

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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I CAME TO SEND FIRE ON THE EARTH

Luke 12:49-50

In sending his Son on earth, God was to be glorified and sinners were to be saved. Jesus was fully aware that his mission will involve suffering, and ultimately death. Yet He came with a willing and ready mind. In fact, during his entire ministry, his mind was constantly set on finishing the work which He came into the world to accomplish. This desire to do his Father's will is so passionately expressed in Luke 12:49-50. Let's read this passage. Luke 12:49-50.

*Luke 12:49. I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!
50 But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!*

A mission statement

We find here a sort of mission statement coming straight from the mouth of the Lord Jesus. What did Jesus come to do? 'I came to bring fire on the earth.' And notice the intensity with which He said it. *Would that it were already kindled!* This fire has not yet been kindled, but it will soon be kindled. How soon? We will discuss about that later.

After talking about 'fire,' Jesus then talked about 'baptism,' his baptism. *I have a baptism to be baptized with.* Again, Jesus expressed himself with a lot of emotion. *How I am constrained until it is accomplished!* Do you feel all the tension in these words?

But this is strange. Jesus was longing for the accomplishment of his baptism. Why? 'He has already been baptized by John the Baptist,' you might say. What does He mean by 'baptism'? Here the expression 'a baptism to be baptized' refers to Christ's death. The baptism of his death. Baptism represents 'death' in the biblical teaching. When we are baptized unto Christ, we are dying with Christ. That is what baptism symbolizes.

Having said that, it seems that the meaning of these two verses remains difficult to grasp. What did Jesus have in mind when He said, 'I came to set the world on fire. I have a baptism to go through. O, I wish that these two things had already happened!' What does that mean? In this lesson, I would like to show you, step by step, how we are to interpret Jesus' words here.

The life of God

I think that a good way to start our study is to compare this text with other similar statements of the Lord Jesus where He tells us the reason for his coming. Let's take for example Matthew 9:13.

Matthew 9:13. ... For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus came with a missionary purpose, we might say, to reach out to the sinners. 'I came to call sinners to repentance. My aim is to get the sinners to repent so that they may be saved.' That is very clear. Here is another verse, Matthew 20:28.

Matthew 20:28. Even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Here is a statement which refers to the same idea, but expressed from a different angle. The reason why Jesus came, the first reason we mentioned, was to call sinners. And in this second verse, Jesus said that He was going to do this, notice carefully, 'by giving his life as a ransom.'

In saying this, immediately we see that this is directly connected to our passage in Luke 12. Baptism, we saw, means death. 'I came because I have a baptism to accomplish, to be baptized with. I came to die. I came to give my life, to die, as a ransom for many.'

Here are other passages where Jesus revealed to us what was his mission on earth.

Luke 19:10. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

The purpose of his coming was to seek and to save that which was lost. And what was lost are the sinners.

John 10:10. ...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

'I came to give life to spiritually dead people. I came to give life abundantly to sinners.'

When we consider all these verses together, we begin to see what is this fire. This fire is a divine fire. It is the life of God in its abundance and in its fullness. 'I came to seek the lost, to call the sinners to repentance. And I will give my life for them as a ransom so that they might have life, God's life, in its completeness and its abundance. I came to send fire on the earth. O how pressured I feel until it is accomplished!' You see what Jesus is saying?

Not division nor judgment

Some commentators say that this fire represents 'division,' or 'persecution.' The fire is the division or the persecution that Jesus will cause by His coming. They have this interpretation of the word 'fire' because they link v. 49 to verses 51 and 52 where Jesus said, *Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; ⁵² for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.* So, the statement 'I came to bring fire' (v. 49) means 'I came to bring division' (v. 51). Therefore, fire equals division and persecution.

This interpretation is not without problems, and here is why. First of all, in connecting v. 49 to v. 51, we are forgetting v. 50, the verse in between. What are we going to do with v. 50? We cannot simply ignore its presence. It is there for a reason. In fact, it is much more natural to connect v. 49 to the verse that follows immediately, v. 50. And there is even a connecting word which invites us to do precisely that. Notice. V. 49: *I came to send fire on the earth...* V. 50: **But** *I have a baptism to be baptized with...* The word 'but' creates a direct link between v. 49 and v. 50. That is certainly the connection that should be emphasized, rather than trying to connect v. 49 to v. 51.

Secondly, there is nothing in v. 49 or 50 that says a word about persecution. V. 51 talks about division. Jesus said, 'Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. No, I have come to bring division.' Yes, the fire of God does divide. It has the effect of dividing between the godly and the

ungodly, between the Christians and the non-Christians, and even between Christians, between the true Christians and the carnal Christians. But that was not the purpose of Jesus' coming. It was the effect of His coming. We have to be careful not to confuse cause and effect. It is not the same thing. Take this illustration. Let's say we have a soccer practice. During the practice, I accidentally hit your face with the ball, and your nose starts to bleed. It was not my intention to hurt you. But that was the undesired effect of my kicking the ball towards you. In the same way, it was not Jesus' intention to divide. However his message has the effect of dividing people.

We must discern between cause and effect, and discern the proper order and sequence of what Jesus said. Therefore we cannot jump over v. 50, and connect v. 49 directly with v. 51. There is a connection between v. 49 et v. 50, and we must take that into account.

So when Jesus said, 'I came to bring fire on earth,' He was speaking about the life of God that is brought into our lives by the Holy Spirit. Jesus came to give us the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit who brings God's life into our soul.

Some commentators say that the word 'fire' refers to God's judgment. 'I came to cast judgment upon the earth.' Yes, 'fire' can mean God's judgment in the Bible. But this interpretation of the word 'fire' in Luke 12 is difficult to support when we compare it with John 3:17 for example. You can quickly see the problem. What does John 3:17 say? *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.* God's purpose in sending His Son was not to judge us. The world deserves to be judged and condemned. But that was not the purpose of Jesus' mission on earth. Christ was sent to save the world by giving us God's life. So to say that the 'fire' of v. 49 represents the judgment of God is inadequate from this perspective.

Fire and baptism linked

I said earlier that there is a connection between v. 49 and v. 50 that cannot be overlooked. Let's focus now on that connection. Notice the theme of each verse. Fire is the key word in v. 49. Baptism is the key word in v. 50. 'I came to bring fire.' 'I have a baptism to be baptized with.' When we say that there is a connection between v. 49 and v. 50, we are saying that there is a connection between 'fire' and 'baptism.' What is the link? What is Jesus' train of thought here?

Look again at Jesus' words. *I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!* I would like you to focus now not on the fire, but on the second part of the statement. 'O how I wish it were already kindled!' It is not yet kindled. It will be kindled in the future. And Jesus is expressing his intense desire for that fire to be kindled.

Then v. 50. *But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!* Again, do not focus on the baptism. Focus on the second part of the statement. 'O how distressed I am till it is accomplished!' The baptism that Jesus is talking about has not happened. It will happen in the future. And Jesus is expressing his intense desire for that baptism to be accomplished.

Do you see what Jesus is trying to communicate? The point of convergence between fire and baptism is this strong emotion, this intense longing, for these two things to take place, the fire to be kindled and the baptism to be accomplished. And when is that going to be accomplished? At Jesus' baptism, at his death. How is this fire going to be kindled in the world? Precisely in the death of Christ. There is the link between 'fire' and 'baptism.'

Here we see the extreme importance of Jesus' words. It is at the cross that God's fire was ignited in the world. It was at Calvary that God's fire began to burn in the world. Jesus was longing for his baptism to be accomplished. He was not longing to die. He was longing for what will be accomplished by his death, namely the fire of God that will come down and begin to burn in the

world. Imagine this. There at Calvary, the Lord Jesus laid himself as priest and as sacrifice upon the altar. And God's fire came down from above and consumed the sacrifice, just like at Mount Carmel. You remember the contest at Mount Carmel? There was a confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to show whose god was able to send fire from heaven to consume the offerings. The prophets of Baal prayed all day. Nothing happened. When Elijah prayed, instantly fire fell from heaven which consumed the sacrifice and the altar. *Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench* (1Kings 18:38). The fire of the Lord consumed the sacrifice. When Jesus died on the cross, a fire was lit, a fire that has never ceased to burn since that moment.

We read in John 2:17, *Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."* When Jesus turned over the money changer's tables, the disciples remembered that it was said of the Lord Jesus, *Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up*. The passage that the disciples remembered is Psalm 69:9. *Zeal for your house has consumed me*. That is another translation. The zeal. The fire. Eaten up. Consumed, just like the sacrifice that was consumed by the fire of the Lord at Mount Carmel. The zeal of Jesus for God's house was like a fire burning within Jesus to the point that it was consuming him. This incident shows that the fire was already burning in Jesus' own heart at that time. That is how we should understand Jesus when He said, *How I am constrained until it is accomplished!* The fire was already in him, burning. It was burning in his bones, burning with a power that was irrepressible, until He went to Calvary. And there it was ignited in the world by the flame of God.

You know, this is a mark of every man of God, this fire that is burning inside of him. In his desire to serve God, he feels a pressure, a strength that builds up in his being. Soon there is a fire burning in his bones as he seeks to accomplish the purpose that God has for him. When you have God's fire burning in your heart, you will have vision. You will have a sense of direction. And when you have vision and direction, it is very easy for God to lead you.

Dying with Jesus

Let us come to the application of this passage. You might say, 'OK, now I understand. Jesus came on earth to cast this fire of God into the world. He came to bring life in abundance. And this fire will be kindled by his death. But how does this affect me? Can I get this fire? How do I catch it?'

Close your eyes for a moment and try to picture the world burning with that divine fire. This is happening now. The fire has been burning since Jesus was baptized at his death on the cross. And then comes this question. How can this fire burn in my life? The fire might burn in the world, but it will never burn in you if Jesus' death is just a historical fact that you believe with your head. Jesus' death has to become a reality that you experience in your own life. That is how the fire of God will be able to burn in you.

You see, you may believe totally that a particular medicine will cure your disease. But this particular medicine is not going to do anything to you until you take it and have it inside of your body. You show that you are committed to your healing by taking the medicine and accepting the consequences of that treatment. Faith in the Bible is more than just a rational and / or an emotional conviction. Faith is about committing yourself to apply your belief into your heart and your life. So in order to catch this fire, you will have to join Jesus in his baptism. In other words, you will have to commit yourself to die with Jesus.

In Jesus' mind, baptism means death. Where does He say that? The expression 'a baptism to be baptized with' is found elsewhere in the Bible in Mark 10:38-39. In that passage, John and James came to Jesus and said, 'Allow one of us to sit at your right, and the other at your left (v. 37).' The Lord Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink, can you drink it? The baptism that I am baptized with, can you be baptized with (v. 38)?' By these words, Jesus was referring to the suffering leading to his

death. To drink his cup and to be baptized with his baptism is to die. ‘Are you able to take that,’ He asked them. John and James said, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then Jesus said, *The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.*

Ponder those words. ‘The baptism I am baptized with, you will also be baptized with.’ In other words, Jesus was saying, ‘My death will be your death.’ If we are going to have God’s fire burning in us, Jesus’ death will have to become our death. That is the meaning of baptism. Baptism means that we are united with Jesus in his death. We don’t just believe in the definition of baptism. We are really, very truly, united with him in his death. It is not just a conviction of dying with Jesus. It is an experience of dying with Jesus. In baptism, we experience the power of his death and resurrection. And in experiencing the power of his resurrection, we experience the fire of God in our life.

The apostle Paul expresses it in this way in 2Timothy 2:11: *If we have died with him, we shall also live with him.* Paul did not say, ‘If you believe that Jesus died for you, you will live with him.’ It is only when you die with him that you will live with him and have the fire of God burning in you. And the implication of that statement is that if you do not die with him, you will not live with him. You will not have God’s fire.

In Philippians 3:10, Paul says that we are to ‘become like him in his death.’ Conformity to Christ’s death means the same thing as ‘dying with him.’ Jesus’ death was for our sins and to sin. When we become like him in his death, it has the implication that we likewise die to the dominion of sin and we rise to a newness of life.

The fire of God was kindled at the Calvary, when Jesus willingly became a sacrifice for our sins. It has never ceased to burn since then. This fire is the life of God. This life-giving fire of God, we can have it. But there is a condition. We have to be willing to drink the cup that Jesus drank and be willing to be baptized with his baptism. We have to join him in his death. This means the death to the world. The death to sin. The death to the flesh. It is when we die to these things that we can truly experience the fire of God burning in our soul.