

THE MEN WHO HAD HEARTBURN

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And there came afire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces. (Lev. 9:24)

And the fire upon the altar shall be burning in it; it shall not be put out: and the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order upon it; and he shall burn thereon the fat of the peace offerings. The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out. (Lev. 6:12-13)

Some of the most important commandments given by God to Israel concerned the fire that burned upon the great altar. When the tabernacle was dedicated, the Lord sent special fire from heaven, and thereafter the priests were expected to keep it burning. Fires need fuel, and God's instruction gave birth to a special industry in Israel. There were "hewers of timber" in the mountains and appointed carriers to transport the wood to the tabernacle. It was never necessary for the priests to go looking for wood; it was available at any time of the day or night. The fire upon the altar never went out until the nation was subdued by Babylonian invaders.

These facts are suggestive, for every Christian is said to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. The ancient tabernacle was beautiful, clean, and acceptable, but without the fire it was an empty shell. Christian ministers may be graduate students, polished and educated; their appearance may be excellent, their grammar faultless; but unless the fire of God burns within them their ministry is ineffective. No one can overestimate the value of study—fresh bread from God's oven is always to be desired—but there cannot be an effective substitute for the power of the Holy Spirit. The fire of God is not necessarily shouting; sometimes empty barrels make the most sound! Congregations know when their preacher is charged with the power of God; they are aware of the fact the moment they enter his presence.

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Similarly, they do not have to be informed when their preacher is cold, placid, and boring. It therefore behooves every preacher to be aware of this fact. God may light a fire within his soul, but he must keep it burning. The Bible supplies striking examples of that fact.

Jeremiah ... Who Complained

"Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jer. 20:9, emphasis mine). Poor Jeremiah! He was often pessimistic and worried, but frequently he survived the onslaught of emotional storms. This time the pressure of unfavorable circumstances had crushed his spirit and he was ready to quit preaching!

Pashur, the chief captain of the temple guard was angry; he believed the conduct of the prophet to be outrageous! What right had that upstart preacher to stand in the sanctuary denouncing everybody? "Then Pashur smote Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of the LORD" (Jer. 20:2). Some visitors to Great Britain see the stocks—the ancient way of punishing violators of the law. Offenders were taken to a public place where their feet and hands were locked into a wooden contraption. Heads were inserted into a wooden collar, and, to say the least, the prisoner was extremely uncomfortable. Any man confined to the stocks was ridiculed by the entire community. Jeremiah was always a sensitive

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man, but the shame of this unjustified punishment broke his heart. During the night he questioned the kindness of God and asked, "Why did He permit this to happen to me?" Weary and disconsolate, he waited for the dawn; sleep was elusive, and he became angry. Sullenly, he said, "I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. The troubled prophet wished he were dead!"

"And it came to pass on the morrow, that Pashur brought forth Jeremiah out of the stocks. Then said Jeremiah unto him, The LORD hath not called thy name Pashur, but Magor-missabib [fear round about]. For thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will make thee a terror to thyself, and to all thy friends... And thou..., shall go into captivity: and thou shalt come to Babylon, and there thou shalt die, and shalt be buried there, thou, and all thy friends, to whom thou hast prophesied lies" (Jer. 20:3-4, 6). True prophets cannot be silenced by hardship. Sometimes smoke gets into their eyes, but the fire within their hearts cannot be extinguished!

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The well-known company Doubleday published a book concerning Conway Twitty, the country-western singer. It revealed how the singer became despondent because of a belief he was not given adequate recognition by the media. Then one day he heard of a missionary returning from China after forty-two years of service. With her was an artist who had just concluded a two-week concert tour of that country. When the artist arrived, a crowd of fans gave him a rousing welcome. The missionary thought, "He was there two weeks, and receives this tremendous welcome; I was there forty-two years, and no one greets me." Then, very softly the Lord whispered to her, "Ah, but you are not home yet." That story removed Twitty's displeasure it might remove ours!

Ezekiel ... Who Criticized

It is believed that Ezekiel was about twenty-five years of age when he was taken to Babylon where he became a spiritual advisor to the Hebrew prisoners. He was married and had his own house (see Ezek. 24:16-18 and Ezek. 3:24) and lived in a colony near the river of Chebar. He scorned the idols of the Babylonians and was intensely proud of the captives for they detested idols.

The young prophet was disturbed; it was difficult to control his anger. God had given to him an unwanted commission. Why was Jehovah so unsympathetic? His people were slaves in an alien land, but they were still His people. Why didn't God give them a break? Ezekiel could not forget what had been said: "But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted" (Ezek. 3:7). Was the Lord blind and unable to understand the burdens of the captives? The prophet said, I must condemn them when they need comfort, and chastise them when they need help. I will not do it! Let God do His own preaching! "So the spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit" (Ezek. 3:14, emphasis mine). Ezekiel was angry; the wrong kind of fire was filling his soul. "Then I came to them of the captivity at Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days" (Ezek. 3:15). Jonah, who ran away from God, would have understood Ezekiel's disobedience.

Unfortunately, the prophet had cataracts on his eyes! He neither saw nor understood the decadence of Israel. He was given a vision in which he saw a hole in the temple wall. When he was told to dig, he discovered

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a door through which he entered to behold the secret idolatry of the

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elders:

So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel . . . with every man his censer in his hand. . . Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The LORD seeth us not; the LORD hath forsaken the earth. He said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations than they do. . . And he brought me into the inner court of the LORD'S house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east. (Ezek. 8:10-13, 16)

The prophet was shocked when God said to him, "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezek. 3:17-18). As God's fire burned again within the soul of the prophet, his indignation subsided, and once again Ezekiel became the man he was meant to be.

David... Who Compromised

"I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me. I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred. My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned. then spake I with my tongue" (Ps. 39:1-3, emphasis mine).

It would be interesting to know when and why this psalm was written. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous British preacher, believed it followed David's illegitimate association with Bathsheba, and that the king's anguish was intensified by a serious illness (see C. H.

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Spurgeon, The Treasury of David [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976], 183-92). Other commentators are inclined to agree with that assumption. The king's indiscreet behavior caused acute mental anguish, and created emotional problems that contributed to his physical condition. When the accusers spread the news of the murder of Bathsheba's husband and the unfortunate arrangement by which she was made a queen, David's popularity waned throughout the nation. Infuriated, the king was tempted to retaliate against the false friends who gloated over his decline. Psalm 39 could easily fit into that period of the monarch's life.

His statement, "My heart was hot within me; while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue," may be interpreted in two contrasting ways. If he were considering the actions of his critics, his musing could have produced an outburst of anger. If he were thinking about the greatness of God's mercy, his thoughts produced a prayer: "LORD, make me to know mine end, . . . verily, every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (Ps. 39:4-5). David possessed a Jekyll and Hyde personality. When he forgot God, fires of discontent, greed, and lust burned within his being; when the music of heaven inspired his soul, he radiated the holiness of the Lord. His confession, "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred," suggests his vision was impaired. He was stubborn and

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determined and resembled Ezekiel, for his words appeared to say, I will not speak for God let Him do His own preaching! Poor David, perhaps self-pity had undermined his spirituality. It is stimulating to know how quickly he recovered. He prayed, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps. 51:7).

One of the most effective methods by which firefighters subdue dangerous conflagrations is the lighting of a second fire that destroys the fuel upon which the first one feeds. When God rekindled the blaze within his soul, David became the man he was meant to be. A holy fire within the souls of men and women affects every part of their beings. Solomon knew this when he wrote, "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" (Prov. 6:27).

The Disciples... Who Comprehended

"And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:32, emphasis mine). The transformation that took place in Emmaus almost beggared description; to the participants, it was phenomenal and unbelievable. The Master was alive, the grave

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had been conquered, death was dead! Their cold and unbelieving hearts were filled with enthusiasm. Weariness vanished, slumber was impossible, but the good news had to be shared: "And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem." Their happiness developed gradually. They shared the joy of listening to Him, walking with Him, receiving from His hand, and finally talking about Him. Despondent Christians should examine each of the four suggestions. The disciples had walked with the risen Christ, and the experience would never be forgotten. They had listened to the most astonishing exposition of the Scripture. His wonderful words dispelled doubts and expelled fear. What had been bewildering and apprehensive had become the greatest gifts of God. They believed God had forsaken their dearest Friend, but now they knew the death of the Messiah had been planned before the commencement of time.

They had been away from home for a week, the house was dusty, the shops were closed, provisions might be in short supply, but they could not allow the Stranger to leave: "But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them. And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:29-32). The distance from Jerusalem to Emmaus was only about seven miles and could be traversed in two hours. Yet, during that short space of time, the Stranger had escorted them through four thousand years of history and had reached the gate of heaven! Their lives had been transformed. Christ continues to walk the roads of life—perhaps we need to accompany Him.

Breathe on me, Breath of God;
`Till I am wholly Thine:
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.

ÆEdwin Hatch, 18 15Æ1895

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