

## **The fire of the gospel**

by Douglas E. Cox

In Scripture, fire and God's sword each represent the word of God, which Jesus said, will endure forever.

Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, & Luke 21:33  
Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

Jeremiah compared God's word to fire.

Jeremiah 5:14  
Wherefore thus saith the Lord God of hosts, Because ye speak this word, behold, I will make my words in thy mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them.

Jeremiah 23:29  
Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?

Fire goes before the great army of God described in Joel 2, like the pillar of fire that went before the Israelites in the wilderness. Their noise is like the noise of fire devouring the stubble.

Joel 2:3-5  
A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth:

the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them. The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they run. Like the noise of chariots on the tops of mountains shall they leap, like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble, as a strong people set in battle array.

Joel referred to the garden of Eden, where after Adam and Eve were expelled, the tree of life was guarded by Cherubims brandishing a flaming sword:

Genesis 3:22-24

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

Isaiah said God will plead with men with fire and with his sword, which is his Word.

Isaiah 66:16

For by fire and by his sword will the Lord plead with all flesh: and the slain of the Lord shall be many.

Isaiah compared the knowledge of God to the waters of the sea.

Isaiah 11:9

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

The idea of a "lake of fire" in the Apocalypse seems to combine two metaphors, fire and water, that John used to describe the time of the judgment. In the Old Testament, the knowledge of God is compared to water; for example

the river of healing water flowing from the visionary temple in Ezek. 47. The rivers of “living water” in Zech. 14:8 are symbolic of the holy Spirit, as Jesus taught:

John 7:38-39

He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

Daniel described a “fiery stream” going forth from Christ’s throne:

Daniel 7:9-11

I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened. I beheld then because of the voice of the great words which the horn spake: I beheld even till the beast was slain, and his body destroyed, and given to the burning flame.

John the Baptist said that Jesus will baptize with the holy Spirit, and with *fire* .

Luke 3:15-17

And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.

Jesus said,

Luke 12:49

I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled?

When he sent the holy Spirit to his disciples, it appeared like *tongues of fire* which sat upon them.

Acts 2:2-4

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

I suggest, the Gospel is the “unquenchable fire” that John and Jesus referred to. Fire is a metaphor representing the Gospel, which is “everlasting.” It also will fill the earth. When we compare the Scriptures that speak of God’s word as a fire with Isaiah 11:9 or Habakkuk 2:14, it is easy to see that the “lake of fire” mentioned in Revelation 20:10 signifies the word of God, and the knowledge of God, that *fill the whole earth* in the time of the judgment, when Jesus and his saints reign over the nations.

Paul said that Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his angels in *flaming fire*, which he connected with believing the apostles’ testimony.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10

And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.

The flaming fire Paul mentions is the metaphorical fire of the gospel, not literal fire. This can be seen by comparing the words of Jude, who describes the same event, with the previous Scripture.

Jude 14-15

And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

Jude said that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered “the vengeance of eternal fire.”

Jude 1:7

Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.

Jude’s statement illustrates the nature of the fire of the gospel, which in this case is part literal, and part figurative. The figurative part represents God’s judgment of the particular sin that we still associate with Sodom. The literal fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was temporal; it was extinguished after a few days or months. But the story of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example for all generations; a metaphorical fire, that continues to burn.

Paul said our works will be tried with “fire.”

1 Corinthians 3:11-15.

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Paul promised that all who live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

2 Timothy 3:12-13

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

The author of Hebrews declared that God is a “consuming fire.”

Hebrews 12:28-29

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.

Peter said that the heavens and the earth are kept by the word of God, reserved unto fire.

2 Peter 3:5-7

For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

Peter applied the metaphor of fire to persecution and trials suffered by Christians.

1 Peter 1:7

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

1 Peter 4:12-13

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

The two witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13 have power to kill their enemies with fire from their mouth. Jesus identified the Spirit and the Scriptures as two things that will “testify” of him, and one who testifies is a *witness*. [John 5:39; 15:26]

Revelation 11:5

And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed.

In Ezekiel 39, the people of Israel burn the weapons of the armies of Gog and Magog with fire for seven years. Their weapons provide fuel, so the people do not need to gather any wood from the forest.

Ezekiel 39:9-10

And they that dwell in the cities of Israel shall go forth, and shall set on fire and burn the weapons, both the shields and the bucklers, the bows and the arrows, and the handstaves, and the spears, and they shall burn them with fire seven years: So that they shall take no wood out of the field, neither cut down any out of the forests; for they shall burn the weapons with fire: and they shall spoil those that spoiled them, and rob those that robbed them, saith the Lord God.

I suggest the weapons represent flawed interpretations of Scripture, and false teachings which the Church has identified and refuted throughout her history; the seven years may be identified with the 70th week of Daniel’s 70 weeks prophecy, which spans all the time from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry to the end of the present age.

In Revelation, John uses highly figurative language, for example he describes a sword going forth from Christ’s mouth:

Revelation 19:15

And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

When the knowledge of God fills the earth, as the waters cover the sea, it is like “fire” to the wicked. Malachi said,

Malachi 4:1-3

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts.

God's sword, and fire, are metaphors employed to represent God's word, and the Gospel. Rivers of *living water* represent the holy Spirit.