

## ***For everyone will be salted with fire (Mark 9:49)***

### **SALTED WITH FIRE\***

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“Salted with fire”—what a bizarre image! It bursts with endless possibilities . . . a sign of great art and a great teacher. But what does it mean? Jesus is not spoon-feeding correct doctrine to his disciples; rather, he wants to ignite in them the same fire that burns in his own soul.

Can you imagine yourself seated on the ground among the disciples with Jesus? You have seen enough signs and wonders to be terribly curious—how does he do it? You observe how Jesus talks with “Abba” in the most intimate terms—something that moves you to keep longing for a similar relationship with God. This Jesus, in a private moment, has shown you that he knows your most hidden sin. Looking into your eyes he tells you, “Your sin is forgiven; don’t go near it anymore.” And Jesus publicly promises a new government, the kingdom of God, coming to earth from heaven with justice for all people, and peace. Your family is coping without you; you have left behind your property and your career—at least for now—because the Master called you.

Jesus looks around at you all, his band of followers, rests his hand on John’s shoulder, and says, “Everyone (here) will be salted with fire.”

When you get to the end of this paragraph, close your eyes for a while. Jesus will not tell you the meaning of these words, but he wants you to sit with them in silence so that the fire of his passion can burn within you to illuminate whatever it will. After a few minutes, imagine that you turn to another disciple and whisper what these words have opened within you.

“For everyone will be salted with fire.” As I ponder these words, I notice that this is not an exhortation to get fired up about something. This is a prophetic promise of Jesus; this *will* happen to everyone who stays close to him.

Fire consumes and utterly transforms what it touches. It moves with a life of its own. Its radiation spreads out at the speed of light and scatters the darkness.

I wonder what these words might have meant to followers in Jesus’ time. Maybe they connected them with the passage in Leviticus 2:13 where worshipers are commanded to throw salt (a symbol of the covenant) on their sacrificial offering before it is charred by fire on the altar. Jesus seems to promise that everyone who makes covenant with him will sacrifice, not just eyes, feet and hands, but life itself.

The early church kept on telling these sayings of Jesus to one another for a generation before they were written down. The first Christians must have seen a reference here to the tongues of fire falling on their heads at Pentecost. The mighty gift of the Holy Spirit upset their personal worlds and ignited a love that created family out of strangers by the thousands so that they had “all things in common . . . and there was not a needy person among them.” The sacrifice of their lives took on concrete meaning as they gave up lands, family expectations, career plans, and control of their own future to enter the kingdom, gaining a whole new extended family and purpose for living.

“Salted with fire,” also seems to foreshadow the coming persecution which will fall on the followers of the One whose life ended on the cross. And there is also an echo of the ultimate judgment where right will be separated from wrong, and only what was given in love will endure. Will our identity stand or be swept away on such a day?

These words of Jesus provoke terror in me but also an indescribable joy. God wants to set us ablaze with love, the greatest gift we can receive. This *will* happen to us if we stay close and let him live through us. Hallelujah! Here is a vision and a life worth the sacrifice of everything. Here is a power that death cannot stop. Here is a way to live all-out for the only reason we have been given life. And we will do it with others in the deepest solidarity possible on this earth. The poor will rejoice and the powerful become servants in the reign of our Prince of Peace. And we will be united with the One who is purest love come from God. Yes, Jesus, let it be!

“Salted with fire.” There’s something personal and familiar about that image for me as well.

I remember back to the early 1970s when my wife, Joanne, and I joined with a few others in beginning New Creation Fellowship. Peace in Vietnam, ecological living, equity for the poor, racial integration—all these issues had moved us into public prophetic action. But we longed to test with our own lives if the radical teachings of Jesus could be trusted to create peace and justice in our own lives together.

We moved our furniture to the 400 block of West 11<sup>th</sup> in Newton, Kansas, pooled our money and combined our energy for a common mission. We felt like we were on the top of a roller coaster, terrified and exhilarated at the same time.

Again and again our minds were blown open with discoveries. “Bear one another’s burdens.” So this is what the Scriptures mean! Much of the Bible only begins to make sense when one is living it. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Countless layers of meaning unfold in Jesus’ teaching when we abandon everything to join with others in a common life—just the way it was for Jesus and his followers.

From lofty principles of community, we soon came down to hassles over keeping the washing machine clean for the next person, about when to confront and when to bear one another’s burdens, about a thousand petty things that irritated us and brought us into deeper awareness of sin than we had ever known before.

We protested nuclear missiles pointed at Russia. We took in a few people who needed refuge and work. We faced some opposition, but mostly we salted each other with fire in those days. God used our lack of love to separate us from our illusions about community, leaving us with real people and the gift of communion. Persecution, transformation, Holy Spirit gifts, unspeakable joy came our way. But our story is only one among countless others in every generation, whose lives are ignited by the words of Jesus and the witness of the early church to give all in order to receive the kingdom.

There are many good arguments why humans should live in community. Community in every age has been the main resource for survival of the poor. There are many blunt biblical arguments for living in community. “None of you can become one of my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14:33). These reasons may even back some very logical people into community, but they are not enough to enable people to live in community.

Christian community is not a human creation; it comes as a gift from God. At the same time, each one enters it as a very personal response to the call of Jesus. The gift and the call must be renewed every step of the way for community to stay alive. It is not possible here to marshal all the arguments for Christian community. Rather, we shall tell a few stories. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit, active in each person who might read them.

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