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## ***THE FIRE THAT BURNS WITHIN***

The fire that burns within is a trait that stands out in Christians whose lives truly count for God and His kingdom. This is the mark of a man of faith and the kind of life God desires for all His children. It is thus crucial for God's children to see clearly the importance of a heart on fire – what it means, how it comes about and how it grows in intensity and meaning.

God desires us to become conformed to the image of His Son. It is therefore helpful for us to constantly reflect on the life and conduct of our Lord Jesus and learn from Him.

I wish to consider with you an incident in the life of the Lord Jesus recorded in John 2:13-17.

### **John 2:13-17**

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

14 And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

15 And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables;

16 and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business."

17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me."

This incident reveals something unusual in the life of the Lord Jesus. In contrast to many other incidents portraying Him as gentle and caring, we see here the anger of the Lord Jesus vividly displayed. Some people in the temple were showing a lack of reverence for the holiness and glory of God by making the temple a place of business. This displeased the Lord Jesus greatly and He drove them out of the temple.

There are some who find this passage troubling. I remember reading the works of the philosopher Bertrand Russell in my younger days. He listed this incident as one of the reasons why he could not believe in Jesus as God. To him, a perfect God would not lose His temper. If Jesus were indeed God, He would not have behaved the way He did in the temple. So, Bertrand Russell concluded that Jesus could not be God.

Although this passage may have troubled some, if we ponder carefully over it, we will find that it is actually very rich in meaning, and many helpful principles can be drawn from it.

This passage can be viewed from many angles. In this message, I will be looking at it from the angle of zeal for the Lord. We will concentrate on verse 17: His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me." I see this as the key verse in this passage. John uses this verse to explain the unusual and puzzling conduct of the Lord Jesus.

Bertrand Russell wrongly concluded that the Lord Jesus lost His temper. Losing one's temper involves loss of self-control. The Lord Jesus did not lose His temper on this or any other occasion. Here, it was an expression of righteous anger against those who were irreverent towards God and who misused His temple. It was a manifestation of zeal for God and for the things of God's kingdom. The issues involved are significant in the eyes of the Lord.

"Zeal for Your house will consume me". This is a characteristic of an effective servant of God. Whether in the Scriptures or in church history, we will find this to be the distinguishing mark of those whose lives counted for God. They have this intensity in their lives, this fire that burns within them. Often, we hear of people obeying God hesitantly and reluctantly. Not so with those who have a burning desire to do the will of God. And this is what we see portrayed in the life of the Lord Jesus, not just on this occasion, but throughout His earthly life.

### **Burden for the Lord's work**

From time to time, God raises up individuals to shake and revive a sleepy church. These are men who have a deep burden for God's work. A strong fire burns within them, a fire that comes from God Himself. Through them, God accomplishes much.

John Wesley was a man on fire for God. Through his life and service, he shook the whole of England and left an indelible mark in the history of the church. It was he who said, "Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I will shake the world." By these words, he was expressing the critical need for men totally on fire for God, men totally committed to God.

But God's kingdom cannot be advanced by zeal alone. Zeal must go together with true knowledge, with an understanding of God's purposes. We need to know what is in God's heart, how He wants things to be accomplished. And this zeal must be sustained, not one that fades away quickly or over time.

The Lord Jesus was not zealous for minor or trivial things but for what truly matters. He was zealous for the house of God – not for the temple as a physical building, but for what the temple signifies, the spiritual house of God, the kingdom of God. He had

a consuming love and passion for God's glory and for His kingdom. This is at the heart of the meaning of the fire that burns within.

### *The apostle Paul*

The apostle Paul is a very good example of a man consumed by zeal for God and the Lord's work. You can see much evidence of this in the Book of Acts and in his letters. If you read through the epistles of Paul, you will find, again and again, that he writes with a burning heart.

Let us first look at Acts 20, where Paul expressed to the elders of the church in Ephesus the primary motivation of his life.

#### **Acts 20:24**

"But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

After Paul understood what was in God's heart and the role God had for him, all that mattered to him was to finish his course. He no longer considered his life to be his own. It had been totally given over to God and to the ministry God had entrusted to him. All that mattered to him now was "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God".

In verse 19, Paul talks about "serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews". Why was he serving with tears? It was because of the deep burden in his heart for the people and the state that they were in. He toiled for them despite the many trials which came upon him. He did not shrink from declaring to them anything that was profitable, teaching them publicly and from house to house (v. 20).

Again the same spirit comes through in verses 22 and 23:

#### **Acts 20:22-23**

22 "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,  
23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

Paul was bound in spirit and making his way to Jerusalem. He did not know what would happen to him there. But in every city, the Holy Spirit had testified to Paul that bonds and afflictions, imprisonment and sufferings would come upon him. Paul was not perturbed by how they would come about or how severe these would be. All these did not deter or distract him. His only concern, which he expressed in verse 24, was that he might finish his course and the ministry he had received.

Paul's heart did not fluctuate. His whole life was centred on and consumed by the purposes of God. From his innermost being flowed forth rivers of living water (John 7:38). The Holy Spirit who indwelt Paul enabled him to live consistently and steadfastly in the direction God desired and to continually minister life to others.

### **Sense of mission**

A person with zeal for God will have a clear sense of mission and a strong sense of urgency. He sees the need to be ready and equipped at all times. Paul had this spirit and attitude within him. In 2 Timothy 4:1-3, he urged Timothy in the same direction.

#### **2 Timothy 4:1-3**

1 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom:

2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,

Paul told Timothy: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus..." This conveys to us the seriousness with which Paul regarded the work of God. There was a sense of urgency, a sense of the importance of the task. He exhorted Timothy: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction". Whatever the circumstances, God's true servants should be ready to continue serving and ministering as God desires of them.

As Paul told Timothy, a time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. None of us knows what the future may hold, and whether opportunities will again present themselves. So, while we have the opportunity, let us labour for the Lord.

### **A Christ-centred life and fruitful labour**

A heart on fire for God is a Christ-centred life and one with fruitful labour. In Philippians 1, Paul, writing from prison, expresses this spirit and reality in his life:

#### **Philippians 1:19-25**

19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,

20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.

23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;  
24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.  
25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith,

Paul had come to know the gospel and the love of God. To him, nothing in this world can compare with the joy of being in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even though it would be a wonderful thing to depart from this world and be with the Lord Jesus, Paul knew the Lord wanted him to remain on earth and engage in fruitful labour for the sake of the brethren, for their progress in the faith (vs. 22, 24, 25).

Verse 21 is the key verse in this passage. In a few words, Paul conveys powerfully and clearly his whole approach to life and what consumes him: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain". It tells us that Christ is the very heart and centre of Paul's life. Christ is the foundation and basis of his life. Christ means everything to him. Thus Paul sought continually to deepen in his knowledge of the Lord Jesus and in his relationship with Him. To Paul, this is what life is all about. He is ever conscious of Christ – always living in deep fellowship with Him and by His guidance and power.

He says: "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). So Paul concentrated on the Lord Jesus Christ, not only for his own life, but also in his ministry. He devoted his life to helping people to come to know Christ as Saviour and Lord and helping believers to grow in Him.

What Paul says in verse 20 is part of the expression of this approach to life: "Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death". The exaltation of Christ was what preoccupied him. He was not distracted by what the world could offer. He would exalt Christ "now, as always", all the time, whatever the circumstances, whether as a free man or imprisoned. He would exalt Christ "whether by life or by death" – whatever might happen to him, even unto death.

Paul's heart was not inward-looking. It looked upwards to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. It also looked outwards to the needs of the brethren. Within Paul's heart, a true fire burned. In him, we see no trace of self-centred living. If there were, the fire within would have been dimmed.

We see this same spirit and approach to life reflected in Philippians 3.

### **That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings**

#### **Philippians 3:8-14**

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,

9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,  
10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;  
11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.  
12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.  
13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,  
14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul says in verse 8: "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord". "All things" would include all that this world has to offer – reputation, status, worldly accomplishments. It would include Paul's Jewish heritage and works of the Law, things which he once valued highly. All these were no longer important to him (vs. 4-9). He discarded them because of the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus".

Knowing the Lord Jesus is not a one-time event that takes place at conversion. It is a process. We should seek to know Him more and more. Paul gave up all that he once held dear so that he could grow in his knowledge of Christ. He says in verses 10 and 11: "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead".

A person who has a burning heart will seek, above all things, to know Christ. Not only that, he will also seek to know the power of His resurrection, which is the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead. Being filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit is an integral part of such a life and enables one to be ready to enter into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. One who longs to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings will nurture a heart that identifies with the burdens in the heart of Christ, the Man of sorrows. He is prepared to suffer for God's kingdom and for the sake of the brethren according to the will of God. This spirit was supremely manifested by Christ at the Cross.

Paul continues: "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on..." Never feeling satisfied, never thinking he has attained to perfection of Christ, always pressing on towards the upward call of God, always thirsting and hungering to deepen in his fellowship with God and to grow in spiritual maturity – this is the characteristic of one whose heart is on fire for God.

**Earnest desire to do the will of God**

We often have to coax believers to do the will of God. We have to persuade them and impress on them why doing the will of God is really good for them, and why it would be tragic for them if they do otherwise. In the lives of many believers, we often find a reluctant and hesitant kind of willingness to follow God when difficulties and uncertainties are involved. They may express to the Lord, "I am willing to obey You, Lord, if You show me Your will." There may be some degree of sincerity in these words, but often the spirit of it is deficient. There is a tinge of reluctance and unwillingness. They may in fact be saying, "Since I have committed myself, since I have promised, I should keep my part of the bargain. Therefore I will do it. It's difficult for me, it's unpleasant to me, but I will do it." Actually, they would rather not do it. When the will of God is contrary to their personal inclination, they would rather not know the will of God so that they need not obey it. This is not the kind of attitude that delights the heart of God.

You will not find such reluctance in the person who has the fire burning within. You do not have to coax him. He earnestly desires to know the will of God. And when he recognises the will of God, he will do it, whatever the cost. Such is the case with Paul. He would press on and obey God "whether by life or by death", whatever might be awaiting him, be it bonds or afflictions. He sought to know the will of God for his whole life as well as at each stage of his life, in the specific situation that he was in, so that he could fulfil it.

It is true that doing the will of God can be very painful. But knowing that His will is perfect and good, our whole approach to life should be one in which we intensely desire to know and do the will of God, whatever it may be.

**Intense concern for spiritual growth of believers**

One who has the fire burning within will have an intense concern for the spiritual growth of believers.

Again, the apostle Paul is a good example. We see in his letters many expressions of deep burden for the growth of believers. In his letter to the Galatians, he says: "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The word "labour" is the same word used for a woman going through childbirth. Mothers would have a better idea of what it means to be in labour. The pain can be agonising, almost unbearable. Paul uses this word to express his intense desire for the spiritual development and transformation in the lives of believers. It took a lot out of him, but he was prepared to go through whatever was needful for the growth of believers. He desired to present every man complete in Christ. He strove and laboured according to the power of God that worked in him (Col. 1:28-29). He told the Corinthian believers: "I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls" (2 Cor. 12:15).

**The whole being on fire for God**

It is clear that this kind of zeal is not something emotional. Although emotion is involved, it is not primarily of the emotions. If such zeal were merely emotional, it would not last. It would come and go. But this zeal that we are talking about is one that lasts, one that consumes the whole life.

This kind of zeal is also not merely of the mind or of the will. Some people think if the mind understands and the will is determined, then zeal for God is present. This is not the case. Some Christians have good attitudes. They know the will of God and are determined to do it. Yet there is no fire burning within.

A person with fire burning within will have zeal that involves the whole being, not just the emotions, the mind, or the will. *The whole being is on fire for God, especially the inner man.* There is a deep burden within.

**Different manifestations of this kind of zeal**

As we consider this issue of the fire that burns within, let us be mindful that there can be different manifestations. People have different personalities. We should not be quick to conclude from outward expressions that one person is on fire for God and another is not, or that one has a stronger fire within than another.

A person may appear to be on fire for God, but it may be primarily an emotional experience without much positive spiritual meaning and reality. He may declare: "I am willing to do anything for God, even to die for Him". But before long, his "fire" may die out and he may no longer be earnest for the things of God.

Another person may come across as quiet and without much fire. We may think that he is not very spiritual. Yet, he can be full of spiritual energy and vitality and truly on fire for God.

Because we are different, there will be different outward manifestations of the fire that burns within. Some of us are more expressive; others less so. Our gifts are different, so are our roles. Whatever our personalities, whatever our gifts and roles, the same fire must burn within. The same kind of attitude and intensity must be present in all of us.

**How does this kind of zeal and fire come about?**

There are two aspects to this: the work of the Holy Spirit and man's response. Both are important and both must be present.

The reality of this principle at work comes through clearly in the life of the apostle Paul. Paul testifies to this reality in 1 Corinthians 15:10.

**1 Corinthians 15:10**

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

On the one hand, it is only by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit that we can have this fire within. On the other hand, there is also the need for deep response on man's part. Paul says: "His grace toward me did not prove vain".

The Holy Spirit desires to fill us, empower us, and help us to be on fire for God. Very often, however, we do not respond properly. We do not remove the obstacles in our life, thus hindering the working of the Spirit of God in us.

Paul knew the importance of man's response. He says: "I labored even more than all of them". Responding to God involves labour. We have to work hard at it. But then, Paul also says: "Yet not I, but the grace of God with me". He knew that he could not respond or labour on his own, but he had to do so according to God's gracious working in his life.

So, the two must go together. We cannot just wait for the fire to ignite spontaneously. Nor can we just strive to ignite it on our own. We need to look to the Lord for a deeper experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. At the same time, we must commit ourselves to working out God's purposes and cooperating with Him. Beyond mere words or thoughts that others may share with us, there needs to be an inward revelation from God, a spiritual insight brought about by the Holy Spirit. It is only with God's revelation that we can have the vision from above and the fire that burns within – one that is genuine and long-lasting.

In Galatians 1, we see an illustration of this principle of man responding to God's revelation.

**Galatians 1:11-12**

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul said that the gospel he preached did not come from men, but he received it directly from God, through a revelation of Jesus Christ. He had met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and from then on, God opened up to him the mysteries, the deep things of God. There was a revelation in his heart, in the inner man. He caught the inward revelation. That is what spurred him on to commit his whole life to God and to the work God entrusted to him. This led Paul to say:

**Galatians 2:20**

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Having caught the revelation, his whole life now centred on the Lord Jesus. Recognising that the Lord Jesus loved him and delivered Himself up for him, as a response of faith, Paul lived totally for the Lord by the power of the risen Christ. It was no longer Paul who lived, but Christ lived in him. He actively cooperated with the Lord Jesus so that the Lord could have the freedom to work in and through him.

We may not receive revelation from God the way Paul did. Revelation from God can come to us in different ways. God can reveal the truth to our hearts as we read the Scriptures, as we pray, as we hear the truth being preached or taught by others, or through the sharing of the brethren, or even through the lives of others. Ultimately, for there to be a deep reality, there must be definite revelation of truth to the heart. It is not just the mind grasping the truth. The heart must also see it – its beauty, its glory and its importance. And as we respond to this revelation from God, the burden grows, the fire grows. It is then that we can enter into God's heart, into the fellowship of His burden for His kingdom and for His people.

*Zeal for God can be cultivated*

The fire that burns within can be cultivated, and it is important that we cultivate it continually. How can we do so?

The fire grows as we deepen in our appreciation of God's greatness and goodness and all that this implies. It grows when we recognise more and more the terribleness of sin, the corruption of man, and the hopelessness and plight of man. It grows as we see the tremendous hope and riches to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. It grows as we see more clearly what is in the heart of God, how we can have a part in the fulfilment of His glorious purposes, and how lives that are transformed can make a difference that endures to eternity.

The fire can grow when we spend time with the Lord. We are often distracted by daily chores and work responsibilities. If we can be less distracted and more earnest in our time with God, we can enter into a deeper fellowship with Him and learn to see things the way He does, and be concerned about the things He is concerned about.

When our hearts are open, God will continually impress upon us His truths, even those we have understood, so that there can be an increasing depth of appreciation. We will see more and more clearly the glory of God and the hopelessness of the man without God in this world of darkness. We will then be deeply convicted that a life lived solely for God is the only life worth living. Such a conviction will then drive our whole life, giving it a clear sense of purpose and direction.

**True fire is stable, unceasing**

True fire must come from the Lord. It is the work of the Holy Spirit within our hearts. Acts 2:3 uses the word "fire" to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, tongues of fire rested on the people, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is also pictured as "rivers of living water" flowing unceasingly.

**John 7:38-39**

38 "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' "

39 But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

This picture conveys the truth that the Spirit will energise the believer to live the abundant life in Christ, one that is stable, consistent and steadfast. Difficulties and obstacles may come his way, others may seek to discourage him, but if the fire is burning strongly within him, it will not be easily snuffed out. He will not be easily shaken or distracted, but will be able to carry on in the ways of God and grow unto maturity.

**True fire spreads, giving life to others**

Like the living water that gives life to others, true fire will spread and bring light and warmth to others, impacting them in a positive way.

When the Lord Jesus spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they felt a fire burning within them (Luke 24:32). In other words, the fire of the Lord Jesus spread to them and it burned within their hearts. This kind of fire brings light and life. This is what we see in the ministry of the apostle Paul, as he went about strengthening the disciples. The fire within the heart of Paul encouraged other believers and helped them in their faith.

**True fire must be maintained and fed**

Even when the fire that burns within is generally stable and is able to spread to others, it can still die out if not constantly fed. It is sad if all that a believer can say is, "Once upon a time, I had a wonderful experience that changed my life completely." But because he had not fed the fire, it has now been extinguished. All he has left are past experiences.

We must not become complacent after having experienced the reality of the fire burning within. We have to feed it so that it may grow stronger and brighter. This takes place as we feed on the word of God, as we nurture our relationship with God

and fellowship with His people, as we engage in prayer and labours of love and other spiritual exercises, and as we obey the injunctions in the Scriptures. As we continue to grow healthily, the fire will grow. This kind of life must be nurtured. It cannot remain static. It will either grow or die off. Either we respond positively to God and make progress or we do not respond positively and go downhill.

So, when we talk about the fire that burns within, it is not just a question of whether we have it or we do not. There is the issue of the intensity of the fire, the brightness of the fire, the quality of the fire. And this can vary from person to person, and within the same person at different phases in his life.

#### *Elijah's fluctuating experience*

We see in the experience of Elijah an example of varying intensity of fire at different points in his life. 1 Kings 18 records an incident in which Elijah demonstrated much faith and confidence in God. We can see clearly the fire burning within him.

At this point in time, Elijah was being hunted by Ahab, a powerful and evil king of Israel.

#### **1 Kings 18:17**

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?"

But Elijah was unafraid. See how he responded to Ahab.

#### **1 Kings 18:18**

He said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and you have followed the Baals.

Elijah told King Ahab to his face that the king and his ancestors were the ones who brought trouble to Israel. From the human point of view, Elijah's life was in Ahab's hands. As the king of Israel, Ahab could easily have ordered Elijah killed. Yet, Elijah went on to say:

#### **1 Kings 18:19**

"Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

Normally, one would expect the subject to listen to the king's command. In this instance, Elijah had the audacity to instruct the king to gather all Israel and the prophets of Baal and Asherah before him at Mount Carmel. As you read on, you will see Elijah showing great confidence in God. He called on God to answer his prayer by fire and put to shame all the false prophets.

What we have here is a dramatic demonstration of the power of God over the prophets of Baal. However, soon after this confrontation at Mount Carmel, we see Elijah entering a low point in his life.

After the confrontation on Mount Carmel, Ahab told his wife Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how Elijah had all the prophets of Baal killed with the sword (1 Kings 19:1). Jezebel then sent a messenger after Elijah threatening to take his life. On receiving this threat, Elijah became "afraid and arose and ran for his life" (v. 3). Not only did he run for his life, he even requested that he might die, saying: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life" (v. 4).

Elijah had on the earlier occasion demonstrated much zeal and power and great confidence in God, but on the latter occasion, he showed great fear and discouragement. When threatened by Jezebel, he was discouraged to the point of wishing he were dead. We see then that a person can be zealous for God in one moment and fail to maintain that zeal in the next.

God desires us to be on fire for Him not just for an occasion. He wants us to continue to maintain at all times the fire, the intensity, the confidence in Him. Even a person of such spiritual stature and fiery zeal as Elijah can falter in this area! This episode in the life of Elijah has been recorded in the Scriptures for our learning. How important it is then to be prayerful and vigilant at all times!

In the case of Elijah, we need to understand that he had just fought an intense spiritual battle with the prophets of Baal. It is likely the forces of darkness were stirred up against him. It was a time of great spiritual pressure. In addition, Jezebel was no ordinary woman, but the vicious and wicked wife of the king of Israel, over whom she wielded much influence. And she wanted Elijah dead. Elijah was also under the wrong impression that all Israel had forsaken the Lord's covenant and all the Lord's prophets had been killed and he alone was left (1 Kings 19:10). Under such circumstances, he was vulnerable to the fiery darts of the evil one. He crumbled under the pressure and became alarmed and dejected. He failed to maintain his faith and confidence in the Lord.

As we desire to be serious for God, we must be prepared for times of intense spiritual pressure, especially after an important event or a great victory that the Lord has accomplished through us. Significant testing of our faith may follow soon after. A life of deep burden for the Lord's work is not an easy life. It is a life in which we will encounter many difficulties. But we can be assured that the Lord understands and He is always seeking to help us attain to greater heights in the process.

We can see this in the way God reached out to Elijah, His wounded servant, to help him and lift him up. Elijah responded well and carried on faithfully till he was taken up into heaven. Likewise, when we falter, we must look to God humbly as He seeks to help us. If we respond well, we can bounce back and continue to grow and serve the Lord well. What we have gone through can even be a helpful part of our total

learning experience. But if we do not respond well, we may go downhill and may never recover.

**“I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord.”**

Throughout church history, there have arisen men and women of God who have this kind of spirit and attitude. We see such an attitude in Watchman Nee. He had this as the motto of his life: “I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord”.

When we really learn how to live with this kind of attitude, we will find increasing freedom from many of the problems that trouble us – struggles and difficulties associated with various things we want for ourselves. Of course, we will still face various kinds of struggles in the path of a faithful walk with God. But they will not be like the negative kinds that now beset us, that hinder us in our effectiveness for God. Instead, what we go through will contribute to our total development and service.

Those who do not have this kind of spirit and attitude cannot go far in their walk with God and service for Him. Many of the things that hinder us have to do with things that we want for ourselves. We want comfort, pleasures, material wealth, a successful career, recognition and appreciation from others. These things may not be wrong in themselves. But if we seek them for ourselves, outside the framework of the Lord's will and provision for our lives, we become easy prey for the evil one. Such desires within us give grounds for the devil to attack, distract and destroy us. If left unchecked, these desires can grow and become very detrimental to our own lives and to the Lord's work.

However, if we live with the attitude of not wanting anything for ourselves, but everything for the Lord, the Spirit of God will then be able to work effectively in our lives.

The attitude of not wanting anything for ourselves but everything for the Lord does not mean we do not care about our own lives. It means we are fully committed to the Lord and His will in all things, including His will for our lives. We are fully contented in the Lord and our earnest desire is that His will be done. We do not want anything for ourselves apart from the will of God and what He deems best for us.

This is the paradox of the Christian life: When we give up all things to God and we do not cling to anything, the Lord can then freely and richly bless us with all things, that is, all things that are good for us. Ultimately, this is what God desires. And this is what Paul tells us in Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”

All too often, we hold on to or clamour for things that are not truly good for us. As a result, the rich blessings of God cannot fully come upon us.

**Other examples in church history**

Throughout church history, there are men of faith who have this fire burning within them. They have accomplished much for God. Some of them are well-known, others are not. We can be truly inspired when we read their life stories. If you read the life of Charles Finney, you will find that he lived for God at a very intense level. There were many manifestations of the tremendous power of God in and through his life. Likewise, we see manifestations of spiritual power in the life and ministry of John Wesley. It has been said that he rode on horseback all over England, sleeping only four hours each night. With fiery zeal, he turned England upside down and left behind a rich legacy. And then we have John Sung of China, who was reputed to have served the Lord with great power and effectiveness, preaching with burning zeal and exerting every ounce of energy he had. Many were converted through his ministry.

Here again, I would like to sound a note of caution. We are all different. We have different personalities. We should not expect God to work in our lives in the same way He works in others. God works differently in different people – whether it is Stephen, Anna, Paul, Finney, Wesley or John Sung. The fire that burns within is often expressed differently in different people.

All of us can aspire to be effective for God, to have the steadfast quality that we see in the lives of faithful brethren who have gone before us. This is God's desire for all His children. If so much can be accomplished through a few individuals, how much more can be achieved if the whole congregation is on fire for God! What great and wondrous things can then be accomplished for God's kingdom!

If we desire to see the work of the Lord in our midst grow from strength to strength and from glory to glory, there must be in each one of us this fire, this deep burden for the Lord's work.

**Concluding remarks**

Let us be mindful that zeal must go together with knowledge. Zeal without knowledge is not only useless, but also dangerous. So let us learn to cultivate both zeal and knowledge. Knowledge will help us channel our zeal in truth and wisdom. Knowledge will also feed the fire, and the fire will in turn help us acquire more knowledge. We need to keep both in a healthy balance at all times.

Proper conduct that manifests the true fire that burns within may not always be understood or appreciated by others, including Christians. We must, however, be careful not to mistake fleshly zeal for the fire that burns within. Fleshly zeal is zeal and emotion that originate from the natural man. It is promoted by the evil one. The true fire that burns within is the appropriate response to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

*Our perfect example*

In closing, let us reflect again on the life of the Lord Jesus, our supreme example. He had a definite sense of mission. He was steadfast and faithful. He was obedient to the point of death on the Cross. Hanging there on the cross, He was able to say: "It is finished". That was His whole attitude – always resolute, never deviating from what God the Father had entrusted to Him. He is a Man with a burning heart. May we also be men and women who have the same fire burning within.

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