

GOD'S LOVE IS A CONSUMING FIRE

Heb. 12:28-29; 1 Jn. 4:8b and 16b; Gal.
5:22-23; 1 Thes. 5:23; and 2 Tim. 1:7

Embracing the Possibility of Change

By

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Opening.

A few weeks back, on one of these rather cool wintry nights, I was sitting on my back porch, looking out at the night sky and thinking about what *craziness*, what *chaos*, what *madness* had engulfed so many lives in the past year — from Ukraine to Iraq, Kurdistan to Kansas, and Nigeria to NYC, in churches, countries, communities, in families, marriages, right down to the core of our most selfish selves. Without even a conscious decision to move in this direction, I simply lifted my hands to the stars and from my lips came these words, “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.... Come with *vengeance*, come with *fire*, bring Your Kingdom down upon the nations of this Earth, upon the wickedness of evil men ...infected with greed and the lust for more. Come, *purify* us by the *fire* of Your love!” And *this* was the phrase which rang out like a shot in the night. **By the fire of Your Love.**

Much will be destroyed in this holy fire; and much will be cleansed, for how could it not? But those who belong to His Kingdom, a **“Kingdom which cannot be shaken”** {Heb. 12:28a}, will be *purified* — by the fire of His love.

I say this, not with the least amount of arrogance {‘Us vs. Them’}, but in the most earnest zeal and deepest desperation my heart can muster. For I see, apart from the Return of the King to claim us as His Own, to strike down the nations with a rod of iron {including Israel}, to tread the winepress of *Abba’s* wrath and *set right* all the enemy has set wrong, no Hope on the horizon. **Things may improve in fits and starts, here and there, but there will be no peace for the souls of men, no Triumphant March toward human progress, no joy which cannot be shaken nor Life which cannot be taken, until Jesus takes up rulership of this Earth as King of all Kings and Lord of all Lords!** Then and *only* then will His-Story reach its climax. Then and *only* then will we become what we were destined to be from the Beginning — true *Sons* and *Daughters* of the Living God.

A Love Unlike Any Other.

At the very end of Hebrews 12 the author tells us in a quote from Deuteronomy 4:24, **“Our God is a consuming fire”** {12:29}. The immediate context says, **“Therefore,”** or since God will soon remove **“what can be shaken”** — that is, the realm of visible and temporal Creation — **“so that what cannot be shaken”** — meaning the spiritual, the invisible and Eternal — **“may remain,”** in light of this, **“since we are receiving a Kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us be thankful....”** *Echo* means- ‘*have and hold*,’ literally ‘in one’s hands, *keep fast, preserve secure, possess as one’s property.*’ “Let us have and hold on to *charis*, to grace,” is what it says, “let us keep it constantly in our hands, securely in our hearts, let us *possess* it as our birthright every moment!”

You see how grace and gratitude are so interwoven Biblically they're used almost interchangeably by the Holy Spirit? **To be in possession of grace, to have and to hold it securely, is to maintain an attitude of constant gratitude, appreciation, thankfulness, a spirit of generosity and genuineness.**

“And so worship God [Or lit., ‘by means of *grace* we may worship *Abba*’] acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire,” vv. 28c-29. Note how indispensable a ‘spirit of grace’ is to our acceptable worship of *Abba*. Grace protects us, and those around us, from arrogance {‘I deserve....’}, from elitism {‘At least we’re not like....’}, and from a self-centred, self-directed spirituality {the ‘me, my and mine’ mentality}.

So, Hebrews says, **“Our God is a consuming fire.”** The apostle John wrote, then repeated, so there would be *no* mistaking this by you and I, that **“God is love”** {1 Jn. 4:8b and 16b}. I think it's entirely reasonable to conclude: **The love of God, the love which God *is*, the love emanating from the centre of His being, is a consuming fire.** And to be ravished by it is to be *radically* and irreversibly altered. *No one*, having been submersed in and surrounded by His flame, can ever be the same! Follow me here.

Is it possible the love of our Lord is so unlike the trite phrases we use to describe what we ‘like’ and what we don't, “I lovvvve _____,” this, that, whatever; is it possible His love is so utterly *beyond* us, so *unlike* anything we have ever experienced that the deepest, most profound connection between two human beings is merely the palest of comparisons? Is it possible His Love is so *powerful* in motion, so *pure* in motive, so *holy* in Spirit and so *healing* to our souls, that the reality of its radical nature and the rhetoric we use to try and define it are universes apart? And that there's no way, until we stand in Love's Presence, we will fully understand what we so long to convey?

God's love is a consuming fire. While it welcomes the world into its flames, it will brook no bystanders content to warm their hands by its heat! **You are in the Flame or you are out, by your own choice, but *no one* will be left standing on the sides.** No one.

Three Thoughts.

- I. **Change is *inevitable*.** The world is in a constant state of flux. There are only two things which *never* change in a fallen world, and it's not ‘death and taxes.’ You can always cheat on your taxes, and if you don't like the idea of death then you can surrender yourself— body and soul, by faith— to Jesus, **“the Resurrection and the Life”** {Jn. 11:25a}.

The two things which never change are the nature of *Abba* and the nature of evil. The world around us, the sin within us, and the demonic set upon us do not change.

Their goal is always to distract, deceive, and destroy. The tactics may shift according to time and place, but the strategy remains the same— an *unceasing* assault on the image-bearers of God! **Believing and unbelieving alike.** Everything else around us— from nature to technology, from cultural formation to artistic expression, from nations and their rulers {both human and angelic} to our neighbors next-door— *everything changes*. People change, relationships change, marriages change, families change, communities of faith change, all for *good* or for ill, for *better* or for worse. **Change is inevitable.**

- II. **Change is possible.** Inner transformation, spiritual renewal, a *reshaping* of our souls into the Master's image is not only highly *possible*, it is highly *probable*. Inevitable, in fact, when we walk in Light of His Love and are willing to draw on divine strength once ours has long tapped out!

Why is this so important? Because most people don't believe change is even possible. They resign themselves, with an almost fatalistic sense of resignation, to the fact that whatever *this* is will always be this way. And if you don't believe something is even possible, what are the chances you're ever going to see it materialize? Your world-view is going to be *reinforced*, probably by people who *refuse* to change because, like you, they don't believe it's possible. *Or* they just don't want to. To believe personal change is impossible, or that 'people don't really change,' is to *ignore* the power of God working its wonders in life after life after life. **It ignores the fact that your God is greater than all your hurts, heartaches, and hang-ups!**

This is going to be my mantra for 2015. **If you want a different outcome, embrace a different path!** Which is simply my way of saying, "Stop doing the *same* things over and over and over expecting a different result." Change is possible, it's probable, even *inevitable*... but not by thinking the same thoughts, speaking the same lies, and doing the same deeds that got us *in* this mess to begin with. A mess which we, on our own, can't seem to escape from.

Don't like the people around you? Stop hanging out with them. It's not a 'shotgun friendship,' *is* it? This may not be something you want to grasp, or are even ready to, but it's not a complicated concept.

Show me your friends and I'll show you your future. You become like the people you surround yourself with. You doubt the validity of this? See what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:33. I want to ask: What *influence* do you have on them and what *effect* do they have on you? Are you maturing into the man or woman Christ created you to be, flowering into the fullness of His image, or shrinking into the shadows of your acquaintances?

Burdened with responsibilities which aren't yours to bear? Start saying, "No," *graciously*. To maintain your focus on Jesus' Commission and Commands, you're going to have to learn how to say, "No." And mean it.

Hate your job? Many post-moderns in America do. **Ask *Abba* for another one, a different one.** Then start looking for openings, start dropping resumes, and start dreaming of what it is you *really* want to do. Most people of working age in the US have come to value *security* over *happiness* with regard to their vocation {"comes from the same root as 'voice,' denoting the hearing of a divine call,"¹ a way to put your 'gifts' into practice for God's glory!}. Fulfillment is a pipe-dream, and even a pleasant working environment seems like too much to ask.

The Bible, however, is a sixty-six book narrative of faith-filled risk takers— cf. Hebrews 11:32-40. In light of the Letter of Hebrews, specifically, the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, *show* me where it tells the Sons and Daughters of the One True God to value security over liberty, security over joy in Jesus Christ, security over walking in step with the Spirit and sharing His Love with the broken.

Now, through faith in the finished Work of Jesus we have a *relationship* with His heavenly Father. And we live in a world full of other creatures made in His image, which means we each have a *relationship* with the world around us. **So, we have a relationship to the God who saved us, and we have a relationship to the people around us.** Which brings us to our third and final thought. This is something I picked up from a blog by Christian author Donald Miller, and it is utterly and absolutely revelatory.

III. **You have a relationship with yourself— make it a *healthy* one.** People who respect themselves feel better, in general, and feel better specifically about their own lives.

If you want to respect yourself, start making decisions worthy of self-respect: start behaving in respectable ways, *not* engaging in disrespectful conversations about others.

If you want to feel better about your body— and I have never met a woman who didn't— make wiser decisions with regard to your diet. Choose, with the brain, the will, and the faithful heart God gave you, to eat healthier foods. And *not* eat half a sheet cake... or a chocolate pie... or those God-forsaken donuts which sit out front every Son-day.

If you want to feel better physically, and have more energy and endurance, you've got to get out and walk. You've got to exercise in some form or fashion; you've got to put a body not in motion *into* motion!

The point is: **Make your relationship with yourself a good one. Change the way *you* view you; and change it into the way Jesus views you.** “I am a Child of God in whom Jesus dwells. And I live in my Father’s Kingdom. This is *who* I am and *where* I am regardless of what may be raging around me.” **This is my Eternal Identity: the Beloved of *Abba*.**

I’m not talking about the power of positive thinking. I’m talking about looking to the living, breathing, abiding Word of God {Heb. 4:12}, letting it fill our hearts and minds with its wisdom, and choosing in the strength and authority of the Spirit of God, to *act* on it. To live, to love, to forgive, to *feel* {yes *feel*} all those things we’ve been running from, hiding our heads under our pillows and hoping will go away, masking over with too much food and too much drink, with anger and arrogance and drugs and shopping and sex, with idol after idol.

The Love of God is a *consuming fire*, and a consuming fire is the *only* thing strong enough to destroy our idolatries and to heal our addictions. The Love of God consumed our *sin* on the Cross; it can consume our *shame* if we will let it; it will consume the lies which have been eating away like a cancer in our souls, *sabotaging* us every step of the Way. Finally, His Love consumes our hatred and our bitterness by the glory of His forgiveness. **The Cross is the soul-solution to the bitterness springing up from inside of us.**

I love how Peterson puts this passage in *The Message*. “**Do you see what we’ve got? An *unshakable* Kingdom! And do you see how *thankful* we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, *deeply reverent* before God. For God is not an indifferent bystander. He’s *actively* cleaning house, *torching* all that needs to burn, and He won’t quit until it’s *all* cleansed. God Himself is Fire!**” {Heb. 12:28-29}.

What Kind of Fruit Is Borne From the Fire?

“**Our God is a consuming fire**” {Heb. 12:29}; and our “**God is *love***” which cannot be reasoned with {1 Jn. 4:8b and 16b}. **Reckless, raging, irrevocable, irresistible... Love.** His Love is capable of rearranging the reality around us. It is *beyond* capable of provoking change, sustaining change, and seeing change through to the finished, final product— the “**fruit**” of a Life deeply in love with God.

We get a glimpse of this Life in Galatians 5:22-23, the Divine Nine, where Paul say’s, “**But the fruit of the Spirit is love...**” That sounds incredibly familiar. It’s a “**love**” willing to serve, a love willing to sacrifice, a love which puts others before self and has their deepest, most beautiful *good* always in mind. It respects and it embraces, and not from a distance. Sometimes, *yes*, but aloof and unengaged is not its nature!

It is not a *relaxed mental attitude*; it is not merely ‘allowing others the freedom to fail;’ it is *fighting* for their Victory in Jesus!

So, the singular **“fruit of the Spirit is love.”** And out of love flows **“joy,”** *centred* in Jesus and a destiny which lies beyond the walls of this world, **“peace,”** meaning not the absence of conflict {though that’s not a bad thing} but an inner emotional stability regardless of pressure or pain, and **“patience....”** You’re not going to like this; I don’t really either. But this is ‘patience with people.’ Never, ever, *ever* is this word used for **“patience”** with God! Did I say never? Good, cause what I meant was never, *ever*. What hubris, what insolence, what *unbridled* arrogance, to think we have a right to say to God, or to others in regards to Him, “Well, I’m being patient with you, Lord, until....” Until *what*, exactly? You get your way? And what happens when you don’t? “I’m putting up with God til He changes this, that, or whatever.” No, see that’s what the peace and joy are for. **Circumstances may surround me, but the Kingdom of God is within me. And the resources of His Kingdom are waiting at my disposal!**

“Kindness” is the inner disposition; **“goodness”** is the outworking of kindness in action. We treat others kindly, fairly, respectfully; we *do* good deeds, good things on their behalf. You tracking? **“In everything,”** we **“do to others what”** we **“would have them do to”** us, and we **“do for others what”** we **“would have them do for”** us, **“for this sums up the Law and the Prophets”** {Matt. 7:12}.

“Faithfulness,” or what I call the missing component of post-modern life, a willingness to *commit* and follow through with one’s commitment. A pledge of honor, a word of truth, a heart of loyalty which cannot be shaken, *that* is **“faithfulness.”** And it is *possible*, it is *desirable*, it is *spiritual* to live faithfully in a faithless world! **“Gentleness”** is a soul surrendered and submitted to the will of its Master; a soul broken on the wheels of living and restored by the Hands of Grace. It is humble, and helpful, and not the least bit desirous of being hurtful. Are you getting this?

“And,” finally, **“self-control.”** Which means you have an inner system of authority in your soul, based on something *superior* to power and politics, money and Mammon, ego and opinion. This something is actually *two* things: the wisdom of *Abba’s* Word and the strength of *Abba’s* Spirit. They come together to give the Children of God a divine defense against the distractions, deceptions, and destructions of our enemies. **An inner authority to rule us, regardless of whose kingdom surrounds us.** I love this. I’ll give you the RRExp of this final phrase: **“Against things like this, there is no Law.”** *Right?*

Mastering My Identity.

We have a relationship with the God who saved us, we have a relationship with the

people around us, *and* as author Donald Miller has so aptly pointed out, we have a relationship with ourselves. **You have a relationship with yourself— so make it a *good* one, make it a *healthy* one.** In a world of people consumed with self-absorption on one hand or self-hatred on the other, you've got to change the way *you* view you; and change it into the way *God* views you. "I am a Child of God in whom Jesus dwells. And I live in my Father's Kingdom. This is *who* I am and *where* I am regardless of what may be raging around me." **This *alone* is my Eternal Identity.**

Again, we're not talking about pop psychology with a little 'God' thrown in for good measure. We're talking about looking to the living, breathing, abiding Word of God {Heb. 4:12}, letting it *fill* our hearts and minds with its wisdom, and choosing in the strength and authority of the Spirit of God, to *act* on it. To choose *Jesus* over too much food, Jesus over too much drink, Jesus over anger, Jesus over jealousy, Jesus over arrogance, Jesus over worry, Jesus over drugs {pharmaceuticals at the *top* of the List: don't *kid* yourself cause it came with a script}, Jesus over shopping, Jesus over sinful sex, Jesus over *all* our *idols*. **Jesus' Love is a consuming fire, and a consuming fire is the *only* thing strong enough to destroy our idolatries and to heal our addictions.**

Refuge In the Spirit of Jesus.

So, how do we 'work this out,' how do we put this into practice when our enemies come calling? How do you 'face down' a wary and ancient adversary who knows your greatest weakness? This was the question, in essence, posed to me a week or so ago. The answer is: **We take *refuge* in the Spirit of Jesus, refuge in the Son of God.** We bring our spirits, souls, and bodies fully and completely under His rule, under His reign, under His Kingdom. The Apostle prayed for the Saints of *Thessalonike* saying, "**May God Himself, the God of Peace, sanctify you through and through.**" And "**may your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**" {1 Thes. 5:23}. In this he 'outlines' every part of us; and each of these parts must be surrendered to the Son of God— spirit, soul, and body.

In Satan's kingdom, change is forced from the *outside* in. It's imposed by force or coercion, manipulation or legislation. In the spiritual realm we call this 'legalism:' the attempt, however *well*-meaning but horribly misguided, to control the actions of others, to bring them into conformity {with *our* standards, of course}, to shame or shun them into our mold of Biblical behavior.

In *Abba's* Kingdom, change works from the *inside* out. And this is the *only* way it works. You cannot legislate morality, ethicality, and certainly not spirituality {as 40 years of utter failure in 'The War On Drugs' amply testifies: cocaine and heroin, to name but *two* examples, are cheaper, purer, and more plentiful than they were in 1970}. When Paul tells the Philippians, to "**work out**" their "**salvation with fear and**

trembling,” he’s talking about the same thing he laid out in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. He prayed God would sanctify them “entirely” or “through and through.” He mentions it’s “spirit” first, then “soul,” then “body.” We know the target for the Word of God is the human heart. **The heart is the place from which faith is exercised and love is offered.** The heart is what allows us to have relationship with God and receive communication from God through His Word and through His Spirit.

When the Word is taught by whatever spiritual gift is doing the teaching {pastor-teacher, teacher, evangelist, exhortation}, the target is your heart, so that like a “double-edged sword” it will penetrate “even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.” It judges between both “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” {Heb. 4:12}, which means both ‘what’ we think and even ‘why’ we think it. Nothing else on Earth has the power to discern the dark and tangled motives of the human heart. **But Scripture can.** It *divides* the indivisible, and that’s the point. How? Because it is “living and active,” and because “nothing in all Creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything [*motive* included] **is uncovered and laid bare** [Like the neck of a man about to be executed!] **before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account,**” v. 13.

The Word must *take hold* in our hearts or it will never accomplish its divine design. And believing, trusting *in*, is the *hook* that secures it. Why is this important? **Because a change which is merely external is nothing more than cosmetic; a change which is not from within, is worthless.** Change which is imposed on you because society demands it, or because the legalism of your denomination or tradition demands it, is not genuine change. It’s just a ‘going-through’ of the motions, a ritual without reality. True change, the spiritual transformation Paul speaks of in Romans 12:2, has to start in the *heart*, in conjunction with the Spirit of God. It affects the entire soul, which means it transforms our attitude and our thinking {how we relate to the *God* above us, the *world* around us, and the *image* in front of us!}. And lastly, in our *praxis* {old Latin word meaning ‘practice, as opposed to theory’} it works its way out to affecting the body. **A healthy soul and spirit is infinitely better for your body than an unhealthy one.** And vice versa. **A healthy body is infinitely better for your soul and spirit than an unhealthy one!**

Finale.

Planting Courage and Instilling Strength— 2 Timothy 1:7.

How does Paul plant courage in the heart of his rather timid young protege in 2 Timothy 1:7? He ‘flips the script’ by reminding him of a *single* spiritual reality, “**For God did not give us** [Any of ‘us,’ Apostles included!] **a spirit of timidity....**” This is an old word going all the way back to the Classical Age {*deilia*}; it means ‘fearfulness,

cowardice.' In the Classical Greek, this word is *always* used in a negative sense. There is no redeeming quality to it whatsoever! Our God **"did not give us a spirit of timidity, or of fear, or of cautiousness and cowardice, but a Spirit of dynamic power...."** *Dunamis* is the term from which we get 'dynamite.' This is *holy* **"power"** in our warfare against evil, in *whatever* form it takes in its attacks: the smell of a bakery, an ad with a half-naked woman in it, a liquor store, a cut-throat conversation, a 50% off sale!, the thought of food or sex or drink or drug as my Comforter, capital C.

"Of sacrificial love...." *Agape*, as we saw in Galatians 5, is **"love"** reigning in our relationships, the constant seeking of another's greatest good. **"And self-control in the face of panic or passion"** {RRExp}. Another way to frame this is 'the wisdom of a disciplined heart,' a 'sound mind' in a world gone mad, a soul at rest in the reign of its Master.

To the worriers, the panic-prone, the fear-ridden, and the easily addicted, to the idol-worshipper in *all* of us, let's get this and don't forget it. ***Fear* is not something to be reasoned with; *food* addiction is not something to be reasoned with; *alcoholism* is not something to be reasoned with; *opiate* addiction is not something to be reasoned with; *sexual* addiction is not something to be reasoned with; *rage* is not something to be reasoned with; *lust* is not something to be reasoned with; *lying* is not something to be reasoned with; *slander* is not something to be reasoned with; *malice* is not something to be reasoned with; it is something to be *renounced*!** Here's how we deal with this. You run, *immediately*— not tomorrow or tonight or after I've had to time sort all this out, but *now*— into the presence of Jesus, into the sanctuary of His Spirit.

'O Mighty King, I know you have not given me a spirit of fear, faithlessness, lust, rage, weakness, addiction, cowardice, arrogance or self-absorption. You have removed both passivity and fatalism from my vocabulary! I reject _____ in the name of Jesus Christ; I renounce any spirit other than the Spirit of Jesus. By the authority of the Son of God I break any and every agreement I have made with _____ {addiction}.

I bring the Cross of my Lord Jesus Christ against _____, the power of His Resurrection against _____, and the authority of His Ascension against _____ {idolatry}. I renounce any claim to my own 'kingdom' apart from Yours, to my own 'life' apart from You, to the falsehoods of the faithless one over the wisdom of Your Word, the Truth which You are, Jesus. I bind and banish these forms of idolatry / addiction and all their manifestations from me. In Your holy name... Amen!

Give them *no air* to breathe in your life, no room to maneuver whatsoever.