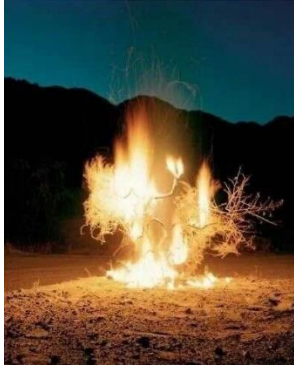


The Consuming Fire

First Series – Sermon Two

Original by George MacDonald

Paraphrase by Dale R. Howie



God loves His children with such entirety and devotion wanting only the best for them. His consuming fire is not something to be feared but welcomed as how all that is evil is burned away so that only Life remains. Only when all "that is other" has been completely consumed are we truly liberated and at Home with the Father!

"The truth that God is love, all love, and nothing other than Love" is the only hope we have! MacDonald makes it clear that God is not a permissive and enabling Father. He will not just fix for us, now or later, what is darkness and bondage to us! "Therefore, all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that separates and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed." Love liberates us, consumes with our participation, all of our sin and darkness in the consuming fire. MacDonald is clear, while corruption and darkness are one with us, He is against us as our selfish-selves, so that "He can be always and entirely for us!"

Outline

Love – Nothing is relentless but love!

Fire of Love – Not from Him, but to Him, his very Father!

A Partial Revelation – What else can the highest spiritual condition of men receive of an infinite God?

Revelation of Fire – That which kills the sin and gives life to the sinner.

The Coming Revelation – God gives Himself entirely for us, because He has no justice nor dignity to support.

What is to be Feared – This image was helping them see that evil, not fire, is the fearful thing.

Outer Darkness – The fire will go on burning in him, consuming what is "other" for our liberation.

Home – Of all God's natures, is His mercy not infinite!

Hebrews 12:29 NAS

"For our God is a consuming fire."

Love

Nothing is relentless but Love! The affection that yields to self-interest is weak and imperfect. Compromised, it is not devotion that concedes, but a mixture, an alloy, of self-giving and self-interest. If in the moment of the demand, love remains firm against pressure, it is love giving itself, not retreating from its useful purpose. It is not Love that resents a blessing; even less is it what answers a prayer that harms or hurts the one who asks. Love is one in purpose, pure, and changeless.

Devotion loves to purity and has no alloys. Love sees its full expression in beauty. This beauty not being fully expressed lacks in loveliness. Love then spends itself initiating more love so that this passion will multiply. This passion is moving towards perfection, so that love itself would be better realized – not due to a lack in itself, but in those receiving it. It was love that created us! So, even human love, in its corresponding relation to its divine source, will continue creating beauty in its own expression of giving.

There is nothing eternal but that which loves and can be loved, and love is ever climbing to its consummation when love will fill and inspire the universe, imperishable and divine!

Therefore, all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that separates and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed.

"Our God is a consuming fire!"

If this is hard to understand, it will become simple. Absolute truth is hard to know. It may take centuries of ages, of struggle, effort, and aspiration before we see reality. **Once we finally see it, it is so plain and simple. We wonder how we could have lived without seeing it before. That we did not understand it sooner was simply that we could not see it. To see the truth, to know what it is, to understand it, are all one and the same!**

This love is what we grope for in our darkness, being driven by the hunger of our desire. Our crying is the painful awareness of its' lack and the longing to fulfill its' mysterious need. Our hearts finally awakening, the darkness and emptiness yielding to the light of its' truth! But once seen, it is eternal. **One glimpse of divine love, and you are face-to-face with the vital heart of eternal Life!** For this vision of His love, God has been working from the beginning. This simple awakening is the climax of life. Once we receive it, the wonder of it, like a child, we want others to see it as we have seen it. We want everyone to realize what God's whole labor through creation, science, history, and poetry reveals. For this, God patiently works, while there is but one soul's eyes who are closed. One soul whose child-heart is not free in Him. One life in which this Love, this consuming fire, is not their very being!

Let's look at the apostle's words, which crowns the truth of this lovely terror: "Our God is a consuming fire."

Fire of Love

"Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire." We have received a

kingdom whose very nature is immovable. Give us the grace to serve our God, the Consuming Fire, with divine awe. Not with fear that draws back, in lack and lust. But with the humbling of our thoughts, delights and loves before Him. God is the Life of all and will have us be pure. This kingdom is immovable because there is no weakness in it. It's from an eternal world of Divine Beings and truth. We, therefore, must worship Him with reverence as pure as the kingdom is unshakable. He will shake heaven and earth so that only the unshakeable will remain.

Only that which is eternal will be able to stand. It is the nature of God, so wonderfully pure, that destroys all that is not pure, by fire. That demands purity in our worship. He will have purity. It is not that the fire consumes us if we do not worship perfectly. However, the fire will burn within us long after all that is "other" is destroyed. No longer with pain and suffering, but as the highest awareness of life, the very presence of God.

When evil, which alone is consumable, has been destroyed in His fire. We, who live in His immovable kingdom, will see God's nature face-to-face. His splendor is seen clearly with holy and eternal admiration. This realization can only come from the knowledge of His character, not of His power and that which survives is unified in One, a beautiful whole! Therefore, in such a soul, the wonder of God will be one with the simplest of love.

Yes, the fear and awe of God will cause a man to flee, not from God, but himself. Not from Him, but to Him, his very Father, in terror, lest he should do God or his neighbor wrong! "Let brotherly love continue." These are the words that express the grace whereby we serve God acceptably. Loving our brother is to worship the Consuming Fire.

The consuming fire image comes from the fire that burned upon the mountain in the Old Testament. This fire was part of the revelation of God to the Israelites. This was not the first use of this image as a revelation. This fire was part of the encounter of God with Moses. The meeting in which he took off his shoes and it was unsafe for him to come any closer. This fire burned in the bush but did not consume it.

The repeat of this image by the writers of the New Testament should strengthen it even more. Not more than it meant previously, but as much as it could have revealed then. It could not express then more than they could have understood. What else other than terror could a nation of slaves see? Those whose souls the rust of their chains had eaten and, in whose memory, lingered the smell of the kitchens of Egypt. Who, rather than give up the foods they liked, would have gone back into bondage! What else could such people see in the fire but terror and destruction? How else could they have considered purification by fire? For as of yet, they had no experience by which to consider such a thought.

If these slaves could have had such a thought then the very idea of the suffering involved would have overshadowed the whole concept of purification. They could not have heard or imagined a message from a deity that terror did not support. Therefore, fear was all they were capable of at the time. **They had no worship for any being with which they were not afraid. Was then this show upon Mount Sinai a display to create obedience, such as a bad nurse would use with children? Was it a suggestion of vague and false horror or was it not a real revelation of God?**

If it was not a real revelation, then it was none at all. Either the story was false or the whole display was a political trick by Moses. Those who understand the heart of Moses will not believe the latter. Those who follow the pretend revelation will see no reason for supporting the former. Some people believe so little in the cosmos or ordered world that the very argument of fitness is a reason for unbelief.

In any event, if God showed them these things, then God showed them what was real. He revealed Himself; He could never wear a mask. God could only show His face. He would not speak out of a flaming fire if it were foreign to Him. The blazing fire revealed something of Himself. Even if His children were so offensive, He would never have terrified them with a lie.

A Partial Revelation

It was a revelation, but only a partial one, a real image, but not a final one.

No revelation of God can be other than partial. If full disclosure is required to be considered accurate, then so much for revelation and goodbye to sonship. What other than a partial one can the highest spiritual condition of men receive of an infinite God? It is not untrue just because it is incomplete. Being partial is due to us, the lower state of the receivers. A partial revelation would be more understandable to us than one beyond our grasp. Therefore, a partial one would reveal more to us when a fuller revelation might reveal nothing.

For us to change, the nature of the revelation must allow for growth and development. That is moving us towards maturity. A false one would work against us and our experience inside our humanity. Real revelations awaken the desire to know more by a realization of our immaturity.

Israel revealed here was a people at their lowest. Could they have received anything else but a partial revelation, one of fear? How could the Israelites have responded in any other way? They were terrified by what was opposed to all they understood about themselves. They thought it was good to honor a golden calf. Being where they were, they were right to be afraid.

They were better off acknowledging the flaming terror from above than stooping to worship the idol below. Fear is nobler than sensuality.

Fear of God is better than no God, much better than a god made with hands! In this fear was a deeper awareness, hidden in the infinite. Worship from fear is unacceptable to God in itself. Only true worship that is in Spirit and Truth could be acceptable to Him. Even the beginnings of worship are precious in His sight. **He relates to us, not as we are, but as we will be. Not as we will be only, but as we are growing or capable of becoming. Humanity created in His image is what we will become.**

Therefore, a thousand stages, each in its self tiny, are invaluable in worth. These steps are connected and necessary in an infinite process. A process when declining would point towards evil, in growth, would lead to sainthood. So far, then, the revelation, while not being final, was calling them upwards. **Upwards to the best that they were now capable of being. Making future and higher revelations possible would support this partial one as being true.**

Revelation of Fire

But we will see that this revelation of fire is in itself, in the higher sense, a true one. Real to the mind and heart of the rejoicing saint, as it is to the trembling sinner. The saint sees more into the fire's meaning and understands better what it will do for him. It is an image that needs not be done away with but

unpacked. We, while participating in our sins, feel that being sinners is who we are. Giving up sin would mean that we were no longer ourselves. **So how can we understand that this revelation from God is our savior? The word penetrates and divides between our true man and the evil in us killing the sin and giving life to the sinner. Can it be of any comfort to tell them that God loves them by burning them clean? Can this cleansing by fire appear to us as anything beyond what it must always be, more or less – a process of torture?**

We do not want to be clean and cannot bear to be tortured! Can anyone do otherwise than fear this God? We, with the wicked, must learn to love Him with genuine Love! To them, Mount Sinai was crowned with signs of vengeance. **Was not God ready to do to them even what they feared? Though with another motive and a different purpose from any which they were capable of imagining? He is against sin: in so far as, and while, sin and we are one! He then is against this selfish-self. Against our selfish desires, aims, and hopes, so that He can be always and altogether for us!**

The sound of a trumpet split the thunder, lightning, storms, and darkness. Visible horror, but a faint image to the slave's senses, billowed with His voice, revealing what God thinks and feels about wickedness and selfishness. He regards with contempt the unrest of the dissatisfied. His intention for these ignorant people, restrained somewhat, was to leave a little room for grace in them to grow. This image was helping them see that evil, not fire, is the fearful thing. This grace was to help transform them to gladly rush up into the trumpet blast to escape the flutes around the calf. If they had been capable of understanding this, they would not have needed Mount Sinai. Sinai was a necessary and partial revelation for them because they were not prepared to receive anything else.

The Coming Revelation

Even Moses, their leader, misunderstood God's revelation. His love for the people was such that he was willing to sacrifice himself for them by suggesting his name be blotted out of the Book of Life. This perspective only revealed his misunderstanding. Moses was thinking it necessary to appease God, thinking of God as being less tender than himself. Not seeing that God was the Reconciler, the Redeemer, and only desired the heart's sacrifice.

Moses could not have known at this moment, nor understood, that one day, the very descendants of these people would kill their God, crown Him with thorns and sacrifice Him! The same Divine Son who would bear their grief and carry away their sorrows. Who is still taking and carrying them away even now! God does not need to satisfy His justice or support His dignity by accepting the sacrifice of even one of His creatures. **Instead, He gives Himself entirely for them! Jesus was doing His Father's will. He was laying down His life, suffering death, not that we would not hurt. But that our suffering would lead us to the Father's perfect love!**

The truth is that God is Love, all love, and nothing other than love!

A selfish man cannot believe the Truth concerning this gift of grace and love and misrepresents it. He cannot understand it in his selfishness. But one filled with love, oppressed by wrong teaching or partial truths claiming to be the Truth, will hear, understand and rejoice!

What Is to be Feared

When we say that God is love, do we tell people that their fear of Him is ungrounded? No, for much they fear happens and even more. However, there is something beyond their fears that they are a part of, a divine destiny that they cannot resist. This fate works alongside our human individuality which God has created in us.

This wrath against sin is consuming what we mistakenly call ourselves—freeing the self God made us to be to appear. This self appears with ten times the awareness than before and brings with it all the blessings of Life. Bringing with it all the benefits we tried to find without God. Surprisingly, now we will realize that we are our true selves. The weary, greedy, selfish, and suspicious old man has passed away. The new man, the new self, has come forward. What we thought and felt about ourselves will have vanished, and what remains, remains in glorified and repentant hope. For the glory that cannot be shaken remains. That which is eternal from God will continue and that which is temporary, even death itself, will be consumed.

The law of nature, the law of God, is that the destructible be destroyed and the eternal hidden in it will survive. The voices and messages surrounding us come from this corruption. They are drowning out the sounds from within, coming through the everlasting doors. Often, we cannot distinguish between them even though our real nature is eternal. The corruption must be burned out or at least have begun to be burned from us before we can participate in eternal life. Once the divine fire has consumed the flesh and the destructible been destroyed, only then will we find ourselves pure and whole!

Many of a man's works are consumed that by their very loss, he is freed – "...so as by fire." Gone in the smoke are all our petty superiorities and titles in this world. Its fire delivers the man who yields to the burning for the burning has destroyed the destructible. This power and rule are the perspective of the dead. This perspective will destroy both body and soul in hell. **If we continue to cling to the destructible, the burning goes deeper and deeper into our souls. They burn until they reach the root of the lies that enslave us – to the myths that appear to us as truth.**

The man who loves God, but is not yet pure, invites and embraces the fire of God. Fire embraced is not always torture! **The fire often reveals itself only as light, but it will still be the refiner's fire. The consuming fire is just the original and active form of its purity and love that is God's creative energy.** Without cleansing, there can be no new creation, no redemption. That which is not of God is corruptible, and corruption cannot inherit incorruption.

One whose deeds are evil fears the fire, but the burning will come whether we fear it, deny it, or accept it. Escape is hopeless, for love is relentless! Love is a consuming fire. We will not come out until we have paid the last penny.

Outer Darkness

If we resist the purifying of God, the consuming fire of love, a terrible fate awaits us, and its day will come. Outer darkness awaits those that hate the fire; what awful confusion will seize them! For a man to think and care so little about God, even though his existence is in Him. The truth is that God is always with him, upholding, delighting, and teaching him – making life good for him. God is giving Himself, even though we don't know it.

When God withdraws, He is as removed as He can be from the man without destroying Him. The man is aware of feeling abandoned, on the very edge of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim. Without end, that is to destroy himself. Without joy, with nothing of life's good, then will he in agony listen for the faintest sound of life coming from beyond the door. If the moans, even of suffering humanity, were to reach his ears in the darkness, he will be ready now to rush into the very heart of the Consuming Fire. He is prepared to know life once more, to exchange the terror of emptiness and unspeakable isolation for a place of painful hope.

Our imaginations cannot mislead us into too much horror of the awareness of being without God which is the place of living death. This dreadful image of a fire without light, the darkness visible in the black flame. When God has withdrawn Himself but not let go of His hold, his face turned away, but His hand He still holds. His heart is ceasing to beat in the man's heart, but keeping him alive by His fire. **This fire will go on searching and burning in him, as in the highest saint, consuming all that is "other" for our liberation so that we may be pure, even as He is pure.**

But at last, O God, you will throw Death and Hell into the lake of fire – even into your own consuming self? Death will then die forever!

"And Hell will pass away, and leave her dolorous mansions to the appearing day."

HOME

Then indeed will we be one, and with all our poor brothers and sisters, we will trust you, the Consuming Fire. We will have been burnt clean and brought home. If our moans, many ages away, would turn heaven into hell for us – **can a man then be more merciful than God? Could, of all His natures, His mercy, be not infinite? Could a brother love a brother more than The Father loves His own? More than the Brother Christ loves His brothers? Would Jesus not die again to save just one brother more?**

Let us come to you, Oh God, our Consuming Fire. Remind us that you will not burn us more than we can stand, but You will refine us. Even though You seem to slay us, yet will we trust you! Trust in you, even where there is no promise. Trust that by any means You use, in the end, we will receive the blessings with those who have not seen and yet still believe!

CLIFFNOTES WITH ORIGINAL MACDONALD QUOTES

LOVE

Nothing is inexorable but love.

There is nothing eternal but that which loves and can be loved, and love is ever climbing towards the consummation when such shall be the universe, imperishable, divine.

Therefore all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed.

But when once he does see it, it is so plain that he wonders he could have lived without seeing it. That he did not understand it sooner was simply and only that he did not see it. To see a truth, to know what it is, to understand it, and to love it, are all one.

To see one divine fact is to stand face to face with essential eternal life.

FIRE OF LOVE

Yea, the fear of God will cause a man to flee, not from him, but from himself; not from him, but to him, the Father of himself, in terror lest he should do Him wrong or his neighbor wrong.

They had no worship for any being of whom they had not to be afraid. Was then this show upon Mount Sinai a device to move obedience, such as bad nurses employ with children? a hint of vague and false horror? Was it not a true revelation of God?

A PARTIAL REVELATION

It was a revelation, but a partial one; a true symbol, not a final vision.

Fear is better than no God, better than a god made with hands.

For he regards men not as they are merely, but as they shall be; not as they shall be merely, but as they are now growing, or capable of growing, towards that image after which he made them that they might grow to it.

And calling forth the best of which they were now capable, so making future and higher revelation possible, may have been a true one.

REVELATION OF FIRE

How can they understand that the lightning word is a Saviour—that word which pierces to the dividing between the man and the evil, which will slay the sin and give life to the sinner? Can it be any comfort to them to be told that God loves them so that he will burn them clean. Can the cleansing of the fire appear to them anything beyond what it must always, more or less, be—a process of torture?

And is not God ready to do unto them even as they fear, though with another feeling and a different end from any which they are capable of supposing? He is against sin: in so far as, and while, they and sin are one, he is against them—against their desires, their aims, their fears, and their hopes; and thus he is altogether and always for them.

THE COMING REVELATION

For so he would think to appease God, not seeing that God was as tender as himself, not seeing that God is the Reconciler, the Redeemer, not seeing that the sacrifice of the heart is the atonement for which alone he cares.

Who, instead of accepting the sacrifice of one of his creatures to satisfy his justice or support his dignity, gave himself utterly unto them, and therein to the Father by doing his lovely will; who suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his, and lead them up to his perfection;

May it not then hurt to say that God is Love, all love, and nothing other than love?

If the selfish man could believe it, he would misinterpret it; but he cannot believe it. It is not possible that he should. But the loving soul, oppressed by wrong teaching, or partial truth claiming to be the whole, will hear, understand, rejoice.

WHAT IS TO BE FEARED

The wrath will consume what they call themselves; so that the selves God made shall appear, coming out with tenfold consciousness of being, and bringing with them all that made the blessedness of the life the men tried to lead without God. They will know that now first are they fully themselves.

If still he cling to that which can be burned, the burning goes on deeper and deeper into his bosom, till it reaches the roots of the falsehood that enslaves him—possibly by looking like the truth.

The fire shows itself sometimes only as light—still it will be fire of purifying. The consuming fire is just the original, the active form of Purity,—that which makes pure, that which is indeed Love, the creative energy of God.

OUTER DARKNESS

And that fire will go searching and burning on in him, as in the highest saint who is not yet pure as he is pure.

HOME

Shall a man be more merciful than God? Shall, of all his glories, his mercy alone not be infinite? Shall a brother love a brother more than The Father loves a son?—more than The Brother Christ loves his brother? Would he not die yet again to save one brother more?