

The Dividing Fire

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

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June 30, 2024

Text: Old Testament: Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm Reading: Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19
New Testament: Luke 12:49-59

Fire is a fascinating thing to watch. People like to watch fires being fought. I remember living in Kinston we would often hear the fire trucks roll by. On several occasions, especially when there were dozens of fire trucks responding, we would get in our car to go see what was happening. I came across a story this week about an oil well in West Texas that was burning out of control.



The Midland and Odessa fire departments were unable to get close enough to put out the fire, and it was burning away. The owner of the well offered \$50,000 to any fire department that could put it out. A few minutes later, a single old fire truck from the Notrees, Texas Volunteer Fire Department came barreling by the other trucks and rolled to a stop right in front of the burning well.

The volunteer firefighters were screaming and yelling as they jumped off the truck. They took the hoses and wet each other down and proceeded to put out the fire. When the fire was out, the well owner approached the fire chief and handed him the check for \$50,000. He said,

“Congratulations! What are you going to do with that money?” The chief who looked like he could hardly stand up said, “I’m going to use this money to fix the brakes on that dadgum fire truck!”

In our houses we have smoke detectors and fire extinguishers. In restaurants they have fire suppression systems over the grills. Maybe there are some here that have served as a volunteer firefighter to help contain the fire at a home or business. Maybe you have experienced a devastating fire in your lifetime and the only thing you could do is watch as all you had saved went up in smoke in just a few minutes. With the record high temperatures, and increasing drought conditions, we may once again hear of wildfires raging out of control burning up thousands of acres of forest and consuming everything in its path.



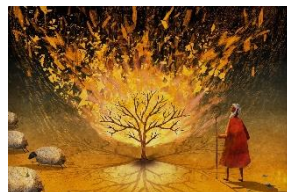
Fire is nothing to mess with. Maybe you have heard some of these:

- “It only takes a spark to get a fire going.”
- “If you mess with fire you will get burned.”
- Smokey the Bear reminds us that: “Only You can Prevent Forest Fires.”



Fire is an image that is used in several places in the Bible.

- Moses met the Lord at the burning bush.



- On Mount Sinai, God appeared to the Israelites as a fire on the mountain.
- Exodus 24:17 describes the Glory of God like a consuming fire.
- The Lord led the people of Israel through the wilderness with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
- When Elijah stood on Mt. Carmel, God sent down fire to consume the offering.
- In Acts chapter two, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples there on Pentecost and appeared as “divided tongues, as of fire, and sat upon each of them.” (Acts 2:3)
- In Revelation chapter one, the Apostle John describes the Glorified Jesus as having eyes of flaming fire!



God’s presence as well as His judgment has been illustrated by fire. God also uses fire to refine us and purify us to be what He would have us to be.

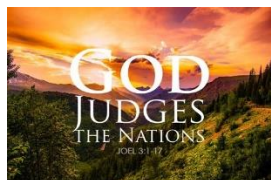
Fire once you experience it, you fear and respect the awesome power it displays. It is all consuming while at the same time, purifying.

Our three Biblical texts this morning all speak of the Lord using fire for judgement, and refining.

- Isaiah speaks of the vineyard of the Lord being judged, trampled down and burned.
- Psalm 80 continues with the theme of judgment and the vineyard of the Lord being burned with fire.
- Luke's gospel quotes Jesus as saying, *"I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*



I want to focus on something very important this morning. I want to explore a topic that is not often discussed today in many churches. This is not a sermon that will make you feel good about yourself. It is not a sermon that gives you ten easy ways to heal your marriage, find a better job, manage your finances, or empower you to live into your full potential (as Joel Olsten would suggest). No, it is not a self-help sermon. It is not a feel-good sermon. It is one that will make you uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable speaking of our Lord in this manner. It is a sermon concerning the coming judgment of the Lord.



God's judgment has been repeated in nation after nation. It has been repeated in generation after generation. It is repeated in family after family and individual after individual. It is a pattern that will continue until the time the Lord finally puts away sin. The Lord is Lord over all. He is creator and sustainer of all. He has the right to judge and will execute judgment upon all. He is a righteous judge and all will come and be judged either at the Great White Throne judgment seat (for



unrepentant sinners) or at the Judgment Seat of Christ (for all that have received Christ by faith). All will be judged and sentenced to hell or welcomed into heaven.



How Could A Loving God Condemn Anyone To Hell?

So many individuals cannot accept that idea. They would say, *"How can a loving God condemn someone to hell?"* The scripture is abundantly clear; the Lord

doesn't want any to perish but that all come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and receive everlasting life. But some will refuse to submit their will to the will of the Lord. They refuse to change their sinful ways and instead form a god to their own liking and bow down and worship their own created image of god.

There is only one God and that is the Lord. He is revealed through Jesus Christ.

The Vineyard of the Lord



If we turn over to Isaiah 5, we see the lament of the Lord concerning His chosen people. God choose Abraham out of all the people and made his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and sand on the seashore. The scriptures describe the people of Israel as His choice vineyard. It is a beautiful allegory of how the Lord tended His vineyard (Israel) and yet the vineyard (Israel) proved to bring forth wild grapes – a sinful people, instead of good grapes. It says:

Isaiah 5:5-7 – The Message Translation

5¹⁻² I'll sing a ballad to the one I love, a love ballad about his vineyard:

The one I love had a vineyard, a fine, well-placed vineyard. He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds, and planted the very best vines.

He built a lookout, built a winepress, a vineyard to be proud of.

He looked for a vintage yield of grapes, but for all his pains he got junk grapes.

3-4 “Now listen to what I'm telling you, you who live in Jerusalem and Judah.

What do you think is going on between me and my vineyard?

Can you think of anything I could have done to my vineyard that I didn't do?

When I expected good grapes, why did I get bitter grapes?



5-6 “Well now, let me tell you what I'll do to my vineyard:

I'll tear down its fence and let it go to ruin.

I'll knock down the gate and let it be trampled.

*I'll turn it into a patch of weeds, untended, uncared for—
thistles and thorns will take over.*

I'll give orders to the clouds: ‘Don't rain on that vineyard, ever!’”

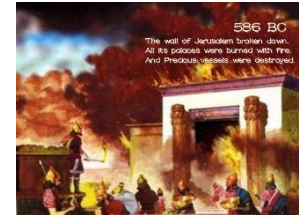
7 Do you get it? The vineyard of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies is the country of Israel.

All the men and women of Judah are the garden he was so proud of.

He looked for a crop of justice and saw them murdering each other.

He looked for a harvest of righteousness and heard only the moans of victims.

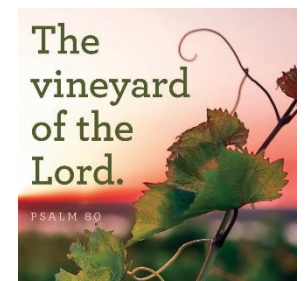
Israel repeatedly failed to heed the word of the Lord. They failed time and time again, generation after generation continued to worship other idols. Injustice reigned, wickedness was widespread, kings and judges perverted justice and failed to lead the people to live righteously. And the judgment of God culminated in 586 B.C. when Babylon came and defeated the city and took some of its inhabitants into captivity. The city of Jerusalem was completely destroyed. The walls were torn down, the temple was burned. The gold and silver were looted. Men, women, and children were cut down in the streets. The dead lay unburied. For 70 years those in captivity remained in bondage, as slaves in a foreign land



But God preserved a remnant. That remnant became acutely aware of their sins and lamented their position but understood clearly the cause of God's heavy hand of judgment.

Psalm 80 – A Prayer to Restore the Vineyard

Psalm 80 was probably written during the time Israel was in captivity. It is a prayer unto God for Israel's restoration. In it you see the Lord is acknowledged as the Shepherd of Israel. You see Israel once again describing themselves



as the vine planted by the Lord. They recall the past, they plead for restoration, they ask God to turn back from His anger which was unleashed upon Israel, and a prayer that they will not be abandoned by God.

Prayer for Israel's Restoration – Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,

You who lead Joseph like a flock;

You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!

² Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,

Stir up Your strength, And come and save us!

⁸ You have brought a vine out of Egypt;

You have cast out the nations, and planted it.

⁹ You prepared room for it,

And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land.

¹⁰ The hills were covered with its shadow,

And the mighty cedars with its boughs.

¹¹ She sent out her boughs to the Sea,

And her branches to the River.

¹² Why have You broken down her hedges,

So that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit?

¹³ The boar out of the woods uproots it,

And the wild beast of the field devours it.

¹⁴ Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts;

Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine

¹⁵ And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted,

And the branch that You made strong for Yourself.

¹⁶ It is burned with fire, it is cut down;

They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance.

¹⁷ Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand,

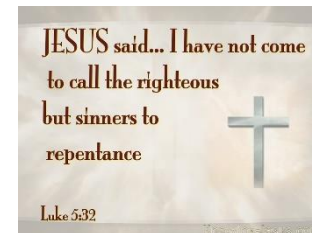
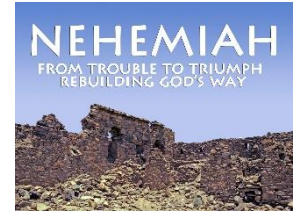
Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself.

¹⁸ Then we will not turn back from You;

Revive us, and we will call upon Your name.

¹⁹ Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!

Israel understood their sin very well and knew they needed to repent. That remnant returned to Jerusalem after 70 years with a repentant, willing heart ready to rebuild the walls, streets, and Temple. Under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra they reestablished the City of Jerusalem and reinstated the worship of God. When they returned to the Promised Land, the sin of worshipping idols and other foreign gods (which began when they first entered the land) was completely removed from them. They sought, with one heart, to worship the One True Living God.



In the fullness of time, God sent His one and only Son, Jesus Christ to complete what was started with Israel. The Master sent His Son to call them once again to repentance. This time it was not repentance from idol worship, instead it was a call to repentance from the legalism that regulated their life. The religious leaders had become outward worshippers of God (followers of the letter of the law) instead of worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth. They resisted the Spirit of God and twisted the Word of God to the point they were rejected by God's Son time and time again. Jesus called them "hypocrites" and "white washed sepulchers filled with dead men's bones." Parable after parable pointed to the fact that they had failed to be the people of God that the Lord desired.

It was the longing of God that ALL come to receive His Son. Yet knowing the heart of man, the Lord knew they would reject this offer of Salvation. The great division would rear its ugly head and the only thing that would purge it is fire.

The Fire brought About by Jesus

Alexander Maclaren in his exposition of this passage of scripture in Luke 12:49 tells us this passage of scripture is a rare glimpse of the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said He was coming to set the world on fire – and He did!



Luke 12:49-50 says, *“⁴⁹I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!*



Jesus’ appearance brings division. Some will believe and receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and others will reject Jesus as the Savior. Even while Jesus was here on earth,

after seeing the miracles (blind given sight, lepers healed, dead raised) many turned away because they could not – would not – believe.

Jesus longs for a time when the division between Himself and un-believers would be reconciled. He longed for a time when unbelievers would turn to Jesus for forgiveness and

receive Him as their Lord and Savior. He longs for everyone to be with Him and obey what He taught so they could live eternally with Him. He longed for the time when sin was completely judged and all unrighteousness was punished. But before a way of salvation could be offered, Jesus understood that there was a baptism that only He could go through – that needed to be completed first.

He is not talking about the water baptism with John the Baptist. That was already completed at the beginning of His earthly ministry. Even John the Baptist saw the fire that Jesus would bring. When John the Baptist first spoke of his cousin Jesus he said, *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”* (Matt. 3:11-12)

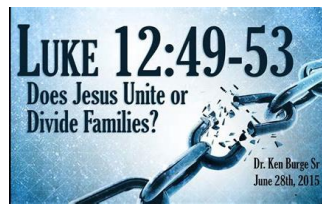


The baptism Jesus was speaking of was His upcoming crucifixion. Jesus understood for any sinner to ever be considered righteous before God, they needed their sin debt to be paid. Our sin debt is paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus knew what He was facing in a few short weeks. The disciples and Jesus were only a few short weeks away from that moment in Jerusalem.

Jesus said He was distressed until it is accomplished. He knew there was only one way of salvation – and that was by the way of the cross. There is a hymn that says, “*I must needs go home by the way of the cross, there is no other way but this.*” The only way you and I could ever be considered righteous before God is through the Cross of Calvary and the sacrifice offered there on our behalf.

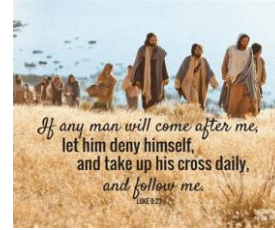
Can you imagine the agony Jesus had knowing what He would be facing? The rejection, the betrayal, the denial, the beatings, the scourging, the humiliation, the mocking, the piercing of hands and feet, the spear thrust in his side? Jesus saw it all and knew it all – and He did it anyway! Some have called verse 49 the prelude to Gethsemane.

Jesus goes on to say, “⁵¹ *Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division.*” ⁵² *For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three.* ⁵³ *Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*”



So many people speak of Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Yes, He is as far as reconciling us back to God. But when a person becomes a believer of Jesus Christ, and really begins to live out their faith, to reject the sins accepted by the world, to avoid the lusts of the world, to live a holy life – your former friends will leave you like you have a contagious disease. Some of a person’s greatest enemies –

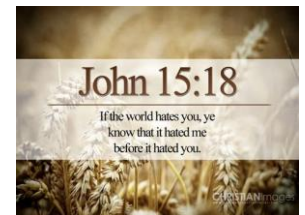
those that mock your faith and ridicule you – may even be from your own family, in your own home.



Jesus is reminding His followers that being a disciple of Jesus Christ may even cost you your family. In many parts of the world if you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, your family will disown you and count you as dead.

They may even seek to take your life when you profess Jesus Christ as the Lord of your life. In Muslim countries today, Christian believers are exiled from their families and sometimes sentenced to death for converting to Christianity. Every week you hear of another crisis arising and haters of Christ use the crisis and exploit it as an opportunity to harm Christians and burn churches. This has happened around the world more and more frequently. Jesus knew His coming would be like a raging fire causing division and discord. This hatred and discord may soon be in our streets and communities.

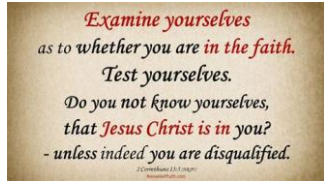
Jesus reminded His followers, “*If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.*” (John 15:18)



For those that have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and have expressed that faith through baptism, and are trying to live as Christ taught, you can celebrate knowing that when the judgment of God comes, you will be saved.

I John 1:7-9 says, “*But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another (other believers), and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the*

truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

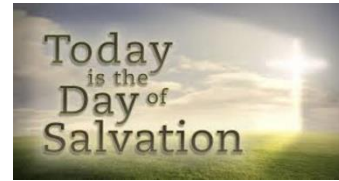


It is time we examine our hearts and make sure of our salvation. If we judge ourselves, and take the corrective action we need, then we

will not face judgment. The corrective action is to repent and receive Jesus Christ. If you are hoping God grades on the curve, then you may find yourself sadly on the wrong side of the dividing line of God. Only through the blood of Jesus Christ are we reconciled.

Jesus rebuked those gathered there because they could understand the weather, but could not understand that judgment was coming. Today on our cell phones we have weather apps that tell us when it will rain or when we are under a tornado watch. Our televisions will alert us to bad weather. We can subscribe to services that call us to alert us to bad weather. Even with all the warnings available to us today, people still ignore the warnings and end up injured or killed. The same is said for the spiritual life. We are without excuse; we have been warned!

Jesus said it like this to the multitudes: ⁵⁴ “...Whenever you see a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming’; and so it is. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blow, you say, ‘There will be hot weather’; and there is. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?”



The time Jesus is talking about is the time of repentance. Today is the day of salvation. Our life is very fragile and we do not know when we will take our last breath. Don’t be deceived. God will not be mocked. *“And as it is appointed for man to die once, but after this the judgment.”* (Hebrews 9:27)

If you have not accepted Jesus as your Savior, you will face eternal separation from God and eternal separation from everyone you love. God has reserved judgment and eternal punishment in hell for all that reject God’s offer of salvation. If you cared about your unsaved family and neighbors, you should be compelled to tell them before it is too late.

Jesus concludes this section with one more example of self-examination.

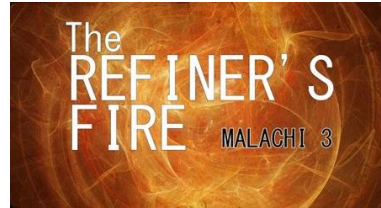
⁵⁷ *“Yes, and why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right? ⁵⁸ When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, the judge delivers you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last mite.”*

Even in the world’s legal system there is an opportunity open to many individuals to “settle the matter out of court.” Matthew 5:25 says, *“Agree with your adversary quickly while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.”*

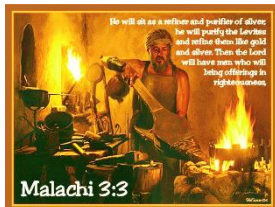
There is one more thing I want to say about the fire of God before I conclude this morning. The fire of God's judgment will fall one day. God also uses fire to purify us and to conform us into the image of His Son.

THE REFINER'S FIRE¹

The story is told of a group of women that met for Bible study. While studying in the book of Malachi, chapter three, they came across verse three which says: *"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."* This verse puzzled the women and they wondered how this statement applied to the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out more about the process of refining silver, and to get back to the group at their next Bible study.



The following week, the woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him while at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest, beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver.



As she watched the silversmith work, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire, where the flames were the hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot, then she thought again about the verse, that *"He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver."*

She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the entire time the silver was being refined.



"Oh, yes, madam," replied the silversmith; "I must sit with my eye steadily fixed on the furnace, for if the time necessary for refining is exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured."

The lady at once saw the beauty, and comfort too, of the expression, *"He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."* Christ sees it needful to put His children into a furnace; His eye is steadily intent on the work of purifying, and His wisdom and love are both engaged in the best manner for them. Their trials do not come at random; *"the very hairs of your head are all numbered."*

As the lady was leaving the shop, the silversmith called her back, and said he had forgotten to mention that "The only way that he knows when the process of purifying is complete when he sees his own image reflected in the silver...."

What a beautiful example for us to remember when we feel like we are in the fire! When Christ shall see His own image in His people, His work of purifying will be accomplished.



LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹ The Refiners Fire – adapted from several sources

