

God... Unexpected: Fire

Reconnect – May 23, 2010

Text: Hebrews 12:25-29; I Corinthians 3:12-15

Key Thought: God refines us, sometimes painfully, so that one day we will be able to be with Him.

See to it that you obey God, the one who is speaking to you. For if the people of Israel did not escape when they refused to listen to Moses, the earthly messenger, how terrible our danger if we reject the One who speaks to us from heaven! When God spoke from Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth, but now he makes another promise: "Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also." This means that the things on earth will be shaken, so that only eternal things will be left. Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be destroyed, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe. For our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:25-29, NLT

Intro: Panning for gold

Q: Does anyone know what this is? [picture of someone panning for gold]

- Done during the gold rush – the gold flecks and dust were heavier than everything else that was washed downstream
- You can still pan for gold today – you just need to be in the right place along a stream, and have a “non-teflon coated pan” – you can even see how-to videos on YouTube
- The idea is that you are constantly swirling around the contents of the pan, and as they separate from each other, you tip the rocks and gravel out the side
- Eventually, with care, you wind up with just the good stuff – the gold
- (Mind you, you could just buy a mine and blast it out of the ground – but where’s the fun in THAT?!?)
- But that’s not the last step for that gold, even though it’s very valuable stuff – it still has to be refined
- And the way that happens is a different kind of sifting process, where it’s heated up to a high temperature (but not too high or it boils and the hard work is gone) in a controlled way, chemicals are added and then the whole thing is stirred so that the slag (the non-gold being removed) rises to the top and then can be skimmed off the top
- Then, to get it really pure, you add chlorine and then run electricity through it, and it’s purified in the last step using electrolysis
- You’ve got to be careful when you do this – because if you’re not, again, you lose gold – like our own Mint – do you remember the case of the missing gold last year – when they said that they were out about 41 bars of gold, \$15 million dollars worth - and they thought that someone might have stolen it
- Turns out part of it was accounting (at least that’s what they’re SAYING) and part of it was outdated refining processes – they were throwing it out because it wasn’t being properly refined

The process of purity

- Shaking and firing – testing and refining, because anything less than purity is unacceptable, given the potential value of what is being worked with
- It’s true for gold, and it’s actually true for humanity as well, when it comes to God and what He’s up to:

Read Text: Hebrews 12:25-29

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Background: Sinai – God’s first approach vs. Jesus (go through the passage)

- Context of the passage is Hebrews 11 – heroes of faith – and then Hebrews 12, talking about the struggle that it takes to become one of them – to resist sin, the easy ways of life that lead to hurt and pain and ultimately destruction
- The writer lays out two paths – one of fear and gloom and religion (Sinai) and one of grace and joy (Zion) – but you have to choose, and stick to your choice
- In Moses’ time, God was extremely real to the people – very near, and they were terrified – they didn’t want to get near Him out of fear, and out of a desire to still go their own way, even in the face of everything God was doing for them
- The writer of Hebrews is warning people who have enjoyed the grace and welcome of God not to make the same mistakes – because God hasn’t changed – He’s changing us

God... Fire? (Dandelions)

- There’s so much to love about God – his love for us, His beauty, His grace in our lives, the patience He has with us and all He’s done for us already
- And yet – He is GOD – He’s who He is in the Old Testament as well as the New – He didn’t undergo a personal transformation in between the sections
- He can’t stand evil and injustice – sin is a blight on what He’s created – He watches it destroy the people that He loves and it kills Him – so He fights it – He pulls it out one person at a time, one part at a time, **just like we do with our dandelions** (instead of spraying and running the risk of hurting something that’s good)
- He is a consuming fire when it comes to what’s not right – if it gets near Him... poof!
- Fire purifies – it’s used to burn up all kinds of stuff, including some of the big Gulf spill in the news lately – can you imagine fire burning along the water – but it’s being done
- What are all the ways we use fire? We forget in our hi-tech, ultra modern world that fire – this most basic, primal, caveman thing – still underlies so much of what we do and have
 - The heating system in your home – the hot water that sterilizes medical supplies – electricity generation – what else? Manufacturing... ?
- Fire purifies – when everything is being shaken in our lives, we hold onto what’s most important – when a family is running out of a burning house, their priorities become very apparent, even if they wouldn’t have been as clear a few moments before
- We fear God when we know we’re not right – when we know there’s something wrong, something we want to hide (a la Adam and Eve)
- We hate Him when He tests us and we know we’re not making the grade
- “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”

Pure – not untested, but rather tested and proven (testing and refining)

- This process of testing and refining is in all sorts of important areas of our lives – any time the outcome, the end result, is something that is important
 - Quality control in manufacturing (the stuff we buy) – safety standards, government too (i.e. Maple Leaf meats – unsterilized equipment leading to sickness and even death)
 - Our performance at work (annual review process)
 - In our own health (getting healthy/dieting – on the scale)
 - And most of all, when we move (what to keep, what to give away, what goes to the Army – a la Mark and Kimberley – “there’s no place for that where we’re going)

Holiness

- There’s no place for that where we’re going
- Holiness is one of those “Christianese” words – that make people turn off their minds, or fall asleep, or that they instinctively distrust
- It conjures up images of people who are stern and dour, telling other people what to do and what not to do – the opposite of joy
- And yet – the most clear image the Bible gives us of holiness is... Jesus
- “True holiness consists in doing God’s will with a smile” (**Mother Teresa**)
- “In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action” (**Robert Green Ingersoll**)
- “This, and this alone, is Christianity, a universal holiness in every part of life, a heavenly wisdom in all our actions, not conforming to the spirit and temper of the world but turning all worldly enjoyments into means of piety and devotion to God” (**William Law**)
- At times in the history of the church it has seemed like holiness was an escape – something that you pursued to leave behind the difficulty of life – a retreat into isolation – but it’s not that at all – true holiness is preparation for all the good that God is going to bring:
- "The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die... What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it... What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether... They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom." – N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope
- So how do we get there?

How do I become pure?

Prayer – being with someone who is pure rubs off on you

Bible reading - a mirror – we can't reason it away – the hard truth, what we don't understand, the power to transform us

Commit – a “no turning back” moment – conversion, baptism, put down a marker in your life with God, yourself, your loved ones, everyone around you

Act – put your strength into doing good, speaking about God and acting as He would to bring life and hope to others – live your life to the fullest in doing good – THE QUOTE

God's refining process – he shakes us, he turns up the heat, and we must conform – sticking with the process gets us further along – our priorities change and we are changed as a result

Purity – traps

Either “you're not good enough, and you never will be, so why try? – this is only for the “good people”

Or

This is such a drag, why would anyone want it?

But

Freedom comes with purity – single-mindedness, clarity of focus and motive – sets you free from distractions and stickiness – and that brings joy – and joy and freedom in relationship with God leads to incredible life

God wants us to be pure because He wants us to be with Him – and He's pure – and He has a purifying effect on everything around Himself – so if we're going to get close, we're going to have to be pure – either through our own efforts or through His – and that's where Jesus came in – He purifies us before God, the consuming fire – the fire that just keeps eating and eating and eating

Key Thought:

God refines us, sometimes painfully, so that one day we will be able to be with Him.

Now anyone who builds on that foundation [Jesus Christ] may use gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But there is going to come a time of testing at the judgment day to see what kind of work each builder has done. Everyone's work will be put through the fire to see whether or not it keeps its value. If the work survives the fire, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builders themselves will be saved, but like someone escaping through a wall of flames.

1 Corinthians 3:12-15, NLT

Conclusion: Pentecost

- When God set people “on fire” to show that everything was going to change

“No one enters existence as a spectator. We either take up the life to which we have been consecrated or we traitorously defect from it. We cannot say, “Hold it! I am not quite ready. Wait until I have sorted things out.” For a long time all Christians called each other “saints.” They were all saints regardless of how well or badly they lived, of how experienced or inexperienced they were. The word *saint* did not refer to the quality or virtue of their acts, but to the kind of life to which they had been chosen, life on a battlefield. It was not a title given after a spectacular performance, but a mark of whose side they were on.” (Peterson, Run With The Horses 41-42)

- I want to be pure – I want my life to reflect the best that God has for me, and the most that is “eternal” – which is the best of everything that there is – what is eternal – the best of the heavens and the earth – not harps and wings (NT Wright – Surprised by Hope quote) but by the recreated heavens and earth – land and sky – and the best of what I can be is what I want to pass along to my children as what is good and true and important