

Find the Fire

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June 18, 2017

We used to have one of those videos at home which you only have if you have small children or grandchildren around. Its title is, “The Big Red Fire Engine.” It shows fire stations with Dalmatians. It shows firefighters sliding down the pole. It shows fire trucks squirting water. The basic theme, however, is that firefighters look for fire and put it out.

Sometimes finding fire and putting it out is not the real problem. Sometimes the real predicament is quite the opposite, it’s not finding any fire ... in our lives. No fire in the belly, no fire in the marriage, no fire about life or God. Sometimes the predicament is not finding fire and putting it out but simply not finding fire at all.

Steve was an executive with a great company. They made radar equipment. They were very innovative. They collaborated with the government. He represented the company and the government throughout Asia. That’s how his dossier read. When I had met him he had been retired quite some years and it was obvious to my eye that the fire I saw in his dossier was way in the past and little fire was evident in his current life. Sometimes the problem is finding the fire.

Alexis was 30 years old and in a young adult Sunday School class I taught. One day in our class discussion she said, “I came to San Antonio when I was 21 and just out of college. I went into a bank training program. I’ve worked my way up very well. I make a lot of money. But ... I have no passion in my life, no fire. I’m a Christian but I feel like my soul is slowing dying.” Sometimes the problem is finding fire.

We can see this being a problem for people and even if we are in our sunset years, when we might not feel up for fiery, we want our souls to have an earnestness and passion ... a kind of fire.

We're going to go to a Bible passage. It's in a book of fire, the Acts of the Apostle. That book opens with fire, representing the Holy Spirit, cascading down from heaven and encircling the heads of men and women. There comes a subsequent incendiary moment in that book and that's what we are going to read about.

Sometimes when firefighters fight fires, they cut a large swathe hoping that the fire, having no fuel to consume, will stop at that line and burn itself out. The NT church has had a fire in it. It has flickered and turned here and there. Then it comes weakly to the edge of a swathe, a firebreak; it's the one separating Jew and Gentile. Then the wind flicks the spark of Peter over the gap and the Gentile and Jew side bursts into flames. Let's go and read about finding fire.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these words: Acts 10

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. [2] He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. [3] One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

[4] Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. [5] Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named

Simon who is called Peter. [6] He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

[7] When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. [8] He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

[9] About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. [10] He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. [11] He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. [12] It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. [13] Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

[14] "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

[15] The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

[16] This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

[17] While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. [18] They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

[19] While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. [20] So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

[21] Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

[22] The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man,

who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." [23] Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

Cornelius recounts to Peter his directive from God. Peter replies by telling about Jesus.

[39] "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, [40] but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. [41] He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. [42] He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. [43] All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

[44] While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. [45] The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. [46] For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, [47] "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." [48] So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth; and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.*

There are three principles this text renders about finding the fire. The first is **pray for fire**. Pray for fire. The chapter begins with prayer – Cornelius is praying,

Peter is praying. Flint here (Cornelius), rock there (Peter) – and prayer is the motion that ignites the fire.

In the 17th century one of the most brilliant men in all of Europe was Blaise Pascal. This young man lost his mother at age three but was raised carefully by his father and two older sisters. His intelligence was noted early on. By age 16 he had been published for his work in geometry. He would go on to invent the digital calculating machine. He astonished the university professors of the day when, although none other than the famed Rene Descartes insisted that a vacuum could not exist, Pascal proved it could.

In a period of great illness for his father, Pascal observed the charity of some Christians toward him and this aroused a spiritual hunger in him. In this time of searching, longing, and praying there came, on the night of November 23, 1654 a profound mystical experience. It altered (altar'd) his life forever.

When Pascal died found sewn into the lining of his jacket were these words describing that night: "From about half past ten in the evening until about half past twelve, FIRE - God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certitude, certitude. Heartfelt joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and thy God. Thy God shall be my God." Did I mention his longing and *praying* for fire? Longing and *praying* and fire! Pray for fire.

Pray for fire for you. Pray for fire me. Pray for fire for the church. Pray.

Walt Kallestad was a pastor in Phoenix. He had such a hard beginning. People were there who didn't want any fire. He had his own shortcomings that were keeping him from fire. One night he received a phone call, the police, "Your church is on fire." "Finally," he muttered to himself, "the church is on fire." Then in

exhaustion, he heard himself say in frustration, “Oh, just let it burn.” And tears.

But then the tears turned to prayer for another kind of fire – the fire of God and the fire of purification, the fire of love and the fire of joy. Today that church is a bonfire of worship and ministry. It is called the Community Church of Joy.

Pray for fire, for you, for us, for God’s church around the world. Will you pray for fire?

The second principle – **Go out for fire**. Go out for fire. Peter had to get up and get out to be used by God with Cornelius, to see the fire God was igniting with Cornelius.

Peter’s life had get up and get outs associated with it. He had a get up and get out when Jesus called him – *leave fishing boats* and fishing nets and fishing family. He had a get up and get out when Jesus *walked on the water*. “Let me walk to you, Jesus.” “Walk to me, then. Get up and get out of the boat.” He had a get up and get out when Jesus was crucified and resurrected and gave the *Great Commission*. The disciples were huddled in fear, behind locked doors and such. Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Wait a minute. The authorities are looking for us. We don’t understand all that has happened. We haven’t gone to seminary about it yet. Judas is dead so we’re down a man. Jesus didn’t say, “Oh, hadn’t thought about that. You’re right. Forget I ever said anything.” No. He said, “Get up and get out.” Peter heard that word.

The programmatic verse for Acts is chapter one verse eight. You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. And at each stage there was a reluctance of some sort, a sense of, “Did he mean it?” Or “I’m not ready.” Or something. And God had to shove them out of the nest. Get up and get out. He drove them by the Spirit. He

drove them by persecution. Here in chapter ten we are getting up and getting out with this church not just over geographical barriers but over sociological, political, and religious barriers. For Peter, Mr. Jew, is being sent to Cornelius, Mr. Gentile. Jew and Gentile, never-the-twain-shall-meet. But the spark is going to jump the divide, if Peter gets up and gets out.

I used to run staff meetings in larger churches. Every now and then I would say, “Let’s go. You can leave your stuff. But let’s go.” And then we go ... to visit the apartment manager at the complex across the street, or to sit with the owner of the bread shop across the street, or to tour the facilities of child care center down the street, or to introduce ourselves to the staff in the flower shop down the street. “Tell us about your work,” we’d say. “What’s fun? What’s hard? Any ways we can be of help to you?”

One day our little staff walked across the street and one of our staff people, the one leading our tutoring program, came upon Mary in the nail salon. The store was empty and Mary, when she heard our person, Denise, was from a church, showed her inner distress and said that she had been praying for God to send her help and Denise must be it! They went in the back area by the sinks and prayed together.

Does that sound like Acts 10 to you? It does to me. Someone calling on God and him sending another person as an answer to that prayer and it happens when a believer gets up and goes out for God. In my mind, and I think in that staff’s mind, some of our very best staff meetings have been when we got up and got out for Jesus.

Here’s the third principle: **Connect with people for fire.** Here’s what I mean. Peter has to deal with Cornelius. And you say, “Yeah, so?” Cornelius is a Gentile. He’s a religious leper. I remember two rabbis telling me that we divide the world into black and white,

rich and poor, male and female, white collar and blue collar, national and international ... to them it is just Jew and Gentile and Gentile is pagan, godless, unclean.

Everything in Peter was backpedaling at the thought of having to associate with a Gentile. What will my friends think? I'll get religious coodies from him. I don't have any "want to" about this guy, Lord. He didn't say, "I'll send a check." He didn't say, "Let's have some start a program to Italian centurions." He didn't say, "This is a good idea for the Baptist church." He went and connected personally.

See, the fire we need is in people with need. Sometimes people don't get the fire in them because they don't want to associate with the people. It's inconvenient. It's costly. It's an unknown.

Dr. Paul Brand was the most famous man in the 20th century when it came to two things – leprosy and hand surgery. He was awarded countless honors for his work in these two areas. I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Brand on several occasions.

Leprosy is a disease that kills nerve endings and so fingers and toes and such get damaged without the patient knowing that they are damaged. No pain. It was a terrible disease that was not understood until the middle of the 20th century. In India, where Dr. Brand lived, multitudes were disfigured by the disease. A Christian medical missionary, Dr. Brand tried to understand the disease.

On one occasion he recounted how early in his career he came home from being away for quite some time. He discovered that his wife had found a leper in their front yard. This man had traveled for many days and was in desperate condition. Night was falling and there was nowhere for him to go. She brought him into the house. She got up and got out of her comfort zone and connected.

Dr. Brand came home and found the leper there. He murmured with worry to his wife, “The children.” His wife replied, “He needed our help.” Dr. Brand sighed, “Yes, of course.” As he examined the man’s wounds and condition, he felt the fire of God’s love burn up from within and he spoke to the man of God’s love. That man became his lifelong friend and partner in ministry.

What does get up and out, connect with a person mean for you? Is there a grandson or granddaughter you can connect with? Is there a lonely teen in your neighborhood you can connect with? A single mom?

We might as older adults not like heartburn but we are not interested in fiery lives. And while we know the dangers of burnout, the dangers of rust out are far greater. Regardless of our chronology or the demise of our bodies, we have hearths in us that are souls and they are meant for fire. May the Lord not find there for any of us, rust, but may he find in us and in his church fire.

Pray for fire, go out for fire, connect with a person for Jesus and may the church of Jesus be on fire.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com www.welovefirst.org
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