

{This message was delivered by Mr. Makoto Fujimura at the Christian Embassy to the United Nations on 1 March 2006. For more information, please visit www.MakotoFujimura.com}

Redeemed from Fire by Fire

*The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre of pyre
To be redeemed from fire by fire
--T.S. Eliot*

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Introduction:

I remember riding a train to attend a worship service in Tokyo about 18 years ago, reading this passage from 1 Corinthians 3. Being new to the faith, everything in the scriptures seemed fresh. I read through the entire scripture, having my artist's eye washed by the sanctifying beauty of God's words. I was in Tokyo to study the ancient craft of painting called Nihonga, using materials such as precious minerals, gold, silver and paper. When I read these passages, Paul's metaphor for building the church seemed rather like an answer to prayer. I literally saw the materials I was using in this description.

Paul is making a distinction of materials that have lasting quality, like gold, silver and precious minerals and materials that are fugitive like wood, hay and straw. But to me every material listed here seemed to capture both the ephemeral nature of our art and the durable potential of what can be created via nature. Japanese paper, for instance, made of wood, hay and straw, is one of the most durable materials, though it is made of the fragile fibers of plants. Silver, though metal, can oxidize and darken, and a darkened silver crumbles in your hand like dust, making it very difficult to use.

What excited me about reading this passage that particular day is that I had asked God to reveal Himself to me through scriptures. I wanted to know if what I did as an artist and a person of faith could be integrated. The answer, it seemed to me then and now, is a resounding yes. In fact, this integration of faith and our works is one of the fundamental building blocks of Christian community.

Paul, though, seems not to focus on this integration issue, though it can be inferred, but rather on something much more literally foundational. He suggests something remarkable that we rarely consider as Christians. He wants to make sure that we understand that there is a foundation, a cornerstone, that is Jesus Christ. And then he tells us that the judgment of God is upon our works. But he continues to promise that if our works built on the cornerstone of Jesus, they will survive. If not, they will be burnt. There is holy fire waiting for all of us.

But we may ask, what does he really mean by this? Is he saying that what we build, our art, our cultural products, our buildings will last physically? Or is it metaphorical? What does it mean to

build on the foundation of Christ? Is he referring to only a spiritual legacy? Is it possible to consider a paradigm in which even the material stuff of the earth will be affected by God's intervention and made indestructible via this fire of judgment?

In my recent exhibit in Chelsea, I exhibited a series of new paintings called Water Flames. Loosely based on Dante's vision of his journey to Paradise via Inferno and Purgatorio, I am painting flames with water based minerals. This is a new series of works that I have done; they are based on a video of memorial flames at Hiroshima. I am in essence, combining the flames of Hiroshima with this 1Cor. 3 image of God's flames. So I have been thinking of the symbolic weight of flames in scriptures and in other sources.

Flames do pop up everywhere in the Bible, from the flaming sword of the Cherubim guarding the Garden of Eden to the burning bush, from the chariots of fire to the Revelation battle of heavens.

Ex. 3:2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of **fire** from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on **fire** it did not burn up.

Deut. 4:24 For the LORD your God is a consuming **fire**, a jealous God.

Ezek. 1:27 I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of **fire**, and that from there down he looked like **fire**; and brilliant light surrounded him.

Rev. 3:18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the **fire**, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Fire or flames seem to coincide with the appearance of God, either as a mediating force, or as a judgment of God. And the weight of flames' symbolism reverberates through all cultures.

The Greeks considered fire to be one of the four basic elements, which you may remember to be, earth, fire, water and air. There are many fire paintings in Japanese history, from fires kindled at cherry blossom festivals to the fires of hell depicted by Buddhistic works of the 15th century.

This passage of scripture gives us a curious, distinctive vantage point in looking at the fires of life. Today, I want to focus on three stories/themes. 1) A Tale of two art professors which reveals two contrasting responses to devastations, 2) "pyre of pyre, redeemed from fire by Fire" taking T.S. Eliot's expressions from Four Quartets to consider with you what the process of finding hope in the time of fiery trials 3) A fiery prayer of a sister/poet in Christ which articulates the power of the promise of 1 Corinthians 3 passages.

1) A Tale of Two Art Professors:

I have a wonderful friend in Bruce Herman, who heads the art department at Gordon College. His studio and his home burned down some time ago and he lost twenty years of work.

I also know of a story of another artist, of similar stature as a painter, also a head of another art department. They are similar ages, and they are both passionate teachers. He also lost many years' works due to a flood. A friend who went through an M.F.A. program with him tells me that this professor is very, very bitter and has not been able to fully recover from the damage of losing many years of what he considers his best works.

The fire of death and destruction surrounds us, every day. It may not be a physical fire or a flood that destroys. It may be illness, it may be psychological torment, or it may be 9/11 or Hiroshima. We seem to live to avoid the fire of destruction and death.

But if you ask Bruce Herman what losing twenty years of work means to him now, he will tell you without any hesitation “it was the best thing that could have happened to me.” And he will smile in joy as he states that. If you ask this other professor, he will say that losing his works haunts him like it happened yesterday. Bruce would say that since the fire, he has been more focused, more productive, and his faith has come alive via his paintings. In fact, so much so that all of the paintings he makes now seem to me like expressions of figures arising out of flames of God.

The other professor is not able to see in the same way as Bruce. Why? What do you do with the fire in your life? Is it because he doesn't have faith that the anonymous professor cannot recover from the fire?

But, I know many Christians who are bitter. So it would be too simplistic to say, “See, if you are a Christian, you can face fire and be refined.”

I want to make it clear, that when we see people suffer because of loss, we should not over-spiritualize and say something like “see, if you had more faith, you would be ok.” Or “see, this is a test to see what you are truly made of. You will rise out of the ashes and become refined by fire!” Why not?

Because we are also commanded to share in one other's suffering (Romans 8), to weep with those who weep. In that sense, Fire of any kind is an opportunity to share in one other's suffering. Fire is our common curse/grace. These passages tell us, my friends, that all of us will eventually face great loss as we are to recount our lives and our works before God: we will face that fire, flood that wipe out, seemingly, everything. We will have our own ground zero.

So, instead of over-spiritualizing, we need to experience their suffering as ours. Devastating Fire is not the way it was meant to be when God created the world. We should not have to experience a loss of a loved one; we should not have to bury a nine year old in a tragic sledding accident; we should not have to lose an entire city, a cultural legacy of New Orleans in one day. No, it is not supposed to be this way, and we can say with Dylan Thomas “rage, rage against the dying of the night.” The Fire of Death affects us all.

Dylan Thomas' “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green
bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding
sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

But our reaction to that suffering does make a difference in how we live. Bruce and this other professor's stories make that clear. So what is the difference? What is the secret of turning the fire of destruction into the fire of life? That seems to be the crux of Paul's message. He is directing this dialogue toward Christians first. (So for a non-believer, the anonymous professors of the world, the fire of destruction should indeed make you bitter and angry. He is being absolutely honest. We need to realize that someone "raging against the dying of the light", is being honest.) Christians tend to be stoic and say "God is going to redeem this," but remain bitter and angry on the inside. Let's be more honest. We need to weep. We need to even express our anger toward God (Psalmists do this very well). And then we can have the capacity to empathize with others, even those outside of the community of faith. We need to weep with them first, before we tell them about the impending doom of rejecting Christ's love.

Yes, this passage speaks of the Fire on "the Day" with a capital "D". The Bible speaks of that Day in which Christ will appear as the Judge. This Fire will destroy anything that is impure, including us. Paul is particularly addressing Christ's appearance in the life of a believer. Now, he is speaking in the context of building God's church ("you are God's building...you are God's Temple.") As a church planter himself, he is addressing the divisions that often take place in a local church. He is exhorting the church in Corinth to come together: not to come together in our destructive natures or partisan divisions, nor on the Fire of Destruction, but on the death and resurrection of Jesus. He is warning Christians that unless we build on Christ, no matter how moral or good our actions seem, no matter how effective we are as activists, our contributions to Christ will come to naught. Looking at this passage, apparently this Fire of Death will make many Christians "suffer loss."

Many Christians will be surprised to find that the work they have done for the church, as people of faith, as pastors and teachers will be tested and found to be not lasting.

The fire made Bruce even more compassionate, even more creative, and even more dependent on God. He discovered, I think, that it was good to face that judgment now, rather than at the end of his life. The real danger is that we will be-surprised at the end of our lives by the real fire of judgment. That is the difference between gold and hay. Gold will be refined by fire, the other will simply burn away. Gold will remain, reshaped, yes, but purified. Hay will simply disappear. If we go through the fire with Christ, and walk with God in faith, we will not be surprised when that Day comes. You already know that fire, so you will recognize it. What you experience will be revealed in Christ.

St. Symeon the New Theologian [define St. Symeon briefly, as in "the sixth century church father St. Symeon the New Theologian...], in *The Discourses*, suggests this:

"God is fire and when He came into the world, and became man, He sent fire on the earth, as He Himself says: this fire turns about searching to find material...and for those in whom this fire will ignite, it becomes a great flame, which reaches Heaven . . . this flame at first purifies us ...then it becomes in us food and drink and light and joy, and renders us light ourselves because we participate in His light"

2) Pyre of Pyre, Redeemed from fire by fire.

But, at the same time, Paul insists on telling us something truly remarkable. Yes, if we do not build on Christ, our works of "righteousness" will come to naught: that is fairly easy to see, if you are a Christian. But the other side of the message, if you are reading the text with a fresh eye, is an

incredulous promise. The Fire of Destruction will reveal something you have done, you have built, to be indestructible.

Our works do matter. Our words do matter. Not simply because they are going to be tested. Our works do matter because what we say and do today can last eternally! Even if it is a short word of assurance and encouragement, even if no one sees your act of kindness. That silent submission to forgive rather than stay bitter, that lonely time of walking with Christ alone in workplace, schools or in the art world: Christ will use those deeds to build his City of God.

To build The City of God, we need to be a fiery Body of Christ. The church is to be a fiery body, like the burning bush which is burning but not consumed; and we need to be an enigma to the world around us. There's holy fire burning within us, and we can, with faith, see the presence of Christ in all places, even among the ashes. We can not only see burning bushes, we can walk in a burning city, we can live and breathe among the burning people of God. We are burning and yet not consumed. We are people, as C.S. Lewis stated, of "immortal horrors or everlasting splendors." And I find that these people of "everlasting splendors," my heroes of faith whom I admire, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Mother Teresa, seem to spend a lot of time in the ashes of the world, intentionally going there, to experience others' burning remains.

So, T.S. Eliot, the poet of the Wasteland who journeyed somehow to the Stillpoint, writes:

*The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre of pyre
To be redeemed from fire by fire*

We are to be "redeemed from fire by fire." But what is the "choice of pyre of pyre?" Then there is really no choice, is there? We are all walking among the ashes and pyres of life, like on the day of 9/11. Our choice seems to be in getting to the "pyre of pyre," the pyre of life underneath the surface of the pyre of death and destruction. The only way to get there is to believe that there is a Fire of Life greater than the fire of destruction. That fire of death, even as destructive as Hiroshima and Nagasaki, can be met, do you realize, with a greater and more powerful Fire of LIFE? Your works and words can last eternally, if build upon the foundation of Christ.

I am going to end with a story, and a challenge.

3) A Prayer of a Sister/Poet: How Fire of Life and Fire of Death are the same fire

Melissa came to NYC, a writer, having come to NYC after graduating from a Christian college. When I met her, she was, even as a pastor's daughter, not sure of where she stood spiritually. But via a good mentor and friends, she eventually came to embrace her faith in Christ, and to grow in her faith in the spheres of her writing, as an MFA student at The New School, and as a wonderful facilitator for the arts. She spearheaded many of IAM's efforts to engage with culture.

Recently, we had breakfast. She and her husband were about to move to Nottingham, England, and this was one of the last times for us to get together before her journey. I asked her to pray. And she prayed an unforgettable prayer that echoed 1 Corinthians 3:

"Lord, use this food, this breakfast, to prepare us for our deaths."

The words of her simple prayer reverberated in my heart for the rest of the day. Later I emailed her and asked what exactly she had meant by that. "Melissa," I asked her, "what did you mean by your prayer?"

She told me that she was just at her grandmother's deathbed, having taken the responsibility of carrying out her duty, as a granddaughter, to be on a death-watch. She watched her grandmother, a woman of faith, be received into Christ's hands late in the evening, and held her hands.

"Lord, use this food to prepare us for our deaths."

In these simple words, I realized I had in front of me an extraordinarily creative believer, a true follower of Christ. I realized I was privileged to witness a transformation of someone who felt, ten years ago, uneasy about her faith, but now a vibrant, determined Christian. And *she understood that the fire of life and the fire of death are one and the same*. She understood that her fire of death sanctifies her.

Do you pray like that? We can pray like that today: as we approach the Table.

"Lord, use this Food to prepare us for our deaths."

Christ knew, when he instituted this Table 2000 years ago, that we would gather here today. He has been long-suffering, patient with us, waiting for us. He knew that today, we would be faced with horrific destructive powers, and chaotic storms in our lives. He is waiting for us to utter, "Lord, by your Death, we LIVE." Despite the errors and horrors of the day, his death, his Fire will redeem. His Body was broken for us, that we can rise to Life: His blood was shed for us so that we can receive the wine of Joy. That's why Melissa can pray:

"Lord, use this Food to prepare us for our deaths."

Because by being prepared for death, we LIVE in Christ. This Table is a fiery Table of Christ: His resurrected presence invites us to feed us with His Fire so we will be strengthened to face the fires and floods of our lives.

And if you utter these prayers in faith, what you say and do will last, even through the most destructive fires. And Jesus will translate what you say into a building block of Eternity. I do not know what that will look like: I only know it will take time. It took Melissa her life-time to utter those prayers. No, it took faithful grandmothers, and generations of faith for Melissa to utter that prayer. One thing is sure: As we build on the foundation of Christ, we will choose to be in the "pyre of pyre." Even our grandmother's deathbed. "Pyre of pyre" is what Christ's building block look like from the outside. And we will be "redeemed from fire by Fire." We will all see and witness that ultimate Fire, both today, all around us, and in that Day.