13. a Consuming Fire in the Midst of the Church

by Zac Poonen

God is a consuming fire who seeks to burn up our pride and hypocrisy, and desires us to live in humility and sincerity.

Scripture: Genesis 3:4, Isaiah 33:14, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 10:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:11, Hebrews 12:29, 1 Peter 2:18, 1 Peter 3:4

Topics: "Gods Nature", "Spiritual Purification"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the concept of God as a consuming fire, emphasizing the need for balance in our understanding of God's nature. He highlights the importance of living righteously, rejecting unjust gain, avoiding bloodshed, and shutting our eyes from evil to dwell with the consuming fire of God. Poonen stresses the significance of humility, sincerity, and faithfulness in money matters as qualifications to live with God's consuming fire, warning against hypocrisy and insincerity. He encourages believers to love the truth about themselves, seek salvation from sin, and embrace humility to avoid being deceived and to experience God's refining fire.

Transcript

"Our God is a consuming fire...." (Heb.12:29).

We have often seen the words "God is love" hanging on the wall in many homes. But have you ever seen the words "God is a consuming fire" hanging anywhere? Both these verses are in the New Testament. But we don't like to think of God as a consuming fire. And therefore our concept of God is imbalanced. And when our concept of God is imbalanced, our Christian life will be imbalanced too - and carnal!

In Isaiah's prophecy we read the following words:

"Sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling has seized the godless (hypocrites - KJV). Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning? He who walks righteously, and speaks with sincerity, he who rejects unjust gain, and shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe; he who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil" (Isa.33:14,15).

Here we read that there are both sinners and hypocrites in Zion (the church)!!! And then it goes on to ask who can live with the consuming fire? If the Lord is really present in a church, there will be a consuming

fire and a continual burning there at all times.

Many churches today claim to be "New Testament churches", because of certain distinctive features like "believer's baptism", "speaking in tongues", "praise and worship", "weekly breaking of bread" etc., But none of these are the identification mark of a truly New Testament church. The mark of a true New Testament Church is this that God is in its midst as a consuming fire - a fire that terrifies sinners and makes hypocrites tremble.

I am not surprised when carnal people leave our church, or fall away - because this is proof that the consuming fire is still burning in our midst. When hypocrites and carnal people leave a church, that is a good sign. It is a sign that God is working in power in such a church. It is when spiritually-minded, God-fearing people leave a church, that the church should sit up and take stock of its position. That would be akin to the best students leaving a school and joining another in the same locality. Then the first school should ask itself, "Why did they leave?".

If the fire is not burning in our midst, then many people will continue to remain with us. It is still possible that there are haughty, insincere hypocrites in our churches even today. I don't know, because I am not God! But I am absolutely certain of one thing: As long as God is present in our midst as a consuming fire, one day or the other, all such hypocrites will be exposed, if they do not repent and set matters right. There is no partiality with God - He will even expose hypocritical elders, as we see in Revelation 2 and 3.

God is longsuffering, but His patience will come to an end one day. The one who defiles the church of God will himself be destroyed by God - that is certain (1 Cor.3:17). God does not remove those who are imperfect, or those defeated by sin. But He removes the insincere.

The first qualification to dwell with this consuming fire mentioned here is: "He who walks righteously and speaks with SINCERITY" (Isa.33:15)". That refers to those who walk according to the light they have, in sincerity in their private lives. They may not be perfect, but they are SINCERE. They are not hypocrites.

If there is one thing that we must fear more than anything else in the church , it is giving people an impression about our spirituality that is not true. Do you give others the impression that you pray a lot, when you don't pray at all? Do you give them the impression that you fast much when you don't actually fast that much? Do you want others to consider you as wholehearted when you are not? Then you are in danger of falling away - not because you are imperfect, but because you are insincere. God desires truth in our inward part. The hypocrites in Zion tremble, because they are afraid of being exposed.

The second qualification to live with the consuming fire is "rejecting unjust gain" (Isa.33:15) - in other words, being righteous and faithful in money matters. We may have thought that the alternative master to God is Satan. But Jesus Himself stated in Luke 16:13 that that alternative master to God was Mammon (money and material riches)! No believer imagines that he can love God and Satan at the same time. But there are multitudes of believers who imagine that they can love money and God simultaneously. No believer will ever fall down and worship Satan. But there are millions of believers today who worship Mammon and who imagine that they can worship God too. But they cannot worship God, if they are not faithful with money. They don't realise that Mammon draws a person away from the true and living God.

The third qualification to live with the consuming fire is shutting our ears from hearing about bloodshed (Isa.33:15). This is more than avoiding gossiping. This refers to not wanting to HEAR even someone else gossiping. A Godfearing man will shut his ears not only to the main Accuser of the brethren (Rev.12:10),

but to the Accuser's agents as well!!

If we could look at this earth from heaven's standpoint, we would see millions of people all over the world, tearing others to pieces with their tongue from early morning to late at night, every day. But if you want to live with God, the consuming fire, you must discipline yourself not to listen to such accusations. Even if you have to listen to them in situations where it is impossible for you to get up and walk out of the room, you should switch off your mind inwardly from listening. Let people around you be corrupt but why should you lose God's grace in your life? If you are serious about living with the consuming fire, then stop listening to all accusations. God has given us the ability to switch off our mind from inside. Do that. Stop your ears from bloodshed.

A fourth qualification that is mentioned here, to live with the consuming fire, is shutting our eyes from looking upon evil. These two bodily senses - hearing and seeing - are the main channels through which good and evil enter our minds. We must decide what we allow to enter in. One who lives with the consuming fire does not look upon what will defile his spirit.

Only when you allow God to consume all that is worldly and that can be consumed in your life, will you be able to live with Him Who is a consuming fire. Whatever is left in you then will be incombustible!! God is going to populate heaven with such people - who have nothing combustible left in them.

God is preparing us for heaven. When we sing the song, "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul", what are we talking about? We are talking about that consuming fire coming into our soul, that burns up everything that can be burnt up. Can we willingly say to the Lord, "Lord, I only want those things left in my life, that cannot be burned, so that You and I can live in fellowship with each other forever."

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 tells us that in the final day the Lord will test everything by His fire. Everything that is combustible - wood, hay and straw will be burnt up. Only those things that cannot burn - gold, silver and precious stones - will remain.

Since this going to be so, what a wonderful privilege it is to receive the fire of the Holy Spirit now itself, so that all that is combustible in us can be burnt up before that day.

Jesus has come to baptize us with the fire of the Holy Spirit (John 1:29), so that the Spirit can enter every part of our lives with His burning fire and burn up everything in us that is worldly - all the wood, hay and straw.

God's Word is a fire that can burn up and eliminate many things in our lives (Jer.23:29). But there are many things that God's Word doesn't speak about, that still need to be burnt up in us. These are the things that the Holy Spirit will point out to us and ask our permission to burn up. God's Word tells us nothing about many matters that we face in the modern world, because they did not exist in the first century. But the Spirit will tell us whether we can practise them in fellowship with Christ or not.

Therefore we must be careful to be sensitive every day to all that the Holy Spirit tells us. The only one who can live with God the consuming fire is the one who is always listens to the Holy Spirit and acts in the fear of God.

When such a man sees other believers slipping up and falling, he fears for himself. He does not judge those others but says "Lord, I have the same flesh as them. The same thing can happen to me. I want to live in fear. Help me to be sincere. I want to be faithful with money according to my light. I don't want to

listen to `accusations' against others. Lord, preserve me from all `bloodshed'. I don't want to look at anything evil either, Lord. I don't want to imagine that just because I have accepted You, I am safe forever, irrespective of how I live. I want to live in fear." That is how a God-fearing man who is serious about living with the consuming fire will pray.

It says in 2 Thess.2:11 that God will send a deceiving influence on those who don't love the truth (about themselves) so as to be saved. That verse teaches us that God will also allow evil spirits to deceive all those who DO NOT LOVE THE TRUTH and permit them to believe the Lie -(NASB margin).

What is `The Lie'? There are many types of lies, but there is one lie, that is called `The Lie' in Scripture. `THE LIE' is the first LIE that a human being ever heard! It was Satan's word to Eve saying, "YOU WILL NOT DIE" (Gen.3:4). Eve believed the lie that because she was made in God's image, she would not die spiritually, even if she disobeyed God and sinned. And the Devil is still telling people today that they will not die, because they accepted the Lord, or because they were baptized in water or because they speak in tongues, or because they attend meetings regularly, etc., etc.,

God will allow all those who don't love the truth about themselves to believe this `Lie'. And there are millions of so-called "believers" believing this lie today. They believe that they will never die spiritually, even if they live in sin. And so, they are careless with sin. They don't fear God. They don't hate sin. They don't throw into the consuming fire, all that needs to be burned up in their lives. They are not sincere or upright, but hypocritical. They play the fool with sin. They accuse others and listen to accusations. They look at evil things with their eyes. And yet they imagine that they will live forever in heaven with "the consuming fire". How did they come to believe such a lie? Through the master-plan of Satan who has made them believe that if their doctrines are right, it does not matter how they live!!

God says in His Word, "I gave them time to repent". How good God is! He does not judge at once. He gives us time to repent. But if we don't love the truth about ourselves so as to be saved from sin, then God Himself will not be able to help us. So, brothers and sisters, let me plead with you to love the truth about yourself and seek to be saved from everything un-Christlike in your life.

Today there are so many groups, denominations and cults, all proclaiming that they have the truth. How can we know which is the truth? How can we prevent ourselves from being deceived?

Here is the answer: If you love the truth about yourself at all times and eagerly desire to be saved from all sin, the Lord will never allow you to be deceived till the end of your life. Otherwise, you may preach to others and not only go to hell yourself but lead others there as well.

If we love the truth so as to be saved ourselves, we can never be deceived, by any preacher, or so-called godly man, or cultist or Pharisee or legalist. No-one will be able to deceive us or lead us astray.

When God speaks to us - directly by His Word, or by the Holy Spirit, or through another brother, or perhaps even through an enemy - and we hear the truth about ourselves, what do we do? Do we justify ourselves or do we judge ourselves?

I have received many letters of accusation in my life. (That is the appointed lot of all who serve the Lord). I usually throw them all into the garbage bin. But before doing so, I read them and ask the Lord, "Lord, is there some truth in what my enemy is saying? Perhaps there is. Please show me." Our enemies often tell us more truths about ourselves than our friends do.

But I never allow any letter to make me feel condemned, because I know there is NO condemnation for me, because I am in Christ. But I do allow the Lord to speak to me at such times. It is like getting a free "scan" of our bodies. A Magnetic Resonance Imaging scan of our body can cost thousands of rupees in medical diagnostic laboratories these days. Isn't it wonderful then that someone scans our heart freely for us!! And if it is our enemy who is offering us such a scan, let us praise the Lord and subject ourselves to such a scan. If there is no sickness in our hearts, we can lose nothing by "scanning" ourselves even with a letter written by an enemy.

Remember that it was an ungodly, heathen man (Abimelech) who once rebuked Abraham for lying (Gen.20:9). Abraham was a prophet chosen by God. But he had to be rebuked for his sin by a godless man! Today, Abraham is in heaven and Abimelech may be in hell. But it was Abimelech who helped Abraham that day, to see his sin.

Humble yourself then. Maybe some heathen man can help you too to see something in your life that may help you to cleanse out some evil habit from your life.

In the final analysis, we will discover that there are only TWO categories of people before God - not those who do right and those who do wrong, but those who are HUMBLE and those who are PROUD, or in other words, those who followed Jesus in His humility and those who followed Satan in his pride.

It is the pride in our hearts that God is constantly seeking to burn up with His consuming fire, first of all. It is the proud, haughty ones whom He seeks to remove from Zion. The Lord says, "I will remove from your midst your proud, exulting ones, and you will never again be haughty on my holy mountain" (Zeph.3:11). And then the church will be left with "a humble and lowly people" (Zeph.3:12). This is the church that will triumph over Satan.

In the final day, we will find many people who did right being rejected by God because they were proud. And amazingly, we will also discover then that some people who made serious mistakes in their lives are still accepted by God, because they were humble and sincere.

Consider how God rejected some who committed what we would call "a small sin" and how He accepted and blessed some who committed what we would call "a great sin".

Take first the case of King Saul. He committed what we would call "a small sin": Instead of killing ALL the sheep of Amalek, as God had told him to, he killed only the bad sheep and kept the good sheep to offer to God as a sacrifice. Would you have condemned Saul for such a mistake? Perhaps not. But God did punish him - and that severely! He took away the kingdom from Saul.

On the other hand, consider what King David did. He committed adultery with a man's wife when the man was out of town (fighting in David's own army). And then to cover up his sin, David had the man killed on the battlefield and then married the woman. What would you do with such a man as David? You would perhaps send David to hell immediately. But God didn't do that. His ways are not our ways. God's ways cannot be understood by our human reason. We divide people according to whether they do right or wrong. But God divides them according to whether they are proud (and insincere) or humble (and sincere). And so God accepted David, after punishing him for his sin.

God even refers to David as a man after His own heart, who served his generation in the will of God (Acts 13:22,36). David's end was not like Saul's, just because he was humble.

In observing Christians and Christian leaders who have fallen, I have noticed a difference. God allows some to get exposed but not others. Some whose crimes are very small (in man's eyes) are exposed and humiliated before everyone. While others (who I happen to know confidentially have committed far greater sins), do NOT get exposed at all! And not only does God cover up their failures, He even blesses them and uses them greatly!

All this appears unfair to us. But it is not. Why does God do things like that? Because He is NOT Pharisaical, like most religious people are! He divides people into "Humble" and "Proud" categories and not into "Those who did right" and "Those who did wrong" categories.

This what gives great hope and encouragement to all of us. If God had divided people up as men divide them, then we would have to live in constant fear lest we accidentally end up in the wrong group - for all of us make mistakes and do wrong things - at least accidentally, if not deliberately.

Men usually come down hard on us, when we do even one wrong thing. But thank God, we don't have to deal with unmerciful men. We have to deal only with God our merciful Creator (Heb.4:13).

If we live in humility and brokenness before God always, never esteeming ourselves as better than anyone else, but always recognising ourselves as the chief of sinners; if we never seek to lord it over others and never seek to grab anything on earth (not even a ministry); if we are willing to walk "the second mile"; and if we are ready to forgive those who have done us the greatest wrong, then God will cover up our failures and continue to bless us, no matter what men think about us or do to us.

1 Peter 2:18,19 tells servants to be submissive even to unreasonable masters. As long as we live in this world, we will all encounter people who are unreasonable. If we can live only with reasonable people, then we are unfit to be the disciples of Jesus. It is through unreasonable people that God consumes away our pride. And when we deal with unreasonable people, and we suffer at their hands, God will be happy with us, if we humble ourselves and endure our suffering patiently, because that is how Jesus suffered too.

You get no credit for being patient, when you suffer for having done something wrong. You get ZERO for that! Why should you get any marks from God in any case for that? But if you do what is right and suffer for it - whether in the office or in the church or anywhere - and bear that patiently, God is well-pleased with you (1 Pet.2:20). "Well-pleased" is such a wonderful word! That was the word that God used when He spoke about Jesus, saying, "This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well-pleased".

Humility has tremendous value before God. It says in 1 Peter 3:4 that a meek and gentle spirit is extremely precious to God - whether found in a woman or in a man. Jesus Himself had a humble and gentle heart and told us to learn these virtues from Him (Matt.11:28).

A gentle and a quiet spirit is one that is not agitated or in unrest. Some washing machines have what is called an "agitator". It turns one way and then the other way - perpetually. It is never at rest, it is always "agitating"! In the hearts of all who are born of Adam too, there is an "agitator". If anyone rubs them the wrong way, the agitator starts "agitating". But those who are humble and gentle in spirit have got rid of this agitator. They are not offended or hurt, when anyone says or does something to them, or when they don't say or do something that was expected of them. They have put their "agitator" on the cross.

Peter says that the beauty of a gentle and a quiet spirit is "imperishable"! This is the secret of eternal beauty. The world is full of women nowadays who are wanting to look younger. But what is the beauty that

is really imperishable? It is a gentle and a quiet spirit.

And this is for men too! This is what will make you really precious to God - if you have a gentle, quiet spirit that is not agitated or offended, that doesn't get into bad moods, that is not grumpy or angry. You need never lose control of yourself at any time either, for the fruit of the Spirit is self-control.

Let the world be full of people who have "agitators" but that's not for us any longer. Praise the Lord, we can get rid of our agitators permanently.

When Jesus told His disciples that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, what did He mean? He meant what I have just been talking about. The righteousness of the Pharisees was a matter of "right" and "wrong". But Jesus wanted the righteousness of His disciples to comprise of more than that. It was to include humility, brokenness, gentleness and quietness of spirit as well. He told them that otherwise they would NEVER enter the kingdom of God. I don't know how many of us really believe what Jesus said.

In Hebrews 4:1, we are asked to fear lest we do not enter into this "rest" that Jesus offers - this freedom from "agitating". And in verse 11, we are told to be diligent to ensure that we enter into that rest. Have you entered into that rest yourself?

Have you forgiven all those who have cheated you, and those who have wronged you? Have you cleansed your heart of all bitterness, hatred, anxiety and greed? This is what will enable us to enter into that rest of God.

There is no person or situation in the world, that can ever prevent Romans 8:28 ("All things work together for good for those who love God...") and 1 Corinthians 10:13 ("God will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability...") from being fulfilled in your life, if you are a disciple of Jesus. We can never be tempted beyond our ability. That is impossible - because God is faithful to His promises. And everything - yes, everything - will work for our good.

A humble person can never fall, because he is already at ground-level! How then can he fall down!! When God's Word says, "He is able to keep you from falling" (Jude 24), it is thus that the Lord keeps us - by keeping our faces in the dust before Him. Then it becomes impossible to fall.

The way of escape promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13 is the way of humbling ourselves. We humble ourselves, because we believe that God will give us grace and lift us up. Just as in water-baptism, we submit readily to someone who immerses us in the water, because we believe that he will lift us up again. In the same way, we also believe that the God who allows some situation to crush us will lift us up and bring a resurrection in our lives too.

God is a consuming fire who is determined to consume every bit of pride from every corner of our hearts - if we will let Him. He will arrange people and circumstances in such a way that every particle of pride is totally consumed. Let us cooperate then with Him and allow the Spirit to do a perfect work within us.

He who has ears to hear let him hear.

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