

The Forest for the Trees

By Dave Neale, Ph.D.

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

First I want to talk just a little bit about what this passage is about generally. Then we will move to the part of the passage that talks about the weather, and discerning the times.¹

What is Jesus talking about in vs 49-53? What is the fire to which he refers? Let’s try to get our heads around what this means and how it applies to our lives today. What a challenge we have with this not just “interesting,” but difficult passage.

I hope you don’t lose patience with my dogged, dogged I say, insistence that we read biblical texts with a view toward their original context first and always. The interpretive principal being: that in order to understand what a passage means for us today; we must understand how the original readers might have understood before, to the best of our modest ability, before moving on to the meaning for us.

We never can forget that our reading is separated from the time of its writing by centuries of cultural evolution.

And yet, here the Word stand before us. Always calling us to some important truth for life today.

The question is, to what “fire” Jesus is referring here. There are two possible interpretations proposed by commentators. Most think that it refers to the fire of the end-time judgment (***“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze!”***)

Even the great Hans Conzelmann calls this verse a reference to the “eschatological conflagration.”² So also my ‘great cloud of witnesses’ Marshall, Green and Fitzmyer, agree.

Fortunately, one, Luke Timothy Johnson allows that its second meaning to which I subscribe, is a possibility: is the fire of Pentecost.

I disagree with all of them. And it only goes to show that sometimes being right is a lonely business.

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze!”

Jesus is talking about the fire of the Spirit that is burning within him. Yes, the coming tongues of fire of Pentecost are about to break out and change the world. But here Jesus is talking about his current situation and the coming difficulties he and the disciples are facing.

Sidebar: In the mid- to late 1800s a reinterpretation of Jesus of Nazareth occurred in the West that cast him as figure who proclaimed the end of the world; he was an eschatological doomsaying figure who thought the world was going to end immediately (Samuel Reimarus, D.F. Strauss).

This found its apex in Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. It’s really hard to overstate how profoundly influential this view of Jesus became throughout the 20th century.

Christian theology so fully imbibed this reinterpretation from a wise gentle rabbi to a firebrand, until we could see him no other way. It even came to fully inform evangelical theology, and thus the emphasis you find in millennialism.

All this to say, that I don't think Jesus is talking about the future end of the world at all. How could that mean anything at all to his hearers that day?

I said last week that, in the first three centuries of the church, Christians didn't win people to Jesus by winning arguments. They did it by their habits of life, calm, holy, patient, loving. So I'm not trying to change anybody's mind.

Here is how I see this passage.

The "fire" isn't the fire of judgment but the fire of God's presence as the Messiah stepped into our world, bringing the truth and Spirit of God blazing into our lives.

But I understand in terms of John's statement about Jesus in Luke 3:16: ***He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.***³

Listen to this. This is how the great C.H. Dodd summarized the aim of Jesus.

"His aim was to constitute a community worthy of the name of a people of God, a divine commonwealth, through individual response to God coming in his kingdom."⁴

This text is not about the end of time. Jesus wasn't a wild-eyed doomsayer. He was so fully possessed of the presence of God in the *now* that he says ***"...what stress I am under until my baptism is completed."*** (συνεχω, or *synechō* in transliteration).

...what a constraint I'm under... (NRSVUE)

A present passive that means, "be distressed."

This seems to indicate inner turmoil; an emotional eruption. We seem to be seeing an emotional Jesus at this point.

Our Lord had emotions and probably experienced a full range, just as we do. It's like his frustration is boiling to the surface, using terms like "fire, kindled, baptism, distressed, division and against".⁵

A stress all the more intense because the Lord knew that the coming trials were going to create division even in the family. Christians dragged before judges, expulsion from synagogues, Paul breathing threats of murder and binding Christians and dragging them to Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 9:1-2), the martyrdom of Stephen, the dispersion of the nascent church from Jerusalem in the late 50s, barely 20 years after Jesus.

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The very next thing he does is describe explicitly how the coming tribulations will rend even families apart.⁶ See the footnote of my manuscript for details. The challenge is that, just as the prophecy of Simeon at his birth in Luke 2:34, Jesus comes to "divide households and create division." The division is by the diverse ways in which people respond to the Messiah – to the fire of his presence.

This is, Johnson says, a matter of prophetic passion and urgency.⁷ That the Word shows us this about our Lord is a truly profound thing for us – to see the passion of Jesus.

This is all very sobering and, on its surface perhaps, not very inspirational.

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

This is a passage about Jesus’ state of mind on that day, facing the cross, and knowing full well that his followers were in for a rough go in the days and months and years ahead.

It is, rather than teaching us about the end of time, drawing our attention to and holding in firmly on the presence of God here and now.

In the art of conversation the safest topic in the world is the weather! Don’t you find it quite a dramatic shift from the sublime to the mundane? After this unsettling discourse Jesus said, ‘Let’s talk the weather.’

54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain,’ and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens.”



It’s a charming realistic observation. If you look to the west you see the Mediterranean Sea from when arise the rain-soaked clouds. From the south you know perfectly well that the oven heated winds of the Negev will blow up through the Valley of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth, and then up the Jordon River Valley. Hot and hot.

And then he challenges them with this question: ***You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?***

Hypocrites, It is hard to understand how their viewing the weather makes them hypocrites. Living Translation says, “Fools!” In Matthew the word implies those who are “play acting” as righteous as they give alms. The Message says, “Frauds!”

He isn’t asking us if we can predict the future. (***but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?***) He is asking us if we have the right perspective on the “present time.”

He is asking us if we understand that the Messiah stands before us.

His point is that the Messiah is with now! And Jesus says, ‘Why can’t you see it?!’

Why is your spiritual perception so shallow that you are unmoved by the presence even of the Messiah. It is a call to decision.

My second observation is this related to discerning the times is this.

“The most highly valued adviser is the one who can step back from the pressures of a situation and put the situation in a broader context. Hard decisions can be made more wisely if they have the larger background in view. Most people are good at seeing the trees, but few are able to see the forest.

We have this saying: We can't see the forest for the trees.

Jesus' question calls for reflection: Why indeed do we not know how to judge our present time? It is easy to become so absorbed in the details of the present that we miss the implications of the age we are in. The present moment requires a calm spirit to find God's presence in the melee of life.”⁸ We are called to dwell in the forest, not in the tree.

The fire of God's presence is with us now.

I close with this beautiful prayer of Restoration by Lysa Terkeurst someone share with me this week: “Because You, Jesus, You are greater than anything we face; we proclaim in Jesus' name there is no defeat in our lives. There is no discouragement in our lives. There is no condemnation in our lives. There is no sense of worthlessness or insecurity or inferiority in our lives. There is no rejection, no fear, no confusion. There is just life!” (From a *Prayer of Restoration* by Lysa Terkeurst)

Thanks be to God.

¹ Typically, we only come to these more seemingly apocalyptic texts in November, towards the very end of the church year when, as makes sense, we talk about the consummation of things. From birth to consummation each and every year in the lectionary cycle.

² Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, p. 109. But Fitzmyer, Green and Marshall as well. Luke Timothy Johnson does too, but allows that it may be the fire of Pentecost in Acts 2:3.

³ The major two interpretations are the fire of the Spirit or the fire of judgment. Most modern commentators think it is the second. But in favour of the first is the representation of fire of the presence of the Spirit in Acts 2:3. My interpretation is a minority view. See Neale, *Luke 9-24*, p. 107.

⁴ *The Founder of Christianity*, p. 90.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 107

⁶ See my article, *Was Jesus a Mesith? Public Response to Jesus and His Ministry*. Tyndale Bulletin 44.1 (1993). I flatter myself that I convinced N.T. Wright of the argument in this article (see Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 439-441). Jesus conflicts with local synagogues led to his banishment from cities and towns. And as per Deut 13 and Micah 7:6, which Jesus quotes here, families were obligated to expel and stone even members if they followed a “deceiver.”

⁷ L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 209.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 109